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# English Language Learners' Achievement at an Urban High School in Atlanta, U.S.

*EL2-elevers skolprestationer vid en gymnasieskola i Atlanta, USA*

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## ABSTRACT

This explorative research paper looks at language proficiency development of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States, and examines what factors influence their academic achievement. The paper discusses cultural and linguistic diversity in the United States and aims to explore educational policies, in relation to educating ELLs. The study was carried out with a qualitative approach where semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers and two administrators at the high school of the investigation. The data collected were analysed with a constant comparative approach, and a thick description of the setting is provided. The conclusion that is drawn from this investigation is that ELLs' academic achievement is affected by a wide range of factors, including current testing policies, resource allocation, school system requirements, school environment, home situation, and the ELLs' previous schooling.

**Keywords:** Academic Achievement, Education Policies, English Language Learners (ELLs), English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Urban High Schools

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## DIVISION OF LABOUR

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The State of Georgia is a culturally diverse area. The diverse population is growing steadily, and there are more than 50 per cent minority enrolments across school districts (Tarasawa, 2009). When looking at statistics, research indicates that foreign born students across the United States, and particularly in the state of Georgia, seem to be consistently underperforming their native English speaking peers on high-stakes standardised tests (Echeverria, Short & Powers, 2006; Georgia Department of Education, 2008). Owing to this, and after carefully considering different research possibilities for our study in the United States, we decided to investigate an ESOL program at a local urban high school, located in the Atlanta metro area. At this high school we wanted to gain an understanding about an unfamiliar school setting and to get an insight into what other educators are experiencing in a culturally and linguistically diverse area.

The purpose of this explorative research paper was to look at language proficiency development of English Language Learners (ELL), and especially what factors influence their academic achievement. The research question we aimed to answer in this text is as follows:

- What do five ESOL teachers at Little Hills High School believe influence ELLs' academic achievement?

To investigate this, our research was carried out with a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers at the high school of our investigation. An interview schedule with five main themes was used, and the data were

subsequently coded following a constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Hopefully, our research will equip us with a better understanding of second language education. We also hope to widen our perspectives on how to make multicultural and multilingual classrooms more accessible, meaningful and effective for all students. Additionally, we hope that this research can assist other educators as well in their efforts to better address the complex educational, cultural and linguistic issues of urban communities, for the benefit of language minority students.

## 1.2 Abbreviations and Key Concepts Used

- AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress. This is the yearly measure of progress introduced in the federal 2001 educational legislation No Child Left Behind.
- ELL-M: English Language Learner Monitored. A student who has been classified as ELL but has exited the ESOL programme and is monitored.
- ELL: English Language Learner. A student whose primary or home language is not English, and who is eligible for supportive service based on results of language placement assessment.
- ESOL: English to Speakers of Other Languages. This is the name of the programme that provides services to ELLs, not the students themselves.
- GHS GT: Georgia High School Graduation Test.
- GSU: Georgia State University.
- Hispanic: The term Hispanic defines a region of origin. The United States Government and the United States Census Bureau use this term on all federal forms and documents, when describing any person whose origins are Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central or South American, or of some other areas where Spanish is the primary language.
- Inclusion: The act of placing English language learners in a mainstream classroom, relying on the mainstream teacher to provide necessary instructional accommodations. Used interchangeably with *mainstreaming*.
- L1: The student's first language.

- L2:** The student's second language.
- Latino, Latina:** In American English, the terms Hispanic and Latino are often used interchangeably. However, Latino is used when referring to gender neutral, and Latina when specifically referring to women.
- Mainstream:** Classrooms in which the teacher may or may not have ESOL training and where the course curriculum is grade level and delivered in English.
- Mainstreaming:** The act of placing English language learners in a mainstream classroom, relying on the mainstream teacher to provide necessary instructional accommodations. Used interchangeably with *inclusion*.
- NCLB:** No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.
- SIOP:** Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol is a teaching style founded on the concept of providing meaningful instruction in the content areas for ELLs, while simultaneously improving English proficiency.
- Push-in Instruction:** Students remain in their general education class where they receive content instruction from their content area teacher along with language assistance from the ESOL teacher.
- Title 1:** Title I is legislative part of NCLB. Title 1 support school districts that are educating high numbers of low-income students through federal funds and programs, and includes many opportunities for parent and community involvement.
- Urban Education:** Diverse schools in metropolitan communities, characterized by large enrolments of various ethnic minorities, multiple languages, typically with a greater concentration of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds.
- WIDA:** World-class Instructional Design and Assessment is a consortium of states dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for ELLs.

## 2 Theoretical Context: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the United States

### 2.1 Demographics and Immigration

The volume of immigration to the United States has varied over time; it was relatively small till the 1840s when it rose rapidly. From 1873 to 1910, approximately 9,306,000 immigrants migrated to the United States. Although the volume fell between 1931 and 1946, by the 1970s this had again increased substantially. The rise in volume continued and during the 1990s the average yearly number of immigrants that entered the United States surpassed that of any previous periods in the history of the United States (Brisk, 2006; Dueñas & Mellis, 2000:a).

According to the Migration Policy Institute (2011), the average of immigrants arriving in the United States has been close to 1 million per year during the last two decades. By 2007, the percentage of foreign-born people living in the United States began to approach the sizes that were seen during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century migration, and by the end of 2009 immigrants compromised 38.5 million of the total United States population of approximately 305 million. These immigrants – both documented and undocumented – have mainly Hispanic or Asian background, in contrast with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century European migration. As the immigrant population grows, the country becomes more culturally and linguistically diverse, with growing numbers of immigrant children entering school in the United States (Brisk, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Based on 2007 census results, there are more than five million immigrant children attending American schools. The schools in the states of New York, Texas, Florida, Arizona and Illinois have a majority of language minority students (Brisk, 2006). According to statistics, states such as Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Nebraska, Kentucky and Indiana have experienced a 300 per cent growth of

immigrant students between 1995 and 2005. The state of Georgia has experienced a 291 per cent growth of ELLs for the same period, which means that the ELL population in public schools has almost tripled during the last decade. In the 2007-2008 academic year, 79,894 ELLs enrolled in public schools in the state of Georgia, of which 65,815 received language assistance. These ELLs vary in their educational and linguistic backgrounds, nationality and English proficiency (Colombo & Furbush 2009; Echevarria et al., 2004; USDOE, 2009).

Some of the most significant increases in recent immigration in Georgia have occurred in the Atlanta region, where Latinos are the fastest growing foreign-born group. The first wave of Latino immigrants came in connection with the summer Olympics of 1996, as there was a shortage of construction workers. An agreement was made with the Mexican government and temporary visas were given to Mexican workers, who were hired over a limited period of time to construct the infrastructure needed for the Olympics. Though the workers were supposed to leave after a specified period of time, many stayed in the United States with their families (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011; Tarasawa, 2009). The large Latino growth in Atlanta had a tremendous impact on the region's schools, and public high school enrolments in the twenty-county Atlanta region increased by 83 per cent; enrolments in the six largest Atlanta school districts increased by 70 per cent, and in the suburbs the enrolments grew more than double, with a 114.2 per cent increase (Tarasawa, 2009).

The 2000 United States Census indicates that 311 languages are spoken in the United States. Many of these are represented in the United States public schools, but the majority of the ELLs are Spanish speakers. Spanish speakers make up of 79 per cent of the ELLs; Vietnamese (2 per cent), Hmong (1,6 per cent), Chinese (1 per cent) and Korean (1 per cent) are other major languages spoken by the ELLs. In addition to these, there are other minor language groups (15,4 per cent) (Colombo & Furbush, 2009; Echevarria et al., 2004).

The Spanish speaking ELLs are however not a homogenous group. This group contains speakers of Spanish from many different countries and regions, with different cultures, dialects and vocabularies. In addition to language differences, ELLs in the United States differ in other aspects as well. While some ELLs are born in the United States, being second- or even third-generation immigrants, some have arrived to the United States as immigrants themselves. Whereas some of these newly arrived immigrants have received extensive schooling previous to arriving to the United States,

some are illiterate and have received little to no schooling. However, one factor that often ties these students together is their low socio-economic status (Colombo & Furbush, 2009; Echevarria et al., 2004).

The increasing population of immigrant students across the nation, along with the objective of educational success, have shifted the ELLs into English-only programmes (Cho & Reich, 2008; Echeverria et al., 2006). Similarly, teaching and learning in American schools have become embedded in a particularly standardised teaching-to-the-test model. According to Brisk (2006), this shift has created educational difficulties for ELLs, hindering their academic achievements.

Figure 1: Per cent of students meeting or exceeding the passing standard

Year: 2011	Language Arts	Mathematics	Social Studies	Science
ELLs	54%	57%	41%	66%
Non ELLs	93%	87%	83%	95%

Source: Georgia Department of Education 2011:b

When looking at the test scores from Georgia above, it is clear that ELLs struggle to score well on high-stakes tests. This in turn prevents them from graduating from both secondary school and high school (Cho & Reich, 2008).

## 2.2 Language Policies

During the past century in the United States, ESOL programmes have experienced a great deal of changes. These changes in education policies are closely linked to periods of high immigration in the early and late twentieth century, along with the political nature of educating ELLs. Policymakers in the United States have held different attitudes towards immigrants over time. As a result, some education policies have introduced bilingual programmes whereas others have abolished bilingual education or required Standard English only as the medium of instruction (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a).

Immigration brought many new languages to the United States. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants established schools using the languages of their countries of origin, while teaching English as a second language (Brisk, 2006). The

presence of many languages in schools was nationally accepted, and cultural and linguistic identity was not seen as an issue. However, in connection with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration, attitudes towards those perceived to be foreigners began to shift. This shift becomes evident when looking at the emergence of political movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a; Marková, 1978). Some of these movements were affected by the idea that high immigration was threatening national identity (Brisk, 2006). Through immigration and nationality laws, the federal government attempted to exclude unwanted immigrant groups, and the rebuilding of “national identity was articulated through concepts of race, language, country of origin, and religion” (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a p. 66). One example of this was the 1882 Chinese Act that restricted Chinese immigration for ten years (Tollefson, 2002). According to Dueñas and Melis (2000:a), this restriction was an attempt to limit an immigrant population that was regarded as undesirable in the United States. Many of these laws focused on language, and laws restricting the use of foreign languages in both schools and other public domains came into effect. Similarly, European immigrants were required to speak English in order to start their process of naturalization (Brisk, 2006).

