

Needfinding and Empathy Work

We have interviewed 6 individuals so far and have 3 more interviews scheduled for next week (due to interviewee availability). Our interviewees include ELL students, teachers, parents, and experts across different phases of the ELL experience in order to comprehensively cover the ELL journey.

Distillation of Interviews

Professor Helen Quinn

Category: Expert, Parent/Relative of ELL students, Academic Researcher

Background: Professor Quinn is an expert in education, specifically in STEM learning in the class. She is a Stanford Emerita Professor in Physics and is affiliated with the Stanford ELL group. She has been actively involved in ELL academic research and organizations supporting ELL students and continuing education for students. Her granddaughters are ELL students.

Key Insight #1: Each ELL student's journey is very personal and varies based on their home language proficiency, overall educational level, current English proficiency, length of residency in the U.S., cultural background, school system, school ELL program, and familial support.

Observations: Student experiences vary heavily, where they need different levels of support. Professor Quinn described a student who was in the U.S. for many years but has not yet met the ELL standard, another student was proficient in their home language but not in English, and another student had little education in their home language. Schools collect limited information about their student, such as whether they are an ELL language and their home language. The student may speak and write in different languages.

Suggestion: A solution for ELL students should focus on a targeted scope (e.g. specific school district, student background, or education level).

Key Insight #2: School districts have different ELL programs, where resource-limited schools may not serve the students' needs.

Observations: Some school districts have newcomer programs for students who recently immigrated to the US. Other districts also have bilingual schools and ESL programs.

Story: One ELL student was dyslexic, but it took a long time to reach that diagnosis from the school.

Key Insight #3: ELL language proficiency tests are flawed.

Observations: ELL proficiency tests are based on school district and influenced by other factors besides English proficiency. There are chances of misclassification for a 1 hour test.

Story: Some exams ELL Professor Quinn's granddaughter was asked to read a poster on classroom rules and write new classroom rules. Her daughter could read the poster, but she was not familiar with what classroom rules. She had a cultural disconnect which prevented her from getting the correct answer.

Key Insight #4: Teachers need a growth mindset, where they need to encourage students to not be afraid of failure.

Observations: During ELL programs, teachers often interrupt students to correct them. This actually hurts a student's learning and discourages them from trying. They draw back.

Quotes: "Teachers need growth mindset, where they need to believe that all their students can learn a subject."

Suggestion: Teachers need to create an encouraging and inclusive environment, where students are not afraid to try and fail. By doing so, they can learn and grow their skills to proficiency.

Key Insight #5: Teachers, especially STEM, should engage ELL students' home culture to help them form connections between class content and applications.

Suggestion: Teachers should understand their students' culture to devise an inclusive curriculum for their students.

Ana Cabrera

Category: Former ESL student (Spanish)

Background: Ana Cabrera (Public Policy '20) spent her childhood in Cuba before moving to the U.S. at the end of sixth grade in 2010. She spent the remainder of her middle school years in the ESL program at a public school in Miami, FL.

Key Insight #1: ESL programs aren't designed to help students reach their full potential.

Story: Teachers in ESL framed the educational goal for their students as passing and going onto the next ESL grade. At best, they would encourage students to "graduate" from ESL into mainstream classrooms. In contrast, teachers in regular or advanced mainstream classes encouraged their students to strive for higher educational goals, like attending Harvard. The attitude of teachers meant that many ESL students low-balled themselves and never strove for more.

Quote: "When I look back at kids who never left ESL, many of them ended up dropping out or enrolling in community college and then dropping out."

Suggestion: Tell students that they *can* do it, that ESL is just a stepping stone where students are supposed to learn the language, practice skills, and *move on* from the program. It's not just about passing and going to the next ESL class.

Key Insight #2: School administrators and other students alike view ESL students as less educationally qualified.

Story: Ana was at the top of her sixth grade class and student body president in Cuba, but she had to fight with the school to be recognized for her educational accomplishments. She was first told she would have to repeat the sixth grade, but when her test scores showed her to be more than qualified to pass, she was put into ESL classes straightaway and was actively discouraged from testing out, until her eighth grade Language Arts teacher saw her score on the state standardized test and spoke to a counselor. Even after she joined mainstream education, teachers doubted her ability to succeed in their classes to her face.

Quote #1: "When my teachers recommended me for advanced courses in the eighth grade and the school didn't give them to me, I went and asked the counselors why. They said it wasn't possible for someone in ESL to go into advanced placement. That was really difficult. I felt really put down."

