The voices of English-language learners (ELLs) and their families and communities are often marginalized in the discourse regarding the education of linguistic-minority students. Moreover, efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes for ELLs are often rooted in a deficit perspective that views linguistically diverse students of color as inferior and undesirable. Therefore, in an effort to foreground their voices and, at the same time, to critique inaccurate assumptions regarding this community, our chapter utilizes an unorthodox methodology to ensure the inclusion of frequently silenced voices. Our approach draws from cultural sources including print media, documentary films, personal experience, family stories, and academic research. Our approach parallels the “counter-story” methodology described by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging majoritarian stories” (p. 23) by centering the experiences and voices of marginalized peoples. In this chapter, we forward the subaltern voices of current and former ELL students, as well as their family and community members, with the goal of contributing to a more complex understanding of ELLs and the sociopolitical context of their education. As multicultural teacher educators, we concur with Les Back (1996) that “these muted voices must be integrated into any understanding of the contemporary politics of culture and identity” (p. 6) and, further, that today’s teachers must understand their work in relation to ELLs’ personal and collective struggles, for example, for cultural survival, educational equity, and social justice.
We realize that we are wading into tricky waters. While we are not bilingual educators or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers per se, we approach this work as former classroom teachers and current teacher educators and researchers concerned with improving the quality of education for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. As we see it, given the highly communicative nature of teaching and the importance of linguistic communication in the relationship between teaching and learning, every teacher is a language teacher. Building on the work of scholars in the field of multicultural education (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Nieto, 2004), we assert that language, literacy, and culture are inextricably linked. Our intention is not to overwhelm readers with a paralyzing portrait of the dire straits confronting ELLs and those who work with them. Rather, we hope to forward, through the use of empowering personal voices, a view of ELLs and the families and communities they come from as vibrant, rich, and vital entities that do, in fact, assert agency and challenge the larger sociopolitical context of their schooling.

Our goal as multicultural teacher educators is to prepare teachers, including preservice teachers and those already in the field, to enter their sites of practice with eyes wide open, fully cognizant of the complexities and profound responsibilities of the work they have chosen to do. Rather than attempting to romanticize the facts, we opt for candor with the intent of demystifying a situation that remains, all too often, clouded by ill-conceived deficit models that place the blame on ELLs and other young people instead of on the institutions that seek to control them. We hope readers will come away not only more aware but also more committed to facing the challenges of providing meaningful educational experiences for today’s ELLs and other students of their generation.

Voice of an Elder (Voice #1): “Your grandmothers and grandfathers spoke in Spanish until the day they died. Everybody we knew did. Sure, they could speak a little English now and then at the store or whenever they needed to, to get by. But they were proud Hisp纳入os. They traced their lineage back to España, back to Spain. They could show you the documents signed in the royal court that gave their families their tracts of land in New Mexico way back in the 1500s. As far as they were concerned, Spanish was the national language. People who speak today of making English the national language don’t know what they are talking about. Our familia has always lived on Spanish-speaking soil. It is our land—nuestra tierra—and our way of life. We’ve been on this land longer than the Pilgrims, longer than those Anglo so-called founding fathers. And we speak Spanish and a little English. Don’t you ever forget it, m’hijito. Don’t let anyone tell you different. Be proud of who you are. Know where you come from, know your history. Most of all, love your familia, love the land, and love la Raza.”
History Informs the Current Context for Learning and Teaching

As multicultural educators, we draw from the groundbreaking work of Sonia Nieto (2004) and the more recent scholarship of Nieto and Patty Bode (2008) to define what we mean by the “sociopolitical context” of education. As we understand it, the sociopolitical context in which ELLs are situated, and thus defined, is rooted in the history of protracted cultural collisions that flared up in the contest between the colonizers of the Americas. The literal wars between England, France, Spain, and other European powers—not to mention against the indigenous peoples who were overwhelmed by imported diseases and intentional genocide—underwrite the origins of the present-day culture wars. We define the contemporary culture wars following Ira Shor (1988) to describe the systematic rollbacks undertaken largely by political conservatives to dismantle the gains of the left-leaning social movements of the mid-twentieth century. These rollbacks include, among numerous others, attacks on reproductive rights for women and legal protections for sexual minorities (such as gay men, lesbians, and members of the transgender community), state-by-state attempts to outlaw progressive interventions (such as affirmative action and same-sex marriage), as well as more localized efforts to water down (i.e., depoliticize) multicultural education and dismantle bilingual education in its various forms. We hold that today’s ELLs are caught in the crossfire of raging debates over immigration reform, the future of bilingual education, and mean-spirited (and short-sighted) English-only initiatives, all of which represent the continuation into the present day of age-old conflicts about social and economic control over and within colonized territory. In our view, the current educational status of ELLs is made all the more precarious due to its outgrowth from the nexus of centuries-long collisions between cultures and distinct ways of life.