Along with the anti-immigrant movement and the fear that Americans might lose national identity, a new form of standardized English testing became popular in the 1920s. The test findings sustained attempts to reduce immigration, and were used by psychologists and researchers to report evidence that immigrant children were inferior in intelligence, compared with their American peers. These claims strongly supported education policies that encouraged the acquisition of English over the maintenance of native languages. As a result, by 1920 English had been imposed as the sole language of instruction in nearly all states across the nation; by 1923, thirty-four states had banned instruction in students’ native languages. Nevertheless, the same year a number of appeals for breaking this law had been filed to the Supreme Court. The most influential legal case was *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923), a provincial school teacher who was convicted for teaching German to immigrant children. The Nebraska Supreme Court argued that teaching foreign languages was unfavourable to national safety (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a; Tollefson, 2002). At this point, the imposition of English was based on the connection between loyalty to the United States and national identity (Nieto, 2009).

Towards the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there were some bilingual and dual-language programmes in private and provincial schools in the United States. However, public

schools almost exclusively adopted a sink-or-swim attitude towards ELL education. A sink-or-swim approach is based on the belief that immigrant students should be fully immersed and exposed to the target language in order to learn it and to be successful, without being given additional language support. Children attending regular schools were submersed in English-only programmes. In order to compensate for lower language proficiency, most of the immigrant children were put back one or two grades, and retained until they had acquired enough English to manage (Brisk, 2006; Lotherington, 2004). Teachers did seldom adopt new techniques in order to better approach the ELLs and responsibility fell on the students (Wong & LoBianco, 1999).

Some of these foreign-born non-English speaker students succeeded in English-only programmes, although the dropout rates were very high. For instance, in Boston only 38 per cent of the ELLs reached high school, whereas nearly 70 per cent of American-born students accomplished that goal. This massive school failure of foreign-born students demonstrates the malfunction of the sink-or swim approach (Brisk, 2006). However, at this time, during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the expanding economy needed unskilled labour. Consequently there was little pressure for newcomers to learn English or to obtain a high school certificate, as they easily found employment without this (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a).

During the next half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration changed. Most immigrants to the United States came from Latin America and Asia rather than from Europe. Recent newcomers also encounter a different situation than that of earlier immigrants, as they enter an economy with an increased need for educated and skilled labour (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a).

Along with the wave of immigration from Latin America and Asia, the American government started to provide emergency services, booklets, and election ballots – among other information – in various languages. As a result, the connection between language and immigration increased, and concerns regarding language and civil rights started to emerge (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:b). New language policies were introduced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the sink-or-swim approach remained the norm for educating ELLs until 1974, when the Bilingual Education Act was passed. With this Act the Supreme Court ruled that the system was denying immigrant students equal opportunity to education. Furthermore, the previous policy was considered a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and thus the Bilingual Education Act made the sink-or-swim approach unlawful. In addition, the Office of Civil Rights published the *Lau*

*Remedies*, a set of guidelines suggesting standards for better teacher preparation, recommending bilingual education as the best approach for instructing ELLs (Brisk, 2006; Tollefson, 2002).

However, in the 1980s new changes were approaching, as research on bilingual programmes showed that bilingual education was ineffective. It became harshly criticized “as the cause for immigrant children not being able to learn English” (Brisk, 2006: p. 27). As a result, bilingual programmes were no longer seen as appropriate for educating ELLs. What is more, in 1984 the Bilingual Education Act of 1974 was renewed and remodelled, emphasising the importance of English-only programmes and increasing their funding. This legislation was renewed again in 1988 and 1994 with the desire to continue building against bilingual education (Brisk, 2006). In short, in the 1980s and 1990s, language battles in the United States received as much attention as in the early 1900s (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a). An anti-bilingual education movement gained strength in the late 1990s, and resulted in the imposition of disciplinary and restrictive sheltered English programmes (Brisk, 2006; Tollefson, 2002).

In 1983, one anti-bilingual group named U.S. English was established. U.S. English is a successful organisation that promotes English as the sole official language in the United States. Further, the organisation’s main focus is to protect the English language. It aims at “restricting government funding for bilingual programmes, to short-term transitional programs” (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a p. 70). To this date English-only legislation has been passed in 31 states (U.S. English, n.d.). According to the supporters of U.S. English, language proficiency is a form of human capital, and the organisation’s goal is to help immigrants to assimilate and to achieve the American dream (Schmidt, 2000). However, U.S. English has warned of a Hispanic political takeover “through immigration, language maintenance, high birth rates, and cultural maintenance” (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a p. 72) of Latin-American communities in the United States. In contrast, Dueñas and Melis (2000:a) argue that there are strong connections between U.S. English, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, Americans for Border Control, Californians for Population Stabilization, and other anti-immigrant groups.

Along with the negative attention that U.S. English has brought to bilingual education, in 1998 the state of California approved Proposition 227. This legislation drastically changed the way that ELL students are taught in California. Proposition 227 requires that all public schools teach through English only, thus banning bilingual

education. Further, this law reduces to a maximum of one year the time ELLs are allowed to stay in special English classes (Dueñas & Melis, 2000:a).

Surrounded by the official English movement, increasing immigration and a concern for the condition of the nations' schools, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted in 2001. This Act consolidated the Bilingual Education Act of 1974 and increased accountability of states and schools, with the objective of improving the education system. With this act, academic success was redefined across the nation. This act measures academic success of individual schools based on categories of attendance, graduation rates, and test scores. The students in the schools are categorized into subgroups, and the underperformance of a single subgroup on a standardized test can potentially label a school as not making AYP. In short, the success of an entire school can be determined by the success or failure of ELLs on state administered testing (Cho & Reich, 2008; Echeverria et al., 2006).

The goal with the implementation of the NCLB Act is to increase graduation rates and to increase academic proficiency for all students. The idea is also to provide fair and equal opportunities to high-quality education for all children in the United States. This law has consequently focused attention on assisting ELLs and immigrant children to succeed at school, both in core academic subjects and in acquiring English. To ensure this, additional funding has been allotted to schools: 80 per cent of the grants based on the number of ELL students, and 20 per cent based on the increase of immigrant children enrollments. This has affected the curriculum, the teaching practices and the instructional approaches across all schools in the United States (Clewell, 2007; Dee & Jacob, 2009; Linn, 2005).

A distinctive quality of the NCLB is the drive to increase achievement in districts with high enrollments of ELLs, with the purpose of aligning instruction and assessment with the general curriculum and state standards. The federal government requires that teachers who work with ELLs must be highly qualified. Similarly, NCLB has also influenced the educational approaches for ELLs, raising the bar for the students' achievement. In order to ensure that all students in the United States demonstrate English and academic proficiency, the federal government requires districts and schools to measure student AYP. This is done through a set of high-stakes tests, administered to all students. On the whole, schools are responsible for making annual progress in students' English proficiency, and are required to show improved classroom practices

and academic achievement of ELL students (Clewell, 2007; Dee & Jacob, 2009; Linn, 2005).

## 2.3 Student Achievement

Educational high school programmes designed to assist ELLs often provide intensive language instruction prior to the transition to the mainstream classroom. Provincial governments and the State determine the actual number of years the ELLs are eligible for ESOL support before they must enter the mainstream classroom. They also decide what forms of support for ELLs that are to be offered. However, this is often inconsistent and varies from year to year, depending on the governing political party and government policies (Hinkel, 2005).

According to a study by Reeves (2006), 82.5 per cent of teachers across the United States are positive towards the inclusion of ELLs in the mainstream classroom and support legislations that make English the official language of the United States. Consequently, interaction in the mainstream classroom is in English, meaning that classroom instruction may or may not be understood by the ELLs (Reeves, 2006; Wright, 2006). The ability and willingness of understanding classroom discourse is a crucial factor for the acquisition of both language and content. However, instruction and content must be presented in appropriate and meaningful ways to help ELLs succeed academically (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2006; Reeves, 2006).

According to Hinkel (2005), there is a current trend of mainstreaming ELLs more quickly than before. Hinkel contributes this to government policies intending to reduce support for ESOL programmes. As a result, many schools in the United States have experienced drastic budget cuts, which in turn have led to programme cuts and cutbacks on resources and the hiring of ESOL teachers. With fewer teachers, class sizes have increased considerably, thus limiting teachers' planning time and availability for their students. This has negatives consequences for ELLs, considering that in smaller classes students receive more individualized attention from teachers. Research indicates that small classes are particularly beneficial for students with weak educational backgrounds and students struggling to acquire subject content and/or language proficiency. In addition, research reveals that small class size fosters greater school engagement,

leading to lower dropout rates and higher academic achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Hinkel, 2005).

In some regions of the United States, ELLs are not allowed to attend high school after a certain age. After this age, students must leave high school, regardless whether graduation requirements have been met or not. If the latter is the case, students are allowed to attend community colleges, or seek equivalent courses for graduation. Time pressure is thus an issue for ELLs, considering the many years that it takes for these students to achieve academic English (Hinkel, 2005). Accordingly, Gonzalez (2004) states that it takes a minimum of six to eight years for ELLs to attain academic language proficiency. This is corroborated by Cummings (1984).

According to Sharkey and Layzer (2000), research findings from across the United States reveal that teachers hold varying attitudes regarding success for ELLs. However, most teachers agree that the first criterion for ELLs' success is to have a good knowledge of English (Clair, 1995; Reeves, 2006). Related to this is the approach of Carrasquillo and Rodriguez (2006) and Clair (1995), who argue that all teachers need some knowledge of second language acquisition to build ELLs' communicative and academic English. Teaching content and language proficiency are two distinct aspects of teaching.

It is also important to note that while some ELLs have received extensive and continuous schooling previous to arriving in the United States, others have had interrupted education, no schooling at all, or are illiterate. Being forced to leave high school at a particular age, regardless of previous schooling or age when entering the public high school system in the United States makes it difficult for ELLs to achieve high school graduation (Decapua, Smathers & Tang, 2007; Hinkel, 2005; Nesman, Barobs-Gahr & Medrano, 2001; Sharkey & Layzer, 2000).

