Teachers’ Experiences in Serving Late-Entering Central American Refugees with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

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FOUR YEARS AFTER THE “IMMIGRATION CRISIS”: TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES IN SERVING LATE-ENTERING CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES WITH LIMITED OR INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION

By

Kristin W. Kibler

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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FOUR YEARS AFTER THE “IMMIGRATION CRISIS”: TEACHERS’
EXPERIENCES IN SERVING LATE-ENTERING CENTRAL AMERICAN
REFUGEES WITH LIMITED OR INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION

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The overarching purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the academic literature not only by shedding light on the experiences and perceptions of teachers of late-entering Central American students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), all of whom teach in segregated, high-poverty, under-resourced, urban high schools, but in looking at what works in those challenging contexts. Therefore, the research questions asked what the teachers’ experiences have been in serving the focal students, what challenges the teachers have faced and how they have addressed them, how they effectively leveraged the focal students’ strengths and languaging practices in the classroom, and how teachers, schools, and districts can improve their services.

This qualitative study employed Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) as the conceptual framework and constructivist grounded theory methods for the data analysis. Fifteen high school teachers from different subject areas were interviewed, and the findings were member checked with focus group interviews. The participants had to have taught Central American newcomers for at least one year since the influx of unaccompanied minors from the northern triangle countries in 2014. A theoretical statement and six themes emerged, and they have implications for policy, practice, and research.
DEDICATION

To family and friends who lost their lives to cancer during this journey, this is for you:

To my father-in-law, Rick Kibler, who was an exceptional father, husband, friend, and farmer. I know you would be super proud, and we miss you every single day.

To my professor and friend, Marget Lippincott, who served as a mentor and encouraged me to continue traveling and to pursue education to the highest level possible.

To Brig Caldwell, who was a beloved father, husband, brother, friend, educator, and fierce advocate for undocumented students in his community.

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To my Mamaw and Papaw, Lois and Eugene Watson, who turned 90 years old this year. You have always been my role models for how to live, love, think critically, appreciate the natural world, and be life-long learners. I love you all more than words can say.

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To my cousins Heather, Erin, Matt, and Allison, and the wonderful girls they are raising.

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Chapter I: Introduction

In the summer of 2014, the “border kids” were all over the news. Although it was dubbed “The Immigration Crisis,” the United Nations recommended that the United States should address it as a refugee crisis and Nazario (2014) rightly stated that we should call it such. I was working as an instructional facilitator in two urban high schools that received several Central American refugee students when the 2014-2015 school year began. In fact, one of the schools received 117 students from Honduras in the 9th grade alone. Both of these schools are situated in high-poverty neighborhoods and were already strained for resources.

Over the course of that school year, I was able to have some insight into how this unexpected influx played out in the English for Speaker of Other Languages (ESOL) classrooms and the schools at large. Aside from the swelling of class sizes, the range within them was very challenging for the teachers. This was especially true for the content area teachers, who already had a mixture of native speakers of English (NSEs) and students with various ESOL levels. As the ESOL teachers investigated the newcomers’ backgrounds, they realized that many of them were students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE per DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009) and that they required specialized academic supports. Furthermore, it was apparent through the students’ stories that many of them had experienced trauma and that they needed supports and services that the schools were not equipped to provide.

As support personnel, I worked closely with both ESOL and content area teachers as they tried to differentiate instruction and accommodate the needs of all of
their students. This led me to search for viable solutions and then to the realization that there was a dearth of research about adolescent SLIFE. This experience was the deciding factor in pursuing a doctoral degree as well as the inspiration for this dissertation study. In fact, fourteen of the fifteen participants were drawn from these two high schools.

**Influx of Unaccompanied Minors Seeking Asylum**

Within the first eight and half months of 2014, 52,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended while crossing the southern border of the United States. That is a drastic increase from a total of 8,000 children who were apprehended in 2008 (Kandel et al., 2014). Between 2012 through 2014, almost all of the unaccompanied minors entering the U.S. came from the “northern triangle” countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Although the children’s reasons for migrating vary, “four recent out-migration-related factors distinguishing northern triangle Central American countries are high violent crime rates, poor economic conditions fueled by relatively low economic growth rates, high rates of poverty, and the presence of transnational gangs” (Kandel et al., 2014, p. 453). In fact, the northern triangle countries have “for several years accounted for the highest murder rates in the world” (Rosenblum & Ball, 2016, p. 3).

The violence in the northern triangle countries is often attributed to gangs and organized crime syndicates, but it can also come from members of the police force and military (Medrano, 2017). Since the violence is being perpetrated by nonstate actors outside of an official war, the people who flee do not meet the definition of a refugee
according to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Therefore, many immigrants from Central America are de facto refugees and “protective status is almost always denied” (Medrano, 2017, p. 129). Still, thousands of children fled and attempted to seek asylum in the United States. In fact, the U.S. had a 44% increase in asylum claims in 2014 from the previous year and “Asylum-seekers from Honduras (+115%), Guatemala (+87%), El Salvador (+77%), and Mexico (+39%) accounted, among others, for this increase” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014, p. 11). In order to be granted asylum, “foreign nationals must demonstrate a well-founded fear that if returned home, they will be persecuted based upon one of five characteristics: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Kandel et al., 2015, p. 472). This can be quite difficult to document, especially in the case of unaccompanied minors.

Although the immigration of unaccompanied minors from Central America peaked in 2014, children, and increasingly families, have continued to come to the United States to seek asylum. The numbers dropped sharply by the end of 2014, but there was a “significant resurgence” by the summer of 2015 (Rosenblum & Ball, 2016, p. 1). In 2016, a temporary “camp” for unaccompanied minors was opened near one of the high schools that was a site in this study. The children were held at the camp until they could be placed with a sponsor. Since the 2016 presidential election, the policies of the U.S. government have changed dramatically. In 2018, governmental agencies detained the highest level of immigrant children in U.S. history, most of whom had crossed the southern border alone (Dickerson, 2018). At the time of writing, national
media outlets are reporting that the aforementioned “camp” is now the largest detention facility for children in the United States.

**Placement and Entry into U.S. Schools**

According to Sánchez (2014), “federal and state-mandated policies affect such things as immigrant students’ right to attend public schools, the language instruction they will receive in school, the composition of their family household, and the opportunity to attend college—to name a few” (p. 363). In the case of the unaccompanied minors from Central America, policies also affect placement and enrollment. When unaccompanied minors are apprehended, their custody and care is transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) while they await their removal hearings. Following the *Flores v. Reno* settlement (1987), the ORR is required to place unaccompanied minors in the “least restrictive” setting possible “without unnecessary delay.” Children who cannot be placed with a sponsor must be transferred to a “licensed facility.” It is important to note that the Trump administration and “its allies in congress” are “seeking to eliminate Flores protections” (Kang, 2018, p. 1). However, four years ago, Kandel et al. (2015) reported that the majority of children were placed with immediate family members or extended relatives. And, in response to the 2014 influx, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) released an information sheet that stipulates “while residing with a sponsor, unaccompanied children, like other children, are required to attend school up to a certain age established under State law. Sponsors must help unaccompanied children to enroll in school immediately following family reunification” (USDOE, 2015, p. 1).
Although the United States has Supreme Court rulings (e.g. *Lau v. Nichols*, *Plyer v. Doe*) and federal laws that work together to mandate equal opportunities and access to public education regardless of language and/or immigration status, the type of schooling that is available for immigrant children varies greatly across states and even within districts. For example, some districts have newcomer programs, ranging in length from half days for a few weeks to full days for an academic year. These are segregated programs, typically teaching English as a second language (ESL) rather than using bilingual instruction (Menken, 2013). In many places, immigrant students are placed directly in a school according to their chronological age, although sometimes they are placed in a lower grade level with younger children. Newcomers may be mainstreamed into English-only classes and receive pull-out or push-in services from an ESL teacher or they may have some sheltered instruction courses, meant to allow for language development in content areas. Other trajectories for late-entering immigrant students include being counseled out of high schools, needing to work and not attending school, or being shut out and unable to enroll (Lukes, 2014).

**SLIFE in the United States**

According to the USDOE (2018), English learners (ELs) comprise 10% of the K-12 student population in the United States and this segment is growing. “Between the 2009–10 and 2014–15 school years, the percentage of EL students increased in more than half of the states, with increases of over 40 percent in five states” (p. 1). With increases of school-aged ELs, there has also been an increase in the subpopulation of ELs who are SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Menken, 2013). Although this is a growing demographic, we have no way of knowing how many SLIFE there actually are
because the data are limited. This is largely attributed to the fact that most states do not identify and track SLIFE and there are inconsistencies amongst places that do (Browder, 2014; Morland & Custodio, 2017).

New York was the first state to define SLIFE and start treating them differently from other newcomers. As early as 1996, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) began identifying a subpopulation of ELs that had unique needs that were not being met by the public school system (Advocates for Children of New York City [AFCNY], 2010). NYSED surveyed school districts throughout the state to understand how “over-age limited English proficient students with interrupted formal schooling” were similar to and yet different from other EL students (AFCNY, 2010, p. 8). A formal definition of SLIFE emerged from this investigation:

Immigrant students who come from a home in which a language other than English is spoken and: 1. Enter a United States school after the second grade; 2. Have had at least two years less schooling than their peers; 3. Function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics; and 4. May be pre-literate in their first language (AFCNY, 2010, pp. 8-9).

The states of Oregon, Massachusetts, and Minnesota recently adopted similar definitions of SLIFE and districts within those states must report their numbers. There may be more states identifying and tracking these students but that information is difficult to obtain. Until recently, state departments of education were only required to report enrollment and performance data by race/ethnicity and gender to the federal government. The latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education
Act of 1965 (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015) added to that by requiring states to standardize their criteria for identifying ELs and mandating proficiency measurements as part of school performance criteria. However, there is still no federal requirement to identify SLIFE.

Statement of the Problem

Research suggests that ESOL programs in secondary schools generally assume that students have strong literacy skills and therefore do not meet the needs of students who do not (Menken, 2013). This presents a major challenge for SLIFE and for their teachers, as by definition SLIFE perform two or more years below their peers in reading and mathematics and may be not be print literate in their home language. This is even more difficult at the high school level, since SLIFE have a short amount of time to prepare for state-mandated testing while simultaneously building advanced literacy skills and content knowledge in a language they are in the process of learning (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007; Drake, 2017; Menken, 2013). The findings from a longitudinal study by Collier and Thomas (2017) indicate that it takes ELs seven to ten years or more to perform at the same level of English proficiency as their NSE peers, and the average period was shortened to six years for ELs who entered in kindergarten and had continuous access to quality, dual language instruction. Collier and Thomas (2017) state that “many will never reach grade level achievement” if receiving English-only instruction (p. 208).

To further complicate this matter, schools and teachers are often held accountable for immigrant students’ standardized test scores one or two years after
their date of entry into the United States. Testing accountability has an array of implications for teachers and schools (Hillburn, 2014). According to education historian Diane Ravitch, when school performance scores drop, the school may be closed down, taken over by the state, and/or chartered as a result (Hudson, 2012). This creates tremendous pressure to increase the students’ test scores, which drastically impacts curriculum and instruction (Hillburn, 2014; Roxas, 2011b).

Immigrant students, and especially SLIFE refugees, also face structural barriers. They often attend segregated, under resourced, underperforming schools (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008) and may be seen as “a drain on limited resources” (Birman, Weinstein, Chan, & Beehler, 2007, p. 14). In fact, “few U.S. school districts have the background or resources to address the needs of students [SLIFE] with such enormous academic, social, and emotional challenges” (Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015, p. 49). Immigrant students who attend segregated schools were found to be likely to have an academic trajectory of low achievement or for their academic performance to decline precipitously (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). A lack of trained teachers further complicates these structural problems (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). All of these things work together to create “assimilationist structures that prove more exclusionary than inclusionary and that promote an identity based on failure and marginality” (Dávila, 2012, p. 139).

Additional barriers are faced by students who are undocumented (i.e. having no official immigration authorization) (Allard, 2015; Hillburn, 2014) and unaccompanied (Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012). As Hillburn (2014) explains,
undocumented students “are faced with structural vulnerabilities which can cause high levels of stress, familial separation, poverty, and even homelessness” (p. 676). Furthermore, immigrant youth who are separated from their parents are more likely to have co-morbid depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Carlson et al., 2012). Financial hardships also produce obstacles since these students often need income to get by (Allard, 2015; Drake, 2017; Hillburn, 2014; Hopkins et al., 2013). Undocumented immigrants do not qualify for a work visa, so the alternative is to work for low cash wages. This is true even if they graduate from high school and/or college in the United States (Perez, 2009).

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The primary goals of this qualitative study are fourfold. The first objective is to better understand the overall experiences of teaching late-entering (i.e., arriving in the U.S. at high school age) SLIFE from the northern triangle countries of Central America who came during or after the refugee crisis of 2014. As there is a range of issues that arise in serving these students, the second objective is to identify them and examine how the teachers respond. The third objective involves gaining a better understanding of the dynamic languaging practices and strengths of this group of students and how the teachers effectively leverage them in the classroom. All three of these objectives fall under the final and overarching one, which is to learn more about how to improve services for late-entering SLIFE/refugees.

According to Suárez -Orozco (1987), students from different parts of Latin America are “distinct populations” with varying histories and issues in schools (p.
And yet, the literature review featured in the following chapter yielded no recent studies about the educational experiences of SLIFE from Central America or of their teachers. There is also a paucity of research about SLIFE in general and the research that has been carried out tends to focus on their poor academic performance, including their disproportionate course failure and dropout rates (Menken, 2013). Furthermore, research about ELs has typically occurred at the elementary level (Menken, 2013). Studies looking at the high school context are “particularly needed” due to the lack of supports, instructional and otherwise (Roxas & Roy, 2012, p. 471).

This study seeks to fill a gap in the academic literature not only by shedding light on the experiences and perceptions of teachers of recently arrived late-entering Central American SLIFE refugees, all of whom teach in segregated, high-poverty, under-resourced, urban high schools, but in looking at what works even in those challenging contexts. Importantly, it also takes a strengths-based approach that focuses on what these students do well rather than perpetuating deficit-laden narratives.

Conceptual Framework

With certainty, it is already evident to the reader that late-entering Central American SLIFE refugees are on a difficult path and that there are many complex factors affecting their educational opportunities and outcomes in the United States. It was necessary to choose a theoretical framework through which to view the intersectionality of the various factors contributing to these outcomes and to teachers’ and institutions’ roles in them. Latina/Latino Critical Race Theory, or LatCrit, provides this lens.
**LatCrit**

LatCrit stemmed from the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement, in which scholars and activists study and attempt to transform the intersections of power, race, and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Although the origins can be traced back to W.E.B. DuBois’s (1903) seminal text titled *The Souls of Black Folk* (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), the CRT movement formed in the wake of the civil rights movement.

Critical race theory sprang up in the 1970s, as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many aspects, were being rolled back (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4).

Scholars of CRT view race as a social construct, but they also have the awareness that race creates very real lived experiences for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Furthermore, they examine the intersectionality of race along with the other categories that can cause people to be marginalized. Like CRT, intersectionality emerged from the field of legal studies. However, the term originated from a Black, feminist perspective that looked at the ways that race and gender interact in experiences of African American females (see Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), “intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings. These categories- and others- can be separate disadvantaging factors” (p. 57). Therefore, people who are both gay and Native
American or both African American and female “operate at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 57).

LatCrit emerged in a 1995 colloquium on CRT and Latinas/os. It draws a lot from CRT and, in fact, is called a “close cousin” (Valdés, n.d. para 2). “LatCrit theorists aim to center Latinas/os’ multiple internal diversities and to situate Latinas/os in larger inter-group frameworks, both domestically and globally, to promote social justice awareness and activism” (“About LatCrit,” n.d., para. 1). LatCrit scholars also examine intersectionality, but add in categories such as ethnicity, identity, immigration status, language, phenotype, and culture (Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005). In addition to providing an appropriate lens through which to view the intersectionality of adolescent SLIFE from Central America who are often undocumented, unaccompanied, de facto refugees, LatCrit provides an appropriate conceptual framework for educational research.

LatCrit theorists acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize and their potential to emancipate and empower. CRT and LatCrit are transdisciplinary and draw on many bodies of progressive scholarship to understand and improve the educational experiences of students of color (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999) (Bernal, 2002, p. 109).

Critical educational scholars Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2001) provide five tenets of CRT that they suggest should guide theory, research, policy, and practice in the field: (1) “the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other
forms of subordination; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective” (pp. 472-473). These tenets informed each phase of this study and the advocacy that will follow. A summary of the findings and recommendations will be presented to key decision makers in the district in which this research was carried out, and they will be disseminated in ways where they will be accessible for educators, researchers, and policy makers.

