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# Testimonio of a Migrant English Language Learner (ELL)

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TESTIMONIO OF A MIGRANT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER

By

Steven T. Hoy

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Requirements for the Degree of

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Educational Administration Leadership

University of the Pacific  
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2018

*Grandpa used to say, "Education opens doors...Own horses, own cars and you will have a  
good life!" Juan Carlos*

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Testimonio of a Migrant English Language Learner

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Steven T. Hoy

## DEDICATION

To my mother Janet Ann Hoy, father Roger V. Hoy, wife Connie T. Hoy, son Shayn C. Hoy, Dr. Ronald Hallett, Dr. Tony Serna, Dr. Patricia Noel, Dr. Susan Fair, and all the people who have helped me along my educational journey. You all have played an instrumental role in my accomplishments, and for this, I truly thank you for your love, guidance, support and continued faith in my abilities to climb this mountain. I love each and every one of you beyond words. Now the journey continues to even greater heights. Thank you!

## Testimonio of a Migrant English Language Learner

### Abstract

By Steven Thomas Hoy

University of the Pacific  
2018

This story explored the educational experience of a 20 year-old man who came to California from Michoacán, Mexico with his parents and siblings when he was 10 years old. Using qualitative research methodology and testimonio, he and his parents were interviewed to hear and document their stories of his academic journey from the early years in Michoacán to completion of twelfth grade in California. His testimonio, as a migrant English Language Learner (ELL) special education student, who experienced the K-12 Public Education system, provides an in depth view to consider when making educational placement decisions. The ELL student population continues to rise faster than any other student population within California. This student population creates a unique set of circumstances, challenging educators to properly identify and qualify these students into special services. Unfortunately, their lack of language acquisition generally results in lower performance scores on placement assessments. The consequence of these lower test scores oftentimes qualifies these students for special services. The purpose of this qualitative study was

to share additional considerations needed to effectively assess and provide the ELL student equitable services. There were two major themes woven throughout the study. First, the study looked at the importance of parent involvement in understanding the academic history of any new student in a school, especially an ELL student. In addition, the role that assessment plays in educational placement of an ELL special education student was explored.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

As the United States public education system adjusts to an ever-changing student demographic with multilingual and multicultural increases in diversity, it requires the implementation of our “best practices” to adjust to meet these changes. The public education system is at the forefront of teaching the 21st century skill sets required to be successful in becoming college/career ready and, most importantly, life ready. The migration of immigrants from around the world increases the demands on the education system. This qualitative study is focused on educational needs of diverse student populations, specifically, evaluation and assessment that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for the multi-labeled student.

According to Roy (2015) educators who develop a critical, inquiry stance by embedding multiple entry points for students to cross social, cultural, linguistic, and curricular borders in school can have a lasting impact on literacy acquisition and resettlement experiences for the English Language Learner (ELL) special education student. Most significantly, assessments can be problematic in accurately identifying ELL students’ proficiency levels. Second, the past quarter-century’s reliance on the “Medical Model” that is based on human pathology, which leads to the “medicalization of learning problems,” is often flawed.

The critical importance of adequate education in the United States makes it necessary to provide relevant services for these ELL students. Unfortunately, there continues to be social stigma attached to the special education label and this can lead to students becoming marginalized and not able to participate in what the larger society has to offer. Also, schools often unable to ensure the most effective learning environment for the ELL population. This can result in the erroneous placement of a disproportionate number of English language learners in special education (Hamayan et al., 2007).

In the State of California, an even greater challenge exists with the increases to immigrated student population, which is the fastest growing segment within the public education system (CDE, 2016; Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2006). Therefore, the necessary adaptations increase the demands on the already strained and/or uninformed public education system. Moreover, the system's inability to effectively assess and understand the educational needs to appropriately place this student subgroup leads to misplacement (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Sullivan 2011). Therefore, the lack of understanding that there is additional diversity within these subgroups raises the need for cultural relevancy in meeting these students educational placement needs through evidence-based interventions (Ferlis & Xu, 2016).

### **Background**

Research shows that many ELL students who have also been labeled special education have cultural background and language differences from the majority culture that impact the assessment process (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2006; Overton, Fielding & Simonsson, 2004). As a result of the diverse cultural backgrounds of these students it is challenging to provide an assessment process that is appropriate for their specific educational needs. For the assessment process to be adequate it requires someone who understands both the student's native language and cultural background. If there is no such qualified school psychologist, the school district must provide a qualified interpreter who is fluent in the language and has firsthand knowledge of the culture, and helps guide the bilingual student and monolingual English school psychologist through the assessment of ELLs (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011). When this works, the process results in a reduction of inappropriate initial identification of ELL students into special services (Yin, 2014).

Current assessment practices are predominately cognitive based measurements where a number of correct and incorrect answers result in standardized scores that, when compared to a normative sample, are used to categorize levels of intellectual functioning that are used to determine the ability to learn (Zhang, Katslyannis, Ju & Roberts, 2012). Students with scores below a certain level can be determined to need placement in special education. However, no research exists on cultural/trust/relationship-oriented assessment practices, where cultural misunderstandings are not misinterpreted as special accommodations or educational needs. These misunderstandings have resulted in an overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children within special education programs (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011). In order to begin to resolve the increase of CLD children inappropriately placed in special education and ELL programs, students should be able to complete learning assessments in their primary language to attain an accurate baseline educational level. Using a bilingual assessment conducted by a qualified school psychologist does this as does a monolingual English school psychologist working with a qualified interpreter (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005).

In addition, factors such as a student's culture, ability to trust the educational system, and their resiliency play major roles in the success of an ELL placement. Furthermore, flexibility in the school system is critical. When students speak English as a second language and their primary language is Spanish, cultural relevancy in the assessment process plays an important role in effective evaluation due to the many subgroups within this specific demographic (Guiberson, 2009; Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). For example, the students in the Spanish speaking subgroup could come from diverse cultures whether they are from Mexico, Honduras, or Chile. These students bring their own uniqueness and experiences making them who they are.

The interrelationship between the student, parent, and educator demands the ability to build the necessary trust needed to encourage, develop, and provide the “Best” academic opportunities (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). Moreover, the relationship between trust and navigating the school systems with flexibility lead the student towards developing resiliency in becoming academically proficient. Therefore, these areas of interest play significant roles in the proper placement of ELL students.

During six and a half years as a special education teacher working with ELL special education students of various cultures, as well as socioeconomic backgrounds, I observed these students become diverted from the opportunity to attain a high school diploma. Instead, many students in special education settings are put on a certificate track, which means their curriculum has been modified from the general education curriculum. Students with a modified curriculum are typically a part of a subgroup within special education known as Special Day Class (SDC) students. SDC students can either be on a diploma track or a certificate track. Certificate track includes modification of the student’s curriculum. The diploma track curriculum is not modified; however, these students are provided with additional academic supports. The track on which a student is placed has the potential to influence their future options whether they are educational, familial, and/or career-wise.

This testimonio examined the educational journey of a young man, Mexican immigrant, Juan Carlos, from his eighth grade year forward to identify the short, and long-term effects of being assessed and placed into a special education-SDC setting. It also explored the process of how Juan Carlos was identified and directed to special education curriculum, how systematic assessments were used to identify his needs, and what role his parents played within the identification process.

## **Purpose of the Study**

With an increased number of students in public schools with multiple labels of ELL, migrant and special education, research is needed to understand the individual student perspective. The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how a student who is an English language learner (ELL), experiences navigating the public school system while identified as requiring special education placement.

## **Research Question**

“How does a student with an ELL and special education designation experience the K-12 educational system?”

## **Significance of the Study**

ELL special education students need to be college and/or career ready as they transition into adulthood. When ELL students are effectively prepared with these transitional skills they provide cultural and community wealth that does not drain resources lessening the impact on society as a whole (Horak & Valle, 2016). When these students receive effective assessments they can be appropriately challenged to meet their full academic potential (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). Hence, accurate assessment may also build the necessary self-advocacy skills that will be required to meet the academic rigor for becoming college prepared (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Following this, career readiness becomes increasingly possible throughout adulthood.

A school district could be providing high quality/research based services but they might not be the ones necessary or appropriate for the students' needs (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). To get it right educators need to further develop equitable assessments that lead to fair and appropriate services once the correct diagnoses are made. Equitable assessments that take into consideration the assessed person's cultural and linguistic background can be used as a basis to build their individual

learner profile (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Overton, Fielding & Simonsson, 2004). For change to happen in the assessment process, there will need to be identification and acceptance of the relevant issues. The necessary conversation begins with the recognition on all sides that this issue is more complex than has been previously understood and documented. This conversation has been taboo for far too long, as criticizing public education and its faults is a sensitive subject. This study will serve as a platform to begin this conversation by identifying the relevant issues in the life of one migrant family.

This testimonio illustrates that there are students who suffer as a result of cognitive and educational testing due to being assessed when practices are not in place to evaluate the students appropriately in their primary language (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). The ability to gain the student's perspective provides invaluable insight that sheds additional light as to how the student has become who they are. The point of view of the person being evaluated is necessary to getting the story correct (Sullivan, 2011). Interest in understanding the student's perspective may become the first step in being able to learn self-advocacy skills (Garcia & Tyler, 2010).

Review of the literature reveals that there is little current research into the emotional, social and vocational impact for an ELL student who has not received a culturally and linguistically appropriate education. In addition, it is unknown how many students this issue may have affected. There is little literature that currently tells researchers what it is like for students whose educational placements with modified curriculum reduce the opportunities available to them. The lasting effects of the assessment process can linger years after graduation from high school, affecting socioeconomic status, aspirations, and successful entry into adulthood (Garcia & Tyler, 2010).

This testimonio explores Juan's experience and perspective of entering the public school system as the child of migrant farm workers. It also identifies the impact of the assessment

process that resulted in the determination that Juan required special education services. This provides other researchers further issues to consider in future studies on this and related topics. Ultimately, the goal is to decrease the information gap and reduce the possibility of negligence as a major contributing factor preventing these students' movement from at-risk to productive educated citizens (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework: Testimonio**

Using a testimonio framework “allows Native voices to emerge in scriptocentric culture while questioning the authority of neo/colonial cultures and addressing important issues regarding Native survival” (Dominguez, 2012 p. 9). Using testimonio based research made it possible to gain further insights in to this student's strengths, weaknesses and needs, as well as his parents perspectives on their son's education. The testimonio framework integrated with concepts from positive psychology theory created the necessary environment to gather information about cultural assets, family/social trust, and emotional self-advocacy to accurately tell Juan Carlos' story. This study benefited by gaining a clearer understanding of Juan's strengths, to understand how he might address his weaknesses. These revealing insights gained through sharing his personal cultural/societal assets, mutual trust, and ability to self-advocate for learning opportunities was central to this research.

Positive psychology theory has many common traits, although the ability to stay positive when assessment is involved requires a structured framework that addresses both of these important theories. The ability to assess a student in their primary language while considering family and cultural background, social/emotional functioning, and socio-economic status is a necessary and significant part of our educational assessment and was important in this study. The potential risks of misunderstanding cultural differences is well illustrated in Anne Fadiman's book,

*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. Fadiman tells the story how Americans living in Merced, California misperceived Hmong elders who were sitting in public venues as being drunks. In reality, they were actual war heroes saving American lives' during the Viet Nam War. These Hmong gentlemen did not socially assimilate into Merced's society, preferring to dress different than the locals leading to misperceptions (Fadiman, 1997, p. 298). Fadiman used testimonio as a research method to increase accuracy in understanding and interpreting the subjects in her story.

The ability to provide a positive learning environment for the educational development of all students requires a "paradigm shift" concerning student assessments and interventions towards a strength-based model instead of focusing on students' deficits. This testimonio framework incorporated the participants' authentic perspective to optimize stakeholder outcomes. Juan's testimonio told through this lens, helped identify his capacity for resilience. The model utilized multiple sources of information: observation, data-driven hypothesis, English language development, and language of assessment. The testimonio framework research states that a complete reliance on the discrepancy model hinders children's optimum social-emotional and educational development.

The testimonio research approach "Could be extended and used to diffuse the deficit practices in schools and communities that position newcomers as deficient and lacking, rather than possessing multiple literacies and identities" (Roy, 2015 p. 67). Juan's special education placement following an assessment while in eighth grade put him on a personal trajectory in which he began to be looked at as a student with a disability, someone who needed a specific kind of help. Instead of looking at Juan's many other qualities, he was placed into a special education setting without any questions raised. Ultimately, may have had a direct connection to his future



career/social standing, and as well as how he will continue to assimilate into his greater surrounding community. This strength-based shift is becoming more prominent in education, as it uncovers a deeper understanding of students and what they have to offer.