Current political debates around issues such as bilingual education and immigration tend to overlook or simply ignore the legacy of physical colonization as well as linguistic imperialism that have been at the center of U.S. expansion. From our perspective, Spanish speakers, who currently constitute the largest linguistic-minority population in the United States, have become an increasingly popular target in the culture wars. Spanish speakers, otherwise known as hispanohablantes, number approximately thirty-two million, representing almost 12 percent of the entire population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). After English and Spanish, the next most common language spoken in the United States is French, with four million people in the country claiming to speak the language fluently. Therefore, one can argue that efforts to suppress linguistic diversity are reflective of “hispanophobia” and represent a form of linguistic colonialism, which,
we argue, is central to understanding the current sociopolitical context in which ELLs are embedded.

Much of what is currently referred to as the Southwest of the United States was once northern Mexico. While the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) resulted in the imposition of a new border between the United States and Mexico, many individuals still refer to this land as “occupied America” (Acuña, 2000) or Aztlán, the ancestral home of the indigenous Nahua peoples. Referring to the territory in these terms signals not only to the contentious struggle for land and the vestiges of colonialism but also references how these factors contribute to shaping the identities of many of the lands’ current inhabitants.

While individuals of Mexican descent comprise the largest percentage of hispanohablantes in the United States, Puerto Ricans, the second largest group, share a similar history of colonization, first by the Spanish and later by the United States. The island of Puerto Rico, a U.S. colonial possession since 1898, is one of the oldest colonies on the face of the earth. When the United States first occupied the island, one of its first imperialistic acts was to change the mode of instruction in schools from Spanish to English (Negrón de Montilla, 1975). Puerto Rican teachers who were not fluent in English were forced to teach using a language that neither they nor their students understood. Language was, and continues to be, a primary vehicle for the cultural suppression and subjugation of Puerto Rico.

The cultural collisions that were a product of U.S. imperialism and westward expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries played out in schools on the U.S. mainland as well. Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest/Aztlán at the turn of the twentieth century were often denied access to any education. In fact, by 1915 nearly 80 percent of Mexican children in Texas did not attend school, and even as late as 1944 only approximately half of school-aged Mexican children were enrolled in school (Cockcroft, 1995). Opportunities for formal education that were available were typically in segregated schools, housed in dilapidated facilities, with outdated and often biased curriculum materials that were discarded by white schools. Such conditions reflect majority views of and prejudice against “undesirable” populations.

Contrary to misconceptions and stereotypes regarding the educational aspirations of Latino families, Mexican parents in the Southwest/Aztlán have a long legacy of activism and struggle for educational equity and social justice. For example, responding to a lack of access to quality education for their children, parents in Texas withheld the names of two hundred school children from U.S. Census personnel, resulting in significantly less money for per pupil expenditures flowing into the district. If their children could not access the same resources as their white counterparts, parents decided...
they would not subsidize the education of Anglo students. While many people today are familiar with the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision that ended *de jure* segregation in the United States, few are aware that the first successful school integration case was won by Mexican Americans in Lemon Grove, California, in 1931 (Alvarez, 1986; Garcia, 2001). Upset by the fact that their children could not have access to the new school constructed in the town for white students, Mexican American parents mobilized members of their community and brought a case against the school district, eventually winning the first successful school-integration case in the history of the United States. Despite this early victory, Latinos were not officially recognized as covered under the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision until 1973 (Cockcroft, 1995), and today they remain one of the most segregated group of students in the country.

Beyond access to education and the quest for equality of resources (including facilities, books, and qualified teachers) that were assumed to accompany the promise of racial/ethnic school integration, was the issue of quality classroom instruction. Because many Mexican American families spoke Spanish as their primary language, schools in the Southwest/Aztlan were faced with the task of educating students who spoke languages most teachers did not understand. Although there is a current backlash against using any language other than English as a means of instruction in public schools, it is important to note that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the U.S. war with Mexico, recognized the cultural distinctiveness as well as the linguistic and educational rights of Mexicans remaining in the Southwest/Aztlan after the U.S. acquisition of close to half of the land belonging to Mexico. Moreover, early state constitutions in states such as New Mexico explicitly outlined provisions for bilingual education in these newly acquired states (MacDonald, 2004). According to the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and the Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols*, instruction for ELLs has to be meaningful. That is, it is unconstitutional (i.e., illegal) to immerse students in classrooms where they can understand little or none of the linguistic communication in the classroom. That being said, there continues to be a significant discrepancy between legal and educational policy and practice. There are many published stories of linguistic-minority students, past and present, languishing in classrooms where they understand little if any of the language spoken in the classroom.