Terminology

The terms and labels that we use carry meaning, and can in fact be stigmatizing. The rationale for the selected terminology is provided below.

Emergent Bilinguals

In the United States, students who are learning English in school are referred to in many ways. The most commonly utilized terms are English language learners (ELLs), or the version already used in this chapter (ELs). Another one is limited English proficient students, or LEPs. As García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) point out, these terms omit an idea that is critical in conversations about providing an equitable education. ELs “are in fact emergent bilinguals. That is, through school and through acquiring English, these children become bilingual, able to continue to function in their home language as well as in English, their new language and that of school” (p. 6). As the commonly used terms focus on what the students cannot do (speak English proficiently) and emergent bilinguals focuses on learning more than one language, the latter will be used throughout the remainder of this manuscript.
**Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE)**

Students with interrupted formal education, or SIFE, is also commonly used. However, these students may enter our classrooms not just with interrupted education, but with limited and/or interrupted formal education. I prefer SLIFE as the term better captures the range of possible educational histories. DeCapua and Marshall (2010) explain:

Some of these so-called SIFE are students who never had the opportunity to participate in any type of schooling before entering school in the United States. Others may have been enrolled in school in their home countries for the same number of years as their U.S. peers but experienced limited education, whether due to lack of resources, trained teachers, the type of schooling they participated in, or other circumstances (p. 50).

**Languaging and Translanguaging**

Other terms that will be utilized throughout this manuscript come from the field of linguistics: languaging and translanguaging. Shomany (2006) provides a useful definition for the first term in saying that languaging is used to “refer to language as an integral and natural component of interaction, communication, and construction of meanings” (p. 2). She goes on to say that it is in contrast with rigid linguistical views where language is bounded by fixed rules and therefore seen as standard or non-standard, good or bad, and so forth. García, (2009), also rejects rigid views such as monoglossic language ideologies “that treat each of the child’s languages as separate and whole, and view the two languages as bounded autonomous systems” (p. 7). Rather,
emergent bilinguals utilize complex, dynamic languaging practices, including translanguaging.

Although the term translanguaging is attributed to the Welsh educator and professor Cen Williams, it was expanded upon and popularized by Ofelia García. Following her definition, “translanguagings are multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds” (García, 2009, p. 45). Alternatively, translanguaging can be defined as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 283).

**Latina/o**

According to Araujo-Dawson (2015), research among Latina/o populations has grouped people of different races and ethnicities together without considering their unique histories and experiences. With a few exceptions (e.g. Brazil, Belize, Guyana), most countries in Latin America share the same official language, but differences that are rooted in colonialism exist. This extends to the labels that people from different Latin American countries and racial backgrounds choose for themselves (Araujo-Dawson, 2015). Since I have personally heard people say that they do not like to be called Hispanic as that is the origin of a common racial slur, and since several LatCrit scholars use the term Latina/o, that will be used throughout this manuscript.
Discussion

Although I am focusing on a specific group in a specific place, it important to situate this study in its larger context. Refugee issues have long-existed worldwide, and scholars from several countries have contributed to a body of work surrounding this topic. This remains a critical area for research and advocacy, since by the end of the 2017 calendar year, 68.5 million people were displaced due to conflict or violence, surpassing previous world records (USA for UNHCR, 2018). The United States has been the global leader in refugee resettlement since the 1970s, welcoming more than three million refugees with protective status (USA for UNHCR, 2018). There is a resulting body of literature on refugee-background students in U.S. educational settings, and the same is true for other resettlement countries (e.g. Australia, Canada). From this literature, we know that refugee-background students must not only negotiate language and acculturation issues, but must also grapple with issues stemming from limited or interrupted formal education and trauma.
Chapter II: Literature Review

There is an extensive body of literature on serving emergent bilingual students, and, as has just been mentioned, on refugee-background youth in various educational settings. However, an initial search yielded no recent literature on the educational experiences of late-entering students from Central America or of their teachers. Therefore, I carried out a review of the academic literature with the following questions in mind:

1. What research has been conducted about the educational experiences of SLIFE, refugees, and/or undocumented newcomers at the high school level?
2. What research has been carried out about the experiences or perceptions of their teachers?
3. What are some challenges that arise in serving these students?
4. How can teachers, schools, and districts effectively respond to these challenges?

Method of Review

I began by looking for research articles about adolescent SLIFE in the United States but quickly expanded the search terms to include adolescent refugees, newcomers, and immigrants. As McBrien (2005) points out, information about refugees is often located in articles about immigrants, and newcomer is commonly used to refer to recently arrived immigrant students. In addition, many students with official refugee status are also SLIFE (Menken, 2013; Morland & Custodio, 2017). Therefore, several of the articles included more than one these terms (e.g. SLIFE and refugees).
**Inclusion Criteria**

Empirical studies that were conducted in the United States and published in peer-reviewed journals over the past 15 years were included in the review. One exception was made, since the search yielded a literacy intervention carried out with adolescent SLIFE in a public high school in Canada. Otherwise, the results were limited to the U.S. due to its unique educational landscape. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 drastically altered public education in the U.S. and required emergent bilinguals to pass standardized assessments in core subject areas in English (Menken, 2013). Additional inclusion criteria required the studies to focus on the schooling experiences of late-entering refugees, newcomers, and/or SLIFE or of the experiences and perceptions of their teachers.

**Literature Search Process**

The applicable studies were located via three methods. First, I searched research databases (e.g. ERIC via EBSCO, ERIC ProQuest, ProQuest Research Library) with combinations of the following keywords: *adolescents, students with limited or interrupted formal education, students with interrupted formal education, SLIFE, SIFE, refugee students, newcomer students, immigrant students, unaccompanied minors, undocumented students, secondary schools, high schools, United States, Central America, and Northern Triangle.* Second, the reference lists of the articles yielded from the database search were mined for additional studies. Third, a hand search of the following journals was conducted: *Urban Education, The Urban Review, TESOL Journal, TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, Multicultural*

Seeking answers to the guiding questions involved reading the articles and placing key information into a chart, such as the type of study, the participants (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity), and the setting (e.g. urban high school, high school in a new gateway state). In doing a thematic analysis, it also involved coding the articles for challenges and promising practices. This was an iterative process in which each article was revisited multiple times.

Two prominent themes emerged from the analysis: barriers in serving late-entering SLIFE/refugees and promising practices and policies for responding to their needs. Under the first theme, the sub-themes are as follows: stringent graduation requirements are detrimental, schools are typically under resourced and may be unwelcoming, teaching SLIFE refugees presents unique challenges, educators may hold meritocracy ideologies and deficit perspectives, and SLIFE refugees require wraparound services. The findings from the promising practices/policies theme are presented at the district, school, and classroom levels.

**Literature Review Findings**

The inclusion criteria and search process yielded a total of 17 studies, eight of which were about the experiences of late-entering newcomers/SLIFE/refugees and seven of which were about the experiences or perceptions of their teachers. Two
studies focused on the implementation of literacy programs developed for adolescent SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Montero, Newmaster, & Ledger, 2014). These studies were carried out in ESOL classrooms (in the U.S. and Canada respectively) where students spoke multiple languages.

Of the eight studies examining the experiences of the focal group of students, all but one are qualitative. Four of the studies looked at the experiences of members of a particular group in traditional high schools, such as undocumented newcomers from Mexico (Allard, 2015), SLIFE refugees for the Central Highlands of Vietnam (Dávila, 2012), a critical case study of a male Somali Bantu refugee (Roxas & Roy, 2012), and the experiences of four male newcomers from Mexico who were dually enrolled in Spanish college preparatory courses (Hopkins, Martinez-Wenzl, Aldana, and Gándara, 2013). The other studies examined the experiences of refugee students in an urban high school focusing on emergent bilinguals (Mendenhall et al., 2017) and SLIFE refugees in a newcomer program within an urban high school (Hos 2016a, 2016b). The mixed methods study (Lukes, 2014) looked at the pre- and post-migration educational experiences of 149 Latina/o SLIFE (teenagers and young adults, some from Central America) enrolled in adult education programs in New York City. Almost 19% of the participants attended high school after arriving in the U.S. and some had attempted to enroll.

The review also yielded seven qualitative studies looking at different aspects of teaching adolescent SLIFE/refugees/newcomers. Drake (2017) examined how teachers of SLIFE refugees mediate policy demands while meeting their students’ unique needs. Another study asked six high school teachers about non-linguistic challenges
that their students face (Hillburn, 2014). One study examined three teachers’ cultural scripts and institutional obstacles (Roxas, 2010), and another by the same researcher examined ways that teachers respond to the needs of their Somali Bantu refugee students (Roxas, 2011b). Roxas (2011a) also observed a teacher as she attempted to build a classroom learning community and worked with another researcher (Roy & Roxas, 2011) to explore the disconnect between teacher and caregiver perceptions. Stewart (2015) took a different approach as a teacher/researcher who drew on her refugee students’ experiences to learn about them, build upon their funds of knowledge, and ultimately increase their literacy skills and amplify their voices.

### Barriers in Serving Late-Entering SLIFE/Refugees

In a literature review of educational needs for refugee students in the United States, McBrien (2005) identified trauma (often experienced pre-flight, during flight, and during resettlement), cultural dissonance, acculturation stress, family conflicts or separation, unwelcoming communities and schools, needing to work, encountering stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, deficit perspectives from school personnel, teasing and bullying from other students, and issues surrounding language acquisition as some of the barriers they face. As the findings below demonstrate, these barriers have persisted, and they have implications for the teachers, schools, and districts that are serving these students.

**Stringent graduation requirements are detrimental.** Inflexible graduation requirements, including high-stakes testing components, emerged as a barrier for students, teachers, and schools. It is very difficult for late-entering emergent bilinguals
to meet the requirements for high school graduation, but this is particularly true for late-entering SLIFE (Dávila, 2012; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Drake, 2017; Hos, 2016a; Lukes, 2014; Montero et al., 2014). State-mandated, standardized tests typically serve a gate-keeping function, meaning that students must pass them (in English) in order to receive a standard diploma.

Testing policies and rigid graduation requirements result in pathways for late-entering newcomers that often do not include high school graduation and the ability to go to college. The students may be tracked into remedial or career-track classes (Dávila, 2012; Hopkins et al., 2013; Roxas, 2010), end up aging out of the system (Drake, 2017; Lukes, 2014; Montero et al., 2014), or be pushed into General Education Development (GED) programs, job training programs, or the workforce (Lukes, 2014). In Allard’s (2015) ethnography, her participants (undocumented newcomers from Mexico) were working while attending school and almost half of them “dropped out” by the end of the year. The vast majority of Lukes’ (2014) participants (adolescent or young adult Latinas/os enrolled in adult education programs) pushed back on being called dropouts, saying that they were interested in completing their schooling but lacked access and opportunity.

**Schools are typically under resourced and may be unwelcoming.** As previously mentioned, immigrant students often attend segregated, under resourced, underperforming schools (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). A few of the studies looking at the experiences of refugee students mentioned limited funding and resources at their school site (Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roxas, 2011b) and/or that they were understaffed and the teachers were overworked (Roxas, 2010; Roxas, 2011b). Whether these are the
primary contributing factors or not, schools can be seen as unwelcoming for SLIFE refugees (Dávila, 2012; Roxas & Roy, 2012). Additionally, immigrant students may be isolated from their English-speaking peers in mainstream classes (Dávila, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011) and may not receive the support they need in that environment (Dávila, 2012; Roxas, 2011b). The students may, in fact, have limited opportunities to speak English in school (Dávila, 2012; Roy, 2015) and may not be able to join friendship groups with their U.S.-born peers (Roxas & Roy, 2012).

**Teaching SLIFE refugees presents unique challenges.** One of the studies (Roxas, 2011b) reported that refugee students were placed in the teachers’ classrooms with little or no warning. This school also lacked scheduling options and the counselors placed the students where they could. This practice is problematic for a few reasons. It is particularly difficult to teach SLIFE and NSEs in the same classroom as well as emergent bilinguals with varying levels of English proficiency (Roxas, 2011b). Additionally, teachers may feel they are put in a difficult position when SLIFE refugee students enter their classes and may think that some of the challenges are beyond their control (Hillburn, 2014; Roxas, 2010; Roxas, 2011b). In the words of teacher/researcher Amanda Stewart (2015), “teaching students who are refugees is challenging, particularly at the secondary level in light of high-stakes testing, curricular standardization, and the many diverse students for whom teachers are accountable” (p. 150).

Furthermore, DeCapua and Marshall (2010, 2015) state that SLIFE often experience cultural dissonance in U.S. schools, and teachers must help them navigate this. They point out that schooling is in the U.S. emphasizes individual accountability,
critical thinking, print-based literacy, and abstract scientific thinking. DeCapua and Marshall (2010) maintain that “SLIFE, who have not fully partaken in Western-style schooling, may come into the U.S. schooling context with this different learning paradigm” (p. 52).

**Educators may hold meritocracy ideologies and deficit perspectives.** In an educational system that expects SLIFE refugees to “sink or swim,” their teachers may also maintain this perspective and may not sufficiently address their students’ academic needs (Dávila, 2012; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roxas, 2010; Roxas, 2011b). Teachers may believe that the students are fully responsible for whether or not they succeed academically without realizing the structural barriers that they are up against (Dávila, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011). In other words, they may believe in meritocracy, or success being determined primarily by merit, effort, and/or innate abilities.

Another challenge stems from school personnel holding deficit perspectives that focus on things that SLIFE refugees cannot do or do not know (e.g. cannot speak English, do not know U.S. cultural norms) rather than leveraging their strengths, experiences, and cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Educators holding deficit perspectives about refugee students came out strongly in the literature review (Dávila, 2012; Hopkins et al., 2013; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roxas, 2011b; Roy & Roxas, 2011). This can create myriad problems, including low expectations for students (Roy & Roxas, 2012), micro aggressions, and missed learning opportunities (Roy & Roxas, 2011).
A contributing factor to meritocracy ideologies and deficit perspectives may be the teachers’ lack of knowledge about immigrant/refugee students’ backgrounds (Hillburn, 2014; Hopkins et al, 2013; Roxas & Roy; 2012; Stewart, 2015; Roxas, 2011b; Roy & Roxas, 2011) and about factors that contribute to different adaptation for different groups (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Educators also may not understand their students’ cultural or religious backgrounds (Roy & Roxas, 2011) or may be “unaware of their unique challenges” (Stewart, 2015, p. 150). Sometimes, they are not comfortable teaching this group of students (Hopkins et al., 2013) and may even avoid them (Roxas, 2011b).

**SLIFE refugees require wraparound services.** Although numerous challenges have already been noted, they do not provide a comprehensive list of the obstacles that many SLIFE refugees face. In order to take a whole child approach, we must understand that the basic psychological and physiological needs of these students may override their academic needs (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Drake, 2017; Hos, 2016a). As Drake (2017) states, refugee students must have a sense of security and trust before they can focus on academic endeavors. After all, they frequently face additional stress from trauma before and/or during migration (Birman et al., 2007). In fact, refugee students experiencing stress from trauma was discussed in six of the studies that were reviewed. Refugee students often experience acculturative stress in school as well (Birman et al., 2007; Hos, 2016a). Additional barriers illuminated in the studies stemmed from language (n=10), the need to work (n=7), and absenteeism (n=6). With so many pressing needs, school and homework may seem irrelevant to refugee students’ day-to-day lives (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Roxas, 2011b).
Promising Educational Policies and Practices

The research articles from the literature review recommend some practices and policies for responding to the needs of late-entering SLIFE/refugees. These are highlighted below at the district, school, and classroom levels to show what can be done within existing state and federal mandates.

**Promising practices at the district level.** Due to the issues surrounding stringent graduation requirements, districts should provide flexible scheduling around students’ work needs and offer pathways to obtain a diploma (Allard, 2015; Roxas & Roy, 2012). Districts can also provide extended learning programs (e.g. weekend, summer), since they are beneficial for SLIFE (Dávila, 2012). If a district chooses to operate a newcomer program, bridge programs and transition strategies help support the students as they move into mainstream classes (Dávila, 2012; Hos, 2016a).

