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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHERS:  
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

And the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Reading

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Marion Kristine Burns

May, 2006

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
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requirements for the degree Master of Science,  
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

*Wilma Kuhlman*

*Kristen Swain*

Chairperson

*SK [Signature]*

Date

*4/18/06*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHERS:  
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Marion Kristine Burns, MS  
University of Nebraska, 2006

Advisor: Sarah Edwards, Ph.D.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore student's perceptions of interactions with their teachers in order to better understand the underpinnings of motivation and achievement. The theoretical lens that framed the research was a relational model of teaching that emphasizes the impact of teacher caring on student engagement. Three English language learners who attended a middle school in a small, rural-suburban school district were asked to share stories of their experiences with teachers in a three-phase interview format. The themes and issues identified in the narratives of the three English language learners substantiated the importance of caring teacher behaviors for student engagement and academic achievement.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

A narrow understanding of educational practice defines effective teaching by referencing the test scores and course grades produced by students. But teachers' interpersonal behaviors may be a fundamental piece of children's motivation to learn and subsequent achievement. "To feel safe, secure, and cared for gives children the courage to wander forth both physically and intellectually into new territory" (Noddings, 2001, p. 104). Without the caring support of teachers, students have fewer relational experiences that support their cognitive and emotional growth.

Students who are English language learners are as a group at risk for low academic achievement. Language-minority children, particularly those who are Spanish-speaking and from low-income backgrounds generally do not do well in U.S. schools (Goldenberg, 1996). These students comprise a growing segment of our public schools' student population. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2002) reports that the number of English language learners continued to increase in 1999-2000, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total student enrollment. The reported number of students who are English language learners has grown by 27 percent since the 1997-1998 school year. These children now represent approximately 9.3 percent of the total public school enrollment of students in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12.

The majority of the increase of language-minority students in the schools is due to the growth in the number of Latino students (NCELA, 2002). The Latino



population will soon become the largest minority group in the United States. Spanish-speaking children represent approximately 75% of all English language learners. The outlook for these students is troubling. While Latino students have made gains in several important educational areas in the last twenty years, significant gaps in the academic performance between Latino and non-Latino white students remain (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). Eighty-five percent of Hispanic fourth and eighth-graders read in English at a basic level or below; over half score even below the basic level which indicates that they cannot demonstrate understanding of grade-level texts (Goldenberg, 1996). English language learners especially need teachers who can nurture engagement and motivation.

The public schools are faced with the challenge of providing an adequate education for children who are not yet fully proficient in English. Complicating this goal, the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that all children, including English language learners reach high levels of academic achievement. Meeting these standards requires students to demonstrate proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by the year 2014. State tests show that ELL students' academic performance is far below that of other students, in some regions 20 to 30 percentage points lower (Abedi & Dietel, 2004). Classroom teachers and school administrators are concerned with finding ways to increase the academic achievement of these growing numbers of English language learners.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### *Motivation and Engagement*

Christophel (1990) describes student motivation as the process that stimulates student interest, gives direction and purpose to their behaviors, and supports persistence of actions to achieve a goal. Research evidence suggests that students' motivation to learn strongly influences their academic performance and general adjustment to school (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Skinner and Belmont (1993) report that children who are more motivated and engaged in school earn higher grades, score higher on standardized tests of achievement, and show better personal adjustment. In short, teachers easily identify highly motivated children: “they are enthusiastic, interested, involved and curious; they try hard and persist; and they actively cope with challenges and setbacks” (p. 571). Further, Skinner and Belmont specifically address the importance of engagement, one aspect of motivation, defining an engaged student as a child who exhibits a positive attitude and a sustained involvement in class activities. According to Skinner and Belmont, social contexts that support children's psychological needs nurture their intrinsic motivation to learn as well as their engagement with learning.

#### *Teacher-Student Interactions*

The literature on the interpersonal aspects of motivation suggests that relationships in general and teacher-student interactions in particular impact student engagement, motivation, and achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan, Stiller, and

Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998). For example, Wentzel (1998) reports that supportive interpersonal relationships were significant predictors of academic motivation for sixth-grade students. The research by Ryan et al. (1994) suggests that the students in their study who experienced their teachers as warm and supportive were more motivated, confident, and had higher self-esteem. And results from the study by Furrer and Skinner (2003) suggest that relatedness contributes to a sense of belonging which in turn underlies students' enthusiasm, interest, and a willingness to participate in classroom activities.

### *Caring Teachers*

Research has also specifically focused on caring teacher behaviors and the relationship of these behaviors to student motivation and achievement. For example, Tucker et al. (2002) report that teachers' involvement with their students had a "strong and direct effect on student engagement" (p. 477). Results from their study of first- through twelfth-grade teachers and their African American students indicated that person-centered qualities such as communicating caring and concern to students, taking time for them, knowing them on a personal level, and enjoying the time spent with them are ways that teachers demonstrate their involvement. Tucker et al. suggest that teachers may be able to interrupt the downward spiral of disengagement from learning and lowered achievement by taking an active and positive interest in disaffected students.

In one study of teacher caring, Klem and Connell (2004) investigated conditions that contributed to student academic achievement. Using student records

and survey data, they found that elementary and middle school students who perceive their teachers as caring and as having high clear expectations are more likely to report engagement in the learning process. The data also showed that high levels of student engagement were related to higher scores on an index that took into account such factors as attendance and student outcomes in reading and/or math. Klem and Connell conclude that creating more personalized educational environments may lead to greater student engagement, better attendance, and more success at school.

### *Students of Diverse Backgrounds*

Today's teachers are faced with a wide range of students in their classes. Many of these children, especially ones from low socioeconomic or linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, have had limited experiences with mainstream culture and fewer opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed for success in U.S. schools. These children are at risk for failure. Several studies have addressed the importance of caring teachers for supporting at-risk students' academic achievement (Baker, 1999; Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Gersten, 1999; Payne, 1994).

In his research, Gersten (1999) found that teachers inexperienced at working with linguistically and culturally diverse students focused their instruction more on student products rather than on the process of learning. The teachers seemed to avoid meaningful, authentic encounters with their students. Gersten attributes this reluctance to use more challenging and engaging instructional practices to the distance these teachers felt from students of different backgrounds. Based on his findings, Gersten suggests that teachers need to reduce their professional isolation

from these children by developing sustained personal relationships with them. He concludes that it is “essential for teachers to get to know their students” (p. 53).

Payne (1994) studied the relationships between teachers and their lower socioeconomic status (LSES) minority students. The purpose of her research was to examine how teacher characteristics create or limit those teachers’ importance to African-American and Latino LSES children. The results of Payne’s research suggest that teachers who are perceived as significant to their students feel a sense of efficacy in classroom organization and establish warm, positive interactions with their students. Teachers who are not perceived as significant, in contrast, are anxious about control, focus on their needs as an instructor, and discount some students as “unteachable.”

In another study highlighting the value of teacher caring, Baker (1999) examined the interactions that occurred between teachers and their students in poor, urban classrooms. She reports that students’ perceptions of a caring, supportive relationship with their teacher and of a positive classroom climate were significantly associated with their school satisfaction. Further, Baker found that the “pedagogy of poverty” that relies heavily on independent seatwork limits student-teacher interaction and reduces the chance of developing personal and caring relationships.

Ennis and McCauley (2002) looked at teacher-student relationships from the perspective of trust. Through their data analysis, they identified several themes that shed light on the ways in which teachers build trusting relationships with their students. Teachers who were identified as supportive by at-risk students felt it was

their responsibility to initiate tasks and interactions and to entice reluctant learners to participate in class. These teachers often revealed their own vulnerabilities to their students in an effort to make emotional connections with them. Many also stressed the value of working slowly and deliberately with students in order to convey their sincerity and authenticity and to develop a “sense of being in relation with them” (p. 155). Ennis and McCauley conclude that such relational knowing is the foundation of trust and the ability to teach effectively.