Quote #2: "When I finally approved my change from regular math to AP, the teacher asked me 'What are you doing?' I told her I was recommended, and at the end of the year, she apologized to me, saying 'I'm sorry. I didn't believe in you.'"

Suggestion: Don't treat ESL as a separate division of the school; instead, see it as just a class. Ensure the entire student body intermingles and interacts in some way so ESL kids aren't siloed and don't only have ESL classes in their schedules.

Key Insight #3: ESL classes don't teach cultural integration effectively, creating a sort of linguistic "comfort zone" for students that they are reluctant to leave.

Quote #1: "Students are taught reading comprehension, but they're not taught American culture. We learn about the Pilgrims but not about contemporary TV shows, so we go home and keep watching *telenovelas* in Spanish."

Quote #2: "In high school, I had been friends with American kids from the beginning because I was in AP classes, whereas my cousin, when he exited ESL, still found community with the ESL kids. I was surprised that he, who came to the States a year before me, still found them to be his main community. I guess it is your cultural identity, wherever you feel comfortable, kind of like your home environment."

Suggestion: Focus on American cultural, not just academic, education and, while encouraging the development of community, foster cross-cultural connections among students.

Ada Zhou

Category: Former ESL student (Chinese)

Background: Ada Zhou (Product Design '20) is currently a City Innovation Fellow at City Innovate, Inc., in NYC. After moving to the U.S. from China at the age of four, she spent her elementary school years in the ESL program at a public school in Chinatown, Manhattan.

Key Insight #1: The “segregation” of ESL classes created a sense of shame among ESL students.

Story: Ada remembers hiding the fact that she attended some elementary ESL classes from her friends in mainstream education well into her middle and high school years. When her friend made friends with a former ESL student (after Ada had joined mainstream classrooms), she remembers feeling surprised at their new friendship. While she doesn't recall any sort of academic prejudice against ESL students at her school, she does remember distinct social stigma of having to be part of a constructed “other.”

Quote: “On some level, even as a kid, I didn't want people to know I had the extra time or was being pulled out of class... I guess the school wanted to make sure ESL kids weren't being taught things they wouldn't understand, but socially, it created kind of a bad environment.”

Suggestion: Better integrate classes and focus on supporting ESL students in mainstream classes by providing them with resources, encouraging them to seek help and practice, etc.

Key Insight #2: ESL programs often focus heavily on English language learning through subjects like Language Arts.

Observations: Most of Ada's memories of ESL are centered on reading and, to some extent, writing. She doesn't remember being pulled out for other subjects.

Story: Some Chinese parents recognize this pattern and purposely let their kids grow up in China until the third grade so they get a solid Chinese math education. They only bring them to the States when standardized testing starts, assuming it would be easy for kids to learn English at that stage. One ESL student was a math genius but couldn't speak English at all.

Suggestion: Broaden the scope of ESL education to frame English as a tool to succeed across the board in various subjects. Integrate English communication in all classes instead of siloing it in the context of Language Arts, for example.

Sandy Wallace

Category: Teacher / Classroom Aid

Background: Sandy Wallace is a retired elementary school aid with over 30 years of experience teaching K-5 ELL students with a full range of English abilities in socioeconomically diverse schools.

Key Insight #1: Bureaucracy in school system prevents utilization of resources for ELL students

Observation: There are multiple types of educators in elementary school environments, and it is not necessarily credentialed teachers that end up working with ELL students. There is little communication between the students' classroom teachers and their aides/speech teachers. Moreover, since the aides are not necessarily credentialed teachers, they are not allowed to access the resources available for ELL instruction, and the credentialed teachers in the classroom seldom have time to work with the ELL students and use these resources. Students often get misclassified, either as special ed when they don't need to be, or they do have a learning disability but it is not dealt with due to blaming struggle on English language ability.

Quotes: "We as the aides were not allowed to do it because we weren't certificated. It was ridiculous because we could really use those programs. So most of it was just we'd have meetings a couple times a year. And then it's usually just using workbooks and using our intuition and feeling what we thought the student needed"

Suggestion: To get rid of the need for credentiality in using these resources.

Key Insight #2: What can help students most? tackle the public health crisis

Observations: Students are in a place of incredible need where their health and well being is the first priority, and their environments are not conducive to learning.