Importantly, districts should provide additional support, training, funding, and resources to schools with SLIFE/refugees (Roxas, 2010, 2011b; Roy & Roxas, 2011). The training should include extensive professional development on integrating language into course content as well as learning about refugee and asylum-seeking experiences (Mendenhall et al., 2017). Teachers and staff also need training that counters deficit perspectives that they may hold about the students (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Furthermore, they need specific training on teaching SLIFE/refugees (Brinegar, 2010; Dávila, 2012; Hillburn, 2014; Hos, 2016b; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roxas, 2011b) and undocumented students (Allard, 2015). Last, it is very important that teachers are trained on curriculum development and then given the autonomy to develop their own
curriculum. To this end, the use of backwards planning in collaborative teacher teams should be supported (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

District support can also extend in to the surrounding community. Roy and Roxas (2011) recommend that “districts should consider explicitly supporting community engagement, perhaps by allowing teachers time for home visits and providing opportunities for parents to visit the school” (p. 539). Furthermore, district staff can educate community members about ways that they can assist (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010) and can form agreements between their schools and supportive non-profit or for-profit organizations.

**Promising practices at the school level.** Administrators play a critical role in establishing and maintaining a safe, welcoming, inclusive learning community for their students and teachers. As such, school staff should work together to “create classrooms and devise programs that encourage newcomers in school and to value their native cultures, experiences, and language abilities well into their futures” (Dávila, 2012, p. 147). Additionally, schools should help facilitate newcomers’ adaptation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Ideally, SLIFE refugees would be able to provide input into their schooling (Hillburn, 2014) and share their experiences and knowledge with their teachers and peers (Dávila, 2012; Stewart, 2015). After all, recognizing and building upon their strengths, experiences, and funds of knowledge is crucial (Allard, 2015; Hillburn, 2014; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Montero et al, 2014; Roy, 2015; Roxas, 2011b, Stewart, 2015).
Building a sense of community within the school and its classrooms is important for all students, but this is especially beneficial for SLIFE refugees (Drake, 2017; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Roxas, 2011a). Providing a safe space is key in achieving this (Allard, 2015; Hillburn, 2014; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Roxas, 2010; Roxas, 2011a). In addition, since many SLIFE refugees have experienced a lot of trauma, counselors and teachers must consider their need to talk about it (Stewart, 2015; Roy & Roxas, 2011). In the case of undocumented newcomers, Allard (2015) found that once she had established rapport, the students wanted to tell their border crossing stories. They also need a safe space to be able to request help and advocate for their needs (Dávila, 2012; Mendenhall et al., 2017). Since emergent bilinguals are often isolated, schools should foster cultural awareness, friendships (Hillburn, 2014), and meaningful interactions with their NSE peers (Dávila, 2012).

Finally, school personnel should work together to build upon the students’ aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) to help them succeed (Hos, 2016a). One way that teachers and counselors can do this is to clarify graduation requirements and focus on access to higher education (Allard, 2015; Hillburn, 2014; Hos, 2016a) and post-secondary careers. Another way is to promote engagement with the outside community (Roy & Roxas, 2011) and to reach out to and include the students’ families (Roxas, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Roy, 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Connecting students and their families with community resources is also beneficial (Roxas, 2011a). Furthermore, school staff can provide social-emotional supports (Hos, 2016a, 2016b; Mendenhall et al., 2017), academic supports, and homework supports (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010).
**Promising practices at the classroom level.** Since the prevalence of educators holding deficit perspectives came out so strongly, it is critical to counter this. The literature suggests that asset pedagogies provide an effective tool. According to Roy and Roxas (2011), teachers should first spend time investigating their students’ strengths and prior knowledge. Then, they should use culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2018) and/or culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy (see Ladson-Billings 1995, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017) to center the students in the classroom and build upon their strengths, experiences, and linguistic and cultural knowledge (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; DeCapua, 2016; Hillburn, 2014; Hos, 2016a, 2016b; Mendenhall et al., 2017).

Critical pedagogies such as problem-posing (Freire, 1970) also hold promise (Dávila, 2012). After all, the students have many strengths and experiences that can be leveraged. Unaccompanied adolescent immigrants have demonstrated increased agency, a transnational identity, a strong work ethic, and a desire to learn English to succeed (Allard, 2015). Furthermore, adolescent newcomers/refugees have shown to be resilient (Allard, 2015; Dávila, 2012), responsible (Allard, 2015; Stewart, 2015), optimistic, persistent, and motivated to learn (Roxas & Roy, 2011). They may also come from an oral storytelling culture that can be drawn from (Roy, 2015; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

In a seminal study examining Mexican and Mexican-American students in an urban high school, Valenzuela (1999) found that the students’ language and culture was subtracted rather than being leveraged and that authentic caring from teachers helped in negating the effects of “subtractive schooling.” The articles in the literature review strongly support Valenzuela’s (1999) findings about the importance of teachers
exhibiting authentic care and indicate that the same holds true for teachers of refugee students (Dávila, 2012; DeCapua, 2016; Hillburn, 2014; Hos, 2016a; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Roxas, 2011a). In short, teachers should investigate their students’ backgrounds, strengths, knowledge, interests, and current situations and should find ways of showing that they truly care about them and their success.

Curriculum, planning, and assessments are also important considerations in combatting subtractive schooling. Hillburn (2014) recommends using outside materials “to overcome the subtractive nature of the formal curriculum” (p. 675). It is also beneficial to modify curricular activities and assessments (Dávila, 2012; Mendenhall et al., 2017) and to link them to the students’ interests (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Teachers should implement tasks that promote critical thinking skills (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2017) and should utilize alternative forms of assessment (Mendenhall et al., 2017). Scaffolding instruction using familiar language and content is also a promising practice (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2017). In addition, teachers should be thoughtful when forming cooperative learning groups and should ensure that the SLIFE refugees are involved in group discussions (Hillburn, 2014). Finally, teachers should allow for translanguaging as well as the use of translation devices in their classroom (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

According to DeCapua and Marshall (2010), SLIFE “have a great deal of knowledge about daily living; they have different priorities and different, nonacademic ways of perceiving and construing the world around them; and they are used to seeing learning as being of immediate benefit or relevance” (p. 52). Not only should the curriculum and instruction be culturally relevant, but it should be relevant to their lives.
and their immediate situation (Dávila, 2012; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Roxas, 2011b).

**Discussion**

It was beneficial to identify common challenges that arise in serving late-entering SLIFE/refugees in order to situate this study into the larger state and national context. It was also helpful to identify some ways that teachers, schools, and districts can effectively respond to these challenges before interviewing the participants. This knowledge was beneficial in ensuring that the interview was a guided conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) in which I was a well-informed facilitator and participant. It was also useful for carrying out empathetic interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), in which the interviewer is an advocate who is hoping to effect change.

Of the studies that fit the search criteria, all were qualitative save one, which employed mixed-methods. As explained in the following chapter, this study also employs qualitative methods, and is therefore well-aligned with the existing body of literature about the experiences and perceptions of the teachers of late-entering SLIFE/refugees. Interestingly, the most commonly cited theoretical frameworks across the studies were critical (e.g Apple, 2004; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1995). Therefore, the use of LatCrit is aligned with the literature as well. After all, critical frameworks are useful for naming and disrupting inequalities rather than reproducing them.

**Research Questions**

Due to the gaps in the academic literature, prior knowledge from working in two high schools that received several SLIFE refugees from Central America, and the
findings of a pilot study that was carried out in one of those schools during a
qualitative research class, this study addresses four primary questions:

1. What are the teachers’ experiences in serving late-entering SLIFE from the
   northern triangle countries of Central America who entered during or after the
   2014 refugee crisis?

2. What challenges have teachers faced in providing services for these students
   and how have they addressed those challenges?

3. How do teachers build on the students’ strengths and languaging practices in
   the classroom?

4. How can teachers, schools, and districts improve services for late-entering
   SLIFE/refugees?
Chapter III: Methodology

“Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3).

In the words of Cresswell (2013), researchers carry out qualitative research “because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices” (pp. 47-48). As I was unable to find any published research about the experiences of teachers serving late-entering SLIFE refugees from Central America after a massive influx into schools across the U.S., this topic certainly merits exploration. Furthermore, I intend to amplify voices that are not being heard in the current anti-immigration, anti-public education political climate in the United States.

Not only is qualitative research well-suited for this project, but this is particularly true for grounded theory methods. Engward (2013) states that “The premise of grounded theory is that empirical inquiry should explore social phenomena by looking at what people experience, what problems are present and how individuals go about resolving these issues” (p. 37). That premise is very perfectly aligned with the research questions. Moreover, as outlined below, constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) are well-aligned with my philosophical beliefs as a researcher.
Underlying Philosophical Beliefs

Qualitative research carries its own ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. According to Cresswell (2013), this is also true of studies that use critical theoretical frameworks. In the following section, I will discuss the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research, critical frameworks, and how they align with my thinking about this research project.

Ontological Beliefs

Ontology deals with the nature of being, or the nature of reality. In choosing to do qualitative research, I am “embracing the idea of multiple realities” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 20). Charmaz (2014) expands on this from a constructivist point of view in saying that we should “start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed” and that we should “take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It, too, is a construction” (p. 13). I indeed started with this assumption and considered my positionality, privilege, interactions, and insider/outsider status throughout the entire process, as will be discussed in chapter five.

Furthermore, critical researchers tend to take the ontological stance that “reality is based on power and identity struggles” and that privilege and oppression are “based on race or ethnicity, class, gender, mental abilities, and sexual preference” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 37). In a pilot study that I carried out in one of the study sites, the participating teachers felt that they were working within a top-down system in which they had little agency or voice. Power dynamics, such as who holds it and who does
not, who creates and benefits from policies and practices and who does not, are considered in the findings and implications. In addition, the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, immigration status, language, and educational histories is considered. These are important factors affecting the lived realities of the focal group of teachers and of their students.

**Epistemological Beliefs**

Epistemology is concerned with theories of knowledge, such as what knowledge is and how reality is known. In qualitative research, “knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of people” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 20). In addition, critical researchers believe that “reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control,” and believe that research can influence reality (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). This aligns well with Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist approach, which I again adhere to. In explaining her interpretation of constructivism, Charmaz (2014) provided an appropriate citation from Karl Marx (1852): “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (p. 13). Charmaz (2014) went on to say that the constructivist approach “treats research as a construction but acknowledges that it occurs under specific conditions- of which we may not be aware and may not be of our choosing” (p. 13). In this study, constructivism was applied by considering how systems and policies at higher levels are exerting influence on the teachers’ and students’ experiences. According to Charmaz (2014), this is in line with the “logical extension of the constructivist approach, which means learning how, when, and to
what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships” (p. 240).

**Axiological Beliefs**

Axiology considers the nature of values. According to Cresswell (2013), “All researchers bring values to the study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study. This is the axiological assumption that characterizes qualitative research” (p. 20). Again, Charmaz (2014) takes this further: “The constructivist approach perspective shreds the notion of a neutral observer and value-free expert” (p. 13). I take a critical perspective in believing not only that I am not neutral, but neither are the schools. Rather, I am in agreement with Kohli and Solórzano’s (2012) statement that “schools uphold the value system of the dominant culture in many ways” (p. 444). As a former teacher and literacy coach in majority-minority urban schools, I have personally witnessed some ways that the dominant language and culture are maintained while the students’ home languages and cultures are negated. However, I believe that it is important not to place blame on teachers and schools, but to recognize structural issues and external pressures and work towards an equitable system.

Empathetic interviewing, as described by Fontana and Frey (2005), provides a fitting approach for my axiological views: “If we proceed from the belief that neutrality is not possible (even assuming that it would be desirable), then taking a stance becomes unavoidable” (p. 696). In using the empathetic approach, “the interviewer becomes an advocate and partner in the study, hoping to be able to use the
results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee” (p. 696). This works very well with the LatCrit tenet of using research and scholarship for social transformation. In this case, the goal is to better support the late-entering students from Central America and the teachers and schools that serve them. All of this being said, I constantly used reflective practices in order to “become aware of and deal with selective perceptions, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions” (Patton, 2015, p. 58). My reflexivity will be further discussed toward the end of this chapter.

In critical studies, the role of values are typically “emphasized within the standpoint of various communities” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 37). The present study is from the teachers’ perspectives and the sample and methods allowed for a range of perceptions to surface. The participants all have the shared experience of teaching Central American SLIFE refugees in urban high schools, but they themselves are a diverse group. Of the fifteen participants, eight are immigrants themselves and five are second-generation, meaning that they were born in the United States but their parents were first-generation immigrants. Only three of the participants spoke English as their home language while growing up. Furthermore, the participants have had various experiences while teaching different subjects (e.g. ESOL, content areas) with varied pressure applied from mandated testing.

Methodological Beliefs

Finally, Cresswell (2013) stated that critical researchers’ methodological beliefs, or approaches to inquiry, begin with “assumptions of power and identity struggles,
document them, and call for action and change” (p. 37). As mentioned in chapter one, I employed Solórzano and Yosso’s (2001) CRT tenets throughout the study and will indeed advocate for change. I also utilized constructivist grounded theory methods as they align with my philosophical beliefs and provide “flexible guidelines” that allow for a range of perceptions to surface (Charmaz, 2014, p. 16).

**Grounded Theory Methods**

The original (and, at the time, revolutionary) grounded theory methods of Glaser and Strauss (1967) were deeply rooted in positivism, which was the popular paradigm in the field of sociology (Charmaz, 2014; Engward, 2013). Mid-Century positivism stressed the need for objectivity, generality, the replication of results, and theories and hypotheses being falsifiable (Charmaz, 2014). While placing grounded theory in its historical context, Charmaz (2014) stated that positivism in the social sciences “legitimized reducing qualities of human experience into quantifiable variables” (p. 6). With the invention of grounded theory methods, Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged widespread positivistic beliefs such as “qualitative methods were impressionistic and unsystematic” and “qualitative research could not generate theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 8).

The key to grounded theory methods was an inductive step by step, systematic approach to analysis that involved moving inductively from an initial coding strategy that “grounds” the analysis by coding as concretely as possible, to increasingly abstract levels of interpretation that demonstrate the relationships among the codes and the themes or patterns they display (Charmaz, 2014 ). While the goal of grounded theory is
the development of a theoretical understanding of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it is also understood as an analytic method, that may or may not lead to a theory, or may lead to substantive or formal levels of theory (Charmaz, 2014). Most often, limited studies such as the present one may aspire to produce a substantive theory that explains the social processes driving a particular area of study in a particular setting. Glaser and Strauss (1967) propose that the development of formal theories would require considerable replication of studies in similar settings, which could ultimately arrive at a level of generalization.

The originators gradually took their grounded theory approach in different directions (see Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). Strauss and Corbin (1990) later changed some of the terminology and added a more complex coding system in an attempt to augment measurability (Engward, 2013). Constructivist grounded theory, as explicated by Charmaz (2014), emerged in the 1990s and again modified the approach:

Constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original statement. It includes the iterative logic that Strauss emphasized in his early teaching, as well as the dual emphasis on action and meaning inherent in the pragmatist tradition. The constructivist turn answers numerous criticisms raised about earlier versions of grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory highlights the flexibility of the method and resists mechanical applications of it (pp. 12-13).

It is important to note that even with the different turns, each of these grounded theory variations has retained the use of inductive logic and comparative methods, the
iterative processes of collecting and analyzing data simultaneously, and the emphasis on developing a theory that is grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Because of the intent of developing theoretical analyses, grounded theory methods are useful for making inquiries in areas where there has been little prior research (Engward, 2013). Furthermore, “the premise of grounded theory is that empirical inquiry should explore social phenomena by looking at what people experience, what problems are present and how individuals go about resolving these issues” (Engward, 2013, p. 37).

Study Design

As mentioned in the first chapter, this study was inspired by my observations and experiences while working in two public high schools that received several late-entering students from Central America following the 2014 influx. Additional information about the district, the primary school sites, and the design of the study are provided in this section.

Setting

The study was carried out in a large, urban school district located in the southeastern region of the United States. It is a county-wide system and one of the largest public school districts in the country. According to the 2016-2017 statistical highlights, the district operated 467 schools that held 356,086 students and 18,275 teachers. For the same school year, the district reported having 187,858 students who spoke Spanish as their home language and 13,156 speakers of Haitian Creole. That
was followed by Portuguese (2,067), French (1,542), and Russian (988). They reported having 72,256 students who were receiving ESOL services.

The district’s statistical highlights show that Latina/o teachers comprise the greatest part of the teaching workforce at 51.9%. This is followed by Black Non-Latina/o at 25.4%, and White Non-Latina/o at 20.8%. This differs greatly from the teaching workforce in the United States as a whole. In fact, the USDOE (2016) reported that in the 2011-2012 school year, 82% of the public school teachers in the U.S. were White.

