

"En los Estados, tienen que hablar español": A Study of Indigenous Language Speaking Youth Experiences of Latinization and Resiliency in a U.S. Public School System

By

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A todos los estudiantes que hablan lenguas indígenas de América Latina en escuelas en los Estados Unidos y los maestros que los apoyan.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----------|---|
| CLACX | Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latinx Studies |
| CRP | Culturally Responsive Pedagogy |
| EL | English Learner |
| ELL | English Language Learner |
| EL Office | English Learners Office |
| LEP | Limited English Proficient |
| ML | Multilingual Learner |
| NELB | Non-English Language Background |
| PLC | Professional Learning Community |
| SEL | Social Emotional Learning |
| SHINE | A students with interrupted formal education in a Tennessee school district |

*Es felicidad tener un dialecto como Mam y no avergonzar de donde vemos—donde venimos. Muchos me han dicho, ya va a olvidar tu idioma porque ya va a aprender inglés. Y yo le digo, no, yo siempre voy a llevarlo porque eso es lo que yo llevo yo. Yo vengo de Guatemala y yo aprendí, gracias a Dios, yo aprendí ese idioma. ¿Como lo voy a olvidarle? Muchos lo han olvidado. Pero no.*¹

-Lagina², 16, Mam speaker

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

The high school's cafeteria was bright with the glow of the overhead fluorescent lights reflecting upon the linoleum floors. Families, teachers and community members alike were scattered across the blue stool seats that extended out from under each of the foldable cafeteria tables. Young girls in *cortes* ran across the room, and high school boys and girls gathered separately at the ends of the long, brown-top tables. The teachers chatted with parents, students and their siblings, *marimba* blasted from a large, color-changing speaker, and Spanish filled the room. Tables dressed in intricate textiles, handmade posters, cultural artifacts and Central American flags lined the back wall of the room against the pitch-black windows that radiated the cold from the dark, winter evening. Food covered every inch of free space on the designated country tables, representing the U.S., Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The U.S. table displayed meatballs, cornbread and chili in crockpots situated on red and white checkered picnic blankets that stood in contrast with the brightly colored, handwoven textiles at the table to its right, representing Guatemala. This table was adorned with bulky aluminum pans steaming with homemade *tamales*, *caldo de pollo* and warm tortillas.

One of the families in attendance took up nearly a whole cafeteria table, all dressed in *indumentaria maya*—the traditional dress of Mayan communities. For women, this clothing

¹ My translation: It is happiness to have a dialect like Mam and not be ashamed of where we—come from. Many have told me, you are going to forget your language because you will already learn English. And I say, no, I am always going to carry it because it is what I have. I come from Guatemala, and I learned, thanks to God, I learned that language. How am I going to forget it? Many have forgotten [it]. But no.

² To protect the identities of all participants, all names of students, teachers and schools are pseudonyms.

consists of long cloth skirts known as *uq* and intricately designed blouses known as *po't*.³ These blouses and skirts are usually handmade with elaborate details unique to their community, for the women in this family, their collars and short sleeves were embroidered with wide-petaled flowers and shining beads. The men of the family wore stark white pants and shirts with red sashes and tan-colored hats. It was quite unusual to see the men dressed in their traditional clothing in particular as this is less and less common in Guatemala, let alone in the United States.⁴ The youngest member of this family, a five-year-old girl, bounded around the room also dressed in *indumentaria maya*. This was the family of one high schooler, Lagina, a young woman who carried her child with her on her back as is customary in Guatemala, wrapped tightly in a textile. This student and her family spoke Spanish to the teachers and other students, but among themselves, they spoke Mam.

Abruptly, the *marimba* stopped. Lagina had made her way to the front of the cafeteria and now stood in the attention of approximately 70 sets of eyes. Her hair was wrapped in a Mayan head piece, her *su't*—a folded, white textile with multicolored stripes—hung from her arm, and she stood up straight in her slightly heeled sandals. Her baby was sitting on the lap of a family member smiling brightly at her, and everyone turned their attention to the young, Indigenous woman from Guatemala.

Even though the microphone placed firmly in her grip was not working, she projected her voice clearly across the cafeteria, speaking in Spanish. With the voice of a leader, she expressed to the crowd how proud she was to be Guatemalan. We came here for opportunities, but “*no debemos olvidar nuestras culturas.*”⁵ Addressing her fellow Guatemalan classmates and their families specifically, she stated that, our blood is not from the United States, but rather “*tenemos sangre chapina.*”⁶ Turning her attention to the Indigenous language

³ *Uq* is the Maya K'iche' term for the Spanish *corte*, and *po't* is the Maya K'iche' term for Spanish term *huipil*.

⁴ In Guatemala, it common for women to wear their traditional dress and for men to wear “Western” clothing. According to Otzoy, this is a “result of the social, economic and cultural pressures exerted by *Ladino* society” over centuries which, dating back to the 1830s, required men to wear Western clothing to hold a position of power. See Irma Otzoy, “Maya Clothing and Identity,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 141–55.

⁵ My translation: “We should not forget our cultures.”

⁶ My translation: “We have Guatemalan blood.”

speakers in the room, she stressed that, we cannot forget “*nuestros idiomas*.” “Because if we do, who will speak them?” Lagina explained the value of her language and the importance of not being ashamed of one’s Indigenous language to a room full of teachers, student families and her fellow classmates from across North and Central America—some of whom were Indigenous and others who were not. She declared her pride for her language and advocated for herself, her family and Indigenous language speakers across the U.S. in a Tennessee high school cafeteria in her *indumentaria maya*. A young, Indigenous woman from Guatemala raised her voice, and we all listened.⁷

Not all Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in the U.S., this Tennessee school district or Lagina’s school have the same space to acknowledge, discuss and engage with their native languages. Instead, Indigenous-language speaking students, like Lagina, are severely underrepresented in national and district data and tend to be “Latinized as Latino Spanish-speakers” despite their diverse native languages and backgrounds.⁸ However, as demonstrated through the Family Leadership Team’s Cultural Fair described above, this students with interrupted formal education program, hereafter referred to as the SHINE program, is working to bring visibility to their Indigenous students and their languages at each of their seven school sites across the district.

Under the City School District’s⁹ English Learners Office, the SHINE program includes English Language Learners (ELLs)¹⁰ who recently immigrated to the United States and spend the majority of the school day surrounded by students from diverse cultural backgrounds, improving their English language skills and working to fill the gaps in their varied educational

⁷ Personal observation. November 20, 2022.

⁸ Rebecca Campbell-Montalvo, “Linguistic Re-Formation in Florida Heartland Schools: School Erasures of Indigenous Latino Languages,” *American Educational Research Journal* 58, no. 1 (February 1, 2021): 33, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831220924353>.

⁹ City School District is a pseudonym for a school district in Tennessee that is the field site of this thesis research. I will also not name the city where the study took place, and a few sources have been altered to preserve anonymity of the city and school district of study.

¹⁰ City School District utilizes the term English Language Learner (ELL) to refer to students who are not native speakers of English and are actively learning the language. I choose to utilize the term Multilingual Learners (ML) to refer to the same students except when representing the English Learners Office and SHINE Program or if the use of Multilingual Learner affects clarity. The use of the term Multilingual Learner intends to acknowledge the vast linguistic repertoires of such students, who, even though they are learning English, already know and utilize one or more equally valuable languages.

experiences to enter mainstream classrooms the following year.¹¹ SHINE students have a wide variety of countries of origin, cultural backgrounds and languages, but as is the case in the high school mentioned above, a large majority of SHINE students are from Latin America with the greatest numbers from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico.¹² Despite their common region of origin, these students represent a diverse range of linguistic, ethnic and cultural communities. Over the last several years, the City School District has seen a significant rise in its Indigenous language speaking populations, specifically from Guatemala, and many of these students have been placed in one of the seven SHINE sites throughout the city.

Guatemala is a richly diverse country in which over 40% of its population is considered Indigenous, the second largest percentage of Indigenous persons among all Latin American countries.¹³ Of these more than seven million Indigenous persons in Guatemala, 24 different Indigenous languages are spoken.¹⁴ With such a large Guatemalan population in the SHINE program, it follows that some of these students would be speakers of Indigenous languages. Yet, there is a pronounced lack of information on the presence of Indigenous languages from Latin America in this Tennessee school district and the linguistic experiences of Indigenous youth across this Southeastern city, but specifically within local schools.

My research illustrates that despite being hidden within the Spanish-speaking, Latinx student body, Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America comprise a

¹¹ For the complete criteria, see “English Learners Handbook” (City School District Office of English Learners, October 29, 2021), 14, https://p13cdn4static.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_32970243/File/Learn/English%20Learners/Handbook/MASTER%20EL%20Handbook%2021-22_8.29.21.pdf.

¹² This statistic comes from the Ellevation Report data for City School District. Since 2015, Guatemala represents the country from which the greatest number of SHINE students are from, followed by Honduras. See Ellevation Report Data. Data provided by City School District Research, Assessment and Evaluation Department. Accessed November 10, 2022.

¹³ Briggittine M. French, *Maya Ethnolinguistic Identity: Violence, Cultural Rights, and Modernity in Highland Guatemala* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010). It is important to note that despite many of these being Mayan languages, they are not mutually intelligible, and these linguistic communities hold their own, distinctive cultural practices and beliefs in separate communities across Guatemala.

¹⁴ It must be noted that Guatemalan population data and the percentage of Indigenous persons is variable from source to source. Here, I have noted that the percentage is approximately 40%, but other sources indicate that the Indigenous population in Guatemala may be as high as 60%. See “Guatemala - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples,” Minority Rights Group, June 19, 2015, <https://minorityrights.org/country/guatemala/>. “Comunidades Lingüísticas – Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala,” Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2022, <https://www.almg.org.gt/comunidades-linguisticas>.

percentage of Latin American origin students in this school district, representing a diversity of Indigenous languages. While attempting to adapt to its growing student population, City School District reinforces the Latinization of Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America and erases their Indigenous languages, as reflective of a larger, systemic issue in U.S. educational institutions. However, the sheltered environment of the SHINE program provides a unique space in local schools where Indigenous language speakers are represented, affirmed and encouraged to embrace their linguistic abilities. In addition, my research project demonstrates the presence of a diversity of Indigenous languages from Latin America in this Tennessee school district as represented by the 17 student participants in this study who speak seven different Indigenous languages from the region.

Initially, this study focused broadly on Indigenous student identity with research questions concentrating on identity markers such as language, clothing and cultural practices. However, through the data collection process, I refined my research focus and concentrated on language as an integral facet of identity. The resulting research questions are as follows: Which Indigenous languages from Latin America are spoken in the City School District? Of all of the languages they speak, which language(s) do Indigenous students from Latin America consider the most important? What role do SHINE teachers play in creating spaces for Indigenous language speakers? Are Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America Latinized within the City School District? If yes, how so, and in what ways do teachers and students respond to Latinization?

Over the course of six months, I interviewed nine SHINE teachers, conducted five focus groups with 17 Indigenous students and observed several SHINE classes and SHINE teacher meetings to better understand, from the students themselves, what it looks like to be an Indigenous language speaking student from Latin America in public schools in Tennessee. I worked with Indigenous language speakers both who are currently SHINE students and non-SHINE students. Non-SHINE students included graduates from the SHINE program and those who have never been enrolled in the program. However, the resulting data was similar for both SHINE and non-SHINE students, and therefore, I treat SHINE and non-SHINE enrolled students

as one group of participants in the discussion section. See the subsection entitled Student Focus Groups and Student Participants in Chapter V for more detail.

For the purposes of this thesis, I utilize the term Latinx to refer to non-Indigenous individuals from Latin America who are residing in the United States and speak Spanish, but do not speak any Indigenous languages. However, I recognize the complexity of the colonial history in Latin America that has resulted in the erasure and whitewashing of Indigenous populations, resulting in many Indigenous persons who no longer speak their Indigenous languages.¹⁵ Throughout this thesis, I will grapple with how these colonial histories continue to affect Indigenous language speaking students in the U.S. education system through Latinization.

I do not include Indigenous populations in the term Latinx in accordance with Kurly Tlapoyawa. Tlapoyawa is an Indigenous person from Mexico who explains that the “x” intends to exclude gender from “Latino,” but the term “still pays deference to a Eurocentric ideology that actively denies the Indigenous and African heritage of the people it claims to represent...Personally, I prefer to identify as Mazewalli, a term in the Nawatl language that means “Indigenous person.” Like many Mesoamerican languages, Nawatl is a non-gendered language. As an Indigenous man who descends from the Nawa peoples of Puebla, I think it is far more powerful and meaningful to my identity if I use a term in the language of my ancestors.”¹⁶

While commonly utilized in “academic circles,” it is important to note that the term Latinx is not typically used in the City School District by staff, teachers or students.¹⁷ Instead, during my observations and data collection, I more commonly heard Latino or Hispanic to refer to all students from Latin America, regardless of whether they are Indigenous or not. I ultimately decided to employ the term “Latinx” to refer to non-Indigenous students in this study because of its gender inclusivity as well as its preferred use within my own academic department—the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latinx Studies.

¹⁵ Ayendy Bonifacio, “Our Patrias Cannot Liberate Us from Anti-Blackness,” *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 75–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2007348>. Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919–1991*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Kurly Tlapoyawa, “What ‘Latinx’ Doesn’t Include,” *YES! Magazine* (blog), November 22, 2019, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2019/11/22/latinx-indigenous-history-heritage>.

¹⁷ “A Guide to How Words like Hispanic and Latinx Came About,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/10/01/hispanic-latino-latinx-latine-words-history/>.

In this master's thesis, I focus on the linguistic repertoires of students from Latin America in City School District in Tennessee. It is essential to recognize that while some Indigenous students speak only their Indigenous language(s) upon their arrival to the United States, other Indigenous students grew up in bilingual settings, learning Spanish in their household or at school. Having a multilingual background in both Indigenous and Indo-European languages could alter how students perceive of themselves and their languages, whether they identify as Latinx, Indigenous or a combination of both. As a result, the linguistic priorities of each student may vary, whether a student desires to promote their Indigenous language, prefers to speak only Spanish and so forth. What is essential is to recognize that students are negotiating a space for themselves that most likely does not fall within the binary of either only speaking their Indigenous language or losing it entirely. In this study, I concentrate on the linguistic representations of students' identities and how they are able to engage with and share their Indigenous language(s) or not in schools through their language knowledge and use.

Theoretical Framework

The theories which outline this research project pull from a variety of disciplines, as is the nature of my degree in Latin American Studies. This thesis incorporates perspectives on identity from the field of Anthropology and Latinx Studies, ideas regarding language acquisition and attrition from Linguistics and theories of multilingual learning and teaching from studies in the field of Education. The nature of education is interdisciplinary and is reflected in "the fact that all the interactions that take place between educators and students in schools can be viewed and analyzed within the context of multiple frames of reference."¹⁸ In an effort to narrow the focus of the framing of this research, I emphasize four theories: Indigenous identity and language, Spanish as a language of power, Latinization and educator agency.

¹⁸ Jim Cummins, *Rethinking the Education of Multilingual Learners: A Critical Analysis of Theoretical Concepts*, Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights 19 (Bristol, UK ; Multilingual Matters, 2021), 3.

Indigenous Identity and Language

To begin, I first address Indigenous identity and the invaluable role of language as a marker of identity. Over the course of the summer of 2022, I engaged in conversations with my language instructors while immersed in a Maya K'iche' speaking region of Guatemala, where I was working to improve my K'iche' language proficiency.¹⁹ During the six-week experience, I further attempted to untangle aspects of K'iche' identity through informal conversations with my language teachers, Nan Nela and Nan Luisa,²⁰ each a native speaker of K'iche', born and raised in Guatemala. Both K'iche' educators were adamant that their linguistic knowledge of K'iche' is an essential element of their identification as Indigenous, Mayan women. Nan Nela explained: "Me gusta que me vean como una mujer K'iche' con mi indumentaria y mi idioma."²¹ Nan Luisa additionally highlighted the value of her language to her Mayan identity: "Por mi cultura, mi idioma, todos los costumbres. Son lo que soy."²²

In identifying themselves, both Nan Nela and Nan Luisa specifically acknowledged their *idioma*, the Spanish term for language and in this case referring to K'iche', as a central element of their identities. Agoos explains, "While it must be noted that language is not the sole defining characteristic of any given culture, it is a critical tool in understanding individuals as agents within their cultural contexts."²³ Fischer and Brown further confirm that language is indeed a defining component of identity, especially for Mayan communities.²⁴ Therefore, it would follow that in order to preserve one's identity, it is critical to also maintain one's language. This becomes particularly important when considering the migration of Indigenous

¹⁹ In the summer of 2022, I studied Maya K'iche' for six weeks in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala at the Mayan Language Institute through Tulane University.

²⁰ Nan Luisa is a pseudonym.

²¹ Personal communication. July 2022. My translation: "I like that they see me as a K'iche' woman with my Mayan clothing and my language."

²² Personal communication. July 2022. My translation: "For my culture, my language, all of the customs. They are who I am."

²³ Ella Agoos, "Linguistic Essentialism and Indigenous Authenticity: The Role of Indigenous Languages in Defining Indigeneity," *Inquiries Journal* 12, no. 09 (2020), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1790/linguistic-essentialism-and-indigenous-authenticity-the-role-of-indigenous-languages-in-defining-Indigeneity>.

²⁴ Edward F. Fischer and McKenna Brown, eds., *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, First Edition (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), https://catalog.library.vanderbilt.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991029291709703276&context=L&vid=01VAN_INST:vanui&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any,contains,maya%20cultural%20activism.

language speaking individuals from Latin America to the United States, where English is widely spoken and “a powerful symbol of community membership.”²⁵

Spanish as a Language of Power

In the United States, English is often considered synonymous with being “American,” and the increase in use of Spanish in the U.S. is frequently and alarmingly, considered a “threat” to both national identity and unity.²⁶ Driven by such fear of linguistic diversity and a loss of “Americanness,” the English-Only movement has gained momentum over the previous several decades as prominently demonstrated by the passage of English-Only laws in Arizona, California and Massachusetts.²⁷ By codifying the use of English over other languages, English is being used as a tool to serve the purpose of homogenization and cultural unification across an expansive portion of the North American continent where, “multilingualism [has] long [been] the norm.”²⁸

Phillipson defines linguistic imperialism as a phenomenon in which “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequities between English and other languages.”²⁹ But this definition itself is also focused on English, when the term is “linguistic imperialism” not “English imperialism.” English is not the only imperialistic language nor the only language of power in the United States.

Latin America is recognized globally as a predominantly Spanish-speaking region and nearly every Latin American country maintains Spanish as one of its official languages including the Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.³⁰ However, Spanish has an extensive history in North America as it was spoken in the region “as a colonial language over 100 years before the establishment of the first permanent English-speaking colonies at

²⁵ Ester J. De Jong, “Language Policy in the United States,” in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 125.

²⁶ De Jong, 125, 132.

²⁷ De Jong, 144.

²⁸ De Jong, 126. Robert Phillipson, “Globalizing English: Are Linguistic Human Rights an Alternative to Linguistic Imperialism?,” *Language Sciences* 20, no. 1 (1998): 101.

²⁹ Phillipson, “Globalizing English: Are Linguistic Human Rights an Alternative to Linguistic Imperialism?”

³⁰ Madison Crow, “‘Sí, Hablo Dialecto’: A Study to Identify the Presence of and Promote Pride for Indigenous Languages in Charleston, SC,” *Southern Journal of Linguistics* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 153.

Jamestown and Plymouth.” Today, Spanish is the most commonly taught “foreign language” in the U.S., and 13% of the country’s population speaks Spanish at home.³¹ This is not to ignore the existence of linguistic discrimination against Spanish speakers, which continues to be a reality in the United States, but is to call attention to the similar history between English and Spanish as colonial and dominant languages as well as indicate the significant presence of Spanish in the U.S., not only in Latin America. As I will demonstrate later in this master’s thesis, the Spanish language and its speakers hold a certain kind of power that Indigenous language speakers do not in U.S. schools, and my research demonstrates that it is not just English that continues to dominate classrooms but also Spanish.

Latinization

Approximately 64% of the U.S.’s total LEP population, including both native- and foreign-born individuals, speaks Spanish; such statistics as these play into the fear of the “overtaking” of English with Spanish and Latin American culture.³² In alignment with this fear, Salas and Portes explain that “Latinization” is now perceived as the “counterpoint for Americanization.” In their definition which operates within the context of K-12 schools, Latinization is the process in which, “all children shar[e] in a majority popular culture that is distinct from any one Latin American national or regional culture.”³³ In essence, Latinization is equated to the homogenization of Latin America, a region which is richly diverse in culture, practices, food, dress and, most especially for the purposes of this research, language. Latin

³¹ Reynaldo F. Macías, “Spanish as the Second National Language of the United States: Fact, Future, Fiction, or Hope?,” *Review of Research in Education* 38 (2014): 33–57; Sonia Thompson, “The U.S. Has The Second-Largest Population Of Spanish Speakers—How To Equip Your Brand To Serve Them,” *Forbes*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/soniathompson/2021/05/27/the-us-has-the-second-largest-population-of-spanish-speakers-how-to-equip-your-brand-to-serve-them/>.

³² “The perception that Latino immigration has led Spanish to sideline or even overtake English in the US is widespread.” See Phillip M. Carter, “A Linguist Explains How the ‘Three Generation Pattern’ Could Wipe Out Spanish in the US,” *Quartz*, February 1, 2018, <https://qz.com/1195658/spanish-to-english-us-is-increasingly-monolingual-despite-latino-immigration/>. Jeanne Batalova and Jie Zong, “Language Diversity and English Proficiency in the United States,” *migrationpolicy.org*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/language-diversity-and-english-proficiency-united-states>.

³³ Pedro R. Portes and Spencer Salas, eds., *US Latinization: Education and the New Latino South* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), xvii, <https://web-p-ebshost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=2881d75e-1deb-4f9c-81dd-6bf85c9c323c%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

America is often overgeneralized as a Spanish-speaking region of the world, and while Spanish does dominate the region, such a statement ignores the diversity of Indigenous languages present in Latin America and thereby overlooks the validity of thousands of Indigenous identities across Central and South America.³⁴

Campbell-Montalvo explains the phenomena of Latinization in relation to raciolinguistic enregisterment in which “linguistic forms” are seen as symbolic of “particular racial categories” or the opposite.³⁵ In this way, the process of Latinization perceives of, “Latino and Spanish [as] a set—a set constructed to be exclusive of Indigenous race and languages, which results in the erasure of Indigeneity.”³⁶ To speak Spanish is to be Latinx and to be Latinx is to speak Spanish. There is no room for Indigenous persons who speak a non-Indo-European language and Spanish or any Indigenous person within this dichotomy, ignoring the vast diversity of Indigenous peoples that comprise Latin America.

Using the example of Mexican immigrants in the United States, Stephen explains a similar phenomenon in that, “once Mexican migrants cross into the United States, what was their national identity, that is, their “Mexicanness,” is treated as a racial identity.”³⁷ Similarly, for Mayan students from Guatemala in the United States, for example, their Guatemalan national identity is now perceived of as their racial identity and their Indigenous identity is left unacknowledged and thereby erased. Urrieta explains an Indigenous person’s experience of Latinization like this: “When discussing identity politics within U.S. categories, for example, the Indigenous people of Latin America are left unnamed, engulfed within a sea of “Hispanos” or “Latinos.” The *indígena* population is therefore left silent and either learns to be Hispanic or Latino or chooses to form its own local community-based organizations.”³⁸ This very process of Latinization occurs with Indigenous language speakers from Latin America across a variety of institutions within the United States, including educational spaces as I will argue in this thesis.

³⁴ It should be acknowledged that Portuguese is another imperialistic, Indo-European language in Latin America.

³⁵ Campbell-Montalvo, “Linguistic Re-Formation in Florida Heartland Schools,” 38.

³⁶ Campbell-Montalvo, 38.

³⁷ Lynn Stephen, “Chapter 7: Navigating the Borders of Racial and Ethnic Hierarchies,” in *Transborder Lives* (Duke University Press, 2007), 211, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822389965-010>.

³⁸ Luis Urrieta, Jr., “Las Identidades También Lloran, Identities Also Cry: Exploring the Human Side of Indigenous Latina/o Identities,” *Research Gate*, June 2023, 150, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326993ES3402_3.

