

Exploring Language & Identity: The Experiences of ELL/ESL Students



Laichia Vang

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To all the people who lost their language.

Acknowledgement

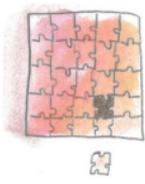
I would like to thank the Social Justice Through The Humanities Mini Grant Program. Without this funding, I would have never been able to create this book. I would also like to thank the youth and educators who were involved with recruitment and/or submitting stories. Your stories will change and better countless people in our communities.

Preface

Funded by a MN Alliance with Youth mini-grant, this collection of stories is intended to encourage schools to examine their own language program, center youth experiences, and reaffirm youth identity and experiences. I believe that there is not enough data, resources, and accurate narratives about English learners, and I want to be able to change that by building a better understanding of youth experiences. I hope when you read these stories of life and experiences in EL programs, youth are reminded that they are not alone. As for educators or community members involved in education, you are reminded of your WHY. Why do you work in education and why do you continue?

The following stories are minimally edited, and created by Minnesotan youth.

Like artists, authors and poets make pictures and scenes using words. Letters are like dots, words are like lines, sentences are like outlines. It all connects together to make the full picture like puzzle pieces.



EDTalks: Exploring the Loss of Language and Identity in Education (Transcription)

Presenter: Laichia Vang, High School Student and Activist, Roseville Area High School

Our cultural identity is strongly intertwined with our native language. So what happens when that language gets lost or diminished? High school activist Laichia Vang (she/they) is a native Hmong speaker who experienced the erasure of her native Hmong language while participating in English Language Learners (ELL) classes. In her talk, she explores this common experience that is shared by many students of color and others for whom English is not their first language. They also identify ways that our education systems must support and advocate for multilingual students and families by understanding what is at stake when language is lost.

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This virtual EDTalk was live streamed online on February 23, 2022. It was emceed by Amanda Koonjbeharry.

Nyob zoo. Kuv lub npe hu ua Laichia. Kuv lub xeeem yog Vaj. Kuv hais lus Hmoob vim kuv yog Hmoob thiab rau kaum xyoo, kuv tau tsis paub hais lus Hmoob. Hnub no, kuv xav nthuav txujci tias kuv paub hais lus Hmoob me me xwb.

I am a senior at Roseville Area High School. After all these years from K-12, education is a vital part of who I am and who I want to become. Language, or the lack of it, is an integral part of whether or not you succeed or are left behind.

A mentor once told me: ELL is a system that makes you lose your language, and one day when you want to learn your language again, it is typically in college where you have to pay. Or in other words, the system makes you lose your language and then benefits from it once you attempt to relearn. While it may be unintentional, this is a cycle of capitalism, white supremacy, and cultural assimilation.

I grew up talking about losing our language and culture with my siblings. Yet there never seemed to be any notable solutions. My first language is Hmong. For the first 4 years of my life, that's all I knew. A tiny Hmong girl obsessed with Dora the Explorer and passionate about playing with my siblings. And then I went to Kindergarten, and was enrolled in ELL. The English Language Learners program.

Today, about 1 in 4 public school students are an English Language Learner. In MN, the three

largest public school districts with EL students are St Paul, Minneapolis and Anoka-Hennepin. The top three primary home languages include Spanish, Somali, and Hmong. No matter where they go to school, most ELs are struggling because they have little or no access to quality instruction that is tailored to their needs.

I remember leaving my classroom for ELL. The room was tiny, like an extra sized walk in closet. It had no windows and it was typically hidden in a back corner. Sometimes I would be by myself or with a group of peers. And I would miss the general classroom content because I had to leave to do my EL learning. I would have to catch up with this content with my general education teacher on their own time, or attempt to learn it by myself. This continues to be an issue that many EL students experience today.

I was lucky. I got out of EL by the end of third grade, and I was a great student. Fluent in English, great at reading and writing. I was a success story. However, as time passed in this program, I spoke less and less Hmong. Schools discouraged the use of any other language that was not English. It was also because I wanted to run away from the fact that I was Hmong. At family gatherings, all I would say was uv. Which means okay. Or kuv tsis paub, meaning I don't know. And thov txim, which is sorry. That's all I knew for about 10 years. That's all I did for 10 years.

When I lost my language, I also lost my people. My connection to the people who fled during the Vietnam and Secret War. Who traveled from refugee camp to refugee camp. Who nearly died crossing the Mekong River, a mile long swim. Half of the Hmong died there. Who begged for another plane to come after fighting and dying for the CIA, for America.

Hmong people have experienced mass genocide, exploitation by the CIA, War, and continued failed policies. In the Secret and Vietnam War, the elders were all soldiers. Our language, our history is primarily never taught in K-12. When our elders are gone, we will know nothing of who we are. Our elders are the carriers of history, the carriers of the Hmong language. And I don't know it. Many of us Hmong youth don't know it at all.

Language is a connector to culture. In America, it's extremely difficult to maintain that connection. And so when you lose one aspect, it has a tremendous impact. Because I didn't connect to my culture or maintain my language, nor did I see myself at school, I was ashamed of who I was. I hated being Hmong, or really because I wasn't white. I wasn't the American ideal. I didn't fit in.

This led me to loathe my culture. At the time, I thought the Hmong culture was a division of sexes, women confined to the kitchen and men at a table talking and drinking beer, free from responsibility. A traditional bride price, and the freedom of a woman seized and replaced with

motherhood. A clear distinction between a progressive America and a conservative Hmong.

All of my siblings went through this. This hatred, this shame, this loneliness. I have a younger sister, she's in 4th grade, and I'm afraid she's going through this too. Just by living in America, and being different, you lose a piece of yourself, your truth, your connection. I began my journey of self love about three years ago when I attended a youth leadership retreat and learned about Asian American history and our contributions in activism. Had I not gone, I most likely would've started my journey even later, or possibly not even begin. I am lucky that I have opportunities to connect with my Asian American community today, but not all have this. Today, there are still some traditional Hmong aspects, but today with the younger generations, things are changing. The Hmong are a story of resistance and resilience. We have fought and fought and fought for a better future, and we will continue to do this until justice occurs.

My sister is also in ELL at the moment, even though she doesn't know any Hmong. Nothing at all, we never taught her or even spoke it at home because at that point, we lost our language. We could not share our language with her. Losing a language is one thing, never knowing it is a completely different experience.

EL wasn't always like this. There was a time before it, before this version even began. In Ohio

of 1839, the first bilingual education law implemented a German-English language program. Similar laws were also created in Louisiana and New Mexico for French and Spanish instruction. Soon, more and more states ratified dual language instruction. However, with WW1 and the rise of xenophobia and discrimination against language minorities, this trend declined and English-only laws increased. Students with limited English skills began to suffer.