### *Student Perceptions of Caring*

As Noddings (2001) cautions, however, a caring relationship depends on the response of the “cared-for.” By defining teaching as relational, as rooted in the teacher-student interaction, the student’s participation in the relationship is essential. The student must feel cared for or the emotional scaffold the teacher offers is lost.

Cothran and Ennis (2000) point out that “we actually know very little about what students think about schooling and engagement” (p. 107). Their qualitative study provides insights into minority, urban students’ perceptions of their teachers. In interviews, students reported that their engagement level in class was variable and that a key factor in their engagement was the teacher. From their perspectives, engaging teachers were willing to talk to them about topics other than the subject matter. They listened to students and took their ideas seriously. The teacher’s respect for the student was a critical aspect of this relationship. Further, students reported that they were more likely to engage in classroom activities when they felt as if the teacher cared that they learned the subject matter as well as caring about them as a

person. Cothran and Ennis concluded that teachers' knowledge was less important than their interpersonal skills.

Moje (1996) studied the impact of caring teachers on the language and literacy development of students from a sociocultural perspective. Sociocultural theory posits that literacy events are socially constructed and embedded in a network of social relations. Moje's ethnographic research design enhanced her understanding of a high school classroom culture and its social interactions. Through long-term participant-observation, she examined why and how literacy strategies were used and how literacy developed as the teachers and students employed these strategies for different purposes. Moje's findings suggest that the student-participants in her study were willing to participate in class literacy events because they believed that the teacher used the activities to help them learn and be successful. In short, the students' belief that their teacher cared about them influenced their acquisition and application of literacy strategies.

In another study that examined how students socially construct meaning, Raider-Roth (2005) focused on the link between students' perceptions of their school relationships and the trust they place in their ability to learn and apply knowledge. Raider-Roth interviewed nine sixth-grade children in order to better understand the "relational context" of learning in which students negotiate meaning through their interactions with teachers and peers. The key finding of her research indicated that students are sensitive to their relationships with others in the classroom and tend to share the knowledge that they believe is acceptable. More significantly, students trust

or distrust what they know and their abilities to learn depending on how they perceive it will be received by others. Raider-Roth's findings imply that supportive and caring teachers foster a social context that promotes student growth and achievement.

Extensive interviews and casual conversations with students in a high school dance class informed research by Stinson (1993) into students' experiences of their school and teachers. Her data analysis revealed four themes in the students' responses: they found school boring; they reported that some students who don't want to be there disrupt the classes for others; they felt unable to express their feelings and be themselves; and they reported a general lack of caring from their teachers. According to the students, teachers demonstrate caring by giving additional help during or after class to make sure the student would be successful. Another way teachers show caring is by preventing students from disrupting the learning process. Caring teachers also talk to students about topics of interest to them and listen to what they had to say. Stinson pointed out in her conclusion that, for most of the students she interviewed, feelings about a subject were connected to feelings about the teacher.

### *Present Study*

The present study proposes to explore the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships as it relates to students of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The research draws on cognitive theory that views the learner as actively involved in the learning process. Seen through this theoretical lens, students' perceptions and experiences are fundamental to understanding how and why they learn. Constructivists assert that students create personal meaning by relating their



accumulated knowledge and experiences to their present academic tasks. “Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.3).

Narrative research designs provide a framework for exploring educational issues by collecting and telling stories about individuals and by discussing the meaning of these experiences for those individuals (Creswell, 2005). This form of qualitative research seeks to understand the present thinking and behaviors of participants by collecting and retelling their histories. As the researcher narrates participants’ stories, themes emerge that inform understanding of how past experiences influence present and future experiences.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore students’ perceptions of interactions with their teachers in order to better understand the underpinnings of motivation and achievement. Specifically, I asked three English language learners at a middle school in a small, rural-suburban school district to share stories of their experiences with teachers. I hoped that their narratives would communicate a more authentic picture of their relationships with teachers and their perceptions of the educational experience. While the narratives of three individuals are not generalizable to the entire school population or even the subgroup of at risk students, the knowledge gained by hearing their stories can transfer to classroom teaching and can promote the development of a more responsive and effective pedagogy. Consequently, the central research question guiding my study was: What are the

experiences of three English language learners at a middle school in a small, rural-suburban school district with their teachers?

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### *Permissions*

Prior to contacting the participants, I submitted a description of the proposed study to the Institutional Review Board at the UNO which included the purpose of the study, the data collection process, the guarantees for protecting the rights of the participants, and a sample consent form. I also contacted by letter and in person the principal of the school the participants attended. I answered his questions concerning the reason for the study, the amount of time required to interview the participants, and how the information obtained would be used to inform educational practice. The principal gave his permission with the stipulation that I conduct my research either before or after school hours so that academic activities were not interrupted.

Once I had received permission from the necessary administrative individuals and organizations, I arranged a preliminary meeting with the participants through the school's English as a Second Language teacher. The principal had requested that she assist me in contacting the participants and their parents. During this meeting, I explained the purposes and procedures of the research to the participants and, when they expressed their willingness to talk with me for my study, I gave them each a parental consent form along with a letter in Spanish summarizing and clarifying that form. All three forms were returned to me within the next week.

### *Participants*

I used purposeful sampling to select three English language learners for my research. For the purpose of my study, an English language learner is defined as a student who speaks a language other than English at home and is presently enrolled in English as a Second Language program at their school. All three students were born in Mexico and have lived in the United States varying lengths of time. In order to ensure confidentiality, the names of the participants in this report are pseudonyms.

The three students that I interviewed attend a sixth- through eighth-grade middle school in a small, rural-suburban school district in the Midwest. The district's student population is predominantly white and middle-class with few students of diverse backgrounds. During the 2005-2006 school year, out of a total school population of approximately 2200, there were 26 students identified by the Language Assessment Scale as needing supplementary English as a Second Language instruction.

I had already met the three students in this study when I taught reading in third-through fifth-grade classrooms two years earlier. Laura immigrated to the area from Mexico when she was in first grade and has been enrolled in the school system continuously since that time. She was in sixth grade when I interviewed her. Jessica moved into the school district after completing fourth grade in Mexico. She was enrolled in a fourth-grade class on her arrival and was a seventh grader when participating in my research. Ramon, who was in eighth grade at the time of the interviews, attended a district elementary school briefly when he was in fifth grade.

That year, he enrolled in August and returned to Mexico in December. He reentered the current school system at the beginning of seventh grade. At the time of the study, the three participating students were receiving ESL instruction two to four times a week depending on their need.

### *Interviews*

I initially interviewed the three students together as a focus group in order to introduce them to the purpose and procedures of the study and to develop a general impression of their experiences with teachers. The individual interviews that followed sought to expand my understanding of each participant's unique background and stories. I had the principal's permission to use the middle school's conference room for this interview as well as the subsequent individual interviews. When the conference room was in use by school personnel, I met with my participants in the English as a Second Language teacher's office. The interviews were conducted after school from 3:30 to 4:00 so that their academic activities were not interrupted.

I audio-taped the focus group and each of the individual interviews. Data collection during the focus group also included having the students create semantic maps of the word "teachers". To augment the data from the audio-taped interviews, I kept a researcher's journal in which I recorded impressions, recurring ideas, questions, and thoughts. Finally, as an additional data source, I encouraged the students to share examples of their academic work.

I structured the focus group interview according to the protocol described by Templeton (1994). In addition, I incorporated the interview format recommended by

Spradley (1979) which includes an explicit statement of purpose, repeated explanations of the interview expectations and process, and descriptive, structural, and contrast questions.

After the students were seated, I conducted a short warm-up period in which I explained to the students the purpose of the study, outlined the procedures of the focus group and individual interviews, and reiterated their rights as participants. This brief introduction was followed by a general discussion of the research and the students' reactions. Since none of the students were familiar with the strategy of brainstorming ideas, I took some time to practice the procedure using the examples of "food" and "Mexico." Then we addressed the topic of teachers.