This study was guided by the testimonio perspective, which suggests emphasizing a participant's perspective through sharing their personal experiences by telling their story. Using this method illuminated Juan's story and increased his ability to reflect on his prior experiences. In addition, Juan's own family's experience through his high school years was revealed through deeper conversations surrounding this crucial time in his life. Furthermore, it is hoped that Juan's family members who participated in this testimonio benefitted from the researcher's interest in cultural/social assets and in how they made education available to their children. Not only will they understand that they had and still have much to offer in many ways, they will learn that their culture and that familial practice are things that enable Juan to succeed.

### **Description of the Study**

The passion to explore a testimonio was developed through my educational journey while working as a special education teacher in a predominantly Latino agricultural community. This experience taught me about the complexity of the multiple layers and challenges that ELL students must overcome. The testimonio of Juan Carlos begins with his birthplace in Mexico, and his family's immigration to the California Central Coast, primarily agricultural part of the state, and then through his educational experiences. To better understand his story, we need to know where Juan has been to know where he is going.

Juan's story is compelling and serves as a purpose for why we should implement more policies and regulations when it comes to cognitive assessments in schools. Juan Carlos' outcome from his assessment has had negative results. Because he was identified as needing special

education services Juan was placed in a SDC setting program and put on a high school certificate track instead of a high school diploma track. Now, Juan Carlos lives his life with a high school certificate instead of a high school diploma, possibly hindering the opportunity for him to matriculate to higher education.

The purpose of this testimonio was to better comprehend how Juan's eighth grade assessment resulting in special education placement impacted his long-term life and career goals. Additionally, this study sought to understand any interactions between this experience and his transition to postsecondary education. The larger purpose was to uncover how Juan's experience can help educators understand how to better serve and assess English language learners. I did this by interviewing Juan and his parents.

The research question was examined through a qualitative testimonio research design. According to Yin (2014),

Testimonio studies are empirical inquiries that investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. Conversely, "an experiment, by comparison, does deal with the entangled situation between phenomenon and context but usually in studying non-contemporary events" (p.16).

This is why I chose to use a qualitative testimonio research design for my exploration.

The ability to understand this study as an actual exploration has stretched me to have faith in the qualitative research process. "Too much emphasis on original research questions and context can distract researchers from recognizing new issues when they emerge" (Stake, 2006, p. 13). My testimonio research design was assembled to focus on identifying, recognizing, and understanding the "bounded system." Merriam (2009) shares that the single most defining

characteristic of qualitative research lies in delimiting the object of study. Meaning, the bounded system allows her to “fence in” what she is going to study.

The bounded system of this study included the participants exercising their responsibilities as parents, son/student. “Ideally, for example, the design of a qualitative study is emergent and flexible, responsive to challenging conditions of the study in progress” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). However, “If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Thus, the importance for me is to truly understand the data, the number of people to be interviewed and the time available for observations.

To understand an issue such as Juan Carlos’ journey through special education, Stake (2006) suggests that qualitative understanding of the testimonio requires experiencing the activity of the life as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation. This concept was a guide to interpreting the interactions between participants as well as helping me to better understand their “bound systems.”

### **Chapter Summary**

Using testimonio I collected data from Juan Carlos, Jr and his parents. The dialogue provided insight into the participant’s challenges throughout the assessment process and beyond. The testimonio details help illuminate for the reader a clearer picture of Juan Carlos’ life and how the assessment process can misunderstand ELL special education students possibly resulting in missed college/career readiness opportunities beyond high school. It is hoped that understanding this issue helps educators and evaluators move towards improved initial assessment processes, making them much more informed before they make critical placement decisions. Ultimately, this study may inform the development of improved assessment protocols, streamlined communications, and dynamic opportunities to meet the ELL student’s academic needs.

The literature review's overarching theme surrounds capital/community cultural wealth. The subthemes are built upon processes, assessment of minorities, specifically Latino students, the development of self-advocacy skills as perseverance and resiliency, and coping with educational labels in relationship to trustworthiness. These subthemes helped guide the development of effective methods to accurately chronicle this testimonio. These important themes allowed for deeper exploration as they relate to the research questions.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Public school leadership and administrators face a number of challenges meeting school and district goals as a result of worldwide demographic shifts, changes in the technological landscape, the financial landscape, and competition from private, charter, and online schools. In addition, there is growing need for creating specialized education programs for students with needs that cannot be met in the standard classroom setting. The public school system is also increasingly challenged to address student underachievement and dropout rates in schools in ethnically diverse districts, which also experience excessive special education referrals and placements.

Review of the literature in six general subject areas will provide the background needed to explain the factors under consideration in this study. These six areas are a) identification criteria for migrant students; b) the English language learner; c) assessment for educational placement; d) school psychologists and challenges in the assessment process; e) over-representation of minorities in special education; and, f) a better way to make placement decisions.

### **Testimonio and Positive Psychology**

The research framework for this study combines testimonio and positive psychology to inform the research method and analysis of the data. The focus of the study centers on the consequences of the assessment process that is broadly used in public schools for determining grade level placement, individualized education plans (IEP) and placement in special education programs through the participants' lens. This assessment process, typically conducted by school psychologists, uses a variety of standardized tests that have been validated and normed for specific populations of children. For test results to be considered a valid indication of a child's performance/intelligence/academic functioning, the child must be adequately represented in the normative sample. In addition, the test must be administered under the conditions in which it was

standardized. This is where problems develop when evaluating students who do not have representation in the normative sample and whose language, culture, and current citizenship status vary from those for whom the test was designed. To understand the implications of this, the study investigates the testimonio of a migrant student who was assessed for special education in the eighth grade and the long-term results from his educational experiences, future career opportunities, and family life.

Positive psychology is defined as, nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology re-visits "the average person," with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the effectively functioning human being, who successfully applies evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that, despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose?" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p.216).

Positive psychology theory provides a way to understand someone who can adapt and overcome unforeseen or unknown obstacles. Positive psychology identifies how people can develop resiliency and "grit" to adapt and cope with diversity of many kinds. One major factor suggested about resiliency theory concerning families is "A comprehensive understanding of family resiliency is the lack of integration and synthesis of the main risk and protective factors that influence outcomes" (Benzies & Mychasiuk 2008, p.103). Therefore, by using the ideas informing positive psychology, it may be possible to use the identification of a person's strengths and skills to assist in expanding resiliency.

### **Migrant Students**

The qualifications to be classified as a migrant student in the State of California have been dramatically changed to delineate amongst students who travel up and down the agricultural regions along the Western United States (California north through Oregon up to Washington State) and the student whose parents work different growing seasons, staying in the same geographical region. These designated migrant students are often referred to as the, “invisible children” (Cranston-Gingras & Paul, 2008). Providing voice and identity for this already marginalized student demographic can lead to a deeper understanding of one’s cultural background (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez & Cooper, 2009).

Cranston-Gingras and Paul (2008) describe a migrant student as an individual whose family travels various parts of the country seeking seasonal agricultural work in order to survive. These families’ struggles include ethical challenges accessing schools and service delivery systems intended to be resources to help navigate their children’s educational experiences. “To qualify for migrant education, students must meet strict federal eligibility criteria including moving from one school district to another within and between states in search of temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing” (Cranston-Gingras & Paul, 2008, p. 24). The migrant student’s family consistently shows up after the school year has begun and leaves prior to the school year ending, depending upon the growing season their family is working, making it difficult to have longer term, familiar and consistent learning environments.

When a student is a migrant, an ELL, and also determined to be special education the challenge is even greater when considering there may be minimal time to connect and build the relationship necessary to mentor these same students to academic success. In addition, the opportunity for moral neglect becomes a further ethical compromise for the family, school, and service delivery systems that are currently in place (Cranston-Gingras & Paul, 2008).

Furthermore, the recent change in the requirements to qualify as a migrant student helps shift resources to a very specific student profile. Hence, commingling the “regional,” formerly recognized migrant students, in with other ELL and special education students. In the grand scheme of things this further minimizes their voice.

**Why does it happen?** Migrant seasonal workers who travel up and down various agricultural regions to earn their living provide unique skill sets in bringing our grown produce to market. Their skills, developed over many generations, include willingness and ability to travel region to region providing harvesting, planting and seasonal maintenance services. Here in the United States where workers have exposure to harmful pesticides, dangerous farm equipment, unsafe transportation, excruciating weather conditions, and poor sanitation, migrant farm work is one of the most dangerous occupations for farmworkers and children (Cranston-Gingras & Paul, 2008).

**Why are we talking about it?** As the government of California has changed its view on who qualifies as a migrant student, the proper identification of students is critical to providing the individual academic support required to become college/career/life-readiness. Cranston-Gingras and Paul (2008) emphasize the need for full participation and trust of the student, family, and educators in making decisions involving the student’s academic success. Without the trusting relationship, academic engagement becomes minimal.

### **English Language Learner (ELL)**

ELLs present many challenges for the education system to address. When this student population is thrust in to the special education setting, effective instruction becomes challenged (Cranston-Gingras and Paul, 2008; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). These students bring with them different backgrounds concerning cultural, socioeconomic success, and prior belief systems



towards the value of education, both positive and negative (Liou, Anthrop-Gonzalez & Cooper, 2009). This ELL label combined with being special education and beginning your educational journey creates a “trifecta-type” effect. Cranston-Gingras and Paul (2008) expand upon this “trifecta-effect” noting that students who have educational challenges are further vulnerable to moral neglect due to school systems being overburdened with competing interests of their majority constituents. Many educators believe that prior knowledge, experiences, and past successes with this student population have prepared them to be successful with addressing the needs of the Migrant ELL special education student. Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013) suggest leveraging a student’s strengths to address weaknesses, which they refer to as “strength-to-strategy,” to better help parents understand the student’s individual educational plan (IEP).

In the assessment process it is necessary to delineate between students who have been appropriately placed versus the students who have been placed in the same setting due to English language acquisition skill deficiencies. Some people believe that the ELL students who have been placed in the special education setting, due to language deficiencies, require English language skill development interventions prior to this unfortunate placement (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). Other educators believe these interventions need to jointly address their lack of language skills in conjunction with remedial skill development (Garcia & Ortiz, 2008). In addition, Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013) suggest comprehensive assessment comprising cognitive and neuropsychological strengths and weaknesses will help the school psychologist better understand the intervention process with students who experience learning issues and disabilities. Furthermore, they suggest that deficit focused assessments often lead to unintended effects, including student demoralization, reduced self-confidence, lowered motivation, and desire to perform, as well as losing a sense of belonging to the learning community.

ELL students who fit this scenario have a “double-edge sword” to contend with and overcome. The double battle deals with their lack of language skills and grade level standards mastery (Echievarria, Short & Powers, 2006). Some end up dropping out of school when the school district fails to meet their individual academic needs (Chu, 2011). Moreover, these students hover at a frustration level, which might result in their personal disengagement from effective learning. The level of disservice to these students costs society exponentially.

An alternate model for assessment, which has been proposed by Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013), is called Leveraging Strengths Assessment and Intervention Model (LeStAIM). An important component to the LeStAIM theory is the incorporation of dynamic assessment, which includes qualitative data collected from the assessed student. Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013) suggest this helps the school psychologist increase understanding of the student’s processing, learning, and their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to determine what is going to benefit the student concerning future learning opportunities. ZPD is the gap between what a child can accomplish independently and what they can do with assistance. The inclusion of qualitative data brings to light students’ academic development capabilities.

The testimonio framework that uses direct information from students and parents, is one tool educational specialists could use when addressing ELL students who have been referred for special education service assessments. Many factors play key roles within this process, while the focus being kept on strength-based assessments allows for the greatest clarity (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011). The testimonio lens could help provide the school psychologist with a life context to answer crucial questions when evaluating students for special education status and help facilitate the necessary challenging conversations about the students’ needs (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez & Cooper, 2009).

## **Special Education**

Special education students have been identified through an educational referral process, which assesses their cognitive and academic levels in order to make an appropriate determination whether a student qualifies for special need services or not. Ferlis and Xu (2016) call for a more evidence-based assortment of assessment tools in the decision-making process qualifying ELL students into the special education setting. They discuss the response-to-intervention (RTI) process to allow for further considerations such as interpersonal and institutional concerns, which impact a student's performance. "Linguistic differences and frequent mobility compound the already complex decision-making process in determining whether additional educational support services for specific learning disabilities may benefit culturally and linguistically diverse learners in schools in the United States" (Overton, Fielding & Simonson, 2004, p. 319). Therefore, the necessity for increased understanding of this decision-making process becomes paramount in the proper placement of these students.