In 1968, more than a century later, the Bilingual Education Act created a return to bilingual instruction in many of America's schools. Then, it was reviewed and updated in the 1980s and '90s, and later incorporated under No Child Left Behind in 2002. Today, we have been falling behind in supporting EL students and families.

ELLs are often concentrated in schools with untrained or poorly trained teachers. The shortage of teachers who can work with this population is a big problem in a growing number of states. Funding for EL programs comes almost entirely from local and state sources, leading to many issues if those sources are inconsistent. Schools often have crowded classroom space, lack sufficient educational resources and a lack of a responsive school climate that may unintentionally result in the failure of students. States have the power to create procedures for identifying and teaching ELs that meet national standards. Because of this EL can look entirely

different from state to state, from district to district.

The three primary EL models used in the United States for service delivery are: 1) English as a Second Language (ESL) pull-out, 2) Transitional Bilingual, and 3) Dual Language. The most used program is the ESL pull-out model. It is the least effective and the most expensive that requires removing students from their classrooms, and meets for 30 to 45 minutes a day or longer. Students will miss their daily instructions in these classrooms, and the ESL teacher has limited time to meet with the teacher for planning and individualization.

The Transitional Bilingual model provides ELs with instruction in their native language and in English. The goal is to convert ELs to English instructions.

The Dual Language model is designed to inclusively engage students with their native language and English. The classroom dynamics reflect collaborative learning where ELs help native English speakers to grasp the curriculum, and English speakers help ELs to acquire the curriculum through English. The Dual Language model is cost efficient and has a reliable success rate. I support the Dual Language model, for if I experienced it, I would still be proficient in Hmong.

There are so many ways to better EL programs and support EL students. One way is having an organized and supportive classroom environment. We also need positive teacher and child interactions. A long friend of mine told me about her experience in EL where she was stuck in there for years because her teacher believed she did not know English. But it wasn't because she didn't know English. It wasn't because she seemed incapable of grasping English proficiency, rather she was uncomfortable in her presence. She didn't feel welcomed or empowered, especially in a predominantly white school with a lack of diverse narratives and representation. This is why she was timid, because how can you thrive in an environment with no positive reflections of yourself? These relationships mean more than you think, and can further support EL students in reaching their academic potential.

Skilled teachers. Programs should hire and utilize teachers with specialized training and preparation in working with ELs, as well as ongoing training. As well as increasing the teachers' salary. Educators do so much, and our society needs to value them more than what we are doing today. Family engagement. Programs should have put effort to respect, involve, and educate EL families. When the family feels involved in the program, higher learning outcomes can be expected. However, it is important to keep in mind that families of ELs do not always have the same opportunities and familiarity with the educational process that many English speaking parents have.

These parents can be uncomfortable with schools, leading to their reluctance to get involved. Some feel that their own beliefs about education are ignored or undervalued, and some parents actually are ignored and undervalued by school teachers and administrators that prefer influential parents and community members. EL programs must make an effort to invite parents of ELs in order to bridge our current gap in EL student's lives at home and at school.

Learn and correctly pronounce names. I used to go by Laichia. I had to conform my name to make it easier for others, especially white people, to pronounce. It was never my name, but because it made my life easier and less humiliating to explain and reexplain, I was called that for the past 15 years. But my name is Laichia. Throughout U.S. history, renaming has been used to colonize, dehumanize and take away power and freedom of many communities. It is a microaggression when you continue to mispronounce and have a lack of effort to learn.

Let's also recognize African American Vernacular English or AAVE as a language. Too often is it stigmatized and deemed inferior compared to academic language.

Here I gave you some solutions, but let us remember that EL can be used as a tool of oppression when it is framed as a solution to a flaw in an individual that does not speak English. Ethnocentric thinking in America believes that

English is normal in society and should be the start of language learning. Too many times the goal is replacing the native language with English, and this comes from many people whether that is the student, family member, or teacher.

It is imperative for us to invite our students to the table and empower them to share their lives, interests, and abilities and then tie them to the curriculum. When EL students are included in curriculum building, they receive an education that informs them of diverse cultures and societal views that includes and affirms their own cultures. We then allow them to understand that they are worthwhile and important human beings and students. We must include resistance and resilience, oppression, and joy for we are more than the trauma and pain we have experienced. EL students will learn that their culture and language are key identities to who they are, and that conforming to white ideals is not the goal. Although the United States has no official language at the federal level, the de facto national language is English. The use of English is reinforced everywhere in America, making it valuable while excluding other languages. We can see that when non-English is spoken in public spaces and then are questioned, seen as inferior or alien by complete strangers. My grandparents experienced this. They were told to go back to their country, repeatedly. Probably way more than I was told, and it's infuriating. Yet this is something that happens everyday to people of color, whether or not they speak English in public.

Language loss is often associated with oppression. In education, the United States has a history of suppressing non-English languages to promote assimilation and cultural loss of the speakers such as Indigenous Boarding Schools. I would argue we're still doing it today. It's not as obvious, it's not as intentional. Rather it is good intentions that are fueling this loss of language and oppression. Good intentions do not make up for the harm and erasure that is happening, flawed practice is enforcing cultural assimilation and white supremacy. Good intentions are not enough to repair this damage and constant cycle of language and cultural loss. We must act by implementing policy that helps EL programs and participants, improve teaching and curriculum with professional developments, and involve youth voices and ideas that are meaningful rather than performative.

This involves every person in education, for we hold an enormous amount of influence on language acquisition and language loss. Language loss can destroy a sense of self-worth and identity. And let us remember that language death does not happen in privileged communities.

Language is power, it decides and controls what we know and do not know. It impacts us way more than we think, and if we think that language loss is okay or for the betterment of an individual, we have succumbed to the exact methods and ideologies that stripped away Indigenous

communities of their language and cultures at Boarding Schools.

Change is desperately needed. And this is only the beginning of a conversation that has yet to even start. How will the role of language play into our Education System now and in the future?

Only 63 percent of ELs graduate from high school, compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent. I am graduating this year, and I think about how far I have come to get here. Constant stress, depression and anxiety, losing my language and attempting to relearn it, multiple major historical events, and more. I'm glad that I've gotten this far and still have so much to look forward to this upcoming year. Yet I know that there is a large portion of us who will not get to receive their diploma. That after all this time, our education system failed these students and families, and will continue to fail them.

