An Ixil portrait: exercising resilience amidst inequity, (dis)interest, and self-discovery

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An Ixil portrait: exercising resilience amidst inequity, (dis)interest, and self-discovery

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ABSTRACT
The growing presence of the Indigenous diaspora from Latin America is beginning to transform notions of Latinidad and Indigeneity in the United States. Yet, scant studies have focused on the experiences of Indigenous Latinx students in U.S. learning environments and on what is needed to ensure their academic success. In this article, I share the results of a portraiture qualitative research inquiry that explored the academic and social experiences of an adolescent Ixil English learner with limited or interrupted education at a U.S. high school. Findings paint a picture of the participant’s experiences and resilience while providing a foundation for teachers and researchers serving students with similar academic and social realities.

Introduction
The study of immigration education in the United States has primarily focused on English learners’ engagement with and adaptation to formal schooling (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2016). For the Latinx EL student population, the last two decades of research in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classrooms have also been concerned with removing educational barriers (see Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006) and incorporating culturally-relevant pedagogies to close the achievement gap (see Kidwell & Pentón Herrera, 2019). However, it is important to recognize that the literature has often grouped immigrant Latinx ELs under general umbrella terms such as “Hispanic” or “Latino”, which has contributed to an oversimplified image of this student population in the United States. As such, there still remains much to be learned about the rich and vibrant diversity and populations that comprise the Latinx diaspora in the United States. One particular group that continues to be widely invisible in the ESOL field – and in the field of education – are Indigenous Latinx students, a growing population in U.S. classrooms (Pentón Herrera, 2018, 2019).

The growing presence of the Indigenous diaspora from Latin America is beginning to transform notions of Latinidad and Indigeneity in the United States (Blackwell, Boj Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017). Yet, scant studies have focused on the experiences of Indigenous Latinx students in U.S. learning environments and on what is needed to ensure their academic success. As Barillas-Chón (2018) shares, the literature on Latinx and education and Latinx and immigration does not immediately speak to unique views, feelings, and understandings lived by Indigenous Latinx learners, “which shows … how powerful coloniality and the invisibilization of Indigenous people is” (Barillas-Chón, 2018, p. 10). Thus, the purpose of this study is to disrupt the colonialisist narrative of erasure and invisibility and allow for a space where Indigenous stories can be shared, respected, and celebrated. Inspired by Dr. Lawrence-Lightfoot’s groundbreaking work, I use the research question of What are the participant’s academic and social experiences in his first year of high school in the United States? as bridge to share in this article a portraiture (see Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of an adolescent Indigenous Ixil (Maya) EL in a U.S. high school.
The Ixil in Guatemala and in the United States

The word Ixil, sometimes spelled Ixhil (see García, 2014), is etymological interpreted as “place of the jaguar” (Place, 2013, p. 23). The Ixil community is primarily located in El Departamento de Quiché, a mountainous region in the northern part of Guatemala and comprises three towns: (1) Cotzal, (2) Nebaj, and (3) Chajul. According to Josserand and Hopkins (1996), the Ixil language emerged as an individual entity around the year 500AD. The longevity of the Ixil language and culture is further discussed by Colby (1976) where he makes reference to archeological evidence that shows the Ixil people have inhabited the Quiché region since the Classic Period, and perhaps even earlier. Different from other Mayan cultures and groups, the Ixil “have had a (relatively) greater continuity with classic Maya cultures than any other Maya or non-Maya group” (Colby, 1976, p. 75). The Ixil’s deep cultural tradition as a Mayan society remains today as they continue to be removed physically and culturally from the main currents of modern Guatemala (Place, 2013).

In the United States, two established Ixil communities have emerged in recent years, one in Centreville, VA and another in Dover, OH (Pentón Herrera, 2018). In addition, “smaller pockets are also found in Northern Virginia and throughout Maryland” (Pentón Herrera, 2018, p. 14). In schools, the Ixil and other Indigenous learners sometimes arrive with limited or interrupted formal education and with emergent language and literacy skills in their first language (L1) and in Spanish, their second language (L2) (Jenner & Konkel, 2018; Pentón Herrera, 2018), which places them at a precarious situation academically. In addition to this, school staff’s unawareness about this population’s needs and realities has made it difficult to serve them appropriately. Conversely, in the community, the Ixil are becoming empowered and visible, sharing their culture, language, and traditions in their communities and with their neighbors (see Pentón Herrera, 2019). Community visibility and individualized support in their native language has, without a doubt, contributed to the successful integration of this population in the United States (Pentón Herrera, 2019).

