

# **UCLA**

## **Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences**

### **Title**

Prejudices and Obstacles Immigrant Students Face in the Los Angeles Unified School District

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3742m8cd>

### **Journal**

Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 16(0)

### **ISSN**

2639-6440

### **Author**

Yousef, Natalie

### **Publication Date**

2019

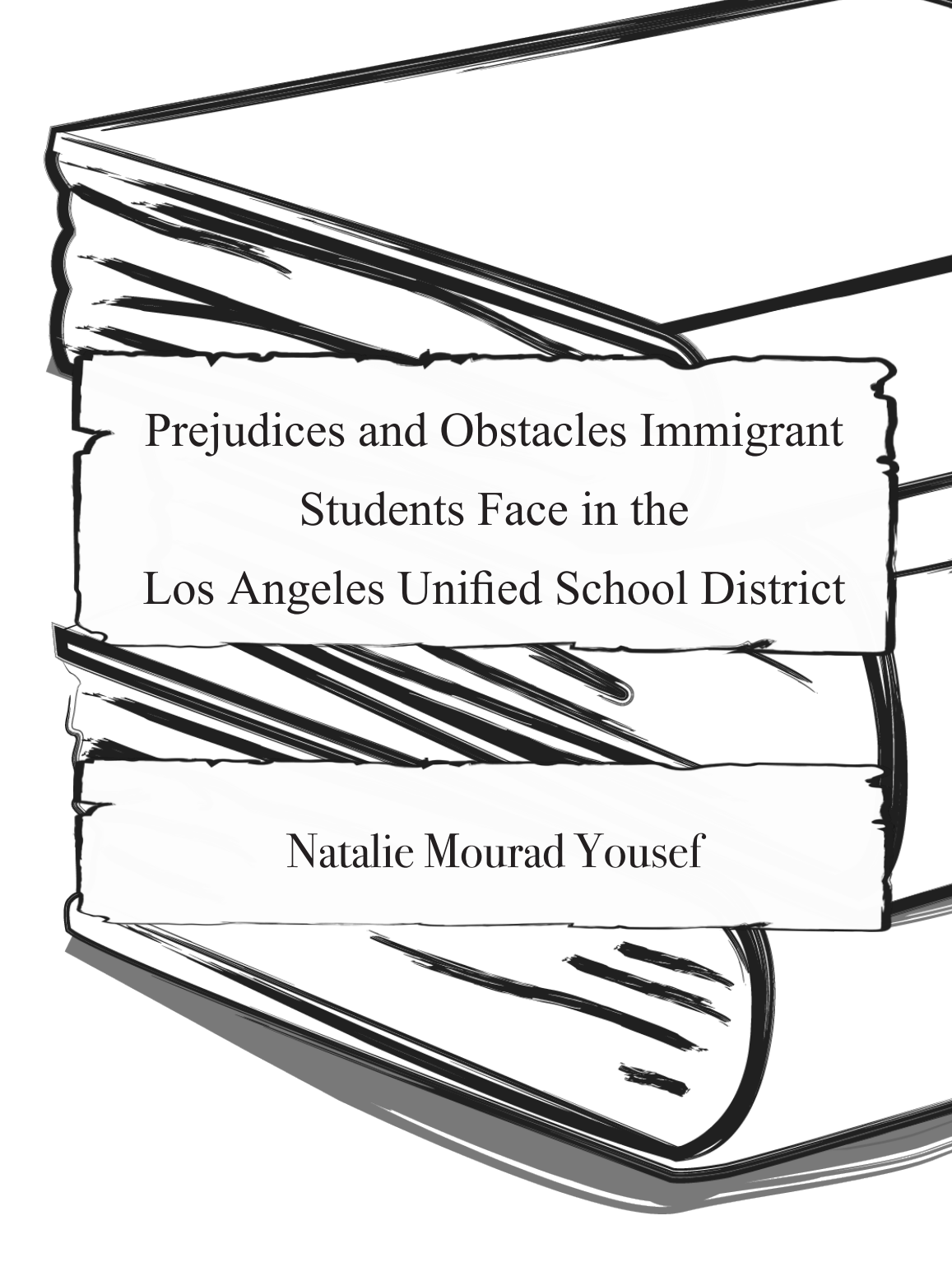
### **DOI**

10.5070/L6161045514

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

A stylized black and white illustration of an open book. The book is shown from a slightly elevated perspective, with the pages fanned out. A white rectangular title slip is placed over the center of the book. The text on the slip is centered and reads: "Prejudices and Obstacles Immigrant Students Face in the Los Angeles Unified School District". Below the title slip, the author's name "Natalie Mourad Yousef" is also centered on a white rectangular background. The book's cover and pages are rendered with thick, expressive black lines, giving it a hand-drawn, sketch-like appearance. The background is plain white.

Prejudices and Obstacles Immigrant  
Students Face in the  
Los Angeles Unified School District

Natalie Mourad Yousef

# Prejudices and Obstacles Immigrant Students Face in the Los Angeles Unified School District

Natalie Mourad Yousef



**Abstract:** California law states that “all children in the United States are entitled to equal access to a public elementary and secondary education without regard to their or their parents’ actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status,” (U.S. Department of Education). If the previously stated law is true, why are immigrant students isolated in English Learner Development (ELD) classrooms? Why is it difficult to reclassify English learner students as English proficient? Why are teachers not properly trained to teach immigrant students? Why do foreign-born students perform poorly and drop out of school? My goal is to answer these questions as well as elucidate the prejudices, injustices, and corrupt enforcements that are inflicted upon immigrant students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The presence of these unjust principles is exemplified by my internship experience during the fall of 2017 at a LAUSD high school located in the San Fernando Valley; the school has asked to remain anonymous for legal reasons. Despite this anonymity, the obstacles and situations these immigrant students face should be known and addressed by the public.