While this chapter tends to focus on *hispanohablantes* as the largest linguistic-minority group, we remind readers that contemporary ELLs include students from Native communities, both in urban and reservation settings. Native Americans long have felt the effects of colonization and deculturalization. The imposition of English-only schooling has been a key weapon in the government’s struggle to “civilize” American Indians,
Alaskan Natives, and Hawaiian islanders during the past two hundred years (Spring, 2004), and, to this day, struggles for cultural survival, including language revitalization projects and bilingual education, continue in various Native communities.

Contemporary Collisions and the Attempt to Control “Undesirables”

Voice of a Scholar (Voice #2): “So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself . . . Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without always having to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59)

A wealth of scholarship in the area of language acquisition suggests that it takes students approximately five to seven years to develop meaningful proficiency in another language (Crawford, 1999; Cummins, 2000). Transitional bilingual-education programs, aimed at transitioning students into “mainstream” English-dominant classrooms, were typically structured to provide ELLs support for their academic growth and language acquisition for up to five years using the students’ native language in classroom instruction. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan, despite the wealth of evidence to the contrary, mandated that transitional programs be limited to three years. More recently, voters in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have abandoned transitional models in favor of one-year “sheltered immersion” programs where students are allowed limited support in their first language for one year and are then immersed in English-only classrooms, in essence eliminating promising practices in bilingual education in these states with significant ELL student populations.

As the nation continues to grapple with relatively recent legislation such as school desegregation, as evidenced by remedies implemented in response to the 1954 Brown and 1974 Lau Supreme Court decisions, ELLs continue to be positioned as political pawns whose educational needs vie for attention against the objectives of more powerful forces.

Our multicultural, subaltern perspective holds that history renders it too simplistic to accept the majority narrative of a “nation of immigrants” expanding under the watchful and welcoming eye of a benign Statue of
Liberty. U.S. history involves far more turmoil and intercultural strife than the mainstream patriotic narrative suggests, which prefers to tell its story as a pleasant melding of peoples from diverse cultures, all of whom arrived with open hearts and minds and a generosity of spirit to pursue religious freedom and economic security for their families. As Voice of an Elder #1 reminds us, large parts of what is now U.S. territory literally belonged to other nations (both indigenous and European) for generations, if not centuries. Moreover, given this chapter’s focus on ELLs, it is worth noting that the North American lands now controlled by the United States have always been multilingual (Loewen, 1995). Thus, the story of today’s ELLs is not simply a tale of newcomers who “don’t speak English.” It is a deeper and more complex story of ongoing conflict and conquest, of economic and political winners and losers, and of cultural hybridity and moments of intercultural cooperation. A more accurate narrative would include stories of wholesale genocide and transnational movements of people, both in the United States and abroad, spurring concerted efforts for cultural survival, mass migration, and immigration, including to North American shores. In some present-day communities in the United States (for example, in parts of the Southwest/Aztlan), historical conflicts rage on, if only on an emotional or ideological level. Families and communities continue to struggle with issues of ethnic pride and identity in which language issues play a significant role.

Another example of the struggle for cultural affirmation and survival unfolded more recently in Oakland, California, when in 1994 the school board proposed using Ebonics (also referred to as African American English Vernacular) in the teaching of African American students. The argument advanced by the Oakland School Board was rooted in the premises that students’ cultural sensibilities, including language, should be affirmed and that the culture of African Americans can potentially be used as a bridge to help students acquire the “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995) necessary to successfully navigate schooling. The Oakland proposal received criticism from those opposing any form of bilingual education as well as from critics rejecting the idea that Ebonics is a distinct language that merits consideration in the classroom. Much of the antipathy toward Ebonics, as well as other language forms, emanates from oppressive historical relationships (between the powerful elite and the “undesirable” populations) that continue to manifest themselves in the present day. The rejection of Oakland’s proposal to make instruction more culturally responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of African American students, along with the electoral victories in several states to outlaw bilingual education clearly demonstrates the intense political nature of English-language learning. To remedy this situation, teachers need to understand their work in classrooms as necessarily a political activity and not only as an educational one.
Language Teaching as a Political Act

Voice of a Scholar (Voice #3): “Language learning is the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific social identity. What kind of person should we bring into being? Every vested interest in the community is concerned with what is to happen during those years, with how language training is to be organized and evaluated, for the continued survival of any power structure requires the production of certain personality types. The making of an English program becomes, then, not simply an educational venture but a political act.” (Rouse, 1979, p. 2)

We believe that a significant part of our responsibility as multicultural teacher educators is facilitating the development of what Lilia Bartolomé and Donaldo Macedo term “political clarity” (Macedo & Bartolomé, 2000, p. 4). One aspect of that project involves offering our teacher education students a variety of perspectives from the study of history, politics, and literature to counter the popular tendency toward an ahistorical view of intercultural relations in our pluralistic society. From this perspective, all teaching is understood as a political act that takes place within a complex, though often unexamined, sociopolitical context.