There is substantial research indicating that schools in the United States are too test-driven (Swars, Meyers, Mays & Lack, 2009; Wright, 2006). Indeed, teachers criticize schools for stopping their normal curriculum to focus on high-stakes tests only. A major issue is that test content and methodology is not always integrated into the curriculum, resulting in students losing out on knowledge necessary for high-stakes testing (Abedi, 2003; Wayne & Virginia, 1997; Wright, 2006). From this perspective, a series of different studies on evaluation and student testing revealed that 95 per cent of the investigated teacher cohort felt pressured to teach to the test. Further, 80 per cent felt that the focus on high-stakes testing was driving instruction for ELLs. Moreover, ELLs

may be unfamiliar with the testing methodology. They might not be used to answering implicit questions, or their first language may interfere with their understanding (Abedi, 2003). Hinkel (2005) points out that ELLs' misinterpretation of oral and written texts, along with the lack of linguistic, cultural and geographic knowledge, is an issue when it comes to high-stakes tests. According to test scores and dropout rates, ELLs are struggling to gain both the content knowledge and the academic language skills they need to score well on high-stakes tests, and in the end, graduate from secondary school or high school (Cho & Reich, 2008). High-stakes tests function as English language proficiency tests, and content-based assessments are confounded with English proficiency level testing. According to a survey of 126 questions administered to teachers from different urban, rural and reservation schools nationwide, 90 per cent of the partaking teachers believed that high-stakes tests do not provide accurate measures of ELLs' academic achievement (Abedi, 2003). Accordingly, 80 per cent of teachers from another study (Wright, 2006) expressed concern about the fairness of measuring students' progress of both content and language simultaneously. As noted previously, ELLs have different language proficiency backgrounds, and the research mentioned above indicate that the less English the students know, the greater the risk that the students fail. On the other hand, when ELLs have reached age-appropriate grade level in English proficiency, research shows that they can compete successfully with native English speakers also on the most difficult high-stakes tests and across all subjects (Wayne & Virginia, 1997).

In some states in the United States, such as Florida and California, it is required that every single teacher who works with ELLs is highly qualified. Teachers in those states must also be ESOL certified to work with ELLs (United States Department of Education, 2008; Clair, 1995). However, while some states have higher ESOL training standards for teachers than others, some have no such standards at all. Georgia can be placed somewhere in the middle of the spectrum; it offers in-service courses and materials to school districts but ESOL in-service training is not mandatory (United States Department of Education, 2008). Despite acknowledging that most ELLs are lacking in language proficiency, a survey by Reeves (2006) of 279 high school teachers reveals that only 43 per cent of the teachers responding to the survey have a positive attitude towards receiving special training for working with ELLs. Furthermore, the same research indicates that only 12.5 per cent of United States mainstream teachers have received a minimum of a few hours of such special training. With little to no

training to address the needs of the ELLs, and a school policy of mainstreaming these students, some public schools in the United States are not prepared to educate students of limited English proficiency (Reeves, 2006). According to Clair (1995) and Reeves (2006), inadequate teacher preparation results in mainstream teachers learning to educate ELLs on the job.

Although the vast majority of teachers welcome ELLs into the mainstream classroom, research indicate that teachers struggle to make sense of teaching and learning in their classrooms (Batt, 2008; Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 2006; Reeves, 2006). In relation to this, the Georgia Department of Education states that teachers who work with ELLs are responsible for making both content and interactions within the classroom comprehensible for ELLs (2008). However, Clair (1995) argues that teachers' attitudes demonstrate that some teachers do not understand the usefulness of specialized knowledge concerning L2 development. For example, some mainstream teachers make accommodations, often with input from language teachers, in order to work effectively with ELLs. On the other hand, other mainstream teachers feel that the special needs of ELL students are not their responsibility, and once these students move into the mainstream classroom, no additional help is provided. That is, some teachers feel that teaching is the same, no matter what students they teach, and they do not feel the need of any kind of in-service professional development. This contradicts research that shows that in-service training provides teachers with relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes to serve the literacy needs of ELLs (Clair, 1995; Hinkel, 2005; Reeves, 2006). Further, Clair (1995) and Hinkel (2005) argue that teaching Language Arts or any content area to ELLs is more than just good teaching. Mainstream teachers need special preparation to ensure that when an ELL is placed in the mainstream classroom, the student is provided with the necessary support. This is of particular importance as push-in instruction programmes can be extremely demanding for ELLs, and teachers should be able to address issues regarding the integration of ELLs in the mainstream classroom (Gonzalez, 2004).

Understanding the experience of the ESOL classroom requires investigating the interactions between teachers and students, and between content and context. According to Ball and Forzani (2007) and Reeves (2006), these interactions are a dynamic instructional process, which occurs simultaneously and is affected by the attitudes teachers hold regarding their role in shaping classroom communities. Clair (1995) further states that there must be adequate instructional procedures in the ESOL

classroom to ensure the inclusion of both language and content objectives, respectively. Opportunities to use cognitive, social and linguistic features of the target language must be given in order for ELLs to develop both subject knowledge and academic English proficiency (Johnson, 1995; Marcová, 1978; Sharkey & Layzer, 2000).

In today's diverse schools, meeting the individual needs of students is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. One powerful tool that many teachers utilize to meet this challenge is instructional scaffolding, and many educators consider scaffolding to be one of the most effective instructional procedures available (Graves, Graves, & Braaten, 1996). Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) describe scaffolding as "a process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90). This quote describes learning that take place within the students zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined by Vygotsky (1981) as the distance between what the learner can do without assistance and what they can accomplish with the assistance of a teacher or a more knowledgeable peer. Scaffolding can thus be seen as support that a teacher or a more knowledgeable peer supplies to students, within the students' ZPD, thus enabling them to develop understandings or to use strategies that they would not have been capable of independently. Research indicates that accommodations in the form of scaffolding, such as bilingual vocabulary lists, audio support and visuals are beneficial for ELLs (Clair, 1995). Teachers can effectively introduce songs in the target language, using lyrics to teach vocabulary. Similarly, visual aids provide students with visual cues that may help clarify meaning. Role-plays and hands-on activities are other useful methods, which can be used both in ESOL and push-in programmes, in order to help students to connect with classroom content (Decapua, Smathers & Tang, 2007; Hinkel, 2005; Holly, 2008).

According to Hinkel (2005) and Ball and Forzani (2007), teachers' strategies and behaviours influence students' learning process and thus, the level of academic engagement. What is more, positive relationships with teachers can also provide ELLs with meaningful roles and enhance their motivation (Hindin, 2010).

Another school related factor influencing student achievement is extra-curricular involvement. Research has proven engagement in school activities outside of the regular schedule to have a positive influence also on academic achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; González, Vélez & Garret, 2003; Nesman et al., 2001). Wilkinson-Lee et al. (2009) discuss what they call "connectedness". They argue that when students feel a connection to the school, they perform better, and that engaging students in extra-

curricular activities can achieve this connectedness. Nevertheless, extra-curricular activities can be prohibitively expensive, carrying not only registration fees but requiring costly equipment as well (Hinkel, 2005).

Exposure to the target language is a crucial factor for ELLs' success. Hinkel (2005) points out that ELLs often use their L1 both inside and outside of school. In other words, ELLs often socialize with other ELLs from similar linguistic backgrounds. As they often live in non-English speaking households this too slows their L2 learning process. Related to this is also the discussion on how different Englishes are achieved. Cummins (1984) explains language proficiency as mastery of both quickly acquired skills, what he labels Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and the more slowly acquired and less visible academic skills, labelled Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALPS). BICS are the language skills used in everyday communicative situations and CALPS are needed to manipulate language in academic settings. Cummings research shows that while everyday communicative skills can be learned relatively quickly, mastering academic English takes up to eight years.

ELLs' academic ambitions, personality and sense of identity are other factors that may have a significant impact on students' education and careers (Hinkel, 2005). Milton (2010) argues that there is a link between low self-esteem and motivation, home and cultural values. Accordingly, Hinkel (2005) affirms the strong connection between family circumstances, students' obligations and educational achievement. Indeed, parents can positively influence children's level of motivation and learning. That is, if the home environment is supportive, the ELL will be able to place more value on education (Hindin, 2010; Nesman et al., 2001; OECD, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2009). In this regard, not all families provide the same level of support and involvement at home. According to research, parent involvement depends on the parents' educational and cultural background, as well as their socio-economic status. Indeed, there is a strong connection between poverty and low test scores, and ELLs that come from low-income homes often place less value on education (Hinkel, 2005; OECD, 2010; Terwilliger & Magnuson, 2005). It is important to note that in addition, these students often have to deal with complex family situations and other social pressures too. They often work jobs after school, or help with household chores such as taking care of younger siblings. From this perspective, some ELLs face high demands from both school and life outside of school, making it difficult to find a balance (Ghazarian & Roche, 2010; Hinkel, 2005). In sum, stressful home life and obligations can become an obstacle to school

demands, placing a great number of ELL students at risk of negative school outcomes (Nesman et al., 2001; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2009). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that ELLs who have experienced residential and/or family transition, are at greater risk to undergo culture shock and distress (Ghazarian & Roche, 2010). Therefore, the process of becoming fully integrated is demanding for many ELLs, “regardless of the level at which they enter school” (Hinkel, 2005).

Teen pregnancy is an additional factor influencing student achievement and teen dropouts, especially among Latinas. According to statistics, 8,3 per cent of Latinas become pregnant at least once before they are 20, which is twice as high as the national average of 4,3 per cent. Of these Latina teen moms, 69 per cent drop out of high school. This is an important number, considering that close to 80 per cent of the ELLs are of Hispanic origin (Colombo & Furbush, 2009; Ventura et al., 2008).

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Qualitative Research

Our research was carried out with a qualitative approach. While this can include a wide array of interpretive approaches such as ethnographies and case studies, we conducted a “basic qualitative study” (Merriam, 2009: p. 22), defined by Merriam as a “basic, interpretive study” (p. 22). We found this to be the best approach for two main reasons; our purpose with this study was to investigate and describe some ESOL teachers’ beliefs, and we had limited time and resources to conduct the study. The foci of our qualitative study were not to make predictions or generalizations, but to interpret and create an understanding. We were not interested in the big picture, but rather in a context bound understanding of a certain situation. Thus, we emphasize the definition of qualitative research given by Patton (1985, quoted in Merriam, 2009): “[Qualitative research] is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what might happen in the future” (p. 14).