Quotes: "So I think the main thing is the education of the parents and helping them as much as possible. You know, it might be giving them computers, it might be I don't know... Social workers. I know people, a lot of people don't like that, because... they feel like, why should they be getting extra help? But if you want to help society, you have to go back to why these kids, why are they struggling? It's not because they want to struggle, it's because of their home life.... And I think it needs to be, you know, nutrition is a big part of it. A lot of these kids, you see the girls through the years, that was a difference, I did see, through the years that Hispanic kids would at the beginning, they were in good shape.... and they'd be eating the healthy stuff that [the parents] knew how to make and little by little, they'd be eating out five days a week, you know, fast food, and the kids were getting heavier and heavier. Little girls were probably getting periods when they were nine. And you know, eventually they're going to be diabetic."

Suggestions: figure out how to best use the school environment to support the health and well being of the children

Key Insight #3: Cultural competence is seldom trained but is important

Observations: The teachers and administrators at low income schools and the students and families are often in completely different socioeconomic classes, and often lack the education or personal experience to know what reasonable expectations are for family support and engagement.

Quotes: "depending on the type of population you have, I think it would be really helpful to give some sort of classes on like you saying cultural background....I know, there's certain things like in the Asian population that you have to because they're something that could be construed as rude.....So I think it would have been more helpful to have

more trainings in that in that respect. But, you know, that part is not part of our job description.”

Suggestions: Teachers should have cultural competency training for the specific school demographics

Zahra Surani

Category: Tutor to High School and College ELL Students

Background: Zahra has experience tutoring students that are recent immigrants from Afghanistan, and has tutored them for a few years in Math, English, and Film.

Key Insight #1: Students benefit from being involved in a community with others adjusting to a new educational system and having resources to learn about the educational system

Observations: having this community conversation helps the tutors be better fit to help the students, and helps the students understand the new world they entered.

Quote: “Yeah, so it's so like, the community I mentioned, is actually like a religious community. So we're fairly tight knit, like, we see each other pretty often. And it's pretty diverse. So that's why we have people from like different backgrounds, and people that might not be born in this area. So that's why I like having like, kind of a diversity of perspective is always nice. And seeing like, where they come from, and understanding more about their culture, too.”

Suggestions: cultural diversity and education is really important and can help understand how the student perceives both the material as well as the educational system.

Key Insight #2: Asking for help is difficult, and it is difficult to figure out when they need it

Observations: ELL students have the same types of problems with the material that non-ELL students do, just exacerbated, and it is hard to tell when they do not understand a concept without them directly telling you or seeing results of exams.

Quotes: “[Students] have like the same problems in the sense that there's like, certain things that both students do is just like, a little bit more magnified if they don't have a good grasp of the language, or they don't know, like the education system well enough to like, really know, like, this is what's expected from me from the class, or this is how they want me to complete my assignments, or this is how like, I should be, should be studying for the four exams. I feel the same things between like these two types of students are, they're really bad at asking for help. I feel like that's kind of accepting defeat, in a sense. So it's like really hard to follow up and make sure that they're actually understanding it and not just saying they're understanding it.

Suggestions: would like a way to know how the student is progressing on assignments without having to directly ask them, as well as having the ability to easily send review problems before section to make time together more efficient.

Samia N.

Category: Current ESL student (Farsi)

Background: Samia N. is a 12th grade ESL student at Center High School in Sacramento, CA. She moved from Afghanistan to the USA with her family in 2016.

Key Insight #1: ESL students find it difficult to ask non-ESL teachers for help, but the help is often extremely useful when received.

Story: There seems to be a lot of tension between ESL students and non-ESL teachers. ESL students often feel unnoticed in these classes and don't understand most of what is going on. The teachers don't provide special help or assistance, so the students have the burden of asking for help. However, they may find it difficult to ask for help because they feel unequal to the other students and thus an extra burden for teachers, who seem unapproachable and don't care about them personally because they have to teach all the students. Moreover, there is often limited time to ask for help; after class, they have to walk to their following class, and after school, they have to leave immediately. However, when they are able to ask for help, the help is really useful and significantly improves the understanding of the ESL students.

Quote #1: "The teacher teach all class so they have to present their thing to other students, not just me."

Quote #2: On a history test, "I told the teacher that I couldn't read and then the teacher read to me, and then I gave him my answers"

Suggestion: Since it may be hard to adapt the curriculum and main teaching style to accommodate ESL students in non-ESL classes, set up a method for ESL students to easily ask for help and ask questions about the assignment.