To this end, we help teacher education students to understand the work of schools in what Ira Shor (1988) refers to as the current era of “conservative restoration.” Shor identifies the beginnings of the restoration with the rightward political turn in the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan as president. The conservative restoration was the latest installment of the culture wars between defenders of the gains won by the popular social movements of the mid-twentieth century (for instance, the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, and gay liberation) and the mainstream establishment that had lost cultural and political ground. The “wars” were understood to be cultural insofar as they involved pitched debates around questions of culture—that is, definitions of what counts as knowledge, which canons of knowledge would be taught in schools and universities, whose language would dominate as the official language, and even what were the definitions of cultural institutions such as marriage and the family. Specifically targeted by the Right were many of the progressive innovations in education, including ethnic and women’s studies, affirmative action, and multicultural and bilingual education.

Shor’s cogent analysis of the culture wars explains clearly how the nation’s rightward shift in the 1980s marked the beginning of what would become sustained assaults on hard-won progressive gains. According to Macedo and Bartolomé (2000), there remains today a direct correlation between the colonial legacy of white supremacy, current grabs for global
corporate power, and calls for anti-immigrant policies on the domestic front. Under the recent U.S. regime, the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act can be understood as one of the latest accomplishments of the conservative restoration. Explicating the links between the current discourse of accountability, high-stakes testing, and cultural hegemony, Joel Spring (2004) argues, “The NCLB Act represents a victory for those advocating that schools teach a uniform American culture . . . The primary emphasis in the legislation is on the acquisition of English rather than support of minority languages and cultures” (p. 123).

Whereas progressives advocated for more inclusive schools with increased multicultural curricular offerings, antibias structural reforms, and expanded opportunities for historically marginalized students (including ELLs), the conservative restoration has systematically attempted to curtail the inroads made by the social movements of the 1960s. In their insightful review of Macedo and Bartolomé, R. Truth Goodman and Kenneth Saltman (2001) explain how the restoration relies on an explicitly racialized discourse: “Conservatives have launched a discourse on cultural and linguistic purity, insisting that White culture, White power, White jobs, White language, and White territory are endangered because Black and brown people are claiming pieces of ‘our’ precious tax base, national sovereignty, and heritage” (p. 27). Clearly, schools remain one of the main battlegrounds upon which the culture wars continue to be waged, as majority discourse decries the dilution of traditional values, “dumbed down” canons, and increasingly “impure” communities.

Returning briefly to 1980s scholarship for additional historical and contextual insight, we draw upon the perspective of Native scholar and author Vine Deloria, Jr. In his prescient article *Identity and Culture* (1987), Deloria took stock of the last hundred years of social and political struggles in various ethnic communities. Concluding his essay by looking to the future of interethnic relations, Deloria suggested that as members of minority communities became homogenized through education and the rapidly expanding influence of the media, once-vital subcultures might lose their vigor and distinctness: “Racial minorities will always have a social/political identity because of their obvious presence within a large white majority . . . Brutal measures have declined with the increase of majority sophistication, but basic attitudes create new forms of oppression, unique to the age but ancient in impact. As the cultural traditions of racial minorities erode and become homogenized by modern communication, the fearful possibility exists that these groups will be sapped of their natural resources for survival and become perpetual *wards of the welfare state*” (in Takaki, 1987, p. 103, emphasis added).
While the above passage, which was first published in 1981, comes across today as rather prophetic, what Deloria could not have foreseen was the rapid rise in the 1990s of the numbers of actual (as opposed to metaphorical) wards of the state. Nor could he likely have predicted, to quote proponents of neoliberalism, the “end of welfare as we know it.” For example, Deloria could not have foreseen the staggering growth of what has been described as the prison-industrial complex (see Angela Davis, 1999), which has added exponentially to the ranks of wards of the state in real terms. Vince Beiser, writing in *Mother Jones* in 2001, documented the astronomical rates of incarceration in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Beiser contends that “the number of Americans held in local, state, and federal lockups has doubled—and then doubled again. The United States now locks up some two million people . . . And the number is still growing” (Beiser, 2001). The United States ranks number one among industrialized nations in the percentage of the population it incarcerates. Beiser further documents how, since the 1980s, per capita spending on prisons grew six times faster than spending for higher education. Moreover, the racial disparity of prison populations has been widely publicized. That is, the clear overrepresentation of inmates of color has become common knowledge. We concur with Beiser’s analysis that the reasons behind these alarming rates are not only escalating rates of crime. On the contrary, as Beiser asserts, “It’s not crime that has increased; it’s punishment. More people are now arrested for minor offenses, more arrestees are prosecuted, and more of those convicted are given lengthy sentences. Huge numbers of current prisoners are locked up for drug offenses and other transgressions that would not have met with such harsh punishment 20 years ago” (p. 63).