As we were investigating teacher beliefs, we focused on experiences and stories. This is in line with Merriam’s (2009) discussion on focus: “qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experience they have in the world” (p. 13, italics in original). Interpretation is a key to this understanding, and as researchers we act as a filter through which data is both collected and presented. We as researchers are thus our primary instrument, both for gathering data and processing it. As humans we have shortcomings and biases, and can never claim to be totally objective. Instead of trying to eliminate these biases, we tried to identify and monitor them in order to be able to see if and how they affected the collection and interpretation of data (Lichtman, 2010, Merriam, 2009). One way we did this was to keep individual journals throughout the

project. We discussed our entries and other thoughts and ideas, which helped us when we processed our data through the coding process and when we started writing up our findings. We did the initial coding of the data separately and then compared the results, and by doing this we could see what differences and similarities existed between our individual coding. We discussed this coding back and forth, and the synthesis of our different perspectives added to the reliability of our findings (Richards, 2009).

What concerned us was ELL achievement and what factors our interviewees experienced as influential to this. In the analysis of our data we identified themes that were supported by our data. These themes make up the foundations for our findings. We did not seek an objective truth, or a one factor more important than others. Instead we wanted to achieve an understanding of how our interviewees made sense of the phenomenon of ELL achievement. To increase the validity and to facilitate for a transferability of our findings, we provide a thick description. In this thick description is included a description of the setting, the context and the interviewees. In addition, we rely on words and quotes rather than numbers and statistics to convey our results. By letting the voices of our interviewees speak and present our findings, we add to the descriptive nature of our research (Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 2009; Valentine, 2006).

## 3.2 Research Ethics

Doing research in the United States differs a lot from the situation in Sweden, and we were limited by certain restrictions. These restrictions are mostly of ethical considerations, but also include risks of exposure to lawsuits and other concerns. This is further discussed below in 3.3 Limitations.

When doing interviews, the researcher can affect the interviewee in several ways, and it is important to minimize the possible negative consequences. We followed guidelines presented by Kvale (1996), both when conducting our interviews and in the following processes of coding and presenting. The first step was to make sure that we received *informed consent* from our interviewees. This informed consent meant that the interviewees were aware of potential risks (none) with participation, but also that they were aware of what the purpose of the study was. We thus described our research, and explained to them how we were doing research for our home institution in Sweden. We

also informed them that they could stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any point. As we were interested in the ESOL department in a whole, and not made any effort of producing generalizable data, we were not very interested in the background and demographics of the participants. The private data we did collect has all been made anonymous, and any identifying features have been removed. We made sure that the identifiable data stayed safe with us, and thus ensured *confidentiality*. A third ethical principle is that of *beneficence*, meaning that the risk the participants is subjected to is as low as possible, and that the knowledge gain possible should outweigh this risk. We saw no risk at all participating in our study, as no linking to the participants would be possible. Furthermore, no emotional or private subjects were discussed. The possible knowledge gains thus outweighed the risk by a good margin.

### 3.3 Limitations

Doing research in the United States proved to be more difficult than we expected. Getting into contact with schools was hard, and to get permission to observe and speak to teachers even harder. We were however lucky to have a contact at the College of Education at Georgia State University (GSU), who acted as a sponsor for our research. This sponsor initiated contact with an urban high school in the Atlanta area, and negotiated access through a contact at the school. This person was an administrator at the school in question, and functioned as the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper controlled research access, and made it possible for us to enter the school environment, at the same time as we were given access to teachers and classrooms within the ESOL department (Saunders, 2006). However, as we had gotten access to an ESOL department to carry out our research, getting to the school turned out to be our next problem, as getting there through public transport proved impossible. We thus became dependent on our contact at GSU, who agreed to drive us to the school on two different occasions.

Due to strict rules for conducting research in the United States, we were not able to do interviews with students, but had to settle for interviewing teachers. While we to some extent could choose how many interviews we wanted to do, we were limited by the fact that we had only one day to do all the interviewing. While we thus were able to

gain access, we were dependent on a lot of other people and factors, which constitutes the outer limitations of our research.

Within these outer limitations, we also set our own limitations. We wanted five interviews, with teachers and administrators within the ESOL department; we chose to focus on fewer but longer interviews in order to add depth rather than generalizability to the study. We also refrained from doing observations of the interviewees' teaching. By this we limited ourselves to investigate the interviewees' perceptions and beliefs, and not to compare this to their actual teaching. It was the beliefs, not the actions that we wanted to investigate. While we did conduct several observations, these were all done to be able to produce a rich description of the research setting, and no human behaviour was observed. We continue our discussion on interviews below in section 3.4 Interviews.

### 3.4 Interviews

An interview for qualitative research has been described by Kvale (1996) as a "professional conversation" (p. 5) and by Burgess (1984) as a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 5). These interviews differ from everyday conversation in that there is a research approach, and that there is usually one person – the researcher – asking questions, and one person – the interviewee – answering them. The interviews we did for this research project were of a semi-structured type, but with more open-ended foci as we did not focus on a pre-determined set of questions. To achieve this we created an interview guide (see appendix 1). This interview guide was topic-based rather than question-based, and consisted of a list of five topics, or areas, that we wanted to cover. We organized the topics in an outline format to make it easier to follow during the interview, and to be able to see what was left to cover (Merriam, 2009). Of these five topics, one was to procure background information about the interviewees and one was related to the interviewees' teaching philosophies. The other three topics all concerned the ESOL programme at the school of our investigation; one topic aimed at discussing the ESOL programme, one to discuss the teachers' roles within this, whereas the key topic regarded ELL achievement. We went into the interviews with some suggested questions on each topic, but these were not strictly followed. Instead we let the

interview take its own course, and we let the interviewees tell their own stories. When we felt we had enough on one topic, we steered the conversation towards another topic; when we felt that there might be more to be said on a topic, we used probing questions to elicit more information. We did, apart from the topic of the interviewees' background, not discuss the topics in any given order, but let the interviewee's discussion determine the order (Kvale, 1996; Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 2009).

We conducted all interviews in the classrooms/offices of the respective interviewees, and we tried to make them feel at ease and comfortable by explaining the purpose of the interview and what we were to discuss. We also ensured the interviewees that their identities would remain anonymous, and that nothing would be published in the United States. We told them that the interviews would last approximately one hour and asked for permission to use a recording device. We then began the interviews by asking the interviewees to tell us a bit about themselves, with the rationale that we wanted them to feel comfortable, to feel that this was about them and their stories. During the interviews we tried to make sure that the interviewees felt comfortable by remaining connected, using laughter, smiles and nods (Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 2009).

As we were limited to only one opportunity to conduct our interviews, we had no possibility to do follow-up interviews in person. However, after we had transcribed and started coding our data, we sent out a summary via e-mail of what each interviewee had discussed. All interviewees replied to this e-mail and all agreed on our findings, saying that they thought their views were portrayed correctly. To some of the interviewees we then wrote follow-up questions that were answered promptly via e-mail.

When we decided on whom to interview we focused on a smaller number of longer interviews. To get as holistic a picture of the ESOL programme at Little Hills High School as possible, we chose to interview people with different experiences and from different positions. The interviewees are described below in section 3.6 Participants.

### 3.5 Coding

Coding of the data began directly after we had conducted our first interviews, and followed the qualitative constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While quantitative coding reduces data, qualitative coding retains data, with the aim to learn

from the data and to find patterns and explanations. The coding of data is an analytical process that involves moving back and forth between concrete pieces of data and more abstract concepts. The coding also involves consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said. This coding is not merely about labelling all the parts of the data, but also to bring them together and understand them (Merriam, 2010; Richards, 2009).

The first step of our coding process was to identify segments in the data that might be relevant to our investigation. As we at the onset of the coding process did not know exactly what would be interesting or not, almost all the interview data were broken down into smaller units that were subsequently coded. These units could consist of a word, sentence or whole paragraph. The principle we worked with was that each unit should be the smallest piece of information that could stand for itself and still be understandable without other support. This first coding can be labelled topic coding (Richards, 2009) or open coding (Merriam, 2010). This first stage that dominated the early coding process involved little interpretation or analysis, and aimed at organizing the data. When all the data were coded, we started a second round of coding. We went through all the codes and tried to group similar codes together into larger entities. This process can be labelled analytical coding (Richards, 2009) and refers to “coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (p. 102). When we went through the initial coding we discovered patterns and regularities in the codes. Units that were similarly coded were joined into categories that encompassed many individual examples of similar ideas, actions or beliefs. These categories were created to capture the patterns and regularities we discovered, but are not data in themselves; instead they are abstractions, derived from the data. The creation of categories was a highly inductive process. This step of the process initially produced a long list of more than 30 categories, but as we went through the data repeatedly, we narrowed down the number of categories to less than 20. While doing the analytical coding we also started to consider how to present our findings, and during this process we started to search for themes (Merriam, 2010). We finally came up with four themes, each containing a number of categories. The four themes: political, school, teacher and student factors can be placed on a spectrum ranging from far from the ELL to closer to the ELL. In chapter 4 we present our findings and discuss these, and this is done thematically with the four themes forming the foundation.

## 3.6 Participants

All five interviewees worked at the same high school, Little Hills, but they had different positions. All were however ESOL certified, and all had a background working with ELLs for more than ten years. Two of our interviewees, Ms Greene and Ms Smith were not teaching at the time of our investigation. Ms Greene worked with administration of the Language Department, whereas Ms Smith worked as the school's Parent Instructional Support Coordinator. Ms Roberts and Ms Parker both worked as ESOL teachers, but they were also heads of the ESOL Department at the school. Finally, Ms Heinz worked exclusively with teaching at the ESOL programme.

We assured the participants that both their names and work environment would be kept confidential throughout this research paper. We also made clear that no identifiable references to their students would be made. In line with this, all participants' names and the name of the school have been altered, in order to protect the participants from being recognised. Of further relief for the participants was the fact that this study was not to be published through an American University, but through Malmö University.