I asked the students to brainstorm the word "teacher" and to write anything that they associated with the word on a poster-sized piece of paper in order to create a semantic map. As the students worked on individual semantic maps, we discussed what they were writing and why they had included it on their map.

To wrap up the focus group meeting, I asked the students if they had any questions or concerns. I arranged to meet with the students for their first individual interviews the following week. Their English as a Second Language teacher offered to remind the students and their families about the interviews. Through the interview process, she also kept me informed of any difficulties with arranged times and the use of the conference room.

A week after the focus group, I began conducting individual interviews. I structured these meetings according to the in-depth, phenomenological interview

protocol described by Seidman (1991) and the three-dimensional space narrative structure recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Both Seidman's three-phase interview format and the three-dimensional narrative space of Clandinin and Connelly incorporate the elements of interaction, continuity, and situation when constructing the stories of participants. Interaction refers to the feelings, hopes, and reactions of both the participant and others in relationships. Continuity focuses on the past that is remembered and how it influences the present and future. Situation addresses information about context, time, and place as well as the individual intentions.

I adapted Seidman's protocol for use with my younger participants by shortening the length of the interviews to 30 minutes. All interviews were held after school in either the school's conference room or the ELL teacher's office. Each interview was audio-taped. I met with the students individually three times approximately every other week and encouraged them to tell their stories about experiences with teachers. To guide responses during the interviews, I asked the students to tell me about teachers, probing their initial answers with follow-up questions to reconstruct their experiences as fully as possible.

During the first interview, in addition to the participant's narratives of present experiences, I developed a life history of each student, generating stories about personal backgrounds and memories of past associations with teachers. The second interview focused primarily on details of each student's present experience with teachers. In the third interview, while continuing to look at their present experiences,

I asked the students to reflect on the meaning of their stories about teachers and learning. Specifically, I asked them to tell me about “good teachers.” I also encouraged them to consider how their history connects to the present and how the past and present will affect the future.

I planned a follow-up group meeting with the three students a few days after the last interview. I arranged to have a pizza party for them at the school during their scheduled lunch time. The purpose of the meeting was to thank the students for participating in my research as well as to share my impressions of their interviews and to obtain their feedback about the study.

### *Data Analysis*

All interview data were transcribed so that the information could be organized and analyzed. The preliminary exploratory analysis consisted of reading through the text data for each participant several times in order to get a sense of that individual’s interviews as a whole. I also included in this analysis my researcher’s journal and the semantic maps of “teacher” developed by the participants during the focus group. Then, using the constant comparative method described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), I analyzed and triangulated the data acquired from the various data sources.

The protocols and procedures that I used for collecting and analyzing the data provided me with several means of substantiating the validity of the research findings. First, Creswell (2005) argues that when the researcher establishes a collaborative relationship with participants, validation of the accuracy of the results occurs throughout the study. The active participation of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon



with me to tell stories about their experiences with teachers lessened any potential inconsistencies between their narratives and my report. I continuously verified my understandings of the interviews with them in order to achieve an authentic rendering of their stories.

In addition, the use of multiple data sources for the analysis facilitated validation of the findings. The audio-tapes of the interviews as well as the semantic maps of “teacher” generated during the focus group and the notes I kept in my researcher’s journal provided a variety of perspectives for cross-checking the themes and categories identified by the analysis. Further, the protocol described by Seidman (1991) recommends a series of three interviews over a period of one to three weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of the participants’ responses. Finally, thorough documentation of the analysis process provided a clear audit trail for further validation of the research findings.

I began the analysis by unitizing the data. I read through the interview transcripts, the semantic maps created by the students, and my researcher’s journal, dividing the text into segments that represented the smallest units of meaning. I coded these segments with an identifying word or phrase. Referring to the coded text, I next attempted to identify potentially important experiences, concepts, or themes in the data. I followed the recommendation of Maykut and Morehouse (1994) and made this process of searching for recurring topics or patterns visible by attaching coded text segments and sorting them into thematic categories on a large piece of paper.

All data were analyzed using the constant comparative method as outlined by Maycut & Morehouse (1994). I proceeded inductively from the smaller units of meaning, continuously comparing each coded text segment with all the others to generate categories. As I refined these categories by the continual addition or removal of data, I was able to determine rules for inclusion for each one. I continued the constant comparing of coded text segments with each other until I had placed all into a substantive or miscellaneous category. Finally, I studied the resulting categories for those that stood alone and those that formed significant relationships with other in order to further narrow the number of themes identified by the analysis.

During the discovery process, I looked for recurring words, phrases, and topics in the data. I found that for the most part the coded text segments related to categories of teacher behavior. I tentatively grouped students' negative perceptions of teachers into the categories of "mean," "unreliable," "boring," or "impatient." Positive perceptions formed the categories "nice," "fun," and "helpful."

As I continued to add new text segments to the categories reflecting these emerging themes, I compared each new unit to all other units searching for similarities in meaning. I probed the meanings expressed in each coded response and attempted to deepen my understanding of the data. Further refining my analysis of the initial groupings, I developed several provisional coding categories: student disaffection, student involvement, caring teacher behaviors, and untrustworthy teacher behaviors. I wrote rules of inclusion for each of the provisional coding categories that set forth criteria for including/excluding coded text segments. These

propositional statements conveyed the essential meaning represented by each group of data.

Finally, when I had sorted all of the data units into a substantive grouping or a miscellaneous pile, I looked for relationships and patterns across the provisional coding categories. I examined the propositional statements that emerged from the analysis for meanings that contributed insights into the focus of my inquiry: what were the students saying about their interactions with teachers that might affect their academic motivation and achievement? As a result of my search for patterns and themes in the data, I developed an outcome proposition that connected the provisional propositions to my research question. My data analysis suggests that English language learners' framed their experiences with teachers in terms of their need for support in achieving academic success.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

During the discovery stage of the data analysis, I identified several general themes in the responses of the students. I initially categorized data from the students' narratives by their positive and negative perceptions of teacher behaviors.

#### *Emerging Themes*

*Mean.* Laura, Jessica, and Ramon all expressed concern about teachers who they perceived as “mean” or “grumpy.” Laura didn't like teachers that yelled before knowing the whole story.

Like sometimes when we're talking, when they think it's this person, they automatically choose which one they think it is when they don't know. Today, Kenny went... wanted to put the computer back. He thought he was going to get into trouble so he just put it right back. And the teacher's like “Kenny! You put that computer back! I haven't even told you what to do!” (Laura, 10-17-05)

Teachers who enforced rules inconsistently were also troublesome for Laura. “And then he says like the first person to ask him (to go to the bathroom), he says ‘yes’ and the second person who asks him, he's like ‘no, no, no! You had time!’” (10-17-05). Jessica told me about a teacher she knew in Mexico. “There's some really, really mean teacher who didn't let you talk. Like they'll be walking around...and they have a ruler and like hit the table so hard. That was my cousin's teacher...She said he was really, really mean. Nobody wants to get him in school” (10-25-05). In another interview, Jessica described her history teacher. “She's kinda old...kinda getting grumpy. She's really grumpy and there's like tapping on the table. ‘Guys! Shut up or you're going to stay after school.’ She just screams stuff if we're really loud” (11-9-

05). Even Ramon who seldom expressed negative judgments of his teachers defined good teachers as those who “don’t yell” (10 21-05).

*Unreliable.* Laura and Jessica addressed the issue of the teacher’s control of their students. Laura described a man who taught Spanish to the children at her church. “He stinks at being a teacher! Nobody listens to him! The guy I got in a fight with, he’s in my class and he doesn’t listen any more. His own son doesn’t pay attention!” (10-17-05). Jessica, too, spoke of teacher control as well as of teachers who were manipulated by students. “And (the teachers) are like young. They’re like not that much experiences ... so they don’t have that much control of their kids” (10-25-05).