Along with the rapid rise of the prison industrial complex, other social phenomena provide examples of the ongoing culture wars and, in our view, further attempt to position so-called undesirables as wards of the state. For example, we can look to recent attempts to assert official government agency in the effort to control language use as evident in recent legal and civil court cases. In several instances, court judges, acting in the role of representatives of the state, have used their platforms to rebuke parents for speaking languages other than English to their children, going so far as to threaten dire consequences for noncompliance. For example, in a 1995 Texas divorce and parental-custody case, a state district judge ruled that it was “child abuse” for a Mexican-born mother to speak Spanish exclusively to her child, suggesting she would be relegating her child to a life of servitude as a “housemaid” (Verhovek, 1995). In another example, a Tennessee judge instructed a mother of Mexican descent who was in court in part for failure to immunize her child (arguably a controversial practice), to “use birth control and learn English” (Barry, 2005). In yet another case, the
same judge threatened a Mexican mother with terminating her parental rights if she did not learn to speak English at a fourth grade level within six months, that is, in time for her next court date. According to the *Los Angeles Times* article about this case, the court order noted that “the court specifically informs the mother that if she does not make the effort to learn English, she is running the risk of losing any connection—legally, morally and physically—with her daughter forever” (Barry, 2005, p. A14). The threatened removal of children from their unfit and undesirable (i.e., non–English-speaking, non-Christian, and “uncivilized”) parents harkens back eerily to the widespread roundup of Native children and the origins of the Indian boarding-school movement of the late-nineteenth century (see Spring, 2004).

The ward-of-the-state metaphor can be applied further to describe the experiences of a Mexican woman who was held in a Kansas hospital against her will for a decade, spanning from 1983 to 1993. The hospital staff diagnosed and treated the woman as a schizophrenic after attempting to converse with her in English and Spanish. However, the woman’s primary language was Raramuri, an indigenous language similar to that spoken by the Aztecs. A lawsuit filed on the woman’s behalf stated, “All of the defendants [which included more than a dozen doctors and several other professional staff] forced Ms. Quintero to abandon her ethnic identity and conform to Euro-American cultural customs by forcing her to attend certain activity therapies, by forcing her to change her behavior, her dress, her language, her thoughts, her beliefs” (Corrin, 1996).

Efforts to usurp the rights of linguistic minorities and to exert increased control over their communities are clearly evident in the actions of the aforementioned government agents. In the first example from Texas, speaking to a child in a language other than English was equated with child abuse. In the Tennessee case, not only did the judge attempt to infringe on a woman’s reproductive rights by suggesting that a mother appearing in his court not bear any more children, but the court also threatened to physically remove another woman’s child from her custody if she could not meet its prescribed level of English proficiency prior to the next scheduled hearing. The final example tells the story of the forced incarceration and concurrent culturally insensitive treatment of a woman based solely on a psychiatric diagnosis made as a result of conversations in a language she did not understand. Although each of these events is shocking in and of itself, it is important to consider these cases not as random acts but rather as present-day examples of institutional oppression against ELLs with historical roots that date back centuries.

While not necessarily related to efforts to increase the ranks of legal wards of the state, we find further evidence to increase state control over certain groups of deemed “undesirable” in the movement to make English
the official language of the United States. Beginning in the early 1980s, groups such as U.S. English have advocated for the creation of a constitutional amendment to identify English as the country’s official language. Cloaked in benign efforts to “unify” the country around one language, the potential outcomes associated with the creation of such a national policy are far more sinister. One of the most significant implications of this proposed legislation would be a mandate to ensure that all federal documents, including election ballots, would be available only in English. Given the proficiency needed to navigate the process of voting, it is likely that many ELLs would become disenfranchised as a result. Considering the recent significant population gains made among minority populations in the United States, coupled with future population projections that predict the deepening ethnic, racial, and linguistic texture of the country, perhaps these actions are not unintended consequences.

Efforts to mandate one official language fail to recognize the multilingual history of the country. Written in 1777, the Articles of Confederation, the country’s first constitution, were disseminated in English, French and German (Crawford, 1999). However, more than two centuries later, as the United States has become increasingly linguistically diverse, proponents of English-only legislation believe government documents should be available in only one language. In fact, there is evidence to suggest the authors of the Constitution deliberately refused to name an official language, suggesting that choice, and in this case choice related to language, should be the cornerstone of democracy (Brice-Heath, 1992; Crawford, 1999). Certainly proposed English-only legislation presents serious implications for all ELLs; given the predominance of people in the United States who speak Spanish as a primary language (the United States is home to the second largest Spanish-speaking population in the world), it would have a disproportionate, adverse affect on the burgeoning population of hispanohablantes.