**Keywords:** *LAUSD, High School, Students, Immigrants, CELDT, United States, School System, English-Learners, ELD Classrooms*

## **The Facts**

It is important to know the stereotypes and statistics that immigrant students fall into in order to better understand the problems within the American education system and how we can help students. In the 2002-2003 academic school year, an estimated five million limited English proficient (LEP) students were enrolled in grades K-12 (Morse 2005). In 2005, approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants resided in the United States of America (Faltis 7). By 2007, the foreign-born population had reached 13%, including about 2 million school-aged immigrant children (Adelman et al. 323). In 2013, 8% of the total student population in America was labeled as LEP even though 41% of these students already spoke English (Zong et al.). In 2015, the overall immigrant population reached 41 million, which was approximately 13% of the population in the United States. Of those 41 million, 11.5 million people were undocumented, 4.6 million were labeled as “English learners,” and roughly 840,000 immigrant newcomers were enrolled as K-12 students (Adelman et al. 325). As of 2015, 79% of English learning immigrant children spoke Spanish as their primary or native language, and an estimated 33% of those born outside of the U.S. did not have a high school diploma (Adelman et al. 326, 333). It is predicted that by the year 2050, more than 33% of school-aged children will be foreign-born students with the majority classified as English learners. These statistics indicate an ever-growing, multifaceted problem that needs to receive more public attention.

## **Lack of Teacher Training**

In the *Journal for Global Initiatives*, Christian Faltis, a professor of language, literacy, and culture in the School of Education at UC Davis, writes that the majority of immigrant schoolchildren are in secondary schools. This is important to note because the majority of teachers at the secondary level are not as prepared to teach language, comprehension, and literacy (Faltis 8). If every student or school-aged child in the U.S. is supposedly granted equal opportunity to gain an education regardless of their

race or legality, then why are teachers not properly trained or predisposed to teach immigrant newcomers? With the always-increasing immigration rates, why are teachers not prepared to welcome these students with ease? While there could be multiple reasons for these seemingly endless questions, UCLA researchers Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor suspect that foreign-born students who lack English proficiency and experience cultural differences may face prejudice and discrimination from their peers and school staff (Adelman et al. 325). Thus, teachers must be trained to handle these prejudicial issues in order to better control their classrooms and limit biases of their own.