(My history teacher) is like... somebody brings up another subject...like she’s talking about George Washington and ... somebody raise their hand and say like “why do nails grow so fast?” And she’s just talking a whole bunch of stories about it. If a kid raises their hand and gets the subject ...like out of... like all of the kids start raising their hands like more and more and more...like so have to trust the kids if they something from the subject that we’re studying or not. (Jessica, 10-25-05)

The students also expressed disapproval of teachers that they perceived as uninformed or lacking mastery of classroom content. Laura reported that when she needed help using the computer’s spell check, neither her teacher nor the librarian could help her.

“I couldn’t help what the computer was doing! I tried to put on the spell check and it wouldn’t go!... (My teacher) said, ‘Well, all of them are on spell check so you shouldn’t have this many misspelled words.’ I’m like, it wasn’t on spell check. I checked. I wrote some long words in there and it still was wrong. And she’s like, ‘They were all on spell check.’ ...And then I told the librarian. She’s like, ‘Well, that one’s been like doing some weird stuff.’ And before that I asked her if she could put it on spell check and she didn’t ever tell me!” (Laura, 10-31-05).

Jessica, too, found some teachers less reliable sources of knowledge than others. Describing a substitute for her science teacher, she stated that “(Mrs. B) knows what she’s doing and (her substitute) is just like reading out of the notes that she has from (my teacher)” (10-25-05). Later, in the same interview, Jessica compared younger and older teachers. “And they’re like young, they’re not that much experiences... The oldest ones just like know everything” (10-25-05).

*Boring.* I heard the word “boring” often in the students’ narratives. Jessica attended an intensive English language program for six weeks before entering a regular fourth-grade classroom. “They first taught me how to do the alphabet... and then some words. I would have to listen to tapes all the time. And for home, like to go home, I would have to listen to tapes for an hour. And it’s really boring” (10-25-05). Later, in the same interview, Jessica exclaimed “science is too boring!” (10-25-05). In another interview, two weeks later, she reiterated the same feeling: “Oh, and science, it’s not my favorite one. I don’t like science very much. It’s fun to (look at) the pictures. It’s kinda boring, the tests” (11-9-05). When Laura’s mom wanted her to work on reading and pronouncing words at home, Laura’s emphatic response was “that’s boring!” (10-17-05). While explaining that good teachers need to repeat stuff more than once, Laura cautioned “but like not get ...overboard with it. Like some teachers, like for all three weeks, they repeat the same thing. It gets kind of boring” (11-21-05).

*Impatient.* None of the students felt comfortable speaking up in class. Ramon told me “I don’t like to raise my hand to ask questions or answer something” (11-4-

05). When asked when she would volunteer an answer, Jessica said “when I know ‘em and they’re short” (11-9-05). Laura reported “I usually don’t ask many questions” (10-17-05), adding that she thought teachers got frustrated when students asked questions they had already answered. “I’m (inaudible) to ask teachers questions. She’s like ‘I’ve already been over that! Next question!’ Well, how does that helping? Or sometimes they’re like ‘look in your book, look in your notebook.’ How’s that gonna help us?” (11-21-05).

*Nice.* On semantic maps for the word “teacher” that each student created during the focus group (10-14-05), the word “nice” shows up six times. Laura wrote “some teachers are nice” next to the phrase “some teachers make you mad.” Ramon wrote “in eighth grade is a nice teacher.” Jessica wrote “nice” next to a large K representing her kindergarten teacher and “1<sup>th</sup>” representing the teacher in first grade. She added on her semantic map that “woman teachers are nicer” and that young teachers are mean but “old – nice and funny.” In the subsequent interviews, these students’ responses suggested that “nice” teachers awarded special privileges in recognition of good behavior and demonstrated a personal interest in their students.

Also on his semantic map of “teacher,” Ramon wrote “Mr. A is the best teacher in Mexico.” Later, in an interview, he spoke again of his Mr. A, his fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, referring to him as “nice” and elaborating: “he don’t give you homework” (10-21-05). And Ramon described how he and his friends stayed after school to spend time with Mr. A: “like every day, me and my friends, we play sport

with him... baseball, soccer...we don't play football because he don't like football"  
(10-21-05).

Jessica described several of her nice teachers during the interviews. Referring to a teacher she had in Mexico, she said "I remember my teacher Petie (nickname). She's a really nice teacher I had in first and second grade. She like...you get homework, just like a little, and if we weren't really noisy, she (inaudible) out school and buy stuff when we were having classes" (10-25-05). Mrs. P allowed good students to go to an in-school store to purchase snacks for lunch.

Jessica also described her fourth-grade teacher as "really nice" (10-25-05). She and her friends went to school early to check homework with their teacher, talk, and help clean the fourth-grade room until classes began. The principal of the school too was "like really nice and he's making jokes when he talks through the (school) speakers. And he'll let us go ring the bell if we're really nice. If somebody's been really nice in school, they can like go...ring the bell so we can get out of school. It's pretty fun" (10-25-05).

After completing the six-week English language program, Jessica entered a regular fourth grade classroom where she was the only Spanish-speaking student, one of five Spanish-speaking students in the school building. "I remember Mrs. R. She was my first teacher (here). She was really nice. Everybody said she was mean but she was nice to me. She like brought tapes so I could listen after lunch. Instead of reading, I listened to tapes... The library teacher was really nice to me because she like brought Spanish books for me so I can read" (10-25-05).



*Humorous.* The students I interviewed also liked teachers who used humor to enliven their classrooms. Ramon wrote on his “teacher” semantic map that teachers “are funny” and that “Mrs. J (his English teacher) is a funny teacher”. In a later interview, he explained how the same teacher made him laugh. “Like, she like...one of the students, he doesn’t understand the, like the review and ... (she) hit with her head the wall” (11-4-05). During that same interview, Ramon included the phrase “funny teachers” when asked to write down what came to mind when he thought of “good teachers.”

In addition to using “nice” to describe both her kindergarten teacher and first- and second-grade teacher, Jessica wrote the word “funny”. Below on her map as noted above, she had added “old – nice and funny”. Laura, too, included references to fun on her semantic map. “Fun classes go faster,” she wrote and “funny teachers”.

Jessica elaborated on fun teachers and teaching practices in her interviews. She described the principal at her school in Mexico who made jokes over the loudspeaker system, her math teacher, Mr. Z, who is “really funny,” and other teachers who were “fun...’cause they tell us about (their) lives and fun stuff” (10-25-05). Later, she explained that she had brought up her grade in history because “we had just a week to study with the classroom, play game reviews and that’s like easier... easier to review (with) games so everything is having fun.”

In the same interview, she asserted again that “the teachers, like really older, are mostly more funnier because they have more experience with other kids... It’s more funner because the younger ones just like explain you everything and the oldest

ones just like know everything (inaudible) notes they give us, so they make ‘em shorter and more understandable.”

*Helpful.* By far the most consistent response of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon when discussing their positive experiences with teachers was their appreciation of teachers who made school easier. In other words, these students liked teachers who helped them be successful at school.

For Ramon, “easier” meant that teachers “don’t give homework...not give you quizzes a lot” (semantic map, 11-4-05). Jessica enthusiastically endorsed the teaching methods of Mr. Z, her math teacher.

He makes everything easier. Like, if you don’t understand, like if you don’t do your homework, like, he’ll tells us to regard attention and he’ll explain everything back to us...Yeah, he shows us how to do everything. If we didn’t get it, like everybody missed like an item on the test, he’ll like make us a number, like weeks, to study more about it so we have to know it all.

Laura, too, spoke of teachers who made her life easier. “And good teachers will like give breaks once in a while and make your homework easy, explain stuff...not just toss everything out at you or take a long time doing it. And they won’t give us too much homework... they’ll actually give us time to do our homework (in class)” (10-25-05).

The students I interviewed wanted teachers who explained school work and made it understandable. When I asked Ramon what was most helpful for him when he was trying to learn something, he replied “I go to the teacher...if they explain it , I do it...Like if you doing something...I don’t understand (and) I ask and she or he talk

to (me). And you don't understand how you do an example, they write examples or something" (11-4-05).