Anti-immigrant initiatives and proposed language restrictions, as Macedo and Bartolomé (2000) point out, have become a key trope in a vote-getting discourse based largely on racism and fear of the Other (or what we are calling “undesirables”) in the popular imagination. Once again, we see how ELLs, many of whom come from immigrant communities, are positioned as pawns in ongoing sociopolitical controversies, rather than as individual children and youth with pressing educational needs.
From Collision and Containment to Cultural Connectedness

Voice of Adolescent ELL (Voice #4): “My family came here from Cambodia when I was real little. I’m 14 now; I was a baby then. My parents work very hard so us kids can get an education and have a better life here. A lot of my friends are in a gang. It’s hard because they are my friends, you know, but I see that thug life is not for me. I’m trying to keep myself out of trouble, but trouble always seems to find me. I been suspended three times this year, mostly for attendance, once for fighting. I was defending myself after we got jumped by these American boys. It makes no sense. They say go to school, but if you don’t, we gonna throw you out anyway. What kind of logic is that? If I don’t show up in school, I’m in trouble, but if I do show up in school, I’m in trouble, too. My teachers don’t like me. They do not understand me or respect me or what I’m about. They think because they can’t speak my language or even pronounce my name that I must be dumb or less than them. I am afraid that if I get suspended one more time, I may get deported. Yes, actually sent to Cambodia because I was born there. My probation officer told me about this. They got new rules about that. You mess up here, you find your ass over there in some place where you don’t know anybody or how anything works. It happened to one of my homies. I don’t want to lose my family and everything I know just because of one slip I happen to make.”

The voice of the Cambodian ELL teenager above expresses the legal limbo facing a number of ELLs from immigrant families and the high stakes facing others who find themselves occasionally in legal trouble. Henry Giroux (1997) has alerted educators to the adversarial legal predicament facing not only young ELLs, but the entire generation now experiencing childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. According to Giroux, adult society has not only turned its back on traditional “undesirable” populations but also has expanded the parameters delineating undesirable populations to include all youths: “Releasing itself from its obligations to youth, the American public continuously enacts punishment-driven policies to regulate and contain youth within a variety of social spheres” (p. 2). In Giroux’s view, adult society equates youths as a class with the blurring of traditional lines of difference, and it writes off many youths as undesirable: “The attack on youth and the resurgence of a vitriolic racism in the United States is, in part, fueled by adult anxiety and fear over the emergence of a cultural landscape in which cultural mobility, hybridity, racial mixing, and indeterminacy increasingly characterize a generation of young people who appear to have lost faith in the old modernist narratives of cultural homogeneity, the work ethic, repressive sublimation, and the ethos of rugged individualism” (Giroux, 1997, p. 6, emphasis added).
Blaming youths for many social ills impacts ELLs to an even greater degree, as evidenced in the example of the teen whose voice opened this section (see Voice #4). Even as the aging generation of adults is apparently fascinated by the more spectacular aspects of youth culture (e.g., youthful celebrities and athletes), it nevertheless positions youths as a problem to be solved through more and more regulation and containment. Poor youths and youths of color, in particular, bear the brunt of this ageist assault. California’s Proposition 21 (the Juvenile Crime Initiative of 2001) epitomizes the ways in which adult society has come to fear and then criminalize the young, just as the national discourse around immigration reform demonizes and seeks to punish undocumented workers as “illegals.” The California example is especially pertinent to our discussion of ELLs since it occurred in a multilingual state with broad pockets of burgeoning multicultural and “minority-majority” populations, particularly in its major cities.

A study of Californian urban youths’ identities conducted by Fazila Bhimji (2004) provides insight into the divide-and-conquer dynamic in this adult-driven legislation. The Juvenile Crime Initiative effectively separates unruly youths into two camps, namely “good kids who make mistakes” and “bad kids” who are dangerous and incorrigible and therefore in need of incarceration (p. 40). Bhimji describes the harsh nature of Proposition 21, which not only allows children as young as fourteen to be tried in adult court for murder and serious sex offenses but also increases the powers of prosecutors to try young people as adults for less serious crimes, among other provisions. In Bhimji’s analysis, “The representations of urban youth, reflected in California’s policies and in the media, portray urban youth of color as deviant, dangerous, and morally un-reformable” (p. 43).