In this school district, immigrant students are placed in a grade level according to their chronological age. The schools follow the district’s ESOL program placement policy, which requires a home language survey to be administered upon initial enrollment. If any of the responses are affirmative regarding the use of a language other than English at home, the student is referred for an English proficiency assessment. If their scores place them in ESOL levels I through IV, they are required to receive ESOL services. At the secondary level, the newcomers who are placed in beginning levels (ESOL levels I and II) will take a developmental ESOL course. In addition, all of the students receiving ESOL services will take English language arts (ELA) through ESOL rather than a traditional ELA class. Both of these are taught as ESL courses and are intended to provide sheltered instruction, but grade-level, English materials are expected to be used in the latter. The ESOL students are typically mainstreamed in all of their other classes without the support of push-in or pull-out ESL services. Therefore, students in the ESOL program typically receive English
instruction in required courses such as science, mathematics, social studies, freshmen seminar, and physical education.

The above mentioned English proficiency assessment includes a L1 writing sample. This could provide useful information for the ESOL teachers, but the L1 writing data are not tracked in the district database. In short, the district and its schools treat all newcomers as a homogenous group, and SLIFE are not treated differently from ESOL students who do not have a history of limited or interrupted formal education.

In order to receive a standard diploma, students in this district must earn 24 credits, pass a standardized reading and writing assessment (or earn an equivalent passing score on the ACT or SAT tests), and pass various end-of-course (EOC) assessments in math and science. Furthermore, teachers and schools in this district are held accountable for newcomers’ reading and writing scores two years after their date of entry into the United States. The two year exemption window was granted from the USDOE in 2014, and other districts in the state only receive a one year exemption.

Fourteen out of the fifteen participants were drawn from the two aforementioned high schools, and information on those sites is provided in Table 1. According to the district’s 2016-2017 statistical highlights, the percentage of students experiencing poverty at those schools ranged from 21.5% to 24.5% higher than the district average. The percentage of students identifying as a race other than White is also higher than average. The other participant was teaching in the largest GED program in the district. It was housed within a high school in a school-within-a-school
model, and intentionally served refugee students aged 16 and up, including de facto refugees from Central America.

Table 1

Comparison of Primary School Sites and the District for the 2016-2017 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools &amp; District</th>
<th>Students Experiencing Poverty</th>
<th>Students Identifying as Non-White</th>
<th>School Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>I (On a turnaround plan until it earns a C or higher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHS</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>69.5% of high school students</td>
<td>93% (K-12)</td>
<td>50% of the high schools had an A or B performance score</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The percentage of students experiencing poverty in the district is based upon students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch.

Recruitment

Purposeful, or purposive, sampling was utilized for this project. This is a strength of qualitative research as it allows for the selection of “information-rich cases for in-depth study” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Following Patton (2015), the cases, or participants, were selected with the study’s purpose, research questions, and data in mind. There are many ways to go about this. In fact, Patton (2015) discusses 40 ways to do purposive sampling that fall within eight categories (e.g. single significant case, comparison-focused sampling, group characteristics sampling, theory-focused and concept sampling, instrumental use multiple case sampling, sequential and emergence driven, analytically focused, mixed, stratified and nesting sampling). As described below, I combined two purposive sampling strategies to recruit participants, which Patton (2015) lists a strategy in and of itself.
In addition to considering the study’s purpose, research questions, and data, participants should be selected who are “experienced and knowledgeable in the area you are interviewing about” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 64). With all of this in mind, I set the following inclusion criteria: Current teachers from different subject areas (e.g. ESOL teachers, core subject area teachers, site-based GED teachers) who taught the focal group of students for at least one year between the 2014-2015 school year and 2017-2018 school year. Many teachers quit following the 2014 influx, so it was important to hear the perspectives of teachers who were still at the selected school sites. Furthermore, it had been reported that students over the age of 16 were being placed in GED programs housed within high schools. It was necessary to recruit teachers from different subject areas and sites in order for an array of perceptions and experiences to emerge.

For the first stage of recruitment, I drew from my prior knowledge of the school sites and identified some key informants (Patton, 2015). Although this could be considered a type of convenience sampling, it is still purposive since I knew that these participants had the desired experience and that they were therefore “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). From that starting point, I utilized snowball sampling (also called chain sampling) to gain more participants who fit the inclusion criteria. Snowballing is a useful sampling strategy since “cases that are recommended by individuals who know other individuals are likely to yield relevant, information-rich data” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 181). This indeed proved to be a useful strategy, since each of my key informants recommended teachers in their school to interview.
Participants

I recruited 15 high school teachers who met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. I was hoping for equal representation in each content area, and was overjoyed to recruit three math teachers, three social studies teachers, three science teachers, and three ELA through ESOL teachers. I also recruited one Developmental ESOL teacher, one high school-based GED teacher, and one participant who taught the focal group of students in a mandatory course for freshmen. Their teaching experience ranged from one and a half to 24 years.

As previously mentioned, the demographics of the teachers in this district look very different than the demographics of teachers in the U.S. as a whole. This was reflected by the teachers who participated in this study and will therefore be discussed in chapter five. Of the participants, 67% identify as Latina/o, 20% as White, and 13% as Caribbean Black, with parents who immigrated from Jamaica and Haiti. As Table 2 demonstrates, just over half of the participants are immigrants themselves (titled first generation) and one third were the first generation in their families to be born in the United States (titled second generation). To protect the teachers’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the table below and throughout the manuscript.

Table 2

Study Participants’ Immigration, Language, and Teaching Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Immigration History</th>
<th>Credentials</th>
<th>Teaching History</th>
<th>Subjects Taught</th>
<th>Languages spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violeta</td>
<td>Second Generation</td>
<td>Social Studies Certification</td>
<td>24 years-all at site</td>
<td>World &amp; U.S. History</td>
<td>Spanish, French, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Generation</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Endorsements</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>First-Generation</td>
<td>Aerospace Science &amp; Biology Certification, ESOL Endorsement</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>ESOL Science &amp; Physical Science</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María</td>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>SPED &amp; Spanish Certification, ESOL &amp; Reading Endorsement</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>ELA through ESOL</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>SPED Certification, ESOL &amp; Reading Endorsement</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Development ESOL</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>Second Generation</td>
<td>English, Social Studies, &amp; Spanish Certification</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Freshman Seminar &amp; ELA</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>Social Studies Certification</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>GED: Science, Social Studies, Math, Spanish Language Arts, ESOL</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camila</td>
<td>Second Generation</td>
<td>Social Studies Certification, National Board Certified, ESOL &amp; SPED Endorsement</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>U.S. History &amp; Honors U.S. History</td>
<td>Spanish English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariana</td>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>Mathematics Certification</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Algebra I &amp; II</td>
<td>Spanish German English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Generation</td>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>Years at Site</td>
<td>Endorsement</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adèle</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Provisional Certification</td>
<td>1½ years</td>
<td>ESOL Biology &amp; Biology</td>
<td>Haitian Creole &amp; English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>all at site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Provisional Certification</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Honors Biology</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>all at site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>English &amp; Spanish Certification</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>ELA through ESOL</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd at site</td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Provisional Certification</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>ELA through ESOL</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>generations in U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>all at site</td>
<td>ESOL, ESOL Freshman Seminar, &amp; ESOL Speech</td>
<td>Some Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Math Certification</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>ESOL Algebra I</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ESOL Endorsement</td>
<td>all at site</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Provisional Certification</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Geometry &amp; Honors Geometry</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>generations in U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td>all at site</td>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Social Studies &amp; SPED</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>World History</td>
<td>Polish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>3 at site</td>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand experiences in which they did not participate (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). They can be defined as “conversations in which a researcher guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). Since the discussion needs to be guided, focused questions are quite useful. According to Charmaz (2014), focused questions allow for
dialogue about a specific topic that can be discussed “from the vantage points of their experiences” (p. 71). Therefore, individual, semi-structured interviews provided the data for this study.

In creating the interview guide (see APPENDIX A), I took an approach that was recommended by both Charmaz (2014) and Rubin and Rubin (2005). They suggest beginning with unstructured, or open-ended, questions and using the information those generate to create focused, or semi-structured, questions. Therefore, the focused questions on the interview guide were partially informed by the responses to unstructured questions in the aforementioned pilot study. The participants in the pilot taught the focal students at one of the sites during the 2014-2015 school year, but were no longer at the school when these data were collected. The interview questions were also informed by my prior knowledge from working in the schools and feedback from my dissertation proposal meeting.

During the interviews, the participants’ responses were followed with probes as needed. Probing is an important tool for “eliciting the participants’ definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 95). This process allows for the type of “depth, detail, and richness sought in interviews, what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls thick description” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 13). Therefore, I probed to ask the participants to clarify their meaning, elaborate, and/or provide specific examples. A few probes that were utilized were “Can you tell me more about…?” and “Could you further describe…?”
The individual interviews ranged in length from around 40 minutes \((n=2)\) to an hour and a half or longer \((n=2)\), with the remainder \((n=11)\) being around an hour long. I kept a journal in which I wrote reflective memos and field notes before and/or after each interview. Reflective memos are critical for reflexivity in order “to avoid preconceiving your data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 165). This was especially important in my case due to having extensive prior knowledge about the schools, the district, and even some of the participants.

Two group interviews were held after the initial data analysis was completed, one at each of the two high schools that all but one of the participants were drawn from. This information was used as a member check to test credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The focus group interviews focused on member checking the tentative findings from the analysis of the individual interview data. Although two thirds of the participants were invited to participate in the focus group interviews, one third \((n=5)\) showed up at the designated place and time. I presented the tentative themes and their families (see Table 5), and the focus group participants unanimously agreed with them. Therefore, the themes and families remained and the theoretical statement was crafted.

**Data Analysis**

Since the analysis was guided by Charmaz’s (2014) text titled *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.), her brief overview is provided here: “Grounded theory begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between the data and the analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps you
interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis” (p. 1). This was the process that was used from transcribing the interviews to moving up each analytical level (see Figure 1 below) to the theoretical statement.

After the interviews were carried out, they were transcribed word for word, either by myself or by a colleague who has lived in the area where the research was carried out for years and understands the local dialects. In the latter case, I quality checked each transcription for accuracy. I continued to keep a journal in which I wrote memos (both analytic and reflective) following each transcription or quality check. Analytic memos are very important in grounded theory methods because they help the researcher analyze data and codes early in the process (Charmaz, 2014). They also provide a useful tool to “catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162).

*Figure 1. Analytical levels.*
Open and focused coding. The data analysis process in grounded theory begins with open and focused coding. Charmaz (2014) provides the following definition: “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 111). In other words, the researcher creates initial codes that represent chunks of meaning. These are called “open” codes because they are arrived at inductively, through an open-ended process of analysis. Next, through constant comparison of the codes with each other, the researcher systematically refines these codes into what Charmaz (2014) refers to as “focused codes.”

I began by creating open codes for a few pages of the first interview transcript. A colleague open coded the same piece separately, and we then compared our work to ensure that we were coding the data the same way. After we reached consensus on coding, I proceeded to open code each line of each transcript. To the extent that it was possible, I followed Charmaz’s (2014) suggestion of using gerunds in order for the codes to show action. Since open and focused coding are at the bottom of the analytic pyramid, I was careful to stay close to the data and not yet interpret it. This is important in grounded theory since “initial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 117).

The open coding process was done manually using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. After each interview was completed, I exported the open codes into a Microsoft Word document. This allowed me to sort and compare the initial codes (n= 3,287) and determine which ones I could merge or drop altogether. After this process was completed, I was left with only the focused codes (n=236).
codes were then entered into ATLAS.ti in order to create data displays such as word clouds and frequency. Throughout the open and focused coding processes, I was able to “define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). The analytic memos were an integral part of this.

Table 3

*Example of a Focused Code and its Open Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focused Code</th>
<th>Open Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Working at age 16 and up | • Working after school and on weekends  
                          | • Boys and girls are working  
                          | • Having to work at ages 16 and 17  
                          | • 10th graders having jobs on top of school  
                          | • Most boys start working in the 10th grade  
                          | • Most 11th grade students are working  
                          | • Some 9th graders having jobs     |

**Families.** After reducing the initial codes into focused codes, I moved up to the next analytical level by grouping the focused codes that belong together into families (n=25). Corbin and Strauss (2008) call this step axial coding and define it as “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (p. 195). Again, I followed Charmaz’s (2014) approach and stayed close to the patterns that I defined in the data and treated as conceptual categories. Each category, or family, was given a working title that was later modified in order to capture the meaning of all of the focused codes within it.
Table 4

Example of a Family and its Focused Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having to work</td>
<td>• Feeling more secure when working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Many working in construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Work conflicting with schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Working and supporting family is cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Working at age 16 and up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Working at home and caring for siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Working for rent and getting by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Supporting families here and abroad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the coding and grouping processes I utilized the constant comparative method. In short, I followed Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) guideline: “While coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (p. 106). This is a critical part of using grounded theory methods since “this constant comparison of incidents very soon starts to generate the theoretical properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106).

**Themes.** The next level of analysis involved exploring the relationships across and between families in order to generate themes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that the concepts that are developed into categories (or families) are abstractions and that any theoretical formulation that comes from them must apply to all of the cases in the study. They go on to say that “findings should be presented as a set of interrelated concepts, not just a listing of themes” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 104). I continued to use the constant comparative method, creating graphic organizers and writing analytic memos until the interrelated concepts among the families emerged. Six themes (n=6)
were then constructed. These families and themes were member checked in focus group interviews before moving up to the highest analytical level. The themes and their families are presented in the table below and discussed in the following chapter.

Table 5

*Themes and their Families*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Families within Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teaching late-entering C.A. refugees presents</td>
<td>▪ Newcomers are SLIFE and a few have large gaps in schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>particular educational challenges</td>
<td>▪ Teachers learning educational backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Low L1 proficiency &amp; varied math levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Multiple challenges arising in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Variation within ESOL Levels is challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teaching students with unaddressed trauma &amp; needs</td>
<td>▪ Have experienced myriad traumas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presents additional challenges</td>
<td>▪ Trauma is unaddressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Experiencing unmet basic needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Some facing additional challenges at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers perceiving that unaccompanied</td>
<td>▪ UMNRs having additional barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;/or undocumented students face additional barriers</td>
<td>▪ Undocumented students having additional barriers due to immigration status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Increased fear &amp; anger since the election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers perceiving the students’ adjustment to cultural,</td>
<td>▪ Difficult to adjust to life in the U.S. &amp; entering high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educational, &amp; economic circumstances in the U.S. to be</td>
<td>▪ Overall school climate is subtractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficult</td>
<td>▪ Needing educational pathways &amp; transitions support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Attendance &amp; graduation challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Having to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teachers perceiving that testing creates myriad difficulties</td>
<td>▪ Testing is exceedingly difficult &amp; not valid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for themselves &amp; their students</td>
<td>▪ Subject-area testing challenges</td>
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<td>6. Teachers responding by establishing a safe &amp; productive</td>
<td>▪ Creating a safe &amp; comfortable learning environment</td>
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<td>learning environment,</td>
<td>▪ Using various instructional strategies</td>
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<td>▪ Using grouping &amp; pairing strategies</td>
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Theoretical Statement. Although grounded theory can produce both formal and substantive theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it typically produces the latter. “Most grounded theorists produce substantive theories addressing delimited problems in specific substantive areas” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 10). In other words, a substantive theory is only related to its setting and its data and cannot be generalized to other settings.

Instead of producing a substantive theory, this research project produced a theoretical statement. The theoretical statement sits at the top of the analytic pyramid and is grounded in the themes themselves. As discussed below, qualitative findings are not transferable, but rather, this statement captures the experiences and perceptions of the participating teachers of late-entering Central American SLIFE refugees in their specific contexts.

Credibility

In qualitative research, “terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, p. 24). Credibility is to qualitative research what internal validity is to quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2003). That is, the study measures what it intends to measure.
“Credibility deals with the question, ‘How congruent are the findings with reality?’” (Shenton, 2003, p. 64).

This study employed a few different strategies to enhance credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide some suggestions including spending time in the field, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, video recordings, and member checks. Therefore, group interviews were conducted for member checking purposes. The research questions are clearly stated and a detailed description of the context is provided, as these things are also important in making a study credible (Devers, 1999). Finally, Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that “the credibility of your findings will be enhanced if you make sure you have interviewed individuals who reflect a variety of perspectives” (p. 67). To this end, I intentionally recruited teachers from different subject areas and school sites.

Transferability

This is in the qualitative equivalent of external validity/generalizability in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2003). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher “cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can only provide the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (p. 316). It is indeed my intention to provide this so that others can decide if the findings apply to their specific context(s).
Dependability

According to Shenton (2003), “the positivist employs techniques to show that, if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained” (p. 71). This approach obviously differs from qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that there is no validity without reliability and therefore no credibility without dependability. “If it is possible using the techniques outlined in relation to credibility to show that a study has that quality, it ought not be necessary to demonstrate dependability separately” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 316-317). They do go on to say that this is not the strongest argument and suggest an “inquiry audit,” in which the process and the product are examined. Shenton (2003) offers a more accessible solution and therefore the one that I followed: “In order to address the dependability issue more directly, the processes within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (p. 71).

