

**Presenting a Social Justice and Equity-Oriented PDS Research Model:  
Example of a Sensory Ethnography of the Experiences of English Learners and the Role of  
Raciolinguistics**

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**Abstract:** Linguistically diverse students have been historically marginalized in U.S. schools through biased language policies. The contentious focus on immigration in recent U.S. political history has raised concerns about the marginalization of immigrant families in and outside of schools. This article reports on one of a series of ethnographic case studies focused on issues of social justice and equity, born in the context of a school-university partnership (SUP) between a professional development school (PDS) and a research institution. This ongoing sensory ethnography centers around vexing issues concerning an English language learner population mainly comprised of Mexican immigrant families. The author uses sensory methods to amplify participants' voices and raciolinguistics as a theoretical framework. Interviews, photography, observations, and a documentary analysis inform this work, while thematic analysis is used to treat data. Preliminary findings, anticipated implications, and possible future research goals of this continuing PDS research are presented.

**KEYWORDS:** professional development school, sensory ethnography, raciolinguistics

**NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration
8. Work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

## Introduction

Political and social tensions following the 2016 U.S. presidential election emerged along with the appearance of nationalistic immigration policies, which undeniably impact the lives of linguistically and culturally diverse populations. At Winston School (pseudonym), my professional development school (PDS), these students come from immigrant families. Nearly 45% of the student population at Winston School speaks Spanish at home (State of New Jersey School Report Card, 2017). Many of them are classified as English language learners (ELLs) and thus are enrolled in the school's English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education (BE) programs. As a new professor-in-residence (PIR), I engaged the school administration, teachers, and staff in discussions about the concerns they would be most interested in tackling during my first year. Through a survey and formal and informal meetings, a majority communicated that their most pressing issue was teaching ELLs because of a recent change in ESL and BE programs. Several new bilingual classrooms were opened and hosted eligible students; others were enrolled in general education classrooms. The general education teachers, especially those in grades K-3, grew concerned about efficiently teaching ELLs. After discussions and reflections, our PDS steering committee decided to prioritize the academic and social condition of ELLs in our PDS plan.

PIRs from Roland University (pseudonym) focus on four PDS areas: increase student achievement, professional development (PD) for the school community, provide clinical candidates with supervision and PD opportunities, and research. In research, the examination of the academic and social experiences of ELLs at Winston School quickly became a priority in our school-university partnership (SUP) research. In this mutually beneficial endeavor, we hope to address social and academic concerns related to diverse students, support teachers in their pedagogical practices, and help create a more inclusive learning community. In turn, we envision this work will contribute to our current social justice and equity-focused work at Roland University (RU) and inform our teacher education programs.

I would like to acknowledge my positionality. I am both a  $\frac{3}{4}$  faculty PIR and Ph.D. student in Education at RU. I have previously worked with immigrant students and families as an elementary ESL, world cultures, Spanish teacher, and bilingual teacher mentor. I identify as an immigrant, and I strive to address my own biases in my research. I purposefully practice extensive reflexivity and regularly conduct member and peer check-ins. Although I am writing this present paper individually, the nature of my PDS research is participatory and inclusive of the Winston School community members; particularly teachers and ELL families. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it reports on how our SUP examines and addresses issues concerning diverse students, mainly minoritized language groups at our PDS. The second goal is to share a model of mutually-beneficial research focused on social justice and equity topics.

## The RU-Winston School SUP

RU has been partnering with Winston School since 2010 and had two more PDS schools in its district. Winston School is in rural southern New Jersey, where in 2015, 38.4% of the population was a native Spanish speaker. That year, it was also home to 1.46 times more Hispanic residents than any other race or ethnicity (Data USA, 2018). Most migrated from Mexico.