Teacher Agency

In such educational systems, it is important to recognize the essential “role of teachers as agents of social and educational transformation,” and in this thesis, I discuss the agency of SHINE teachers as changemakers on behalf of their Indigenous students in relation to fellow educators and their schools as a whole.³⁹ Cummins points to this invaluable and powerful role that teachers play in advocating for their students and in altering systemic problems within the present educational system, explaining that “school failure among minoritized students will be reversed only when educators actively challenge historical and current patterns of disempowerment.”⁴⁰ Cummins continues on to say, “educators do have the power to exercise agency in challenging disabling educational structures,” rather than solely being subjected to the power of the educational system as is the case for their Indigenous students.⁴¹ My research demonstrates that SHINE teachers do work to dismantle educational structures by advocating for their Indigenous students and utilizing their positions of power to educate other teachers, even while operating in this broken educational system that Latinizes Indigenous students.

Literature Review

Teachers and administrators confirm the growing number of Indigenous, particularly Mayan, language speaking students in their classes across the City School District.⁴² However, these Indigenous students from Latin America remain largely invisible to the public eye as the research surrounding the experiences of Indigenous language speaking students in Tennessee, and across the United States in general, is sparse.

A few sources investigate the gaps in data regarding the presence of Latin American Indigenous languages and demonstrate the oversimplification of such linguistic data both within U.S. schools and across the country. Rebecca Campbell-Montalvo explores this

³⁹ Cummins, *Rethinking the Education of Multilingual Learners*, xxxiv.

⁴⁰ Jim Cummins, “Power Relations in School: Constructing or Constricting Identities?” (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2021), 61, <https://web-s-ebcohost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=88ecf599-5206-4d7a-978a-5d4b04c82a5d%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

⁴¹ Cummins, 68.

⁴² Personal communications with Tennessee educators. Spring 2022.

phenomenon in her work on “erasures of Indigenous Latino languages” in the Heartland of Florida.⁴³ Campbell-Montalvo identifies the undermeasurement of Indigenous languages spoken in Central County, Florida schools as these students are consistently assumed to be native speakers of Spanish due to their country of origin through which process students are stripped of their Indigenous identity within the school system. In fact, Campbell-Montalvo found that in Central County, only one Indigenous language speaking student was recorded as such for every 19 who spoke an Indigenous language.⁴⁴

A similar phenomenon is occurring across the nation. U.S. Census data categorizes Indigenous languages from Latin America as “other than English,” glossing over the diversity of languages that exist in the U.S. and inhibiting access to information about the presence of those languages. In her chapter from *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*, Garcia uses data from past U.S. censuses to analyze the discrepancy between the number of English Language Learners and those who “don’t speak English well or not at all.”⁴⁵ According to Garcia, “emergent bilinguals are lumped into one category in relationship to English, without regard to the home languages they speak.”⁴⁶ As such, the U.S. census data is not reflective of the linguistic diversity in the United States, especially due to issues with self-reporting languages and the undercounting of undocumented individuals. Garcia’s work demonstrates that little is known regarding the presence of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America, and a similar phenomenon is occurring in Tennessee schools. In Tennessee, 76.5% of all English Learners (ELs) speak Spanish, 6.9% speak Arabic, 1.4% speak Somali, 1.3% speak Chinese and 11.6% speak “other languages.”⁴⁷ However, what are these “other languages,” and how many of those Spanish speakers are actually bilingual or trilingual? These are essential questions to understanding the presence of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America. Additionally, Garcia’s chapter discusses Native American languages and studies the history of unjust

⁴³ See Campbell-Montalvo, “Linguistic Re-Formation in Florida Heartland Schools.”

⁴⁴ Campbell-Montalvo, 53.

⁴⁵ Ofelia García, “U.S. Language Policy in Education,” in *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 179.

⁴⁶ García, 175.

⁴⁷ “Our Nation’s English Learners” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/el-characteristics/index.html#three>.

treatment of Native American Indigenous language speaking students in U.S. schools. This work situates the disregard for Indigenous language speakers from Latin America in U.S. schools as a continuation of similar educational experiences faced by Native American language speakers for hundreds of years.

Rather than identifying gaps in linguistic data, other literature investigates the role of schools in language revitalization. For instance, McCarty and Nicholas focus on the relationship between the school system and the Indigenous language revitalization process. In their article, school is only partly the answer to the question of language preservation. It is essential that these languages be employed outside of the educational system in order to give them the true possibility of revitalization.⁴⁸

Hornberger agrees with McCarty and Nicholas. In her book, Hornberger includes the work of four scholars in Latin America, Africa, Europe and North America, asking the question, “Can schools save Indigenous languages?” Comparing case studies of revitalization efforts across the world, Hornberger demonstrates the importance of schools in this process, but in accordance with McCarty and Nicholas, Hornberger agrees that “schools alone are not enough to do the job” of the linguistic preservation of Indigenous languages.⁴⁹ While such studies may revolve around Indigenous language speakers in their home countries, the work of such scholars as Hornberger, McCarty and Nicholas provides an important analysis of the school setting as a place where linguistic preservation can and should be a reality for Indigenous students.

Rather than focusing on educational institutions broadly, Cummins concentrates on the role of educators in a student’s academic experience. Cummins argues that the relationship between teacher and student can be leveraged to defy “disabling educational structures,” which diminish the value of minoritized students’ identities.⁵⁰ According to Cummins, it is not the school which determines a student’s performance, but rather, “teacher-student interactions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or

⁴⁸ Teresa L. McCarty and Sheilah E. Nicholas, “Reclaiming Indigenous Languages: A Reconsideration of the Roles and Responsibilities of Schools,” *Review of Research in Education* 38 (2014): 106–36.

⁴⁹ Nancy H. Hornberger, ed., *Can Schools Save Indigenous Languages: Policy and Practice on Four Continents* (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages and Communities, 2008).

⁵⁰ Cummins, “Power Relations in School: Constructing or Constricting Identities?,” 68.

failure.”⁵¹ Cummins contends that the role of teachers is especially invaluable in empowering linguistically diverse and impoverished students and contradicting prejudiced and exclusionary educational practices and policies.⁵²

In contrast to a school-centered or teacher-centered approach, other scholars focus on how leveraging students’ identities and cultural knowledge can support their success in school.⁵³ For example, Daniel and Zybina’s work, while focusing more broadly on refugee students from diverse backgrounds, highlights the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). CRP incorporates student knowledge into the classroom, recognizing that the student also has valuable knowledge to share originating from their own culture and language.⁵⁴ Daniel and Pacheco’s article further explains the value of incorporating students’ native languages into the classroom setting, again recognizing the importance of these native languages and of educators acknowledging their students’ linguistic skills.⁵⁵ As Indigenous language speakers from Guatemala have historically been discriminated against in their home country, such pedagogy is a vital way in which teachers can illustrate to the students the importance of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, showing them that it is valuable including within an academic setting.

Funds of Knowledge is another essential, educational concept that, in the case of the SHINE program specifically, indicates that immigrant and refugee students have rich cultural and linguistic knowledge that teachers should leverage in the classroom as a tool for empowerment, involvement and educational success. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez’s project in 1992 acted upon the “assumption that the educational process can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn about their students’ everyday lives.”⁵⁶ This is the very same

⁵¹ Cummins, 72.

⁵² Cummins, 82.

⁵³ Rafael Vásquez, “Zapotec Identity as a Matter of Schooling,” *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* 13, no. 2 (May 1, 2019): 66–90, <https://doi.org/10.24974/amae.13.2.429>.

⁵⁴ Shannon M. Daniel and Maria Zybina, “Resettled Refugee Teens’ Perspectives: Identifying a Need to Centralize Youths’ ‘Funds of Strategies’ in Future Efforts to Enact Culturally Responsive Pedagogy,” *The Urban Review* 51, no. 3 (2018): 345–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0484-7>.

⁵⁵ Shannon M. Daniel and Mark B. Pacheco, “Translanguaging Practices and Perspectives of Four Multilingual Teens,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 59, no. 6 (June 2016): 653–63.

⁵⁶ Cathy Amanti, Norma Gonzalez, and Luis C. Moll, eds., *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practice in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 6, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613462>.

assumption applied by SHINE teachers as they leverage their students' experiences and knowledge within the classroom.

O'Loughlin and Custodio study the educational experiences of immigrant and refugee children in the U.S. In their book, *Supporting the Journey of English Learners After Trauma*, the former ESL teachers attempt to create an understanding of the traumatic realities faced by immigrant students and better equip teachers with the knowledge to support those students. Such research is essential to better understand the realities of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America, who often face traumatic migration experiences, familial separation, discrimination and culture shock. These experiences are brought into the classroom, and as a result, it is essential that educators are aware of their students' diverse backgrounds and needs.

Research on the experiences of Latin American Indigenous language speakers in the United States, and in Tennessee especially, is scant. My case study fills a critical portion of this gap in data regarding the presence of Indigenous languages in local schools, utilizing a Tennessee school district as an example. This research project attempts to better understand the realities of Indigenous language speaking students from Guatemala in local schools by giving the students and their teachers the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words.

Study Scope

In many ways, this research is a continuation of my previous work in Charleston, SC and a compilation of my various experiences working with Indigenous communities and studying a Mayan language. For two summers, I worked for the Migrant Education Program in South Carolina, enrolling Out of School Youth (OSY) and providing English classes for migrant farmworkers. The majority of these farmworkers were from Mexico, but as I continually attempted to practice my second language—Spanish—I realized that this language was not the “catch all” solution to communicating as I had once believed. After I began to research Indigenous languages from Latin America, I encountered Indigenous language speakers not only on farms in rural South Carolina but in the touristic city of Charleston.

For my undergraduate thesis, I interviewed Indigenous language speaking adults in Charleston and identified Indigenous languages from Latin America spoken in the city yet hidden within the Spanish-speaking immigrant community.⁵⁷ I completed my research principally within the city's migrant farmworker community and documented 40 speakers of 14 distinct Indigenous languages in my limited study. Then, I began my master's in Latin American Studies through Vanderbilt's Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latinx Studies (CLACX). My master's coursework included Maya K'iche' language classes through which I built my proficiency in one of the Indigenous languages from Central America spoken by students in Tennessee. Additionally, during the summer of 2022, I lived in Guatemala to further improve my K'iche' language skills and advance my understanding of Mayan identity.

Upon familiarizing myself with the city of study's diverse immigrant community and connecting with Tennessee schools through CLACX, I encountered similar patterns of Indigeneity erasures within the City School District as I had seen previously from my study in South Carolina with Indigenous language speakers from Latin America. I became particularly interested in the SHINE program as I spoke to more and more teachers in the program who mentioned having students who speak Indigenous languages in their classes, even though this information is not reflected in district data. The SHINE program afforded an excellent research site because, with its seven locations, it provided a sizable but manageable field site with a high concentration of Indigenous students who would later join mainstream content classrooms.

In order to learn more about Indigenous students from Latin America and their experiences in Tennessee schools, I created this ethnographic research study through which I conducted one-on-one interviews with SHINE teachers and five focus groups with both SHINE and non-SHINE, secondary students. The intention of hosting additional focus groups with non-SHINE students was to provide a point of comparison, especially recognizing that the students' experience in the SHINE program is limited to one year with few exceptions. Including non-SHINE participants also increased the original, small sample size of the study. Additionally, as an ethnographic study, I further relied on participant observations of SHINE classes, family events and monthly SHINE meetings to better understand the present context of Indigenous students

⁵⁷ Crow, "Sí, Hablo Dialecto."

and how the program is acknowledging as well as encouraging their students' Indigeneity throughout their academic experience.

Furthermore, the methodology of this research project was inspired by the main tenants of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) Model. PAR was adapted by Elena Benedicto and her team of linguists, Mayangna Yulbarangyang Balna, who worked with the Mayangna language community in Nicaragua with the purpose of acknowledging the power imbalance between researchers and language communities.⁵⁸ This study does not adhere to PAR in all aspects as the project does not result in the creation of a tangible product for the speakers of Indigenous languages in the school district, but it is inspired by the methodology in that the goal of the project is to produce research that is by the Indigenous language speaking students and for the purpose of better supporting these students.

Thesis Outline

In Chapter I of this thesis, I have introduced the project and framed the research theoretically. I provided a review of the relevant literature, an overview of the scope of the study and conclude with this thesis outline.

In Chapter II, I discuss relevant Guatemalan history and the country's linguistic and cultural diversity necessary to contextualize the previous and current experiences of Guatemalan Mayan students in the SHINE program. This chapter includes an overview of the Guatemalan civil war to illustrate the violent history against Indigenous persons in Guatemala. Additionally, I demonstrate Guatemala's history of the linguistic and cultural hierarchy and discrimination that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons and languages that continues to affect Indigenous students in the U.S. Lastly, I define Indigenous identity in Guatemala, emphasizing language as a defining cultural marker for Mayan communities.

Chapter III summarizes Indigenous Guatemalan immigration trends to the United States, then narrows on the state of Tennessee. I address the increase in immigration from the

⁵⁸ Elena Benedicto and Mayangna Balna, "A Model of Participatory Action Research: The Mayangna Linguists' Team of Nicaragua," in *Working Together for Endangered Languages - Research Challenges and Social Impacts* (XI FEL Conference, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: SKET, University of Malaya and Foundation for Endangered Languages., 2007), 29–35. Crow, M., Viñas-de-Puig, R. Under Review.

Northern Triangle over the last decade and the growth in unaccompanied minors to the United States. I also discuss the lack of information on Indigenous languages from Latin America that are spoken across the U.S. and in Tennessee specifically.

Chapter IV discusses education policy and overviews the Tennessee school district where the study takes place. To begin, this section overviews the education policies that I find particularly relevant to the realities of SHINE students including the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Lau Remedies, the *Plyler (1982) v. Doe* court case and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). I then give an overview of the City School District and the SHINE program, to provide a context of the school system where these students are situated. Then, I define the criteria for being a SHINE student according to the school district.

In Chapter V, VI and VII, I present my ethnographic case study. Chapter V details the principal methodology that inspired this project: the Participatory Action Research Model (PAR).⁵⁹ I additionally detail the procedure of data collection and the study's participants. Chapter VI summarizes the results of the teacher interviews and student focus groups and then discusses the implications of those results, focused on the students' experiences in the City School District. Chapter VII further discusses how SHINE teachers are creating a unique space within the school district and SHINE teachers' perspectives on the school system in relationship to their linguistically diverse students.

In Chapter VII, I conclude my master's thesis with a discussion of the study's challenges, ideas for further research, implications for the school district and other final thoughts.

⁵⁹ Benedicto.

CHAPTER II

Multiculturalism and Multilingualism in Guatemala

According to the 2018 Guatemalan census, approximately 44% of Guatemala's population is Indigenous, which comes second in the percentage of Indigenous persons in a Latin American country only to Bolivia.⁶⁰ Among the more than seven million Indigenous persons in Guatemala, 24 different Indigenous languages are recognized, and 22 originate from the Mayan language family.⁶¹ The remaining two are non-Mayan, Indigenous languages including Xinka and Garífuna. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Indigenous Languages Spoken in Guatemala

| Language Families | Languages |
|-------------------|---|
| Mayan | Achi', Akateka, Awakateka, Chalchiteka, Ch'orti, Chuj, Itza', Ixil, Kaqchikel, K'iche' ⁶² , Mam, Mopan, Popti', Poqomchi', Poqomam, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', Sakapulteka, Sipakapense, Tekiteka, Tz'utujil, Uspanteka |
| Xinkan | Xinka |
| Arawakan | Garífuna |

As of 2021, the largest Indigenous linguistic groups in Guatemala belong to the Mayan language family including K'iche', Q'eqchi', Kaqchikel and Mam.⁶³ While these four languages

⁶⁰ Brigittine M. French, *Maya Ethnolinguistic Identity: Violence, Cultural Rights, and Modernity in Highland Guatemala* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010). It is important to note that despite many of these being Mayan languages, they are not mutually intelligible, and these linguistic communities hold their own, distinctive cultural practices and beliefs in separate communities across Guatemala.

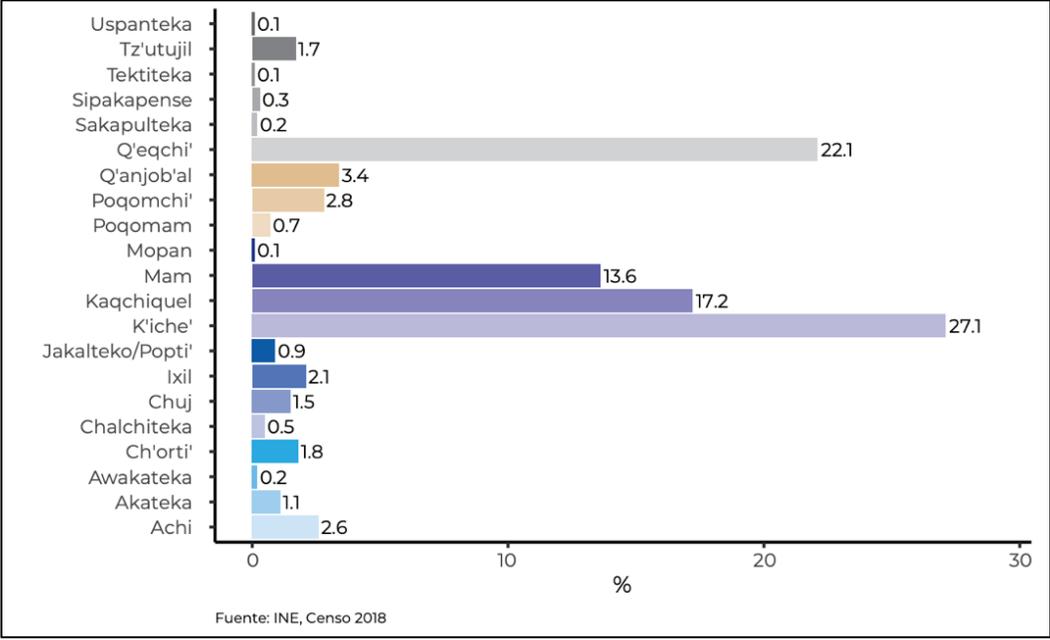
⁶¹ "Comunidades Lingüísticas," Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2022, <https://www.almg.org.gt/comunidades-linguisticas>. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, "Indigenous Peoples in Latin America," Text, United Nations ECLAC (CEPAL, November 11, 2014), <https://www.cepal.org/en/infografias/los-pueblos-indigenas-en-america-latina>. "Portal de Resultados Del Censo 2018," Resultados del Censo 2018, 2018, <https://www.censopoblacion.gt/mapas>.

⁶² In Spanish, K'iche' is written as Quiche. I have chosen to retain the spelling of the language in the K'iche' language. I have attempted to do the same for all of the languages listed in the table above and throughout the paper.

⁶³ "Compendio Estadístico de Pueblos" (Guatemala: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, December 2021), <https://www.ine.gov.gt/sistema/uploads/2021/12/30/20211230192119ITIf0Taxw7mbshQNenoLw9A9K5cR4pMt.pdf>.

are spoken by significantly more individuals than other Indigenous languages in Guatemala, all four languages are considered “vulnerable,” meaning that “most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains.”⁶⁴ See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Distribution of the Linguistic Communities in Guatemala from the “Compendio estadístico de pueblos”⁶⁵



Discrimination and Language Hierarchy in Guatemala

Indigenous persons comprise nearly half of Guatemala’s population, yet the persecution and discrimination of Indigenous communities that began with the arrival of the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524 continues today. In the 16th century, Indigenous persons were deemed by colonizers as “savages who lack human morality, religion and a civilized life.”⁶⁶ The words are striking as they plainly identify Indigenous persons as less intelligent, less moral and less civilized, and the core of this statement blatantly questions the humanity of Indigenous

⁶⁴ Lisa Evans, “Endangered Languages: The Full List,” The Guardian, April 15, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/apr/15/language-extinct-endangered>; “Endangered Languages Project - Guatemala,” accessed January 4, 2023, <https://endangeredlanguages.com/lang/country/Guatemala>.

⁶⁵ “Compendio Estadístico de Pueblos.”

⁶⁶ Victor Montejo, *Mayalogue: An Interactionist Theory of Indigenous Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021), 17.

communities. As Vásquez explains, “The representation of the Indian other has, since colonization, been both an emblematic and pragmatic method to subjugate Indigenous languages and peoples.”⁶⁷

Indigenous peoples were categorized as other not only because of their religion and lack of what the Spanish colonizers considered a “civilized life” but also due to their languages.⁶⁸ With the arrival of the Spanish, a linguistic hierarchy was established, and Indigenous peoples were subjected to the process of “castilianization,” which forced the Spanish language onto Indigenous communities.⁶⁹ However, this imposition of the Spanish language was not just a phase of the colonial past. Time and time again, the importance of Spanish above all other languages has been made clear.

In 1965, the Guatemalan Constitution made Spanish the official language of the nation and encouraged the homogenization of Guatemala as a Spanish-speaking state. This year also saw the creation of the *Ley Orgánica de Educación*, which aimed to utilize Indigenous languages as tools to produce monolingual Spanish speakers.⁷⁰ Over time, there were efforts to accept the plurilingual and pluricultural nature of the Guatemalan state through education reforms like the *Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe* (1984) and the General Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Education (1995), but this history of subjugating Indigenous languages and their communities is not erased so easily.⁷¹ *Artículo 143* in the most recent Guatemalan Constitution from 1993 states, “El idioma oficial de Guatemala es el español. Las lenguas vernáculas, forman parte del patrimonio cultural de la Nación.”⁷² The terminology states clearly that there is one “idioma oficial,” not “idiomas oficiales.” While the Guatemalan Constitution may state that Indigenous languages are supported constitutionally, these Indigenous languages are not specifically named. As is the case in Mexico according to Vasqués, “Although Indigenous

⁶⁷ Vásquez, “Zapotec Identity as a Matter of Schooling,” 80.

⁶⁸ Montejo, *Mayalogue: An Interactionist Theory of Indigenous Cultures*, 17.

⁶⁹ Sagen T. Eatwell, “Measuring Subtle and Blatant Prejudice: A New Assessment Tool for Guatemala’s Bilingual Education Program” (Vanderbilt University, 2020), 7, <https://ir.vanderbilt.edu/handle/1803/16053>.

⁷⁰ Eatwell, 8.

⁷¹ Eatwell, 9,11.

⁷² My translation: “The official language of Guatemala is Spanish. The vernacular languages are part of the cultural heritage of the Nation.” See “Constitución Política de la República de Guatemala, 1985 con reformas de 1993” (Organization of the American States, 1993), 31, https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/Constitucion_Guatemala.pdf.

languages are constitutionally protected, these hold unequal power relationships against Spanish and English.”⁷³

Beyond the linguistic hierarchy that exists in Guatemala, the arrival of the Spanish also resulted in the establishment of an ethnic hierarchy that is maintained today as demonstrated by the extreme inequality and exclusion experienced by Indigenous individuals. A previous UN Special Rapporteur identified discrimination against Indigenous communities in Guatemala in the legal, interpersonal, institutional and structural realms.⁷⁴ According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 75% of Indigenous persons in Guatemala experience poverty, and 58% suffer from chronic malnutrition. However, only 36% of non-Indigenous Guatemalans experience poverty, and 38% live with chronic malnutrition, even with Indigenous persons comprising a smaller percentage of the population.⁷⁵

The Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996)

To begin to understand discrimination against Indigenous persons in Guatemala and the fear of persecution carried by Guatemalan immigrants in the U.S., it is essential to recognize the historical context of the relatively recent Guatemalan civil war and the United States’ involvement in this conflict. In 1950, Jacobo Árbenz won the Guatemalan presidential election based on his proposed agrarian reform, Decree 900. This new policy intended to redistribute unused land and compensated those individuals with agrarian bonds.⁷⁶ Decree 900 also included the redistribution of private land holdings, and the U.S.’s United Fruit Company, as “the largest private land holder in Guatemala,” had much land to lose.⁷⁷ Moreover, in the midst of the Cold War, the U.S. was fearful of the perceived communist nature of Árbenz; the U.S.

⁷³ Vásquez, “Zapotec Identity as a Matter of Schooling,” 80.