From Mariame Kaba's "We Do This 'Til We Free Us", she says, "Let's begin our journey not with the question "What do we have now, and how can we make it better?" Instead, let's ask, "What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?" I imagine that speaking English no longer correlates with being an American. That non-English spoken in public spaces will no longer be questioned, seen as inferior or alien. That there continues to be no official language in the United States, because if there is, it will only serve as an act to enforce xenophobia and

discrimination against language minorities. That conforming to white society is no longer a regular experience for marginalized communities, and that we maintain our native language and learn about our people in K-12 education. That my younger sister can learn Hmong without having to pay for courses. That after all these years, I can finally say more than uv, kuv tsis paub, and thov txim. Kuv tsev neeg, ua tsaug. Peb yuav nyob zoo heev. Thank you.

Lonely for so many years and counting.
An Anonymous Submission

My dad didn't have the legal papers to stay in the United states. I remember how cold it was that night. There was so much snow falling from the sky, in the cold, dark night. But I remember the inside of my mom's car was so warm, like a crisp christmas morning. So as a result of that, he got deported back to Mexico. He got deported when I was in 3rd Grade, and I'm pretty sure he came back when I was in 5th grade. When It was the day for him to go to Mexico, me and my mom dropped him off at this bus station somewhere in Minneapolis. It was very late at night, maybe 2 or 3 in the morning. It was in the middle of Winter. I remember that it was very snowy, beautiful and dark outside. It was very silent outside, because there was no one out at around 3 am. It felt very calming because of the snow. We got out of the car and I saw this building. It was the bus station. Then we went inside the bus station, and my parents had to fill out some paperwork and stuff like that. They were doing that for a while, maybe like half an hour. I was so bored because I had nothing to do while they were filling out the stuff they needed to. I thought to myself When will this end? Its been so long. Then we had to wait for my dad's bus, which took like 1 or 2 hours. Then when his bus arrived, he said goodbye to my mom, hugging her and telling each other well be okay. Then he comes up to me and gives me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Te amo hija mía y te extrañaré mucho my dad says to me. He goes to

the door, which leads him to the bus, and then he waves goodbye at us and blows kisses. Me and my mom stand in silence for a moment, then she says Come on mija, lets go. I thought to myself I already miss him. That was when I was in 3rd grade. As the years went by, The house got more lonely and more quiet. My mom's friend from Puerto Rico came around the same time my dad left so that I wasn't alone in the house, because someone had to take care of me. She was nice, most of the time. But all she did was mostly just serve the food and watch K-dramas. Life was hard for me. Especially for my mom, she struggled a lot. She had to work two jobs because before my dad worked in the morning (3 am-3pm) And my mom worked in the night time (3pm-12-1am) So she had to work in the morning, and in the night time. I cannot imagine how hard it must've been for her. I felt so bad for her, I couldn't do anything for her, to help her in that situation. I wish I could help in some way, even if its in a small way. I would think. She was struggling with money, taxes and jobs, I was struggling with school and grades. I always saw her with a tired face, her eyes were down, her face muscles were always tense and she looked emotionless at times. 3 years (roughly) has passed since my dad left for Mexico. When I was in 5th grade, my dad finally came back! He's finally coming home, we're going back to normal like before again, I thought to myself. I was really happy, I also wanted to go with my mom to the airport to pick him up. But unfortunately, I fell asleep really quickly and my mom didn't wake me up. That night when my dad

greeted me when I woke up, I was so happy. I didn't show my excitement a lot because I was half asleep. I will never forget when my dad got deported because he was gone for so long and I will never forget that. Today, my dad and I don't talk a bunch or we don't go out often. Sometimes we do though, but I'm grateful that he was able to come back to us and I'm also very proud of my mom for working hard through those tough times. Right now, I talk to my mom more than I do with my dad. I still talk to my dad though, just not a whole ton. I was very lonely before, but now I'm more lonely than ever. But it's okay because I have my parents, nobody else.

Environment

The environment of the ESL program was very diverse,
The kids there were in my grade.
I made many new friends in the ESL program,
Many I still talk to till this day.
Sometimes I would be afraid,-
I didn't know what to say.

We read a lot of material and discussed it together.
I learned more english and also made new friends,
Which made it a lot better.
But then it ends.

I graduated from ESL in the fifth grade,
I missed the teacher I had.
I wished I stayed,
Because honestly it wasn't that bad.

-
Phillips Lohr.

My School Life from the Unfortunate past

By: La Jumoji

It was a normal Monday for me and I'm in my office (cubicle). They were mostly antiquated and we were inside a classroom. It was a sunny morning and when I checked my daily work, there were so many pages I needed to write, memorize, and read. I felt tired before I even started my work because it'll be another long day. I opened my textbook and read every single sentence carefully but my eyes started closing on their own and I fell asleep. A supervisor woke me up and told me to go wash my face. I thought to myself that the school needed proper supervisors and improvements. School in Burma was too strict so it became difficult to learn over time, mostly because of teachers, but they don't really teach us so they're called supervisors. When I was around 12, my Dad went abroad to finish his studies, so I lived with my mom for some time. I moved to a new private school that's called ACE from a public school that was called EH or English House. The new school was kinda far from my house. I live in a town that's called Pyin Oo Lwin, which is in Burma. We had to drive at least 15-20 mins on a motorcycle. There were only three seasons back in Burma. They are summer, rainy, and winter seasons. Most of the mornings were cold, sometimes I would shiver or even get sick. The motorcycle we had was red and the sound it made was similar to an electric motorcycle. It is mostly made out of metal or steel. Most of the time they were hot and sometimes they smelled

after a fresh rain. The new school where I moved to was originally near a church that belongs to an ethnicity group called Kachin. The school building was completely made out of concrete, it has three floors and the classrooms were on the second floor. The building is kinda old and its chilly inside. We have two classrooms, one on the left and the other on the right. The school starts at 9 and ends at 3, at first we originally had a 1-hour lunch but when the school moved to a new place, it became 30 mins. I kinda like the new place where my school moved because it wasn't far from my house, now it is a 5 to 10 mins motorcycle drive. The school's compound is very small and we barely had enough space to run or play around because the school now only has one floor. The ground was covered with concrete but they weren't smoothen so there were many pebbles. Two of the permanent scars on my right knee and left elbow were because I fell there twice. Even though the school was a self-learning school, supervisors were supposed to help us understand better what we're learning. Sometimes they don't know the answer that I'm supposed to be answering, even though they are the supervisors. I felt frustrated and bored. It is pointless to even go to school at this point, I thought to myself because technically I wasn't doing anything there. The thing is, the teachers weren't properly trained and the education they had wasn't related to the education with what they're providing us. The result is obvious: we will have difficulties when our textbooks are at a higher level. I had many difficulties because I was

one of the few students that were learning at a higher level. I was thinking that I should probably quit because I wasn't learning or understanding anything. Some thoughts I had were that I should change schools. My school was established not long ago so there weren't many students there, there were about 50 students. By the time my father came here (U.S) to finish his studies, I was falling behind on my lessons and I couldn't even understand some words. Then, he called me and my mom to come to the U.S. I think the education I'm having here is way better than the education I had. I will never forget those days because they were not fun and exciting. I wish the supervisors had decent training so we would have a better education but its much better now, here in the U.S.