My first year at Winston School was challenging. RU’s renewed dedication and focus on social justice and equity inspired those involved in our PDS work to have tough conversations about the condition of the *other*, typically non-mainstream students who have often been traumatized by nativist policies in American schools (Malsbary, 2014). The current political environment in the U.S. characterized by controversial immigration policies, the routine deportation of immigrants from Hispanic descent, and their negative characterization, added urgency and relevance to our work. Our research has the potential to give a voice to the *others* and create counter narratives. We resisted common systemic and marginalizing language policies by integrating activities that disrupt an English-only paradigm. For example, our PDS activities include the creation of a free-library that contains bilingual and culturally-sensitive books; an African-American Read-In, which featured bilingual materials and readers; PIR-ran PD about integrating, teaching, and assessing students in diverse classrooms; and research that amplifies the voices of linguistically and culturally diverse students and their families.

### A Student-Centered Conceptual Framework

To materialize this work, I created a conceptual framework that encompasses our four PDS focus areas while allowing to keep students at the center of our mission. This framework places students and their success at the center of our work and conceptualizes the support system of diverse students, based on current language and literacy literature. Our research plan uses this framework to look deeper into the factors that can support or hinder the academic and social school experiences of linguistically and culturally students. These include pedagogy, instruction and assessment, programs and policy, the nature of school-home connection and relationship, and perceptions about students’ backgrounds and school culture. Figure 1 below illustrates our conceptual framework.

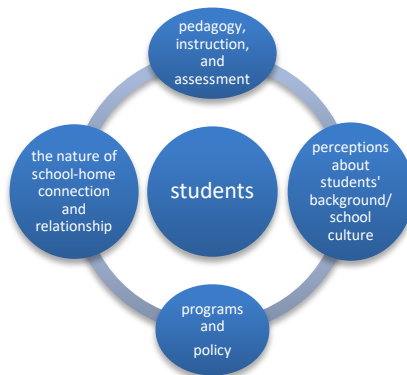


Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework

The goal of the study presented here is to examine the extent to which the convergence of the race, language, and ethnicity of ELLs shape their experiences in their school community. This is a sensory ethnographic case study, analyzed through the conceptual framework presented above and the lens of raciolinguistics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Historically in the U.S., the Spanish of Latinos and their Englishes have been a source of linguistic oppression (Zentella, 2014). Despite the value found in bilingualism worldwide, immigrant populations have been subject to discrimination because of their semantic baggage, while bilingual children have been subject to deficit-oriented practices in U.S. classrooms (García, 2014). Raciolinguistics goes beyond racism based solely on language; it adds a layer interested in racism based on race and ethnicity (Alim, 2016). In schools, it can be manifested in how linguistically-diverse students are perceived, socially treated, taught, and assessed. It highlights the marginalization of speakers of languages other than English and the use of harmful labels to portray their language proficiency and learning abilities when compared to native speakers of English (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Raciolinguistics examines how race, ethnicity, and language, when combined, can be another source of racism. It is an appropriate framework through which the experiences of children of Mexican immigrants in U.S. schools can be critically examined.

### **Sensory Ethnographic Design and Methodology**

Our PDS research plan is organized into a series of case studies that each focuses on a single facet of a broader inquiry which examines the factors that benefit and hinder the social and educational experiences of minoritized language individuals in this school community. This current study is ongoing and is at the data collection stage at the time this paper is written. It is a sensory ethnographic case study that poses the following question: How does raciolinguistics shape the social and educational experiences of English language learners in the Winston School community?

Sensory ethnography is a critical approach to ethnography; it insists on reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Pink, 2013) and the immersion of the participants in the research work. Sensory methods were chosen to achieve a participatory project and an emphasis on reflexivity on the part of the author and other individuals involved in this PDS work. The ethnographic case study approach allows for the use of both ethnographic and case study methods. The ethnographic methods encourage my integration and participation in the participants' daily lives in their school community, while enabling their authentic voices and emic perspectives to feed the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The nature of PIR work in a PDS environment eases the researcher's access and contribution to the lives of research participants, and it facilitates collaboration and exchange. The case study methods allow the use of holistic analysis of the themes that emerge from the study findings while prioritizing contextual information. They also alleviate the limitations of purely ethnographic work for a PIR, including limited time spent at the study site.