In both instances, that is, in the case of California’s Proposition 21 and in the immigration-reform debate taking place at the national level, official calls for containment provide politically expedient responses to the artificially manipulated sense of moral panic and adult insecurity. Containment can happen on many levels: through building a wall along the border between two nations, through self-appointed vigilantes who patrol the border, and through the construction of more and more prison cells. The discourse of containment also attempts to control unruly youths discursively through policing their language, music, and even dress styles (think of the growing popularity of uniforms in urban public schools, as well as adult indignation over the use of profanity and the widespread use of the “N-word” in hip-hop lyrics). Linking the criminalization of youths as a class to fear of what we are calling “undesirables,” Giroux (1997) writes, “The growing demonization of youth and the spreading racism in this country indicate how fragile democratic
life can become when the most compassionate spheres of public life—
public education, health care, social services—increasingly are attacked
and abandoned” (p. 15).

For youths in immigrant communities, including many ELLs, the stakes
now include deportation to countries with which they may have no cul-
tural or linguistic familiarity, particularly if they were born in the United
States or came to the United States as very young children. As teacher edu-
cators, we feel obligated to prepare preservice teachers for an admittedly
harsh sociopolitical reality that is most effectively addressed without sugar
coating. At the same time, we feel responsible for engendering a spirit of
hopefulness so that novice teachers will stay in the trenches and take up
arduous and challenging, but nonetheless rewarding, work with young
people. In the final section, we turn to possibilities and practices that we
believe can make a difference for today’s ELLs, particularly when teachers
view themselves as allies in struggle.

From Pedagogy to Empowerment

Voice of a Scholar (Voice #5): “This is not a pretty picture of the world being
constructed for us by the market system. These are toxic conditions for our
work in colleges. What to do? . . . Connect to others who are in the same
boat. Full and part-time teachers, along with our students and their families,
need to stand together to get the . . . programs we deserve, but we also have
to stand with the cheap labor that cleans our classrooms, dorms, and offices,
as well as with the cheap labor that grows our delicious bananas in Guate-
mala and stitches our elegant running shoes in Vietnam. The choices are
only becoming more stark—solidarity or inequity, solidarity or barbarism.”
(Leo Shor in Parascondola, 2007).

In this chapter, we have argued that ELLs, along with other populations
that are deemed threatening and undesirable in majority discourse, are
positioned in marginalized and controlling ways. We have shown, through
examples of the actual voices of ELLs, their family members, and scholars
writing from within and about ELL communities, various ways in which
ELLs have responded to marginalization and pathological positioning. In
concluding this chapter, we are mindful once again of how the teaching of
ELLs should be the responsibility of all teachers, not only those designated
as ESL or bilingual educators. We draw this conclusion in the realization
that because teaching and learning are fundamentally communicative, lin-
guistic, and therefore cultural enterprises, each of us has an obligation to
attend to issues of language and culture in education.
We have further argued that one important aspect of preparing future teachers is encouraging teacher-education students to develop political clarity about the larger sociopolitical context surrounding their chosen profession. We have drawn on the definition of sociopolitical context in which teaching and learning occur as advanced in the work of Nieto and Bode (Nieto, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008), particularly where ELLs are concerned. In some ways, given today’s political climate during the conservative restoration (Shor, 1988), all teachers who work in public schools can be said to have been relegated to the ranks of the undesirables by being marginalized themselves. If we equate the majority view of the teaching profession with marginalized communities, particularly in public schools that brim with increasingly diverse students, we can then draw inspiration and strength from the creative responses to marginalization on the part of other supposedly undesirable groups, including ELLs.

In our view, teachers must eventually understand their work as Paulo Freire (1970) understood the work of teaching, particularly when working with ELLs and others from cultural- and linguistic-minority communities. That is, we hope to encourage preservice teachers to see their role as standing not over but also alongside their students in ongoing solidarity to challenge the marginalization thrust upon all of us. In this sense, teaching can be reinterpreted as a political act of solidarity and in service to the ideals of social justice and cultural change.

We draw hope from our experiences in these communities and draw inspiration to continue to champion this cause within our work as multicultural teacher educators. Our optimism is renewed again and again by the courageous examples of various members of ELL communities who, in the face of great odds against them, continue to struggle for educational equity, social justice, and cultural survival.

One step teachers can take is to develop strong alliances with the communities from which their ELL students come. Gil Conchas (2001) also underscores the need for teachers to develop strong ties to students and their communities when teaching students from cultural- and linguistic-minority communities. In his report on his study of variability among urban Latino students, and how one particular school constructed school failure and success, Conchas emphasized the need for schools to “structure learning environments that link academic rigor with strong collaborative relationships among students and teachers” via the implementation of supportive institutional and cultural processes (p. 502).