Key Insight #2: There is a disconnect between topics ESL students want to learn and topics that are actually covered in ESL classes.

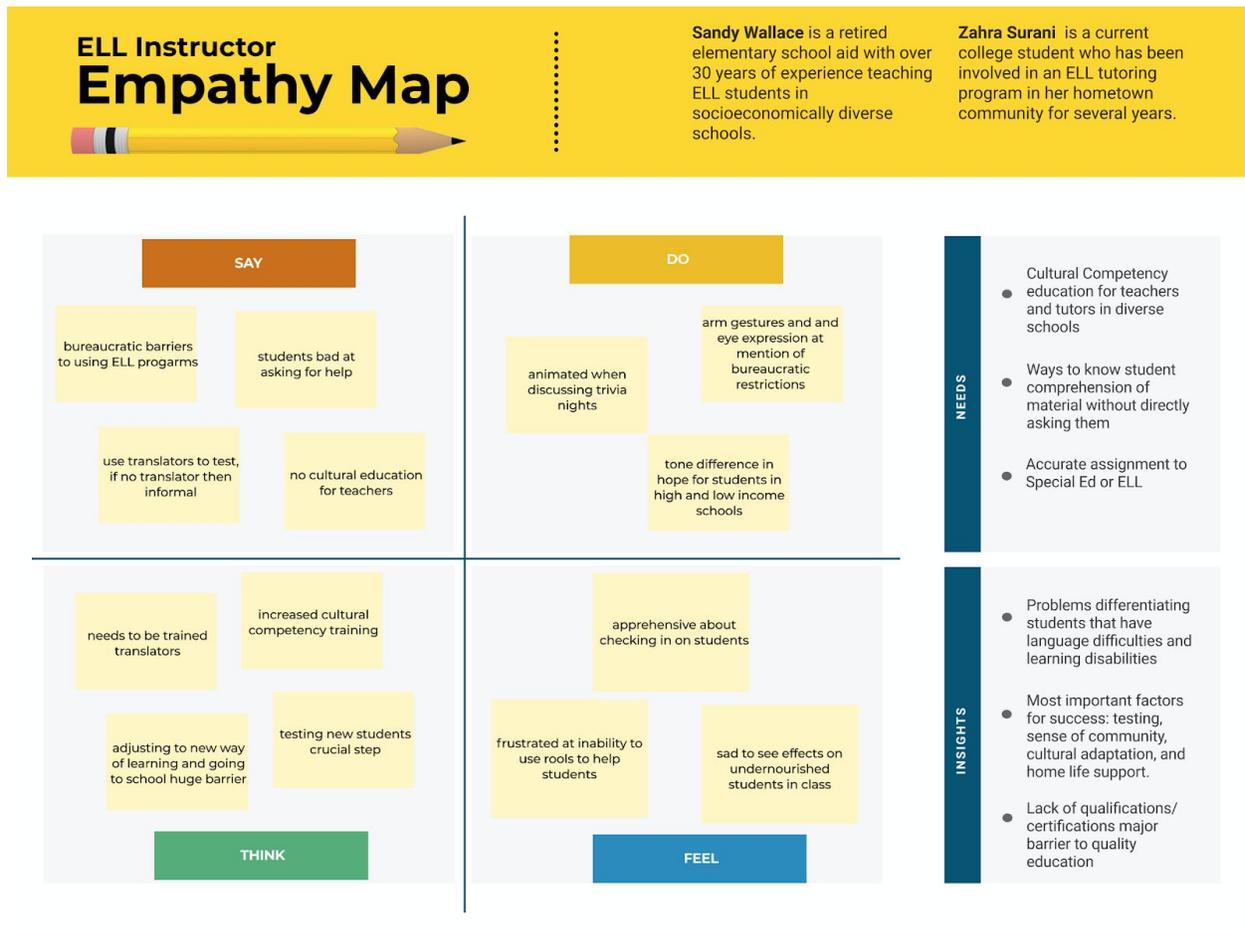
Story: Samia showed contradictory behavior about ESL learning. She knew exactly what she wanted to work on learning and was very excited and animated when describing what she still wanted to learn (how to form sentences, how to pronounce letters and words, and how to write well). However, she was not enthusiastic about and interested in what was being taught in her ESL English classes since they were very focused on grammar, which wasn't as relevant to her at the moment. Samia wanted a book to learn about pronunciations and making sentences but didn't realize that ideally ESL would be teaching all these things to her. Thus, it seems like there is a disconnect between what she wants to and needs to learn versus what is actually being taught in classes. This may be because teachers are not asking the students what they want to learn or because ESL classes cannot accommodate or handle students who are significantly behind the regular ESL level for their age.