Confirmability

The concept of confirmability is comparable to objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2003). “Here steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2003, p. 72). To this end, I stayed close to the data throughout the process, examined my positionality, and practiced reflexivity.
Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The father of multicultural education, James A. Banks (1998), states that “the educational policies supported by mainstream social science and educational researchers have often harmed low-income students of color” (p. 5). Since I am a white female from the dominant racial and language group and have access to the language and culture of power (Delpit, 1988), it is critical that I am always aware of my positionality and that I use my influence to help and not cause further harm. It is also critical that I amplify voices rather than speak for others.

In addition, Banks (2010) talks about researchers as indigenous-insiders, indigenous-outsiders, external-insiders, or external-outsiders. In the primary sites that I drew participants from, I am an external-insider. This is because I am from a different part of the United States, have a different cultural and linguistic background, and I am a Ph.D. candidate carrying out research. However, I knew each of the key participants from working in the schools and participating in common planning and professional development sessions.

I brought a lot of prior knowledge into this project and had to constantly reflect about my sensitivity as well as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969). “Sensitizing concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). Both of these were important considerations throughout the data collection and analysis phases.

Before each interview, I wrote a reflective memo about my assumptions, feelings, and concerns. Following the interview, I immediately wrote another
reflective memo and field notes. Excerpts of reflective memos are provided below to
provide a few examples of how reflexivity was used throughout different phases of
this project. The first excerpt is from a memo that was written after visiting one of the
school sites but before collecting data. The second one was written immediately
following my first interview, and the third one was written after the ninth interview
was completed.

1. I had assumed that most of the SLIFE refugees had dropped out or were
pushed out. The latter has certainly been the case in some local high
schools, especially after the school is held accountable for their test scores. I
was pleasantly surprised to learn that some of the 2014 cohort is graduating
this year. I asked the cap advisor and two teachers about this and their
estimates ranged from 30-50 graduates. Because of the anticipated two year
push out, I was planning on only having participants who taught in 2014-
2015 or 2015-2016. I expanded my inclusion criteria to the current school
year due to this news.

2. Although I have an interview guide and asked every question on it, I treated
this as more of an open-ended interview. I attempted to clarify her meaning
and asked for examples at different points. Due to my history of working in
this school, I really do have to be careful about assuming that I understand
what they are saying rather than clarifying their intended meaning. I also
have to be careful so that I am not leading. Overall, I feel like I did well for
my first interview.

3. I had originally assumed that some of the SLIFE would have been referred
in to special education (SPED) due to low math and reading levels and
accountability. This, however, does not appear to be the case. Two of the
ESOL teachers I interviewed have backgrounds in SPED and the third has a
SPED endorsement. This simply does not appear to be a trend. In fact, one
of the ESOL teachers talked about the difficulty in referring students, so this
would be something interesting to follow up on at a later point. She also
thought that they would still receive their ESOL services if they had an IEP
and I have not witnessed that. That would be interesting to follow up on as
well.
Chapter IV: Results

“We do what we can, but it’s definitely not enough, not only in ESOL, but in general.”

-Sofia

I selected this quote for placement at the beginning of this chapter for two main reasons. First, it succinctly sums up the findings, and is in the words of an ESOL teacher who works exclusively with newcomers, most of whom hail from the northern triangle countries of Central America. Sofia was a late-entering student herself, and went through the ESOL program in the district that this research was carried out in. Second, in taking a critical approach and honoring the teachers’ experiential knowledge, it is important to amplify their voices. As such, direct quotations are woven throughout this chapter.

Findings

As suggested by Charmaz (2014), the findings will be presented thematically. This section begins with the theoretical statement since it sits at the top of the analytic pyramid. The themes will then be discussed, along with the families and focused codes that support them.

Many of the findings, particularly relating to the students’ backgrounds and the challenges that they face, are difficult to grapple with. It is imperative that we do not view the effects of the traumas that they have experienced and lack of access to formal education as intrinsic deficits, but rather, that we are aware of the teachers’ and students’ experiences and use this information to effect meaningful change. After all,
we must dismantle barriers and properly support the students as well as the teachers and schools that serve them.

**Theoretical Statement**

The following theoretical statement was created to capture the themes (n=6) that emerged in the analysis: *Although teaching late-entering refugees from Central America presents particular educational challenges which the teachers perceive to be exacerbated by the students’ unaddressed trauma and needs, structural and political barriers that they face, difficulties they have in adjusting to cultural, educational, and economic circumstances, and pressures from standardized testing, the teachers responded by creating a safe and productive learning environment, leveraging the students’ multiple strengths in the classroom, and going above and beyond what their position requires.*

**Theme 1: Teaching Late-Entering Central American Refugees Presents Particular Educational Challenges**

Teaching any newcomers who must learn an additional language in school presents teachers with challenges, but particular educational challenges arise in serving late-entering students from Central America. A veteran science teacher, Santiago, provided the example of teaching photosynthesis to newcomers from Cuba who had learned about the concept in Spanish versus newcomers from Guatemala who had never even heard the term. When I asked him what he responded since these students were in the same class he replied, “Well, I'm not a magician.” Santiago went on to say that he tutors the students who need extra help after school as much as possible, but this
illustrates the challenge of having classes where the students have a wide array of educational histories. The families below provide more information about the challenges that emerged from the data.

**Newcomers are SLIFE and a few have large gaps in schooling.** The teachers overwhelmingly stated that the late-entering students from Central America have at least some gaps in their formal education, and a few of them have no schooling at all or very large gaps (e.g. completed the 3rd or 4th grade). The teachers reported that the focal students have typically completed the elementary grades, but some were unable to do so. They provided a few examples of students from mountainous regions who did not have access to schools and students who were unable to attend due to threats of violence. In the words of Olivia, who was herself a de facto refugee from Central America, “Some of the students have been out of school for years because of the situation [the violence], the loss, and everything. Some have been victims of rape, mostly girls. So, that's why their mothers have sent them to this country.”

**Teachers learning educational backgrounds.** The majority of the teachers were able to talk about their students’ educational backgrounds because they had found ways to learn about them. They stated that they need this information, and yet all that they are provided are the students’ ESOL levels and their date of entry into the United States. The teachers reported learning about the newcomers’ educational backgrounds through developing relationships with them and having informal conversations, but the teachers who don’t speak Spanish learned this information from other teachers. Some teachers also gained information through observing the students’ performance in the
classroom. A few teachers noted that many of the students are open about their educational backgrounds but some are guarded.

The dialect of Spanish that is dominant in the city where the research was carried out differs from the varieties that most of the students from Central America speak. This may add to the challenge of learning about students’ backgrounds. Olivia provided the following example when I asked how she learns about her students’ educational histories:

I try to get involved with them because I don't know what they learned and what they need, because they sit in the back of the room, they don't understand. Yes, we all speak Spanish but we have different accents and the culture is different, the idiomatic expressions are different.

**Students having low L1 proficiency and varied math levels.** All of the teachers talked about the newcomers from Central America having first language (L1) literacy levels that are below where they should be. Several teachers stated that the students do not speak or write in academic Spanish and that some struggle to read and write in Spanish at all. In the words, Natalia, an ESOL teacher with a Master’s degree in the subject:

The education—the kids that come from Cuba pick it up a lot faster whereas the kids from Central America, it’s—it’s a struggle. Because I don’t think they were proficient in their first language in the first place. Where some were writing in Spanish, they have a lot of like errors, or even reading in Spanish. So it’s really hard to learn a second language when you’re not even proficient in your first.
It is important to note that one cannot assume that people from Central America speak Spanish as their L1 because of their countries of origin. Many of the recent immigrants from Guatemala are from indigenous communities, and they may speak their tribal language rather than Spanish. All of the teachers reported having a few of these students in their classrooms, and some had students from Honduras who only spoke Garifuna.

The math teachers reported that the Central American students have a wide range in math levels depending on their educational backgrounds. To further complicate the matter, mathematics is taught differently in different countries. Two out of the three teachers use their own diagnostic tools to determine the newcomers’ math levels, and they ask questions about different units and concepts to determine what and how the students have already been taught. Zoe has an honors class in addition to an unofficial ESOL Geometry section, and had newcomers from Central America performing on the same level (and in some cases even outperforming) her honors students. However, the GED teacher, Olivia, guessed that around 80% of her students were not at the math level that they needed to be at. All of the teachers remarked that it takes time to learn their students’ math levels. A veteran math teacher, Gabriel, talked about this process in saying, “I start with the student. Okay, these students are very low, very high. So, let me see, how do I raise this group—give them something for activities? In the beginning it's very hard.”

**Multiple challenges arising in the classroom.** This was the largest family with the most focused codes underneath it. As has already been mentioned, the students’ array of educational and language backgrounds presents challenges for their teachers.
To further complicate the matter, newcomers are continuously placed in their classes throughout the school year. Their class sizes are very large and all of the teachers have a lot of content that they must cover. In fact, the content area teachers (ELA, science, math, and social studies) are expected to cover everything on the district’s pacing guide in order to prepare the students for the state-mandated EOC exam. The students’ performance on these exams affects the teachers’ performance scores, creating additional pressure. An excerpt from the interview with the Gabriel illuminates this challenge:

*K*: So, less than half of the class will not have attended middle school [this was just stated]. So, they just come straight in to the 9th grade or 10th grade?

*G*: So, when they come straight in [from middle school] it’s so easy—easy. They saw things. But the others, ‘This is my first time Mister, seeing this, my first time.’

*K*: Wow. And this is about half of your class usually.

*G*: And, we receive the students throughout the year.

*K*: So you're always getting new students?

*G*: Exactly, so, that affects the learning process, that affects my grade.

Even though this district is situated in a state with an “English-only” law and the various administrators and coaches have told the teachers not to use or allow Spanish in their classrooms, the teachers overwhelmingly felt that they must provide bilingual instruction and/or allow for translation in order for the newcomers to comprehend the content and instruction. One of the math teachers, Zoe stated, “To speak in only English and to teach it only in English I think is a disservice because they're only gonna get a little bit.” In addition, all of the teachers felt like they must allow for translanguaging for various writing and speaking purposes. Isabella talked about students “shutting
“down” when they are asked to write in English. Furthermore, the teachers consistently reported that the students get bored and/or discouraged when the materials and instruction are not comprehensible. Mariana stated, “It’s hard for the teachers but it’s even harder for the students. They get frustrated.”

Due to the range within each class, the teachers felt that they must plan to build their students’ background knowledge and that they must differentiate their instruction, activities, and materials. The district that the teachers work in requires creating data-based differentiated instruction (DI) groups and doing rotations between a teacher-led station, an independent station, and a technology station. The teachers felt like DI rotations can work well, but unanimously said that it is very time-consuming and difficult to plan for. It also requires a lot of knowledge about how to effectively differentiate as well as knowledge of ESOL methods. All of the novice teachers felt like they needed additional professional development and support in this area. Sarah stated:

*I was forced to make lesson plans like that—lesson plans that are kindergarten level, lesson plans that are third grade level. Lessons—and in—all in one class. And you know, I got very overwhelmed because it was you know, three lesson plans for one class. All completely different levels!*

Although most teachers were provided with some supplementary curricula for newcomers, the content area teachers are supposed to use grade-level materials. This curricula is not accessible for these students, so the teachers end up creating and/or seeking materials that are. Two out of the three math teachers called their curriculum “useless” and spend a lot of time searching for appropriate materials.
Adèle talked about having to find kindergarten and early elementary level science materials on a variety of topics. The ELA through ESOL teachers unanimously talked about how their required curriculum is exceedingly difficult, even for the students with high ESOL levels. Natalia provided the example of having to cover the *Texas v. Johnson* Supreme Court case in her 10th grade classes. Not only was it challenging to build the necessary background knowledge, but the legal language is inaccessible. Natalia read the following excerpt from the text itself:

*In deep Texas…..[they] look at the burning as an act to have a high likelihood to cause a breach of the peace and its statute’s implicit assumption that the physical mistreatment of the flag will lead to a serious offense tend to confirm that the flag’s special role is not in danger.*

The ELA through ESOL classes have students with mixed ESOL levels (sometimes just levels ones and twos or threes and fours but in both of these schools, the teachers had all four levels in each class), and even the newcomers are expected to read texts such as this. One ELA through ESOL teacher, Maria, stays at least three hours after school every day in order to create four different levels of materials for every single class. As she explains,

*Most of the time I prepare different materials, like supplements. I design some books for them, a little book or something like that because some lectures are so heavy for them. I try to do accommodations for them according to their levels. Sometimes, although they are in level three and level four, it's [the mandated curriculum] so hard for them.*
The teachers noted additional challenges at the classroom level such as needing to teach the students how to use dictionaries, how to type, how to use computer software, and how to study effectively. Many also remarked about the difficulty of assigning homework. The teachers said that few or their students have computers, Internet access, or homework assistance at home. Furthermore, some of the students are not able to stay after school for tutoring or go to their neighborhood library to use the computers. Natalia talked about having to change her grading system and allow class time for homework after learning why her students were not completing it.

**Variation within ESOL levels is challenging.** The majority of the teachers have students with different ESOL levels within each class, and several talked about the variation within the levels as an additional challenge. They overwhelmingly felt like the newcomers’ L1 proficiency should be assessed and considered because the ESOL levels are often inaccurate. This is particularly true with the newcomers since they are all labeled as ESOL Level 1. A level one who is SLIFE is likely to have a different L1 literacy level than a level one student who has had continuous access to quality schooling. In fact, two of the ELA through ESOL teachers created their own system for labeling their level one students so that they could differentiate more effectively. María splits her level ones into subgroups, calling the students with low L1 literacy skills “emerging.” She explained that these students typically know their alphabet in Spanish. However, she sometimes she has to split her “emerging” group because students will come in without this knowledge. María reported that she has to begin with the alphabet with those students. Sarah also created an informal spectrum in order to capture the range within ESOL level one students. In her words,
They say this one’s a Level 1, and I make like a 1.2, 1.5, 1.7, in my head. You know, because there are huge differences. Like, Level 1 encompasses so much. And a student that understands nothing and a student that understands, you know, if I speak slowly, they understand a lot. They’re both Level 1 but it’s just different variations.

The teachers talked about the ESOL level one students needing a lot of support across the board, but some level one and level two students need even more.

**Theme 2: Teaching Students with Unaddressed Trauma and Needs Presents Additional Challenges**

The students who were forced to flee from their homes have typically experienced myriad traumas, pre-flight, during flight, and after entering the United States. A few of the teachers relayed heartbreaking stories about the violence that the students fled from and even of family members dying during the journey. They also stated that the students may have experienced additional trauma due to being separated from friends and family and from the pressures of assimilating to life in their new school, neighborhood, city, and country. When talking about this matter, Camila stated, “You know, when we start telling their stories, sometimes those stories are whew!!! They're very hard. They're hard, ugly things.”

**Trauma is unaddressed.** The teachers overwhelmingly reported that the students are not receiving proper counseling and that their trauma is unaddressed. A few talked about feeling limited in what they can ask and discuss and a few noted that not all students wanted to talk or to seek help. That being said, all of the teachers mentioned the need for more counselors, social workers, programs, funding, and
resources. Julia was a former counselor at the high school, and this was her response when I asked her how we can better support the newcomers:

Send more counselors for those kids I would say. Because as a counselor, you have so much going on, like now, thank God, you know, that there will be more um, trust counselors, going to the schools, this next school year, that the county did receive the money for that [after the Parkland school shooting]. As a counselor, you know that most of your job you spend dealing with the parents, dealing with the schedule changes, dealing with the grades, talking to kids. Now what about the crisis situations that we have? You know? So many kids need help and especially ESOL kids, they need help as well, adjusting to that. So I think providing groups for them, you know, some kind of support groups for them.

Experiencing unmet basic needs. The teachers reported that many of the newcomers have unmet basic needs, including a lack of safe, stable housing and sufficient food. María had 20 homeless students that she knew of. In her words, “It's hard. They don't have a place, they don't have anything.” Furthermore, most of the teachers talked about many of the focal students experiencing food scarcity, perhaps receiving their only meal(s) of the day at the school.