⁷⁴ “Situación de derechos humanos en Guatemala” (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos; Organización de los Estados Americanos, December 31, 2015), 39–42, <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/Guatemala2016.pdf>.

⁷⁵ “The Indigenous World 2022: Guatemala,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), April 1, 2022, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/guatemala/4668-iw-2022-guatemala.html>.

⁷⁶ This policy is in response to the Spanish conquest of Guatemala through which lands were forcibly taken from Indigenous communities. See Tiffany Harbour, “Creating A New Guatemala: The 1952 Agrarian Reform Law,” *Browse All Theses and Dissertations*, January 1, 2008, 12–13, https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all/855.

⁷⁷ Harbour, 17.

ambassador to Guatemala determined that Árbenz “talked like a communist, he thought like a communist [and] he acted like a communist.” Árbenz was therefore deemed a threat to the U.S., and President Eisenhower granted the CIA permission to overthrow the Guatemalan president.

Once the United States had successfully deposed Árbenz in 1954, a tumultuous political period began as a series of dictators rose to power, resulting in the beginning of the civil war in 1960. The war was marked by brutality and violence at the hands of the Guatemalan military resulting in the massacre of more than 200,000 civilians, yet “only six percent were directly involved in insurgent or guerrilla activities.”⁷⁸ Under the dictatorships of Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt and their scorched earth policy, the Guatemalan military targeted Indigenous Mayan communities for destruction and mass killings for fear these rural communities were aiding guerrilla fighters.⁷⁹ This resulted in the genocide and displacement of thousands of Indigenous Guatemalans from their ancestral lands as 83% of the victims of this policy were of Mayan descent.⁸⁰

Of the 1.5 to 2.5 million Guatemalans displaced by the war—accounting for approximately 20% of the country’s total population—50% of those individuals ultimately fled the country.⁸¹ However, Mexico and the United States did not begin to see a substantial increase in immigration until the 1980s, when the violence of the war had intensified exponentially. Many Indigenous Guatemalans escaped to southern Mexico where they lived in UNHCR refugee camps while others continued on to the United States; despite fleeing such horrific violence and persecution, they were not considered refugees either in Mexico or the United States.⁸² Guatemalan immigrants in the United States rose from 13,785 in 1977 to

⁷⁸ Trudy Mercadal, “Documenting the Human Cost of Guatemala’s Civil War,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, April 26, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.638>.

⁷⁹ Mercadal.

⁸⁰ Pablo Yankelevich, “Exiles in Mexico,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, April 26, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.922>.

⁸¹ Johannes Chudoba, “Moving beyond Long-Term Refugee Situations: The Case of Guatemala,” 2003, https://www.academia.edu/1264737/Moving_beyond_long_term_refugee_situations_the_case_of_Guatemala.

⁸² Susanne Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges,” Migration Policy Institute, March 27, 2013, 2, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/guatemalan-migration-times-civil-war-and-post-war-challenges>.

45,917 in 1989.⁸³ As of 2017, Guatemalans comprise 2% of the U.S. population, having grown from 406,000 to 1.4 million people, resulting in a 255% increase in the Guatemalan population in the U.S. since the year 2000.⁸⁴ Such data demonstrates that the Guatemalan civil war may have spiked Guatemalan immigration to the United States, but this migratory trend did not end with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. The war lasted a total of 36 years, and the flow of Guatemalan ‘refugees’ that expanded greatly in the 1970s and 1980s continues today.⁸⁵

Defining Mayan Identity

While the vast majority of Guatemala’s Indigenous population consists of Mayan persons, it is important to recognize that these Mayan communities are distinctive from one another, and their languages, while from the same language family, are not mutually intelligible. Billings explains that the variety of Indigenous languages spoken by different Mayan communities is a reflection of the “separateness of communities in Guatemala, as [is] women’s *traje*.”⁸⁶ Indigenous immigrants from Guatemala bring this “separateness” with them to the United States, and therefore, it is essential to recognize that these Indigenous Mayan people are from various Guatemalan departments and towns, speak different Mayan Indigenous languages and maintain varying cultural practices.

Despite the significant diversity that exists among these Indigenous communities, Mayan peoples do share, “three cornerstones of Maya culture” including “land, community and an attachment to place.”⁸⁷ The importance of place and ancestral lands in Mayan identity is illustrated clearly by the manner in which Indigenous Guatemalans identify themselves. For instance, “a Q’anjob’al-speaking Indian woman from San Miguel Acatán would identify herself as an ‘Acateca,’ while a resident of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango would describe himself as a

⁸³ Jonas, 3.

⁸⁴ “Facts on Latinos of Guatemalan Origin in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project, September 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-guatemalan-origin-latinos/>.

⁸⁵ See Chapter III for more details on contemporary Guatemalan immigration to the U.S.

⁸⁶ Billings, “Identities, Consciousness, and Organizing in Exile,” 87.

⁸⁷ W. George Lovell, “Surviving Conquest: The Maya of Guatemala in Historical Perspective,” *Latin American Research Review* 23, no. 2 (1988): 25–57.

Maxeña.”⁸⁸ As such, Mayan Guatemalans are more likely to utilize their communities of origin to identify themselves rather than to describe themselves as *guatemalteco/a*, *Maya* or even *indígena*.⁸⁹ The importance of place for the Maya is further demonstrated within Mayan languages themselves. The word “*naabl* (“way of being”) involves abiding attachment to the place first settled by local ancestors.”⁹⁰ Not only does this reflect the strong connection between Mayan identity and sense of place, but it highlights how Mayan refugees and immigrants face a serious challenge to their Indigenous identity upon migrating to the U.S. and leaving their communities behind.

Another defining component of Mayan identity and culture is the customary form of dress known as *indumentaria maya*, as beforementioned, or Mayan “garments woven or embroidered by hand that are distinguished by their type of manufacture, design, form, motifs and styles.”⁹¹ These various garment pieces which compose the Mayan dress carry important cultural significance in their use of colors, designs and images. In fact, the particular weaving technique of one’s clothing can serve to identify one’s *aldea* and reflects features of their “religious and communal identity.”⁹² *Indumentaria maya* is especially significant as a representation of identity for Mayan women, who even in Guatemala, tend to wear their *indumentaria maya* more than men, a phenomenon that was present throughout Guatemala prior to the 1980s and continues today.⁹³ This additionally demonstrates the Maya woman’s role as the primary exponent of Maya culture for their children.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Billings, “Organizing in Exile: The Reconstruction of Community in the Guatemalan Refugee Camps in Chiapas, Mexico,” 76.

⁸⁹ Nolin additionally provides the example of an Indigenous Guatemalan man who would say, “*Yo soy San Pedroño* (I am from San Pedro), rather than “*Yo soy Maya*” (I am Maya)” as a reflection of their worldview. Catherine Nolin, “Out of Place: Displacement and Collective Return of Maya Refugees,” in *Mythic History and Symbolic Landscape*, 1997, 56,

https://www.academia.edu/202369/Out_of_place_Displacement_and_collective_return_of_Maya_refugees. Billings further discusses this concept by demonstrating how the term *indígena* has been utilized as an exonym, allowing people outside of Mayan communities to distinguish themselves from the “Indigenous” Guatemalans. On the other hand, Mayan Guatemalans would utilize their specific communities as a point of identification instead. See Billings, “Identities, Consciousness, and Organizing in Exile,” 87.

⁹⁰ Nolin, “Out of Place,” 56.

⁹¹ Irma Otzoy, “Maya Clothing and Identity,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 142.

⁹² Otzoy, 141.

⁹³ Otzoy, “Maya Clothing and Identity.”

⁹⁴ Otzoy, 147.

The third, and arguably one of the most fundamental markers of Mayan identity, is language. Fischer argues that “languages represent a uniquely authentic cultural possession for their speakers” most notably because Mayan languages such as Mam and K’iche’, for example, “have remained largely intact throughout the centuries of foreign incursions and upheaval in Guatemala.”⁹⁵ Therefore, one of the unique purposes of Mayan languages has been to preserve the history and culture of the Maya over hundreds of years. Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján, a native Kaqchikel speaker, defines members of the Mayan community by the use of their Indigenous language and asserts that Mayan languages are “unmistakable symbols of [Mayan] identity and existence.”⁹⁶

To understand the present educational experiences of Indigenous students from Latin America in the City School District in Tennessee, it is essential to recognize the larger context of where these students immigrated from. In this study, student participants are largely from Mayan communities in Guatemala, one of the countries with the largest percentage of Indigenous persons in Latin America. Despite its longstanding history of multiculturalism and multilingualism, Guatemala is still dominated by a linguistic hierarchy in which Spanish is the language of power—a hierarchy that is paralleled in this Tennessee school district and participates in the erasure of student Indigenous languages. Even so, Mayan communities in Guatemala continue to represent their Indigenous identity through their language, dress and self-identification with their communities. While immigration to the U.S. has increased significantly over the previous decade, Indigenous immigrants from Guatemala are not leaving behind their Indigenous languages, even if such languages are not represented in U.S. language data.

⁹⁵ Edward F. Fischer and McKenna Brown, eds., *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, First Edition (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 14, https://catalog.library.vanderbilt.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991029291709703276&context=L&vid=01VAN_INST:vanui&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any,contains,maya%20cultural%20activism.

⁹⁶ Rodríguez Guaján, “Maya Culture and the Politics of Development,” 76, 79.

CHAPTER III

Guatemalan Immigration to the U.S. and U.S. Language Data

In order to understand why there is a growing number of Indigenous students from Guatemala in Tennessee public schools, and in the SHINE program more specifically, it is important to first understand recent migratory trends between the Northern Triangle⁹⁷ and Tennessee. Migration from the three Northern Triangle nations to the U.S. has increased sharply, doubling from 2011 to 2014.⁹⁸ According to the 2020 U.S. Census, thirty-three percent of the nation's "foreign-born population"⁹⁹ originates from Central America, and the largest nationalities represented from this region are Salvadoreans (1,412,101) and Guatemalans (1,111,495). This data reflects an increase of 100,000 Guatemalan immigrants arriving to the United States since 2018.¹⁰⁰ Following the trend of many other immigrant communities, the top destination states for these Guatemalan immigrants to the U.S. are California, Florida and Texas.¹⁰¹ However, Tennessee's Guatemalan immigrant community is growing rapidly.

The urban area which acts as the field site for this study is also home to "a burgeoning immigrant population. In fact, it is one of the fastest growing in the entire U.S."¹⁰² From 1990 to

⁹⁷ The Northern Triangle is an area in Central America encompassing Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. For more information, see Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle," Council on Foreign Relations, June 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>.

⁹⁸ "Immigration From Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador Up," *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project* (blog), December 7, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/12/07/rise-in-u-s-immigrants-from-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-outpaces-growth-from-elsewhere/>.

⁹⁹ According to the U.S. Census's glossary, the "foreign-born population" refers to people who are not U.S. citizens at birth. This includes naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as foreign students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees and asylees), and persons illegally present in the United States." See American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates U.S. Census Bureau, "Table BB05006: Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States," 2018, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=B05006%3A%20PLACE%20OF%20BIRTH%20FOR%20THE%20FOREIGN-BORN%20POPULATION%20IN%20THE%20UNITED%20STATES&y=2018>.

¹⁰⁰ U.S. Census Bureau.

¹⁰¹ "Facts on Latinos of Guatemalan Origin in the U.S."

¹⁰² Meagan Fitzpatrick, "Tennessee City Has a Thriving Immigrant Community — How Did That Happen? | CBC News," CBC, May 10, 2015.

2000, city residents who were born outside of the United States tripled.¹⁰³ As of 2015, 5% of Tennessee’s total population consists of immigrants, and within the urban area of study, 7% of the city is comprised of immigrants.¹⁰⁴ While this percentage is still below the national average, this growth represents a considerable and sudden change in the demographics of city’s residents, and Guatemalan immigrants comprise a significant portion of this “new” immigrant community.¹⁰⁵

Imitating national trends, Central Americans comprise the largest immigrant group in this urban area in Tennessee with 2,759 of those individuals having been born in Guatemala.¹⁰⁶ Both across the state and in the city of study, Guatemalan immigrants compose 4% of the total immigrant population—only less than the state and city’s immigrant populations from Mexico (29%) and India (6%).¹⁰⁷ The noteworthy number of Guatemalan immigrants in this city could be a result of its favorable job market. In fact, “immigrants living in [this area] reported slightly higher employment rates compared to immigrants in Tennessee and the United States” with 71% of immigrants from 16 to 65 employed.¹⁰⁸ The CBC news frames it rather simply, “The newcomers found a city with jobs, a good cost of living, and a nice climate. They told their friends and family to join them. The population kept growing.”¹⁰⁹ This increase in Guatemalan immigration is changing the landscape of the immigrant community across the state, but especially in this urban area in Tennessee.

¹⁰³ Daniel B. Cornfield and Angela Arzubaiaga, “Immigrants and Education in the U.S. Interior: Integrating and Segmenting Tendencies in Tennessee,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 79, no. 2 (2004): 161–62, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327930pje7902_11.

¹⁰⁴ “Immigrants in Tennessee” (Fairfax, Virginia: George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research, 2015). Additionally, 10.5% of the total foreign-born population in this area is aged from 5 to 17. See “Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations” (United States Census Bureau, 2019), https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=foreign-born%20women&g=0400000US47_0500000US47037&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S0501.

¹⁰⁵ Dan Cornfield, “Immigrant Communities in Tennessee” (PSCI 2254W, Vanderbilt University, March 23, 2022), 162.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table BB05006: Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States.”

¹⁰⁷ “Immigrants in Tennessee.”

¹⁰⁸ “Immigrants in Tennessee,” 2.

¹⁰⁹ Fitzpatrick, “Tennessee City Has a Thriving Immigrant Community — How Did That Happen?”

Contemporary Guatemalan Migration to the U.S.

Guatemalan migration to the United States continues today due to a myriad of factors including “Guatemala’s severe and continuing socioeconomic problems, successive natural disasters, [and] increasing social violence.”¹¹⁰ The Guatemalan civil war created a “Lost Decade” marked not only by death but by extreme unemployment and underemployment, and the Guatemalan government suffered a lack of international economic support as other countries condemned the brutality of the civil war.¹¹¹ As a result, post-war Guatemala continues to face a “precarious” economy with extreme socioeconomic inequality. As of 2019, the employment rate in Guatemala was only 57.9%.¹¹² Not to mention, Guatemala today has a “medium” Human Development Index score, placing 135th out of 187 countries and remains one of the lowest ranking countries in the Latin American region.¹¹³

Another factor shaping Guatemalan immigration to the United States is the effect of climate change and recent natural disasters. This includes Hurricane Mitch (1998), Hurricane Stan (2005) and Hurricane Agatha (2010). However, even with the disastrous effects of these hurricanes on Guatemala, Guatemalan immigrants were never granted Temporary Protected Status in the United States.¹¹⁴

As the number of Guatemalan immigrants rises, the demographics of these individuals are shifting from young men to women and children.¹¹⁵ In their home countries, Central American women face a “range of violence from everyday experiences of domestic violence, marital rape, and sexual assault, to femicide.”¹¹⁶ Guatemala itself has one of the highest femicide rates in the world with over 6,500 cases reported between 2000 and 2011.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges.”

¹¹¹ Jonas, 2.

¹¹² *Anuario Estadístico de América Latina y el Caribe 2020* (CEPAL, 2021), 17, <https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/46739>.

¹¹³ “Human Development Index,” *Human Development Reports* (United Nations, 2023), <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index>.

¹¹⁴ Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges,” 4.

¹¹⁵ According to the American Community Survey, 51% of the foreign-born population is female in the county of study in Tennessee. “Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations.”

¹¹⁶ Laurie Cook Heffron, “‘Salía de Uno y Me Metí En Otro’: Exploring the Migration-Violence Nexus Among Central American Women,” *Violence against Women*, 2019, 679, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218797473>.

¹¹⁷ Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges,” 4. Heffron, “‘Salía de Uno y Me Metí En Otro.’”

However, many of these cases of femicide, domestic abuse and other forms of violence go unreported and are left unresolved.¹¹⁸ Heffron states that across Central America, “Violence against women in the region is largely underreported and shrouded in silence” as it is considered a personal and private matter.¹¹⁹ As a result, many Guatemalan, and other Central American, women are forced to take matters into their own hands. One woman from Heffron’s study of Central American women and violence stated, “Nunca lo planifiqué, nunca pensé en llegar aquí. Fue simplemente la desesperación.”¹²⁰ Despite the fact that the Guatemalan government has, “demonstrated a refusal or unwillingness to investigate the overwhelming majority of these cases,” these women are not considered refugees in the United States today.¹²¹

While some mothers bring their children with them to make the perilous journey to the United States, other children have no option but to travel alone. In the last decade, the number of unaccompanied minors has grown exponentially and came to the forefront of U.S. attention in 2014, when the Office of Refugee Resettlement worked with more than 57,000 children throughout the course of the year.¹²² Guatemala is one of the top four countries with the largest number of unaccompanied children entering the United States. These young persons are in search of “asylum from coerced recruitment by gangs or persecution by traffickers or smugglers. Some seek work, seeing no jobs or economic future for themselves in Guatemala, while still others migrate in search of their parents already in the United States.”¹²³ Of the Latin American migrant youth arriving to the United States, little data is recorded concerning the variety of Indigenous languages they may speak.

¹¹⁸ As of 2017, the impunity rate in Guatemala for violent crimes was 87%. See “Fact Sheet: The CICIG’s Legacy in Fighting Corruption in Guatemala,” WOLA, August 27, 2019, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/cicigs-legacy-fighting-corruption-guatemala/>.

¹¹⁹ Heffron, “Salía de Uno y Me Metí En Otro,” 679.

¹²⁰ Heffron, 690. Translation: “I never planned it. I never thought I would make it here. It was simply desperation.”

¹²¹ Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges,” 4.

¹²² “Rising Child Migration to the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, July 21, 2014, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/us-immigration-policy-program/rising-child-migration-united-states>. Muzaffar Chishti, Sarah Pierce, and Herrica Telus, “Spike in Unaccompanied Child Arrivals at U.S.-Mexico Border Proves Enduring Challenge; Citizenship Question on 2020 Census in Doubt,” Migration Policy Institute, June 26, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/spike-unaccompanied-child-arrivals-proves-enduring-challenge>.

¹²³ Jonas, “Guatemalan Migration in Times of Civil War and Post-War Challenges.”

(Lack of) Data on Indigenous Language Speakers

There exists little information regarding the number of Indigenous language speakers from Guatemala, and Latin America as a whole, across the U.S., and as is the focus of this study, in Tennessee. The recent U.S. census identified a total of 477,381 individuals who do not speak English at home in Tennessee. However, the only other language categories are Spanish (271,483), “Other Indo-European Languages” (82,502), “Asian and Pacific Island languages” (70,079) and “Other Languages” (53,317).¹²⁴ This categorization presents a myriad of erasures. For instance, such classifications ignore how many of these individuals are multilingual, perhaps speaking Spanish, English *and* an Indigenous language. In addition, the use of the term “other language” is ambiguous, as if it is not important enough to examine further or to name. This terminology is reflective of the linguistic hierarchy, which places Indo-European languages above all other languages, that dominates the Americas and continues making invisible Latin American Indigenous languages in the United States.

These same erasures can be seen in the U.S. census’s report on “Detailed Languages Spoken at Home,” which was last updated in October of 2015. While somewhat outdated, it is the only data I have encountered that specifically lists Indigenous language families. In the report detailing languages spoken in Tennessee, under the section titled “All Other Languages” and the subsection “Other and Unspecified Languages,” there are four possible categories that could include Latin American Indigenous languages: Aztecan,¹²⁵ Mayan languages, Oto-Manguean and Uncodable. Both Uto-Aztecan, a language family originating in Mexico including languages like Nahuatl, and Oto-Manguean, a language family also originating in Mexico including Mixteco and Chatino, are marked with a “D” meaning “Data withheld to avoid disclosure.” The data identifies 120 speakers of Mayan languages with a margin of error of 133. Finally, the “Uncodable” category includes 125 speakers with a margin of error of 67.¹²⁶ None of

¹²⁴ “DP02: Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: Tennessee,” United States Census Bureau, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/table?tid=ACSDP5Y2021.DP02&g=040XX00US47&hidePreview=true>.

¹²⁵ The data refers to it as the “Aztecan” language family, but the language family’s complete name is the Uto-Aztecan language family. Nahuatl is from the Aztecan branch of Uto-Aztecan languages.

¹²⁶ “Table 43. Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for Tennessee: 2009-2013” (United States Census Bureau, October 2015), 43, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

these categories provide any specifics with regards to which languages are spoken within these language families, and when considering that, for instance, the Mayan language family includes 32 languages, this does not provide much specific information at all.¹²⁷

It is possible that Indigenous immigrants are hesitant to indicate their knowledge of an Indigenous language for fear of deportation or discrimination, and such linguistic discrimination could also impact the ability to accurately represent the presence of Indigenous languages in the U.S. The commonly utilized term for Indigenous languages in Central American countries by both the in-group and out-group is *dialecto* or dialect. A dialect is a “variety of language used by members of a group” such as southern English or Castilian Spanish.¹²⁸ However, Indigenous languages like K’iche’ or Popti’ are not mutually intelligible but are complete and distinctive languages. This terminology stems from the long history of discrimination and oppression against Indigenous language speaking communities, which follows Indigenous immigrants to the United States and in many ways is reinforced in the U.S. The use of *dialecto* creates further difficulties with assessing the true number of Indigenous languages spoken in the city, especially because for many, they are not even languages.¹²⁹

Upon first working within Tennessee schools as a volunteer in the Fall of 2021, I encountered several Indigenous language speaking students. Local teachers and staff cited the presence of several Mayan languages from Guatemala in City School District’s classrooms including Achi’, Chuj, K’iche’ Mam, Popti’¹³⁰ and Q’eqchi’. This was particularly brought up in relation to interpretation challenges. Such linguistic diversity does present a challenge for the city and especially in local schools, due to the lack of access to interpreters for all of the Indigenous languages from Latin America spoken within its classrooms.

¹²⁷ Judith L. Aissen, Nora C. England, and Roberto Zavala, eds., *The Mayan Languages*, First (New York: Routledge, 2017), https://catalog.library.vanderbilt.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991043273853203276&context=L&vid=01VAN_INST:vanui&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any,contains,The%20Mayan%20Languages&mode=Basic.

¹²⁸ “Definition of DIALECT,” n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialect>.

¹²⁹ Crow, “Sí, Hablo Dialecto.” It should be noted, however, that not all students in this focus group use the term “dialecto.” A few students further used the term “idioma,” meaning “language,” to refer to their specific Indigenous languages.

¹³⁰ While I did not encounter Popti’ speakers in my own study, which worked with a limited sample size of students, teachers and other school staff repeatedly cited the presence of Popti’ speakers in their schools.

Due to its Maya K'iche' program and teacher workshops, the Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latinx Studies at Vanderbilt University receives a significant number of calls from school districts, non-profit organizations and other institutions across Tennessee requesting interpreters for Indigenous languages. However, the school district of focus in this study did not and does not currently have language data that reflect this diversity of Indigenous language speaking students in its classrooms. According to the district's "Ellevation Report," from 2002 to 2022, there have been a total of three Mayan language speakers and ten students who speak "Other" languages in the history of the SHINE program.¹³¹ Along with the teacher statements cited above, the SHINE program enrollment data suggests this number is far too low. SHINE data indicates that 34 students who have been enrolled in the program throughout the course of the 2022-2023 academic year speak an Indigenous language from Latin America across the seven SHINE sites including: Q'eqchi (21), Chuj (7), Achi' (2), K'iche' (2), Q'anjob'al (1) and Poqomchi (1).¹³² While the SHINE program has more specific data on the languages spoken by their students, the discrepancy between the district and the program data is problematic.¹³³

The number of Guatemalan immigrants in Tennessee has grown significantly over the past several decades, and this growth is reflected in the student population within the City School District. Similarly, to the U.S.'s census data, the district's data regarding Indigenous language speaking students is inaccurate, citing extremely low numbers that further conflict with SHINE program data. By not having data that accurately reflects the Indigenous languages spoken by its students, the City School District participates in the erasure of students' Indigeneity and denies them the opportunity to identify themselves as Indigenous language speaking as I discuss in detail later in this thesis. While the data demonstrates this in schools in the City School District, these erasures of Indigeneity are likely not limited to this school district,

¹³¹ Ellevation Report Data. Data provided by City School District Research, Assessment and Evaluation Department. Accessed November 10, 2022. It must be noted that this data, which I requested from the school district's Research, Assessment and Evaluation department, is inaccurate for multiple reasons. This was the data provided from the district regarding only SHINE students, but it is not an accurate representation. This was first evident in recognizing that the program has only existed for seven years, but this data dates back to 2002. The number of students that the data says are enrolled in SHINE are much higher than the number provided directly by the SHINE program.