### **Prejudice, Racism, and Bias**

It is well-known that intolerance and bias towards immigrants is prevalent in America, especially against illegal immigrants or those among lower socioeconomic classes. However, it is also important to acknowledge the varying motives that drive migration. There are endless reasons why a family would migrate to America, but the most common among students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and their families include seeking political or religious refuge, reuniting their divided families, or amplifying their economic and educational opportunities. Although migration success stories do exist, the rates of adaptation, educational success, and financial stability are dwindling among these immigrant families given today's economy and hierarchical society. In addition to these issues, "the stress of coping with a new language and a new culture, a less than welcoming reception, racism, discrimination, school and community violence are all recipes for learning, behavioral, and emotional problems" (Adelman et al. 328). When Americans take these motives, challenges, and hardships into account, it becomes easier to sympathize with these immigrant families and their school-aged children.

## **California English Language Development Test (CELDT)**

Considering this racist prejudice and bias, it is important to note the increased obstacles, challenges, and special rules that immigrant students face relative to their native-born classmates. Within thirty days of migrating to America and entering the school district, local educational agencies (LEAs) are required by the state of California to administer the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to all students who indicate that their native language is not English (California Department of Education). The exam is used to determine the level of English proficiency that an immigrant or bilingual student possesses. The thirty-day time period can be stressful due to the difficult transition that comes as a result of migrating to a foreign country. Additionally, it is important to point out that even if the student is bilingual in English and another language, they are still required to be tested, which can lead to feelings of belittlement or, perhaps, discrimination. In 2000, the number of homes in which another language was spoken reached 2 million, and, in the state of California alone, 37% of students lived in homes in which a language other than English was spoken (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al. 13). With the magnitude of these numbers in mind, it is not feasible to test everyone, especially American-born students who indicate they are bilingual or whose native languages are not English.

The CELDT is a rather lengthy and difficult standardized test containing four different domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. During an interview, the aforementioned anonymous high school's ELD coordinator and counselor stated that the CELDT is comprised of long passages in the reading and writing portions. Additionally, the vocabulary used in the listening and speaking domains is so advanced that even native English speakers might struggle to comprehend the material, rendering it more difficult for newcomers to excel. The counselor also roughly estimated the passing rate of the CELDT at her high school to be 20%, accounting for grades 9 through 12. In addition to passing the exam, there are other obstacles that students need to tackle before being reclassified from "English learner" to

“English proficient.” In order to be reclassified as proficient, a student must pass the CELDT, which is scored on a scale from one to five. The student must obtain an overall score of four or five. Additionally, a student must pass an English class and the reading inventory (RI) exam within the same academic year. These rules for reclassification seem exceedingly challenging for immigrant students who are simultaneously trying to adjust to their new lives in a different country, balance schoolwork, and obtain jobs to help support their families.

### **Reclassification and Consequences**

These various obstacles prevent many immigrant students enrolled in LAUSD from earning the English proficient classification, which subsequently affects them beyond their high school careers. If these students are accepted into universities and choose to pursue higher education, the label of LEP will follow them through the application process. Admissions committees notice that these students were previously placed in ELD classes rather than within the proficient English classrooms of their native counterparts. Additionally, when LEP students enroll in college courses, they will be forced to take introductory English classes before being able to enroll in proficient English courses, costing these students valuable time and money.<sup>1</sup> When asked if she thought LAUSD genuinely wants to help these immigrant students succeed, the response I received from the ELD Counselor was mixed:

Of course they want to help, but they have to have a certain standard, and that is unfortunately really high in America. They can always make the test easier, but that doesn't mean it will help the students. What good is it to reclassify these students when they don't have the skills?

With these thoughts in mind, it is hardly fair to permanently label these students as English learners due to such high expectations and a tedious checklist of requirements.

## **Consequence - Dropping Out**

These standards and numerous obstacles often lead to feelings of discouragement and a lack of motivation to succeed in secondary education. Dropping out or failing are the most common routes for immigrant students in LAUSD, and while this is not the case for all students, statistics show that foreign-born, first-generation students have higher dropout rates than the children of natives (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al. 15). Although this statistic is commonly expected due to racial stereotypes, the rates at which immigrant students are dropping out of school are rather telling and alarming.