Some students facing additional challenges at home. Although some newcomers are living with at least one parent, the teachers said that many are not. According to Julia, the former counselor, “They live with other family members, with the grandparents, distant family.” In some cases, they are living on their own, with
friends, with older siblings, or with an unauthorized guardian. The teachers had several stories about parent(s) who had been in the U.S. for a while and sent for their child when they were able to provide for him or her. In these cases, they said that it is difficult to reunite with their parent(s) after many years. Sometimes the parent has re-married and they have to adapt to living in a new family unit. A few teachers talked about the parents supporting their children financially, but not emotionally, and not knowing how to support them with their schooling. They also talked about newcomers who are seeking asylum being placed with guardians who do not know their needs and cannot properly support them.

Theme 3: Teachers Perceiving that Unaccompanied and/or Undocumented Students Face Additional Barriers

Although all of the de facto refugees from Central America face barriers, the teachers perceive that those who are undocumented and children who are unaccompanied face even more. In the case of unaccompanied minors, they perceive their adjustment to be more difficult. The children do not have the immediate support of family and are likely to have experienced additional trauma in coming to the United States on their own. A few teachers reported that most of their students crossed the border in groups, but typically without a parent or guardian. In the words of Santiago, “The ones that come with the whole family tend to be, to adapt better, and the other ones, you know, they're going through all those rough times.” Furthermore, the teachers talked about unaccompanied minors missing their friends and family back home.
Undocumented students have additional barriers due to status. The teachers overwhelmingly reported that the students who are not asylees, whether they are in the process of seeking asylum or trying not to be apprehended by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), are living in fear of deportation. This fear may not only be for themselves, but for parents, guardians, and other family members. Some teachers felt like fear of deportation contributes to absences from school and relocating frequently. Olivia remarked, “Everything comes down to immigration status. They’re afraid.”

For those who are seeking asylum, the process is long and expensive. A few teachers talked about the need to provide legal support in order to provide credible information and to help them avoid being scammed. Violeta and Olivia shared stories about their students’ families being scammed by people saying that they would fill out the legal documents for them and provide representation. In one case, the swindler disappeared with $5,000, and in another, $18,000, depleting all of the family’s hard-earned savings.

Since undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers do not have protective legal status, they are not afforded the same opportunities and supports as the de jure refugees who have that. This applies to employment opportunities as well, and undocumented immigrants are forced to work for low, cash wages. In the state where the research was carried out in, they often provide cheap labor in the agriculture, construction, and hospitality industries.

Increased fear and anger since the election. Immigrant communities across the United States have been living with increased fear stemming from the Trump
administration’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. In last year’s State of the Union Address, the president called for tougher immigration policies by highlighting a heinous act of violence carried out by a few El Salvadorian gang members. President Trump claimed that "many of these gang members took advantage of glaring loopholes and our laws to enter the country as illegal, unaccompanied, alien minors" (Wolfe, 2018). This is one example of Trump’s rhetoric about “criminal immigrants,” even if their “crime” was entering the United States to seek asylum. The person in our highest office has extended this label to children, and there are reports of them being detained until they reach the age of 18 and can be moved into adult detention facilities (see Burnett, 2019).

Several of the teachers talked about their students’ anger towards and dislike of Donald Trump, and they talked about some of their perceived dangers stemming from his rhetoric. For example, Olivia said that her students follow politics closely and that some have internalized things that the president has said about them and their countries of origin. She stated,

And then one of them told me, ‘Miss., maybe the president is right, we're not worth it because our countries are really bad. We come here, we have nothing.’
And I said, no! He's wrong! He's wrong! Your country is not what he said it is.
You're from a beautiful country, you're a beautiful person, and a beautiful people. We're just going through the things and we're learning. And here you're gonna learn why the country is in the situation it is.....I've got some kids that have told me, ‘maybe he's right.’ No, he is not!
Theme 4: Teachers Perceiving the Students’ Adjustment to Cultural, Educational, and Economic Circumstances in the U.S. to be Difficult

Based upon their personal experiences, a few of the teachers talked about how difficult it is for immigrants to succeed in the United States. They said that this is not only the case economically, but that it is difficult to adapt to the culture. Furthermore, several teachers talked about how the added difficulty of transitioning into being a student in U.S. high schools, and how many newcomers are struggling with this. The following quote from Julia, the former counselor, captures this well: “Not only is it culture shock, you don’t know how to speak the language, but then, you know, you kind of don’t know the whole high school thing.”

The overall school climate is subtractive. Borrowing the term that Angela Valenzuela (1999) coined, the newcomers are experiencing “subtractive schooling,” meaning that rather than being valued and reinforced, their languages and cultures are being subtracted out. Several teachers talked about doing whatever they can in their classrooms to leverage their students’ languages and cultures, but they had several examples of working in subtractive school climates. As mentioned before, many of the teachers, including ESOL teachers, were told that their classrooms should be “English-only.” The announcements and assemblies are in English, even when providing critical information. In one of the school sites, no one in the front office, including the counselors, speaks Spanish. Yet, over half of the student body at this particular site speaks Spanish as their home language. A teacher at this school, Zoe, said the following:
No matter what, the presentations and different things in the auditorium are always in English, flyers, always in English, announcements, in English. So, I had students yesterday, they're not supposed to bring their backpacks this week [the policy for the last week of school in this district]. For the students, I had students who brought their backpacks and they're like, ‘Why are you taking my backpack?’ And I witnessed many teachers yell.

Zoe expressed the need for the school staff to be trained in multicultural education, and teachers from each site provided examples of other teachers holding deficit views of the students and low expectations. Moreover, teachers at each school also talked about the stigma of being an ESOL student within the larger school community. Natalia reported that her students want to exit the ESOL program to get the label removed. She provided an example of a teacher making “ESOL” t-shirts, and all of the ESOL students refusing to wear them.

**Attendance and graduation challenges.** Although some of the focal students are graduating, many dropped out for various reasons. Several of the teachers reported attendance issues, and overwhelmingly reported that the students do not see the relevance of high school in their daily lives. According to Santiago, “Many of these students, they don't know what they're doing in school. They're not conscious of why they are here. They are pushed to come here.” When I asked Zoe about the attendance issues, this was her response:

*I would say, I guess part of it would be a general dislike for school because they have to work ten times harder, especially if you're in the ESOL program and you're getting instruction from somebody who doesn't know your language,*
which can be very difficult. And, students have communicated dislike for school.

Um, other, I know, some of my students have jobs.

The majority of the teachers talked about having to explain how courses, credits, tests, and graduation requirements work. To further complicate this matter, the graduation requirements have changed several times in the past few years. As previously mentioned, the students must pass a series of state-mandated standardized tests (in English) or the ACT equivalents in order to graduate. Some of the teachers said that many of the students do not initially realize the importance of passing these tests.

**Needing educational pathways and transitions support.** It clearly came through that there is great need to support the focal students not only in transitioning into high school, but in transitioning out of it. The teachers talked about the need for newcomer programs since they do not exist in this district. They also clearly expressed the need for pathways for newcomers to complete high school and succeed beyond, whether going to college or directly into the labor market. In the words of Camila, “Our biggest deal is to have the proper programs that are monitored, that are funded, and that really create pathways for them.” Several of the teachers said that the students have dreams but need means, including ongoing support to be successful in high school and guidance with their post-secondary plans.

**Having to work.** The teachers reported that they vast majority of the focal students have to work once they reach the age of 16 if not before. According to Camila, “They're always looking for jobs. They're all like, 'Miss, have you heard about a job here? Miss, can you write me a recommendation?' All the time.” A few teachers talked
about working and supporting families as part of the students’ culture, and shared stories of them financially supporting their families here and in their country of origin. They also reported that the students feel more secure when having steady income, but that some students are reliant on it since they must pay their own rent and living expenses. When I asked how much the students are paid, two different teachers replied that the wage is $5.00 per hour.

The girls often do domestic work and care for siblings while the boys typically obtain jobs in construction. There were several stories of the students working long hours after school and on weekends, and of work conflicting with their schooling. In addition to affecting attendance, the teachers talked about them being exhausted and sometimes sleeping in class.

**Theme 5: Teachers Perceiving that Testing Creates Myriad Difficulties for Themselves and for Their Students**

The teachers perceive that state-mandated standardized tests present multiple challenges for late-entering students and themselves alike. At the time of the interviews, the math, science, and social studies teachers were required to count their students’ scores on the EOC exam as 30% of their final grade in the course. And, as mentioned above, this affects the teachers’ performance scores. In addition, the 10th grade reading and writing tests serve gate-keeping functions and the students will not receive a high school diploma without passing them, even if they complete their coursework. The students’ scores on the reading and writing tests count towards the school performance score after two years of their date of entry, putting additional pressure on teachers and
administrators. With the exception of the GED tests (which are available in Spanish), all of the assessments are in English. However, Olivia reported that the Spanish version of the GED test is still quite difficult for the students.

**Testing is exceedingly difficult and not valid.** One of the veteran teachers, Camila, called the state’s standardized reading and writing tests a “disaster for the kids.” She was not only talking about newcomers, but all of the students in the school. However, it is even more difficult for students who are learning both the content and the language at the same time. The teachers provided examples of students having to take the standardized tests for practice, even if they had been in the country for a few days and did not know any English. The students have to re-take the tests multiple times, and the teachers said that it is intimidating and frustrating for them. Sofía, an ESOL teacher who came through the district’s ESOL program herself said the following:

> Testing is crazy. Insane. Insane. I know because I was ESOL I. There's nothing in this world more frustrating than being in front of a computer having no idea what it's saying, and someone telling you that you've gotta pass it because if you don't pass it you're not going to graduate. That's crazy!

The teachers talked about students needing content knowledge, advanced English reading skills, and analyzation skills to pass the standardized tests. Several teachers remarked that dictionaries are insufficient accommodations and Camila said that tests do not account for trauma or emotional states. In general, the teachers feel like they are forced to prepare students for testing, not for life.
Furthermore, there are validity issues with the state-mandated assessments. The state “leased” their reading and writing tests from another state with very different demographics (over 70% White) and different content standards. This alone raises validity questions, but the teachers added to that. They overwhelming stated that testing emergent bilingual students in English is not a valid way of measuring content knowledge. Zoe elaborated on this in saying, “So, from a math perspective it doesn't hold much validity to have a student test in English and to like view how they're gonna do in math.”

**Subject-area testing challenges.** Testing presents specific challenges in different content areas. The math, science, and social studies teachers talked about having to balance teaching the course content with teaching English so that the students would pass the EOC exams. The Algebra teachers provided examples of the difficulty of solving cumbersome word problems and equations. The science teachers talked about mastering their subject’s genre of writing as an additional challenge. They also said that the Biology EOC is essentially a reading test. The social studies teachers said the same, and added that the students must have a lot of background knowledge to do well on it.

**Theme 6: Teachers Responding by Establishing a Safe and Productive Learning Environment, Leveraging Students’ Multiple Strengths, and Going Above and Beyond.**

Although the overall school climates were subtractive, all of the teachers strove to establish and maintain a safe and productive learning environment and build upon the students’ strengths. While highlighting the importance of this, Isabella stated,
“They have to feel that sense of safety first. You can’t really be concerned with learning unless your well-being and your needs are taken care of first.” To achieve this, the teachers did what they could to help the students within and outside of their classroom walls.

Creating a safe and productive learning environment. The importance of creating a safe, positive, and productive learning environment came through clearly. The teachers emphasized the importance of making their classrooms welcoming and establishing relationships with their students. Several teachers spoke about this in terms of forming a community and remarked that the students are very good building this. They also stated that it is highly beneficial for teachers to speak Spanish and understand the students’ cultures.

A critical part of the teachers’ relationship building process is showing the students that they care. In the words of Violeta, “I think what they need is a bit of TLC, tender loving care, ‘cause they don’t have that anymore. And someone who listens to them.” Several teachers talked about how the focal students really need and respond well to caring teachers. A few ways that they demonstrated caring is through talking to the students and helping in any way that they can, teaching the norms and etiquette of high school, being role models and providing guidance, providing constant encouragement, and having high expectations for their work.

Instructional strategies. The teachers listed multiple instructional and grouping strategies that they use to ensure a productive learning environment. The general strategies will be presented first and the content-area and grouping strategies will follow.
The importance of limiting teacher talk and making the classroom student-centered came through clearly. To accomplish this, the teachers talked about meeting the students where they are at, doing a lot of partner and group activities, and proving scaffolding. For the latter, the teachers attempt to make the content accessible through the use of videos and other visual aids (e.g. timelines, photos, posters, foldables, graphic organizers), simplified language, translation, bilingual instruction, relatable lessons, extended time, and teacher and peer support. As previously noted, all of the teachers also allowed for translanguaging in their classrooms. A few examples are allowing the use of the students’ L1 for clarification and discussions, for demonstrating comprehension, and for pre-writing and brainstorming activities. They also used various strategies to encourage the focal students to feel comfortable speaking aloud, and noted that this was especially needed in classrooms where they are mixed with NSEs. One of the math teachers, Mariana, uses the following strategies to this end:

*What I do is say, ‘Okay, let’s start reading this.’ I read it first and then I said, ‘You,’ pointing to an ESOL student. ‘What does it say here?’ For example, solve. He said, ‘Solve.’ The next day, when you ask him, he reads, ‘solve.’ So he doesn’t feel ashamed to do it because he already knows how to do it. Of course I’m not gonna make them read a paragraph, but at least, ‘Let’s highlight the key words. What are the key words?’ I have been repeating the key words the whole week. So, when I ask them, so they don’t feel embarrassed to say something, to pronounce something wrong. But usually the other students, they like it when they try. And they, they clap at them, ‘Heeyyyyy, yaaaaayy, you did it!’ And we also say, ‘Okay you, I’m gonna write...’ even when it has nothing to do*
with the lesson, ‘How do you say that in Spanish?’ And they [the emergent bilinguals] say, ‘Ah you say it like that.’ ‘How do you say this?’ And then the kids who speak English have to try too, so that way they understand more of what it feels like for them.

**Math strategies.** The math teachers build upon Spanish-English cognates, as Zoe demonstrated in this quote, “A lot of it is teaching cognates, because the English language, especially math is Latin-based, it translates over. So for example, the word parallel is paralella, or perpendicular, perpindiculares, and so it's just very similar.” As shown in Mariana’s larger quote above, they also teach math vocabulary and keywords and use highlighting activities. In addition, the math teachers model solving problems and try to incorporate puzzles and real-world applications to teach mathematical concepts in an engaging way. Zoe provided this example, “We mentioned parallel, perpendicular lines, um, we talked about even in their communities, what the structure, wherever they're from, what the structure of those communities are like because in the United States it's very parallel and perpendicular set up.” The students compared maps of their town or city of origin to their new city, which is laid out in a grid, to understand both the terms and the concept.

**Science strategies.** The science teachers explicitly taught vocabulary, and Adèle and Amelia do Quizlet Live vocabulary competitions on Fridays. They incorporate a lot of videos and visual images while teaching vocabulary and content, and sometimes have the students draw and label things such as cells and flower parts. All of the science teachers said that hands-on activities and labs work well, especially when the teacher models them first. Amelia said the following:
When I know the lab that I’m doing is pretty complex and has several little steps I’ll model certain things. So they can see what they’re supposed to do. And so my kids—my ESOL kids from pretty much anywhere, but especially the ones that I knew weren’t necessarily great with formal education, because I figured they probably had a lot of hands-on stuff that they had to do at home, whether it was working or whatever, they were very good with verbal modeled instructions, turning it around and actually doing. Very good with that. Um. They’re—they were the ones that actually kept their group on task.

Amelia provided a few examples of labs that the SLIFE were highly successful at doing, including a cardiovascular lab. It is important to note a tarp with blue and red tape symbolizing blood flow was placed on the floor.

We took the big tarp, we put the heart on the tarp and we tell the kids okay, this is what it means for resistance. This is what blood flow means and this is what—uh, resistance, blood flow, we give them a few definitions before they start. Then they have to come up with a skit. To explain to everyone what viscosity is, what atherosclerosis is. What’s Sickle Cell? How does it affect blood flow? How does it…?

English language arts and social studies strategies. The ELA and social studies teachers also talked about the importance of teaching cognates and vocabulary, and a few use highlighting strategies and cognate recognition activities. These teachers have intensive pacing guides and grade-level curricula that they are supposed to follow, so they spend a lot of time differentiating instruction and materials by language level. They
also incorporate videos, images, and hands-on activities and projects wherever possible. One example is working in small groups to create an “Instagram” post, with a photo and a caption to summarize the unit.

**Grouping and pairing strategies.** The teachers overwhelmingly stated that the students are more productive and comfortable when working together, so they formed strategies for putting students into pairs and small groups. Many teachers felt that the groups should be fluid, meaning that they should change throughout the semester. Importantly, many also said that the groups should not contain more than four students.