The ability for the special education student to be accurately referred, assessed, and appropriately placed within special services becomes a matter of proper trajectory. "The inaccurate placement of minority students in special education programs can take various forms including overrepresentation, underrepresentation, and misidentification" (Guiberson, 2009, p. 167). Moreover, this shines the spotlight on the need for an assessment model that is flexible, thorough, and most importantly, culturally relevant to the student being assessed. Without this type of assessment model these unfortunate circumstances will continue to evolve.

### **Assessment Model: National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems**

A tool suggested by Richards, Artiles, Klingler, and Brown (2005) is a "self-assessment instrument" that school leadership can apply to be more responsive to their students' needs. It is

designed to more effectively measure student needs in an effort to assist educational practitioners in creating schools that are culturally responsive to the needs of the varying, diverse student populations represented in California. The benefit of this is that it addresses the increasing numbers of students from different backgrounds making it easier for schools to provide a more appropriate education for its students. Additional benefits of the tool include helping institutions increase prevention and intervention strategies, creating educational systems improvement, as well as enhancing the overall teaching and learning for teachers and students (Richards et al., 2005).

Espinosa (2005) contends that the growing cultural diversity within school settings requires a more diverse teaching force. She calls for increased teacher diversity training as well as recruitment for a more “non-white” teaching talent pool to match the diversity growth of the student population. She ties together the issue of how poverty has a tremendous effect on early childhood learning literacy levels as well as “school readiness” capabilities. Espinosa’s research is right in line with other researchers in that she is reinforcing the need for an assessment team with at least one member who is fluent in the assessed student’s language. Espinosa’s work informed this study through the use of reflexive thought during the case study interviewing process to help reduce potential cultural biases (Espinosa, 2005).

### **Bilingual Assessment**

Abedi’s (2005) contention that the identified student needs to be assessed in their native language is well documented by many studies. He asserts that,

The reliability and validity of assessments can be improved for ELL students by reducing the level of unnecessary linguistic complexity of test items. An assessment with clearer language involves less measurement error; therefore, it will be more reliable (Abedi, p.183).

In addition, he suggests that an assessment, which is less linguistically complex “may also be more valid due to construct-irrelevant variance” reduces the reliability and validity gaps between ELLs and non-ELL students making the assessment fairer for everyone (Abedi, p.183). Abedi (2005) utilizes three of his previous studies to support his “recommendations for accommodations.” He reports that the “linguistic modification” did not affect the scores of English-proficient students indicating that linguistic modification is not a threat to score compatibility.

### **Assessment Tools**

A number of tools and strategies to assess students’ abilities and needs are available. There are opposing viewpoints on what tool and strategy is best for the student. Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011), Laija-Rodriguez et al. (2013), and Joshi (2003) agree that assessments that focus on strengths are a better strategy for student assessment than deficit model practices which focus merely on what students cannot do.

School psychologists need to be equipped with nondiscriminatory assessment procedures to adequately differentiate normal English language development (ELD) manifestations from specific learning disabilities (SLD). An assessment tool guided by the Leveraging Strengths Assessment and Intervention Model (LeStAIM) developed by Laija-Rodriguez et al. (2013) emphasizes students’ strengths to leverage weaknesses in cognitive, academic, and social-emotional functioning. This model was applied to the initial assessment process for ELL students, who had been referred for special education assessment, and is discussed as it relates to the case review of this dissertation study.

Kushner’s (2008) observation is that educators must have a comprehensive understanding of the broad array of instructional strategies for ELLs, ELLs with disabilities, and ELLs at risk of being identified as learning disabled (LD) to help guide informed decision making. He shares his

vision of a “shared knowledge base” among all educator groups as being the key to closing the achievement gap between these students and their mainstream peers. Furthermore, these competencies must be developed in multiple areas to prevent academic difficulty including meaningful assessment (Kushner, 2008).

### **School Psychologists’ Role and Challenges in the Assessment Process**

Most educators believe that the school psychologist’s professional role is critical to making informed special education eligibility decisions in the assessment process for ELL special education students (Fletcher & Navrrete, 2003). School psychologists are required to follow the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) model for the professional practice of school psychologists. NASP recognized practices for identifying children with learning disabilities include Response to Intervention (RTI), Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW), and discrepancy model (Schultz, Simpson, & Lynch, 2012).

Some experts have questioned this way of identifying needs for educational intervention. In another study findings indicate that sole reliance on the discrepancy model will not benefit children to their optimum development (Laija-Rodriguez et. al., 2013). Laija-Rodriguez and colleagues strongly suggest a move away from this deficit model. Their strength-based model requires the school psychologists and assessment personnel to incorporate children and youths’ strengths and needs in the assessment and intervention process. However, they acknowledge barriers to using their model that include minimal research linking strengths to outcomes, lack of role delineation amongst legislation and professionals, available resources for appropriate standardized measures and strength-based focused practices.

Furthermore, the assessment process needs to involve active participation from the student, parents, school personnel, and community to improve student outcomes. The ability to

differentiate between these two concerns makes their role as school psychologists in assessment quite visible. In the same study, Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011) suggest the school psychologist or language assessor must assess the ELL student's Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to help determine the most appropriate language of assessment before completing any psycho-educational evaluation. With this information the school psychologists is in a better position to analyze the ELL student's primary and secondary language skills by incorporating assessments that provide them with a clearer picture of the students' strengths and weaknesses (Olvera & Gomez-Cerillo, 2011).

In a study titled, *Misconceptions about the Assessment and Diagnosis of Reading Disability* (Joshi, 2003) the authors suggest that reading disability is the most commonly diagnosed learning disability, which is mainly identified as a discrepancy between the "at-risk" students' IQ score and their reading achievement score. He suggests this discrepancy approach is based upon a position or a hunch that LD poor readers are qualitatively divergent from non-LD poor readers Joshi (2003). Therefore, he suggests poor readers who demonstrate a "significant" discrepancy between their IQ and achievement are labeled learning-disabled (LD), and poor readers whose scores are on par with each other are not labeled LD. Whichever way a student is labeled both groups of children are in need of additional reading intervention supports and further assessment opportunities Joshi (2003).

In addition, "diagnosis based on IQ scores does not lead to recommendations regarding remediation, instruction, and management of reading problems" (Joshi, 2003, p. 249). Moreover, "The IQ-achievement discrepancy approach, therefore, undermines the very notion of learning disability and its usefulness as an educational concept" (Joshi, 2003, p. 249). These thoughts on a discrepancy model provide additional factors to consider for the ELL student who has been

misidentified as qualifying for special education services based upon their poor reading levels. Because of its importance the complex issues involved in evaluating ELLs must be fully understood.

The potential harm done by a lack of understanding warrants concern about the preparation school psychologists have to work with this population. The Multiple Sources of Information, Observation, Data-Driven Hypothesis, English language Development, and Language of Assessment (MODEL), developed by Olvera and Gomez-Carrillo (2011) was developed to help guide the bilingual and monolingual school psychologist through the ELL student assessment process. This process begins with the review of the student's cumulative file, specifically, looking for their English Language Development (ELD) level as well as their primary language. In addition, the examiner should review the student's home language survey, which is completed by the student's parent(s) when the ELL student enters the school district.

Another group suggests this MODEL process contributes to the school psychologist's ability to maintain an objective attitude concerning referred ELL students allowing the focus to remain on the objective data while not making eligibility decisions based upon personal beliefs or biases. In addition, focusing on students' deficits does not provide the school psychologist with a clear understanding of their learning needs, nor does it consistently "address or promote better student outcomes" (Olvera & Gomez-Carrillo, 2011). As school psychologists continue to play a vital role in the assessment of the ELL special education students' initial evaluation they should have specific training in the relevant issues when evaluating ELLs.

### **Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education**

Oswald and Coutinho (2001) assert that disproportionality should not be the focus of discussion because "factors that cause overrepresentation include the failures of the general



education system, inequities in the referral, assessment and placement process, and the subjectivity of high-incidence disability categories” (Oswald & Coutinho, 2001, p. 5). Oswald and Coutinho (2001) contend that high-quality effective instruction for all students could diminish the significance of overrepresentation. This is a valuable piece of work in attempting to create the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in closing the achievement gap for these ELL students.

Gersten and Woodward discuss the stress that immigrant students put on classroom teachers. These teachers often experience added pressure and strain forcing them to rely on special education services to help provide academic instruction for the immigrant ELL students. Gersten and Woodward also identify the coexistence of overrepresentation and underrepresentation as it relates to key issues and tensions between the areas of referral and special education instruction. They recommend a more holistic or natural approach to teaching second language learners to help increase their language comprehension rate. They also recommend the need for further collaboration between bilingual education and special education (Gersten & Woodward, 1994).

Guiberson’s literature review attempts to answer the question of why Latino students are disproportionately placed in special education, and the issues that make accurate placement for these students so complicated. His two broad themes guiding his literature review were patterns of Hispanic representation in special education and implications for practitioners. The review he has presented leads back to the issue of cultural competency and how this affects English language learner students’ academic success rate (Guiberson, 2009).

Fletcher and Navarette (2003) suggest the methods of assessing students require outdated professional development standards to be brought in line with the most current research as it relates to second language acquisition and cognitive development. Again, as in other studies the

authors are precise in their critiques of public education's ability to adapt to the changing demographics and realities associated with immigration.

The authors also shared that the makeups of special education departments nationwide have inadequacies that are confronting this student population on a daily basis. Another area they critiqued was the limitations of traditional methods of assessment. They drove home the point "there is little examination of contextual contributions influencing learning" (Fletcher & Navarette, 2003, p. 36). Therefore, these culturally challenged students from diverse backgrounds need assessments that accurately measure their baseline to ensure appropriate placement for effective academic engagement.

### **Self-Advocacy and Resilience**

When students and their family cannot advocate for themselves who will advocate for them? Often these students suffer in silence when left to navigate unhelpful educational experiences alone. This advocacy piece has many components to it. However, the main advocacy piece must come from oneself in the form of self-advocacy. "Resistance capital refers to those skills that are garnered through oppositional identities/behavior that challenge instances of inequality" (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez & Cooper, 2009, p. 538). How do we ensure that administrators are following policies and protocol and not passing students into special education programs due to their blind negligence? This question becomes a significant part of the literatures gap.

Nan (2013) identifies four "best practices" as increasing comprehensible input, encouraging social collaboration, relating instruction to the real world and providing supportive learning environments combined with the high ELL population growth that creates an opportunity to maximize technology within the classroom. Technology can help support ELL students with

“convenient access to the information-gathering and presenting tools that students need and that assist teachers in making learning authentic and relevant” (Nan, 2013, p. 220).

Tellez and Waxman (2010) explore the connection between current research projects concerning effective ELL communities and the role they play in student educational success. Tellez and Waxman relied on five primary search sources in completing this meta-synthesis. Their reviews attempt to apply the body of research on effective communities for students within the ELL and educational setting. The authors limited their reviewed journals to articles published between 1990 and 2005, with the utilization of older papers to help inform their theoretical framework. This framework suggests that the role of parents, community participation, and the students’ peers help play an integral part in the ability to gain academic success (Tellez & Waxman, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Through this review of the literature, it has been shown that there are a number of interacting factors that can affect the assessment process of ELLs who are being evaluated for appropriate academic placement. These include six areas a) identification criteria for migrant students; b) the English language learner; c) assessment for educational placement; d) school psychologists and challenges in the assessment process; e) over-representation of minorities in special education; f) a better way to make placement decisions. These factors were considered in designing this study that used testimonio as a method and structure for gathering information from the three participants who shared their stories for this research.

### Chapter 3: Research Methods

During six and a half years as a special education teacher working with ELL special education students of various levels from different cultures as well as socioeconomic backgrounds, I have observed students assimilate into the special education setting with inconsistent academic and social success. Many ELL students, whether they technically qualify for special education day classes (SDC) or not, are placed in these classes because they do not fit the standard student profile. As Espinosa (2005) points out, “All children have individual differences in personality, motivation, personal experiences, and learning styles” (Espinosa, 2005, pp. 842-843). However, these differences can be overlooked for the ELL student whose predominant presentation to their new learning environment is as a non-native speaker. The language differences can create challenges on both sides; the student cannot express him or herself fully nor be understood by teachers and evaluators.