Theoretical framework

With the vision of painting a portrait of the participant’s stories, I use the narrative theory as the theoretical framework in this manuscript. Narrative theory starts from the assumption that narrative is a subjective and basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience and existence. In addition, narrative theory acknowledges that “the telling of the story will be affected by both the narrator and the listener” (Gale, Mitchell, Garand, & Wesner, 2003, p. 82); that is, the listener’s voice and interpretation are acknowledged as part of the story. In this respect, narratives are useful as a means of exploration, interpretation, and of forming a personal relationship between the narrator and the researcher. Furthermore, narratives disrupt the power structure of inquiry where the researcher’s role evolves from expert to listener – sometimes also co-participant – and the narrator’s role from respondent to expert.

It has been stated that narrative theory is, in some ways, “both more and less clear” (Kim, 2012, p. 235), especially as it pertains to the nascent conversation about the relationship of narrative theory with postcolonial and ethnic studies (Kim, 2012). In this inquiry, narrative theory is used to purposefully decolonize previous trends of narratives that have primarily focused on American, European, and white stories (Kim, 2012). Importantly, in this explanation and manuscript I use the word decolonization not as a metaphor (see Tuck & Yang, 2012), but as perspective to human and civil rights that is “accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 35). Through this decolonizing narrative theory lens, narratives and stories are repatriated back to Indigenous peoples – the participant –, reversing the longstanding culture of silence and invisibility. In this manuscript, narratives are used to share the participant’s story and, through his story, share a timeless portrait that honors and preserves his truth and experiences.
Materials and methods

This research study followed the portraiture methodology – an innovative approach to qualitative research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The purpose for using portraiture emerged from my need, as a researcher, to use a form of inquiry that would allow me to capture the complexity and esthetic of the subject’s experience. At the same time, portraiture allows my voice, as researcher and co-participant in the study, to be shared. Thus, in portraiture, I also become a storyteller and a portraitist, seeking to make sense of the subject’s experiences while framing my research by identifying the burning questions (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Through the use of rich and detailed descriptions, portraiture allowed me to create life drawings of the participant and his context while purposefully searching out the goodness in this particular educational setting and situation (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

It is important for me to disclose that, because portraiture was the methodology used, I approached this study with an asset-based perspective pursuing the goodness of every discovery from the beginning (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This qualitative portraiture inquiry was primarily guided by the research question: What are the participant’s academic and social experiences in his first year of high school in the United States? In addition, the following sub-question was also explored: How can the findings help inform the future practices of instruction for Indigenous Latinx students in K-12 classrooms in the United States?

Setting

This inquiry was conducted in a public high school – Willow Oak High School (pseudonym) – in a northeastern state of the United States of America. This high school is considered a medium-size high school with a student enrollment of over 1,500 and over 250 professional staff (including teaching personnel). Data collection was conducted primarily inside the participant’s ESOL, language of math (a math sheltered ESOL course), and language of science (a science sheltered ESOL course) classrooms.

Participant

Tranquilino (pseudonym) is 18 years of age and is considered a newcomer (recently arrived to the United States) who speaks Ixil as first language, Spanish as second language, and is learning English as third language. He is a short, medium-built individual who often wears long-sleeve shirts and khaki pants. He has aboriginal features, brown skin, big brown eyes, and very dark black smooth hair that moves as he walks or shakes his head. Tranquilino has a big white smile but he is very introverted and prefers to show a serious face. He often walks in-between classes with his headphones on listening to music and staring at the floor.