There are several considerations when grouping and pairing students. In addition to data, the teachers considered attendance, behavior, work habits, math levels, and language levels. In mixed-language classes, the teachers often pair NSEs with ESOL level 3 and 4 students. Although they are supposed to group the students according to standardized assessment data, several teachers found language-level grouping to be more effective. Therefore, the level ones might be placed in one group and the level twos in another. All of the teachers talked about the necessity of observing and learning about the students before grouping them.

**Students Having Many Strengths That Can Be Leveraged.** One of the questions was about the focal students’ strengths, and all but one of the participants responded without hesitation. The focused codes in this family are having work and immigration experiences to leverage; the majority being applied, determined, and putting forth great effort; working well together and helping each other; taking their time, being precise, and paying attention; being inquisitive and wanting to learn; being
good at applying hands-on, practical knowledge; being artistic and creative; being resilient; being respectful and caring; and being intelligent.

**Teachers Going Above and Beyond.** It was evident that the teachers were working very hard and doing what they can within their classrooms, but they were also doing what they can outside of it. At one of the schools, the ESOL teachers and some content-area teachers meet regularly to discuss the students and talk about how they can better support them. Many of the teachers offer tutoring after school. Violeta and Santiago were also volunteering as soccer coaches and encouraging their students to play. The majority of them were trying to bridge the gap created by the lack of counseling and social work services. A few examples include explaining required courses and credits, translating for site-based counselors, and trying to connect their students with outside resources. María and Olivia have knowledge of the U.S. legal system and were assisting with their students’ asylum cases. Olivia calls the students’ lawyers, negotiates their fees, and offers free translation services. Zoe was networking in order to start a newcomer club. All of the novice teachers were seeking additional training and support to be more effective. These efforts require time outside of the school day. María, the ESOL teacher who stays at least three additional hours after school every day made the following remark, “I love my career. Most of the time I spend hours and hours. I love to learn too.”

**Summary**

The teachers were clearly doing what they can to help their students from Central America, both inside and outside of the classroom. However, as the opening
quote stated, that is not enough. Federal legislation is in place to mandate access to a public K-12 education, but changes need to be made at the state, district, and school levels to make it equitable. The teachers who participated in this study are doing their best within a subtractive and unsupportive top-down system in which they have little to no agency.
Chapter V: Discussion

"Una mano adelante, una mano atrás." - Santiago

Santiago, who came to the United States as a teenager, said that he shares with his students his experiences of immigrating “con una mano adelante y otra atrás,” or one hand in front and the other behind. He explained that the expression means being an immigrant who comes with nothing (e.g. money and material possessions) and is able to work with only one hand, and that this is the experience of his students who fled from Central America as well.

Although this study largely supported the findings of the studies in the literature review, there is one prominent difference: An overwhelmingly positive, rather than deficit perspective, regarding late-entering SLIFE refugees. The teachers in this study did, however, provide examples of other teachers and school staff having deficit views and felt that the overall school climate was subtractive, and they expressed frustration at this. The fact that 87% of the teachers in this sample were first or second generation immigrants and 73% speak Spanish fluently surely contributed to their perceptions of the focal students’ barriers, resiliency, and strengths. Only one novice teacher, a white female whose family had been in the United States for multiple generations and who does not speak Spanish fluently, hesitated when asked about the students’ strengths. All of the other teachers listed them without pause.

In this chapter, I will discuss the present study’s findings and implications according to the themes from the literature review that is featured in chapter two. I will apply a LatCrit lens throughout this discussion, as well as the implications for
research and practice. I will then provide recommendations and will discuss the study’s limitations and my reflexivity before closing.

**Through a LatCrit Lens**

To recap, critical race scholars examine the intersectionality of race along with the other categories that can cause people to be marginalized and minoritized. In the case of LatCrit, “scholars assert that racism, sexism and classism are experienced amidst other layers of subordination based on immigration status, sexuality, culture, language, phenotype, accent and surname” (Yosso, 2005, p. 73). As the present study’s findings indicate, Central American refugees do indeed experience rampant anti-immigrant racism/nativism along with “layers of subordination.” This is particularly true for those who are at the intersection of having undocumented and/or unaccompanied status, a point that I will return to later.

In expanding upon the fourth tenet of CRT, the centrality of experiential knowledge, Yosso (2005) explains, “CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination (Delgado Bernal, 2002). CRT draws explicitly on the lived experiences of People of Color” (p. 73). In this study, the majority of the participants were Spanish-speaking Latinas/os who were first or second generation immigrants. According to Yosso (2005), this is important since “looking through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by its omission of voices of People of Color” (p. 75). Yosso (2005) follows this in saying that “one of the most prevalent forms of racism in US schools is deficit thinking,
which takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance” (p. 75). In other words, poor academic performance is attributed to perceived deficits of the students and their families rather than the structural and institutional barriers that limit their access and opportunities.

To counter widespread deficit thinking, Yosso (2005) proposes the concept of community cultural wealth, and defines it as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). This concept also counters traditional views of cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which can lead to the idea that “some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76).

Community cultural wealth consists of six forms of capital, which work together and build on each other: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). These forms of capital will be defined and discussed along with the present study’s findings of the focal students’ strengths.

**Discussion of the Findings**

As stated in chapter one, this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature not only by shedding light on the experiences and perceptions of teachers of late-entering Central American SLIFE refugees, all of whom teach in segregated, high-poverty, under-resourced, urban high schools, but in looking at what works even in those challenging contexts. To this end, the following research questions were asked: (a) What are the
teachers’ experiences in serving late-entering SLIFE from the northern triangle countries of Central America who entered during or after the 2014 refugee crisis?, (b) What challenges have teachers faced in providing services for these students and how have they addressed those challenges?, (c) How do teachers build on the students’ strengths and languaging practices in the classroom?, and (d) How can teachers, schools, and districts improve services for late-entering SLIFE/refugees? The data analysis yielded six themes in response to those questions, and, with one important exception, they supported the findings of the studies in the literature review.

**Ruptures in the Graduation Pipeline**

According to Solórzano (2009), there are “enormous leaks” in the high school graduation pipeline for Latina/o students, and the numbers are even worse when looking at non-citizens (p. xii). Although there are many reasons for the leaks and ruptures, the causes that emerged in both the literature review and the study’s findings will be discussed below.

**Pipeline leaks from graduation requirements, testing, and standardized curricula.** The literature clearly demonstrates that stringent graduation requirements and high-stakes testing are detrimental for late-entering SLIFE and those who serve them. As discussed in chapter four, the present study supports these findings. However, it also extends them in showing additional challenges presented to teachers and students due to the inaccessibility of the mandated, assessment-aligned, standardized curricula. The pacing guides that content-area teachers must follow and the curricula they are expected to use are aligned with the content standards that the
students will be tested on. Some content area teachers do receive some supplementary materials for newcomers, but this is insufficient. The grade-level English curricula are not only inaccessible, but they are not relevant to the students’ lives. The teachers have to go to great lengths to create and locate materials and plan lessons that are.

**Leaks stemming from under resourced, unsupportive, subtractive schools.**

The literature shows that immigrant students typically attend segregated, under-resourced schools, as was the case for the sites in this study. These schools are situated in a county-wide district and one could argue that funding is distributed equally, but not equitably. In order to receive equitable distributions, the schools serving these students would need additional funding, resources, training opportunities, and personnel.

The study’s findings indicating that the Central American newcomers experienced trauma pre-flight, during flight, and upon resettlement is strongly supported in the literature about refugee children. However, the teachers in this study reported that their traumas are unaddressed. They overwhelmingly talked about the need for social workers, counselors, funded programs, and additional support staff. Furthermore, the teachers talked about several of the students having unmet basic needs (e.g. food scarcity, unstable housing, and homelessness), unmet legal needs, and having to work to support themselves and/or their families. In addition, all of the novice teachers discussed their need for additional professional development and support to effectively serve late-entering newcomers, and the veteran teachers discussed their need for time and support to reach out to parents and guardians and provide them with information.
The literature demonstrates that schools can be unwelcoming for late-entering newcomers/refugees, and the findings indicate that this was true for the study sites. Although the teachers did not use the word “subtractive” while describing the larger school climate, the focus group participants unanimously agreed when I told them what that term meant. Teachers at each site talked about the ESOL students being isolated and stigmatized, and stated that this is particularly true for the SLIFE who have not been taught the norms of U.S. schools. They shared stories of other teachers and staff not knowing about or understanding their experiences, and holding deficit perspectives of the students and their abilities. Finally, they provided examples of the schools not being welcoming sites for students and parents. This includes the lack of parental outreach, the lack of Spanish-speaking office staff and counselors, and important information being relayed only in English.

The literature points to some typical challenges that arise in serving late-entering refugee-background students, such as the students being placed in teachers’ classes with little information or notice and being placed in classes with NSEs. The teachers in this study also noted these challenges, but added to them in talking about the difficulty of newcomers being placed in their classes throughout the school year and the unfairness of the students’ EOC scores affecting their performance ratings. Furthermore, the variation within beginning ESOL levels emerged as a challenge in this study where it did not in the literature review. The teachers overwhelmingly stated that there is wide variation across ESOL level ones depending on the individual student’s educational history. This range makes planning and delivery difficult, especially in mixed level/language classrooms. Furthermore, it is up to the teachers to
investigate their students’ levels and backgrounds. The district does not track this information, although it would be very beneficial in serving the students.

**Plugging Leaks in the Graduation Pipeline**

As has been mentioned, a theme in the literature review was educators holding meritocracy and deficit perspectives about late-entering SLIFE/refugees. Meritocracy is a pervasive and ingrained concept in American culture, as evidenced by the widely used “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps” idiom. The literature indicates that educators who hold this view may believe that their students are fully responsible without realizing the structural barriers that they face. In addition, the literature shows that deficit perspectives can result in low expectations, micro aggressions, and missed learning opportunities. Yosso (2005) adds to this in saying that deficit thinking leads to Freire’s (1970) banking model of education, where students are seen as empty vessels that need to be filled. Moreover, educators who hold deficit perspectives may believe that schools are equitable and effective institutions and that students, parents, and the community need to conform to them (Yosso, 2005).

**Leveraging community cultural wealth.** At this point, the findings of the present study diverge from the findings of the literature review. The teachers lacked meritocracy and deficit perspectives and were able to identify several barriers that their students face as well as multiple strengths that they successfully leverage in the classroom. This affirms the importance of the centrality of experiential knowledge (Yosso, 2005), since the majority of the teachers share the same language and are first or second-generation immigrants themselves. Although the teachers are unlikely to be
familiar with the LatCrit concept of community cultural wealth and its six forms of
capital (Yosso, 2005), the findings regarding their perceptions of the students’
strengths strongly support both its existence and importance. The findings also suggest
that the teachers such as these could more effectively build on their students’
experiential knowledge and community cultural wealth in more supportive/less
restrictive contexts.

The first form, aspirational capital, “refers to the ability to maintain hopes and
dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p.
77). As has been discussed, the barriers to obtaining a standard high school diploma,
going to college, and obtaining legal employment are very real. And yet, the teachers
affirmed the students’ aspirational capital, as evidenced by the following focused
codes: “having dreams but needing means,” “students are resilient,” “putting forth
great effort,” “students are inquisitive and want to learn,” and “most students are
applied and determined.” There was also a family titled “needing educational
pathways and transitions support,” since the majority of the students do indeed have
untapped aspirational capital.

The second form, linguistic capital, “includes the intellectual and social skills
attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style”
(Yosso, 2005, p. 78). The students are, in fact emergent bilinguals, and some are
already multilinguals. One of the questions on the interview guide asked about the
students’ languaging practices, and the teachers responded by talking about their use
of their L1 in the classroom, with friends and family, in their community, and on
social media. A few of the teachers talked about the focal students’ frequent and adept
use of their L1 in popular social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat. The students having work and immigration experiences came through as a strength, which presents additional ways that they have built linguistic capital. The teachers reported that the focal students are good at applying hands-on, practical knowledge that they have acquired through their varied experiences.

All of the teachers disregarded the “English-only” policy and leveraged their students’ linguistic capital in allowing for translanguaging in their classrooms. Some teachers even provided bilingual instruction when possible. Importantly, the ability to communicate via different modes (e.g. visual arts, poetry, music) is also linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). “Students are artistic and creative” emerged as a strength, and the majority of the teachers provided examples of leveraging this form of capital via multimodal compositions, displays, and performances.

The third form, familial capital, “refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Extended family members relay the importance of “maintaining a healthy connection to the community and its resources” and they “model lessons of caring, coping, and providing educación” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). The students’ adeptness at building community emerged as a strength, and the teachers leveraged this through maintaining a safe learning environment and using cooperative learning groups and activities. A few supporting focused codes are “students work well together,” “students help each other,” “students are good, intelligent, and caring,” and “students are respectful.” Importantly, the teachers talked about the majority of parents wanting an education for kids.
The fourth form, social capital, “can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). In this study, all of the Spanish-speaking teachers (including one white American female) were part of the newcomers’ social capital network. This is supported by the teachers showing authentic care and “going above and beyond.” The teachers employed their own social capital in different ways, including helping the focal students navigate high school, connecting them with jobs and community resources, assisting with their asylum paperwork, and learning more about law and policy to be more effective advocates. I feel as though several teachers included me in this network by introducing me to teachers to interview and asking me to “do something” with the study’s findings.

The fifth form, navigational capital, “refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). The students’ resiliency is important here, as they are indeed navigating political systems and institutions that were not created for them. And, some are doing so with great success. In one of the sites, over a third of the 2014 cohort reportedly graduated in the spring of 2019. The teachers talked of the desperate need to mend the graduation pipeline and help the newcomers navigate through it.

The sixth form, resistant capital, “refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). When discussing the students’ reasons for undergoing the harsh and dangerous journey to the
United States, the teachers said that the studies have various stories. Some were sent because their parents want a better future for them but many were sent due to violence. I would argue that the act of leaving friends and family members and risking everything to immigrate, all with the hope of a better future for yourself and future generations, is a form of resistant capital. Yosso (2005) states that resistant capital can be tapped into and can become transformative via Freirean critical consciousness (1970), or recognition of structural causes of oppression and acting against them via social and racial justice. As will be discussed, this has implications for practice.

**Implications for Research**

To reiterate, the teachers were doing their best to support the focal students and leverage their strengths, but were doing so within a top-down, subtractive educational system where they have little to no voice regarding the changes that need to be made. This appeared to be the case even at the school level. In one of the focus groups, I was asked to share the findings with the building administrators but to assure the teachers’ anonymity in the process. Therefore, the first implication is the need for more research that follows Yosso and Solórzano’s (2001) tenets of CRT. There is particular need for more studies that center the experiential knowledge of teachers and communities of color, and then amplify their voices to work towards effecting change at higher levels.

Second, additional studies examining the experiences of late-entering undocumented students in various contexts are needed. The present study’s findings reinforce other recent studies (Allard, 2015; Hillburn, 2014) that indicate that undocumented students need additional supports, legal and otherwise. Allard (2015)
reported that undocumented adolescents have the same concerns as undocumented adults and typically must work to support themselves, but they are minors and may also be living on their own. In the case of high school students, they are usually balancing their jobs with their schooling. And, they are doing this in a country with a hostile anti-immigrant climate being perpetuated by the top levels of government.

Third, there is tremendous need for more research examining effective programs, policies, and ways of leveraging late-entering SLIFE’s strengths, community cultural wealth, and experiential knowledge. We must identify and be aware of the challenges that these students, their teachers, and their schools face, but it is imperative that we work to ameliorate these challenges rather than reproducing them. A conversation with one of the participants illustrates this point. At the end of the interview, Amelia told me that she loves that I asked the question about the students’ strengths. She went on to say that “with minority students, the focus is usually not on strengths,” and that she “wishes schools measured and built upon the students’ skills and strengths rather than forcing them to do things that don’t show up in tests.”

Implications for Practice

The importance of teachers creating a safe and productive learning environment and showing authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) came through strongly. This is critical in any classroom, but especially when teaching newcomers in an overall subtractive learning environment. The teachers built relationships with their students, learned about their strengths, learned how to leverage them, allowed for translanguage, and utilized collaborative learning. Impressively, they did this to the greatest extent that they could
within the confines of a restrictive pacing guide, unrealistic curriculum, and English-only expectations that were reinforced by coaches and administrators. Whether aware of it or not, the teachers were using tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). The newest iteration, culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) provides an effective means for leveraging students’ strengths and sustaining (rather than subtracting) their languages and cultures.