A Bittersweet End

By: William Her

I could hear a lot of sniffing and crying. I saw people with red faces with teary eyes, people wearing black suits and dresses, and a bunch of rows filled with people. I was stuck in a never-ending loop filled with sadness and despair. It felt like time was just rewinding to the same moment, replaying it over and over again. I then saw a large wooden casket through the crowd of people. This memory would be burned into my head for my whole life.

This was five years ago, on any normal day. My family members in Oregon randomly called my mom and dad and said that something had happened to my grandma and grandpa. I wasn't sure what they were saying until my dad started to tear up and started to talk to me about what happened. A few minutes later, I felt discouraged and sad about how it happened. Even though I haven't seen them for years, it was sad to hear about them. My grandma has been diagnosed with stomach cancer for a few months, and its gotten worse. My grandpa tried to commit suicide upon learning that my grandmas cancer had gotten worse, but failed. The doctors said even if he survives, he will become a human vegetable. They all decided to pull his life support because they couldn't bear to see him like this and wanted to let him be free of suffering.

I've known them my whole life. They've been there since day one, cleaning up after me and

watching me. Hearing this so suddenly tore my heart. I then realized that we never visited them during those years, but we only came for their funeral.

My parents then booked the whole family a flight, and we stayed for a week. When we arrived, I was happy to see all my relatives, but that happiness went away quickly. We all went to the room my grandma was in and saw my 68-year-old grandmother laying in bed, skinny and wrinkly. The room was bright and sunny, with a little bit of shade in front of the clouds. There was a pot filled with beautiful flowers on the dresser. You could see the IV tube and the heart rate monitor beside her. You will hear beeping from the heart monitor. There was crying and sniffing from my relatives around the bed. You could hear her whispering to my aunties. You could hear some people praying. Emotionally, it broke my heart to see my grandma like this. I felt pain and despair. Physically, I was slowly descending into tears, but I didn't sniffle or anything. Tears then started to run down my eyes. Then I smelt the lavender with a mix of herbs and flowers. For a while, it was a nice sensation to soothe my sadness, and it made me forget about all the problems in the world for a little bit. The flowers were a nice way for my grandma to relax in her final days. It was hard to imagine my big and happy grandma becoming like this. We then started to get ready for my grandpa's funeral. But remember, I was only a kid, so I still didn't realize that I was not paying my respects to

him. When I went to the funeral home, I stayed in another room, just horsing around with other kids the whole day. When I went to eat, I saw pictures of my grandpa and grandma sitting at a table, lit with candles and white flowers. Now that I think about it, I wish I could walk up there and just see him one last time and say some words to him. That was the biggest regret I have had in life till this day. I regret not seeing him one last time. If I was the same age as today, I would've devoted that day to him. I didn't go to his burial. I feel ashamed that I just came to play games, eat and have fun. A few days later, we were getting ready to go back home. We all gathered around my grandma and started to pray for her. I hugged her and hugged everyone else and then left for the airport. That was the last time I hugged my grandma and the last time I saw her.

When we came back home, my mind suddenly clicked that I wasn't there for my grandpa, and I started to feel even more dread. That's when I started to get into a really dark spot. I then started to eat more, and I even felt suicidal. Then, a few weeks later, my parents got a call. They said that my grandma had just died. When I heard those words, I wanted to run away from all of this and even wished I had never moved to Minnesota. I was devastated. I started to tear up and slowly walked towards the stairs. I slumped and even started to cry even more while I was walking. Then I walked past the kitchen. I could see the knife drawer open. I wanted to end it, but I thought about it. My family needs me. I would

make my family and relatives even more heartbroken. I wiped my tears away and walked away from it. Then I stood on top of the stairs. There were many thoughts rushing through my head, but one stood out. The biggest one was why? Why didn't we keep in touch before all this went down? I then went downstairs and just sat in silence on my bed. I then thought of more things. I would never see my grandparents' smiles with my own eyes ever again. I would never hear them laugh and feel them hug me ever again. I then lay on my bed and closed my eyes.

Once the weekend was over, I started to go back to school. I slowly started to fail classes and eat even more than usual. That is when I started to reach out to my best friends, telling them about it and asking if they could console me or just talk to me. Once I talked to other people, it felt like it was getting better day by day.

A month later or so, I was back on my feet like normal. Every now and then when I think about my grandparents, I know they are in a better place than before and they are watching over our family. Now I learned that the death of a relative or a friend is not a stopping point in your life. Enjoy and remember the time you spent with them, Even if they have passed, not all is lost.

Get Out
By: Zubeyda Kawo

"Get out, "the old white lady said to my family and me while walking into my grandma's apartment. "The first thought that popped in my head as she's racist because she was a white lady telling a black and Muslim family to get out of a building. I told myself in my head to walk away. It's not worth it. But the old white lady kept yelling out the same thing," get out" get out" I felt shocked and confused all at once. I looked at her with confusion, not understanding why she was yelling at us until she said, "take that off your head you're in America." The old lady white lady was acting prejudiced towards my family and me. I could tell that my mom was getting angry and frustrated by looking at her facial expression, but she didn't say anything.

Then, my little brother and I went inside my grandma's apartment while my oldest brother, dad, and mother went to talk to the old white lady in the apartment lobby downstairs. After a few minutes, I went down to the apartment lobby where the old white lady and my family were. Once I opened the door, I could see the old white lady getting super close to my older brother, trying to spit on him as if he was trash. When I saw that, I felt angry and disgusted. I couldn't even believe what I saw. I said, "What is wrong with you!?" to her.

After that my brother yelled in an angry and loud tone while walking out. You're crazy! my brother said. My mother and dad also walked out a few minutes later. I walked out right after my dad. I looked behind, and I could see the old white lady following us to our apartment number and I bursted out loud "stop following us. My brother started to get very annoyed and frustrated while we were trying to get the lady back off our backs. My brother stopped walking and he turned around. My brother started walking fast to the front office at the apartment. There's a lady who is bothering our family," he said . The worker came from the lobby walking alongside with my brother to resolve this issue. My mom and dad were standing about five steps away from the old white lady. "Can you please leave these people alone?" the worker said. The old white lady started to act insane, walking around with her hand up yelling. The worker put her hand on the white lady's shoulder and told her to "calm down, calm down." she said. After a few minutes, the old white lady left my family and me alone.