## Participants

A group of six students from grades 1, 3, and 4 (see table 1), and some members of their school support system constitute the participants in this study. To conceptualize each student's circumstances in this school community, their homeroom teachers, one parent or guardian per student, and one school staff who works closely with each student (administrator, speech therapist, nurse, counselor, cafeteria attendant, or librarian) was invited to take part in this investigation.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this project includes photo-elicitation interviews, observations, and a documentary analysis. During photo-elicitation interviews, the researcher introduces photographs into the interview process (Epstein et al., 2006). Adult participants were asked to take pictures of things, places, people, or activities that represent their social and academic experiences as they relate to their involvement with English language learners. Participants are thus given agency in choosing what they believe constitutes their personal experiences. Following the footsteps of scholars such as Aschermann, Dannenber, & Schulz (1998) and Salmon (2001), I took photographs for the interviews with the children participants. These include the school's physical environment, such as classrooms, the building and the school bus parking area; common school grounds, such as the school playground, the gym, and the cafeteria; and the areas of the city of Winston that surround the school, such as the zoo and park adjacent to the school. Participants were invited to lead me on walking tours of the school community. As Pink (2014) asserts, "working with participants to photograph and video elements of these sensory, affective and embodied experiences of locality and activity, enables researchers to develop empathetic subjectivities through which to remember and imagine other people's worlds" (p. 419). Other personal collections of photographs and images the participants decide to share were also considered relevant to the interview process; such items of personal relevance ease the description of experiences that may be difficult to discuss verbally (Pink, 2013). Along with classroom observations, the interviews helped capture the authentic voices of the participants about the nature of the school-home connection and relationship; the perceptions about students' backgrounds and school culture; and pedagogy, instruction, and assessment. The documentary analysis of the ESL program documents such as admission, exit, and retention information, and standardized test reports addressed the examination of programs and policy.

Sensory data analysis and data collection are not separable (Pink, 2013). Therefore, I strive to make sense of and note the emotions, the words, the gestures, and all other sensory elements produced by participants during my interactions with them. Processing continues through a systematic treatment of research materials during which emerging patterns are deduced and further analyzed. Final primary themes that reflect patterns found throughout the entire data corpus are then extracted.

## Preliminary Findings and Implications for Future Research

As the following narratives about students and their support systems suggest, raciolinguistics shapes problematic educational experiences for ELLs at Winston School. The analysis reveals that various raciolinguistic ideologies influence the lives of ELLs in their school community. These include deficit-based decision-making processes, language profiling, perceptions of ELLs through Whiteness, and standard language ideology. To underline the multisensory characteristics of my interactions with the participants, these accounts couple interview and observation materials with images, walking tours, drawings, and photographs.

### **Deficit-Based Decision-Making Processes**

Programmatic decisions regarding literacy education in general and English language learning at Winston shows to try and “fixing up” those who are deemed non-proficient in English. For example, new literacy curriculum has been introduced to increase the literacy proficiency levels of students, to match state and district standards. However, these programs are highly prescriptive and use practices based on non-standard English criteria. Lilly, a teacher, finds that the reading program she is mandated to use is “not working and do not mesh with other components of the literacy curriculum.” Even children voiced concern for the way their teachers and programs are chosen for them. Both Marta and Evelin find it “unfair” that they suddenly found themselves in classrooms where English is the primary language of instruction. Marta shared a concern about the bilingual program. She said:

I am happy I am in my teacher’s class, and I like her, but I do not know...(hesitating) I was in Mr. X’s class last year (bilingual teacher), and since preschool, all my classes were Spanish (referring to bilingual education classrooms) and then this year, it’s all in English...it’s kinda hard, es un poco duro for me sometimes. That’s why I asked you how to write family, ‘cause yo no sé de la Y, I didn’t know about the Y at the end.