¹³² SHINE enrollment data provided by the EL Coordinator at City School District English Learners Office. 2022-2023.

¹³³ See Chapter VI for more information.

but rather, as I discuss later in this thesis, such a phenomenon hints to a larger, systemic issue within U.S. educational institutions. Nevertheless, the SHINE program provides a unique space for students to be recognized as Indigenous language speakers and where teachers and students work to contradict such erasures of Indigeneity.

CHAPTER IV

The SHINE Program in City School District

As of the most recent academic year, the City School District serves 81,706 students across 162 schools, making it one of the top 50 largest school districts in the country. Approximately 39% of its students are Black/African American, 32% are Hispanic and 24% are white. Students speak 137 distinct languages and were born in 145 different countries, and 27% of all students have a Limited English Proficiency (LEP).¹³⁴ From 2018 to 2021, there has been a 12% decrease in the number of students whose home language is English. In fact, of the top ten home languages spoken by the district's students, only the percentage of Spanish and Swahili speakers has increased since 2018, and the number of students who speak Spanish at home has grown by 19%.¹³⁵

According to the Tennessee State Board of Education, "schools are required to provide specialized programs for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA), and the guidelines published by the Tennessee Department of Education."¹³⁶ Typically, this takes the form of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in which students are guaranteed, by law, to receive a minimum of one hour of ESL education each school day. However, for MLs who have experienced significant interruptions in their educational experience and do not speak English upon arrival in Tennessee, one hour of EL instruction per day is simply not enough to respond to their educational, linguistic, social and emotional needs. Therefore, the district's English Learners Office established its own program for students with interrupted formal education, similar to that of others across the U.S., in an effort to provide multifaceted and expansive support for MLs, specifically for those with significant interruptions in their education.

¹³⁴ "Open Data Portal: Exploring City School District Data," City School District, 2023.

¹³⁵ This data was shared at a SHINE Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting for SHINE teachers. Personal observation. November 3, 2022.

¹³⁶ "English Learners Handbook," 7.

The Education and Language Policy Behind the SHINE Program

The signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 marked a defining moment in U.S. history for the rights of multilingual learners. Through Title VI of this act, “English learner (EL) students in public K-12 education systems have a constitutionally protected right to equitable educational opportunity.”¹³⁷ The subsequent Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and Equal Education Opportunity Act of 1974 reinforced the right to education of multilingual learners by recognizing the rising number of non-native English speakers in U.S. schools and providing access to bilingual education programs. Today, these federal acts, among others, continue to protect the educational rights of the still growing multilingual population of students across the country.

While these laws emphasize the protection of equitable education for MLs, the pressure to teach English rises as more policies push for the dominant use of English in society and, more specifically, in the classroom. Despite the lack of an official language in the United States, a variety of U.S. policymakers and English-Only advocates have continued to push for English-centered legislation. De Jong summarizes why people place such importance on English dominance in this way: “In the United States, assimilationist discourses forge a close link between English proficiency, being an American and academic success.”¹³⁸ Therefore, the ability to speak English is a representation of belonging, and the inability to speak English well represents a risk to U.S. identity and unity.

More than 30 states have established English as their official language including Tennessee.¹³⁹ In 1984, a change to the State Code established that all “communications and publications...produced by governmental entities in Tennessee...and instruction in public schools...shall be conducted in English.”¹⁴⁰ However, this amendment is not equivalent to an English-Only law like those passed in California, Arizona and Massachusetts. This is an important distinction for MLs who, in English-Only states, are immediately placed into English-only classrooms. To access bilingual education services of any kind, a student’s family must

¹³⁷ “Mission and History,” WIDA, 2022, <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/mission-history>.

¹³⁸ De Jong, “Language Policy in the United States,” 125.

¹³⁹ Hunter Schwarz, “States Where English Is the Official Language,” *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/08/12/states-where-english-is-the-official-language/>.

¹⁴⁰ “2016 Tennessee Code.”

undergo a convoluted wavier process, which requires students to first complete a minimum of 30 days in their English-only placements, a waiver request and a visit to the school by the child's legal guardian. This wavier must be renewed yearly. Once a student's family has completed the wavier process, only "limited use" of students' native languages is permitted within the sheltered or structured immersion classrooms.¹⁴¹ While such a law has yet to be passed in Tennessee, English-Only laws have been proposed, most recently in 2009, demonstrating the rising tension in the state as more MLs enroll in Tennessee schools.¹⁴²

In the 2016-2017 academic year, 5% of students in K-12 education in the state of Tennessee were English Language Learners consisting of more than 59,000 students.¹⁴³ Despite TN's English as an Official Language legislation, it is "require[d in Tennessee schools] that students whose first language is other than English and who are limited in their English language proficiency be provided with a specially designed alternative language program."¹⁴⁴ These programs include English as a Second Language (ESL) and the SHINE program. ESL and SHINE teachers can continue to incorporate students' native languages into the classroom through the law's ambiguous stipulation that English be used in public school instruction "unless the nature of the course would require otherwise."¹⁴⁵

The SHINE Program is an important fulfillment of all students' right to accessible education established in the 1974 court case, *Lau v. Nichols*. This infamous court case established that equitable education does not mean simply "providing students with the same faculties, textbooks, teachers and curriculum; for students who do understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education."¹⁴⁶ The SHINE Program not only provides the academic and linguistic support that new-comer, immigrant and refugee students with

¹⁴¹ De Jong, "Language Policy in the United States," 145.

¹⁴² Robbie Brown, "Tennessee City Won't Make English Official Language," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2009, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/23/us/23english.html>.

¹⁴³ Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary, "English Learners in Tennessee: Demographics, Outcomes, and State Accountability Policies" (Migration Policy Institute, August 2018), 2.

¹⁴⁴ "English as a Second Language," Tennessee Department of Education, <https://www.tn.gov/education/instruction/academic-standards/english-as-a-second-language.html>.

¹⁴⁵ "2016 Tennessee Code."

¹⁴⁶ De Jong, "Language Policy in the United States," 138.

significant interruptions in their schooling may need in their transition to the U.S. education system but also provides emotional and social support through its trauma-informed teachers.

What is the SHINE Program?

The SHINE program consists of 19 SHINE teachers distributed across three high schools, two middle schools and two elementary schools in the district. SHINE teachers are district employees who are integrated permanently into each of their schools, but they report to the English Learners Office. SHINE teachers only work with MLs who both qualify for the program and have elected to participate in SHINE.

Despite being from a variety of grade levels, all SHINE students take the same classes with the same SHINE-designated teachers at each of their respective schools.¹⁴⁷ The program provides classes for the majority, if not the entirety, of the academic day. As a result, SHINE students are not integrated into core content classrooms in their schools and typically interact with non-SHINE students only during lunchtime and Related Arts classes including music, gym and art. Students remain in the SHINE program for a maximum of one academic year with rare exceptions and enter the program sporadically throughout the year.

While “school districts generally may not segregate students on the basis of national origin or EL status,” the SHINE program is considered a special exception.¹⁴⁸ SHINE classrooms also tend to be much smaller than content classrooms. For example, the maximum permitted class size for secondary classrooms, per the state of TN, is 35 students. In the SHINE program, the English Learners Office aims for a maximum of 15 students.¹⁴⁹ These smaller class sizes tend to create a tight-knit group of students and permit the SHINE teachers more time to get to know their students academically and personally.

The vision statement for the English Language Learners office is that: “The [City School District] EL Team will support English Learners with the social, emotional, cultural, linguistic,

¹⁴⁷ The SHINE program serves all levels of high school and middle school students. For elementary schools, the SHINE program begins in 3rd grade.

¹⁴⁸ “Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs” (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, January 7, 2015), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-el-students-201501.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Personal communication with the EL Coordinator at the English Learners Office. January 23, 2023.

and academic skills necessary to excel in higher education, work, and life.”¹⁵⁰ The SHINE program operates in accordance with this vision by supporting its students wholistically to prepare them for future success, especially through intensive language support, with the goal of producing English language speakers, and social emotional learning (SEL). All SHINE teachers are trauma-trained to respond to the harsh realities that many of their students bring into the classroom each day. With the majority of students being in the program only for their first year of school in the U.S., SHINE teachers must navigate “transition shock” with students before reaching academic content. O’Loughlin and Custodio define transition shock as “an umbrella term that incorporates culture shock, chronic stress, traumatic upset, and post-traumatic stress disorder [which] can impact student success in a number of behavioral, emotional and physiological ways.”¹⁵¹

The SHINE program operates under the principle that, “Naturally, until English Learners feel comfortable and welcome, they will not be able to focus on academic progress, including language learning.”¹⁵² This results in close teacher-student connections within the program. These close teacher-student relationships, incorporation of student knowledge into the curriculum and the emphasis on emotional and linguistic support made SHINE classrooms a valuable field site for gaining an understanding of Indigenous students’ experiences. Additionally, the teachers themselves, being so involved in the young students’ lives, have vast knowledge regarding the students’ realities, behaviors, language use and beliefs.

However, it should be noted that the goal of SHINE and other programs designated for newcomer students with LEP is to learn English. In accordance with the Official English law in Tennessee beforementioned, English is intended to be the language of instruction in public education.¹⁵³ From the perspective of this law, the use of other languages in the classroom is a method of teaching English and assimilating students into the U.S. education system. Therefore, the goal is “not to maintain or develop the student’s native language, but to provide access to

¹⁵⁰ “English Learners Handbook,” 5.

¹⁵¹ This quote comes from the book that was provided to each SHINE teacher for free as a part of the program’s Social Emotional Learning (SEL) grant. See Judith B. O’Loughlin and Brenda K. Custodio, *Supporting the Journey of English Learners after Trauma* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 44.

¹⁵² O’Loughlin and Custodio, 44.

¹⁵³ “2016 Tennessee Code.”

the language of the school.” These transitional bilingual education approaches are intended to be short term and result in improved English proficiency as in the case in the United States.¹⁵⁴

Who are SHINE Students?

SHINE students have experienced significant interruptions in their education of two or more years and have a Non-English Language Background (NELB), but not all ELLs qualify as SHINE students.¹⁵⁵ In order to qualify for the program, SHINE students must be from another country, have recently arrived in the United States and be new to the English language (See Table 2 below). Other factors that could make a student more likely to be identified for the program would include “recent severe traumatic experiences and the need [for] a sheltered environment to adjust culturally.”¹⁵⁶ SHINE participants are estimated to comprise only 10-20% of the total ELL population across all U.S. schools.¹⁵⁷ Nationally, these students are predominantly from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America. Refugee children from Asia, Africa and the Middle East comprise the second largest group of SHINE students in the U.S.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ester J. De Jong, “Language in Education,” in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 116.

¹⁵⁵ “English Learners Handbook,” 33.

¹⁵⁶ “English Learners Handbook,” 33.

¹⁵⁷ Brenda Custodio and Judith B. O’Loughlin, “Students with Interrupted Formal Education: Understanding Who They Are,” American Federation of Teachers, March 11, 2020, https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2020/custodio_oloughlin.

¹⁵⁸ Custodio and O’Loughlin.

Table 2. Criteria for SHINE Students According to the City School District EL Handbook 2022-2023 ¹⁵⁹

| Students who qualify for SHINE will... |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Be new to the United States ○ Score “entering” on the English proficiency assessment (WIDA screener) ○ Possess limited to no literacy in native language ○ Have limited or interrupted schooling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have had no formal schooling (or large gaps in years), or ▪ Have attended school regularly but may have attended for a limited number of hours per day or week or inconsistent enrollment, or ▪ Have had 2 or more years of interrupted formal schooling immediately prior to enrollment ○ Often come from refugee or asylee situation, with possible trauma and/or social emotional needs |

As of January of 2023, the school district of study has 156 SHINE students across three elementary, two middle and three high schools.¹⁶⁰ This Tennessee-based SHINE program reflects national trends in that the large majority of its students are from Latin American countries. Of the total 198 SHINE students enrolled over the course of 2022-2023, 81% are from Latin America, and 162 students have their primary language marked as Spanish. Most students come from the Northern Triangle with 112 students from Guatemala, 35 from Honduras and 3 from El Salvador.¹⁶¹ While not included in district data, SHINE enrollment data indicates the presence of 29 Indigenous language speakers who speak Achi’, Chuj, K’iche’, Mam, Poqomchi, Q’anjob’al and Q’eqchi’.¹⁶² See Table 3 below for 2022-2023 academic year information on languages spoken within SHINE high school and middle school classrooms according to the English Learners Office.

¹⁵⁹ “English Learners Handbook,” 14.

¹⁶⁰ The SHINE program is consistently enrolling students until the very end of the year; as a result, this number changes almost constantly, increasing and decreasing. Personal communication with the EL Coordinator at the English Learners Office. January 2023.

¹⁶¹ SHINE enrollment data provided by the EL Coordinator at City School District English Learners Office. 2022-2023.

This data reflects overall SHINE enrollments and does not account for students who have left the program since their enrollment date. The current number of SHINE students as of the writing of this thesis is 156, meaning that 42 students included in this data are no longer in the SHINE program.

¹⁶² SHINE enrollment data provided by the EL Coordinator at City School District English Learners Office. 2022-2023.

Table 3. Latin American Indigenous Languages Spoken by Current SHINE Students¹⁶³

| School Name | # of Currently Enrolled SHINE Students | # of Indigenous Language Speakers | Indigenous Languages in SHINE Classroom | Non-Indigenous Languages Spoken by SHINE Students |
|--------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Willow Park High School | 36 | 11 | Chuj, Mam, Q'eqchi' | Arabic, Spanish, Swahili |
| Hillview High School | 37 | 11 | Achi', Chuj, K'iche', Mam, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi' | Arabic/Somali, Spanish |
| Clearwater High School | 33 | 4 | Achi', Chuj, K'iche', Mam, Poqomchi, Q'eqchi' | Karen, Spanish, Swahili |
| Oakwood Middle School | 9 | 2 | K'iche', Q'eqchi' | Dari, Karen, Pashto, Spanish, Swahili |
| Crossroads Middle School | 17 | 1 | Achi', Q'eqchi' | Arabic, Spanish, Swahili |

The SHINE program responds to state and federal law which requires “specialized programs for” MLs by working closely with newcomer, multilingual learners with significant gaps in their education.¹⁶⁴ SHINE students come from a diverse variety of countries, but this school district receives a predominate number of Latin American students, especially from the Northern Triangle. Additionally, SHINE data indicates that more than 20% of SHINE high and middle school students speak a Mayan language from Guatemala.¹⁶⁵ The SHINE program therefore provided an excellent field site for this research study because of the large number of students from Latin America, specifically Guatemala, and the indication of a significant number of Indigenous language speaking students who remain largely unrecognized by district data.

¹⁶³ This data is according to SHINE enrollment data provided by the EL Coordinator at City School District English Learners Office. 2022-2023.

¹⁶⁴ “English Learners Handbook,” 7.

¹⁶⁵ SHINE enrollment data provided by the EL Coordinator at City School District English Learners Office. 2022-2023.

CHAPTER V

Methods

As outlined previously, my research project is a qualitative, ethnographic study inspired by the Participatory Action Research Model (PAR), which aims to create an egalitarian relationship between researcher(s) and the linguistic community. This research was further motivated by the work of Savannah Shange, author of *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, and her in-depth participant observations of Black students in a San Francisco school.

Methodologies

At the core of this project was to learn about Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in the City School District by creating a space for discussion where such students could express their realities, thoughts and needs. Based on my research premise that Indigenous students tend to be hidden within the Spanish-speaking population, it was essential to develop a project which intended to give agency to the students themselves and create opportunities for them to drive the research to the extent this was possible in such a short, small study. In developing this project, I was inspired by the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model. Adapted by Benedicto and a team of linguists, the Mayangna Yulbarang Balna, through their study of the Mayangna linguistic community in Nicaragua, the purpose of PAR is to restore the power imbalance between the external researchers and the language community that often exists within research projects. PAR recognizes that the outside researchers and the community of study have different yet equally valuable knowledge systems.¹⁶⁶ This element of PAR inspired my project as I attempted to create spaces where Indigenous language speakers felt comfortable to share such knowledge and aimed to make clear that the students are the experts in their experiences, languages, cultures, identities and so forth.

¹⁶⁶ Benedicto, "Benedicto, E and Mayangna Yulbarang Balna. 2007. A Model of Participatory Action Research."

However, my research does not follow PAR precisely as it did not result in the creation of a tangible product created by and for the language community nor was there a training component to the study. I did not have enough access to the students over the course of such a short study to do so nor was I able to extensively familiarize myself with the community before embarking on this project. As such, I emphasized the importance of developing a comfortable, safe space for the students, where they could share as much or as little of their knowledge as they desired in a focus group style discussion.

I was further inspired by Savannah Shange's in-depth, ethnographic observations in which she observed teacher-student interactions and analyzed their meanings.¹⁶⁷ With Shange's work in mind, I observed a classroom at all of the SHINE middle and high schools and paid special attention to the student-student interactions as well as the student-teacher interactions in terms of both the conversations exchanges and the body language of the participants. I took extensive fieldnotes from all of my school visits, interviews, focus groups, teacher meetings and family events.

Research Procedures

In this study, data was collected from SHINE teacher interviews; Indigenous language speaking student focus groups; and observations of SHINE classrooms as well as a variety of SHINE events.

Teacher Interviews and Teacher Participants

In total, I interviewed nine SHINE teachers from across the three SHINE high schools and two SHINE middle schools. No elementary school teachers were interviewed as no focus groups were conducted with elementary students. I chose not to include elementary school students due to the preference of working with older students as well as the brevity of the study, which did not permit the conducting of focus groups or teacher interviews at all seven SHINE sites. The goal was to understand the classroom experience from the perspective of the teachers and

¹⁶⁷ Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, AntiBlackness, + Schooling in San Francisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

learn about their Indigenous students’ classroom behaviors, experiences and attitudes from an adult who spends a considerable amount of time with the students. Over the course of an hour and a half, teachers were asked about their own experiences as SHINE teachers, and then, I asked questions more specifically about the social, emotional, linguistic and identity experiences of their Indigenous language speaking students according to their own observations of and interactions with such students. Teacher interview questions are listed in Appendix A.

Teacher participants ranged in experience in the SHINE program from two years to seven. All, but one teacher interviewed, are female. All teachers are actively learning Spanish to some degree. All teachers speak English, but four teachers are additionally highly proficient in a language other than English.

Table 4. List of Interviewed SHINE Teachers

| Teacher Name | Number of Years Teaching for SHINE* | School Level |
|---------------------|--|---------------------|
| Ms. Taylor | 3 | High School |
| Ms. Wright | 4 | High School |
| Ms. Harris | 4 | High School |
| Ms. Hall | 7 | High School |
| Mr. Lewis | 5 | High School |
| Ms. Cooper | 3 | Middle School |
| Ms. Parker | 2 | Middle School |
| Ms. Hearty | 5 | Middle School |
| Ms. Adams | 3 | Middle School |

*The current 2022-2023 academic year included.

Student Focus Groups and Student Participants

I conducted five focus groups with 17 students from Latin America who speak an Indigenous language. The focus groups targeted the central goal of the research project to better understand the educational experiences of Indigenous students from their own

perspective. Two focus groups took place at Willow Park High School; one focus group included three current SHINE students, and the second focus group included four students who were not SHINE students and had never been in the SHINE program. Two more focus groups took place at Crossroads Middle School. The first focus group at Crossroads Middle School included three currently enrolled SHINE students, and the second focus group included four students who previously graduated from the SHINE program and continue attending Crossroads Middle School. The remaining focus group took place at Hillview High School with currently enrolled SHINE students. See Table 5 below.

Table 5. Number of SHINE and Non-SHINE Focus Groups and Student Participants

| School | # of SHINE Focus Groups | SHINE Student Participants | # of Non-SHINE Focus Groups | Non-SHINE Student Participants |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Crossroads Middle School | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Willow Park High School | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Hillview High School | 1 | 3 | — | — |
| TOTAL | 3 | 9 | 2 | 8 |

I decided to include non-SHINE students in my study at the encouragement of Mr. Hernandez, a Spanish interpreter and Family Support specialist for Willow Park High. He explained that there are a significant number of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America at Willow Park who are not associated with the SHINE Program, whether they did not qualify for or refused SHINE services. SHINE provided a concise point of contact with Indigenous students, and I had been hesitant to work with non-SHINE students because of the limited timeline of the study as well as the inability to contact every teacher in each school to see if they worked with Indigenous students. However, Mr. Hernandez filled the missing link with non-SHINE enrolled Indigenous speakers at Willow Park. I then was able to include non-SHINE enrolled students at Crossroads Middle School as well, utilizing the same SHINE teachers as a

point of contact as they had already suggested prior students for the study who they thought should participate.

Incorporating students outside of the SHINE program into the study provided the opportunity to learn from students in a different stage of their U.S. educational experience. Rather than being newly arrived, these students had been in the United States, and Tennessee more specifically, for at least a year and were integrated into mainstream, content classrooms. The data collected from SHINE and non-SHINE students was very similar in regard to their experiences as Indigenous language speakers in the same school district, and therefore I consider them together in my analysis. This is not to say that there are not significant differences between the two groups, but because my data reflected so many commonalities between the two, I discuss both SHINE and non-SHINE Indigenous students together in the discussion section.

Considering the essential role of language as a marker of Indigenous identity for Mayan populations, students were asked to participate in focus groups if they spoke an Indigenous language from Latin America.¹⁶⁸ There was no stipulation with regards to what extent the students spoke the language. Student participants ranged in their Indigenous language proficiency from, according to their own statements, only recognizing words spoken by family members to being fluent speakers themselves. In this study, it was difficult to discern to what extent each student spoke their Indigenous language seeing as some students may have been hesitant to share their language knowledge for fear of discrimination. However, in accordance with De Jong, “Limited proficiency in the home or heritage language does not necessarily diminish its importance for young children’s identification with their culture,” and therefore, any student from Latin America with any level of proficiency in an Indigenous language from the region was welcome to participate.¹⁶⁹ Of the 17 focus group participants, 15 are from

¹⁶⁸ To participate in the study, all students had to have a parent or guardian complete a written consent form in Spanish that was sent home with the students and required a signature. The student participants under 18 then completed an assent form at the time of the focus group. All students who were over the age of 18 were able to complete a consent form for themselves at the time of the focus group. See Fischer and Brown, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*; Demetrio (Raxche’) Rodríguez Guaján, “Maya Culture and the Politics of Development,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996).

¹⁶⁹ Ester J. De Jong, “Linguistic Diversity and Globalization,” in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 32.

Guatemala and speak Mayan languages; one student is from Honduras and speaks Garífuna; and one student is from Mexico and speaks Chatino. Students were identified as an Indigenous language speaker by their SHINE teachers and through their own, self-identification during classroom visits and focus groups. See Table 6 below for a list of the student participants including their country of origin and their primary Indigenous language.¹⁷⁰

Table 6. List of Student Participants for Focus Groups

| High School Student Name | Country of Origin | Primary Indigenous Language | Currently SHINE Enrolled? |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Lagina | Guatemala | Mam | Yes |
| Gloria | Guatemala | Mam | Yes |
| Daniel | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | Yes |
| Clara | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | Yes |
| Carlos | Guatemala | Chuj | Yes |
| Salvador | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | Yes |
| Teresa | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | No |
| Marco | Honduras | Garífuna | No |
| Matías | Mexico | Chatino | No |
| Edgar | Guatemala | Chuj | No |
| Middle School Student Name | | | |
| Ana | Guatemala | Achi' | Yes |
| Walter | Guatemala | Achi' | Yes |
| Samuel | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' ¹⁷¹ | Yes |
| Rocio | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | No |
| Luis | Guatemala | Q'eqchi' | No |
| Alvaro | Guatemala | K'iche' | No |
| Manuel | Guatemala | Chuj | No |

The aim of these focus groups was to provide a space for Indigenous language speaking students to share their experiences, and I intended for the students to determine the direction of the conversation. I designed several open-ended discussion questions to encourage further

¹⁷⁰ I denote “primary” Indigenous language because one student speaks several Indigenous languages. However, his first Indigenous language that is predominantly spoken by his family is Chatino.