As this cultural barrier is evident in the general educational system, “It is imperative that assessors are prepared to adequately assess and intervene with children who are culturally and linguistically diverse” (CLD) (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011, p. 117). This contributes to “An overrepresentation of CLD children within special education programs that has been documented” (Oswald & Coutinho, 2001, p. 1). Moreover, “This cultural background concern is especially evident when considering ELLs placed in special education programs” (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011, p. 117). A bilingual assessment is one conducted in both L1 (primary language) and L2 (secondary language) by a qualified school psychologist who is fluent in both languages, or a monolingual English school psychologist working with a qualified interpreter (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). This study examines how a student who has labels of ELL and special education navigates the public education system.

To understand the experiences of an ELL who was placed in special education and to explore the research question, a qualitative testimonio research design was used. According to Yin (2014), testimonio studies are empirical inquiries that investigate a contemporary phenomenon “the participant” in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. Conversely, “an experiment, by comparison, does deal with the entangled situation between phenomenon and context but usually in studying non-contemporary events” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). This is why I chose to utilize a qualitative testimonio research design for my exploration. In addition, as Seidman noted, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a special education teacher with ELL students I have become more informed and have advocated for this marginalized student population. My experience as teacher, advocate, mentor and family liaison has led me to this research with the hope of expanding understanding of one student’s experience of his education and adjustment to the public school system in California.

Because of my role as both educator and researcher, it was important to monitor my perspectives and assumptions that I brought to this project and minimize the possibility of skewing the results of my study in an inadvertent direction. As it was not possible to remove the influence of my experience, it was necessary to pay attention to and examine potential impact on the results. Merriam (2009) discusses using a research design that “presupposes” a unique worldview that includes an approach to the issues of validity, reliability, and ethics.

I accomplished these “presupposes” by letting all three participants speak without interruptions except for clarification purposes. For example, when they were in the process of

providing their interpretations of a specific testimonio they were afforded the time to elaborate before asking another clarifying question. I was faithful in reporting their words, ideas and experiences as they shared. I had awareness of when they said things that did not fit with what I thought had happened. Moreover, the consultation regarding findings and conclusions was explicit and exact to their testimonios.

Emily Tancredi (2013) described her approach to this issue in her research, through the reflective methods of writing observer comments as I took notes in the field and memoing periodically during the project, I was able to take time to think about how my multiple roles and various positions shaped my research project (Horvat, Heron, Tancredi-Brice Agbenyega & Bergey, 2003, p. 101).

### **Research Question**

How does a student with an ELL and special education designation experience the K-12 educational system?

### **Participant Descriptions**

The participants in this testimonio were Juan Carlos, his father Juan Carlos Sr., and his mother Juanita Carlos (all names are pseudonyms). This testimonio identified and explored the issues Juan faced in having multiple labels in navigating his entry in fifth grade through his high school graduation to the present. I observed these participants throughout three plus years working in the same educational setting where Juan was attending high school, and had the pleasure of working with him, as well as his parents, formally and informally, during this timeframe. Additionally, during Juan's high school years these participants worked through the special education reassessment process to gain a better understanding of Juan's special education services placement.

I interviewed these individuals two-years after Juan's high school graduation to gain further insights. Through this process I have realized understanding the intersection of ELL and special education is of great importance for me as well. My goal was to reflect upon this concern through Juan's experiences as I share these interviewees' personal stories. Rubin and Rubin (2005) observe that some interviewees are shy and might be hesitant to share forthright when they are being recorded, while many will be pleased to be recorded as a way for their message to be accurately heard. Another point they made was that in their experiences with interviewing people, the subjects usually forget all about the recorder's presence. I constantly reminded myself to "do no harm," and be accurate in the transcription process. I ensured that my transcription process included consistency of time between interview and the actual transferring of data to print. I interviewed Juan's mother and father who have day-to-day knowledge of Juan's life, which helped to generate a much deeper and richer data-driven process.

### **Testimonio Methodology**

My testimonio research design was assembled to focus on identifying, recognizing, and understanding the "bounded system." Merriam (2009) describes why the "bounded system" might be selected because it is an instance of concern, issue, or hypothesis. "Ideally, for example, the design of a qualitative study is emergent and flexible, responsive to challenging conditions of the study in progress" (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). As previously mentioned, this testimonio research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system. In addition, the bounded system allows the researcher the necessary containment for the testimonio to be effectively revealed.

The bounded system of this study included the participants exercising their responsibilities within the school site and/or family structure. However, if the object of the study is not provided

explicit guidance during the interview process the true-life story might be lost in translation.

Again, the importance was to interview the right amount of people and interpret the data properly to accurately share Juan's journey.

Stake (2006) suggests that qualitative understanding of the testimonio requires experiencing the activity of the life as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation. This concept guided me to interpret the interactions amongst these individuals, and to better understand their "bound systems." Yin (2014) suggests that when testimonials are poorly designed, preceding "caveats can come together in a negative way." The context of the assessment for ELL special education students can have similar traits or boundaries amongst various programs. However, every life history retains its own unique characteristics.

Juan Carlos' testimonio characteristics present multiple layers of complexity with his label of Migrant, ELL, and special education. These labels have further complicated his ability to assimilate and better understand his personal "bounded system" to help him overcome his deficits. Juan does not know what he does not know, leading him on a personal journey of self-preservation through trial and error without the appropriate supported structure.

### **Trustworthiness**

It is ethically responsible to receive permission from the study's associated instructors and the IRB at the university. The ability to build trustworthiness and self-advocacy skills are required for this examination to be authentic (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In regards to triangulation, Mathison (1988) suggests that it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study to be able to withstand review by colleagues. The data collection process will take place in Juan's home. Stake (2006) shares that qualitative researchers investigate settings, and follow the



range of value commitments. This process includes personal interviews, and observations outside of the classroom setting. Furthermore, these results become important data for this study.

Hallett (2013) suggests that few explicit discussions about how to engage participants in the member checking process exist and that there is not an accepted industry standard amongst researchers about how to accomplish this task. As a result, Hallett shares that future researchers have little guidance regarding how to conduct this process of member checking or how to even evaluate the impact it has on the study establishing either validity or trustworthiness, whether it is positive or negative. Moreover, Hallett proposes, “The assumption is that member checking is at worst a neutral process and at best empowering” (Hallett, 2013, p. 32). This assumption can have a major impact on your study, if unchecked by the researcher.

In addition to triangulation as a major strategy to ensure validity and reliability, Merriam (2009) suggests a second strategy for ensuring the “internal validity or credibility as member checks.” Another term she uses for this is “respondent validation,” as a means for you to solicit feedback on your emerging themes from a segment of the people interviewed. She continues to say that this is the single most important process in ruling out the misinterpretations of what your participants are saying, doing, and acting out. Merriam adds that this is a good way to go back to your participants to ask if your interpretations are accurate, and “ring true.” Member checking was an important aspect for this study as it evolved.

### **Data Collection: Interviews and Process**

Interviews with Juan Carlos and his parents were conducted at his home. Juan’s interview was 90 minutes in length while his parents’ interviews were completed in one hour. Juan was interviewed individually in English while his parents were interviewed together in Spanish with a translator to ensure accuracy. For each interview, initial demographic information was gathered,

including age, place of birth, educational level, current occupation, and the family's living conditions. All interview questions were audio taped in English and Spanish for his parents, which were translated and transcribed into English for organizational purposes.

Interview questions were asked in order, with follow up questions as needed for clarification or to encourage more elaboration on a response. In addition, these interview questions were asked to gain an overview of how the family thought about the importance of an education, and included steps along their journey emigrating from Mexico to California to attain a better quality of life. The conversations were revealing, however, all three participants began answering the questions with ease as we progressed through the interviews process. They become more comfortable sharing their stories speeding up when they were excited to include testimonios they felt were important and became reserved when discussing challenging issues. For example, when the parents spoke about Juan's reassessment in the eleventh grade finding out that he could have been on a diploma track versus completing his high school certificate.

Interviews are an impactful process when integrating the interviewee's positionality, along with their life experiences to make sense of the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" from their lives. Seidman (2006) suggests that each interview encompasses many decisions that the interviewer must manage. As a result, each interview provides the foundation's detailed focus for the next interview. I used a semi-structured interview process as a primary tool, while allowing the interviewee to have flexibility to adjust the interview questions, as needed.

Another important aspect to this interview process is the ability to properly manage the length and spacing of the interviews. Seidman (2006) suggests 90 minutes as the correct length of time to utilize when planning, setting up and obtaining the right to interview the participants in a study. He states that one hour is a standard unit of time that people are conditioned to "watch the

clock,” and two hours is too much time to request someone to sit still and focus on the interview task at hand. Similarly, he suggests spacing the interviews out a minimum of three days to a week apart, allowing the participant to absorb and contemplate the previous session while not losing the connection between the two interviews. Furthermore, the development of the relationship becomes stronger as well as more positive.

I began the data collection process by considering my assumptions. I assumed the participants were not apprehensive about agreeing to be studied, as I already have an established relationship with Juan and his parents. I also assumed that it was not difficult to build the necessary trust with this individual because I have known him for over six years, been exposed to his cultural background and we have spoken extensively and found a way to bridge any remaining language barrier. In addition, I assumed Juan and his family did cooperative, open, and willing to share their personal stories about Juan’s academic and cultural experiences. However, another important assumption I had was the concern all participants might try to tell me what they think I want to hear.

The interviews took place over the summer and culminated with an exit meeting after these interviews were complete to share and review the data to ensure that Juan better understands where he is currently with regards to his career path, and what his hopes and dreams are for his future. The interviews with the parents helped bring clarity to Juan’s life history. The purpose of the exit interview is to ensure that the emerging themes from these participants’ interviews contribute to Juan’s story. “Ordinary conversations just happen; in contrast, depth interviews are structured around stages that differ in terms of what is asked and how” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 114). The interviews took place in Juan’s home. In addition, these interviews will be held in a private setting

as to protect the privacy of all three participants and to keep their responses private. Field notes and audio recordings of these interviews were collected and secured accordingly.

I first met Juan when he was 14 years old and have had ongoing contact with him over the next six years. During that time we spent time outside the school setting, where I was able to observe Juan in extracurricular activities. For example, when he received the migrant ELL student of the year award at the end of his senior school year, I attended the awards ceremony along with his parents, extended family members, and case manager. Further observations were conducted in the workspaces of the case manager, Juan's home and outside community, along with a visit to where Juan and his parents' work in the fields. The observations took place in different settings, for example, when I taught Juan to drive a truck with a five-speed manual transmission. The rationale for including this information was to determine how observing Juan in different settings could help this interview process accurately tell Juan's story, and add to his educational history.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis completion had two phases. The first phase to the data analysis was the review of the interviews conducted with all three participants before the coding process. Boeije (2002) states the aim of internal comparisons in relationship with the coding process is to develop categories and label them with the "most appropriate codes." The purpose of this second phase was to provide an analysis to answer the research question, and contribute to existing assumptions around these participants' governing processes regarding their decision-making practices. In addition, I secured an interpreter/translator to help facilitate the Spanish speaking portions of the interviews with Juan Carlos' parents. This facilitator provided translation as well as interpretation services of the audio and written data collected from these Spanish-speaking interviews.

The second phase to the data analysis was the culmination of all collected data chronicled into Google applications for further manipulation. For example, my Google drive was utilized to store the developed categories, themes, and ideas for further research opportunities. Roberts (2010) shares the utilization of software, sticky notes, index cards, or other processes used to organize data for the analysis process helps readers understand how the researcher reduced or transformed the data. Once the data was organized by grouping their answers to the interview questions into different themes the ideas emerged of how I wanted to present Juan and his parents' testimonios through the subtitles listed in chapter four. These categories cascaded naturally from the front loaded work put into developing the interview questions as to link them in a more logical sequential order. The testimonios to these questions provided the best opportunity to share Juan and his parents' journey through the K-12 public education system.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

*Grandpa used to say, "Education opens doors...Own horses, own cars and you will have a good life!" Juan Carlos*

As described in Chapter One, this study examined the experiences of an ELL student who was identified as requiring special education placement when he moved from Mexico to California at the age of nine. The results presented here are from interviews I conducted with Juan Carlos, Jr. (age 20), his mother, Juanita Carlos (age 56), and his father, Juan Carlos, Sr.(age 59). A general history of the Carlos family will be presented followed by findings from each individual interview. Interviews were conducted using testimonio to allow the experiences of Juan Carlos and his parents to be told in their own words.