When talking to adults (teachers and school staff), Tranquilino often looks down and avoids eye contact as he feels uncomfortable and wants to show respect to authority figures. When his teachers ask him about his truancy record, he often responds “no me gusta la escuela” (I do not like school). Tranquilino is considered a student with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) because he only attended three years of formal schooling (up to third grade) in his native country of Guatemala. As a result, his literacy and language skills in Ixil and Spanish are still emergent. It is important to note that Tranquilino was placed in high school and 9th grade upon arrival to the U.S. because that is the school county’s policy: students are placed in a specific grade level (elementary, middle, or high school) based on their age and on their English language proficiency. Under this countywide policy, Tranquilino’s SLIFE status was neither acknowledged nor taken into consideration for placement.
Data collection

The data collection process of this inquiry was guided primarily by two different methods: (1) interviews with a photo elicitation component and (2) observations. Both of these methods of data collection are qualitative in nature and align with the inquiry’s intent of learning more about the participant’s experiences and reality during his first year of high school in the U.S (Harper, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

Observations

For this study, Tranquilino was observed for a total of five instructional weeks (25 teaching days). The observations took place in the participant’s math, science, and ESOL classrooms as he interacted with his classmates and teachers. ESOL and math classes were taught daily and science class was taught every other day. All classes were 90 minutes long.

Interviews

A total of five unstructured interviews were conducted throughout the study. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio recorded. Two out of the five interviews (the initial and final) lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes and were conducted during weeks 1 and 5, respectively; three shorter interviews (on weeks 2, 3, and 4) took part after observations each lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. Importantly, during the final interview, Tranquilino was asked to have ready a drawing portraying his experiences learning in the United States. Importantly, interviews were transcribed verbatim in a Microsoft Word document and coded. More information about the coding process is explained in the Data Analysis section below.

Visual elicitation

Visual elicitation, in the form of a drawing, was used to create an opportunity to harness the participants’ artistic nature while collecting data that reflects his own reality (Harper, 2002). Because Tranquilino had difficulty speaking Spanish (the language that was used for the interviews), visual elicitation served as a tool to show his messages and transcend the barriers of language. In addition, the drawing provided a tangible description of how Tranquilino felt at the moment he made his drawing. Furthermore, the drawing served as an opportunity to ask additional questions using it as visual support for communication (Harper, 2002). In this way, the data collected added insight into Tranquilino’s reality and feelings toward his experience as EL in a more authentic manner.

Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed and reviewed in Spanish. Inductive logic was used to detect patterns, similarities, and regularities found in the raw data. As such, data was coded without “trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). This approach to coding data and mode of analysis were guided by this study’s research questions as well as by the author’s mindful self-reminder about the importance of disrupting prior assumptions of indigeneity in education. Thus, the data was carefully scanned several times to derive emerging themes and, ultimately, report findings. In addition, the steps used in the analysis followed Yin (2014)’s construct validity approach employing multiple sources of evidence in the form of observations, interviews, and drawing. After establishing chain of evidence, specific key concepts were defined and operational measures that match the concepts were identified.
Results

Academic experiences

Tranquilino feels unsure about his future in school because of what he has experienced thus far. “Yo no estoy interesado en la escuela, yo quiero terminar la escuela porque mi hermano quiere que termine, pero no me gusta la escuela. La clase está difícil porque no sé la información y quieren [los maestros] que yo escriba y lea todo eso.” (I am not interested in school, I want to finish school because my brother wants me to finish, but I do not like school. The class is difficult because I do not know the information and they [the teachers] want me to write and read all that [referring to the content learned in classes]). “No sé si me pueda graduar. Allá en Guatemala no estudiaba, no sabía nada [de la escuela] y aquí es difícil. Aquí cualquier trabajo está bien pero no sé la escuela”. (I do not know if I will be able to graduate. Over there in Guatemala I did not study, I did not know anything [school-related] and here [in the United States] it is difficult. Here [in the United States] any job is fine but I do not know about school).

For Tranquilino, the academic expectations and social interactions involved in formal schooling and formal education are new concepts and it is difficult to get used to them without proper guidance. “El primer día de escuela [refiriéndose a la escuela en Estados Unidos] no sabía que hacer, no tenía cuadernos, ni tampoco sabía escribir mi nombre. Es difícil porque se burlan [los otros estudiantes] de mi español y [que] no se escribir.” (The first day of school [referring to the school in the United States] I did not know what to do, I did not have notebooks, and I did not know how to write my name either. It is difficult because they [the other students] make fun of my Spanish and [that] I do not know how to write). An important clarification needs to be made about what Tranquilino referred to as “mi español” (my Spanish); in this statement Tranquilino expressed his acknowledgment that his Spanish, the way he spoke the language, was different from his Spanish-speaking counterparts as he sometimes makes minor mistakes and has a distinct non-native Spanish-speaking accent. When I asked Tranquilino if teachers have helped him learn English and stop his classmates from making fun of him he just smiled with an empty look and shared “si me ayudan, me explican, y me dan el diccionario, pero yo no entiendo, no sé que hacer.” (Yes, they help me, they explain to me, and they give me the dictionary, but I do not understand, I do not know what to do).