Responding to a question about good teaching, Jessica said "Teaching. You have to be really specific and ...like tell all the people who want to know about it like slow and make it easier to write about it...And if they don't know, like you think they (don't know), go over again, but like specific parts that you really have to know about. You have to explain it really good" (11-9-05). In another interview, Jessica described a substitute teacher she had when Mrs. B, her science teacher, was on maternity leave. "Mrs. S went like really fast and she just went over one time and if you don't (get) it, she went like 'read it, read it again'" (10-25-05). Mrs. B, on the other hand, "is like make us take notes and help us more. She explains it more and makes it short."

Laura, too, spoke at length about the importance of explaining assignments clearly and succinctly to students. She complained that some teachers repeat the same thing at length while others say it once and don't say it again.

You're with Mrs. W. Like sometimes she takes time in reviewing (the information). So she goes a little overboard with it, keeps repeating it, repeating it, repeating it. And other times she tosses it out and expects us to memorize it! Like one time, like sometimes with homework, she helps us with a story problem and she's like, well, we just did it... so I can't tell you now. She just tossed it out at us! Most of us didn't even get it... Like she'd toss it out at us and then erase it really quickly so you can't copy it down. (11-21-05)

Laura's comments like those of Jessica and Ramon suggest that they want to be successful at school and that they expect their teachers to help them.

### *Provisional Coding Categories*

As I read and reread the narratives shared by Laura, Jessica and Ramon and examined the themes running through their stories of teachers, I became aware of deeper meanings revealed by their words.

*Student disaffection.* In a report of their research, Furrer and Skinner (2003) describe patterns of disaffection in which individuals are alienated, apathetic, rebellious, frightened, or burned out and, as a result, turn away from opportunities for learning. Skinner and Belmont (1993), too, found that disaffected children are “passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenge” (p. 572). All three of the students that I interviewed appeared to be disaffected to a greater or lesser degree from the educational process.

Jessica often made such statements as “science is boring” (10-25-05), “tests are boring” (11-9-05), and “I don’t really read” (10-25-05). For her, classes consisted mainly of teacher lectures and note taking: “teachers mostly make you take notes” (11-9-05) and “most of the time we take notes” (11-9-05). Ramon’s main concern appeared to be keeping academic work to a minimum. He repeatedly asserted that good teaching and no homework went hand-in-hand. “Good teachers is when (they) don’t give you homework and don’t give you a lot of quizzes” (11-18-05). Ramon also flatly remarked that “I don’t like too much to read” (10-21-05) and “I don’t like school” (10-21-05).

Laura, too, saw little use for homework: “I don’t like any homework from school or anything... I don’t like to have any homework” (10-17-05). Like Jessica

and Ramon, Laura also shared remarks such as “(school) gets kind of boring” (11-21-05), “I hate writing!” (10-17-05), and “I hate reading!” (10-31-05). She frequently blamed her poor grades on teachers, not acknowledging the responsibility for learning as hers. A leaf project that did not turn out well resulted because “(the science teacher) made me rush” (10-31-05). Laura explained that she was getting a C in math because the teacher taught her to put the decimal in one place when calculating but then changed her directions. “And you put the number there... She told us to do that, and now she’s telling us to just drop down the decimal. So I got that stuck in my head and I can’t get it out” (10-31-05).

*Student involvement.* Despite the disaffection from school that Laura, Jessica, and Ramon expressed in their narratives, their responses also communicated a desire to be academically successful. Klem and Connell (2004) studied student involvement in school, defining it as the psychological commitment students make to their education and the effort they direct toward learning, understanding, and mastering the knowledge and skills taught them. Similarly, Murdock and Miller (2003) assessed motivation by referring to students’ self-reports of academic self-efficacy and intrinsic valuing of education.

I noted in my researcher’s journal that “all three, Jessica, Laura, and Ramon, are cooperative, compliant, and try their best to follow rules and expectations” (11-9-05). The general impression that I took away from the interviews was that the three English language learners wanted to do well at school but were seldom engaged and often frustrated.

Concern about their academic performance underlay much of talk I heard during the interviews. Laura, for example, reported with pride the good grades she earned on tests and school work. During one interview (11-17-05), she remarked “I got an A in that class (computers).” Later, she reiterated, “I have an A in computers and an A in English.” Still later in the same interview, she asked “Guess what I got on my Social Studies test? A ninety-seven!” and then added, referring to her friend Hannah whom she describes as very smart “She got a ninety on it and I got a ninety-seven!” Describing an in-school project in which students read books nominated for a book award and cast their own votes, Laura explained “I want to... The people who got ten (books read) get a certificate. I want to get a certificate” (11-17-05).

Jessica’s responses revealed her desire to work hard to improve grades. “I’m doing okay but I got an F in English because I was gone for three days and I have three zeroes. But I’m finishing my homework, the papers that I do... she said I could bring it up, finish it” (11-20-05). In other interviews, she declared “I just need two points to bring my grade up (in science) so I’ve been studying so I got a good grade in my classes” (11-25-05) and “well, in history, I brought my grades up” (10-25-05).

Ramon worried constantly about completing his school work and taking tests and quizzes. “The quizzes I like or tests is like matching and multiple choice. But I don’t like the spelling or fill-in-the-blanks.... I think I doing bad at filling in the blanks” (11-18-05). Confidence is more evident, but expressed with reservations, when he talks about his math class. “For beginning of school, I think math is easy. But in future, it is hard or easy. (Right now) it’s easy” (11-4-05).

While obviously unclear about procedures, Laura demonstrated persistence in her efforts to master the complexities of computer use. “I couldn’t get my computer to print my paper. I printed it like fifteen times. It only gave me one copy. It kept going to print and other people’s papers came out instead” (11-17-05). Like her previous story about the spell check, Laura struggled to complete an assignment, her words suggesting confusion, frustration, and determination. Ramon, too, worked hard to make sense of science content using both a Spanish-language copy of the text in addition to the English-language version. “Every day, I take to science class the English one. But when I have... like I don’t understand the word of question, I go to the other one” (11-4-05).

Jessica and Laura made comments that indicated the educational goals they had set for themselves. When asked about the future, Jessica replied “I want to go to college... I was thinking of, like, being a photographer, like, people taking photos and stuff. Photographing” (11-20-05). Laura vehemently stated that, unlike her mother who knew little English and was unfamiliar with school subjects, “Since I came to school, I can help my children with their homework!” (11-21-05).

*Untrustworthy teachers.* Ennis and McCauley (2002) defined a trustworthy teacher as one on whose “competence and willingness to fulfill expectations” (p.150) a student can rely. Drawing a similar conclusion, Graham and Pajares (1997) emphasized that the issue of trust is at the heart of the educational process. The students that they interviewed for their research felt that “truth, significance, comprehensibility, and instruction” (p.17) should be an essential part of their

interactions with teachers. Raider-Roth (2005), too, stressed the importance of trust and summed up her findings by asserting “the ways that students learn to trust their relationships in school is integrally linked to the ways they learn to trust what they know” (623). Well-structured, consistent, and supportive teaching appears to be a keystone of trustworthy teacher-student relationships.

Student distrust, fear, or intimidation result when trusting relationships do not exist or have broken down. The study by Chesebro and McCroskey (2001) addressed the negative effects that student anxiety has on their academic performance. Raider-Roth (2005) wrote of students’ concern for “getting it right” and the fears of censure that lead students to disconnect from what they know and to present the information they believe is acceptable. Teven’s research (2001) demonstrated the destructive influence of teachers’ verbal aggressiveness on the trustworthiness of teacher-student relationships.