In this chapter, I share Juan Carlos' experiences through his and his parents' testimonios to provide voice to their experiences growing up in Mexico along with their migration to California, and to show how these experiences affected their assimilation into everyday life. Juan Carlos' testimonio focuses on his educational background as a migrant ELL special education student. I begin this presentation of the research data with Juan and his parents as they grew up in Mexico, what education meant to them and their extended family, and how they experienced formal education in California. I end with Juan's personal reflections about the challenges he faced following his graduation from secondary school, having earned a certificate of completion, rather than a high school diploma, and his thoughts about his future.

### **Family History**

Juan was born in 1997. He spent his early years, through his first half of primary school, living with his family on his grandfather's ranch in rural Mexico, in the State of Michoacán. There were no roads or streetlights in their town of primarily farmers who worked the land for a meager

living. He grew up on this ranch with his parents, grandparents, and five older siblings. Juan Jr. and his older siblings attended school in the same setting as their parents had. Over time, additional teachers were available to teach as more infrastructure made their rural area more accessible. Juan Sr. shared, “As we saw that more parents from the surrounding area were sending their kids to school we wanted the same for our kids. We wanted them to know more than us.” Therefore, the area’s growth increased the educational demands for the youth.

Juan’s parents, having little formal education, understood that immigration to the United States of America would provide their children opportunities they would never be able to realize in Mexico. Therefore, his parents made moving to the agricultural rich California coastline a priority, allowing Juan and his siblings more opportunities in particular, educational access to attend public school beyond the sixth grade for his next older sister and him. Juan Sr. shared, “Back in Mexico you are able to attend school for free until the sixth grade. Then you had to have the ability to pay out of pocket to attend school beyond the sixth grade.” This reality made his parents decision much easier to leave their native country and extended family for the betterment of their children.

**Juan Carlos, Sr.** As a young boy, Juan Carlos, Sr. attended primary school in the same rural setting as his son would years later. He grew up on the same ranch, which belonged to his mother and father. After third grade it was necessary for him to help support the family financially by leaving school to work in Mexico City.

On the ranch where we lived the local school was very small. The school only went to the third grade and after that there were no opportunities to attend school with teachers to teach us. It was them who helped us aside from our parents. There was only one teacher who would teach all three grades. Our parents didn’t even attend school after the first grade, but

they would show us what they could. The third grade was it. After that we didn't study.

We would help our parents to work. If we didn't go to school chances are we worked to help support the family. We lived between Guanajuato, Michoacán.

This was a challenge for Juan Carlos, Sr, as a nine-year-old boy and the oldest child, to leave his parents and siblings to go make money to send home for his family and to force the fork in the road of his life by obeying decisions beyond his control. He shared that, "This was a decision made on pure survival and support for the greater good of my immediate family." Looking back on this time in his life, he shared that, "I did not have the opportunity to question whether the decision to go to the big city for work at such a young age was right or wrong." He did this out of love and support for his parents and other siblings.

Upon migrating to California, Juan's father, 48 years old at the time, went to work in the fields picking crops to make a living supporting his large family. "Our parents would try to teach us right from wrong, they would teach us more about respecting others than trying to educate us since they just knew very little academically." Juan Sr, had many responsibilities that made it difficult to ponder anything other than to work seven days a week in the fields to provide for his family. He continues to work in the same fields to this day moving from crop season to crop season. He remains a steadfast picker. This is where he feels most comfortable and able to provide for his family. He shares, "It has afforded me the opportunity to purchase a home for my large family and continue to keep a roof over our heads, and has allowed me to go back to Mexico each year to visit our extended family for the non-picking season of December through January." He shared that, "I get to take my entire family to Mexico for two months per year to visit our loved ones and give back, and remember our roots."



**Juanita Carlos.** Juanita Carlos is from the same rural setting as her husband, whose childhood took a similar path. She shared that everything was sacrificed for the greater good of the entire family. Just as her husband, she never considered any other scenario but to help support her family by going to work after the third grade.

Our parents sent us to school because the teacher from the local school would come to our house to get us to show up. If we kept on with school we would have learned more but since the teacher only taught up to the third grade there was little more we could learn. He taught us what he knew. Even if we wanted to continue our education there were very little resources at the time, but little by little there was electricity and paved roads allowing for greater opportunities for future generations. However, at the time, we lived in a very rural area where we would go by horse to the nearest town that was five kilometers down the road just to get our necessities.

Juanita worked in the agriculture fields of Mexico, working through the various crops season by season. Juanita shared that, “I knew nothing else as an option, but to help support my family by working as a migrant farm worker picking various crops.” For example, “I remember picking vegetables until my hands were worn and sore beyond belief.” She shared that, “I knew I wanted more for my own family one day when it was time.” Juanita’s “grit” has spread to her children, especially Juan, her youngest child.

**Juan Carlos.** There are six kids in the Carlos family. Juan is the youngest and his next older sister had most of her education in California. She is the only other family member to graduate from high school receiving a high school diploma from the same school as Juan. As the youngest male to receive formal education the level of expectations for his success were dramatically increased. Juan attended primary school in Mexico with his peers and siblings

traveling a long distance daily to and from his school. As Juan was to enter the fourth grade in Mexico the school made the decision to retain him in the third grade. According to his parents they were told that Juan needed to repeat this grade because of his lack of academic success. His parents shared that they do not remember the school in Mexico providing work samples as evidence. At the time, they had faith that the school leaders made the decision in Juan's best interest. They do remember his maestro telling them that, "Juan is reading at a lower level than he should be going into the fourth grade."

Once Juan had completed his second year of third grade his family migrated to the coastal region of California where the agricultural industry was thriving. The opportunities there gave his parents and siblings a better chance at living a more prosperous life. Upon this move to the United States, Juan was moved to join his age appropriate peer level and put into the fifth grade, ultimately, skipping the fourth grade altogether. As they had in Mexico, Juan and his parents put faith in the American education system, "They must be doing this for the right reasons because they are the ones in charge." This is where Juan's educational trajectory took an unexpected turn, that he now feels put him at a disadvantage,

I did not know anyone and did not know the English language I could not speak up for myself. I just went along with what I was told to do. I knew that I felt more comfortable around my fellow peers who spoke Spanish, rather than the white kids who spoke English. It occurred to me that nobody else was paying attention to us, our group, other than the bilingual instructional aide who helped us everyday.

Juan's transition into high school was even more challenging when he had to combat being falsely identified as a Southern gang member, which he was not in the least. He has always associated himself with being a vaquero (Mexican Cowboy) like his brother-in-law.

When Juan entered the American public education system he was placed in special education mid-year during his fifth grade school year when he was identified as having a reading deficiency. His parents did not remember whether they were involved in Juan's transitional decision-making process to special education. They do remember having to sign paperwork to move him from a regular general education classroom setting into a more restrictive special education setting. He was placed in a special education day class (SDC) where he received minimal exposure to the general education setting. His parents do remember informing the district that Juan had been retained in the third grade while attending school back in Mexico. However, the district chose to advance Juan Carlos to his age-appropriate peer grade level, which launched his educational trajectory in an unknown direction. Ultimately, this educational track revealed Juan's true ability to academically engage effectively. Furthermore, Juan's educational journey has yet to unfold, and has a bright future when he re-enters school for additional career skill development.

### **Education**

As Juan's grandfather shared with him and his father before him, "If you want to be somebody you need an education." Even though there were limited opportunities for attending school, these words echoed throughout Juan's entire family, creating the value of formal education. The challenge of physical access to school because of their rural location and limited roadway infrastructure combined with low social wealth in Mexico were the driving forces behind the lack of access to formal education for multiple Carlos generations according to both of his parents. In the United States, access to an education is available without question for those who have the appropriate social wealth to help navigate their Fair and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). This was not the case for the Carlos family migrating from their life in Mexico.

Juan, Sr shared that his family experienced the stereotype of “under valuing education” when they arrived with their family here, on the California Central Coast, as immigrants who had little social wealth. This happened because their children were not educated to the standards of this new culture. He remembers taking his family to the local flea market to buy some household necessities to be treated by other customers who appeared to be Mexican like we were foreigners. “They looked at us in a standoffish kind of way.” This lack of acceptance appeared to be the realization that they lived and worked within the agricultural community limiting their social capital.

In reality, this is often due to limited resources in their home country. However, Juan’s parents and their parents before them understood the value that an education has on life’s trajectory. They put themselves second to the best interests of their children. Juan’s parents’ decision to migrate to the United States for a better chance for their children and their children’s children and beyond was made with serious contemplation. Personal sacrifices were made in this vein for future family opportunities to gain access to better educational services. They left family and homeland and the security these offered for the uncertain future. Ultimately, the goal was to have a chance at a much better quality of life. Juan’s mother and father wanted more for their children. Juan, Sr. shared,

By the time Juan Jr. came into this world, the town had evolved more and I really wanted him to get educated since I never was. We didn’t want to just stay where we lived. We knew there was a greater possibility of us being successful if we made a location move. I myself made a goal to move once I got permission to come to the United States to bring my kids to live over here. The ranch didn’t have much to offer. Water was very limited and the

electricity would go out often. I wanted to give them a better life all around and have them be successful. I/we wanted Juan and our family to achieve the most that they could.

Juan Jr's parents understood the connection between having an education and attaining an improved quality of life. The message Juan's parents made clear was, "School is what can open more doors for Juan and he will be able to have more chances at living a successful life." Juan's self-efficacy became very important to them, as they described his ability to "overcome life's challenges, persevere and not give up, and become empowered to make educational decisions for his future family's children." The driving force and/or overarching theme for the family's migration to the states centered around increasing the chance that their children could have an appropriate education. In hindsight, Juan shared that he appreciates this sacrifice that his parents made for him and his siblings, leaving behind their extended family members in Mexico for the betterment of their immediate family's future.

### **Beginning School in California**

The reason why the Carlos family chose the central coast of California was due to the rich agricultural region and the opportunities to gain employment for the majority of the calendar year. In addition, they felt most comfortable in this region because of the strong and vibrant Michoacán presence throughout the community. His parents agreed that these two factors combined with all of their children being ELLs made sense for them to move their family to this region providing them with some language and cultural familiarity. Juan and his next older sister were the only two family members to finish attending school here in the United States, but his parents felt this move would provide all of their children more opportunities. Juan Jr. shared,

My older siblings because of them being much older than me have always looked after me like they were more of a parent than an older brother or sister. I remember them giving advice to stay in school when I wanted to follow them into the fields to make money.

Juan Jr's siblings are an important part of the extended family who, upon moving to the United States, followed their parents and began working in the fields six to seven days a week from sunup to sundown. This reflected the family values that everyone contributes to help the family survive.

**Primary school (fifth and sixth grade).** When Juan and his family came to the United States of America in search of a better life they enrolled him in the public school closest to where they lived and worked. This K-6 school was close to their home allowing Juan to walk to and from school where the family did not have to worry about his safety. The school had approximately 650 students and served all of their local community's children. This included a generous population of other ELL students. At the time, he was tested and determined to be an ELL who only spoke his primary language, Spanish. Juan was placed in the fifth grade based on his age rather than in fourth grade based upon his previous completion of third grade in Mexico.

Juan spent his first semester in the general education setting and was provided with language supports from a bilingual instructional aide. This instructional aide had many students to support and was able to provide whole group support for the majority of their class time. Juan remembers receiving minimal individual academic supports whether it was for reading, math or other subject areas. The instructional aide and the general education teacher were the ones who requested that Juan be assessed for his reading challenges. Upon additional reflection, his parents now feel the school was more concerned with Juan being with his age appropriate peers than with what he needed in the form of academic instruction. Once placed in the fifth grade, at the mid-

year, the school site team decided Juan needed special education services for his reading deficiencies and he was moved to this department.

When Juan was moved to the special education department due to his reading issues his parents were aware that he was placed into the special education setting due to his reading disability. Juan's parents ability to only speak Spanish along with no English reading abilities, combined with their work schedules, made it impossible for them to help Juan practice reading outside the school setting. His sisters, who did not speak English either, tried to help him with his reading, but were living their own lives full of challenges, limiting Juan's opportunities to help build his Spanish reading fluency. Reading skills in Spanish, that would have been transferable to Juan learning to speak and read English, were what further limited his overall fluency capabilities. In Juan's perspective this was even more challenging because none of the fifth grade general education teachers spoke Spanish so they had little ability to support him academically. Juan recalled,

I was put with other Spanish speakers, who did not speak any English and were struggling academically. I believe I was placed in special education because there was additional Spanish language support. The special education setting with other ELL students made me happy because my friends were predominately Spanish speakers. I do not remember if I had shared this fact with my parents.