During my time observing Tranquilino, it became apparent that Tranquilino’s teachers did not have the time nor the knowledge to help him. He was often given worksheets so he could practice letter-tracing (in ESOL class), re-write the addition and subtraction tables (in language of math class), and color animals (in science class). Large class sizes made it difficult for his teachers to sit down one-on-one with Tranquilino, but also, as one teacher confided “I don’t know what I can do to help him. We are supposed to be learning this information [pointing at a textbook] but he doesn’t know how to even write full sentences yet.” The teacher further shared, “this year I can do my best to help him as much as possible, but when he moves up in grade next year, all teachers are going to be mainstream [non-ESOL classes with little support] and that is going to be tough for him.”

During my observations, I witnessed that Tranquilino was “presently absent” (Barillas-Chón, 2010, p. 313), that is, he was physically present, but was not represented in his classrooms; he was “a population that is totally unknown in the school” (Barillas-Chón, 2010, p. 313). His teachers did not know how to help him academically and, as result, he became unattached and disconnected from the classroom, the content, and even his classmates. During our interviews, I asked Tranquilino a couple of times “dime qué aprendiste hoy en la escuela” (tell me what you learned today at school), and both times he said “nada” (nothing), smiling while gently looking down as his eyes wilted in sadness, regret even. In our last interview, I asked Tranquilino to share a drawing of a learning experience he enjoyed here in the United States; his drawing is shown in Figure 1.

In his drawing, Tranquilino shared an important life event that he particularly enjoyed very much: his visit to a museum in Chicago, Illinois where he saw a dinosaur for the first time. It is interesting to note the three words that appear in his drawing, “boy” (describing himself), “dinosaur” (to share what he learned/saw), and “book” (to signify what he believes to be a learning experience).
These words summarize his experience and how he understands learning to be. While explaining his drawing and sharing his experience in Chicago, Tranquilino was smiling the entire time while pointing at the dinosaur; this was the first and only time during the study that I saw his eyes glow with excitement.

*Vi en Chicago cuando visité el museo – un dinosaurio, eso me recuerda a aprender inglés porque es una cosa nueva que nunca había visto. Hice el libro porque tiene muchas cosas escritas importantes para aprender inglés. Me gusta aprender así*” [apuntando al dinosaurio]. (I saw [this] in Chicago when I visited the museum – a dinosaur, that reminds me of learning English because it is a new thing I have never seen. I [drew] the book because it has many important written things to learn English. I like to learn like that) [pointing at the dinosaur].

**Social experiences**

During the 7-minute class change, Tranquilino walks into his ESOL class; he is one of the first students to arrive. From the moment he walks inside the classroom, he looks down and continues to listen to the music in his headphones. He does not acknowledge anyone, including the teacher. He walks swiftly and discreetly through the student desks, which are arranged in a traditional style, and sits quietly in one of the corners of the classroom. After all the students arrive and sit down, Tranquilino becomes visually invisible all the way in the left back corner of the classroom, sitting behind other students who are physically taller than him.

In all three classrooms (ESOL, math, and science), Tranquilino sat quietly in a corner or in a place where he could just become invisible. He did not make any attempts to communicate or interact with other students and did not answer questions when called upon; he just respectfully declined. When I asked Tranquilino about why he chose to not participate in his classes, he responded “*no entiendo y no me gusta eso*” (I do not understand and I do not like that), referring to his classes and content information taught. It is important to clarify that Tranquilino’s answers in Spanish are abstract, at times, because his level of Spanish is still emergent, but quickly developing. I often had to ask follow-up questions to better understand and dig deeper into the meaning of his answers.