### 3.6.1 Ms Parker

Ms Parker started her working career as a PR writer. While working with this she began tutoring a Korean student on the side. She found herself planning lessons and tasks on her way to her regular job, and realised that she had a passion for teaching. After a few years working with PR, she went back to school and added M.Ed. in English Education to her B.A. in English. Since then she has worked with teaching ELLs for ten years, all this time at Little Hills (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

When we discussed teaching philosophies Ms Parker expressed opinions about testing and current policies. While she did not agree with standardized testing and some of the outcomes of the NCLB, she said that she believed strongly in ideals behind the NCLB. Here she specifically mentioned equal education. She agreed with the ideals that all students should have the same opportunities and that the issue with at-risk students needs to be addressed. For the last five years Ms Parker has been one of the two department chairs of the ESOL programme at Little Hills High School. She has an

overarching responsibility for the programme together with Ms Roberts, who is the second department chair (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 3.6.2 Ms Roberts

Ms Roberts has been teaching for a much longer period than Ms Parker, in total 28 years. She has not taught non-stop however, but took a break for a few years to work with her husband who worked as a photographer. After a few years away from teaching she decided to come back to education, as she missed it (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Ms Roberts graduated from the University of Georgia with an Undergraduate Degree in English Education. She then proceeded to get a M.A. in English Education at GSU, after which she started teaching. She has in contrast to Ms Parker taught at several different schools but started working at Little Hills roughly at the same time as Ms Parker. When we asked how she ended up pursuing a teaching degree, Ms Roberts described to us how her Ukrainian mother struggled to learn English. Ms Roberts saw this as a probable reason why she had always been interested in teaching people to speak English. Like Ms Parker, Ms Roberts too mentioned the ideals behind the NCLB when we discussed teaching philosophy. In addition to this she emphasised the need of using best practices when education ESOL students (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Both Ms Parker and Ms Roberts have been heads of the ESOL Department for the last five years, but they still teach most of their days. Both teach language arts and literacy support classes to ESOL students. One interviewee (Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) expressed that Ms Parker and Ms Roberts worked extremely hard, and mentioned that they had both taken on a lot of extra workload to make up for cuts being made in the Department.

### 3.6.3 Ms Heinz

Ms Heinz comes from a background of working as an administrator for different non-profit organisations, but has been teaching for the last 15 years. She has a Bachelor's Degree from George Washington University in American Studies, and a M.A. in Applied Linguistics from GSU. During her teaching career she has worked both with refugees and college students, before joining the ESOL Department at Little Hills. At Little Hills Ms Heinz teaches language arts and a literature support class. All her students are ESOLs. Ms Heinz has strong opinions and was not afraid to criticise the current emphasis on standardised testing. This testing she said was against her teaching philosophy, and when asked to describe her teaching philosophy she said that she felt strongly for continued education and that the teacher has to be a researcher in his/her own classroom (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 3.6.4 Ms Greene

Ms Greene is relatively new at Little Hills, as she started working there less than a year before we did our research. She does not teach but works as an administrator, responsible for foreign languages. She also has a lot of contact with the ESOL department and the ELLs. Before she started her position at Little Hills she taught English for thirteen years, mostly to ESOL students. She also has some experience of teaching Spanish, and she claimed to be passionate about language learning. She has a Master's Degree in Teaching Additional Languages and lived in Spain for a period of time, a country that she said she adored. Ms Greene gave a very energetic impression, and when she showed us around, she seemed to know every student at the school (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011, Observation, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 3.6.5 Ms Smith

Ms Smith works as the school's Parent Instructional Support Coordinator. This position includes a lot of contact with students' parents and families, especially when there are

issues that need to be discussed or resolved. She also assists parents with the understanding of Title I, NCLB, AYP, report cards, assessments, etc. She thus has a different position in comparison to our four other interviewees, as she functions as a link between the students home and school life. She does not teach at Little Hills, but came from a background as a teacher. She taught Language Arts, mainly to ELLs, and German for 13 years before beginning her current position. She has a an undergraduate degree from University of Georgia in Education and a M.A. in Educational Leadership from GSU. Ms Smith described herself as a very liberal democrat, and her interest in politics shone through time and time again throughout the interview. One phrase that she often came to use was “but that is just a personal opinion, that is not a Little Hills opinion”, often followed by laughter (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 3.7 Setting

The school of our investigation, Little Hills High School, is one of Atlanta’s larger public high schools and is located in one of Atlanta’s larger counties. It is considered an urban school, and attending the school are just over 3000 students of mixed backgrounds. During one interview (Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) the school was described as a 30/30/30 school, meaning that 30 per cent of the students are white, 30 per cent black, 30 per cent Hispanic and the remaining ten per cent Asian. This is confirmed when looking at the official statistics.

Figure 2: Little Hills High School demographics

	School Year
	10-11
<b>Enrolment</b>	<b>3,021</b>
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0,3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8,4%
Black/African American	30%
Hispanic or Latino, <i>any race</i>	32,6%
Multiracial, <i>two or more races</i>	3,2%

White	25,5%
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Source: Title 1 Schoolwide Plan 2011 for Little Hills High School [name altered]

As a side note it is interesting to notice here the American tradition to place all people into racial categories. This is often one of the first questions on forms and surveys.

Of further statistical interest is the way the school, in line with all other public high schools in Atlanta, break down their student population in economic terms. One important concept here is that of free or reduced lunch. As the students normally pay for their own lunch, this is a subsidised option for students from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Currently at Little Hills, 65 per cent of the students receive free or reduced lunch, which was described by one interviewee (Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) as a strategic choice by the principal. Greene described how the school had tried to attract students from lower income backgrounds, with the rationale to raise the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch. With a certain number of students eligible for free or reduced lunch the school can be classified as a Title 1 school, and tied to this classification is substantial additional funding. One interviewee (Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) described Title 1 as something that has been considered a negative label, but that this has changed over the last few years. While Little Hills High School is a Title 1 school, a prominent United States magazine ranked it as the 315<sup>th</sup> best American High School for the year 2010, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme at the school has been ranked as number one in the state of Georgia. In addition to the IB programme, the school also runs Honours, Advanced Placement, College Preparation and ESOL classes. That Little Hills is a successful school is something that our observations and interviews confirm, at least in the eyes of the personnel. All persons we talked to were proud of the school and its efforts (Accountability Report, 2011; Observation, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Other sources of pride were the school's extensive sport facilities and programmes. On the day of our first observation (March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011) all teachers wore a t-shirt with the print "1 school/2 teams/1 goal" in support of the school's two basketball teams that later that day were to play in the finals of an important tournament. Both the boys' and the girls' teams won their final. The school has teams for a wide variety of sports and there are numerous clubs and associations. There is also a huge theatre located inside the school building where plays and music performances take place regularly, many of which have been award-winning. There are thus many opportunities for the students to

engage in extra-curricular activities. In addition to the facilities mentioned above there is a school library that the students are allowed to use for research, but only with permission from a responsible teacher (Accountability Report, 2011; Observation, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The school is located in a newly built brick building, and has three stories. It is a huge building, but still there is not enough room; on the school premises a row of barracks have been placed, used as additional classrooms. Whereas the basement is dedicated to sport facilities, the two top floors are divided into eight different halls, four on each floor. All science classes are in one hall, all Language Art classes in one hall, all ESOL classes in one hall, and so forth. In these halls most every teacher has his/her own classroom, where the teacher has his/her material and computer. This is where the teacher works with planning and preparation, and as there is no teacher's lounge, each teacher works separated from their colleagues. All the classrooms that we observed (a total of six) were decorated with posters, clippings and pictures. The environment in these classrooms can be described as warm and inviting, and it was obvious that the teachers cared about their working environment. Each classroom has what was described to us as a panic button. This button is to be pressed in cases of emergency, as the teacher is instructed never to leave students unattended in the classroom. Lawsuits was described to us a huge issue, and the school had all sorts of policies to avoid these. Safety is indeed a main concern at Little Hills High School, and police are present at all times. A survey presented in the Accountability Report (2011) of statistics of school safety perceptions showed that 76,8 per cent of students and 92,1 per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that Little Hills High School is a safe school (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011; Observations, March 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The school day is divided into seven periods and all students follow the same schedule regarding time; they all start at 7.20 am and finish by 14.10 pm. One period is dedicated to lunch. The lunch is then divided into two parts, 24 minutes for the student to eat, and 24 minutes that the student can use to do homework, or to catch up in subjects where they lag behind. This can be mandatory, depending on the individual student's progress. Periods range from 20 to 60 minutes, and in between these periods there are breaks of six minutes. These breaks are for the students to get from one place to another, not for them to socialize. One measure the school has taken in regard to safety is that students are not allowed in hallways during a lesson period, neither are they allowed to leave school premises during the school day. Apart from a huge

cafeteria where lunch is served there are no places to sit for the students. There are no benches in the hallways, and the environment is sterile, quite the opposite of the classrooms. If a student is to go somewhere, to the bathroom, to a computer lab or to the library, a hall pass must be issued. There are cameras monitoring the school's hallways and the school premises that are constantly being watched, and action is taken immediately if a student is discovered wandering around during a class period. Breaking this or any other of a number of rules could result in detention or silent lunch, where the student must sit in a specially designed area away from classmates and friends. The halls are thus very empty and deserted when classes take place. This changes dramatically when the bell rings and every single student in the school exits the classrooms and crowd the hallways on their way to their next class. The volume level becomes very high, and as these six minutes breaks are the students' only windows between classes apart from lunch, a lot of brief socialising takes place (Observations, March 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Our observations (March 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) gave us an overall impression of a highly disciplined and study-focused school environment.

### 3.8 The ESOL Programme

All students are screened when entering the public school system in order to identify possible ELLs. In Georgia this is done through a home language survey (Appendix 2). In this survey three questions are asked regarding language use: "what is the child's mother tongue", "what language is most frequently spoken by the child", and "what language is spoken at home". If the answer to any of these questions is any language other than English, the student is required to take an English language test administered by World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA). This test then determines whether the student is eligible for placement in an ESOL programmes (Georgia Department of Education, 2008; Georgia Department of Education, 2006; Georgia Department of Education, 2011:a).