Quote:“I wish that the teacher teach you how to write, teach you how to pronounce the ABC”

Suggestion: Teachers need to incorporate topics that students want and accommodate students of varying language proficiency.

Empathy and Journey Maps (Revised)

[Figma Boards](#)



ELL Expert Empathy Map



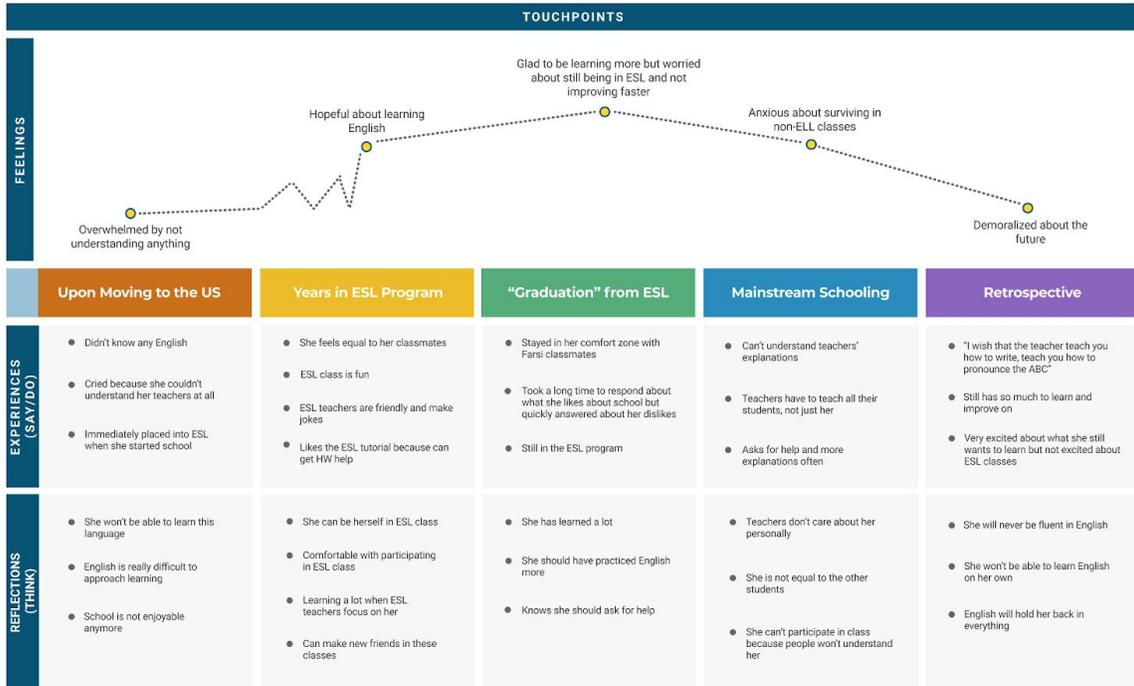
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Current ESL Student's Journey Map



Samia N. is a 12th grade ESL student at Center High School in Sacramento, CA. She moved from Afghanistan to the USA with her family in 2016.