From a social point of view, Tranquilino seemed to still be going through a period of culture shock and adaptation, which is normal for newcomer ELs (Ortega, 2009). Tranquilino’s inattentiveness to class, social disengagement, lack of motivation, and negative predispositions toward the academic environment can be defined as a bad learning situation that causes him to stagnate into
emerging language proficiency skills and development (Ortega, 2009). In addition to his negative predispositions, Tranquilino had a history of excessive school truancy, which may have contributed to his lack of acclimatization to the school environment, his language and literacy learning paralysis, and lack of opportunities to make meaningful and lasting social interactions with his peers. When asked about the reason behind his many absences, Tranquilino just stated “me quedo dormido por el celular” (I oversleep [at home] because of my cellphone). To his comment, I further asked ¿y que dice tu mamá o papá? ¿No te quitan el teléfono? (and what does your mom or dad say about this? Don’t they take your [cell]phone away? Below is Tranquilino’s answer:

Mi mamá está en Guatemala, mi papá no sé. Yo estoy aquí con mi hermano mayor. Él siempre está trabajando. Hay veces que llega a la 1 o las 2 de la mañana. Cuando lo veo me dice que estudie porque él no pudo estudiar y solo trabaja. Yo quiero aprender inglés, pero para hablar para el trabajo. (My mom is in Guatemala, my dad [I] do not know. I am here with my older brother. He is always working. There are times when [he] arrives at 1 or 2 in the morning. When I see him he tells me to study because he could not study and he only works. I want to learn English but just enough to speak for work).

Throughout our conversations, I learned about Tranquilino’s childhood years. During his developmental years, Tranquilino spent most of his days working in the cornfield and daily interactions revolved around adults – especially family members – with whom extended and spontaneous conversations were not the norm. “Aprendí a sembrar y a trabajar en los campos desde que tenía 12 años. Todos los días me los pasaba con mi mamá y mi padrastro en los campos de maíz y después en la casa. Ellos me enseñaron a respetar a las personas y a trabajar sembrando milpas” (I learned to plant and to work in the fields since I was 12 years old. I would spend all day every day with my mother and my stepfather in the maize fields and then at home. They taught me to respect others and to work planting milpas).

For Tranquilino, education came directly from his household and his mother and stepfather were the only role models and educators in his life for most of his childhood. During his childhood years, learning took the form of Learning by Observing and Pitching-In (LOPI) – a practice used by many Indigenous communities from North, Central, and South America to organize children’s learning placing value on their “ability to learn independently by observing, listening, [and] participating with a minimum of intervention and instruction” (Urrieta, 2015, p. 358). Since work became a priority in his household, he stopped attending school in third grade and did not have the opportunity to interact with children his age on a daily basis. As a result, Tranquilino did not learn how to establish and form interpersonal relationships with children of his age during his childhood years. He shared that he does not have any close friends of his age in Guatemala and only talks to his mother and stepfather when he calls back home.

When I asked about what he missed the most about Guatemala and his culture, Tranquilino sadly sighed “extraño mucho mi familia y hablar Ixil. Allá tengo a mi mamá y a mi padrastro y hay muchos vecinos y todos hablan Ixil, aquí no puedo usar mi lengua para hablar con nadie.” (I miss my family very much and [I also miss] speaking Ixil. Over there I have my mother and my stepfather and there are many neighbors who speak Ixil, over here I cannot use my language to talk to anyone). Tranquilino continues to struggle in school and in his classes, partly because he has not been able to establish personal connections with his classmates. As a result, he feels alone and unattached to his instructional environment and to school as a whole. He often sits by himself, seldom holds a conversation with his peers, and rarely participates in class. This academic and social isolation has led to Tranquilino feeling uninterested about school and feeling helpless with no one to turn to.

Discussion

From a social perspective, being in school has been a difficult process for Tranquilino. My time observing and learning from Tranquilino revealed that establishing and maintaining social relationships/connections with classmates his age is difficult for him. He did not practice these social skills
through his developmental years; as a result, finding commonalities with peers his age has proved challenging for both him and his peers. In addition to this, Tranquilino has experienced unwelcoming events with his classmates because he is Indigenous and because of his emergent literacy skills. In a way, being “presently absent” (Barillas-Chón, 2010, p. 313) has placed Tranquilino in the social margins of his classrooms and school; he feels that he neither belongs with the Spanish-speaking ESOL group nor with the larger English-speaking student population. He does not feel like he belongs anywhere, with any group or cliques, which is why he is often by himself. For this reason, he usually avoids going to lunch in the cafeteria and, instead, prefers to sit outside under the shade of a tree by himself.