In an interview at the anonymous high school, a male student from Iraq made it apparent to me how these factors can deeply affect an immigrant student.<sup>2</sup> The student had immigrated to the U.S. at the age of fifteen and had an immensely difficult time adjusting to the drastically different lifestyle of this country. Not only did he long for his friends and family back home, but he also felt isolated within a classroom of forty-two individuals. As a result of these issues, he gave up on school and ultimately failed all of his classes during his freshman year. Although the student spoke English, he lost all motivation to pursue education due to the stress of migrating to a new country, as well as the unwelcoming reception of students and teachers at school. This individual is not the only immigrant student to endure these experiences; the rate at which LEP children are expected to drop out of school is double the amount of their English-speaking counterparts. Additionally, in 2005, 23% of LEP students ranging from 16 to 24 were not enrolled in any form of schooling and subsequently did not obtain a high school diploma or an equivalent form of certification. In comparison, the percentage of native speakers in similar situations was only 13%. Considering this data was published in 2005, the LEP dropout rate has inevitably increased since then (Morse). It is therefore necessary to question why the dropout rates are higher for immigrant students. However, there is no simple answer to this question but, rather, a combination of several reasons.



### ***Reason 1 – Financial Trouble***

Many students and their families are under financial strain, especially those migrating from developing countries such as Mexico or Guatemala (these countries account for the majority of the anonymous high school's immigrant population). Due to such financial burdens, students are often pressured to enter the workforce during their early to mid-teens. According to research done by the Urban Institute, an estimated 30% of students work multiple jobs, many of whom are disproportionately first-generation, Hispanic immigrants between the ages of 16 and 18 (Rosales). It is plausible that these students want to stay in school, but their families are so economically stressed that they often feel obligated to work at a very young age.

### ***Reason 2 – Isolation***

In addition to the stress of working, many researchers support the notion that these isolated ELD classrooms give students a sense of exclusion and segregation. Adelman and Taylor state that examinations of a school's informal social patterns point to an overall isolation of immigrant students from their English speaking or American-born peers (Adelman et al. 328). Even though the development of English proficiency among immigrant students is the main goal of LAUSD, the overall academic, social, and personal needs of these students are largely neglected (Daoud). This phenomenon is caused by the segregation of newcomers at an academic and social level, whether it be through isolated immersion programs or separate ELD classrooms (Daoud). This segregation and limited interaction with their English-speaking peers leads students to feel undervalued — as if they are of a lower status than their native counterparts. Additionally, many students fear they will lose their native language proficiency due to being immersed in an ELD classroom (Hamann). Ultimately, their social skills and self-esteem can be vastly affected by classroom segregation.

### ***Reason 3 – Large Class Size***

Lastly, LEP students in secondary schools are typically placed in the same classrooms as English as a Second Language (ESL) learners with a single curriculum ineffectively addressing the varying levels of English proficiency these students possess (Adelman et al. 331). At the anonymous high school, the ELD classes average around 42 students. Despite the CELDT test, which assists in categorizing these students based on their levels of proficiency, variation is still bound to exist within such a large group. This phenomenon of large capacity classrooms goes beyond ELD classes and includes core classes such as math, history, and science. As a result, the majority of students, including those who are native English speakers, often feel as though their voices are repressed and are frequently too shy or embarrassed to ask questions as opposed to students in smaller, more private classrooms. John Higgins, a *Seattle Times* Education Lab reporter, suggests that smaller class sizes may have the biggest impact on students' learning because they can no longer avoid looking the teacher in the eye or expect another student to answer a question:

Most people I talk to predict that the disruptive kids are the worst, but they're not. The inattentive, withdrawn kids are by far and away poorer students than all the others ... If you want to get lost in the back corner, whether you're disruptive or not ... you disconnect yourself from any instruction at all... (Higgins)

Thus, the lack of personal instruction in “one-size-fits-all” curricula is a significant issue that prevents these immigrant students from succeeding.