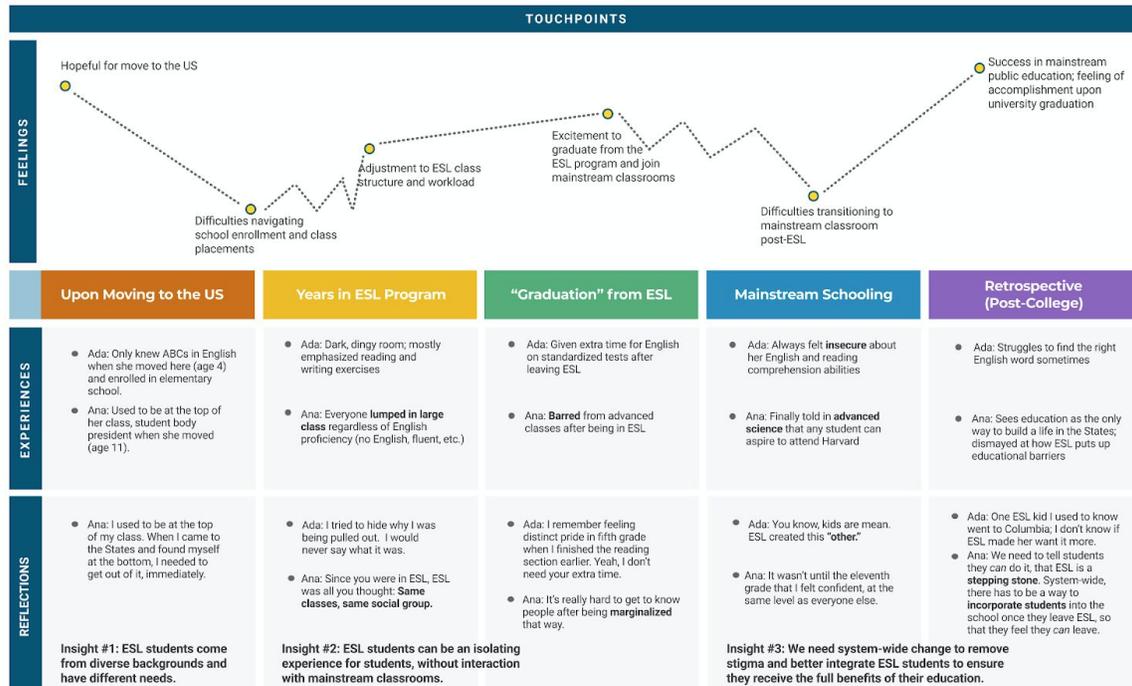


Former ESL Students' Journey Map



Ada Zhou ('20) is currently a City Innovation Fellow at City Innovate, Inc. in NYC. She spent her elementary school years in the ESL program at a public school in Chinatown, Manhattan.

Ana Cabrera ('20) is currently living at home in Miami, FL. She spent her middle school years in the ESL program at a public school in Miami.



Summary of Key Insights from Interviews

Inadequate School Systems for ELL Placement Tests, Programming, and Resources

From our interviews with teachers and experts, we noticed a recurring criticism towards the school systems, the school district, and administrative managing of ELL students. Each ELL student's background is personal and different. Language proficiency tests are based on the school district but indirectly test student background beyond English proficiency. Furthermore, schools collect limited information about the student (e.g. ELL status and home language), which inhibits the abilities of the teacher to provide effective instruction. ELL programming by schools neither fully understands nor supports ELL students, and schools with high ELL populations tend to lack or mismanage resources for ELL students.

Bringing Culture into the Classroom

Teachers often do not fully understand their students' background due to different socioeconomic backgrounds and a lack of student information collected by the schools. Teachers should be trained to incorporate students' home cultures into the classroom to create

a more inclusive learning environment. Overall, learning from teachers who have cultural understanding is important for ELL students, but teachers are seldom trained in cultural competence.

ELL students also felt a disconnect between teachers' instruction styles and cultural immersion, especially in subjects like social studies. For example, they remember learning about American history from an academic perspective, but they did not feel immersed enough in American culture to want to explore it outside the classroom. This disconnect increases the distance ELL students feel from their teachers, who are not equipped to bridge the gap between students' home cultures and new American lives.

Creating an Open and Supportive Classroom Environment

ESL students struggle in classroom environments that are not open and supportive. For ESL students, figuring out when they need help and asking for help are difficult tasks, made more challenging by non-ESL teachers that may seem unapproachable and busy. Teachers should make the classroom environment more open and supportive by encouraging students to not be afraid of failure and by removing the disconnect between topics students want to learn and what the class actually teaches. They can also create a community in which ELL students can adjust to a new educational system and have resources to learn about the educational system while creating a more integrated learning environment (as opposed to one where ELL students are siloed, physically by hallway or emotionally through social dynamics).

Student Social Interactions and Educational Outcomes Shaped by ELL

ELL students across the country are embarrassed to admit that they are in ELL programs, as they recognize that students in mainstream classrooms view ELL students as less intelligent or less "cool." The sense of shame associated with being in ELL manifests itself in different ways for these students, both socially and academically. Some students reported feeling extremely proud to "graduate" from ELL and enter mainstream education, only to be faced with anxiety over integrating into regular classrooms and finding friends after having lived a different school experience for years. Others hesitated to leave ELL, their comfort zone, at all, hampering their long-term educational growth and future prospects. Across the board, former ELL students recall the creation of an "other" associated with ELL that they would like to see removed.