Many of the stories of “mean,” “unreliable,” “boring,” and “impatient” teachers revealed the lack of trust that Laura, Jessica, and Ramon sometimes felt in their relationships with teachers. All three students expressed their dislike of “yelling” and “screaming.” They perceived teachers who resorted to such aggressive verbal behaviors as “mean,” “crabby,” and “grumpy.” Laura cautioned, “Some teachers can be mean. So teachers might freak you out” (10-17-05). Jessica said flatly “We don’t like teachers who are mean” (10-25-05) and described a “really, really mean” man at her school in Mexico that none of the students wanted for a teacher. Referring to a former teacher, Ramon explained “If you make angry, he’s...



a bad teacher, but if you not make angry, he's fine" (10-21-05). In a later interview (11-4-05), he explained that a student "don't have trouble with (good teachers)." Ramon's comment that "I don't like attention to the teacher" (11-4-05) is understandable given his anxiety about getting into trouble or having a teacher yell at him.

Inconsistent and unpredictable behaviors were also worrisome and undermined the students' trust in their teachers. Laura frequently cited instances of teachers' forgetting or changing their minds: "she said that I'll talk to you and she never did" (10-31-05); "teachers can forget tons of stuff really quickly" (10-31-05); "he said 'the leaf project is due tomorrow' ... when I asked are the leaf projects due today, he's like 'no, I'm giving you until the middle of November'" (10-31-05); "then he says like the first person to ask him, he says 'yes' and the second person who asks him (to go to the bathroom), he's like 'no, no, no...you had time!" (10-17-05). Jessica, describing a teacher that digressed frequently when explaining content, observed "Like, so you have to trust the kids if they... if there's something from the subject that we're studying, or not" (10-25-05).

The students were discomfited when they perceived teachers as acting unprofessionally or as lacking expertise. Laura remarked sharply "She didn't know how to use (the laptops) either" (10-17-05). Jessica compared Mrs. B, the science teacher to a long-term substitute, Mrs. S: "(Mrs. B) is the real teacher. She knows what she's doing and Mrs. S just like reading out of the notes" (10-25-05). Ramon preferred the one-teacher-one-subject practice at his present school to having one

teacher for all the subjects “because (here) they explain only those subjects, and, in Mexico, like if you don’t understand...they don’t” (10-21-05). Even while she manipulated her teachers, Laura criticized them for their being gullible: “The teachers there (in Mexico) are really soft. They bought my fake crying” (10-17-05). And she harshly judged the Spanish language teacher at her church who failed to control the students: “He stinks at being a teacher!” (10-17-05).

The students’ trust in their teachers was further shaken if they felt misunderstood. The music teacher’s lack of trust in her honesty hurt Jessica’s feelings.

Because they found a paper by my chair, and it was a paper music and it was, like, all ripped. And Mrs. L told me that I ripped it because it was on my side... and I told her I couldn’t rip it. Somebody probably ripped it because ... it wasn’t even by my side. It was like all the way in the back. I told that to Mrs. L but she still told the principal. (11-20-05)

While discussing her frustration with confusing assignments and unfairly graded papers, Laura commented unhappily “It seems like teachers are really mad at me for something that I didn’t do” (10-31-05).

*Caring teachers.* Noddings (2001) points out that while “caring” can refer to a teacher’s attitude of interest and concern for students, the word can also convey the dyadic nature of relationships between teachers and students. Reflecting such a relational view of teacher-student interactions, the students in the study by Cothran and Ennis (2000) described caring teachers as those who provided them with safe, supportive learning contexts. Similarly, Stinson (1993) reports that the students interviewed for her research portrayed caring teachers as those who had high

expectations and who pushed their students to learn. Bosworth, too, investigated students' perceptions of teachers. The most common theme that emerged from students' discussions of teachers in her research (1995) was that "caring involves helping" (3). The teacher behaviors most frequently cited by her respondents were "helping students with school work" and "explaining" class content and assignments. Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) also found that the adolescents in her study "evaluated teachers' caring most by the extent to which teachers recognized students as learners and focused on students' academic skills, problems, and contributions to the class" (p.53).

At times, the three students mentioned personal relationships with their teachers that were important to them. Ramon recalled with some warmth of his fifth- and sixth-grade teacher. "Me and my friends, we played sport with him. We played baseball, soccer, and basketball, but we don't play football because he doesn't like football" (10-21-05). Jessica was gratified by teachers who demonstrated a personal interest in her: the teacher who encouraged her to listen to books-on-tape; the librarian who ordered novels in Spanish so that she could read them; and her teacher in Mexico who told her grandmother that "I was her favorite student" (10-25-05). She was also pleased that a teacher she'd had a few years before had recognized and spoken to her at the grocery store. "Like two weeks ago, I went to the store and I saw one of my fourth grade teachers. And she ... and like, I say hi to her and she's like 'Oh, hi, (Jessica)' and she still remembers from fourth grade" (11-20-05). Laura's favorite teacher was "extra nice" to her. When Laura forgot to bring her

workout log to her P.E. class, an oversight that usually results in a detention, Mrs. R allowed her some leeway. “I’m like, can I go home (after school), pick it up, and come back? And she’s like, ‘Yeah. Okay. You can do that. Just... go to the office and tell them to put it in my mailbox.’”

Ramon often told stories of “funny” teachers who mugged to the class and told jokes. “Like (Mrs. J)... Like one of the students, he doesn’t understand the, like, the review and (she) go to the board and (she) hit with her on head with the wall” (11-4-05). Laura, too, expressed her enjoyment of teachers who enliven a class with humor: “I like Mrs. L because she’s really funny” (10-17-05).

However, comments that honored academic caring and support were far more numerous than responses about personal caring. Laura wanted teachers to “explain stuff... and not toss everything out at you” (11-21-05). She asserted that “teachers should give, like, good examples of how you should work it... And repeat stuff more than once” (11-21-05). Ramon explained that when he had difficulty understanding something “I go to the... teacher. And I... if (he) explain it, I do it” (11-4-05). He replied to a question about what a teacher might do to help him learn: “If... I don’t understand, I ask and she or he talk to me and... they give me an example. They write example or something like that” (11-4-05). Jessica, too, endorsed the teacher who “explains more” and “makes it short,” who “explains everything back” to you if you don’t understand the material at first, who shows you “how to do everything,” and who is concerned that everybody masters the content (11-25-05).

In their narratives, Laura, Jessica, and Ramon asked again and again for teachers to explain clearly, to make content understandable, and to make schoolwork easy: in short, to help them succeed. Their voices ring with the conviction that their teachers are the key to a safe and caring context for learning.

### *Outcome Proposition*

Continuing refinement of the themes that emerged from the stories of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon led me to a richer understanding of how these three students perceived their teachers and how they constructed meaning from their experiences with them. Their narratives spoke to me of students who want to succeed in school but who are at times alienated from an educational process that fails to meet their needs. Their words reveal that they rely on teachers, some untrustworthy, some caring, to support their acquisition of the knowledge, understandings, and skills expected of them. As Cothran and Ennis (2000) conclude in the report of their research, students who felt cared for were more willing to trust the teachers' knowledge and work succeed academically.

The focus of my research was to listen to the voices of three English language learners in order to gain insights into student's perceptions of their teachers and how those perceptions might relate to student engagement and achievement. By seeking more inclusive patterns and connections among the data, an overarching theme emerged that interrelated the themes of the provisional propositional categories: at-risk students need caring teachers who will help them successfully negotiate the social and academic challenges of school.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how English language learners perceive their teachers and how they assign meaning to their experiences with them. The theoretical lens that framed my research was a relational model of teaching that emphasizes the impact of teacher caring on student motivation and engagement. The themes and issues that I identified in the narratives of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon substantiated the importance of teachers to student engagement and academic achievement. These themes were consistent across multiple interviews with the same student and among the participants themselves providing triangulation.

The students I interviewed all reported negative perceptions of teachers who were “mean,” “grumpy,” or who yelled. The results of Teven’s research (2001) indicated that students’ perceptions of teacher caring were negatively related to teacher verbal aggressiveness. Raider-Roth’s findings (2005) further suggested that students’ relationships at school shape the ways that they “connect and disconnect” from knowledge. If teachers exhibit negative behaviors toward them, children are less likely to trust their own knowledge or to participate fully in classroom activities. Finally, based on their research, Furrer and Skinner (2003) concluded that children who felt unimportant or ignored exhibited more boredom, unhappiness, and anger. These research findings indicate that negative perceptions of teachers undermine a students’ engagement.