From an academic perspective, Tranquilino has a preference for naturalistic learning; he enjoys being outside and learning in real-life situations and settings, such as the museum in Chicago, Illinois. He understands that his textual literacy and traditional academic skills are not on par yet with his classmates and doubts his capabilities. He often declines to participate when he is called upon to answer questions or simply utters “no puedo” (I cannot/I am not able to [do it]). Tranquilino’s self-doubts and self-perception of his academic abilities are impacting his performance during class, his attitude toward learning, and his interest toward continuing to attend school every day. In addition to this, his teachers do not know how to help him and often give him worksheets to practice without proper guidance or reasoning. The inappropriate instructional support, lack of training, and little understanding about Tranquilino’s academic reality, combined with the social factors previously explained, has made it increasingly challenging for his teachers to get his language and literacy skills at the expected level for his age and grade.

**Building resilience**

Tranquilino is a bright young man and understands how precarious his academic situation is, even if he does not express it with words. He often shared that school is not a priority for him, but I believe he made those statements because he does not feel included in his school environment and because he understands that his academic reality is different from that of his counterparts. He often shrugged his shoulders when his classmates or teachers asked him questions and he did not know the answer. Tranquilino’s actions, I learned, concealed a deeper meaning; it was a coping mechanism he embraced to deal with a social and academic reality he could neither control nor fully participate in. Tranquilino’s disregard for school-related matters became a way for him to build resilience for what others – and himself – considered to be failures and to manage his Spanish-speaking ESOL peers making fun of him. For Tranquilino, shrugging his shoulders became the only thing he could control; his only weapon to survive in a completely foreign environment that conspired to make him feel powerless, unwelcomed, helpless, and unsuccessful.

After delving in the literature, I learned that Tranquilino’s resilience can also be interpreted as a form of resistance (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019) against a system designed to make him feel ashamed (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019) of his Indigenous language, identity, emerging literacy skills, and immigrant status. As an Indigenous immigrant literacy-emergent learner surrounded by Spanish-speaking classmates in an English-speaking learning environment, Tranquilino was not afforded opportunities to feel neither included nor valued. In fact, the spaces where Tranquilino navigated – school and classrooms – did not give him the opportunity to self-generate, self-regulate (Canagarajah, 2018), or even self-advocate. In this learning environment, Tranquilino’s Indigenous heritage and language were viewed as inferior by Spanish classmates who mocked him. Similarly, his limited formal schooling background, enrollment as an EL, and immigrant status were also viewed as inferior by his school’s structural system and those working within the system who were trained to value English and western views of formal schooling and literacy as the standards for academic success. For these reasons, Tranquilino had to find a way to survive in a space that was structured to value dominant language and cultures (English and Spanish) and literacies (textual, western-view of literacies, formal education) over
Indigenous/minority language and cultures, literacies, and ways of knowing. Thus, Tranquilino’s resilience became his way to show resistance against individuals and a system design to make him fail.

During my time observing Tranquilino, I saw how teachers tried to help him, but large class sizes prevented them from giving Tranquilino one-on-one differentiated and active instruction time. In addition to this, his high school teachers were not prepared/trained to teach foundational literacy skills. Contrary to his own opinion, Tranquilino did enjoy learning – as he shared in Figure 1 –, he was just not given the opportunity to learn using his strengths and preferred learning styles. Toward the end of the study, Tranquilino confided that he was going to stop coming to school. When I encouraged him to continue in school, he smiled and shared “es mejor trabajar, ya aquí [en la escuela] no puedo … es difícil” (it is better to work, here [in school] I cannot [continue] … it is difficult). A month after our last conversation, Tranquilino stopped attending school and started working with his older brother in a construction job.

Indigenous and SLIFE latinx ELs in U.S. classrooms: what to do?