After this experience, I learned that living life in America as a black person is tough even though people wont speak about it. I am scared to go grocery shopping because they might think I am shoplifting. On top of that I am a Muslim that wears a head scarf in public and people look toward me in fear and hate. And I am a girl living in a world mostly controlled by men I feel powerless I am a Black Muslim Girl living in a

country that goes against everything I am. I just want to get out.

The trauma caused by a family relative An Anonymous Submission

When I was 8 I started living with my dad, I didn't know it was going to be the reason it caused my trauma. I thought it was going to be fun but I was wishing I had a lock on my room and I was wishing I didn't choose this mistake. The last time I saw my dad was in a wheelchair after the incident with him and my mom, that incident got him locked up and that went into having suicidal thoughts. My mom didn't want me seeing him in jail. We couldn't talk to each other since I didn't really know about jail and adult stuff and I generally forgot about him, until the day my mom asked if I wanted to go see him. Of course I said YES by that time he had already gotten out and he was living with his friends. The last time I saw him he was fit, had a lot of muscles and was energetic. Now that I looked at him he became someone I didn't recognize. His face lost all the fat it once had and grew weaker with simple tasks. I noticed that he was in a wheelchair and that his feet had stitches. The heel of his foot was rough. It still had a lot of skin but I could feel the side of his feet was soft like a baby's belly and I could see some stitches there. I would feel extremely emotional when I see how vulnerable he is but he would always tell me he was going to be alright and that he could get through this. I couldn't visit as often because I needed to go to school and focus on my assignments. Whenever I visited him we would talk and I would ask him about how he's doing and how I was doing in school, when his

feet were healing he would take me to the stores to buy me chips. When the weekend rolled around I would visit him and he would cook me meals that were already prepared. It was summer when I couldn't visit him anymore. I asked my mom why I couldn't anymore, she said that my dad's mom picked him up and that they went back to live in Waterloo iowa. I was sad but I knew that he needed to get away and get better and so my life went on, made friends and had a blast. It was only around a month or 2 that I started 4th grade, during one day after school my mom packed my bags and told me that I could live with my dad. I was surprised cause she already packed all my clothes and was ready to get going. I thought gosh she really wants me to live with my dad, because I wasn't informed of this beforehand and she got up and said that she got my clothes packed and ready to go. I mean I was excited that I could but I didn't really want to go cause I had friends and didn't want to make new ones and I was worried about my sister since she was only 4 and barely spoke our native language. Because I wanted to help her learn and didn't want her to be lonely. I remembered sitting in the backseat as my mom's bf drove us to Waterloo iowa and I didnt remember most of the drive cause I was sleeping. When we got there I was nervous. As I knocked on the door an old woman opened the door and introduced herself as my grandma and introduced the person beside her as my younger cousin. My Mom and her bf carried my bags into the house and when I walked in I felt nauseous because the stairs were so cramped I felt like I was going to

faint. But I think that was just overreacting since it was a new place and new people that I have never met or even talked to. Mom left without even saying a proper goodbye, couldn't even say goodbye to my sister either. I wished I did cause I kept crying during the night and when I heard a Knock on the door to reveal my grandma and cousin asking me to sleep with them cause they were worried I was crying. But I declined their offer since I barely knew them. When my dad did come back I was very happy. As time went on I met new faces and became friends. I thought my life was going good until the day he started coming into my room and I didnt think anything of it and asked him what he needed. My memories aren't clear on what happened after that but I did know I got touched inappropriately and it continued to happen, I thought I was the only one experiencing this in my house but as I went into my little cousins room and ask her if we could play games as we continue to play games I would say that uncle will always come into my room, does that happen to you? And she would reply yeah he does and I knew that not only is he doing this to me but also doing this to her. We did decide to tell what happened behind closed doors but as we tell our relatives, nobody would believe us they thought we were joking around and saying stop lying, I know he wont do something like that and I thought HOW could someone that wasn't there tell me that this person didn't do something like this. When I turned 13 I was almost raped but luckily my cries were loud that he stopped what he was doing and scurry away. I was shaken up

and went to take a cold shower hoping to get the feelings off, nobody was home so I couldn't tell anybody because I thought that they would not believe me. During the same year my mom picked me up and I started living with her. Now that I started living with my mom again I would say it isn't the best but its not the worst experience but I know living with her is better than living with my dad because I wont have to protect myself from someone I thought I could trust, even though my life isnt easy as when I was a kid I really wished I stayed living with her. Now that Im a high school student I still have regrets but my life is going good and I hope to maybe one day tell my mom about my experiences.

I will never forget those days because its a part of my life now and I will continue to erase my memories of it the best I can. I know its not my fault and I know others experience it but theres going to be hard times and struggles but I know I can make it out. And I hope everyone who experiences this can get free and hope its not their fault and it will never be your fault.

A Little Part of My Life
By: Blessing Kagni

I'm Confused

I can read this

for you

What do I do

I
can't help you

How can I help
you eat

Did

T

his is
hard

I
don't
know
what
that

mean

Hi, I'm Blessing a first-generation child. Both of my parents don't speak English but they got better over the years. My parents are from Togo, Africa.

They both speak Ewe, which I also speak. My Mom never went to school, but my Dad went to school and college. My parents had 4 kids before coming to America and before me they had 2 more kids, so my older sister helped my parents because she came here in 4th grade. She would read for them and translate. I remember when my mom needed a job and my sister helped our mom get a job and write the application.

My Dad had a stroke in 2019 and he is not working anymore, which puts more stress on me to help. When that happened, me and my sister would help clean the house, watch my baby brother, and cook. I was very worried for my Dad, but I knew nothing would happen. My days will go on like going to school, coming home, cleaning, cooking, doing homework, making sure my baby brother eats and showers and then getting myself ready for the next day.

ESL is very helpful for me, it makes me feel like I'm understood and if I need help I know where to go. When I was in 7th grade, the teacher used to ask how I was doing every morning. Then one day, I broke down and cried and told her everything about how I'm worried for my future and my jobs. There were a lot of things I wanted to tell her, but I didn't. Since that day I have felt better because I talked to someone.

Now, My sister got married and moved out so now I'm the only girl that will help my parents. All my brothers don't like to help my parents, but

I'm only 13 years old. I translate for my parents. I go to offices with them. It's hard and overwhelming for a child to help adults. I understand everything my parents had to do. Because if I was in the same situation, I would want my kid to help me. That's just a little part of my life.

Hola, mi nombre es Alex - Story Of My Life
By: Alex Ortiz

I used to live in Brooklyn Park. I started to go to school in Kindergarten. I didn't know that the color of my skin mattered back then. Not until I started to get older. I started to move to new schools and I didn't make many friends because of my skin color and because I didn't know how to fit in with people who were different from me.