Juan liked this special education setting, "because it was much easier." He also shared that his need to feel welcomed and appreciated in the school setting helped increase his likelihood of having academic success. Juan's parents working sunup to sundown everyday, put their faith in the school system and trusted that educators were acting in their son's best interest. Juan Sr

shared, “In Mexico the maestro is almighty, and you always knew they would do what was in the best interest of my children.”

**Middle school.** When Juan was asked about his middle school experience he remembers that during this time he becomes more comfortable with his educational surroundings. However, he felt that what he was learning was not very challenging. For example, Juan shared,

We would play a lot of games while learning nothing about our Mexican culture. We never asked why we were doing one thing or another. We just went along with what we were told. I just would remember what my mom and dad told me, to listen and do as I was told. I knew this very well because of the way my parents raised me to respect my elders and people of authority.

In the eighth grade, Juan remembers being in a special reading intervention classroom setting full of other Spanish speakers, as the teacher’s instructional aide assessed their abilities to speak English in a whole group setting. Juan does not remember being individually assessed by any school personnel in his primary language when he was in the eighth grade. He just remembers practicing his English in a whole group setting with his Spanish speaking friends and a bilingual aide.

I can remember the aide asking the entire group questions, as we spoke words in English and then calling on individual students to repeat for the entire class what they had said. This made me feel weird being called out in front of my Spanish-speaking friends. I did not like the way they did this because I felt bad for some of my friends whose English was not as good as mine. This made me shy about communicating further with these people who I felt did not even know me, but acted like they cared about me.



Upon further inquiry Juan shared that when it was time for middle school graduation he was told he was being “socially” promoted into the high school setting. He explained “socially” promoted as not receiving an eighth grade diploma, but being moved along to high school with his age appropriate peers. The practice of “social promotion” in the public school system is commonly used when students do not reach academic proficiency levels that qualify them for successful completion of eighth grade. Rather than retain these students they are allowed to start high school, which is justified by the “need” to stay in school with their same age peers. This may or may not be in the best interests of the student, even though it is presented this way. Juan, who did not attend fourth grade at all, entered fifth grade speaking only Spanish as an ELL, and was moved to high school before he was proficient in skills he needed for academic success. Juan said that he never questioned this because he did not know or understand the consequences of this as any different when he was moved forward to the fifth grade without completing fourth grade in primary school.

As previously stated, the language assessments on which these decisions made were administered in a whole group (10-12 count) setting in English from the teacher, with a Spanish speaking instructional aide who would translate the questions into Spanish. Juan just went along with this process while never sharing this with his parents prior to them listening in on this interview.

Furthermore, the way this group assessment was conducted did not take into account the potential for marginalizing students by testing them in an uncomfortable social situation, possibly leading to academic disengagement and calling into question the validity of the testing results. Students who are made to feel shame or discomfort may not be able to fully demonstrate what they

know and their true abilities can go unrecognized. Ultimately, this affects their educational placement and trajectory.

As Juan's parents looked back on his eighth grade three-year Triennial assessment they understood more clearly that the situation and placement was not optimal for Juan Jr's needs. They shared, "We did not know or understand the importance of assessing Juan in Spanish as a key in his educational journey. We believed that things were as they were supposed to be." They spoke of the whole group assessments as being a good thing for Juan and were comfortable with his placement into special education in a Special Day Class (SDC) setting instead of a main streamed resource (RSP) setting. They remember asking Juan how he felt about being put into this group; he told them that he was happier in this group.

**High school.** As Juan transitioned to the high school setting he felt comfort because his older sister attended the same school. This made his mother happy, knowing he would be looked after and he would have a better chance at being academically successful. Juan shared that,

By the end of the ninth grade I started talking to everybody because they knew I was not a gangster wearing clothing that represented one group or another. Things got a lot better as I began to open up to teachers. I came to be part of something bigger than what I had previously realized. The other kids and I began to hangout outside of the school setting. We became homies.

Juan became more academically engaged with what was going on in the classroom. He took an interest in how an education could provide him future opportunities like his parents had described to him and his siblings.

In addition to being labeled as special education and ELL, Juan was considered a migrant student who received additional supports through the migrant services center. Juan's parents

communicated with the migrant student services center on his high school campus as needed. Juan Sr shared, “The people in the migrant student services center, who worked to support students like my son, are from the same backgrounds in Mexico, and they knew what my family and I had been through immigrating to the United States.”

As for his migrant status, Juan’s parents felt comfort in knowing that these people were advocating for their son’s educational rights and providing him with additional services when needed. Juan would have another “safe place” on campus to hangout if he felt the need to go to their offices to discuss anything he might have concerns about or just want to talk about his career/job training prospects. Juan’s parents were proud and present when his school reached out to them for evening events. When Juan, as a senior in high school, received the migrant student of the year award for his academic progress, his parents were present. He was recognized as a migrant ELL special education student who graduated from high school. This was a proud moment for his entire family to show Juan their support for his academic accomplishments.

Juan’s peer relationships were limited primarily to his classroom setting peers. These students were primarily taught in a special day classroom (SDC) setting, excluding elective classes such as Art, PE or Bicycle Repair Shop. Juan shared, “I loved my Bicycle Repair Shop class because I could use my hands to build something I was good at and enjoyed. I also liked taking Art because I liked drawing.” These classes were times when Juan would be exposed to peers outside his regular comfort zone. Juan shared,

I wouldn’t talk to people outside of my regular class setting because we did not have anything in common. My school experiences were mainly going from my English class, to my Math class to my Science class to my History class with the same students.

Therefore, Juan went to different classes to experience other subjects without being mainstreamed, it was still an SDC setting with the same students in attendance. This limited Juan's contact with students outside of his immediate academic setting. In fact, Juan continued to prefer this type of school setting as previously discussed.

When Juan was assessed with his three-year triennial as a junior in high school, the test was provided in his primary language to gain a clear understanding of Juan's true academic and cognitive capabilities. When Juan was asked about previous assessments he shared, "I don't remember if they had tested me in Spanish in the eighth grade, but when I came to the United States I only spoke Spanish. But in eighth grade I spoke pretty good English." The academic assessment provided was the Bateria III Woodcock-Munoz, which is the Spanish version of the Woodcock Johnson III, Test of Achievement. Analysis of Juan's assessment results documented that he had a higher level of proficiency than previously thought. The realization in Juan's third year of high school that his academic proficiency was sufficient to be on a diploma track in high school raises questions that are central to this study.

Juan had not been scheduled in the required courses to earn a high school diploma because of the previous eighth grade assessment identifying him as not being academically proficient in many required areas. Upon this realization by the case manager, it was deemed too late for Juan as a junior to go back and take the necessary courses it would have required for him to gain a high school diploma versus a certificate of completion. This was ultimately discussed with his parents and Juan. When Juan was questioned about this misidentification he was calm and undeterred. He said, "I was not mad because I was going to do what I wanted to do." When probed further about this issue Juan added,

I didn't really want to go to college. I just couldn't see myself going to college, but I had a plan to go back to a trade school at some point to get out of the fields after I saved up enough money to buy a truck and take care of my personal needs. I wanted my own money to buy my own things. I wanted to get out of school and get a job to start earning money to move on in my life. I could not realize at the time the missed opportunity.

Juan and his parents did not blame any one person or the school system at all, "We felt that this was a mistake that involved too many pieces for us to become angry or blame someone."

His parents went on to share that they just wanted their son to be happy, and at the time he was not interested in attending more school beyond the following school year as a senior. His parents knew that Juan wanted to earn money before going on to further his education. Even though they preferred for him to continue his education beyond high school to earn a higher quality of life they supported him to this end. They understood his desire to make his own money in becoming self-sufficient. His mother said,

We were so proud of him just finishing high school because he was the only one besides his one sister to graduate from high school. This was a great moment for his father and I seeing him accomplish so much that we did not.

However, they have continually challenged him to go back to school whether it is at the local community college or a trade school.

### **Transitions and Adjustment**

Juan shared that his transition to the American public education system was, Hard at first because I didn't know anybody... I went to a very small rural school in Mexico when I was young. The only time I saw my friends was at school because we lived so far from each other on our own ranches. We did not get to hangout before or after

school because of the distance between our homes. I missed my few friends I had in Mexico when we immigrated to the United States, but I get to see a couple of them when I go back to the ranch each year with my family. I like living here better though because there is more to do, and I have more friends that I work with in the fields than I did in Mexico. I do miss my grandmother when we are here in California though. She has many animals on her ranch and I can be the vaquero I am. When I transitioned from middle school,

I was nervous going from middle school to high school. I knew as a freshman that I had my sister on campus in case any problem came up. She protected me from anybody who thought about messing with me.

In addition,

This is when Ms. Gomez became my case manager and took an interest in me... She helped me fit in with my peers by including me in extracurricular activities along with other students. She would take us on cool field trips to places like the local community college to check out their agriculture program. This is when I started talking and hanging out with everyone in this group.

Juan found a way to fit in by communicating that he was not associated with the Southerners, who were known for wearing the color blue, through consistent dialogue with these individual students.

His school of attendance was predominantly known as a Northerner school associated with the color red. Ultimately, he became socially accepted with his newfound friends, while in the school setting and beyond. They had identified him as a gangster because he liked wearing the

color blue, however, he did not comprehend this fact until learning this red versus blue color issue through life experiences. His wardrobe quickly took on new color coordination. As he explained,

When I transitioned from high school graduation to working in the fields three years ago I realized even more how much my family means to me. It was like when Mr. Knight told me in high school, you will be lucky to count your friends on one hand after graduating from high school. My family and I became even closer hanging out more after work discussing life.

Juan's testimonios are consistently related to his academic trajectory, demonstrating that his self-efficiency has developed throughout his educational journey.

#### **After High School: Thinking About the Future**

Currently, Juan's parents, siblings and several former teachers want him to go back to school and earn a college degree or a trade certificate. Juan shared that his sisters tell him that what they want for him is to earn an honest living and to be able to support his future family. Juan's family members realize Juan is the one who can make a difference by obtaining additional education. His family understands they have limited educational experience compared to Juan. They do not want Juan to be stuck in the fields like them to earn a living.

Juan's sister who graduated from the same high school as he did already has children, and does not have the opportunity to re enter school at this time. His parents shared, "We will support him with everything he needs if he goes back to school; bedroom, food, everything he needs." Grandpa always said, "If you want to be somebody you need an education." In addition, Juan shared that he felt additional comfort in his mother wanting him to attend the same high school as his sister to help him gain a more positive academic learning environment with his fellow primarily Spanish-speaking peers.

It was in his senior year of high school when Juan's educational journey became better for him, as he began to open up with his teachers. At this time he also began building things with his brother-in-law and shared that,

Building things with your hands gives you a sense of accomplishment. I enjoy going to work with my brother-in-law on my off work days in the fields to make additional money building things. It makes me feel good when I get to see what we have built for that day, whether it is a wall in an addition to a house, or brick walkway leading to the house. It reminds me that I have talents others may not have, and this makes me feel good about my future work opportunities. I know I can do things that other people will pay good money for me to do.

Juan's testimonio about his future opportunities to earn a living making things helps demonstrate his willingness to explore, learn and further his experience for his own family. In addition, the above statement reveals a sense of confidence and pride in his accomplishments. His willingness to gain this vocational skill demonstrates an excellent launch point for him to re-enter the educational field as a lifelong learner.

Juan's ability to perform mathematics equations as well as being fluent in English and Spanish has afforded him the opportunity to move up from being a picker of fruits and vegetables to being the person who translates for his boss with customers. In addition, he is the one who counts the quantity of products the pickers yield resulting in compensation for their services. This has been a great source of pride and opportunity for Juan as he shared, "Using my math skills for my work, and being able to speak English allows me to help support my boss who doesn't even know English. I translate for my boss with our customers who do not speak Spanish."

When Juan shared why an education is important to him, he said,



It is where you learn everything. It allows you to buy things and live a better life. When you are happy and make a good living you can own a house, cars and have a family.

Potentially, even have children in the future. I can hear my Grandpa from heaven always telling me, 'Education opens doors... Own horses, own cars and you will have a good life!'

Juan has his entire family's support as they continually tell him to go back to school, or at least go to a vocational school in order to get a certificate for a trade like construction, electrician or mechanic working on cars. Juan is almost 21 years old, and has been out of school for three years making going back to any kind of school a real challenge. The family encourages him to do this because he will be happier working with something he enjoys, and will in turn make more money to support a family in the future.

His sister's husband positively influences Juan, as he is able to go to work with him on his off days from the fields to earn extra money, learning to build things.

My brother-in-law is a Vaquero, Spanish for cowboy. He is my hero! I enjoy going to work with him because he teaches me new things all the time. I learn skills I can use to make something of myself!