Another step teachers can take is to become familiar with the discourse of globalization. As one of the three pillars of globalization (the first, according to Suárez-Orozco, 2001, being new information and communication technologies and the second being the emergence of global
markets and postnational, knowledge-intensive economies), immigration and displacement require further study by educational researchers. After all, as Suárez-Orozco writes, “Globalization is the reason that immigrant children are entering U.S. schools in unprecedented numbers. Furthermore, their life chances and future opportunities will be shaped by globalization” (p. 345). An understanding of globalization’s impact on teaching and learning must accompany any serious consideration of the sociopolitical context of education for ELLs.

Helping preservice teachers to appreciate and value the diverse communities in which their students live and learn requires teacher educators to assist them in redefining not only their personal identities but also their conceptualizations of home, particularly through the lens of transnationalism. Loukia Sarroub (2001) reminds us that home is not only the space we occupy but also “a set of relationships and ideas that proffer a different set of expectations than those of school” (p. 391). For the Yemeni American girls in Sarroub’s ethnographic study, home “constituted a set of relationships among people both in the [United States] and in Yemen.” At the same time, never feeling truly at home in either Yemen or the United States, these particular students/sojourners “found a ‘home’ in managing their liminal space” (p. 413). Sarroub draws on the classic sociological construct of the “sojourner” to indicate a bicultural, transnational individual who “remains attached to his or her own ethnic group while simultaneously living in isolation and staying apart from the host society” (p. 392). Such are the complexities of identity and home under globalization and conditions of postmodernity. Living as they do in two worlds, sojourners are marked by their journeys back and forth between host country and homeland. Teacher educators can cultivate an understanding of the benefits of similar cultural border crossing by providing opportunities to engage in cultural border crossing when working with preservice teachers. Particularly for students who come from dominant or mainstream groups, understanding the complexities of liminality and hybrid identities may invite education students to learn to feel at home in more than just their own culture.

We call for teacher-education students to become, as Nieto discusses, not only multicultural educators but also multicultural people. Just as ELLs grapple with border crossings on a daily basis, their teachers can meet them halfway. As Suárez-Orozco (2001) points out in his essay on globalization, immigration, and education, “For many today, the issue is managing the complexities of belonging both ‘here’ and ‘there’: The ‘average’ youth enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District crosses multiple epistemic, linguistic, and political spaces every day. He is likely to have breakfast in Spanish with his parents, listen to hip-hop
music with his African American classmates in the bus to school, and hear about the New Deal in Standard English from his ‘White’ social studies teacher” (p. 361, footnote 19).

In their case study of U.S.-born adolescents at school, Raible and Nieto (2003) found the same dynamics at play. Many students today—not just ELLs—grapple with finding a sense of belonging, which can be particularly challenging when they embody increasingly complex, and multiple, identities. Teacher educators can provide mechanisms by which preservice teachers can be invited to become more “culturally connected” to the children and youths with whom they will one day work (Irizarry, 2007). One way to foster cultural connectedness is to encourage preservice teachers to familiarize themselves thoroughly with the communities and families of their students. In the process, preservice teachers may become not only aware of but also actually value what López (2001) refers to as the “subjugated” forms of parental involvement that previously went unrecognized (p. 434). However, in the process of working to create strong ties of solidarity and caring, teacher educators should be careful not to replicate the pitying “ay bendito” syndrome, referencing the Spanish-language phraseology.

Breaking the Silence: Asian American Students Speak Out, a film made by Roberta Wallitt (2004), documents a recent conversation between Tibetan and Cambodian youth from refugee families living in upstate New York. The combined comments of this group of young people, several of whom dropped out of high school, reflect the poignancy of the sociopolitical context in which many ELLs find themselves. One young woman, whose family emigrated from Cambodia, had this to say about her educational situation: “I think education is important, even though I am a drop-out. I might be a loser in other people’s eyes, but I am happy.” This young person has gone on with her schooling, receiving a general education degree and is now pursuing higher education at a local community college. She added, “Teachers have to have their mind open, and realize that they are learning, too. Parents and teachers have to realize that there’s an outside world that students have to deal with. They have to give the students respect and realize that they have harder stuff to deal with in the outside world” (Wallitt, 2004).

We close this chapter with the words of another youth in this group of immigrant students, a young man whose family emigrated from Tibet. In Wallitt’s film, he described how vulnerable he felt as a newcomer and how he was ridiculed and even described as “retarded” for being an ELL student. The film concludes, as we now do, with a compelling suggestion. All educators would do well to take his message to heart.
We listen to them all year and we learn. Some, we don’t listen, some we don’t really care. But we do learn from them and respect what they teach us. But to show that they really do listen to me, I think I would like to give them a quiz at the end of the year and see what you have learned about me. See if you know me at all.

References