There are several implications in the present study’s findings for teacher preparation and professional development. First, pre-service and in-service teachers should learn about and be supported in using asset pedagogies such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). This pedagogy also pairs well with universal design for learning and the combination can be used to create a truly inclusive classroom (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). Second, teachers should learn about and build upon their students’ community cultural wealth and experiential knowledge (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational and navigational capital can be leveraged through learning about the students’ hopes and dreams and teaching them about the means to achieve them. This includes teaching them about how U.S. high schools and post-secondary institutions work. Linguistic capital can be leveraged through the strategic use of translanguage (Celic & Seltzer, 2011), bilingual instruction, multimodal communication and composition (Pacheco, Smith, & Carr, 2017), and creating engaging lessons that build upon their experiences and funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). Familial capital can be leveraged through maintaining a safe, student-centered learning community and using pairing, grouping, and cooperative learning strategies. Teachers and school staff can be part of the students’ social capital networks, and can connect them with
necessary resources and services. Finally, teachers should learn about and use critical literacy pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) to leverage the newcomers’ resistant capital and create transformative educational experiences. When using critical literacy, “classrooms become spaces where students interrogate social conditions through dialogue about issues significant to their lives” (Lopez, 2011, p. 78). This pedagogy also works well in tandem with culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies (Lopez, 2011).

**Recommendations**

In the literature review featured in chapter two, themes surrounding barriers and promising policies and practices were presented. The findings regarding promising practices, along with the findings of the present study, inform the following recommendations. They are presented with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model in mind. This can be visualized as concentric circles with the child in the middle. The circle nearest the child represents the microsystems that the child is involved in, such as his or her school, home, and neighborhood (Rogoff, 2003). The mesosystems form the next circle, which represents relations/interactions among the child’s microsystems. The third circle out represents the exosystems, comprised of institutions that exert indirect influence such as the school board, the local government, local industry, and the media (Rogoff, 2003). The outer circle represents the macrosystems, and is comprised of society’s dominant beliefs and ideologies (Rogoff, 2003). Again, the macrosystems indirectly assert influence on the child’s life.
To apply the ecological model to this study, the child is in the center, and the focal microsystems include the classroom and the school. The mesosystems are where the students’ microsystems interact, such as the school, their home, and their neighborhood. This involves “the complementary or conflicting practices of home and school” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 47). The exosystems exert considerable influence in classrooms and schools. In this study, the exosystems consist of school district leadership, the local school board, and local and state governmental entities. After all, they enact laws and policies that greatly impact curriculum, instruction, and the availability of resources. For example, this state’s aforementioned English-only law shielded it from the ESSA requirement to translate assessments into other languages. Moreover, the state’s ESSA plan was met with criticism, including media coverage saying that it is bad for ELs. The macrosystems also exert great influence, especially considering the Trump administration’s ideologies regarding asylum-seekers who cross the southern border as well as the countries that they come from.

In Figure 2, picture an orange circle within the light green circle and a child in the middle. The recommendations that are provided at different levels are actionable, and would alter the student’s microsystems and exosystems to make schooling more equitable for him or her and help repair leaks in the graduation pipeline.

**State level recommendations.** In their research-based report on making education more equitable for emergent bilingual students, García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) make the case for the following: providing late-exit bilingual/dual language programs tailored to meet linguistic and academic needs; utilizing fair and valid assessments that untangle academic English proficiency from content knowledge;
providing quality instruction, adequate resources, and equal opportunities; and involving families and communities in education. States and districts collectively have the power to make each of those things happen.

States can revise and re-submit their ESSA plan, and they can include SLIFE. Minnesota provides an example of this, as they implemented a state-wide definition and included SLIFE in their plan. New Mexico is an interesting state to watch following the results of the Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico decision in 2014 and last year’s election. A judge ruled that the state was not providing the education that its constitution mandates to ELs, students receiving special education services, students from lower socioeconomic status households, and Native American students. The newly elected governor ran on that issue and ensured that the state would not challenge the lawsuit, but rather, would enact it. The Lt. Governor holds a Ph.D. in education, and the state’s new leaders have set up a transformation team with over 100 years of collective educational experience. New Mexico’s revised ESSA plan includes ending the use of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized tests and disbanding their high-stakes accountability system for teachers, students, and schools. New Mexico’s revised ESSA plan also provides a model for providing districts with more power, flexibility, and funding. Interestingly, Louisiana offers an example of a conservative state that was able to support the expansion of dual language programs via its ESSA plan.

States also hold the power to authorize in-state tuition for undocumented college students, and at the time of writing, 18 have done so. Once again, New Mexico provides a model, since the state not only offers in-state tuition for undocumented college
students, but also provides grants since they are ineligible for federal financial aid (Perez, 2009).

*Figure 2.* Adapted ecological model with recommendations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Level: Revise and re-submit ESSA plan to include SLIFE (e.g. MN), remove high-stakes testing mandates and their accountability measures &amp; offer fair, valid assessments (e.g. NM), provide districts with power, flexibility, &amp; ample funding (e.g. NM), &amp; expand &amp; support late-exit bilingual/dual language programs (e.g. LA).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Level: Implement newcomer &amp; bridge programs (e.g. FWISD), offer flexible pathways to obtain a diploma, offer extended learning opportunities, provide additional personnel, professional development, &amp; resources to schools with SLIFE/refugees, collaborate with community partners &amp; nonprofits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level: Establish a safe &amp; inclusive community that values the students’ languages &amp; builds upon their community cultural wealth. Include teacher &amp; student input. Provide counseling &amp; social work services &amp; connect students &amp; families with outside resources. Implement programs &amp; pathways for high school &amp; beyond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Level: Create a safe, student-centered learning community, investigate &amp; leverage students’ strengths &amp; interests, use collaborative learning, promote critical thinking, scaffold materials &amp; instruction, strategically use translanguaging, &amp; use culturally sustaining &amp; critical pedagogies &amp; universal design for learning.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**District level recommendations.** The findings of both the literature review and the present study demonstrate the need for flexible pathways and extended learning opportunities in order for late-entering SLIFE to obtain a standard diploma. In addition, the findings indicate that late-entering newcomers need support transitioning in and out of high school. Districts can implement newcomer and post-secondary transition programs to assist with this process.

In an e-mail thread with Brenda Custodio (personal communication, May 24, 2019), a renowned expert on newcomer programs, I was told that the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) runs an exemplary one year program called the
International Newcomer Academy. Custodio also stated that some of the Internationals Network for Public Schools in New York City provide good models. Districts should look at effective programs such as these, and implement models that would work well for their newcomers. The literature also suggests that bridge programs that help students transition from newcomer programs into traditional high schools are effective.

As has been mentioned, districts need to provide additional funding, resources, personnel, and training to schools serving late-entering SLIFE/refugees. The literature talks about the need for on-going professional development and support, particularly for integrating language into course content, curriculum development, teaching SLIFE, refugees, and/or undocumented students, and using asset and critical pedagogies. It is also beneficial for teachers to learn about the experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees, and about the structural barriers that they face in order to counter deficit perspectives. Importantly, the literature suggests that teachers should be given the autonomy to develop relevant and accessible curriculum and assessments, and that professional learning communities and backwards planning are useful towards this end.

The literature also demonstrates that district support can, and should, extend into the surrounding community. School districts should allow teachers, counselors, and social workers the much needed time for parental and community engagement. Importantly, districts should form agreements between their schools and programs/organizations to help students and families meet basic, medical, psychological, and legal needs.
School level recommendations. It is imperative for schools to establish a safe, welcoming, inclusive learning community that values all of their students’ languages and builds upon their community cultural wealth. In order to establish and maintain this environment, schools should include teacher and student input. Furthermore, schools should help facilitate the newcomers’ adaptation, whether they have an established newcomer program or not. Zoe was networking with teachers and administrators to start a newcomer club in her school, and simple supports such as this could provide an immediate starting point. It could also be used as a means to teach newcomers about high school norms and graduation requirements.

To provide the necessary wrap around supports, schools must offer sufficient counseling and social work services and connect students and families with programs and resources. Violeta offered the suggestion of dedicating a room in the school for immigrant families to come to, where they would have a safe space to ask questions and be provided with legitimate information and resources. Olivia talked about the need to have someone with legal expertise come to the school for at least a few hours per week in order to answer questions and assist with asylum paperwork. There are non-profit legal organizations that offer such services, and the schools could invite them to come to the room that they designated for immigrant families.

Limitations

As discussed in chapter three, steps were taken to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the present study. However, there are a few limitations to keep in mind when considering the findings. First, the study has
a small sample size (n=15), and the participants were recruited from one school district. Furthermore, they were primarily drawn from two schools that I had previously worked in (n=14). This was immensely helpful in identifying “key informants” and using snowball sampling to recruit the remainder of the participants (Patton, 2015), but it could be considered a form of convenience sampling. Although the participants were required to fit the study’s inclusion criteria, the sampling methods may have formed a group with similarities beyond teaching the same group of students in the same school settings. This could have ultimately contributed to the findings regarding the participants’ positive, rather than deficit perspectives, regarding late-entering SLIFE refugees. Finally, the data consisted solely of interviews, and the study would have been strengthened with the addition of classroom observations. It was not possible to carry those out given the timeframe of the study, and I had to rely on member checking the findings with one third of the initial participants.

An additional consideration is the demographics of the school district that this research was carried out in, since the most recent statistical highlights show that their teacher force is comprised of over 77% teachers of color, with over half of them identifying as Latinas/os. This is the close to being the complete opposite of the United States as a whole, since the teaching force is 82% White (USDOE, 2016). The findings may not be transferable to other settings, and similar research in various contexts is greatly needed.
**Researcher Reflections**

This study took place in school settings that I worked in for four years and am intimately familiar with. In addition, I am hoping that the dissemination of the study will answer the teachers’ calls to “do something” with the findings. As stated in chapter three, I am not neutral, and neither are the schools. Therefore, it was imperative that I used reflective processes throughout the study in order to “become aware of and deal with selective perceptions, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions” (Patton, 2015, p. 58) and “to avoid preconceiving your data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 163). I also heeded Charmaz’s (2014) advice to “take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality” (p. 13). Since the use of reflective practices was critical, I wrote reflective memos before and after each interview and throughout each step of the process. I will share some of my relevant thoughts here.

There are many privileges that come along with being a member of the dominant racial and language group and having access to the language and culture of power (Delpit, 1988). I am also very privileged in attaining a terminal degree in the field of education. With those privileges comes great responsibility. I feel that I must use my education and privilege to give back to society, and am therefore attempting to influence educational policy and practice. To recall Banks’s (1998) statement, educational policies supported by social science and educational researchers such as myself have often “harmed low-income students of color” (p. 5). Therefore, I was very careful to adhere to the aforementioned CRT/LatCrit tenets and thus to ensure that I am
using my education and privilege to help rather than harm, and amplify the participants’ voices and experiential knowledge rather than speak for them.

My perspectives and interactions were obviously influenced by my position as an external-insider (Banks, 2010). I am an outsider since I am not from the community that this research was carried out in and because it was for my dissertation, but I have spent a lot of time in classrooms, departmental common planning meetings, and professional development sessions in the primary school sites. Not only did this help me with recruitment, but it undoubtedly helped me build rapport with the participants. I did not know most of them, and yet they spoke to me openly and at length. That being said, I had to be very careful during the interviews to ensure that I understood each participant’s intended meaning rather than making assumptions. To this end, I followed Charmaz’s (2014) suggestion of clarifying unclear statements, acronyms, and jargon with probes. I also had to be conscientious about not being leading due to my insider knowledge. At times this was very difficult, but I feel like I did well. Importantly, I stayed close to the data throughout the entire analysis, and feel like the findings captured what the participants were saying. It was affirmative that the focus group participants, all veteran teachers, unanimously agreed with them.

Finally, the topic of this study is near and dear to me, which gave me further cause for employing reflexivity throughout. Not only did I personally witness how the 2014 influx played out in several classrooms, but I have spent some time in Guatemala and Honduras and was married in Nicaragua. The people and the raw beauty of Central America hold a special place in my heart. It has been heartbreaking to watch as the violence from gangs and cartels spread into and across their lands, and to know that my
government has played/is playing a large role in this. My first degree was in International Relations, and I am well aware of myriad blowback in the region stemming from policies and actions (both covert and overt) of U.S. governmental entities. Innocent people have been caught in the middle of this and have experienced decades of grinding poverty, genocide, and political turmoil. Even so, they are called “criminals” when they exercise their rights to seek asylum. Under this current administration, their traumas have been augmented. Families have been split apart and some have not yet been reunited, children are being incarcerated and some have died in custody, the majority of asylum cases are being denied, and many who are deported know that they are facing certain death when they return home.

After my interview with Olivia, she thanked me for being an American who cares about the plight of Central American refugees. I told her not only that I had spent some time there, but that my family history was not that different. Some members on my father’s side fled the violence of the Civil War. One of my relatives was hung and his wife and children had to flee for their lives. The rest of that side of the family worked as sharecroppers and farmers, as my grandparents still do. My great grandparents were only able to obtain a fifth grade education, and my great grandmother worked as a migrant laborer picking cotton. This was the history of my husband’s grandmother as well, and she still tells the stories. As a migrant laborer, she was only able to go to school through the fourth grade. In short, our histories are not that far removed and our boundaries are political. I also believe that our futures are intertwined, and we must work towards social, racial, and environmental justice with a sense of urgency.
Conclusion

The findings from the study and the literature review inform actionable recommendations to work towards repairing our ruptured graduation pipeline from the state level down. However, changes also need to occur at the national level, and they need to occur soon. Solórzano (2009) places this issue into the larger sociopolitical context: “From a historical and economic standpoint, immigration reform has stratified Latina/o immigrants in a way that encouraged incorporation into the U.S. labor market economy while denying them full membership into the U.S. society” (p. xii). The United States must implement sensible, humane immigration reform, as well as an equitable system for allowing undocumented immigrants access to legal employment and societal membership. Currently, aside from those who are enrolled in the endangered Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, undocumented college graduates cannot obtain legal employment. Perez (2009) points out multiple economic benefits for proving them access to the labor market at local, state, and national levels. However, repairing our pipeline for K-12 and beyond will require a major shift not only in policy, but in the U.S. macrosystems. The ideology needs to shift so that the American public sees immigrants for the assets that they truly are, rather than labeling them and placing blame. Historically, that has never turned out well. We are at a critical point, and lives are literally at stake. As educators and researchers, we must work to repair the educational pipeline and offer counternarratives to the present, damaging anti-immigrant ideology.
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Appendix A: Interview Guide

First of all, I would like to thank you for your valuable time. I know how busy you are and I truly appreciate you agreeing to do this interview. As I mentioned when I set this up, this is part of my dissertation research. I would like to learn more about your experiences teaching students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) from Central American countries who are often de facto refugees. Since you have taught these students, you can offer valuable insight. In addition to asking about your experiences, I will also ask questions about the exemplar lesson plan that you selected. It is important to note that I will not identify you, your school, or anyone within it by name. It would be helpful if you could refer to students and school staff without using their names as well. For example, you could say a level one ESOL student from Honduras or the 10th grade math teacher. If you forget and use a name, I will clarify who the person is and will not use their name in the transcript.

Before we begin, I want to be sure that you are okay with me recording this interview. It will be transcribed, but your identity will be guarded throughout the process. It should take about one hour. Do you have any questions?

1. Let’s begin with your background.
   - What is your city and country of origin and race/ethnicity?
   - How long have you been teaching?
   - Did you enter the classroom through a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative certification program?
   - What is your area(s) of certification and what are your endorsements?
   - How long have you been teaching at this school?
   - What subjects do you currently teach/have you taught?
   - How long have you been teaching Central American SLIFE and in what contexts?

*Will prompt for more information if needed to find out more about the context(s) in which they taught Central American SLIFE*

2. Can you tell me about the general backgrounds of the Central American SLIFE that you have taught since the 2014 influx? How did you find out this information?

*Prompts will include demographic information, educational backgrounds, ages, L1 proficiency, etc. Remember to probe with “tell me more about,” “could you describe further,” and how, what and when questions.*
3. Please describe your experience of teaching these students.

*If any challenges are brought up, will probe to see how they addressed those challenges and how they advocated for their students. For example, can you describe experiences you have had in advocating for these students?*

4. What are the students’ strengths? What did you do to build upon them in the classroom?

*Will probe for specific examples*

5. Can you tell me about the languaging practices that you have witnessed from these students?

*Will prompt for examples of how and when they use English, Spanish, Garifuna, translanguaging, etc.*

6. How do you build upon their languaging practices in the classroom?

*Will prompt for specific examples of how they incorporate and build upon the languaging practices they just talked about.*

7. Please tell me about the lesson plan that you brought in and why it was effective for these particular students.

*Will probe as needed to ask about the students’ languaging practices in the lesson, why something was important, etc.*