This source of knowledge has encouraged Juan to understand supporting the family as a whole is "Muey importante" and that this gives you additional courage to try new things for the betterment of the entire family.

Juan added, "We live together in my parents house like a family compound. My sister, her husband and kids in one part of the house with my brother and I in another, and my parents yet in another." Upon conducting these interviews the familial economic support amongst the entire family was evident. The family eats meals together in a common dining area and socializes in

common areas of their home. For example, they congregate and listen to music together in their outside cabana, and then retreat to their separate, but connected sleeping quarters.

Juan's decision to join the workforce upon earning his certificate of completion from high school was solely based upon making money to help the family by beginning to help support himself. In that, his parents and siblings continue to encourage Juan to go back to school. His motivation continues to be to make money in becoming self-sufficient. Juan shared, "I know how hard my parents have worked and continue to by providing a roof over our heads. I felt it was time for me to pay them back by contributing to the family's future." Juan's family's goal for him is to become the best he can be, and if he feels he needs to contribute financially to the family and to hold off going back to school they are completely supportive. Juan Sr. shared,

To me I wished he would have continued his education by going straight to college or a trade school, but then again, we will continue to support him where he wants to go. I always wanted him to study because it's important to his future and it will only be brighter.

Juan has family support to go back to school and he eventually wants to gain a vocational skill as previously mentioned, however he wants a fast program and is not interested in a four-year program. "Like electrician, mechanic or construction like my brother-in-law, who is in the construction workers union."

When Juan was asked about the value his parents and/or family put on education growing up as a migrant ELL special education student he shared,

My family always states, 'Go back to school... You can do it... It's never too late!' This always makes me feel good that they continue to support me, but I want to make money and feel like I contribute to our family's cause.

This statement reflects Juan's level of value that he puts on his family over his own educational needs. He values the whole more than the single piece, namely, his personal needs. He continues to believe that his reentry to gain a vocational trade is imminent, and will pay for itself over time. He is focused and committed to this cause.

**Institutional cultural barriers.** Juan is now 20 years old. When talking about plans for the future, Juan shared, "I will never give up on this dream to go back to trade school, but I have bigger responsibilities at the present time, like my family's quality of life. I want to give back when it really matters." Juan is not interested in more school right now as previously stated, however, he believes that he is building additional self-confidence and more courage by entering the workforce. Juan takes care of himself; he supports himself financially and lives with his parents. Supporting his boss with various responsibilities that others cannot empowers him to believe in himself. He does not have educated elders to look to for additional insights other than his loved ones who continue to support him unconditionally. Juan understands the barriers he is up against. He continues to learn how his culture actually benefits him and is utilizing these learned traits to his advantage. For instance, he uses his mathematics skills and the translation opportunity he has received from helping his boss.

With only one sibling before him graduating from high school Juan has limited access to educational guidance besides his teachers from the past who he has reached out to for additional guidance and support. His one sister is the only other family member to graduate from high school by earning a high school diploma. This helped influence him to persevere and graduate from high school resulting in his mother and father being very proud of him. About receiving a certificate of completion rather than a high school diploma, Juan shared, "I know if things had been different

concerning my schooling opportunities things could have been different. But, my experiences have made me the person who I am. I like who I am!”

I asked if Juan could do high school all over again, given the chance to earn a high school diploma instead of a certificate, would he have wanted to attend a four-year college straight out of high school. He stated,

No, I would not jump straight into college. I still would have wanted to earn money to help my family and provide things for myself, instead of depending on my parents for everything. My parents did however encourage me to attend community college or a vocational school to learn a trade. It makes me feel good paying for my own clothes, and things I need or want like saving up for a pickup truck. I did not have the desire to attend college or a trade school at the time anyway. I now have a lot more self-confidence in myself and want to go back to school to become a mechanic, electrician or some other trade like my brother-in-law becoming an union carpenter. I know the more you study and the better the education... the more you earn... Like doctors, lawyers and teachers do.

Juan has used educational abilities to maximize his opportunities working in the fields moving from entry-level picker to a position of box counter and translator for his boss. He has increased his hourly wage by performing these additional duties as well as working with his developed math skills counting boxes, which removes him from the actual act of picking vegetables and fruits. He gained these skill sets through his education becoming more proficient with his mathematics and communication skills. If he had earned a diploma, he feels he still would have made the choice to work after high school. “Moving up from picker to box counter and translator for my boss does make the decision to go back to school more difficult with the added

money I made in my check.” But we cannot know what the diploma might have done for him when and if he decides to go to school again.

Juan’s 11th grade triennial reassessment in Spanish was key for him to better understand his true comprehension and cognitive skill levels. As a result, he was not given the opportunity to attend the classes he would have needed to receive a high school diploma. In reflection, Juan shared influences towards receiving an education,

Communicating with others like my peers, my grandpa, and my teachers, Ms. Gomez and Mr. Knight, I know if I stay positive and focused on continuing to learn everything I can about agriculture and construction types of things I will become very successful. I want to one day have a family and make a better life for my wife and children.

Upon further inquiry Juan shared that like his parents have told him before and his grandparents before him, “This is what we want for our children.”

**Interpretations.** Two overarching themes developed from these testimonial interviews with Juan Carlos and his parents. One is that Juan had the great benefit of a supportive family who valued him and believed in the power of education. The second is that accurate cultural understanding is very important in the evaluation and education of migrant ELL students. Juan’s experience shows that social capital made it possible to meet his and his family’s needs. His expanded cultural understanding allows him to go between the Spanish speaking and the English speaking communities with ease.

Juan’s ability to speak both languages fluently has helped him gain this cultural standing. Ultimately, he has gained social wealth beyond that of his parents and a majority of his siblings. Again, he has only one sister who has accomplished graduating from high school, and is considered bilingual. This has given Juan a great sense of confidence looking to the future

economically. He realizes he is on a positive pathway to meet his future challenges head on. Moreover, Juan's ability to constantly adapt and challenge himself to stay positive and use his confidence to persevere where others have failed has shown him how positive psychology has played a role in his young life.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how a child from a migrant farmworker family with ELL experiences navigated the public school system while identified as requiring special education placement. Review of the literature revealed little current research into the emotional, social, and vocational impact on an ELL student who has not received a culturally appropriate education. To consider these issues, this qualitative study was designed using testimonios as a methodological framework. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the ELL special education students' perspectives on their academic needs and experiences. Testimonio was chosen because of the researcher's role as a mirror for the narrator of the story to build connections with an audience outside their realm because of "the conditions of subalternity to which testimonio bears witness" (Beverley 2000, p.256). The testimonio creates a pathway through which these often marginalized students can tell their stories of educational experiences that were based on decisions made by others with little to no input by them. Testimonios were taken from the Carlos family, Juan Sr, Juanita, and their 20-year-old son Juan Jr, using a set of questions I developed.

This study confirms Cranston-Gingras and Paul's (2008) research that the need for full participation and trust with the student and family is critical to successful assessment placement. However, my study showed that there was "blind trust" from the family and no obvious attempt by the public school system to make sure they understood the long-term consequences of the decisions being made. This "blind trust" was culturally influenced by the family's native country. Juan's parents' educational journey stopped back in Mexico while attending school only to the third grade. They shared "Back home the maestro is almighty and you do not question them when it comes to what is best for your children educationally. They have the final word when it comes to your children's educational decisions."

This issue identifies potential “blindness” on the part of educators to the position in the world the migrant family finds itself in. For example, it may be easy to take advantage of their language issues, power differential and the fact that they may see any education in the United States as better than Mexico. This supports LeStAIM theory of Lajai-Rodriguez and colleagues (2013) who suggest that qualitative data can help school psychologists understand these students’ strengths instead of focusing on their deficits. In addition, using testimonios from students and parents could tell their stories in their own words. My study confirms that Guiberson’s (2009) research regarding inaccurate placement can have long-lasting effects negatively impacting the ELL special education student academic success. In Juan’s educational journey, his family’s contentment with his graduation from high school with a certificate reflects his academic success. However, their satisfaction with his success does not include the possibility that he could have had increased possibilities on a high school diploma track, which could have supported Juan to challenge him academically.

The issues identified in Chu’s (2011) research resulted in some of these students dropping out of school altogether. However, Juan did not drop out from school even though he was not getting the best education. He did not know there were other options and he was content where he was placed. His personal journey did not include academic rigor that could have developed his mindset to want more in the way of increased educational challenges. We will never know if he would have continued on to a four-year college institution if he had been placed on a diploma track rather than a certificate track. Without a high school diploma his higher education trajectory would have demanded that he go to the community college setting prior to entering a four-year college or university. Ultimately, his mindset just wanted to exit school to gain employment where he thought he belonged.



This study shows that there are points in the placement decision-making process where parents and educators could work together to be more involved and fully informed of the consequences. For example, by Juan's parents being more aware of his academic needs, it could have helped educators have the best information available about how to place him in the least resistant environment (LRE). Another positive is that it will get the educators to think about the long-term effects for the student when making these important educational decisions.

My theoretical framework used testimonio to gather the data about Juan and his parents' immigration to the United States and their experiences in the K-12 public school system. In addition, positive psychology theory helped me understand what it means, what testimonio is, what it is used for and how it helped me look at this family, and the interview information they provided me. This framework provided a much deeper view of Juan and his family's journey.

This study informed my research purpose by providing an in-depth view of one student and his parents' experiences of the California public school system. I learned that there are educators and researchers who think about these issues and that practice needs to catch up with research. Clearly, Juan is a success as he has made good use of his educational experiences. In doing the study, I realized that I am disappointed that Juan did not have more options. I can see where he might have gone on with his education, but his parents can see how far Juan has come from the little boy who had to repeat third grade in Mexico. They see him as a complete success and will support leveraging his bilingual ability. Review of the testimonios resulted in the identification of two major themes that were true for Juan and may help understand the needs of other ELL students.

### **Importance of Parental Involvement**

The first theme is the involvement of parents when considering the academic history of any

new student in a school, but is especially important for ELL students to accurately identify their needs. For Juan and his family, the admission process would have been more informative if his parents were asked more specific questions about his previous academic experiences, including the challenges. When Juan started school in California, his parents told the school site administration that he had repeated third grade in his local school in Mexico because his reading skills were below grade level. When the district made the placement decision they chose to advance him to the fifth grade with age appropriate peers disregarding his academic history.

In the situation of the ELL student's new country of immigration and new school of residency their personal experiences and previous education need to be understood and valued to make appropriate educational placement decisions. These educational decisions make the difference between whether ELL students receive the additional supports necessary for them to become academically proficient, or become a minimal statistic. For instance, educators might answer the question, "How do we know where our students are going if we do not know where they have been?" Entering the fourth grade could have aided Juan's remedial skills and allowed him to engage at the appropriate grade level. His parents were not given enough information to understand the potential impact of this decision on Juan's life.

### **Assessment in Educational Placement**

The second major theme is the role of assessment in educational placement for the ELL student. For Juan the placement decision was complicated by his ELL status and his reading learning disability. His parents are not sure exactly how his placement was finalized resulting in his being moved to an SDC setting. This may have happened by the second semester of fifth grade, which was his first year in the California public school system. It was during his fifth through eighth grade years that he learned to speak, read, and write English. However at the end

of eighth grade he did not demonstrate academic proficiency that would allow graduation but was socially promoted to high school, where he was also placed in SDC. It was at his triennial assessment in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade that it was determined that he did have a reading disability but could have been mainstreamed with appropriate supports as a resource student (RSP). At this point it was too late for him to complete diploma track coursework and he finished with a high school certificate. Juan's story demonstrates the importance of understanding the relationship between being an ELL and needing special education services. In addition, Juan was not tested in his primary language at the previous triennial assessment in eighth grade. If he had been evaluated in Spanish the outcomes might have been more similar to the outcome in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, resulting in placement on a diploma track with appropriate academic support for his reading disability.

### **Recommendations for research**

In the future, the results of this study could be extended to a larger qualitative study in a community of ELL school districts and/or regional segments to carry this research question further and at a much deeper comprehensiveness. The expansion of the testimonio model to a broader range and larger number of immigrant students has the potential to tell their stories to better understand what their academic needs and experiences are and increase academic assimilation for ELL students while also respecting their histories and culture. In addition, research into the impact of various cultural issues that clash and/or that the immigrant ELL student encounters could provide another lens for researchers to explore further. Moreover, the ability for educators to talk to parents to determine what supports they need and what barriers they face in advocating for their children could reveal additional opportunities for further research.