I started to change myself every time I moved schools. I would change myself so I would become a new person just to fit in. Until I met this one friend and we had so much in common. We were really close. We were in 5th grade getting ready for 6th grade. We didn't have any classes together, and we wouldn't have time to hangout in school, so we had to make some new friends. It was easy for her because her skin color was lighter than mine. I made friends after a while, but then Covid started.

We had to do online school for 2 months. And after those 2 months, we went back to in person learning. It was really hard because I didn't know anyone in my classes. I didn't even have one friend in my classes and the people I had classes with used to make fun of me because I was in ELL. And since I didn't have friends with me to protect me, I had to stand up for myself.

During my 7th grade year, my parents told me that we were moving. I was really happy and sad at the

same time. I was happy that I would be going to a new school and I was also sad because I was leaving the people that I cared about most behind.

We moved to this place called Ham Lake. It was nice, but I used to live next to my friends. It was easy for them to come over. But since I was new to the neighborhood, I didn't know no one until I went to this school called Forest Lake Middle School. I didn't talk to anyone because I was scared.

And then I met this girl that became my friend. We had a lot of things we related with and so we became close friends. Finally, after a year, we were so close we hung out outside of school. Now I know not to change myself and be who I am. My friends now also had the same problem that they couldn't fit in because of their race, so I felt so connected with them. And knowing that I wasn't the only one in ELL made me happy because I thought ELL was like a bad thing to be in. Now I can be who I am and not change for other people.

Losing My Language...

By: Kongcheng Vang

Learning a new language was hard. Starting in an American school, it was hard to communicate because other students spoke a different language than I did, leaving me to be an outcast. The question you're asking yourself is why didn't I already speak English? The answer was easy: my parents taught me and my siblings Hmong. They didn't teach us English because they didn't want us to lose our language by speaking English too much. Who am I...? That question can also be answered. Hello, my name is Kongcheng Vang, I'm 13 years old, and I was born in 2008 on August 2nd, in Milwaukee Wisconsin.

In order to speak and communicate with others, there was a challenge I had to face. That challenge was me losing my own language so I can learn a new one. The first day starting in Kindergarten, starting in an American elementary school Kindergarten was weird. The first day was simple: teachers introduced themselves and told the expectations of their classroom. Then you can just do whatever you want. Being there was confusing for me because the kids looked different from me, they even spoke differently. On that day, I didn't even want to play with the other kids.

In the middle of class, it was just my 5th day there in Kindergarten, and two teachers

came and took me out of class. They introduced themselves, but I couldn't even understand what they were saying. I couldn't even introduce myself. Other kids were in the class with me that day. The teachers introduced themselves again but the kids in the room with me couldn't even understand what the teachers were saying. they whipped out flashcards of just simple easy words that I could understand.

I started learning simple English words that day. It made me bored, it made me waste the energy of my voice. Me mixing the sounds, me even making the words themselves. I had to do Speech class, too. It was a class to improve communication skills. It was hard, trying to sound it out, trying to learn the English language and words. Being in speech class every day was so boring. Learning English words every day and getting taken out in class to learn new English words was frustrating.

One day it led the two teachers to test the students to see what we learned in the past week. The other kids went first before I did. When it was my turn, the two teachers whipped out the flashcards. Without me struggling, I could sound it out.

I felt joy-- like all this training did something good for me. But something was off, then it hit my brain. That lightning bolt struck when I finally realized that my Asian accent was gone, even my own language. At what cost have I lost everything? I only wanted to learn the English

language so I don't feel like an outcast anymore, because on the first day of Kindergarten I felt scared. It made me think I didn't belong there. They were different from me, they spoke a different language than me. Still to this day, I can't speak Hmong.

How EL Changed My Life **An Anonymous Submission**

Being in EL has changed a lot in my life. It has changed, good and bad. A bad thing is that I forgot how to speak Hmong. I only know a little bit, but it is hard to speak to my elders when you don't remember how to speak Hmong. My whole family spoke Hmong when I was a kid so I grew up speaking Hmong. I still understand Hmong, but forgot how to speak Hmong fluently.

Before I went to school I could speak Hmong and talk to my elders. Before I went to school, I was mostly with my grandpa and grandma a lot. Me and my grandpa used to go to a lot of places, and my grandma used to work at this place called Hmong Village. My grandma used to cook there. Before I went to school, my whole family only spoke Hmong.

When I went to school I didn't know much English. They put me in EL when I was in Kindergarten. I did not like EL. I didn't like EL because I had no friends there. It was very boring there. I was too focused on learning English and trying to leave EL to the point I forgot how to speak Hmong. It was hard to talk to my elders because I didn't know how to speak Hmong. But I was lucky that my grandma and grandpa know English a little bit. So it was not as hard as I thought, but there were times they didn't know what I was saying.

Now I can speak English and I can understand Hmong. But I can't speak Hmong as well as before. I used to know Hmong and spoke only Hmong. Sometimes I can understand my grandparents when they speak Hmong, but I can't talk to them in Hmong. Sometimes my grandma would think I don't understand, but I do know what she said. That is how EL changed my life.

Noloshayda - Bilan's life

By: Bilan Dukale

Coming to the United States was hard. Learning a new language was hard too.

Hi, my name is Bilan Dukale, I am 14 years old. I am from Somalia. I came to the United States on December 2014. First, me and my family settled in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was a scary state, so we moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. We lived in a place that helps people who are new to the country. The first school I went to was Anne Sullivan. I went there for 2 to 3 years. That school was fun. I made a lot of friends there. Then I had to move to a different school where I got bullied for my skin color and how I didn't speak English. It was hard for me. I got a lot of stress and sometimes I started hating myself. I used to think of a way to change my skin color. I used to always ask myself, why am I black? After a couple weeks at that school, I started praying to Allah. I asked him to help me change how I feel about myself. As I kept on doing that, my mood started to change. I started to get happy and I loved myself more and more. Alhamdulillah (praise be to Allah), all I can do is to be grateful to Allah for changing me to be a good person and thank him for making me to love myself.

This is the part of the story about how I came to America.

The bus takes us to the city Addis Ababa, which is the capital of Ethiopia. We stayed there for two nights. After those two nights, it was the next day and we had to get to the airport. We waited for 30 minutes for the airplane to land, then they called us saying that our flight was here and it was time to go. We were walking to the plane and I got really nervous and scared. We went inside the airplane and took our seats and it started to take off. We were in the middle of the ocean when the plane started shaking. At that moment, I thought I would die. It was the scariest thing that ever happened to me in my life. Then the captain of the plane told us it was okay and not to worry, we would be safe. After a while, we landed in North America, and it was the longest airplane ride in my life, like a whole three days on a plane moving to different planes and different hotel rooms. Finally, we landed in Chicago, we went to our rooms and my grandma got sick. We had to take care of her. The next day we lost my younger brother, there were so many things happening at the same time. Some of us were getting sick and were new to the place. We found him and he was okay.