Rosa and Flores (2017) argue that Whiteness and hegemonic practices can be imposed through non-human entities, for example, “voice-recognition technologies that privilege languages, varieties, and pronunciation patterns associated with normative whiteness” (p. 10). These ineffective and highly marginalizing pedagogical methods can be seen in routine vocabulary tests and technology centers in which students rotate during reading workshops. These practices are based on deficit views that “focus on fixing marginalized students rather than fixing the conditions that marginalize students, and understand the structural barriers that cheat some people out of the opportunities enjoyed by other people” (Gorski, 2016, p. 5).

### **Discriminatory and Preferential Language Profiling**

“Whereas racial profiling is based on visual cues that result in the confirmation or speculation of the racial background of an individual, linguistic profiling is based upon auditory cues that may include racial identification” (Baugh, 2003, p. 158). Several incidences of language profiling came up in my conversations with teachers and school staff. For example, Holly warned me that although a parent “sounded American,” she spoke Spanish. Others pointed

out that she “didn’t understand a thing they (a parent) was saying because they sounded very Mexican.” Baugh (2003) argues that racial profiling which is based on verbal cues can include racial identification and used to identify linguistic subgroup in a speech community. In identifying a parent as a member of a certain racial or ethnical group, teachers automatically utilize prescribed or pre-planned ways to interact with them, thus rejecting the need to view each family as an individual entity with specific needs. ELL family members’ accent and linguistic profiles may limit their access to equitable services, access to information, or equitable opportunity to succeed with the curriculum. Lilly speaks on this issue:

It seems like certain information is only available to English-speaking guardians, it’s almost like if you don’t speak English you have to request the information, but then how would they know it’s available?! Or I mean even the difference between curricula...if you speak something other than English, we’re not very accommodating as a district...it’s like more like assimilate or get left behind.

Conversely, some children from the ELL group may benefit from preferential linguistic profiling thanks to the way they engage with the English language and their assigned level of proficiency in it. Karmen, for example, has determined that English is her favorite language because it is easier for her. She speaks it mostly at home and at school, and she is encouraged by her parents to value it. In observations, she stands out in the group of ELLs; she is more comfortable interacting with school staff and faculty, voices her opinion quite frequently and is treated differently by children and adults, compared to other ELLs.

### **Whiteness and Hegemonic perceptions**

Racialized English learners are positioned as anomalous and inferior in contexts where raciolinguistics ideologies dominate, even “when engaging in language practices that would otherwise be legitimized or even prized” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 8). So, even when ELLs exhibit mature, legitimate, and valuable literacy practices, they are still subject to remedial programs. During observations, walking tours, and photo-elicited interviews, ELL study participants demonstrated remarkable literacy skills. Eva leads the group in a step-by-step summary of what they were going to do with me as a group after I shared how I envisioned my visit with the kids and asked for their feedback. The children performed highly-skilled literary practices such as having discussions and asking questions to understand a concept, making inferences and using translanguaging practices such as translating for each other, switching between languages to make meaning, and interpreting complex discourse in two languages. For example, Gilda explained to me and the group the concept of *chapparita* (little female person) and how her grandmother became one. She made references to a Mexican legend and then connections to how being a small person could be challenged in our society.

Another important point is that hegemonic perceptions are enacted not only by the institution as demonstrated thus far in the paper but also by individuals. These individuals do not have to be part of the dominant group necessarily; they can be anyone who embodies whiteness (Rosa & Flores, 2017). During walking tours and observations, it was evident that adults in the

school, regardless of race and ethnicity, participate in marginalizing practices in an effort to uphold school rules, whether these acts are intentional or not.