### **Solutions**

First, in order to address the lack of teacher training, the government must provide more funding for paid meetings that will offer more professional development opportunities for

teachers and inform the staff about the experiences and hardships of immigrant students. Many of these students have gone through traumatic events and extreme obstacles to reach America, some of which include crossing the border, being smuggled into the U.S., or leaving family and friends behind in their home countries. The anonymous high school's counselor proposed that educating these teachers about such hardships can reduce the prejudice and bias prevalent in classrooms. In addition to educating teachers about the struggles of their students, it is necessary that both core subject and ELD teachers participate in trainings. Core subject teachers often believe that the responsibility of teaching immigrant students English belongs solely to ELD and ESL teachers. However, teaching students should be a collective effort. Furthermore, the primary problem lies with anti-immigrant taxpayers who believe they should not be obligated to support illegal immigrants who they assume do not want to learn English or even be an American citizen (Faltis 10). Although racism and prejudice are ongoing problems, the power of media exposure should not be underestimated. In fact, a study from the Pew Research Center indicates that "14% of Americans have changed their minds about a big issue because of something they saw on social media" (Bialak). Therefore, if tax-paying Americans were to learn about immigrants' experiences of pain and perseverance, it might alter their perceptions of these students.

With regard to the statewide testing of LEP students' English proficiency, solutions are already in progress. As of the spring 2018 semester, the CELDT was replaced with the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). This test is similar to the CELDT in that it is designed for K-12 students who indicate that their native language differs from English. However, it is sectioned off by grade level in order to help students succeed (California Department of Education). The ELPAC consists of three different versions: one for initial students or newcomers to the district, one for ninth and tenth graders, and one for eleventh and twelfth graders. School officials predict that these different versions of the exam will address the existing difficulty of the CELDT and make it more possible for students to pass the test in pursuit of a reclassification to proficient status.

In order to assist LEP students in reclassifying to proficient status, LAUSD should grant administrators the ability to hold students back if they do not pass the class. For example, if a student fails ELD 2 (intermediate), the school should retain them in ELD 2 until the student passes the class. Instead, LAUSD has a mandatory policy that forces the student to move to the next level, ELD 3 (advanced). This ultimately gives students the option to fail or choose not to learn because they are aware that they cannot be forced to retake the course. In addition to holding students in intermediate levels, I believe that the graduation requirements of these students should be reduced in order to focus on learning English and passing their classes. The majority of these LEP students enroll in school when they are 17 or 18 years old and are placed into ninth grade due to a lack of graduation credits. These students are then forced to meet additional graduation requirements such as art classes or physical education. When any student in the district is a few days shy of reaching age 22, they are required to leave public school and enter an adult school if they so choose. This also applies to any student who is not making academic progress by the age of 18. Thus, it is imperative that LEP students focus on core subjects and their mastery of the English language in order to avoid dropping out.

Moreover, in order to minimize dropout rates among these LEP immigrant students, specialized support for newcomers needs to be provided. Support could take the form of transitional services, smaller class sizes, an overall immersion into English-speaking classrooms, and increased interaction and exposure to their English-speaking peers. While financial circumstances often dictate why students drop out of high school, not much can be done by LAUSD to assist students and their families with such burdens. However, there are other methods the district can employ in order to reduce the chances of students, especially LEP students, dropping out or failing.

Primarily, classroom sizes need to decrease drastically. Grouping 42 students of various proficiencies into a classroom with only one instructor is not an effective way to teach English. However, if classroom sizes were smaller, administrators could separate the students into ELD classrooms catered to their

specific needs rather than designing a curriculum to suit everyone. Additionally, students would benefit from more immersion into English classrooms and interaction with their English-speaking peers. Peer programs in which bilingual or fluent English speakers mentor newcomer students should be implemented thus enabling an easier transition for LEP students (Adelman et al.).