When language proficiency is determined and a student is categorized as an ELL, there are in the United States a variety of programs designed to meet the needs of this student. These programmes differ, and vary from state to state and from district to

district. The programs can be placed along a continuum, where the one extreme is labelled *additive* and the other extreme *subtractive*. The additive programmes all have the common denominator of adding to the previous language abilities of the ELLs. These programs all have the intent to at the least maintain the students' linguistic abilities in their native language (L1), at the same time as they add the target language (L2). The subtractive programs differ in focus as they focus on the development of L2 proficiency alone (Brisk 2006; Colombo & Furbush 2009).

In Georgia public schools there are five approved language assistance service delivery models, all which can be considered subtractive:

1. Pull-out model outside the academic block - students are taken out of a non academic class for the purpose of receiving small group language instruction,
2. Push-in model within the academic block - students remain in their general education class where they receive content instruction from their content area teacher along with language assistance from the ESOL teacher,
3. A cluster center to which students are transported for instruction,
4. A resource center/laboratory - students receive language assistance in a group setting supplemented by multi media materials,
5. A scheduled class period - students at the middle and high school levels receive language assistance and/or content instruction in a class composed of ELLs only (Georgia Department of Education, 2006; Lottig, Mosley-O'Neill & Lawrence, 2010)

Of these delivery models, two are used at the school investigated: push-in and scheduled class periods. In push-in classrooms the ELLs work together with the non-ELL students, focusing on the same content matter as their peers but with support from an ESOL teacher who co-teaches with the mainstream teacher. During the scheduled class period ELLs leave the mainstream classroom to receive extra support in a smaller group exclusively for ELLs led by an ESOL teacher. In these classrooms the ELLs receive additional language support, at the same time as they might work with content from the mainstream classroom. Both delivery methods focus on developing L2 proficiency within content areas (Colombo & Furbush, 2009).

When the ELLs' proficiency and placement is determined, the L2 proficiency progress is continuously measured. Little Hills uses a set of five standards established by WIDA to define and measure the ELLs' language acquisition and progress. Within these five standards there is a focus on a shift from social and instructional language

towards a stronger focus on academic language skills. It is emphasized that ELLs shall not only learn English for social interaction, but also the academic language necessary to be successful with regards to content (Georgia Department of Education, 2011:a; WIDA, 2007).

Tests are administered annually to measure this progress. The ELLs take these tests until they pass, by when they exit the ESOL programme. The ELL student who exits is not left unsupervised though, and for up to two years he or she is labeled ELL-M. The student is then *monitored*. This monitoring includes reviewing of report cards, classroom performance and assessment results – all with the purpose of ensuring a successful transition into the mainstream classroom (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

## 4 Findings and Results

In this chapter we present our findings. Due to the complexity and richness of our findings, we have chosen to discuss our findings as we present them, instead of doing this discussion in a separate chapter.

When coding our data, four major themes emerged and this chapter is divided accordingly. Each theme is further divided up according to the categories that emerged during the coding process. The themes are: (1) Political factors: outside of school control, (2) School factors: outside of teacher control, (3) Teacher factors: outside of student control, and finally (4) Student factors. The themes are ordered in a hierarchal manner, where the first theme of political factors is the farthest away from the student. We have arranged our themes with dependence as a rationale, as each new theme presented is more or less dependent on the previous. As the presentation of the findings progresses, we get closer and closer to the student, and the last theme presented is that of the student's personal situation.

### 4.1 Political Factors: Outside of School Control

In this section we discuss what we have labelled *Political Factors*. This theme concerns factors that are of an overarching type, decided politically and thus, being far from school, teacher, or student control. The political factors are mainly visible through legislations, but of importance are also societal attitudes and the general American economy.

#### 4.1.1 The Political Climate – Immigration

While some ELLs have themselves immigrated to the United States, others were born in the country. Some of these immigrants are in the country illegally, but regardless of their immigration status, the law says that all children in the United States have a right to education. Little Hills is no exception and both documented and undocumented students attend the school. However, the fact that undocumented students have a right to attend school does not automatically mean that their parents have a right to live and work in the United States. During our interviews at Little Hills the subjects of politics and immigration were brought up in connection to the ELLs' achievement. Parker tried to put the current situation into context: "It has been a combination of the political environment and the economy. It has kind of come together to, ahm change the, ah what's going on with ESOL right now" (Interview, March 17th 2011).

According to our interviewees, the immigration status of the ELLs' parents might have a tremendous effect on the student's education. For instance, if the parents are undocumented, they risk being deported to their country of origin. One interviewee described a situation of a teacher working at an elementary school:

The first day of class he had 50 students, 50 moms came with their little kids you know, they went to learn English. The next week they had the police by the school. And they were pulling people over and checking their Ids. And so, if you get pulled over and you don't have an Id, and you are undocumented [...] [you] are deported, so it has cost a real scare where people are scared to even go down the street, to some extent (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Further, Smith continued to describe a case where a family was disrupted:

Last year we had a family who, it was a mom and two children, both children were American citizens, they were born here, they never lived in Mexico. Mom got pulled over and was deported, and the two kids were left here completely alone. So a couple of us got together money so that we could pay for them to ride a bus to Mexico, but they didn't have Mexican passports so we don't know if they got into Mexico. I mean, it is crazy, a crazy situation, so you have got all of these children, who are American citizens, but yet, aren't (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The current political climate in the United States creates fear among undocumented immigrants, which we believe could lead to a stressful home environment. We believe that for ELL students, finding themselves struggling to adjust to the American society, while living under the threat of being deported could be very hard. The prospect of being deported from the United States any day, in combination with living under social pressure might affect these students' motivation to learn. Additionally, Ghazarian and

Roche (2010) argue that family and residential transitions increase the risk of distress, which in turn can also have a negative impact on the student's school performance.

#### 4.1.2 NCLB

Before the implementation of the NCLB Act, high school programmes in the state of Georgia used to offer a technical track. This track was of a vocational kind, and did not qualify for continued higher studies. Students thus had the possibility to choose between a technical diploma and a regular high school diploma. Now the situation has changed, and there is no longer any technical track (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Instead, the goal with the NCLB Act of 2001 is that every student shall graduate from high school and be eligible for higher education. The idea is also that all students should be proficient in Math, Language Art, Science and Social Studies (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). According to the interviews with Roberts and Parker (March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011), this has become a problem for some of the ELLs: "there are some students that I think would thrive more [pursuing a technical track]. I think some of them if they come in, particularly with lower educational background or with gaps, start to see that there's no, you know, I don't know where I'm going to go" (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The conclusion Parker made was that not all students are ready to be in College preparation classes, and in addition, not all students have the motivation or the goal to enter higher education. Parker did however strongly agree with the principle that all students should obtain a high school diploma that qualifies them for higher education: "I mean I think the goal is admirable, because I think you want to prepare every student who comes to your door to be, to have the option" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). But while Parker saw the goal as admirable, she also saw a problem: "But it's just, it's, it's a little bit unrealistic in some ways, in the amount of time that we have with some of the students who come in" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In addition, Parker saw another benefit with the NCLB Act: "I would say the good thing, the one good thing that has come from [the NCLB], is that I think that there has been more of a focus placed on all students and those students who are most at risk" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). She believed that this approach was of great assistance, bringing additional support and resources to the ESOL Department.

### 4.1.3 Time to Graduate

The negative effect of the NCLB regarding time mentioned by Parker above in 4.1.2 was discussed further. No matter at what age the students enter the ESOL programme, according to the law they must exit by the age of 20 (Interview with Smith; Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The consequence of this is that if a student arrives in the United States by the age of seventeen, he/she has only three years to graduate. No matter what English proficiency level the ELL is at, he or she is placed at the high school level: “and of course, people in eighth grade, seventh grade, sixth grade, they don’t want kids to mature there, you know you don’t want a seventeen year old in eighth grade, so sometimes they come to us. And they are not really ready” (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The interviewees expressed some frustration over this matter, which we describe in detail below in sections 4.1 and 4.4.1. With the amount of time to graduate being limited, Greene described how “[o]nce they come, the clock starts. They’ve got to go” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Greene continued to explain that to be able to graduate on time, the student had the options of taking online courses, and/or attend summer school. This while at the same time following their regular high school curricula. However, if the student does not obtain a high school diploma before the age of 20, they have to find another option for high school graduation (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 4.1.4 Late Arriving ELLs

Parker (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) explained that, due to the current focus on graduating all students from high school, Little Hills was not set up for the late arriving ELLs:

[A]nd really the school isn’t set up for, it’s really not set up for those students as much, because everyone is supposed to be on a track to go to college, And then not saying that they can’t, but they need a lot more time, and specific, really specific interventions at the levels where they are to be able to get them to that point. And a lot of those students will come in the age of eighteen, nineteen and then they can only stay in high school until they’re twenty and then they’re asked to leave, so they have to find another option. So those are challenges.

One measure that was taken was that ELLs were often put back a grade or two, so that the ELLs had more time to acquire the language proficiency needed. The putting back

in grades was also done with consideration to course requirements: “if a student enters the tenth grade, they are put back to ninth grade, as they need four years to cover the four courses of English required to graduate” (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Parker also described how some students reacted to this particular intervention: “A lot of them don’t understand. They go back to being a ninth grader, and they get very upset about this [...] they get very depressed” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Also, in order to be promoted to the next grade, the student has to pass the core areas. If the student fails to do so, he/she must retake the grade. According to Roberts, this can be another frustration point for the student:

They don’t know that they have to [do], they can’t just sit in the class and then end up being in the next grade. I mean they have to pass the core areas before they’re promoted to tenth grade, and they look at their progress report and they look at their transcript and they see that they’re still in ninth grade and don’t quite understand that they don’t have those core subjects that they need to move up to the next grade. So that’s a frustration point (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.1.5 Tests

In order to graduate from high school there are different standardized tests that the students need to pass. The most important of these tests is the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT), which tests the students’ abilities in Math, Language Arts, Science and Social Studies. This test is taken in English, as are all the other standardized tests that the ELLs take (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). From mid-April to the end of the spring semester, the students at Little Hills High School take a lot of tests:

So let’s say from mid-April to the end of the [school] year, they’ll do the GHSGT, they’ll do the Portal Test [name altered] that’s specific to Lakeside county [name altered], they’ll do an end of course test, not for every class, but for some of their classes. And then they’ll do a final exam for every single class. And that’s in the last six weeks of the year. All of them. So we have not enough money for schools, but we spend an enormous amount of money on these tests. I think in terms of a spectrum or a pendulum, I would say the pendulum is in to testing mania right now, and I don’t see it getting better, because what I hear everyone telling me about, at the highest levels, is, you know, more testing, more standardization. So I’m not optimistic that they’re gonna back off of that (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

During the interviews at Little Hills, all interviewees discussed standardized testing in relation to ELLs’ achievement. The unfairness was one aspect:

[M]y students take the exact same test that the college prep students, the honours students, the AP students, the IB students, they all take the exact same test. Uhm, and it's just not fair. You know my students start out and they get 30 per cent, and that test is gonna count for 15 per cent of their grade. And I don't make the test, I don't grade the test, there's nothing I can do, uhm, to help with that. They are gonna get what they get. So I take them into the computer lab, we show them and we do warm ups, cause you know one of the biggest predictors of success is do they know the format of the test? uhm, so that they understand how are they being tested (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

An extract from our interview with Greene illuminates another aspect of these discussions of testing: “you can be very literate in other languages, very bright, very well-versed, and take a test, standardized test, and it won't show that you know anything, because the language gets in the way [...] there is so much language on it” (March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This opinion is supported by Abedi (2003), whose research shows that a vast majority of teachers believe that high-stakes testing does not accurately show the ELLs abilities.