¹⁷¹ Student did not identify himself as a Q’eqchi’ speaker. Refer to Discussion section for more information.

conversation, but, in accordance with PAR, the students would ideally take control of the focus group to discuss what they felt was most important. Therefore, the responses of the students determined which questions were asked and in what order, allowing the students to take an active role in the research process. See student discussion questions in Appendix B.

Because Spanish was a common language between the students and I, all four of the focus groups were led entirely in Spanish, but students were encouraged to fill in the Language Pie utilizing whichever language(s) they desired. The focus groups endured a maximum of one hour at the students' respective schools during the regular school day; students were gathered by their teacher at a time pre-determined by the teacher.

To help promote discussion regarding the students' identities and languages, each focus group began with a "Language Pie" worksheet (see Appendix C). This worksheet consisted only of a pre-drawn center circle surrounded by six "slices." Students were asked to fill in the center circle of the worksheet with the language(s) they speak and then complete the surrounding six pieces with drawings, symbols, ideas or words they associate with their language(s). This activity is in alignment with the SHINE teachers' previous training on the Funds of Knowledge curriculum, which is a pedagogical strategy to emphasize student cultural knowledge and experience in the classroom.¹⁷²

Participant Observations

While the teacher interviews and the student focus groups were the primary focus of the study, I also conducted sporadic classroom observations, if the teacher and their schedule permitted, when I visited the students' schools to drop off consent forms, assisted teachers and students in an event or conducted the focus groups themselves. As a participant-observer, I analyzed teacher-student relationships and student commentary in everyday classroom settings. Additionally, I attended monthly SHINE Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, which are professional development workshops led by the English Learners Office for all SHINE teachers.

¹⁷² Ester J. De Jong, "Affirming Identities in Multilingual Schools," in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 189.

In the following chapter, I analyze the results of five student focus groups, nine teacher interviews and participant observations. While much data is left to be analyzed in future studies, the principal themes that emerged from this data set included the Latinization of Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America and the uniqueness of the SHINE program as a place where Indigenous students' languages are affirmed.

CHAPTER VI

Results and Discussion: Forces of Latinization

Study Results

Considering the lack of data on Indigenous languages, one of the primary goals of this research project was to collect data on the significant presence of Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in the City School District. In the focus groups, I spoke with 17 students total. Of the 17 student participants, 15 spoke five different languages from the Mayan language family including: Achi', Chuj, Q'eqchi', K'iche' and Mam. Two of the student participants spoke non-Mayan languages including Garífuna from the Arawakan language family and Chatino from the Zapotecan language family (See Table 7 below). The most commonly spoken Indigenous language of the participants was Q'eqchi'. The vast majority of student participants are from Guatemala (approximately 88%).

Table 7. Languages Identified in All Focus Groups*

| Language Family | Language | Country of Origin |
|-----------------|--|-------------------|
| Mayan | Achi'(2), Chuj (3), Q'eqchi'(7), K'iche'(1), Mam (2) | Guatemala |
| Arawakan | Garífuna (1) | Honduras |
| Zapotecan | Chatino (1) | Mexico |

*As indicated by both the students themselves and their teachers.

However, two more Indigenous languages from the Mayan language family were identified through SHINE enrollment data and teacher interviews as being spoken by current SHINE students who did not participate in focus groups including Poqomchi and Q'anjob'al. Refer back to Table 3 in Chapter IV.

A total of 15 out of the 17 students included Spanish or *español* on their Language Pies, and three students indicated on their Language Pies that Spanish is the only language they speak, despite two of these students mentioning their Indigenous languages in the focus group and having all been identified as Indigenous language speakers by their SHINE teachers. Seven

of the 17 students wrote their Indigenous language first in their list of languages in the center of their Language Pie. One student wrote only the Indigenous language he speaks on the Language Pie.

Table 8 below indicates the Indigenous language spoken by the student participants and the languages as written on their Language Pies, which the students completed during the focus groups. The languages from the student’s Language Pies are copied exactly from what the students included when asked to write their first language explicitly and other languages that they speak.

Table 8. Focus Group Student Languages and Language Indicated on Language Pies

| Hillview High School | Indigenous Languages* | Languages Indicated on Language Pie |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| SHINE students | Mam | Mam, Español |
| | Mam | Mam, Spanish, English |
| | Q'eqchi' | Qeqchi', Español, Inglés |
| Willow Park High School | | |
| SHINE Students | Q'eqchi' | Q'eqchi', Español |
| | Chuj | Chuj, Spanish |
| | Q'eqchi' | Q'eqchi', Espanol |
| NON SHINE Students | Q'eqchi' | Español, Quetchi, Chuj |
| | Garífuna | Garifuna, Español |
| | Chatino | Español, Chatino, Mixe, Inglés, Zapateco, Mazateco |
| | Chuj | Español, Chuj |
| Crossroads Middle School | | |
| SHINE Students | Achi' | Español, Achi' |
| | Achi' | Español, inglés |
| | Q'eqchi' ¹⁷³ | Español |
| NON SHINE Students | Q'eqchi' | Español |
| | Q'eqchi' | Ke'qchi |
| | K'iche' | Spanish |
| | Chuj | NA |

*As indicated by both the students themselves and their teachers.

¹⁷³ This student did not indicate that he speaks Q'eqchi', but his SHINE teacher confirmed that he is a speaker of Q'eqchi' according to his enrollment information.

Student Experiences of the Forces of Latinization

Student focus groups and teacher interviews demonstrated two primary findings. Firstly, the data revealed that Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America are being Latinized within the City School District and secondly, that the SHINE program is a unique space within local schools where Indigenous language speakers from Latin America are being both recognized and celebrated for their Indigeneity.

As I have documented above, there is a diversity of Indigenous-language speaking students from Latin America, which I argue are hidden within the larger Spanish-speaking student body in the SHINE schools included in this study. In the following section, I discuss how, according to my research, the City School District reinforces the Latinization of these Indigenous students from Latin America. This process of Latinization is reflective of a broader, systemic pattern of Latinization across U.S. schools and affects Indigenous students differently and to varying degrees as some students may desire to embrace their Indigenous languages, speak only Spanish or negotiate a space in-between.¹⁷⁴ In this discussion section, I will address the three ways in which both SHINE and non-SHINE enrolled students experience Latinization at their schools including through the lack of Indigenous language representation in the district's student data; the predominance of Spanish in the school district and in the city of study as a whole; and the students' reduction in their Indigenous language proficiencies.

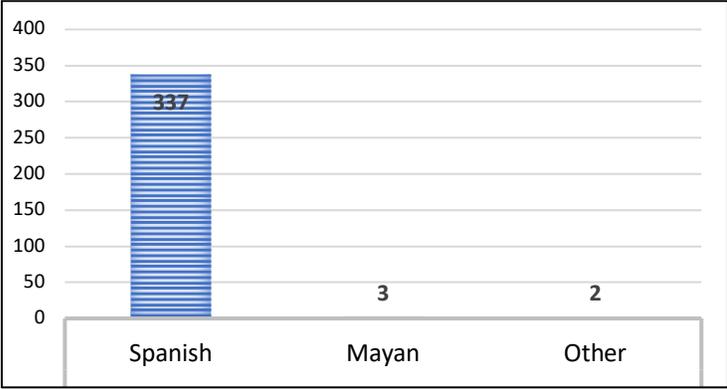
Latinization of the Language Data

The Latinization of Indigenous students within the City School District is particularly evident through the exclusive linguistic data on the district's student population. Such data includes only three Indigenous language speakers in the entire school district over the past 20 years and encourages the default categorization of Indigenous students from Latin America as Spanish speakers, both of which have consequences for students' access to an equitable educational experience.

¹⁷⁴ See Campbell-Montalvo's work for an example of Latinization in a Florida school. Campbell-Montalvo, "Linguistic Re-Formation in Florida Heartland Schools."

According to De Jong, the U.S. Census plays a significant role in defining the country’s imagined community “by determining who gets counted and who remains invisible.”¹⁷⁵ Similarly, data from educational institutions determines the demographics of their student body by electing which elements of student identities, characteristics and languages are collected or not. In the district data for the SHINE program from 2002 to 2022, only three students have been identified as Indigenous language speakers (see Figure 2 below). This is first problematic in recognizing that the SHINE program has only existed in this particular city for seven years, and the total number of enrolled SHINE students for the 2022-2023 academic year is less than 200, while the data says more than 300. Secondly, in a school system of more than 80,000 students, the district data indicates that Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America are nearly nonexistent. Moreover, the data simply indicates that these three students are Mayan-language speaking with no additional information on which language each student speaks. Such a misrepresentation is not only inaccurate but also results in serious complications for students and teachers.

Figure 2. Speakers of Spanish, Mayan Languages and Other in the 2022-2023 Academic Year¹⁷⁶



¹⁷⁵ Ester J. De Jong, *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education: From Principles to Practice* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 70. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2016). Anderson.

¹⁷⁶ Ellevation Report Data. Data provided by City School District Research, Assessment and Evaluation Department. Accessed November 10, 2022.

Ms. Cooper detailed some of these complications, referencing the experience of one of her previous SHINE students. Victor, a Chuj speaker from Guatemala, entered the SHINE program with limited Spanish and continues to learn Spanish and English at the same middle school. Ms. Cooper describes that:

The assumption at the school level is that [Victor] speaks Spanish...multiple teachers, including an EL teacher came to us and said, we think that [Victor] needs special education services and, like, the SHINE teachers were like, that doesn't fit with what we have seen at all.¹⁷⁷

According to Ms. Cooper, Victor's native language was assumed to be Spanish most likely due to his outward appearance. As a way to explain his difficulties in class, this EL teacher drew the conclusion that Victor qualified for special education classes, and because of the assumption of his linguistic abilities based on his looks, she was unable to properly support him in his educational journey.¹⁷⁸ If it weren't for the time Ms. Cooper spent with the student and her SHINE training on Indigenous student experiences, Victor could have entered and remained in special education classes as he attempted to gain proficiency in his second (Spanish) and third (English) languages, excluding him from educational advancement with little opportunity to advocate for himself.

Ms. Cooper continued to explain that the lack of knowledge about Victor's language abilities outside of the SHINE program also resulted in extreme frustrations from a Spanish-speaking teacher who assumed that Victor chose not to listen instead of the reality that he did not understand her:

[This teacher] would get really, really angry and scream and yell at [Victor] for not following directions, and it took a couple of conversations to be like, [Victor] really doesn't understand what you're saying. He speaks a different language than you. <laughs> You can't just say it louder in Spanish, and you can't be upset when he doesn't understand if you are not providing comprehensible input...Those teachers

¹⁷⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ This is not a situation unique to this school district. This was also the case for Elisa, a Mixteco speaking student in New York. See Colleen Connolly, "Why Migrants Who Speak Indigenous Languages Slip through Cracks in US Schools," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2019, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/18/migrants-indigenous-languages-us-schools>.

were...pulling up his language profile, and his language profile says Spanish because there's no Indigenous languages listed.¹⁷⁹

Once Victor left the SHINE program, teachers with little experience with him as a student assumed his linguistic abilities, due to his appearance, country of origin or even his limited use of Spanish. Victor's Indigenous language was therefore erased, and his academic abilities were questioned as he was compared to native Spanish-speaking, non-Indigenous students. Ms. Parker confirms this pattern in her own experience by saying:

But I think in the gen ed setting, that's harder because people are gonna look at them and assume, right? Oh, all your friends speak Spanish, you speak Spanish, it's what you speak. And people don't take the time to get to know them and know who they are.¹⁸⁰

In accordance with Campbell-Montalvo's idea of linguistic reformation, Victor, in this case, is "morphed by [this teacher] to fit into the set corresponding to the perceived race/ethnicity of" Victor as a student from Central America, which includes being a native Spanish speaker.¹⁸¹ It is not that teachers are intentionally rejecting Victor's and other students' Indigeneity, but rather, the lack of data regarding the presence of Indigenous language speaking students results in teachers who are unaware of the possibility of having Indigenous students in their classrooms.

In the last 15 years, the total enrollment of Hispanic/Latinx students in City School District schools has more than doubled from 10,525 to 26,290 students.¹⁸² However, the students' complete linguistic repertoires are unclear with no indication of how many consider themselves Indigenous, speak an Indigenous language or perhaps are even monolingual Indigenous language speakers. Only three Mayan language speakers were identified by the district data over the previous twenty years, which lies in clear contrast with the 17 Indigenous language speakers representing seven distinct languages identified in this study with its small sample size from the 2022-2023 academic year alone. The district's language data illustrates

¹⁷⁹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Campbell-Montalvo, "Linguistic Re-Formation in Florida Heartland Schools," 38.

¹⁸² This data accounts for the 2007-2008 academic year to the 2022-2023 academic year. See "Open Data Portal: Exploring City School District Data."

that this district's imagined community, specifically its ML community, is Spanish dominant and Latinx.¹⁸³ While a significant portion of the ML student body is Spanish speaking as demonstrated above, the data exemplifies that there are families and students who would require interpretation beyond Spanish. Identifying all students as Latinx, ensures that the students will receive services and support in Spanish only, erasing their Indigenous language knowledge from any record and reinforcing the devaluation of the students' Indigenous languages.¹⁸⁴

One of the services that Indigenous students from Latin America receive in Spanish is interpretation and translation. Interpretation and translation are not just useful resources, but rather, "meaningful communication" is a right afforded to both students and their families. According to the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, "LEP [Limited English Proficient] parents are entitled to meaningful communication in a language they can understand, such as through translated materials or a language interpreter," and all students are "entitled to appropriate language assistance." Therefore, not recognizing a student's native language or the language in which a child is most proficient, may prevent that student and his or her parents from having "meaningful communication" with the school, which is a divergence from the right to access to an equitable education as confirmed by *Lau v. Nichols (1974)*.¹⁸⁵

Consider a Mayan-language speaking student who requires interpretation services. From the student's data profile, there is no way to determine which of the more than 30 Mayan languages the student or her family will need interpretation in for an event, meeting or class. Not all Indigenous language speakers are monolingual, and some students and families enter Tennessee schools as fully bilingual in an Indigenous language and Spanish. However, even in this case, only identifying such students as Spanish-speaking places importance on Spanish, reinforcing the language hierarchy between the colonial language, Spanish, and Indigenous languages. Ms. Taylor noticed that, in her case, there is an abundance of support services for

¹⁸³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁸⁴ Within the school district, students from Latin America who speak Spanish are typically referred to as Hispanic or Latino/a, rather than Latinx, by teachers, staff and official documentation. I utilize the term Latinx to distinguish between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Refer to Chapter I.

¹⁸⁵ "Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs."

Spanish-speaking students but not for other students in her class who speak a variety of languages including Indigenous languages. She explains:

We have so many Spanish speaking supports that students can get comforted counseling, academic support in Spanish. Whereas one of my—a family member I think was [harmed]. I didn't ask questions and couldn't ask questions...but I reached out and I was like, hey, I need some SEL support for my student and they were just like, oh, we don't have anyone here. And I'm like, that's not an answer. Yeah, find someone.¹⁸⁶

While there is access to Indigenous language interpretation and translation through the district's language service, Acutrans, these appointments typically need to be set-up in advance and interpretation is not always readily available in the case of emergencies. The district is working to create more services to serve its linguistically diverse population, but having potential access to an interpretation or translation service in Indigenous languages is not comparable to the amount of in-person resources available for Spanish-speakers, both academically and emotionally.

In contrast to other SHINE locations, Ms. Adams is a SHINE teacher at a middle school that is not located in a particularly linguistically or ethnically diverse area of the city of study. As she explained, the lack of Latinx students at her school exacerbates the assumptions of Spanish proficiency pushed onto students from Latin America and the erasure of their Indigenous languages. According to Ms. Adams:

When you are an Indigenous speaker and you're the only EL student in your school, or you're the only EL student in your grade, you're gonna have a lot of kids or teachers coming up to you and saying things in Spanish. It's like, that's just how it is. They're not gonna understand that you speak multiple languages, they're just really gonna underestimate you or they're gonna really view you through the deficit lens instead of really the assets that they bring in being multilingual already.¹⁸⁷

Ms. Adams hints at the difference between elective (or elite) and circumstantial (or folk) bilingualism. Elective bilingualism refers to “proficiency in another language attained by choice,” whereas circumstantial bilingualism means “knowing a language other than the native

¹⁸⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. October 7, 2022.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

language is not a choice but a necessity for survival.”¹⁸⁸ In my experience, as a second language learner of Spanish from the U.S., I am celebrated for my knowledge of Spanish. However, in the case of students like Lagina or Victor, these students are not celebrated for their knowledge of an Indigenous language and Spanish, as their bilingualism is not even acknowledged. Instead, the measure of value comes from how much English knowledge the students have. This same idea is cast upon monolingual, Indigenous-language speakers because other students and teachers are unaware that these students are facing not one, but two language barriers.

Furthermore, such an immense misrepresentation of the presence of Mayan languages in the district data can largely be explained by the data collection system itself. When enrolling in this Tennessee school district, students’ parents or guardians complete the Home Language Survey, which includes five questions about a student’s home language (see Table 9 below). If the parent or guardian indicates a language other than English in response to any of these questions, the student will then be screened for EL services. To participate in the SHINE program, the student will then receive an additional SHINE interview. Therefore, the SHINE program has more time to learn about the student and their family, further investigate which languages they speak and determine if those are the same languages they identify for themselves.

| Table 9. Home Language Survey Language Questions (English version ¹⁸⁹) |
|--|
| 1. What is the first language this child learned to speak? |
| 2. What language does this child speak most often outside of school? |
| 3. What language(s) do people usually speak in this child’s home? |
| 4. What language(s) does your child speak with you as a parent/guardian? |
| 5. What language(s) does your child speak with his/her sibling(s)? |

¹⁸⁸ Ester J. De Jong, “Multilingualism as Norm and Desired Goal,” in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 29.

¹⁸⁹ Online versions include Arabic, Burmese, English, Kurdish, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese. See “English Learners Registration,” accessed January 24, 2023.

If a student's home language is identified as other than the student's primary language, this information can be indicated within the student's profile, which can be viewed by district employees. However, such information is not displayed on the student's main page in the district portal, but rather, it is hidden under the EL services information in a drop-down menu of languages. Despite the diversity of languages represented in this drop-down menu, there are no specific Mayan languages listed, and the only option for such languages is "Mayan language," which was just recently introduced.¹⁹⁰ Teachers are unable to change a student's native or dominant language in their profile unless they contact the enrollment office. Typically, the "dominant" or "primary" language is indicated as Spanish because this is the language that is used for callouts to family homes and ensures that the families will receive some communication from the school, even if only in Spanish. This new menu does indicate that the district is attempting to make changes which more accurately capture the diversity of its student population, but much work remains.

Ms. Taylor expressed a general lack of trust for the languages section of the student information database, questioning whether or not a student marked as a Spanish speaker actually does speak Spanish. Ms. Taylor said, "I'm just always wondering, how much of the truth am I getting out of a situation...I'm always like, do they actually speak Spanish at home? Do they actually understand Spanish?"

The SHINE program is built upon close, teacher-student relationships in smaller classroom settings, in comparison to the rest of their respective schools. As a result, SHINE teachers, due to their training on SEL and Central American migration as well as extended class time with their students, have the ability to get to know their students personally and determine which language(s) a student speaks at home, at school and in the city apart from the data. SHINE teachers do not need to rely on the student's language information in their profile, but this process of getting to know their students and develop trusting relationships with them takes time. If a student's language profile does not match the students' true language skills, precious class time will inevitably be lost to miscommunication or attempting to obtain services in Spanish that a student requires in an alternate language both in the SHINE classroom and the

¹⁹⁰ Personal communication with the EL Coordinator at the English Learners Office. January 23, 2023.

school as a whole. This extra and extensive step to get to know a student’s linguistic repertoire requires time that content teachers may not have. Ms. Wright confirms this:

I think we have more time. We have the ability, I think. Yeah. More time and more space... I will tell you inside [the SHINE program] we are given the liberty to slow things down and not have the humongous demands that content--a lot of content teachers have.¹⁹¹

Furthermore, inaccurate linguistic data affects a student’s family as all of the school’s communication to that child and family will most likely be in Spanish, whether or not it is understood, which results in further exclusion from an equal educational experience. Not knowing a child’s native language or the language(s) in which a child thinks and expresses herself creates more challenges and frustrations in the classroom. Ms. Parker explained that for her:

A lot of it is guesswork, right? Cause it's not on our part before they come because there's no check mark for, do they speak Indigenous language? It's like, do they just mark them as Spanish? Even if they obviously do not speak Spanish? Which is annoying. That's something that the district should change or should be an option to have all languages representation.¹⁹²

Nevertheless, the entirety of the issue of linguistic representation is not limited to the system’s design or a result of miscommunications in the initial family interviews during the student enrollment process. On the contrary, Indigenous families may not want to reveal their Indigeneity, especially when they are new to the area, or country, and have not established trust with the school or their child’s teacher. This is particularly the case for Guatemalan families who, themselves directly or their family members, endured the Guatemalan civil war and continue to experience the legacy of fear resulting from the massacre of thousands based on their Indigeneity. This hesitancy to disclose their Indigenous language knowledge may also result from a fear of deportation if a family is living in the U.S. undocumented. Ms. Parker went into detail about why some families hide their Indigenous language knowledge in their child’s initial enrollment interview:

¹⁹¹ Interview with SHINE educator. November 28, 2022.

¹⁹² Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

It could be because the parent just says, oh no, we only speak Spanish. Which maybe they don't feel, I mean again because they might not feel safe sharing their personal—and especially if you've been taught your whole life that it's a secret. And then sometimes a lot of them...don't know the name of their languages. So, they just know that their language exists, and they speak it. But they don't know what it's called here.¹⁹³

Ms. Cooper expressed similar frustrations about teachers working with limited information about their students' native languages:

Part of that is knowing your students but also part of that is the system enabling teachers to know their students a little bit better. And if those aren't listed, how would you be expected to know?¹⁹⁴

SHINE teachers have unique training and more time with their students than content teachers, which allows them to properly identify their students' Indigenous languages even without access to accurate linguistic data. However, this gap in precise linguistic information for students prevents content teachers, in particular, from sufficiently supporting their Indigenous students by being aware of their Indigeneity. By not reporting students' Indigenous languages and thereby not acknowledging the existence of such languages, these schools are participating in the erasure of student Indigeneity. Not only are such Indigenous students being denied their right to be identified as speakers of their Indigenous languages from Latin America, but they are simultaneously being Latinized. Due to their country of origin, their appearance or even their knowledge of Spanish, it is assumed that these students are native Spanish speakers, and this assumption has serious consequences on a student's educational experience, as does the predominance of Spanish in Tennessee classrooms.

Latinization through the Dominance of Spanish

Another way in which Indigenous-language speaking students experience Latinization is through the dominance of Spanish, which is not only a language of power in Latin America but also in the schools of this study. With the growing number of students from Latin America in

¹⁹³ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

the City School District, hearing Spanish around the hallways or seeing English-Spanish posters is commonplace, especially at Spanish-speaking, Latinx dominant schools like Hillview High School and Willow Park High School. As of November of 2022, Hillview High School is 69% “Hispanic/Latino,” which is the second highest percentage of all of the high schools in the district, and almost half of Willow Park High School is considered “Hispanic/Latino” at 48%.¹⁹⁵ Upon visiting Hillview High, I noticed this firsthand simply by walking around the school itself, spotting Spanish-English posters and hearing Spanish from students, teachers and staff alike. On one site visit at the end of the school day, while making my way to a SHINE classroom against the teenage current, I heard Spanish from all directions. I even caught part of a conversation between two girls saying, “But they don’t speak in English...” Then, the high school sea whisked them away, and I could only hear Spanish once again.¹⁹⁶

When beginning this study and considering the pressure on SHINE teachers to improve their students’ English language proficiencies, I anticipated English being the dominant language in the school setting. I expected English to be the language that students feel pressured to learn, stifling opportunities for students to speak their Indigenous languages. While to some degree this is true, the students demonstrated that Spanish represents an important, language of power in this Tennessee city, a language they need to know more so than English. Clara, a 15-year-old high school student in the SHINE program who speaks Q’eqchi’, explained the importance of Spanish to her and the lack of urgency to learn English:

Clara: Cuando estuve allá, sólo, en Guatemala, sólo Q’eqchi’. Y cuando vine aquí, hablo español. Pues a veces hablo español sólo con mis amigos. Pero con mi mamá, no. Sólo Q’eqchi’.