Lastly, there are extremely high expectations placed on immigrant students, minorities, and English learners. These pressures and inequalities may disengage or overwhelm LEP students. Thus, it is crucial that students have bilingual counselors or mentors who are readily available to meet with them and discuss personal or school related matters. At the anonymous high school, the use of bilingual teacher's assistants has been implemented over the last several years, granting students a sense of comfort, recognition, and understanding, especially in their English-only classes (Mökkönen 138). It is imperative that every school in LAUSD—and across the nation—implement newcomer counselors and bilingual teacher assistants to guarantee that these LEP students feel valued.

## **Conclusion**

This paper outlines the Los Angeles Unified School District's lack of support for incoming immigrant students. Although there are countless drawbacks, worries, and solutions, I chose to focus on those most relevant to my internship site for the purpose of this paper. My internship experience allowed me to witness first-hand the district's adverse effect upon these students and how tests (such as the CELDT) and the struggle for reclassification can hinder the potential of these LEP students. I have met with numerous students and listened to their stories, frustrations, and fears. On the other hand, I have also witnessed new immigrant students thrive in the classroom. Watching students manage to pass the CELDT test and succeed with the help of bilingual teacher's assistants has been a positive experience. Although these are steps in the right direction, there is still progress to be made when it comes to helping new immigrant students succeed. Progress and improvement can only come as

a result of widespread awareness of the ostracization of these immigrant students in classrooms throughout the Los Angeles county.



## Endnotes

1. Personal Interview. 12 November 2017.
2. Personal Interview. 10 March 2019.

## Works Cited

- Adelman, Howard; Taylor, L. (2006) "The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports in the Classroom and Schoolwide: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning," *Corwin Press*: Thousand Oaks.
- Adelman, Howard; Taylor, L. (2015) "Immigrant Children and Youth in the USA: Facilitating Equity of Opportunity at School," *Education Sciences*. Web. Date Accessed: 9 October 2017.
- Bialik, Kristen. "14% in U.S. Say Social Media Led Them to Change Their Mind on an Issue," *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 15 Aug. 2018.
- California Department of Education, (2016) "2015-2016 Edition CELDT Technical Report." Web. Date Accessed: 9 October 2017.
- California Department of Education, (2016) "California English Language Development Test – CalEdFacts." Web. Date Accessed: 9 October 2017.
- California Department of Education, (2017) "English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC)."
- Copp Mökkönen, Alicia (2013) "Newcomers Navigating Language Choice and Seeking Voice: Peer Talk in Multilingual Primary School Classroom in Finland," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*: Vol 44: Issue 2, pp. 124-141.
- Daoud, A (2003) "The ESL Kids Are Over There: Opportunities for Social Interactions Between Immigrant Latino and White High School Students," *J. Hisp. Higher Educ.*, pp. 292-314.
- Faltis, Christian (2007) "Immigrant Students in U.S. Schools: Building a Pro-Immigrant, English Plus Education Counterscript," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 2.

- Hamann, Ted (2017) “Trump, Immigration, and Children,” *Anthropology News*. Web. Date Accessed: 10 October 2017.
- Higgins, John. “Does Class Size Matter? Research Reveals Surprises,” *The Seattle Times*, 2014, [www.seattletimes.com](http://www.seattletimes.com). Web. Date Accessed: 24 April 2019.
- Morse, Ann (2005) “A Look at Immigrant Youth: Prospects and Promising Practices,” *National Conference of State Legislatures*. Web. Date Accessed: 7 October 2017.
- NYU Steinhardt (2017) “Study Finds Classifying English Proficiency Varies by District, with Mixed Outcomes for Students,” *NYU Steinhardt At a Glance*. Print.
- Rosales, John (2015) “Why Students Drop Out: The Economic Pressures That Make Leaving School Unavoidable,” *National Education Association Today (neaToday)*. Web. Date Accessed: 15 October 2017.
- Ruiz-de-Velasco, Jorge, et al. (2000) “Overlooked and Underserved – Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools,” *Urban Institute*. Web. Date Accessed: 20 November 2017.
- U.S. Department of Education (2015) “Educational Services for Immigrant Children and Those Recently Arrived to the United States.” Web. Date Accessed: 7 November 2017.
- Zong, Jie, and Jeanne Batalova. “The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*. Web. Date Accessed: 20 November 2017.