Conversely, a classroom context in which instruction is clear and consistent and in which teachers make school work understandable provides a secure arena for learning. Repeatedly I heard Laura, Jessica, and Ramon express their desire that teachers explain their assignments and help them understand class material. These responses indicate that they believed that teachers could help them be successful. My findings are supported by current research literature. For example, Moje (1996) studied literacy interactions in a high school chemistry classroom. She found that students valued teachers' instructional strategies when they perceived them as supporting academic achievement. Bosworth (1995), too, found that students identified receiving academic help with school work as the highest ranking category of caring behavior.

A study by Perry, Vandekamp, Mercer, and Nordby (2002) found that children as young as those in third grade were more engaged in academic activities when their teachers created nonthreatening learning environments. Similarly, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) addressed the issue of emotional security in school and its relationship to learning. They reported that adolescents who can rely on their teachers for emotional and academic support demonstrate a greater sense of control, autonomy, and engagement in school. Students who reported that they received help from no one when dealing with emotional and school matters were likely to show poorer school adjustment and lower self-esteem. The research by Chesebro and McCroskey (2001), too, indicates that student apprehension, the perception that they are unable to process information effectively, is related to negative instructional

outcomes. Their investigation further suggests, however, that clear and responsive teaching can reduce a student's fear of failure and support the learner's achievement in school.

Klem and Connell's findings (2004) also suggest that caring teachers support student engagement at school. They found that teachers who created caring, well-structured learning environments where expectations were high, clear, and fair were more likely to report engagement in their students. In another study, Goodenow (1993) examined three components of classroom belonging: peer support, teacher support, and sense of belonging/alienation. She reported that teacher support had the most consistent and substantial influence on students' expectations for success, their valuing of education, and their interest in class activities.

Raider-Roth's examination (2005) of the connection between students' perceptions of school relationships and their trust in their own ability to learn revealed that teachers' responsiveness was central to building a supportive context for learning. In addition, based on her research, Payne (1994) concluded that teachers who were significant to their students attended to both the class content and their students. They were "with-it" in the sense of constantly negotiating the classroom dynamics and moving the lesson along while accommodating individual student's needs.

Defining engagement as students' willingness to make the psychological effort required to comprehend and master knowledge, Cothran and Ennis (2000) investigated students' engagement levels in relation to teacher behaviors. Their



findings suggest that teachers are a key factor in student engagement. In fact, Cothran and Ennis argue that because students frequently place a low value on education, teachers rather than class content are the main reason for student engagement.

Other researchers have documented the importance of teachers for student engagement. A study by Wentzel (1997) indicates that perceived teacher caring predicts motivational outcomes. Mottet, Martin, and Myers' findings (2004) imply that student engagement can be strengthened by teacher involvement and messages of inclusion. Based on their research, Murdock and Miller (2003) conclude that perceived teacher caring had a significant impact on students' commitment to learning. The results of a study by Tucker et al (2002) also suggested that students were more likely to report higher levels of engagement if they perceived their teachers as personally involved in their lives.

Baker (1999) reports that student perceptions of caring, supportive relationship with teachers are related to school satisfaction. In addition, she suggests that caring teacher support fosters positive learning environments that may help students build a stronger affiliation with school. She further notes that at-risk students in particular "may not be exposed to mainstream cultural assumptions regarding schooling and may not make meaningful connections to the school culture without the personal and academic support of teachers" (Baker, 1999, p.58). Ennis and McCauley (2002), too, contend that "relational interactions are essential when

working with marginalized students because they create the opportunity for shared meaning” (p.164).

### *Implications for Practice*

Because my study focused on the narratives of three English language learners, my findings are clearly limited in scope and not generalizable to the broader school population. However, they may provide insights into the experiences these students and others from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds have with their teachers. Laura, Jessica, and Ramon all cited teachers who helped them by explaining assignments and school work. I also heard a few stories of teachers who had demonstrated a personal interest in them. Ramon spoke of his relationship with Mr. A, his fifth- and sixth-grade teacher. Jessica told me about spending time before school with a favorite teacher in Mexico and the special efforts her fourth-grade teacher and the school librarian had made to find books on cassettes and in Spanish.

But, in spite of the positive perceptions of teachers that they shared with me, each of the students I interviewed made statements that indicated their disengagement from the educational process. A general disinterest in school is evident in their comments about boring classes, too much homework, and dislike of studying. In reporting her research on significant teachers, Payne (1994) cautions that the quality of instruction among her sample of teachers was inadequate to meet the needs of at-risk students even when at its best. She asserts that “very little was being done to personalize the curriculum or make it culturally relevant, nor were the students adequately intellectually engaged” (Payne, 1994, p. 193).

According to Jimenez (2002), the achievement gap between students of the mainstream culture and Latino children has remained unchanged in recent years. Instructional methods and learning processes are culturally determined. The orientations and backgrounds of culturally and linguistically diverse students disadvantage them in schools where middle-class European-American values and discourses dominate educational practice. Both race and class can distance teachers of mainstream backgrounds from their minority students. As Delpit (1988) warns, the child who comes to school without the skills and understandings of the mainstream culture is often labeled as deficient rather than possessing other, equally valuable, assets. Payne (1994) suggests that teachers who fail to recognize their own cultural biases may misunderstand their students' behavior and performance at school and inadvertently hamper their ability to succeed academically.

Students' relationships at school not only affect their construction of meaningful knowledge but also their perceptions of self. The web of relationships in which learning takes place shapes the ways that students see themselves (Raider-Roth, 2005). In a study of the significance of teachers to their urban minority students, Payne (1994) found that negative teacher attitudes had an effect on students' sense of efficacy. Based on their research, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) also reported that children internalize the opinions of significant others thereby influencing their sense of confidence and their ability to rely on their own intellectual and emotional resources.

Caring contexts are vital for nurturing confident self-concepts and intellectual curiosity in children. Noddings (2001) asserts that feeling safe and secure “gives children the courage to wander forth both physically and intellectually into new territory” (p.104). Chesebro and McCrosky (2001) discovered significant negative relationships between students’ anxiety about their performance on academic tasks and their motivation to learn. Teachers who provided clear instruction reduced their students’ fears of failing. In another study of student motivation, Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer, and Nordby (2002) noted that more students demonstrated self-regulated learning behaviors in classrooms where teachers challenged students but ensured the success of all.

The issue of trust in the teacher-student relationship is also fundamental to fostering student engagement and motivation. The research by Ennis and McCauley (2002) indicates that trusting relationships support the students’ willingness to expand their knowledge and experiences. They suggest that teaching for success is an important factor in building student trust. Skinner and Belmont (1993) recommend that teachers provide structure in their classrooms “by clearly communicating expectations, by responding consistently, predictably, and contingently, by offering instrumental help and support, and by adjusting teaching strategies to the level of the child” (p.572). Structure, in other words, refers to the amount of information the teacher gives the student to ensure successful outcomes.

The narratives of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon articulated their expectation that teachers were supposed to help them succeed in school. Their stories also

communicated disengagement from an educational system that lacked congruence with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. Because English language learners do not have the same access to information as native English-speaking students, they miss out on opportunities to participate in classroom discussions and general conversation. As a result, they continue to lack the shared knowledge and experiences that mainstream students have.

It is essential that teachers in today's increasingly diverse classrooms be aware of assumptions that reflect particular cultural perspectives. Cultural rules for oral discourse as well as nonverbal behavior are implicit and often unrecognized by those who act under their strictures. "Misunderstanding of student intent or overall performance frequently results in misevaluation of student ability, which in turn can lead to lowered expectations and differential treatment of the student" (Michaels, 1985, p.52). When teachers and students do not share the same discourse goals and understandings, both may experience difficulty accurately interpreting the others intentions and actions. For this reason, it is essential that teachers and students continually negotiate meaning in classroom interactions and reflect on the nature of each other's cultural assumptions.