### **Standard language Ideology**

Interactions at Winston, whether they are in or out of the classroom walls, during instruction or assessment, informal or formal exchanges, and even amongst people who speak languages other than English, manifest the belief that literacy practices must be channeled through the English language to be validated. This is true for parents as they encourage their children to learn English in order to become successful in the U.S. This comes in contrast to some schoolwide practices, such as translating documents sent home in Spanish and other more individualized choices by some teachers, such as using Google Translate and classroom communication apps with multi-language features when interacting with parents. Maddison, a teacher, agrees:

I have had people translate things for me to send home although I know sometimes the parents can't even read it in Spanish. I don't think the translation works and if I have to have someone translate, there is no set person to do that, I just have to ask someone who speaks Spanish for a favor although it is not their job.

According to Lippi-Green (2006), although the idea of a national standard language is impossible because everyone speaks a dialect or variation of it, this idea has been used to limit access to discourse for some and fuel the marginalization of those who cannot conform to its biased criteria. Unfortunately, even those who seem accepting of linguistic and cultural differences and who claim that they are free of prejudice do not recognize the negative consequences of the idea of standard language (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Raciolinguistics ideologies at Winston School are met with sporadic but well-meaning efforts by pockets of the school staff and faculty through formal means such as taking on professional development related to teaching ELLs and informal ways such as breaking daily school routines and rules to accommodate ELLs. Despite these well-meant intentions, views about ELLs and their families are often expressed with a tone of pity and condescension. ELLs are perceived from a hegemonic position; they are assumed to be poor, foreign, their family members overworked and undocumented, and incapable of supporting the students academically. Furthermore, students are aware that they are perceived differently because of the language they speak; however, they have not connected these perceptions to their race or ethnicity. Collectively, students seem to yearn for integration into their school community and strive to speak "good English" the best they can.

Parents, on the other hand, struggle with the gap that exists between their children's connections to the English language and American culture and their struggle to feel at home, integrated, and accepted in the U.S. as valuable members of society. In a previous study conducted at Winston School, most of them suffer routine blunt racism in their community, at work, in stores, in their neighborhood, and some have voiced that this is due to the language they



speak but also to the fact that they are immigrants and Mexicans. Some have even denounced the current anti-immigrant political climate as a cause for these distressful circumstances.

As demonstrated in our discussion above, raciolinguistics is enacted at Winston through deficit-based decision-making processes, language profiling, perceptions of ELLs through Whiteness, and standard language ideology. However, this deeply-engrained school culture vis-à-vis ELLs is being challenged by a group of faculty and staff who seem to start gently advocating for a different, more equitable paradigm.

Future research in the Winston School community will develop potential interventions, grounded in social justice and equity-focused stance, such as more intensive university professional development for school faculty, staff, and in-class support for teachers. These initiatives could highlight the following: The abilities and worth of multicultural and multilingual students; pedagogical practices that use students' home languages as an asset to students' language learning; and honest conversations about the teaching, assessing, and integrating of ELLs in the school community.

### **Conclusion: A Model for SUPs Committed to Social Justice and Equity**

The example of research and partnership presented above constitute a viable and compelling model for SUPs around the country and could be adapted to the specific needs of different schools and universities. While one or more of the nine essentials of PDS are continuously addressed, we have created structures that help sustain and support each PDS stakeholder so they can play their role successfully. However, this model is not perfect; limited time and availability have caused interruptions in activities or have caused delays in achieving goals. Stable structures, reflective practice, organization, clarity of shared goals, cooperation, buy-in from all actors involved, and consistency are primordial for successful and sustainable collaboration. Even more crucial is a common understanding about positionalities when it comes to research, social justice, and equity. Both the school community and university must be cognizant and in accord about the level of commitment and dedication necessary to tackle issues born from long-standing hegemonic practices supported by biased systemic processes and policies. Universities must also utilize PDS work as an opportunity to re-assess their teacher education praxis and examine if they are preparing teachers for the diverse classrooms in which they will undoubtedly teach. In fact, many of the issues of inequity discussed in this research can be traced back to inadequate and deficient training received in teacher education programs. In the end, reciprocally successful SUPs can be vehicles of empowerment and critical societal change.

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