We suspect that a combination of low test scores, along with the requirement of graduating all students on time, could result in schools feeling more pressure to teach to the test. That is to say, tests play a predominant role in American schools, which could have negative consequences for ELLs. Firstly, if all tests are taken in English and ELLs lack English language proficiency, these students are not given a fair opportunity to show their content knowledge. Secondly, students might not learn enough content knowledge, or acquire essential facts and information about the world, since teachers do not focus on discussing current events, but only on material that will appear on the test. Therefore, we deem that it is difficult for these students to stay on track towards high school graduation, and that the consequences of the NCLB might make it more difficult and discouraging for ELLs to obtain a high school diploma.

#### 4.1.6 Graduation

During our interviews it became evident that there was a strong focus on graduating all students at Little Hills High School. Greene: “[G]raduation is everything [...] like we get penalized if they do it in more than 3 years” (Interview, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The federal NCLB Act requires that each state in the country establish performance objectives for their schools. According to the Georgia School Council Institute (2004), the purpose behind this is that all students shall reach 100 per cent proficiency on state

assessments by 2014. The NCLB applies to all schools in the United States, however only Title 1 schools are subject to federal sanctions if the AYP is not met. AYP are the goals that each state must establish, and test scores are analysed each year in order to determine whether states and schools are accomplishing these goals. In other words, Title 1 schools need to graduate a certain number of students yearly, in order to receive funding and not get penalized. What is more, the AYP performance goals rise every three years (Interview with Greene, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2011; Georgia School Council Institute, 2004). It is also important to note that requirements for a passing grade on standardized tests are the same for native English speakers and ELLs. To us it becomes obvious that raising test scores is crucial for schools under the requirements of NCLB.

However, it is our belief that this approach has some negative consequences for the ELLs. As noted earlier, ELLs often lack sufficient English proficiency compared to their English speaking peers, with the consequence that any kind of test can become difficult. One of our interviewees also mentioned that schools spend an enormous amount of money on standardized tests, money that could be spent differently (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In the current climate, we believe this is a matter that needs to be addressed, considering the economic situation of the United States public schools in general and Little Hills in particular. Tests are costly, and the time and money that are being used to preparing students for standardized tests could be used differently. In short, we believe it is of utmost importance to understand the significance of what is being sacrificed in the pursuit to raise test scores.

#### 4.1.7 Race to the Top

In 2009 Race to the Top fund, a competitive grant programme, was established with the aim of rewarding states that demonstrate success in raising student achievement, measured through test scores (United States Department of Education, n.d.). Connected to this programme is a discussion of tying teacher salaries to student test scores. Roberts mentioned the Race to the Top fund: “that’s very, a very hot topic right now. Teachers are not very happy about it. I just don’t see how they can make it work. Make it fair” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Roberts was not pleased with the possible outcomes, an opinion that was supported in the interview with Parker (March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

As statistics (Chapman, Laird & KewalRamani, 2010) show that test scores among at-risk students are generally much lower than among the gifted students, teaching at-risk students would mean a lower salary. From this perspective, we can detect a conflict among teachers, meaning that if salaries are tied to test scores, there might be a risk that teachers will not be interested in working with weak students or ELLs. In other words, the strong and experienced teachers may, for monetary reasons, end up teaching the gifted students, thus leaving the at-risk students behind. When it comes to student achievement, this approach can have very undesirable effects, as it is our belief that the at-risk students need to be taught by experienced and highly qualified teachers, an opinion that is also in line with the federal requirements for Title 1 schools.

Another aspect on the matter is that previous research (Nix, 2010) has shown that there might not be a correlation between monetary incentives and test scores. Nix reports of a similar experiment, where a fund was created from which teachers received a bonus to increase test scores. The idea behind this fund was to influence teachers' performance and students' achievement. Yet, the experiment showed that the students' tests scores remained fairly unaffected, despite the fact that teachers were given a pay supplement.

#### 4.1.8 Higher Education

When it comes to higher education, undocumented students in Georgia are allowed to attend university but they are considered international students. This means that instead of paying in-state tuition of around 10,000 dollars yearly, they are charged as much as four to five times as much (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011; Hebel, 2010).

Even though undocumented students have the right and the possibility to attend higher education, we believe that the tuition fees could be discouraging. While Little Hills High School constantly encourages the students to graduate from high school, emphasizing the importance of obtaining an education, the possibility of higher education is limited for many ELLs. It is important to note here that most ELLs, both documented and undocumented, come from low-income families, thus lacking the financial support needed to attend college. Even 10,000 dollars per year could be

prohibitively expensive, not to mention 40,000 dollars. This demoralizing fact could be an additional factor in terms of student's motivation.

## 4.2 School Factors – Outside of Teacher Control

In this section we discuss factors that have Little Hills High School as a common denominator. These factors operate on a level that to a large extent is outside of teacher control, but where school administration has some influence. It is however important to note that the administration works within frames set by policies that are implemented by the county, state or federal government.

### 4.2.1 Title 1

Closely related to the above discussion on politics and policies is the economic reality of Little Hills High School. Since a few years back, Little Hills is labelled a Title 1 school. Title 1 is a federal legislation, and a part of the NCLB Act. This label is given schools that have large groups of economically disadvantaged students. To receive this label a certain number of students must be entitled to free or reduced lunch, which in turn is determined by the household income of the student (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). With Title 1 comes additional funding, and this can be substantial: “The year we become a Title 1 school was the year of the stimulus package that Obama pushed through, you know to help with the economy, so we actually are getting a little over a million dollars. So that was really the reason why our principal decided to go Title 1, to really push going” (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Smith mentioned that becoming a Title 1 school was a conscious strategy by the principal and the school administration, and Greene estimated the current number of students on free or reduced lunch to 65 per cent. (Interviews, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In one interview it was mentioned that Title 1 used to have a real negative meaning: “It used to have a real negative, uh, people thought very negatively of it, because it was high poverty, low income schools, which a lot of times are, you know, not successful schools and it is completely changed now, because, I mean, if you drove around here you wouldn't think

that over 60 per cent...” (Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). What Smith refers to in the following quote is that the school surroundings seem very affluent and the opposite of a low-income district:

And I mean, you haven't seen the entire area, we are a huge area, we back up all the way to another county, two counties actually, and all the way back to another state, and, uh, there are definitely pockets where the lower income families live, but, generally speaking, if you walked into this school you would not think this is a Title 1 school (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

We were also told that the school buses in students from the low-income areas mentioned by Smith, and many students travelled up to one hour to get to school (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011; Observation, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The money coming from the Title 1 legislation was described as a great resource for the school.

The money makes a lot of that possible, you were talking about technology, and we have the basics, but say a teacher decides that they want one of those smartboards because that is what his students need, or they want a lab or they want whatever, Title 1 can step in and do that. Or teachers want training, Title 1 can do that. There are rules though, to spend that money, say that we want to take 200 000 dollars of the money and hire more teachers, they have to be highly qualified in their area so you have to go through that and make sure that anybody who gets Title 1 money for their salary is a highly qualified teacher. So, with every dollar there is a string that is attached, but, I think our kids benefit from it because our principal works really hard to make sure that we keep the main thing, the main thing, you know, so he really wants that to be the focus of everyone who works here, you know, so he deals with all this money stuff so that we can teach, so that we can have kids do right and get what they need (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The counties, within frames set by the state, run the public school system. The federal government has no official control over the United States public school system, but through the interviews conducted, we understood that the relationship is complicated. Educational policies implemented at the national level are negotiated at the state and district level. What became clear to us during the interviews was that the public schools are very dependent on additional funding, i.e. from Title 1, and the federal government controls that funding. One consequence of this is that the schools must get federal approval before they use the Title 1 money.

#### 4.2.2 Cuts in the ESOL Department

Since Roberts and Parker started their positions as heads of the ESOL Department five years ago, drastic cuts have been made. From being 24 ESOL teachers, the number has

now decreased to twelve, of which not all are working full time in the ESOL programme. More cuts in personnel are announced, and Parker (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) mentioned that the ESOL Department would be no exception. While the number of ESOL teacher has halved during the last five years, the same is not true for the ELL population. From a record high of around 250 ELLs, the number is currently down to 175, a reduction of 30 per cent (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). There are thus fewer teachers per students, and class sizes have gone up. The State sets maximum number of students allowed in classes, and when we conducted our research this number was 13 for ESOL classes. This is however expected to increase to 18. In the mainstream classrooms the current class size limit is much higher at 30, which is predicted to increase to 35. Nevertheless, Little Hills was to take action and try to avoid this situation: “I know just in talking with our Title 1 assistant principal, that a majority of our money next year is gonna be spent on teachers because of the class sizes going up. Mr Norris [name altered] sees that the number one priority is keeping those classes lower” (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This was corroborated in the interview with Greene: “We are gonna hire extra teachers, so we are gonna play the game, we get the money we get to hire more teachers so that we don’t get the impact of higher class sizes, like our school neighbours” (March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Smith saw class size as a key factor for ELL achievement. She described the situation of her own children:

My son was in a class of eleven in kindergarten and he reads at an eight grade level, or ninth grade level and he is in fifth grade, whereas my dotter, there are seventeen kids in her kindergarten class and she ... it is two different kids also, but both grew up in the same environment you know, with language lovers and we read constantly, and uh, she is struggling more and I think that really has to do with those six different kids you know, just with small groups (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Smith’s view on class size is also found in research by Biddle and Berliner (2002), where they argue that smaller classes foster greater school engagement and higher academic achievement. We believe that this is an important factor to consider, and that the transit from small ESOL classes to large mainstream classes might affect the ELLs’ achievement.