Landing in United States

And finally we landed in Pennsylvania. There was this Somali girl helping us and she took us to our new house. She was nice and an understanding person. After a week, we started going to school. There were no buses, so we had to walk to school. When I went to school, I was really scared and

didn't know what to do. I didn't even know how to spell my own name but I met this Somali kid and he was really nice. He helped me when I didn't know what to do and how to speak English. We lived there for 4 months, then we decided to move to Minnesota because some of my close family were there and a lot of Somali people live in Minnesota. So we moved to Minneapolis, a place where there are people I know. A place where Somali people speak my language and wear the same clothes as me and eat the same food as me.

After about a week, I went to a school called Anne Sullivan. It was a good school. There were Somali and Muslims kids there and I felt comfortable there. It was my 2nd grade year and there was this one teacher. I forget her name but she was really nice. She said, "Bilan, come here and let's go get some food." I was just standing there because I didn't understand what she was talking about. After she noticed I didn't move, she pointed to me and I didn't understand, so she came to me and hugged me. She said, "it's okay Bilan, I will help you whenever you need my help and you will feel at home when you are with me." After a few days, I made a lot of friends and I had fun with them. And sometimes we got to hang out. After 3rd grade, I moved to a different school, but my friends were writing to me at that school too. But unfortunately, we are not as close as we used to be before.

It was my 4th grade year when I went to this school called Banaadir. I liked the school because

my 4th grade teacher was the best teacher. I really liked her. But that school was my least favorite. Since I wasn't good at speaking English, I started getting bullied for that, and also my skin color. It was just like colorism where your own color people bully you. That was when the tables had turned. My own friends used to make fun of me and my skin color. I started to hate myself and my skin color. I really started feeling like I didn't belong there. Whenever I spoke to answer a question, they were laughing and whispered hateful comments about me. But I never showed them my weakness. I was always a happy and strong person. That ended when I met those people. They used to call me the word fob, which means if you came from a different country and you don't speak the language they speak. But Alhumdulillah (praise be to Allah) and I am so happy that I changed the way I feel about myself.

Right after I left that school.

My mom decided to change my school. After Banaadir, I went to this school called TCIS (Twin Cities International School). I really loved that school because I made a lot of friends there and it was a mostly muslim and Somali school. I want there for 3 years, from my 5th grade to 7th grade. In 7th grade, I had to do distance learning because of Covid. It was hard for me because I failed a lot of classes. I didn't even learn anything during distance learning. There was a lot going on at that time and everything was hard for me. But I did go to school the last 2 months of the school year in

2021. I tried hard to pass all my failing classes. At the end, I did it. I had good grades. As time passed, I didn't want to go to that school anymore because of the way they were teaching and how the students were not listening to teachers got out of hand. I remember I asked my mom to change schools for me.

Starting a new life.

After 5 years in Minneapolis, we decided to move to a place where it is quiet and calm. It was the summer of 2021 when we started to clean the house, pack our clothes and all the things we needed. Moving boxes and doing a lot of things at the same time was hard for me. I started my new school called Forest Lake Area School, and I was going into 8th grade. I was nervous and happy at the same time because I knew I was starting a new life very soon. The school turned out to be okay and I made a lot of friends. Now, here I am working hard and getting ready to graduate middle school so I can finally be a high schooler.

Moving to a New School and Town

By: Valeria Huerta

Hi my name is Valeria Huerta and I'm from Minnesota. This story is about my experience of my first time moving to a primarily white school and town.

So when I first moved to Hugo, I didn't think much of it. I thought the house was pretty and the neighbors were really nice. It wasn't until I started going to school there that I noticed there weren't really people of color. I didn't really feel comfortable because there wasn't someone my race or that related to me because they were mostly white people. I wasn't used to it because I've never been to a primarily white school before. This was my first time.

One day I was on the bus ready to go home. I was sitting down in the back of the bus but not that far back. All of a sudden a boy comes up to me and burps in my face. I said what's wrong with you, that's nasty. He started saying a lot of mean things to me. He started saying that I was Asian and just saying a lot of mean things that no one wants to get called. But there was one thing that I remember the most out of all the stuff he told me. He said your illegal to this country. I don't remember well what I said after that, but I know I did tell him something because I was really mad at the time. He left and I was the last one on the bus because my stop is the last one. When I got

home, I was sad because it was the first time something happened to me like that.

After that day I realized that anything could happen like this anywhere. I've been wanting to move for a while already, but that gave me a bigger reason to move. That wasn't the only thing that has happened to me here. Till this day, I still get racist comments just because I'm Mexican. But that doesn't stop me from being who I am or doing what I want to do.

Switching Schools **An Anonymous Submission**

Something about me is that I am Hmong and I have 4 other siblings. I was born on December 29, 2007 and I am 14 years old right now. I was born in Frog Town, a neighborhood in St. Paul Minnesota and it is kind of a ghetto place now, since there is a lot of trash and the streets are bad with potholes. Something about me is that when I moved to a different school this year, I had to make new friends when my other friends at my old school felt like my brothers and sisters to me.

It hurts because I am leaving my friends. Once I got into my new school, stuff didn't feel right cause I didn't have them with me here. My new school feels like it's not making me see my friends. It's not making me see my friends because we have different times of leaving school and we live kinda far from each other. I didn't know anyone at my new school and it felt different because I had stayed at my old school since I was in kindergarten. In my old school, there were different rules and when there was a snow storm we just stayed home and did online zoom.

Another different rule was that we have different types of lunches. In my old school, all the 7th graders sit together with the 8th graders, but in my new school we have roles that when another lunch is done, we have to go. Another thing is that at my old school we have advisory 1st hour and we have 7 classes only. In this new school we have an

advisory for 6th period and we have 8 classes. I still feel different because outside my new school has a lot of sports places and my old school just has a regular field. At my old school we have Hmong New Year, where we eat food and watch people dance on the stage for hours, and hangout with friends, and have fun playing the games they put outside. My old school also gives out toys on Christmas to kids at my old school.

Once I started to know my new school a little bit better, I kind of feel like it's getting a little bit easier because I found my friend that I didn't even know that he was in my new school. He introduced me to his other Hmong friends and that's how I became friends with them. Once we became friends, we started to go to Hmong Club every Thursday and hangout when we were not busy. Once we get to Hmong Club we just tell our names to each other and talk about what we do. When we are done talking about ourselves, we mostly play a fun game.