PI: Quieren aprender inglés o se sienten—puede ser que no es tan importante—¹⁹⁷

Clara: Bueno, sí, aprendemos inglés y español. Más español o inglés. Es que no es tan fácil también porque nuestra familia no va a entender lo que vamos a decir. Por eso.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ “City School District Enrollment Data,” January 2023.

¹⁹⁶ Personal observation. Hillview High School. November 14, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ PI stands for principal investigator.

¹⁹⁸ My translation: **Clara:** When I was there, only, in Guatemala, only Q’eqchi’. And when I came here, I speak Spanish. Well, sometimes, I speak Spanish just with my friends. But with my mom, no. Only Q’eqchi’.

Clara indicates that the only language she utilized in Guatemala was Q'eqchi', and she continues to communicate with her mom, who remains in Guatemala, solely in Q'eqchi'. However, the principal language she utilizes in Tennessee is Spanish. Clara did not learn Spanish until she was ten years old, but, as portrayed by her confidence in the focus group, she is clearly highly proficient in the language. Though, not all students expressed the same confidence Clara had in Spanish, especially those who had recently arrived to the U.S. and did not speak any Spanish in their country of origin. For example, Salvador, a 17-year-old, Q'eqchi' speaker who did not know any Spanish before immigrating to the U.S., expressed:

Sí, quiero aprender español, pero hablo sólo poco español...cuando me salía de mi casa en Guatemala, no sé hablar español. Cuando vení en camino sí allí aprendí un poco de español.¹⁹⁹

It is important to recognize the double language barrier that students, as well as Indigenous language speakers outside of the school system, face in the United States. For some Indigenous students like Salvador, they knew little to no Spanish before they arrived to the United States.²⁰⁰ In order to fit into the larger, Latinx community in the city of study, students must first learn Spanish, and then, to fit into the larger U.S. community, they face the second language barrier of English.²⁰¹ It should also be noted that students may want to learn Spanish and English, especially when recognizing the convenience of communication when using these languages within Tennessee, and they may decide they do not want to continue speaking their Indigenous language. The important distinction is whether or not they have the power to choose which language(s) they speak or do not speak.

PI: Do you all want to learn English, or do you feel—could be that it is not as important— **Clara:** Well, yes, we learn English and Spanish. More Spanish or English. It is that it is not easy also because our families are not going to understand what we are going to say. That's why.

¹⁹⁹ My translation: "Yes, I want to learn Spanish, but I only speak a little Spanish...when I left my house in Guatemala, I did not know how to speak Spanish. When I came, on the way, yes there I learned a little Spanish."

²⁰⁰ In a 2020 study with Indigenous language speaking adults in Charleston, SC, 20% of the participants knew little to no Spanish before arriving in the United States. Therefore, their first language barrier was Spanish, and a similar trend can be seen in this study. See Crow, "Sí, Hablo Dialecto," 169.

²⁰¹ Crow, "Sí, Hablo Dialecto."

In the focus groups, we further discussed the differences between the United States and Guatemala, and Carlos explained that the principal difference between the two countries is the linguistic expectation: “Sí porque aquí sólo, en los Estados, tienen que hablar español. En cambio, en Guatemala, sí de idioma hablan.”²⁰² Carlos explicitly states that you have to speak Spanish to be in the United States—not English. I proceeded to ask the students which language was most important to them, and without any hesitation, Carlos responded with “español.”

The students in this focus group also perceived learning English much differently than they perceived Spanish learning. When we began discussing English, the students seemed to believe that learning English would cause them to forget their native languages and would not be very useful. Clara explained that they need to know their native language, referring to their Indigenous languages, to speak to their families. Carlos added that if he speaks English, “How will I talk to my grandparents?” However, none of the students questioned the process of learning Spanish, and while many seemed relatively low in their confidence in their language, despite having no problems expressing themselves in the focus group, it was not Spanish that the students saw as a problem.

In addition, 88% of the students wrote Spanish or *español* on their Language Pies, and three students only indicated that they speak Spanish. All of the students spoke Spanish fluidly in the focus groups, even those who expressed insecurity about their language learning process. However, Samuel, a 13-year-old SHINE student from Guatemala, refused to share that he spoke an Indigenous language at all, despite deciding to participate in the focus group with two students who speak Achi’:

Walter asks Samuel: “Hablas otras lenguas vos?”

Samuel: “Yo no.”

PI: Pero hablas Q’eqchi’?

Samuel: No.

PI: Qué hablas?

Ana: Y tu papa habla Achi’? <Question is ignored>

²⁰² My translation: “Yes, because here only, in the States, they have to speak Spanish. On the other hand, in Guatemala, yes, they speak *idioma*.”

Samuel: Sólo español.²⁰³

After this focus group, I found myself rather confused. The study was explicitly to include students who spoke an Indigenous language; the students, families and teachers knew this. It had also been indicated to me that Samuel was, in fact, a Q'eqchi' speaker before the focus group began.

Once the students returned to class, I explained to Ms. Cooper that Samuel had denied his ability to speak an Indigenous language. She responded with an understanding look and a sigh. Ms. Cooper told me that when he was enrolled, they indicated that his family spoke Q'eqchi' including his older brother, who he lives with currently. On the weekends, the two siblings work in construction, and Ms. Cooper mused that perhaps he learned not to share his Indigenous language from his work with non-Indigenous-language speaking construction crews in an attempt to avoid discrimination. Ms. Cooper further explained that his cousin refused to even take the consent form home because she was adamant that she only spoke Spanish.

Although he was the only student in my study who denied his ability to speak an Indigenous language, Samuel is not the only student who is hesitant to share his Indigeneity through language or culture in the larger school district. In their interviews, SHINE teachers explained that having students share their Indigenous language is a process, and at least some degree of hesitancy in sharing one's Indigenous language is common with SHINE students. Ms. Parker told a story of one student who entered SHINE expecting to speak Spanish as a way to hide his lack of documentation:

So last year we had a student who had been in the States for three years but had been told that if you sign up your kid for school, your kid's gonna be deported. Which is not true, right? But they didn't know. So, he learned Spanish watching TV. So, he came to school speaking very fluent Spanish. But once he realized people spoke Achi', then he was like, oh okay, I can talk.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ My translation: **Walter asks Samuel:** Do you speak other languages? **Samuel:** I don't.

PI: But do you speak Q'eqchi'? **Samuel:** No. **PI:** What do you speak? **Ana:** And your dad speaks Achi'? <Question is ignored> **Samuel:** Just Spanish.

²⁰⁴ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

I infer from Ms. Parker’s explanation that in order to blend in at his new school, this student decided that he needed to be Spanish-speaking, and thereby more Latinx than Indigenous. Before even entering the U.S. school system, he had Latinized himself for protection and decided to hide his Indigenous language knowledge. Ms. Harris similarly explained the hesitancy her students feel at sharing their Indigenous language with new students, preferring to identify themselves as Spanish speakers only:

A new student comes...the rest of the class introduces themselves to that new student. And I do ask them to share what languages they speak and sometimes I really have to pull, it's like pulling teeth. Okay, I know you speak Spanish, what else, language do you speak?²⁰⁵

An important factor in the students’ willingness to share their Indigenous language is the composition of the SHINE classroom and which languages are represented. Ms. Adams described how her classroom has changed considerably overtime, and while she has consistently had a significant presence of Indigenous language speakers in her classes, this year, “it just feels like there's more of a presence of Indigenous languages in our class” even though only 25% of the class speaks an Indigenous language.²⁰⁶

As opposed to the past, her classroom is not Spanish dominant this year. Instead, there is a wide variety of languages including Karen, Dari, Swahili, K’iche’, Pashto and Q’eqchi’ represented, and students have been more willing to share their Indigenous languages and cultures than in years past. Ms. Adams credits this to the lack of fluent Spanish speakers who, in previous classes, judged or made fun of non-native Spanish speakers for their non-native proficiency in the language. Ms. Adams further attributes this comfortable environment to the connection that her K’iche’ and Q’eqchi’ speaking students have made in the class, making jokes between one another and sharing their languages with their classmates. As a result, her Indigenous language speaking students are willing to share their languages after having built trust with both Ms. Adams and the class as a whole.

²⁰⁵ Interview with SHINE educator. December 5, 2022.

²⁰⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

In accordance with Ms. Adams’s observations, the overwhelming presence of Latinx, Spanish speakers in the past has encouraged Indigenous students to hide their Indigenous language knowledge in an attempt to blend in with the larger student body. Upon asking Ms. Hall, a high school SHINE teacher, why she thinks that students are hesitant to share their native languages, she replied:

There's a lot of discrimination against the people who have the most Indigenous culture that they still embody and live because it's colonialism, and unfortunately some internalized colonialism. ²⁰⁷

The prevalence of Spanish in the schools of study, especially those of Willow Park High and Hillview High, is clear, and focus group participants demonstrated that the pressure to learn Spanish is often greater than that to learn English. This may be the result of the perceived utility of Spanish within the school system and the larger city as a whole, especially if students are living in predominantly Spanish-speaking areas and attending largely Spanish-speaking schools. As a result of the overwhelming presence of Spanish, many Indigenous-language speakers are hesitant to share their Indigeneity for fear of discrimination or even deportation, and Indigenous students thereby emphasize their Latinness within their schools as a mechanism of protection, real or perceived, from such negative outcomes and as a way to fit in with the students around them. The dominance of Spanish further plays a role in the reduction of students’ Indigenous language proficiencies, especially as they have more contact with Spanish speakers and less contact with native speakers of their Indigenous languages.

Latinization through Indigenous Language Attrition

Another marker of Latinization within the school district of study is the loss of proficiency in students’ Indigenous languages, particularly due to reduced contact with their grandparents and other community members who speak their Indigenous languages. In the field of linguistics, this loss of proficiency is called language attrition, through which a “lack of

²⁰⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

contact leads to a reduced level of proficiency in the attriting language.”²⁰⁸ To frame this loss of first language proficiency, it is important to understand the context in which students first learned an Indigenous language (or languages) and how immigrating to the United States has altered their exposure to such languages.

Input, in relation to language learning, is simply defined as “all the written and spoken target language that a learner encounters, whether it is fully comprehended or not.” Such input is considered “absolutely necessary” in order to learn a language.²⁰⁹ A common theme that emerged from the student focus groups was the role of grandparents as transmitters of Indigenous languages, thereby providing the input necessary for their grandchildren to learn Indigenous languages. In the same SHINE focus-group, both Walter and Ana indicated that they received authentic, linguistic input from a grandparent in Achi’ in their respective families. Regardless of such input, Walter expressed a lack of confidence in his language proficiency in Achi’:

Walter: Yo parte español y sólo Achi’ pero no puedo mucho.

Ana: Yo sí puedo pero con mi abuelita, hablo con ella.

Walter: Mi abuela sólo en Achi’ me hablaba. Ella puede español bien bien pero no, me empezaba dar en Achi’ cualquier cosa.

Tutor: ¿Y tú entendías?

Walter: A veces que sí entendí si no adivinando pero... <trails off>.

PI: Así cuando estabas hablando con tu abuela, ¿estabas respondiendo en español?

Walter: Sí!²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Alan Davies and Catherine Elder, “Language Attrition,” in *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 210–34, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=2m0V1eUe1GoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA210&dq=language+attrition&ots=aS4vE4Kufb&sig=kRLT44RdmS-RK1ALts5iH8bhIEA#v=onepage&q=language%20attrition&f=false>.

²⁰⁹ “Input vs. Intake: What’s the Difference?,” *Foreign Language Teaching Methods: Technology*, accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/technology/04/>. Shumei Zhang, “The Role of Input, Interaction and Output in the Development of Oral Fluency,” *English Language Teaching* 2, no. 4 (November 17, 2009): 91–92, <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v2n4p91>.

²¹⁰ My translation: **Walter:** For me, partly in Spanish and only Achi’, but I can’t [speak it] much. **Ana:** I can [speak Achi’], but with my grandmother, I speak with her. **Walter:** My grandma only speaks to me in Achi’. She can speak Spanish very well, but no, she started to say whatever thing in Achi’. **Tutor:** And you understood? **Walter:** Sometimes yes, I understood, if not guessing but...<trails off>. **PI:** So, when you were speaking with your grandmother, were you responding in Spanish? **Walter:** Yes!

In Walter's case, his grandmother spoke Achi' with him when he lived in Guatemala, but he responded only in Spanish. As a result, he did not build his own capacity to speak the language fluently and expressed doubt in his ability to fully understand his grandmother. Now, despite being from an Indigenous family with family members who actively speak Achi', his proficiency in Achi' is low, and his principal language is Spanish. On the other hand, Ana expressed confidence in her Achi' language proficiency and explicitly stated that she speaks Achi' with her grandmother.

Other focus group participants also indicated that they learned their Indigenous languages from their grandparents. Matías, a 16-year-old high school student, is a native speaker of Chatino but learned a variety of Indigenous languages from his grandparents and even his great-grandmother:

Mr. Hernandez: ¿Cuando ves estas cosas en qué piensas? ¿O qué—

Matías: En mi abuelo. <Laughs>...El idioma natal que nosotros hablamos en México, de donde yo vengo, es el Chatino que sí me lo sé bastante. El Mixe lo aprendí de la parte de mi tatarabuela que viví un tiempito con ella. Y el Zapoteco, que cuando me lo ha hablado mi abuelo. Ahorita, ya está muerto ya, así no tengo con quien practicarlo tanto. Y pues el Nahuatl, lo aprendí de mi abuela también.²¹¹

Unlike Matías, Marco did not learn his Indigenous language, Garífuna, until he was ten, and Spanish is his first language. Despite not learning the language until his adolescence, Marco speaks Garífuna fluidly because he lived with two Garífuna speakers, his grandfather and aunt. Marco explained:

Bueno, yo no podía hablar el Garífuna pero me fui pa pueblo. Vivía con mi abuelo y yo aprendí. Me hablaban el idioma y bueno pues ya, nada, aprendí con mi tía.²¹²

²¹¹ My translation: **Mr. Hernandez:** When you see these things, what do you think about? Or what—

Matías: Of my grandfather <Laughs>...The native language that we speak in Mexico, from where I come from, is Chatino that yes, I know it very well. Mixteco, I learned in part from my great-great grandmother who I lived with for a time. And Zapotec when I had spoken it with my grandfather. Now, he is already dead, so I do not have anyone to practice it with really. And well, Nahuatl, I learned it from my grandmother also.

²¹² My translation: "Well, I couldn't speak Garífuna, but I went to the village. I lived with my grandfather, and I learned. They spoke the language and well, nothing, I learned with my aunt."

Family members, but especially grandparents, hold an important role as transmitters of Indigenous languages for these students but also as transmitters of cultural history and customs. Lagina, a Mam-speaking SHINE student, spent much of the focus group sharing her knowledge of the history of her hometown, her family and Mayan customs. For example, she explained a custom in her family upheld by her grandparents:

Y cuando viene primera lluvia, no nos dejan salir. Bueno mi costumbre con mis abuelos, no nos dejan salir porque la primera lluvia es sagrada. Y si uno sale, a veces mi abuela se moleste y se enoja porque dice que ustedes tienen que respetar. Así es el costumbre.²¹³

However, now that these students are in Tennessee, even those who do have their families in the U.S. have limited input from those of their grandparents who are still living yet remain in Central America. This limits their access to linguistic input and important cultural knowledge that connects students to their family's Indigeneity.

Some students do communicate with family members in their home country online, specifically through WhatsApp, in their Indigenous languages. For example, Clara continues to keep in contact with her mother and her grandparents via WhatsApp, utilizing the application's voice note function. Daniel also keeps in touch with his dad by speaking in Q'eqchi' on WhatsApp, which is one of the few ways he can speak Q'eqchi' since he moved to the U.S. Additionally, Gloria mentioned speaking to her grandmother through videocalls and the difficulty of being apart from her, as she raised Gloria for a significant portion of her life:

PI: ¿Cómo ha sido este proceso?

Gloria: Al principio, difícil, pero poquito, poquito estoy acostumbrando. Como yo, allá en Guatemala, yo vivía con mi abuela. Cuando me vine aquí, se la extrañaba un montón porque ella me cuidó. Me quiso. Por eso, yo le siempre le digo mamá a ella, yo nunca le dije abuela ni nada. Siempre le dije que es como mi segunda madre porque me cuidaba desde de los diez años. Sí porque mi mamá se vino. Primero mi papa, tan chiquito. Y luego se vino mi mamá. Luego me quedé con ella. Al principio sí, un poco difícil ahora ya poquito, poquito, pero no se olvida.

PI: ¿Y puedes hablar con ella por teléfono o por WhatsApp?

²¹³ My translation: "And when the first rain comes, they do not let us leave. Well, my custom with my grandparents, they do not let us leave because the first rain is sacred. And if one leaves, sometimes, my grandmother is bothered and gets angry because she says that you all need to respect [this custom]. This is the custom."

Gloria: Por WhatsApp.

PI: ¿Por WhatsApp sí? ¿Como con mensajes de voz o algo así?

Gloria: Llamada o video llamada.²¹⁴

While the use of WhatsApp does provide the opportunity for students to stay in contact with Indigenous-language speaking family members in their home country, their exposure to native speakers of their Indigenous language(s) in Tennessee is limited, both from grandparents and from other members of their family. In order to understand why maintaining communication with family members is such a challenge, it is essential to recognize the living situations of many of these students as they are not just separated from their extended family but often their immediate family as well. As indicated in teacher interviews, many recently arrived students in SHINE schools are unaccompanied minors, and as a result, not all students are living in a “traditional” family environment where they have interactions with their immediate family each day. Ms. Hall confirmed this by explaining that many students do not have their family at home to provide linguistic reinforcement, especially those who are unaccompanied minors:

So, if it is a family member then it's likely that they will have the language reinforcement at home. But if it's not, sometimes they live with a family friend, the only viable guardian they could find. And I also don't think that they're sitting around a dinner table together every evening and having dinner because they're working opposite schedules, trading off with the small children taking care of the—they're working and sleeping and eating and they're not recreating, they don't have that kind of time available because of their level of poverty...that's why I feel like whatever little boost I can give them of value into their language is might be one of the only ones they hear in their day.²¹⁵

In fact, only three students of the 17 total indicated that they live with their family units in Tennessee. Other students shared that they live with one or two members of their family.

²¹⁴ My translation: **PI:** How has this process been? **Gloria:** At first, difficult, but little by little, I am getting used to it. Like myself, there in Guatemala, I lived with my grandmother. When I came here, I missed her a ton because she took care of me. She loved me. Because of this, I always called her mom, I never called her grandmother or anything. I always told her that she is like my second mom because she took care of me since I was ten years old. Yes, because my mom came. First my dad, so little. And then, came my mom. Then, I stayed with her. At first, yes, a little difficult, now, already, little by little, but I do not forget her. **PI:** And can you speak with her by phone or on WhatsApp? **Gloria:** On WhatsApp. **PI:** On WhatsApp? Yes? With voice messages or something similar? **Gloria:** Calls or video calls.

²¹⁵ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

For example, Edgar, an 18-year-old Chuj speaker, lives with his brother who also speaks Chuj, but they hardly see one another:

Edgar: Sí, pero yo no tengo familia aquí. Tengo mi hermano, pero casi no estamos así juntos. Yo solo, vivo solo. Vivo solo.

Me: ¿No vives con tu hermano?

Edgar: Vivo con mi hermano, pero no lo veo.

Me: ¿Ah no? ¿Y por qué? ¿Está trabajando?

Edgar: Está trabajando...Yo solo. Como solo.²¹⁶

Edgar indicated that his brother is the only person he knows who speaks Chuj in the city, and because he rarely sees his brother due to his work schedule, Edgar's Indigenous language speaking social network is incredibly limited. De Jong explains that language behavior shifts with changes in social networks that surround the speaker, referring to the people who the speaker interacts with and how often, and "weak networks in a particular language may, in contrast, threaten the continued use of a particular language and support a shift to dominant languages in the network."²¹⁷ Therefore, the reduced or complete lack of interaction with Indigenous language speakers, such as is the case for Edgar, may lead to their increased use of Spanish, English or both. This lack of access to these Indigenous language-speaking social networks is a force of Latinization and speaking more Spanish or English is a result of such Latinization.

Overall, students seemed to fall into three proficiency categories: limited proficiency in their Indigenous languages, particularly due to a lack of ability to speak with Indigenous language speaking family members; fluency in their Indigenous language with few people to speak their language with; or fluency in their Indigenous language with family members to speak with physically in Tennessee. According to the focus groups, the majority of student participants fall within the first two categories, and current SHINE students, and non-SHINE alike, demonstrated a trend towards losing first language proficiency in their Indigenous

²¹⁶ My translation: **Edgar:** Yes, but I do not have family here. I have my brother, but we almost aren't together. I am alone, I live alone. I live alone. **Me:** You don't live with your brother? **Edgar:** I live with my brother, but I don't see him. **Me:** Ah no? Why not? Is he working? **Edgar:** He is working...I am alone. I eat alone.

²¹⁷ Ester J. De Jong, "Multilingualism and Multilingual Development," in *Foundations for Multilingualism in Education* (Philadelphia: Caslon Pub., 2011), 64.

languages, especially as a result of this reduced authentic linguistic input from family members and opportunities to speak their Indigenous languages themselves. Ms. Hall explained that when she is talking about Indigenous languages with her students, they often indicate their low proficiency in their Indigenous languages:

They'll say, oh no, I only know the words for the animals and some baby nursery rhyme stuff, but I can't. And I can understand when my parents have a conversation, but I don't feel fluent talking it or that that's the level that a lot of these young students are at.²¹⁸

I observed a similar trend when speaking to the students myself. Carlos is a 16-year-old, Chuj speaker in the SHINE program with a giant smile. During his focus group with two other Q'eqchi' speakers, we shared a laugh when he told me that I ask, "Why?" a lot. He only spoke Chuj before arriving in the United States, eight months earlier. During our conversation, he expressed that he is losing some of his Chuj. Referring to his family, he said, "A veces ya ni sé que decir a ellos. Ya no puedo hablar bien mi idioma."²¹⁹ He could share some words in Chuj, but when asked about other words, he responded with "no sé," recalling the word for "day" in Chuj but not "sun."

Matías is a Chatino speaker previously mentioned as having learned a variety of Indigenous languages in Mexico from his grandparents, and similarly to Carlos, he expressed, "Sí, pues si no tengo con quien practicar, placticar. Así, como el inglés, aquí hay un montón que hablan inglés, pues sigo practicar más rápido pues, en idioma, no tanto va."²²⁰ Both Carlos and Matías expressed a reduction in their ability to speak their Indigenous languages, which they refer to as their "idioma." While Carlos has family with whom he can practice Chuj, his connection to Chuj-speaking family members in Guatemala is fading, perhaps as a result of long-distance communication or his lack of confidence in his ability to speak Chuj. Matías further explained his difficulties speaking his many Indigenous languages in Tennessee, particularly in relation to whether he had someone or not to speak with in the city:

²¹⁸ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

²¹⁹ My translation: "Sometimes I don't even know what to say to them. I can't speak my language well anymore."

²²⁰ My translation: "Yes, well I don't have anyone to practice with, talk with. So, like with English, here there are a ton of people that speak English, well I continue practicing more quickly, well, in my language, not so much."