Tranquilino represents two latent groups of immigrant students arriving to the United States today – Indigenous Latinx students (see Barillas-Chón, 2010; Guerrero-Arias, 2019; Jenner & Konkel, 2018; Lypka, 2018; Pentón Herrera, 2017, 2018, 2019) and SLIFE English learners (see Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017; Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016; Potochnick, 2018). The Indigenous Latinx student population continues to be widely invisible and underresearched in academia, which makes it difficult for institutions, administrators, and teachers to accommodate instruction and allocate successful resources for these learners (Jenner & Konkel, 2018; Pentón Herrera, 2018). Simultaneously, SLIFE English learners remain underidentified and underserved (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017) with “lack of in-depth proven research on what works with SLIFE” (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2017, p. 11). Once again, Tranquilino’s realities pushed him to the margins; the margins of social expectations, academic pressure, and school life. In this study, I learned that neither Tranquilino’s school nor his teachers were prepared to support him and help him successfully integrate into his learning environment. As a result, he never felt part of any classroom and, in response to the social and academic (unwelcoming) experiences endured, built a wall of resilience masked by detachment and disregard.

How, then, can the findings of this study help inform the future practices of instruction for Indigenous Latinx (and SLIFE) students in K-12 classrooms in the United States?

SLIFE

From a practical perspective, smaller and sheltered classes that are conducive of individualized and differentiated instruction are essential for SLIFE. In the classroom, Tranquilino not only became invisible physically, he also became invisible academically. Although he was present in the classroom listening to the information and copying the content from the board in his notebook, his academic needs as a SLIFE were invisible to his teachers. For this reason, teacher preparation programs need to start considering the incorporation of practical literacy classes that educate middle and high school teachers on best practices for teaching foundational literacy to adolescent SLIFE. Furthermore, I recommend that educators teaching adolescent SLIFE get familiarized with Custodio and O’Loughlin (2017), especially chapter 6, where the authors provide detailed examples of school-based support for this student population.

Beyond academics, the impact of social interaction and social relationships needs to also be taken into consideration for SLIFE, as it should be for all other students. From Tranquilino I learned that he did not feel included in his instructional environment partly because he did not feel part of the group(s). Then, the social aspect/experience of learning should be taken into consideration either first, or simultaneously, in addition to the academic component of learning to help anchor students like Tranquilino. It is not the SLIFE textual literacy skills that present the biggest challenge for their
academic success; it is our schools’ failure to take into consideration the social aspect/experience of learning that alienates those who do not conform to the norms of traditional learning.

Indigenous Latinx learners

For educators teaching Indigenous Latinx learners, I urge them to learn about culturally sustaining pedagogy (see Kidwell & Pentón Herrera, 2019) and other forms of educational practices that value students’ cultures, contributions, and individualities as assets. Only through asset-based instructional frameworks, Indigenous Latinx ELs will be allowed a space in the classroom where they are celebrated, respected, and acknowledged as the resilient beings they are, instead of focusing on what they lack (academically and otherwise) and of comparing them to their non-Indigenous Latinx counterparts. In addition to this, it is necessary for educators to learn about the history of Indigenous communities in Latin America and celebrate their languages and cultures in their classrooms, as they would do with students who come from dominant cultures and speak dominant languages. Only through modeled visibility and respect non-Indigenous Latinx counterparts will learn to detach themselves from the colonialist mindset still practiced in many Latin American countries that continues to place barriers on Indigenous Latinxs’ advancement.

Final thoughts

Tranquilino’s story, I fear, is not uncommon for Indigenous Latinx students – especially those who also follow under the SLIFE umbrella. It is my hope that Tranquilino’s story remains a portrait of the social and academic challenges Indigenous Latinx English learners are overcoming today in U.S. classrooms. Although, certainly, Tranquilino’s experience is not representative of all immigrant Indigenous Latinx SLIFE ELs, it does share a realistic and lively picture of the impact school unreadiness has in affording these resilient learners any opportunity for success. To help Indigenous Latinx ELs who are also SLIFE, like Tranquilino, we must then become knowledgeable of their learning contexts from back home, of their native languages, cultures, and literacies, and use their strengths and resilience as foundations for their success in our classrooms and beyond. Taking a path toward the advancement of Indigenous Latinx and SLIFE at our schools must, then, begin with visibility, acknowledgment, and asset-based frameworks that facilitate integration, promote inclusion, and recognize all ways of learning and knowledge systems.

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