Some of the experiences in ESL at my new school are different too. We don't really read articles that much, and there are not a lot of students inside the new ESL class in my new school. The experience at my old school in ESL is that we did a lot of articles, and the class had a good amount of students.

Some good stuff about my new school is that the gym is big and there are also a lot of great teachers that help us. Something also good about the high school is that the building is bigger than

the middle school, and there are more rooms and they have 2 basketball courts with a work out room. Another thing is that all the teachers that I met at the high school are super nice, just like the ones at the middle school.

That is what happened when I moved into my new school without knowing people and without knowing where my classes are at.

My experience as an immersion student

By: Esther DaCruz

Hello everyone, my name is Esther DaCruz. I'm a 12 year old 7th grader and I'm here to talk about my experience.

Most of the time in elementary school I was either getting bullied about the way I would style my hair or my culture's food. Because of this I would be ashamed of my culture. I remember the time in Kindergarten we were waiting for the buses to come since it was a snow day. That day I had my hair shaped as bubbles or "snowmen", that's the way my friends call them because apparently that's what they looked like. I was sitting down in the cafeteria packed with kids waiting for their buses to arrive as well. I sat next to my bullies because that was the only open seat. They saw my hair and started picking on me and making fun of my hair. They were throwing insults here and there saying "HAHA look at her hair" or "Why does it look like that" or "EWWWWW!". I started to cry because I loved that hairstyle and I thought it was cool. My teacher came in and I told her what happened. She sat me back down next to them and asked them to stop. She sat next to me for a while to make sure everything was alright. Later on she had to go. After that the situation got worse because apparently I "snitched" and that made them very upset. I eventually got on the bus and made my way home. I liked being on the bus though because my older brother was also on the bus so the bullies couldn't do/say anything. I

learned later on in life that there is always going to be a group of people that are going to hate me because of my culture/skin color, So i shouldn't have to be ashamed of who I am. If you are one that's going through something like this too I advise you to PLEASE ignore them and keep embracing your culture and do what makes you happy.

(UNTITLED)
An Anonymous Submission

Hola! Si lees este libro antes que nada, gracias. Bueno, Soy Vale y este libro cuenta la historia de cómo viaje de México a Estados Unidos y que tan difícil fue aprender el idioma “INGLÉS.”

Todo comenzó una noche de vacaciones de verano, cuando mi mamá estaba empacando maletas, porque se presentó la oportunidad de venir a Estados Unidos y mi mamá decidió venirnos para tener una mejor educación y un trabajo para ella. Vinimos con unos familiares y ellos nos trajeron hasta Nuevo Laredo y allí esperamos a que nos resolvieran para poder llegar aquí. Durante ese tiempo nos estuvimos quedando en un hotel y salimos a comer, a veces íbamos a comer a la calle.

Hasta que un día nos llamaron y pudimos pasar a un refugio. En ese lugar había personas de diferentes países— había cubanos, colombianos, salvadoreños, hondureños, nicaragüenses y mexicanos. Y así convivimos con gente de muchos lugares en lo que nos tocó llegar aquí.

Y nos quedamos un día en otro hotel, y después llegó nuestro tío y nos recogió y fuimos al aeropuerto. Del avión llegamos a Minnesota y allí conocimos a nuestros tíos y primos que nunca había conocido en persona. Pasó el tiempo y tuvimos que entrar a la escuela y no sabíamos

nada de inglés así que nos costaba a mi hermano y a mí comprender y aprenderlo.

Conocimos gente y tomamos clases de inglés y hasta ahora llevamos 3 años en Estados Unidos. Las cosas que son diferentes en México y Estados Unidos es que México está calificado como el mejor país para hacer amigos y es que en México es muy fácil tener confianza. Porque las personas en México no te tratan como un turista o como alguien extraño, ellos te tratan como una persona más de México .

Pero en Estados Unidos para mi es difícil agarrar confianza en la escuela, no como en México. Esto fue difícil ya que es algo que no solo cambió mi futuro si no que también tanto como el de mis hermanos y el de mi mamá.

Esto es importante para mí porque esto fue un gran impacto que cambió mi vida y mi futuro. Hoy en día estamos aquí aprendiendo más inglés, conociendo parientes que nunca llegamos a conocer en México y viviendo una expectativa y forma de vivir diferente a la de México.

What Now?

You've read the last of the stories in this collection. What's next? Let us look at the statistics. According to an NPR article by Claudio Sanchez,

- The vast majority — some 3.8 million ELL students — speak Spanish. But there are lots of other languages too, including Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Arabic and Vietnamese.
- Most ELLs were born in the United States, and are U.S. citizens.
- No matter where they go to school, most ELLs are struggling because they have little or no access to quality instruction tailored to their needs.
- Funding for ELL programs comes almost entirely from local and state sources. That's because federal education funding on average represents about 11 percent of what local school districts spend overall.
- Only 63 percent of ELLs graduate from high school, compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent.
- ELLs are often concentrated in low-performing schools with untrained or poorly trained teachers. The shortage of teachers who can work with this population is a big problem in a growing number of states.

By 2025, about 1 in 4 public school students will be an English Language Learner. Where we are right now, at this current moment of supporting students, families, and teachers, it is merely not enough. Our community will continue to suffer now and in the future. What can we do? No idea. By ourselves it is a tremendous burden that will eventually fail. Together, however, we can mobilize to advocate and organize for equitable education. It's frightening. Yet, I have hope. Wherever your background is, ranging from youth, adults, and community members, we hold more potential and leadership than we think. Maybe these collections of stories will inspire you, maybe it will not. However, stories are sacred. Stories are changemakers. Stories can begin a conversation of understanding and eventual progress. This means we can begin to share our stories and our experiences to shape and influence the systems today. That is if the systems listen. Either way, I believe in a better future. I believe in us, because I can no longer accept the ways in which education has been taught all these years. It must change. We must change.

Laichia Vang (she/they) is an activist, student, and community organizer. Her work as a queer, non-binary, Hmong activist is focused on healing, solidarity, and storytelling. She has facilitated and spoken in numerous community events, professional development workshops, statewide conferences, and panels to bring awareness and advocate for racial justice, educational equity, mental and sexual health, and LGBTQ rights. Notably, she was a speaker and legislative captain at the fifth annual Asian Minnesotan Day At The Capitol to speak about the status of Asian American youth and the need for the implementation of Ethnic Studies and other important bills. They will be attending the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in the Fall of 2022 with hopes to major in BIS Individualized Studies with concentrations of Political Science, Sociology, and Racial Justice in Urban Schooling. In the future, they intend to work in education. In their free time, they like to read multicultural literature, produce music, and learn about health and fitness.