### **Recommendations for practice**

My research study has identified three areas with many cascading pieces attached to them.

These areas for future considerations are: Assessment of primary language to ensure mastery prior to instruction in English, appropriate language interventions with clear benchmarks to assure mastery of the new language, the need to remove assumptions from the intervention equation to fully utilize strength-based assessments that help students overcome their deficits, and the need for further full inclusion through well thought out school site based cultural/college/career centers to welcome all students. Mastery of these components could be potentially impactful ways to help close the achievement gap previously unrealized. Furthermore, the ability to have excellent data combined with the necessary and appropriate conversations will also assist in moving this issue beyond its current level of comprehension.

Many resources are already available, however, they are always tight for students. These policies and procedural resources, which define Kushner's (2008) best practices instructional strategies for assessments require: accurate information with cultural and familial context by using qualitative data (Laija-Rodriguez & Colleagues) LeStAIM (2013) testimonio to gather this important data. This data can help support teachers who are under stress and struggling for answers to student intervention needs that might not reveal themselves until it is too late.

Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011) suggest that ELL students be assessed using the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to help determine the most appropriate language of assessment before any psycho-educational assessment is conducted. In addition, Joshi (2003) shares that the discrepancy approach is based upon a hunch that LD poor readers are qualitatively divergent from non-LD poor readers, which further marginalizes these students on false positive reading assessment results, undermining the notion of LD and its usefulness as an educational concept. In Juan's case, his lack of reading success directly related to his need for additional literacy intervention supports, which would have built further reading fluency

opportunities. Ultimately, building his reading resiliency to overcome his English language issues, as they related to his academic success.

The need for strength-based assessments becomes a positive solution to effective instruction. This helps allow for the ability to build back roads from strengths to overcome student weaknesses. Research shows that ELL students want to have content proficiency; however, over the course of their educational careers many have had little academic success due to inappropriate instructional services. In Juan Jr's case, his lack of educational challenge lead him on a "minimalist" pathway of little academic "rigor," which left him with limited options and fewer choices than he should have had upon his high school graduation. Many educators have assumed that understanding one's deficits leads them to properly identify the student's appropriate educational needs. When in many cases, these deficit-based assessments lead to unnecessary and/or misleading assumptions, which ultimately negatively impact the individual student's educational trajectory.

Richard, Klinger, Brown, and Artiles (2005) advocate for school leadership to use a "self-assessment instrument" to help build schools that are more culturally responsive to the needs of our growing diverse learning communities. In addition, this could benefit the increasing numbers of students from different backgrounds and help institutions develop prevention and intervention strategies, and enhancing the learning environment for teachers and students alike. Abedi promotes assessments in the student's primary language to gain a more robust data-driven picture from the student's true abilities this helps reflect the need for strength based assessment processes to fully understand what the individual student's educational needs are (Abedi, 2005).

The need for cultural acceptance has revealed an opportunity to develop further student inclusion through a more welcoming, diversified learning environment. These more inclusive

school sites could be built within the College/Career center already in place at most secondary school sites. This opportunity could become an excellent location to design a more welcoming/inclusive school-wide learning environment for all students by adding a cultural component. As Gersten and Woodward (1994) recommend, for additional collaboration amongst professionals who support ELL students, it becomes evident that this cultural challenge needs to be viewed as an excellent opportunity to help address the achievement gap in schools with high ELL students. The school-based cultural center within the existing school site College/Career center could become an excellent incubator for all students to help identify their cultural needs more seamlessly through this process.

These redesigned spaces could help build additional inclusion along with improved academic engagement through culturally relevant instructional strategies at an increased rate. These spaces would be reinforcement for the ELL students that they belong, and are included in the overall school site's educational mission statement. It would also create expanded mentoring opportunities for these different cultural subgroups. I will enumerate upon Tellez and Waxman's (2010) suggestion that the role of parents, community participation, and the students' peers help build additional academic success that access and availability to technology plays an equal and/or even greater role in the 21st century. Students want to help like-minded people when they can be presented with the vision and rewards from becoming civic-minded. Ultimately, this challenges the status quo when it comes to effective academic instructional strategies meeting the needs of ELL students.

Certainly these more welcoming/inclusive cultural environments create the need for building additional student/parent school involvement so they are welcomed to and feel part of the larger learning community. School site based clubs like the Latino Club for students, and Padres

Unidos for increased parent involvement are excellent launch points. However, these opportunities just scratch the surface when it comes to fully developing welcoming/inclusive environments. These are good starting points to begin this important journey yet we have much more work to do in this area. For instance, encourage parent involvement toward participation in school site beautification projects and school site learning environment decision-making opportunities like becoming school site council and Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) members. These important organizations allow for additional parent involvement for their students' increased educational engagement.

### **Next Steps**

My father and mentor once told me, "Half the battle is recognition, and the second half is corrective action." This rings true for me to begin the conversation about how to best serve this student population. We truly need to come to grips with costs versus what is best for all of our student demographics. Obviously, costs are always a driving force in all of our decision-making opportunities. However, public education's continuance to not assess these students in their primary language needs to be extensively reexamined to ensure that we are not further marginalizing any student demographic, especially the fastest growing population, namely, the ELL.

Juan's parents took risks and made a long journey to increase opportunities for their children. They were successful in doing so and are proud of Juan and pleased with the outcome of his education and their efforts. However, his parents were denied the chance to be fully informed of the consequences of the decisions being made for their son. I recognize their satisfaction in his success while I also see the missed potential related to his inaccurate educational placement.

Educators consistently continue to believe that they know what is best for our youth, often

not even taking into consideration what the student has to share. In Juan's case, his educational trajectory may never be fully realized, as he was not provided with the best opportunity to succeed academically. His journey has taken him on a pathway fraught with challenges he might not have had to face had he been given the chance to excel with the right instructional opportunities.

Finally, it is clear that Juan felt accomplished and satisfied with his academic success. He has work that he is proud of and is a reflection of his education and the opportunities his parents wanted for him. In addition, Juan's parents have pride in his success and in what their son has accomplished. Juan is now in an excellent position to return to higher education either to earn a vocational certificate or further academic pursuits.



## Epilogue

Growing up in the bay area afforded me access to an excellent public education. My parents declined to send my siblings and I to a private parochial catholic school because the class sizes were much larger than the public school we attended kindergarten through sixth grade at. During the time we were attending elementary school the public schools ranked among the best in the state of California. For example, my school had approximately twenty students per classroom with all the necessary resources available at the time. My father was an educator and my mother a homemaker who was at our side constantly.

My mother made sure we were looked after, as my father was the breadwinner who taught, coached and progressively became a high school guidance counselor, then an assistant principal. Ultimately, he ended his career training student teachers for a nationally recognized university after his retirement from the public education setting. I was surrounded by educational supports my entire life growing up in a privileged setting with grandparents and neighbors who viewed education as a way of being, with high values and expectations towards a better existence. However, my educational journey has many parallels to Juan's testimonio.

My story was one of not understanding the issues and concerns around my learning differences. At the time these learning differences went unrecognized and undiagnosed. Moreover, these learning concerns I possessed led me on a vision quest that covered many dimensions. The levels of understanding came at different intervals throughout my lifetime, beginning with my primary education being at a frustration level, which was no fault of any one person and/or entity. Therefore, I routinely suffered in silence without a clue as to why my learning-wiring diagram was different than that of my peers. I knew my academic abilities were challenging at best and frustrating in the least. However, my academic story helped me build coping callouses throughout

my educational journey. A walkabout culminating in earning my doctorate in the very field, which by the way built an enormous amount of fear throughout the years, pushing me to excel to heights never envisioned before.

Throughout my educational journey I have always had the grit to ask the question, “Why am I not becoming academically proficient like my peers?” This question has become a lifelong exploration leading me to have the courage to seek out additional help in the form of counseling and further assessments to help understand my personal academic challenges. These obstacles were impeding upon my full potential. Hence, “We only know what we know,” and can only overcome and succeed when we recognize the barriers interfering with our progression. The second half to this equation would be taking corrective actions in the form of coping skills to overcome these obstacles.

In my case, I was in my 40s when, as I struggled to overcome an obstacle to consume large amounts of text, I decided to get assessed for learning differences that were thwarting my academic progression. I believed I had always built coping skills into my repertoire of academic capabilities to overcome any obstacles that might get in my way to success. This is when I hit the wall so to speak, and realized my calloused grit was not enough to get me through to where I wanted to go, namely, to become the educator I had envisioned. Yes, I was successful, and yes, my peers viewed me as an equal, however, to me, I was not.

This is when I realized I could not do it alone anymore and sought out help from an independent psychologist to have several assessments administered in order to figure out, once and for all, what were the actual barriers to my academic freedom. To this point in my career, I had received my undergraduate degree in Management, as well as my Master of Arts degree in Special Education. However, I had decided to take on the ultimate challenge and go for my doctorate

degree. This is when I hit my personal saturation point and knew I needed additional help. I need to add that you may recognize I use the term “learning difference” instead of the standard “learning disability.” I am reluctant to call them disabilities because the characteristics of the differences make us who we are, and there are many positive attributes that come from such variances. I believe society, as a whole, labels such learning differences as deficits instead of individual uniquenesses, which can be considered strengths in many instances. I believe we are wired differently with our own unique learning capabilities. In addition, I find the above-mentioned term as a misrepresentation of our true identity. As our DNA is unique... Our learning styles are as well. I am living proof that these differences can be deciphered and overcome with the proper supports.

In fact, in my doctoral program I was introduced to the journal article, “The academic Imposter.” When I heard this term at the University of the Pacific (UOP) for the first time in Dr. Ronald Hallett’s class that one fateful evening, I said to myself, “Someone has figured me out!” I felt an overwhelming sensation come over me as it made me feel like a black cloud had formed above my head. I remember looking up to the ceiling and saying to myself, “How did my life come to this?” Upon this class session and ensuing class sessions thereafter, I came to realize my personal portrait was beginning to clear like the fog off of the mountaintop.

It has taken me a lifetime of self-reflection to meta-cognitively think about my educational journey. I hope to continue, by helping others overcome these types of obstacles so they can realize sooner than later, that their learning variances can be conquered and harnessed. Therefore, the statement “There are no do-overs” truly does not exist when you build the necessary academic grit and commitment in becoming a lifelong learner.

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## Appendix I

### Interview Protocol: Main Participant

Theme: What does education mean to you?

- 1.) Tell me about people in your life who you value that have influenced your personal education?
- 2.) Tell me about your experiences being in special education.
- 3.) Share with me about where you received your greatest understanding of what it means to be educated?
- 4.) Tell me about a time you learned something in school that you feel is useful for you now as an adult?
- 5.) Share with me why an education is important to you? Your family? Friends? Neighbors? Heroes?
- 6.) How has your special education designation affected your thoughts about what an education means to you?
- 7.) Tell me about your feelings about being placed on the certificate track.
- 8.) What is your understanding of the high school diploma track?
- 9.) If you had received your high school diploma instead of a certificate of completion how would that change your view of higher education for you personally?
- 10.) If given the opportunity to speak with other students who are/were in the similar situation... What advice would you provide them? Why?
- 11.) What value did your parents and/or family put on education growing up as a migrant ELL special education student?
- 12.) Share with me why does education have such an impact on one's earning capacity?

- 13.) What are your thoughts around how much education is considered enough?
- 14.) Tell me about your future career goals and how you plan to attain them?
- 15.) Tell me about any thoughts you may have about the placement decision made when you were in eighth grade that are important to you reflecting back on your educational journey?



## Appendix II

### Interview Protocol: Parents of the Main Participant

Theme: What does education mean to you?

- 1.) Who do you value that has influenced your personal education?
- 2.) Tell me about the experiences that have influenced your understanding of education?
- 3.) Tell me about where did you receive your greatest understanding of what it means to be educated?
- 4.) When did you learn that education could bring the main participant (your son) the life you have always envisioned for him?
- 5.) Why is an education important for the main participant (your son), Your family?  
Friends? Neighbors? Heroes?
- 6.) How do you think this interview might affect the main participant's (your son's) future thoughts about what an education means?
- 7.) What value did your parents and/or family put on education growing up in Mexico?
- 8.) Why does education have such an impact on the main participant's (your son's) future earning capacity?
- 9.) How much education is considered enough for the main participant (your son)?
- 10.) Why does education have such an impact on the main participant's (your son's) current earning capacity?
- 11.) Tell me about the main participant's (your son's) future career goals and how he plans to attain them?

12.) Tell me about any thoughts you may have about the placement decision made when the main participant (your son) was in eighth grade that are important to you reflecting back on his educational journey?