Eh, Chatino que obviamente lo habla mi mamá, toda mi familia, y con las personas con los que vivo. Y también el Zapoteco. El Zapoteco de parte de una señora que conozca aquí...y pues como yo hablo, comunicaba con ella, sé bastante sobre eso...El Mixteco, se me está desapareciendo un poco pero no lo quiero que se vaya, la verdad. El único que habla es mi primo pero no tengo contacto con él. Pero sí...todavía, si me hablan a mí en Mixteco, sí les entiendo pero responderlo, se me complica un poco.²²¹

Matías is able to speak with a woman he knows in Zapotec, which helps him to continue practicing the language. However, not having the opportunity to express himself at home in his variety of Indigenous languages is leading Matías to lose proficiency in languages like Mixteco, which he learned from his great-great-grandmother. Compounding upon a lack of family members to speak their Indigenous languages with regularly and in a comfortable environment like in their homes is the lack of recognition of their Indigeneity, let alone their Indigenous language proficiency in local schools.

It should be recognized, however, that a certain element of this process could be a “natural” progression as a result of the pressure of assimilation. In addition, my study focused on students who are recent arrivals to the U.S. that generally have been in the country for a couple months to a couple of years. Because identity is ever evolving, their relationship to their Indigenous language could shift over their time in the U.S., as they determine which language(s) is most important and grapple with questions of assimilation while creating their own space in the community.

According to data collected from both student focus groups and teacher interviews, three ways in which Indigenous language speaking students are Latinized within the City School District include exclusion from the district’s linguistic data, the dominance of Spanish in local schools and a lack of interaction with Indigenous language speaking social networks that results in a reduction in students’ language proficiencies. Focus group conversations demonstrated that students lack opportunities to share and utilize their Indigenous languages in-person in their homes and classrooms in Tennessee. Students further demonstrated the pressure to

²²¹ My translation: “Eh, Chatino, obviously my mother speaks it, all of my family, and with the people that I live with. And also, Zapotec. Zapotec on behalf of a woman that I know here...and well, like I speak, I communicate with her. I know quite a bit about this...Mixteco is disappearing a little bit, but I don’t want it to, honestly. The only one that speaks [Mixteco] is my cousin, but I am not in contact with him. But yes...still, if they talk to me in Mixteco, yes, I understand them, but to respond, it gets a little complicated for me.”

speak Spanish, but this problem is consistent within local schools, principally because students are not recognized as Indigenous language speakers. Furthermore, because of this lack of accurate data, their country of origin, their complexion, their names or their use of Spanish, students' Indigenous languages are effectively erased in the school environment, and they are treated as monolingual, native Spanish speakers, whether or not they speak Spanish fluently or at all.

However, in the following chapter, I will discuss this study's results demonstrating how the SHINE program offers an alternate space where Indigenous students and their diversity of languages are both affirmed and celebrated as a valuable element of their identities. This valuation of students' Indigenous languages can be seen through the physical landscape of SHINE teachers' classrooms, language representation in their lessons, SHINE cultural celebrations and through the nature of the teachers themselves, specifically in how they consistently grapple with questions of linguistic equity. I will additionally address how the Latinization of Indigenous language speakers in this school district is reflective of a greater, systemic issue in the U.S. educational system in which Indigenous language speaking students are not supported linguistically and culturally to the same degree in mainstream classrooms as they are in the SHINE program.

Chapter VII

Discussion: The SHINE Program as a Unique Space

While this research study found that Indigenous students are Latinized within the broader educational environment, the SHINE program is a unique space where students' Indigeneity is being acknowledged and celebrated. Students' Indigenous languages and cultural backgrounds are physically represented in SHINE classrooms, their languages are incorporated into class content and are celebrated by teachers and families through SHINE events. Moreover, much of the recognition and support of students' Indigeneity is due to the SHINE teachers themselves. Through active engagement with the students' languages and cultural practices, their unique SHINE pedagogy and extensive training with regards to Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America, SHINE teachers utilize their position as educators to learn from the students while affirming the value of their students' languages even while operating in an educational system that was not designed to support such linguistically diverse students.

Celebrating Indigenous Languages in SHINE

The SHINE program and its teachers celebrate students' Indigenous languages in three principal ways including through physical representation in the classroom, language inclusion in academic content and cultural events. Walking around the hallways of each of the SHINE schools, I encountered countless posters in Arabic and Spanish. Teachers had brightly colored crepe paper covering their doors with cut outs of Central American countries. Bulletin boards encouraged students in Spanish. However, I did not see any visual representation of Indigeneity—language or culture—in the hallways. This is not to say it is nonexistent, as I most certainly did not walk every hallway and visit every classroom of every school across the district, but the representation could not compare to that of Spanish at secondary SHINE schools if it does indeed exist.

However, this is not the case in SHINE classroom spaces, where the presence of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America is visible. For example, upon walking into Ms.

Wright’s classroom, the back wall greets you with “Hello” in a wide variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous languages on brightly colored paper. Ms. Hall’s Peace Corner, a space designated for the students to take a moment for themselves when they deem necessary, includes street photos from Baja Verapaz, Guatemala where a large portion of her Indigenous language speaking students emigrated from, which she refers to as “Rinconcito de Baja Verapaz.”²²² Ms. Hearty decorates her walls with flags designed by her students to represent their home countries. Ms. Adams and Ms. Hearty’s classrooms feature a traditional Guatemalan weaving that is available for the students to work on as both an emotion regulating tool and an acknowledgement of the presence of Indigenous students in the classroom. Their rooms also feature diverse texts, which incorporate words from Mayan languages and references to Mayan cultural practices. Ms. Adams explains:

And part of that I think is that they feel represented in the classroom. I think that's something that we've tried really hard in doing. Part of that is having our weaving project. My Q'eqchi' speakers, this is Guatemala, this is home, this is home to me. And then reading a story with them and reading in English and in Spanish, and then there's K'iche' words thrown in or there's Q'eqchi' words thrown in or there's Mayan words woven through the book and then them being like, no, no, no, actually you say it like this. And we're like, well, I say it like this. It's—there's more of a space I think for it.²²³

By being represented in literature and the physical classroom space, Guatemalan Indigenous students are able to discuss their languages and cultural features independently from their Spanish-speaking, Latinx classmates, even those from the same country. Their languages are specifically addressed and discussed in the classroom, creating a space where students are encouraged to not only embrace their Indigenous languages but share them as well.

²²² The Peace Corner is a SEL strategy to help students self-regulate, recognizing that many students in the SHINE program have faced serious trauma and are bringing this trauma with them to school each day. When they feel overwhelmed, angry, frustrated and so forth, students can decide to take a moment to themselves in their classroom’s Peace Corner. This corner often has twinkling lights, fuzzy carpets, comfy chairs, pillows, blankets and even activities (like bracelet making, for example) to give the students a sense of calm. When they are ready, they can return to class.

²²³ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

Beyond the physical representation of Indigenous students in the classroom, SHINE teachers intentionally incorporate students' languages into daily, content lessons. Mr. Lewis explained that a core aspect of his teaching pedagogy is encouraging students to draw connections between their home language and English:

Whenever I teach a topic for the first time, a word for the first time, I make sure that the students are speaking, not just the English, but also their home language equivalent, and allowing them to be the one that lead with that language. So, every day I will have students speak in Spanish and in Swahili out to make sure that they understand that there are different languages here.²²⁴

By encouraging his students to translate new topics and words in English into their home languages, including in Indigenous languages, Mr. Lewis reinforces the idea that Indigenous languages are welcome in his classroom and can be utilized as a tool for further learning. This is an excellent example of utilizing the students' Funds of Knowledge, or the "knowledge and skills children acquire at home and in the community," into the classroom, which the SHINE program has emphasized through teacher trainings over the past several years.²²⁵

Additionally, SHINE teachers incorporate their students' Indigenous languages into their classes by reversing the traditional student-teacher roles. Rather than reinforcing the idea that teachers are the only possessors of knowledge in the classroom, SHINE teachers model the behavior they expect from their students as language learners by taking on the role of student and facilitating mutual exchanges of knowledge. For example, Ms. Cooper is currently learning Spanish, and she shares:

I try to model for them a lot. Okay. Ms. Cooper is going to be vulnerable <laughs> for a minute and try and say this in Spanish, and this is a little above what I can probably say, so I might need some help. I try to really live that out in the classroom.²²⁶

However, SHINE teachers are not only learning Spanish, but they are also learning words in a variety of Indigenous languages spoken by their students. Both Mr. Lewis and Ms. Hall

²²⁴ Interview with SHINE educator. November 30, 2022.

²²⁵ De Jong, "Affirming Identities in Multilingual Schools," 189.

²²⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

mentioned keeping a homemade multilingual dictionary of all of the languages their students speak, entering new words in Achi' or K'iche' as they learn them. Ms. Hall explained:

I know words in Achi' and K'iche' mainly. I don't know much Mam or Chuj because I haven't had students from there...I keep a little composition notebook, and I'm modeling the behavior of keeping a language dictionary because they have—it looks just like their comp books that I expect them to keep. And I just show...I am not exempt. I'm not gonna ask you to do anything that I'm not willing to do. And equally instill value in your language.²²⁷

In this way, SHINE teachers demonstrate to their students that they are not the only person with valuable knowledge and experience in the classroom, validating the use of Indigenous languages in the classroom through their interest and attempts to learn their students' language(s). This knowledge exchange is representative of a collaborative teaching approach, which confirms that both “teachers and students as actively contributing to the learning process.”²²⁸ Although, it may take time for some students to be comfortable with this process, especially for students who are not accustomed to this teaching style. Also, as aforementioned, students may be hesitant to identify themselves as Indigenous language speakers, but SHINE teachers patiently encourage them to, as Ms. Cooper says, “take ownership of that [Indigenous] identity a little bit more.” Ms. Adams explains how this process evolved over the past several years in her own SHINE classroom:

Previously, I think we were like, oh, we have a lot of Indigenous speakers, but there's this tension, they might not feel comfortable. So, I was like, oh, okay, they're not gonna feel comfortable. I'm not gonna ask or I don't wanna bring it up and make students feel uncomfortable. And now it's gotten to the point of let's celebrate it. If you have it, let's celebrate it. Yes, there's some uncomfortable things there. We're talking about colonialism in class. We understand that this feeling is an effect of colonialism. We can go there, and the students can handle that. They can handle the really hard things and we can talk about why it's uncomfortable, but that's not gonna happen if we're scared. And so, I think part of that is I'm willing to go there and I can ask, and I know how to ask in a way that the students feel affirmed and that they know that I'll shut down any student who's laughing at them or they know that I will, I'll back them up.²²⁹

²²⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

²²⁸ De Jong, “Affirming Identities in Multilingual Schools,” 186.

²²⁹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

Ms. Adams specifically addresses the importance of creating a safe space in her classroom, where her students feel comfortable to share their languages and their realities without fear of judgment from their peers. She also stresses how her students may feel uncomfortable when addressing concepts like colonialism in a middle school classroom with such a diverse group of students. However, for Ms. Adams, the important aspect of this discomfort is that everyone in the classroom is uncomfortable together and can work through that as a group, rather than students facing discrimination and colonialism alone without an outlet to address it.

Other SHINE teachers shared how they encourage their students to embrace their Indigenous identities wholistically. Ms. Cooper explains her process of having students connect with their Indigeneity specifically through their class content overtime, specifically when they learn from the EL office that a student may be Indigenous language speaking:

Not necessarily on the first day, we will try to bring up, 'Oh do you speak Achi?'. And if they say no, which happens often, they'll deny their language. Then, we try to start with other things like *marimbas* or 'how do people in your town dress?' Letting them kind of slowly, especially in the context of Social Studies, make connections to their culture, and then kind of, for lack of a better term, allowing them to slowly come out of the closet as an Indigenous—like to start to own that. And they do do a Mayan unit in Social Studies, which tends to be a time where we see a lot of them start to be like, oh yes, that's me. I'm Maya, and I speak Q'eqchi'.²³⁰

In a classroom designed to teach the students the country's dominant language, English, and prepare them for their education post-SHINE, it is further important to address the dueling pressures of assimilation and cultural preservation. Ms. Parker encourages her students to continuing engaging with their Indigenous culture while explaining that this does not mean they cannot embrace U.S. culture simultaneously:

And I always tell [the students] that just cuz you're in America doesn't mean you have to forget where you came from. Don't let Americans convince you that you should lose your culture. You need to stay true to who you are and love the things that you love

²³⁰ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

from your—like you can grow to love American things too, but make sure you don't lose who you are and things that are important to you.²³¹

SHINE teachers create spaces in their classrooms to discuss Indigenous languages and encourage students to embrace their Indigenous culture if they so choose. In this space, students can also navigate the multiplicity of their identity, instead of having to choose one aspect of their identity over another. Ultimately, the students must negotiate a space for themselves that likely will include elements of both assimilation to U.S. culture and the integration of their home country's culture. However, by incorporating Indigenous languages into the classroom, SHINE teachers give the students the opportunity to decide for themselves and demonstrate that the option to continue speaking one's Indigenous language is available, whereas it might not be in other educational spaces.

Furthermore, students' Indigenous languages and cultures are intentionally celebrated outside of the classroom through SHINE events, which also serve the purpose of incorporating families into their child's educational experience. The Cultural Fair that was introduced at the very beginning of this master's thesis is an excellent example of such a celebration. This cultural celebration was the first event created and led by a SHINE parent from the Family Leadership Team, an initiative designed by SHINE to connect students' families with their schools, share their Funds of Knowledge and participate in the decision-making process. The fair was created as a celebration of Latin American cultures represented in Hillview High School's SHINE classrooms, which included a variety of languages, food, and clothing from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

The students presented three dances at the event. Lagina and her family presented a customary Mayan dance. All dressed in *indumentaria maya*, six of the performers took a seat on their knees and, with their hands together, bowed in all four directions on the linoleum floor. Then, the men with their hands behind their back and the women with the small baskets of bread and candies in their hands and the su't on hanging from their arms bounced in step to the *marimba*, tossing candy to the crowd. Afterwards, four Honduran SHINE students danced the *punta* as they displayed two large Honduran flags, wearing jackets adorned in white and

²³¹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

blue stripes. Four more, young SHINE students—three in *corte* and *huipil* and a young man in a Guatemalan soccer jersey—danced to *marimba* as well. The young girl in green held her *corte* out to her sides and swayed side to side. The other students took their rhythmic steps around the Guatemalan flag that had been laid out on the floor. Once the dances had concluded, the crowd cheered boisterously for Lagina’s family, and they were deemed the winners.²³²

This family-designed event provided a unique opportunity for Indigenous SHINE students to share elements of their Indigenous identity in the same, Spanish-dominant space where they attend school. While they may pass through on their way to class and eat their meals in the school cafeteria, this is typically not a space where they wear *indumentaria maya*, speak their Indigenous languages nor share meals with both their families and teachers.

I also observed a Holiday Luncheon for SHINE students and their families at Willow Park High School. All of the SHINE students and their families crowded around bright, plastic-covered tables, eating plantains, chicken and beans from Styrofoam to-go containers. A burst of languages flooded the room as teachers chattered in English, interpreters spoke in Arabic, Somali and Spanish and the students, along with their families, spoke a variety of Spanish, Q’eqchi’ and Chuj.

In support of the Funds of Knowledge curriculum, Ms. Taylor had the students and their families complete a questionnaire to share their cultural traditions and practices from their home country. The students diligently filled out their forms, and I made my way over to what was pointed out to me as the “Q’eqchi’ table.” Clara, from a SHINE focus group just a few weeks prior was seated and smiling with her friends as they chattered about the form, brainstorming answers for the questions about family traditions and favorite foods in Spanish. The students chatted with me in Spanish and then turned to each other, exchanging words in Q’eqchi’. One student started a sentence in Q’eqchi’ and completed it with “otra vez.” The students were completely bilingual in Spanish and Q’eqchi’, and they codeswitched consistently, flowing seamlessly through the languages.

Again, at this luncheon, the SHINE program was providing opportunities for parents with diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage in their child’s educational experience and opening a

²³² Field notes. November 20, 2022.

space for these families and their children to share their Funds of Knowledge.²³³ Both of these events were not just a testament to how the SHINE program celebrates Indigenous language speaking students but also a testament to how many students themselves push back against the process of Latinization by speaking their Indigenous languages, performing dances from their home countries in their cafeteria, wearing customary Mayan clothing and engaging with their Indigeneity in school spaces.

By facilitating opportunities for students to acknowledge their Indigenous languages and share them with their teachers and other students, the SHINE program stands out as a unique space in the City School District. It is not just that SHINE teachers are trained about and aware of their students' Indigenous languages, but SHINE teachers actively encourage their students to engage with their Indigeneity by incorporating their native languages into their educational experience. Not only are SHINE teachers well equipped by the SHINE program, but the teachers themselves are actively “challenging disabling educational structures” through the ways in which they grapple with language equity and support their Indigenous students.²³⁴

The Role of SHINE Teachers

Much of the ability of the SHINE program to acknowledge its students' Indigenous languages and Funds of Knowledge is due to the teachers themselves. As previously mentioned, SHINE teachers receive extensive training with regards to social-emotional learning, Indigenous student backgrounds and trauma, and spend extensive time getting to know their students each day. As such, SHINE educators play an invaluable role in facilitating an equitable educational experience for their students, no matter the languages they speak. One powerful example of how SHINE teachers do so is how they actively grapple with the “problem” of establishing language equity.

In interviews, a theme that often reoccurred was that of language equity. SHINE teachers grappled with how to provide language equity for their students as teachers operating within the bounds of teaching grade level content in English. Two of the nine teachers

²³³ Amanti, Gonzalez, and Moll, *Funds of Knowledge*.

²³⁴ Cummins, “Power Relations in School: Constructing or Constricting Identities?,” 68.

expressed that one of the greatest challenges as a SHINE teacher is "trying to teach them grade level content in a language they don't understand in a way that they can feel successful."²³⁵

Added to this pressure is to do so equitably in a variety of languages. This becomes particularly challenging in the SHINE classroom when the majority of the students speak a common language, such as Spanish, even if many of those individuals also speak an Indigenous language. Ms. Adams explained that:

This year, our Spanish speakers are a minority. So, last year I was mindful of it, we would have mostly Spanish speakers, but we had a significant enough amount of students who were not Spanish speakers. And I could see the disconnect and just their faces were kind of like okay, here she is speaking in Spanish again, here she is not accommodating me the same way she's accommodating these other students. And so, I was really mindful of how can I make sure that I have this equity of language in my classroom? And so, I don't usually speak much in Spanish.²³⁶

Therefore, to preserve language equity, Ms. Adams attempts to minimize her use of Spanish in the classroom in order to demonstrate to her students that she does not prioritize one language over another. This is further complicated when discussing resource availability. Ms. Hearty explained in depth her constant struggle with the vast availability of resources for her Spanish speakers but the lack of such resources for speakers of other languages in her classroom. Mr. Lewis also expounded on his, explaining that, for many of Indigenous languages, for example, they do not have the resources that dominant languages like Spanish may have. Nevertheless, it is essential to incorporate them:

A lot of these languages don't have dictionaries and the students may not even have a wide breadth of knowledge in it. But the idea is finding a space for those languages and honoring them, referencing them, using them, joking around the students with them.²³⁷

What struck me is not that creating language equity is challenging, as this naturally presents serious difficulties for the district as a whole in attempting to provide equitable services in 137 languages. However, the SHINE teachers are actively grappling with the idea of

²³⁵ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

²³⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

²³⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. November 30, 2022.

language equity each day within their classrooms and their schools. They are not ignoring the diversity of languages their students speak as a whole nor the variety of languages that individual students speak, such as bilingual Spanish and Indigenous language speakers. Instead, they are attempting to address inequities in the classroom on behalf of their students and recognize the value that language has for their students' identities.²³⁸

Creating a space where students can engage with their Indigenous languages is part of the process of supporting linguistically diverse students, but the students themselves must make the decision of whether or not they want to continue speaking their Indigenous languages in Tennessee and to what degree.

In the case of this research, many students indicated that they do desire to continue speaking their Indigenous languages. Through class visits, SHINE events and focus groups, some students shared their Indigenous languages proudly and openly like Lagina, who continually expressed the importance of preserving Mam to me, her fellow students and her teachers. Other students were adamant they would never lose their Indigenous language; for example, upon clarifying with Edgar that he had few opportunities to speak Chuj in Tennessee, he sat up straighter saying, "Chuj, yo lo sé cien por ciento. A mí, no se me olvido alguna cosa."²³⁹ Still others quietly expressed their desire to contradict Latinization such as in the case of Daniel. At the end of Daniel's focus group, I began to collect the Language Pie worksheets from the students. Gloria had drawn a singular *tamal* on hers, and the students had shared a laugh about how truly reflective this food is of Guatemalan culture. Lagina filled hers with beautiful, pencil drawn words representing her feelings towards her languages, and Daniel's, while colorful as he had outlined the pie with a variety of markers, was blank except for Q'eqchi', *español* and *inglés* written in the center. I gathered up Lagina's and Gloria's language pie, but when I reached for

²³⁸ An actual quote Ms. Adams heard from another teacher was: "It's not their fault that they don't know English, but it's not mine either." I mention this quote not to villainize any teachers in this school district, but I do believe this quote demonstrates the uniqueness of SHINE teachers. Not everyone is addressing this question of linguistic equity as SHINE teachers are.

²³⁹ My translation: "Chuj, I know it 100%. For me, I don't forget anything."

Daniel's, he held it back a moment. He grabbed a red marker and wrote hastily, "Todo lo que es aprendido nunca se olvidar."²⁴⁰ He handed me the paper, smiled and left.²⁴¹

While many students indicated that they value their Indigenous languages and the SHINE program provides a space which encourages students to take pride in their Indigenous language knowledge, both students and teachers are operating within the confines of the broader, U.S. educational system. After one year in the SHINE program, SHINE students are required to enter mainstream classrooms, where their Indigenous language may not be recognized as the U.S. educational system was not developed to support Indigenous students.

"The System Wasn't Built for Our Students"

As beforementioned, SHINE teachers create a unique space in their schools where Indigenous students' languages are affirmed as demonstrated by their classrooms, language representation in their teaching and cultural celebrations. Interviews further revealed that SHINE teachers themselves see their program and teaching as unique through the way in which they discussed their school environments and the systemic issues they and their students encounter each day within the U.S. educational system.

The distinctiveness of SHINE is demonstrated by the teachers' own accounts of the operations of the program and teacher training. Ms. Taylor described SHINE as a "lab school" in which the English Learners Office is:

...going out there and finding cutting edge research. But it's just good research for all learners and kind of throwing it to us SHINE teachers to see what works. And then, after they see what works with us in our classrooms, they kind of spread it to the masses of other EL teachers in the district. So, we get a lot of frontline trainings when they noticed there were more Indigenous Mayan speakers coming into our district.²⁴²

Ms. Taylor attributes the uniqueness of SHINE to the extensive training and the "cutting edge research" that teachers have access to within the program, a curriculum that specifically

²⁴⁰ My translation: "All that is learned is never forgotten."

²⁴¹ Fieldnotes. January 18, 2023. Refer to Appendix C to see Daniel's language pie.