Students from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds often have not shared the experiences that influence the academic understandings and behaviors of children from white middle-class homes. Instructional strategies that make sense to students of the dominant culture may confound Latino or other minority children. Teachers need to help their students gain control over the discourse of the American

educational system in order to support their academic success. In our standards-driven society, students are evaluated according to guidelines specific to the dominant culture. It would therefore seem expedient to identify and make clear for the uninitiated the rules that will be used to judge them. As Delpit (1988) emphasizes, “for those not already participants in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring that power easier” (p.283).

The three students I interviewed repeatedly equated good teaching with good explaining. In his study of urban teaching, Mason (1999) applies Vygotsky’s principle of “assisted performance” to making sense of the experiences of two undergraduate student teachers. His analysis indicates that individuals, especially students new to a discipline or field, “acquire new knowledge, abilities, and skills through explicit forms of interaction with more competent others or experts” (7). English language learners need opportunities to learn the unspoken discourses of school. In the classroom, the teachers are the experts. They are responsible for identifying the underlying assumptions on which they base their instructional and curricular decisions and for making tacit learning expectations explicit for those students who do not share the dominant culture’s understanding of academic procedures. They are responsible for explaining clearly and concisely what students need to know and do to be successful.

The stories of Laura, Jessica, and Ramon communicated their desire to be successful in school and their expectation that teachers can help them make content

understandable. Caring as demonstrated by clear and responsive teaching may be the key to nurturing academic engagement and achievement for at-risk students.

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## Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

September 14, 2005

Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)MarionKristine Burns  
613 South 25th Street  
Blair, NE 68008-1872IRB # 302-05-EPTITLE OF PROPOSAL: A Narrative Inquiry: English Language Learners' Experiences With Teachers

SECONDARY INVESTIGATORS:

DATE OF FULL BOARD REVIEW \_\_\_\_\_ DATE OF EXPEDITED REVIEW 08-19-05DATE OF FINAL APPROVAL 09-14-05 VALID UNTIL 08-19-06EXPEDITED CATEGORY OF REVIEW: 45CFR46.110; 21CFR56.110, Category #7

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has completed its review of the above-titled protocol and informed consent document(s), including any revised material submitted in response to the IRB's review. The Board has expressed its opinion that you are in compliance with HHS Regulations (45 CFR 46) and applicable FDA Regulations (21 CFR 50, 56) and you have provided adequate safeguards for protecting the rights and welfare of the subjects to be involved in this study. The IRB has, therefore, granted unconditional approval of your research project. This letter constitutes official notification of the final approval and release of your project by the IRB, and you are authorized to implement this study as of the above date of final approval.

Please be advised that only the IRB approved and stamped consent/assent form can be used to make copies to enroll subjects. Also, at the time of consent all subjects/representatives must be given a copy of the rights of research participants. The IRB wishes to remind you that the PI is responsible for ensuring that ethically and legally effective informed consent has been obtained from all research subjects.

Finally, under the provisions of this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (FWA00002939), the PI is directly responsible for submitting to the IRB any proposed change in the research or the consent document(s). In addition, any unanticipated adverse events involving risk to the subject or others must be promptly reported to the IRB. This project is subject to periodic review and surveillance by the IRB and, as part of their surveillance, the IRB may request periodic reports of progress and results. For projects which continue beyond one year, it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to initiate a request to the IRB for continuing review and update of the research project.

Sincerely,

Ernest D. Prentice, Ph.D.  
Co-Chair, IRB

EDP/gdk

Academic and Research Services Building 3000 / 987830 Nebraska Medical Center / Omaha, NE 68198-7830  
402-559-6463 / FAX: 402-559-3300 / Email: irbora@unmc.edu / http://www.unmc.edu/irb

## Appendix B: Parental Consent Form



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
Teacher Education

**IRB# 302-05-EP**

**TITLE: A Narrative Inquiry: English Language Learners' Experiences with Teachers**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study which will take place during the fall school semester. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your rights and what you will do as a participant.

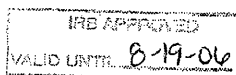
The purposes of this study are to complete a research project for my degree at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and to gain an understanding of your experiences with the teachers that you have now and that you remember.

The methods used to collect information for this study will include a meeting of all the participants with me to discuss teachers in general as well as three individual interviews that ask you about your memories and experiences with teachers. The group meeting and the individual interviews will be video- and/or audio-taped. I will also ask you to share samples of your graded school work. There will be a final meeting of all the participants to discuss your reactions to the study.

I will use the information from this study to write a case report about you and the other participants. This report will be read by you and my instructors at the university. It will not be available to any other person without your permission.

Please ask any questions at any time about the purpose of the study and the methods that I am using. There are no known risks to you that should result from this study. Your participation may benefit all students by helping teachers better understand what happens in the classroom.

I guarantee that your real name will not be used in the written case report. Instead, your name and any other person and place names involved in the study will be given pseudonyms in order to keep identities confidential. If you let me video- and/or audiotape the interviews, the tapes will not be used for any other purpose than to do this study and will be kept for no longer than one year. You will receive a copy of the final report before it is handed in so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to me if necessary. You will receive a copy of the final report that is handed in to the instructor.



6001 Dodge Street / Omaha, NE 68182-0163  
402-554-3666 / FAX: 402-554-3744



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
Teacher Education

IRB# 302-05-EP

Please remember that your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point of the study and for any reason. Any information recorded up to that time will not be used.

*You are freely making a decision whether or not to allow your child to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to allow your child to be in the research study.*

*If you have any questions during the study, you should talk to the investigator listed below. You will be given a copy of the consent form to keep.*

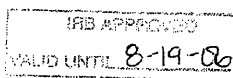
Signature of Parent/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*My signature certifies that all the elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the participant's parent/guardian. In my judgment, the participant's parent/guardian possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent allowing the child to participate in this research and is knowingly giving informed consent to allow the child's participation.*

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator: Kris Burns  
Phone number: 426-5264  
Address: 613 South 25<sup>th</sup> Street, Blair, NE 68008

Your suggestions and concerns are important to me. Please contact me at any time.



6001 Dodge Street / Omaha, NE 68182-0163  
402-554-3666 / FAX: 402-554-3744

Querido estudiante,

Gracias por acordar participar en este estudio que ocurrirá durante el semestre presente de la escuela. En esta carta, explicaré los objetivos del estudio y describiré los actividades y las derechas de los participantes. Haga el favor de compartir esta información con sus padres.

Mis objetivos para este estudio son:

- completar un proyecto de investigación para mis estudios a la Universidad
- ganar una comprensión de las experiencias con los profesores que usted ahora tiene y que usted recuerda.

Los métodos que se utilizaré para recoger la información incluirán:

- una reunión de todos los participantes para discutir a los profesores en general
- tres entrevistas individuales con usted en que le haré preguntas sobre sus memorias y experiencias con los profesores
- la colección de ejemplos de su trabajo escolar
- una reunión final de todos los participantes para discutir sus reacciones al estudio

Las entrevistas ocurrirán a la escuela antes o después de las horas usuales de clases. Las entrevistas serán grabados en cinta.

Utilizaré la información de estas entrevistas para escribir un informe sobre usted y los otros participantes. Este informe será leído solamente por mis instructores en la Universidad. No será leído por ninguna otra persona sin su permiso.

Su participación beneficiará a los otros estudiantes porque la información ayudará a los profesores entender mejor lo que sucede in la sala de clase.

Garantizo:

- su nombre verdadero no será utilizado en el informe escrito
- las cintas de las entrevistas serán utilizadas solamente para este estudio
- su participación es voluntaria; usted tiene la derecha de retirarse en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón
- si lo desea, usted recibirá una copia del informe final

Haga el favor de pedirme cualquier pregunta que tenga sobre los objetivos y los métodos de este estudio. Sus sugerencias y preguntas son importantes a mí.

Muchas gracias por su ayuda,

*Kris Burns*

Kris Burns  
426-5264