²⁴² Interview with SHINE educator. October 7, 2022.

addresses the presence and value of Indigenous language speakers from Latin America in their classrooms. However, as indicated by the teachers themselves, this same training is not taking place with non-SHINE, content teachers. As Ms. Cooper explains, "I typically find that it is a lack of skill not will with teachers, and that they do really want to help our multilingual students and our English learners in particular, but not knowing how."²⁴³ This is a result of the fact that content teachers do not have access to the same "cutting edge research" as SHINE teachers, especially with regards to their Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America. For example, Ms. Hearty described a new City School District initiative to ensure personalized lesson plans for each student in the district, and she thinks:

...that it has shifted the focus more onto English Language Learners. I will say working—I'm trying to decide how to say it delicately—working with some people, it still feels like English Language Learners are the back burner...I had to ask how I would give my students certain accommodations and then that information was shared with me. But I don't know that it was shared with the content teachers of other English Learners in my school.²⁴⁴

By not having accommodation information shared with content teachers, SHINE teachers have the added responsibility of communicating those accommodations for all of their students. In fact, SHINE teachers often have to fulfill a variety of roles at their schools beyond that of educators but also as advocates, counselors, parental figures and even interpreters. These extra roles placed into the hands of SHINE educators adds, as Ms. Adams explains:

"[an] insane amount of pressure and expectations for what the job is that people don't realize...technically I'm performing the job of a counselor of a surrogate mom or these things."²⁴⁵

Beyond fulfilling the role of counselor and parent, Ms. Adams, who is not a fluent Spanish speaker, described how she has also been expected to provide interpretation services for her own students and their families:

²⁴³ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

²⁴⁴ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

²⁴⁵ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

But then there's also very specifically in our context, people expect us to translate things for them...I've had the front office staff send me phone calls in the middle of my class of a parent who's speaking Spanish, and they, they're like, we don't know what to do, so we thought we would send them to you because you speak Spanish. I'm like yeah, my AP Spanish really prepared me for this conversation. I was like, this isn't legal...So it's people not knowing at all what to do and just putting it onto us, which is just can be discouraging cuz I think when we can remember that the system wasn't built for our students, the system's really not built for anyone at my school. But we still have to operate within the system which can be really stifling. But also, just people not knowing how to navigate the system with these other considerations.²⁴⁶

Despite previously teaching the staff in the front office how to utilize the district's interpretation services, Ms. Adams was still called upon to fulfill this interpretation need—even as a non-Spanish speaker. Ms. Adams, also, points out that these challenges, such as the lack of support of multilingual, SHINE students outside of the SHINE program, originate from a larger, systemic issue. Both the students and their teachers are functioning in a “system [that] wasn't built for our students.”²⁴⁷ In agreement with Ms. Adams, Ms. Cooper similarly identified working within the present system of education as the greatest challenge she faces as a SHINE teacher:

I think the greatest challenge that I face is actually, like systemically like getting the system, if you will, on board with meeting their needs and advocating for the students. Like, as they transition out of SHINE, and making sure that they're getting their services and that people understand that this isn't an option or something nice that we do that this is a requirement, and their civil right. I think that like getting other people to understand not only like the work that's done in SHINE, but how they can continue those accommodations and scaffolds outside of the SHINE setting. I think it's like one of the biggest challenges.²⁴⁸

Furthermore, as advocates for their linguistically diverse students, there are expectations to fulfil this gap in training for content teachers and others in their school

²⁴⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

²⁴⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 24, 2022.

²⁴⁸ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

buildings, especially for those who do not know what the SHINE program is. Ms. Parker explained that she is sometimes the one to tell school personnel that the SHINE program exists:

And they're like, I had no idea that SHINE even existed. Thank you for letting us know. And it's true, a lot of these people don't realize when these kids come from SHINE, what that means.²⁴⁹

Therefore, even within SHINE program schools, not all teachers and staff are aware of the presence of the SHINE program, its purpose or its students. This prevents teachers and staff from learning from SHINE teachers, who are a valuable source of information and often act as instructors for other teachers, as well. Ms. Taylor explains:

Last year was the first year I really thought about it in my practices and started explaining to my principal here and other teachers here. I started spreading my knowledge of the situation.²⁵⁰

Similarly, Ms. Hearty has started sharing her knowledge as well as a form of advocacy for her students but also for herself. She elaborates by saying:

I think that's our biggest thing this year is just trying to just stop doing everything under the radar to make everything work. Before that attendance assessment, I would've given up my planning period to just make a visual to go with it. But now we're advocating for our students by advocating for ourselves by saying, no, I cannot give this today. You're gonna have to get it translated.²⁵¹

Such experiences shared by SHINE educators is reflective of both the lack of knowledge regarding both the SHINE program and Indigenous language speakers as well as just how unique the SHINE program is within the larger educational system. Ms. Cooper summarizes that the greatest challenge facing Indigenous students consist of, “teachers and boots on the ground who aren't yet equipped with the knowledge to properly serve them.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 11, 2022.

²⁵⁰ Interview with SHINE educator. October 7, 2022.

²⁵¹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

²⁵² Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

Over the course of the data collection process, I gained an understanding of what the Indigenous language speaking experience in this particular school district looks like for SHINE and non-SHINE students alike. My research shows that Indigenous students from Latin America are being Latinized in a variety of ways through their experiences in the U.S. education system. Indigenous students are often assumed to be Spanish-speaking, Latinx as reflected by the expectations of school staff that they speak Spanish and their language profiles that identify them as such. Many Indigenous language speaking students in focus groups further indicated that they are losing first language proficiency in their Indigenous languages as a result of a lack of or reduced access to authentic linguistic input from native speakers and expectations to be highly proficient Spanish speakers.

However, one difference between SHINE and non-SHINE students is their access to the SHINE program and its educators. SHINE has designed a unique space in the education system where Indigenous students are recognized for their Indigenous language proficiencies and are encouraged to leverage their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Such students are represented physically in their classrooms, in grade-level content and through celebrations of their linguistic abilities. Nonetheless, both SHINE students and SHINE teachers are operating within an education system that was, as teachers indicate, not designed for Indigenous students, and as a result, Indigenous students continue to experience Latinization despite their legal right to an equitable education.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In this master's thesis, I have examined the forces of Latinization faced by Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in a school district in Tennessee. I used the SHINE program as a field site to investigate issues of Indigenous language visibility. My research further identified the SHINE program as a space in the City School District where Indigenous language speaking students can leverage their linguistic and cultural knowledge in the classroom and are recognized for their Indigeneity, apart from their Latinx classmates. I collected data through nine interviews with SHINE teachers, and I held five focus groups for both currently enrolled SHINE students and non-SHINE secondary students who speak Indigenous languages from Latin America.

In response to my research questions, I worked with 17 students who speak seven different languages representing the Mayan, Zapotecan and Arawakan language families. However, such students are not represented by linguistic data as the district only confirms the presence of three Mayan language speakers in the last 20 years, resulting in the erasure of Indigenous languages in the school district of study. In both SHINE and non-SHINE focus groups, students expressed the value of speaking Spanish in Tennessee and the United States as a whole, and a few identified it as the most important language. Rather than English being the language of power that stifles Indigenous students' opportunities to speak their native languages, Spanish appeared to be the primary language of dominance due to its significant presence in the school district's classrooms and the city in general. The dominance of Spanish is a force of Latinization in these Tennessee schools as well as the near complete lack of Indigenous languages in district data, and one of the greatest effects of this Latinization is the loss in Indigenous language proficiency for Indigenous students.

SHINE teachers, however, play a critical role in creating spaces in the district where Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America can share their languages and are affirmed in their Indigenous identities. This can be seen in the physical elements of SHINE classrooms, Indigenous language use within SHINE classes and the way in which students'

Indigeneity is celebrated outside of the classroom as well. Alongside the SHINE teachers, some students resist the forces of Latinization through language advocacy and the use of their Indigenous languages at school and in their homes in Tennessee.

The City School District faces a multitude of challenges moving forward as it continues to adapt to its everchanging student body. A pressing difficulty confronting the district is that of providing sufficient interpretation and translation services in all of the languages spoken by its diverse population of students and families, especially Indigenous languages. Currently, the district's students speak 137 distinct languages.²⁵³ However, the numbers are continuously changing, and each year, the district receives approximately 1,000 new English Learners.²⁵⁴ This school district currently employs 65 interpreters who speak 17 languages, which does not include any Latin American Indigenous languages. The school district further includes access to an interpretation and translation service called, Acutrans. This service includes access to translators and interpreters on the phone in eight Mayan languages (Akateco, Achi', Chuj, K'iche', Mam, Popti', Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi') and potentially others in a category vaguely denoted as "Mayan languages."²⁵⁵ However, this does not include Chatino or Garifuna, each of which were also identified as spoken in the school district during the focus groups. The sheer diversity of languages, especially Indigenous languages, spoken by students leaves the district, and the SHINE program, in a continuous search for more interpreters in order to provide equal access to education for their students.

Translation presents another challenge as well. Not only is access to translation services limited to the languages available through Acutrans, but information from the schools to Latin American origin families continues to overwhelmingly be in Spanish. This presents a myriad of issues for Indigenous language speaking families who do not speak Spanish and may not be literate—in their Indigenous language or Spanish.

²⁵³ "Open Data Portal: Exploring City School District Data." The languages are not listed, and therefore, it is not known whether any Indigenous languages from Latin America are included in the 137 languages or not.

²⁵⁴ The LEP students include those who are "Active English Learners" and "Exited English Learner students in Transitional years 1, 2, 3 [and] 4." See "Open Data Portal: Exploring City School District Data."

²⁵⁵ "Using Acutrans" (City School District, 2023). This document was provided to me by the EL Coordinator at the district's English Learners Office as the instructions for how to use Acutrans for "live, on-demand interpretation services when [district] interpreters are not immediately available."

Furthermore, another challenge that must be acknowledged is the number of students who drop out before completing their high school degree, specifically within the SHINE program. Due to serious interruptions in their education, the majority of SHINE students begin high school in ninth grade despite their age as a result of the credits they require to graduate. Ms. Wright explains that most of her students completed sixth grade, but they typically do not have their educational documentation:

None of 'em are gonna come with [education] documents. Even if they did, they would only have a document through sixth grade. So, none. And so, sixth to ninth is still a jump, but they're, because in America everything is based on age. Cuz you don't want a 16 year old in a first grade class...But if you are older, like you say 17 or 18, you're gonna go to that ninth grade cuz you don't have credits, you gotta start earning credits.²⁵⁶

As a result, students in only the first half of their high school career may turn eighteen and are presented with the opportunity to continue on for a few years to obtain their high school degree or drop out and immediately enter the workforce. According to teachers, dropping out is of particular concern for SHINE students because they face intense pressure to provide for themselves and their family, especially Indigenous students. Ms. Cooper explains:

I think it is amplified for my Indigenous students because of their economic oppression and different factors back home, which is that in a sense a lot of them were brought here to work and to be earners for their family. And school can kinda be seen as a barrier or roadblock to that very real economic need to produce for your family. I think I just see it exacerbated with Indigenous families, but it is very real for all of our families.²⁵⁷

Ultimately, the economic pressure placed upon Indigenous and non-Indigenous SHINE students leads many to dropping out and working as the benefits of obtaining a high school diploma do not solve their immediate needs of paying rent or sending money home. Ms. Hall explains that some of her students work in the evenings after school and only get a few hours of sleep before its time to go back to school again:

²⁵⁶ Interview with SHINE educator. November 28, 2022.

²⁵⁷ Interview with SHINE educator. October 9, 2022.

They are already being relied on as an income source to send money home to their family. And so, they're desperate to work and it's not just for themselves to buy a new phone, sending sustenance money to their families and they're being depended upon and they have to pay their own rent here to live. So, it's not just, oh, I'm dropping out because I don't like school. I actually have been working all night long and I have slept maybe four hours and now I'm here in your classroom and I'm trying to keep my head off the table.²⁵⁸

The school district of study further faces the problems created by the U.S. educational system, as the teachers expressed, such as those which leave content teachers unequipped to support Indigenous students and place immense pressure on SHINE teachers to advocate for the civil rights of their students to be met. As Ms. Hall aptly summarized, “And so, that’s the barrier. The system.”²⁵⁹ This further includes confronting the very issue of Latinization and the effects of such a process, which continue to silence Indigenous students from Latin America in this school district and across the U.S. educational system.

This project faced a myriad of challenges, but perhaps ironically, one of the greatest challenges was that of language barriers. This was a particularly difficult aspect of the project in relation to obtaining consent from the students’ parents to participate in the study. As the student participants in the study are native Indigenous language speakers, many of their parents are also native Indigenous language speakers. If their parents only speak an Indigenous language, I was not able to obtain informed consent as I do not have access to Mayan language interpreters—a central problem facing my project, the school district of study and other institutions (e.g., health, legal and education) across the country.

Similarly, another limitation to this study included my lack of linguistic ability and access to interpretation. I acknowledge that all of the student focus groups were conducted in Spanish—the very language that I identify as the dominant, language of power which is Latinizing Indigenous students in the school district. In an ideal study, the students would have participated in focus groups in their Indigenous languages, rather than speaking Spanish.

Furthermore, Indigenous language speakers across Latin America have faced centuries of linguistic and cultural discrimination. In the face of such discrimination, it is not uncommon

²⁵⁸ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Interview with SHINE educator. October 12, 2022.

for Indigenous language speakers to not reveal their native language or to not feel comfortable identifying themselves as Indigenous, especially in front of non-Indigenous individuals. As such, I had to be cautious to not identify students as Indigenous because of linguistic data, for example, but rather, I had to hope for those students who express comfortability talking about their Indigenous languages to come forward. While many students did identify them as Indigenous language speakers in the classroom, I feel that there were students who decided not to participate for this reason.

Additionally, time was a significant limitation to this study, particularly in the data collection stage. Due to working with students in schools under the age of eighteen, the IRB approval process took from June 2022 to September 2022, limiting my data collection to September 2022 to January 2023. I only had five months to observe the students and teachers, working with both my student schedule and the schools' complex schedules. This resulted in a small sample size of students, few focus groups and the inability to meet with the same students multiple times. Another limitation was that of time and space to investigate all aspects of the data set. There were several themes that arose from the student focus groups and the teacher interviews that I have not been able to analyze in this thesis including those regarding serious transportation inequities, teacher burn out, first language literacy in Indigenous languages and more. Additional time and analysis must be dedicated to this data set but also to future research regarding Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in U.S. schools. It is due to these very challenges, a history of discrimination and widespread invisibility that there is significant lack of research on Indigenous language speakers from Latin America in the United States, especially regarding young students.

The SHINE program in Tennessee is an example of a positive form of English Language Learner intervention, providing linguistic, educational, emotional and social support for immigrant students in the school district. However, in supporting recently arrived MLs in Tennessee, the program's teachers continue to face a multitude of challenges as do the students themselves. This is especially true as the demographics of the students continue to shift. With a growing number of Indigenous language speaking students from Latin America in SHINE classrooms, this school district requires an expansion of interpretation services and other

resources to properly support these students inside and outside of the classroom. There also is a need for increased awareness and training for content teachers, administrators and community members regarding the presence of Indigenous language speaking students. Such training should emphasize that these Indigenous languages are full-fledged languages—not dialects—and would create greater cultural competence and awareness regarding Indigenous students within Tennessee schools. This would further relieve the pressure from SHINE teachers to fulfil the role of teacher trainer and share in the work of advocating for Indigenous students in an educational system that “wasn’t built” for them.

Looking to other research in this area, there has been little opportunity for these students to speak to their own experiences for themselves and even in this study. The logical next steps would include creating more spaces for Indigenous students from Latin America to share their experiences and Funds of Knowledge, which extends beyond their languages. To continue this study would mean broadening the research to include more Indigenous students across schools who can express their needs and share more elements of their identity and cultural experiences as young members of the community. Furthermore, there is little information about Indigenous language speakers in schools across the state of Tennessee, the Southeast and the United States in general. As Vásquez demonstrates in his analysis of Zapotec students in California schools, what is necessary is a “move toward teacher and school awareness of Indigenous youths’ strengths to facilitate sociocultural lives responsibly.”²⁶⁰ Undeniably, much more research is necessary to fill the gap in data and remove the invisibility surrounding the presence of Mayan youth and their educational experiences across U.S. educational institutions.

As the Director of English Learners Office said during a Professional Development meeting for SHINE teachers, “we have to build up other people in our buildings to do this work.”²⁶¹ As more and more Indigenous students enter Tennessee schools, it is essential that content teachers learn the context of these students and their linguistic repertoires. While the

²⁶⁰ Vásquez, “Zapotec Identity as a Matter of Schooling,” 86.

²⁶¹ Personal observation. November 3, 2022.

work of SHINE teachers is undoubtedly impactful, affirming the identities of Indigenous students cannot be solely the work of 19 teachers.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions for SHINE Teachers

Teacher-Centered Questions

1. Where are you from? How long have you been in Tennessee?
2. What language(s) do you speak?
3. How long have you worked for the SHINE Program?
4. Did you teach before the SHINE Program? If so, who were you teaching?
5. What is your first memorable experience of teaching ESL?
6. How would you describe an English Language Learner (ELL)?
7. What does a normal day at school for you look like?
8. How would you describe your classroom and teaching style?
9. How do you navigate a culturally diverse classroom with a variety of linguistic needs?
10. How has your trauma training/SEL training impacted your experience as a SHINE teacher?
11. What is the greatest challenge you face teaching ELLs?

Student-Center Questions

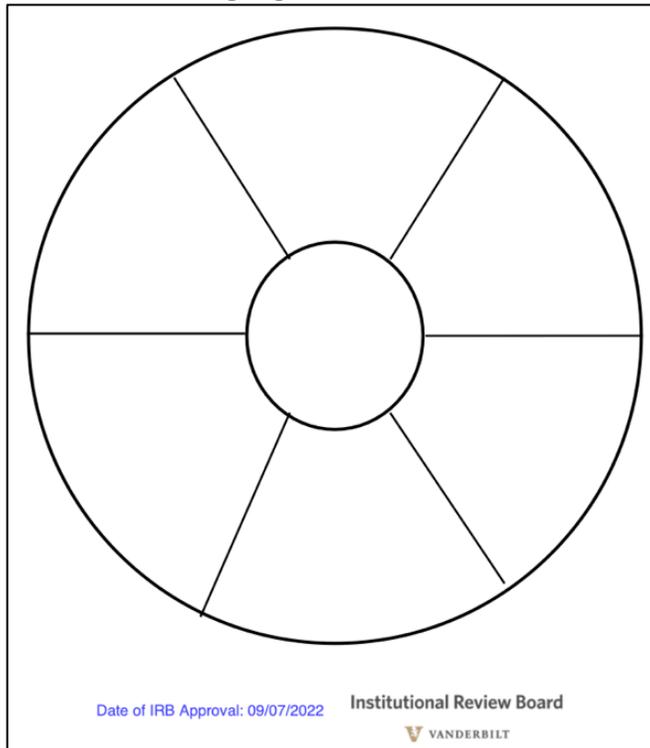
1. What does a normal day at school for your students look like?
2. Where do your students come from? What languages do they speak? Do you have any Indigenous language speakers in your classes now? How many Central American Indigenous students have you had in your previous classes?
3. Have you seen a change in the number of Indigenous students in your classes over the past several years?
4. Do any students or experiences stick out in your mind when thinking of previous classes/years you taught with SHINE?
5. How long do you typically work with your students for in total?
6. Have you seen any significant changes in your Indigenous students from their first day in the SHINE program to the last day? If so, what kind of changes? If not, why do you think that is?
7. How would you describe the present situation for ELL children in this city in Tennessee?
8. Do Indigenous students from Latin America have a different educational and social experience from that of non-Indigenous students? If so, in what way?
9. Do you think Indigenous students are able to preserve their native language and culture in the classroom? What about at home? Do you think they want to? How does this compare to other students in your SHINE classroom?
10. What is the relationship like between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from Latin America in the classroom? Does this relationship change over time during the academic year?
11. What is the greatest challenge facing your students? Are these the same or different for your Indigenous language speaking students?

APPENDIX B

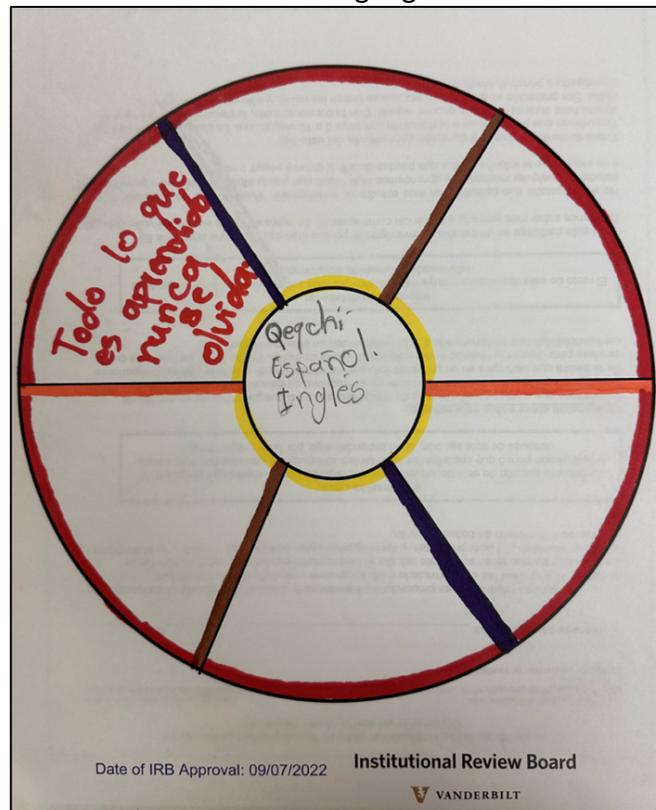
SHINE Student Focus Group Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you been in TN? Did you live anywhere in the US before?
3. What language(s) do you speak?
4. What did you draw/write on your language pizza? Why?
5. What language(s) do you speak at home? Who do you talk to at home? If you speak more than one language at home, can you give a percentage of how much you use each language?
6. What language(s) do you speak with your friends? Why?
7. What language(s) do you feel most comfortable using at school?
8. What language(s) is most important to you? Why?
9. What are some similarities and/or differences between your home and school here in this city and your hometown?
10. What do you like about this city where you live now? What do you dislike about it?
11. What has been the most challenging part of your transition to this school?
12. When you are struggling, who do you reach out to help you?
13. What does the SHINE program mean to you?

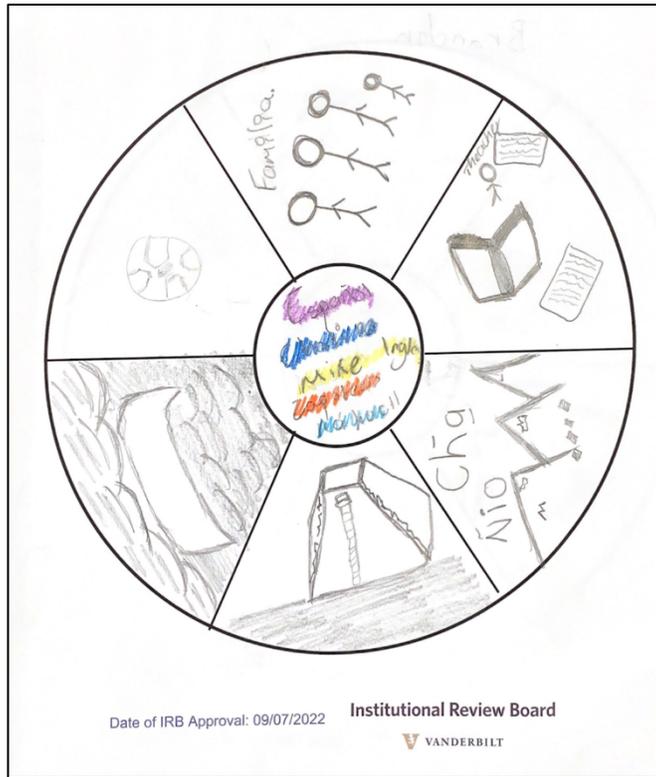
APPENDIX C
Language Pie Worksheet



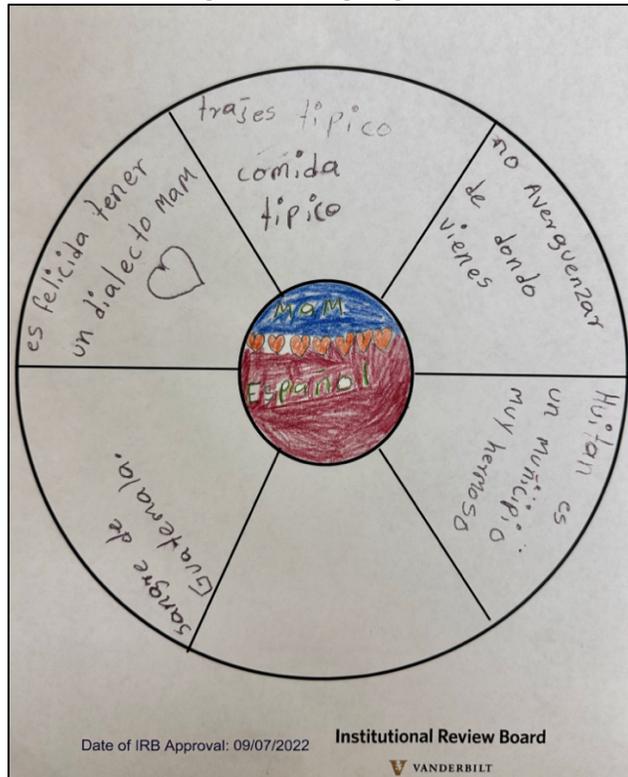
Daniel's Language Pie



Matías's Language Pie



Lagina's Language Pie



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