### 4.2.3 Lost Positions

In addition to a decrease in the number of teachers, other key positions have been lost as well. One position missed by several of the interviewees is that of a counsellor specifically designated to work with ELLs.

We used to have, uhm, a full time ESOL counsellor who was really careful to be sure that the kids were getting the credits that they needed to graduate, and you know the school systems in the United States are all losing money and so they're losing staff and so those positions are disappearing. And now I think there are five or six fulltime counsellors and 3000 students in this school (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

We may not have been able to serve our students as fully as we would like to [...] we used to have a counsellor specifically to ESOL students, who was able to advice them specifically about how to get their credits, and how to get through school [...] I guess that is something that we've lost as we used to have a teacher who was able to monitor them once they exited the program, to kind of track where they were going, and we still try but we don't have it as specifically set up as we had it in the past, so eh that's a loss. This is sounding bad [laughs] (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The counsellor was responsible for monitoring the ELLs that exited the ESOL programme, the ELL-Ms. This has now changed, and the counsellor's workload has been divided up between the teachers at the ESOL department. While all teachers share the burden, Heinz described the situation: "all the ESOL teachers try really hard to check the kids schedules, and really, Parker and Roberts stay, they must work 80 hours a week, all the time both of them. It's awful, but they check every schedule for every single kid to be sure that they're on track for graduation. It's a lot of work" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Roberts also mentioned Smith's work as the Parent Instructional Support Coordinator:

We have a person who goes out into the community, and talks to the families, and she has kind of picked up the slack from the counsellor but, but not, she's only here part time so uhm it has been difficult. Our kids, when they had a special counsellor to go to we had someone who sort of kept tabs on them. Parker and I try to do that to but, yeah, it's eh it's different (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Despite the cuts, Parker was of the opinion, and said that: "we had a really strong programme and I think we continue to have a strong programme, despite the different cuts" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Both Parker and Roberts came across to us as highly engaged and dedicated teachers, with a genuine interest in the ELL students, but we argue that a situation as the one described by Heinz is not sustainable in the long run. The three active ESOL teachers,

Heinz, Roberts and Parker, all mentioned the burden of monitoring the ELL-Ms, as these students are additional to their current students. They all felt that the task of monitoring additional students had a negative effect on their teaching, and that they would rather have spent the time helping their current ELL students. However, even though cuts were made, the interviews revealed a will to try to lessen the impacts on the students. The ESOL teachers dedicated their free time to monitor students, and a very supportive colleague environment was described.

#### 4.2.4 Work Environment

The cuts in the ESOL Department have not only affected class size and personnel, but also the schedule and the teachers' work environment. Heinz described one problem with only having short breaks, six minutes, between classes: “[a]nd also if I need to talk to a student who’s really having a problem, and we have a lot of those, I have five minutes between classes, and there’s always some kid who is late going out the door, and then there’s another one who’s in the door right away, so there’s not a lot of privacy to talk to them” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In addition to not having time to speak to students, they have little time to speak to their colleagues: “There’s not a lounge were you sit and eat. We used to at least all have the same lunch period, so we could get together at lunch and talk, we don’t have the same lunch. That’s a loss, that’s a big loss. Because we used to do mini meetings and mini trainings at lunch, so yeah, that’s a loss” (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This lunch is either eaten in the main cafeteria together with the students where the noise level is very high, or in the classroom. The possibilities for the teachers to collaborate with each other are thus limited. The short lunch period for the students, 24 minutes, was also seen as a problem:

And the kids have to wait in line to get their food, within that period of time, you know, and somehow they have to inhale it and get back to their next class. I think it is very unhealthy, very unhealthy and I don’t like it at all. I don’t like, if they have PE they are outside but these windows don’t open and I don’t like that either. But I heard that in Denmark they are not allowed to build school buildings unless they have sunshine coming in, I said: I need to move to Denmark (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Another work environment related issue that was brought up was planning time. The teachers felt that they did not have enough time to plan their teaching, and disliked that the time allocated for this was after school hours. Heinz: “But I hate the schedule. I

mean I hate it, I want more time to plan, and I don't want it at three or four in the afternoon when I am really tired. I want it when my brain is up and fresh and moving, and so I have more to give to the task" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). While they had weekly meetings at curricular level, referred to as "sacred Wednesdays" (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011), Heinz wished there were more time allocated for planning:

"I would like one planning day every six weeks where we could all get together and just really, really work on programme design. And we do get some planning days but too often I feel they are filled with meetings, so don't really, so yeah you end up doing it in your own time, at night and weekends and, it just goes with the programme. And in the summer (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.2.5 Language Delivery Models

Two language assistance models for educating ELLs were in use at Little Hills: scheduled class periods and push-in. The main method used by the ESOL department was scheduled class periods, classes exclusively for ELL students. The use of the push-in method was not currently used, but it had been and was to resume:

We've had classes in the past what we call inclusion classes where you have an ESOL teacher in the classroom with the mainstream teacher, that may have ten ESOL students in their class of 30. And that ESOL teacher, we've actually done it, if you see that those students are struggling, you can pull them out and talk to them, give them special help and then get them back into that class. Our principal really likes that (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

I think if you look at it, it looks different in each classroom, with each pair of teachers. But, but, we're working with that and we have classes like that. We're going to try to have classes like that next year, just to see. I guess the idea is that it might be a bridge, like a final step before moving into full inclusion (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

However, the interviewees expressed some doubt about it: "we're not convinced, we don't know if that's the perfect way to go" (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011), "well, everything has to be perfect in the situation, you have to have a relationship with that teacher, and similar views, so in order to teach together. So it works sometimes and it doesn't work at other times" (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

## 4.2.6 Mainstreaming

While the ELL student might start off heavily in ESOL classes, the school policy is to push the student into mainstream classes as fast as possible. Greene explained:

There was a trend for a long time to keep students in the ESOL classes for as long as possible, but they found that kids would eventually, sort of plateau... and they wouldn't continue to develop, so, now we give them very basic teaching, get them sort of a minimum, and then we push them out ... into the big, big world, and then they take regular Math. We support them, we check on them, but we feel that they can't learn just to use their skills, if they stay with students that are also learning to use skills, so, I think that is one of the strengths (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

“It gets to a point where being around other ELLs exclusively becomes problem, they sort of feed on each other's weaknesses and nobody gets better” (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

All interviewees agreed that mainstreaming ELLs has a positive effect on students' language acquisition, as they argued that being a part of the mainstream classroom exposes the ELLs to a wider variety of English, accelerating their acquisition of academic English. This can be related to Reeve's (2006) research on including ELLs in the mainstream classroom, which concluded that a majority of teachers supported this inclusion.

Overall I believe that English only classes better serve the students in the long run. Bilingual programmes may be an easier transition for students coming from other countries, but the long-term effects on their acquisition of English suffer (Interview with Smith, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2011),

[Y]eah, I think mainstream is a good idea, I do, I think is the best thing, especially in high school, you know (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Another reason for mainstreaming high school ELLs that was discussed was the limited amount of time the ELLs have to graduate (see section 4.1.3). Since not all classes are given as ESOL classes, sooner or later the ELLs have to enter the mainstream classroom in order to attain the credits needed to graduate: “The curriculum at the high school level is not very forgiving, it just kind of marches on and for these guys to stay on track for graduation its kind of a push. So what they can do we want them go do” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Parker explained how the ESOL Department strived to get the ELLs out into the mainstream:

One thing we do though is that, is if a student is, if we think a student is ready for mainstream, but they haven't scored what they need to score to actually exit, we keep them in ESOL class, in a support type kind of literacy class, and put them in mainstream classes. So we're still able to see them and talk to them and find out what is going on and they can let us know if they're having some trouble, and in that way we can, they won't be out of mind (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

While the interviewees saw good reasons for mainstreaming the ELLs, the transition into the regular classroom could be hard for the students:

They are not always motivated to exit, because what happens is that their friends are here [in ESOL], and they go into the mainstream and suddenly they are in a class of 30 instead of a class of 15, and they don't know those kids. And there's an amazing sense of community and comradely among the students. And you will see students, it costs three dollars a year to rent a locker, ok, they have the three dollars trust me, but they will get together and three kids will be in one locker and have all their stuff in one locker, just because they go to the locker and they chat with each other and they talk and they da da da, and this whole thing. So there's a real communal sense (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Another change for the ELLs entering the mainstream was mentioned: "there are going to be Anglo students and black students and those are two more different cultures, and so that's a big transition as well as the numbers" (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

When ELLs enter the mainstream classroom, they are placed according to their subject knowledge and not according to their language proficiency. Thus, an ELL can have good content knowledge, acquired prior to arriving to the United States, but lack the English to express this:

And see that's another problem, if lets say a student comes in and they've completed algebra in their home language, and so they're bumped up to the next level. But their English level is like a one, and their math level is a four, they'll go into a math four, they'll go into the higher-level math. But their English isn't there with them (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

This problem with lacking adequate English proficiency to grasp the mainstream classroom fully has also been discussed by Wright (2006), who argues that the ELLs might lose valuable information and knowledge in the mainstream classroom due to lacking English proficiency. Another consequence of the school's mainstreaming efforts was described to us:

[T]hat doesn't mean that we only have 175 students in the school that have backgrounds in ESOL. We had a presentation a couple of days ago and we found out that actually 40 % of our students at Norcross who speak a language at home other than English (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

[W]e had so many immigrants coming in. Now they're out of ESOL classes but they're in mainstream classes, which is something that we try to get through to teachers that: yes you do have ESOL students in your classes. So we're serving about 15 per cent but we have a lot of our students that are out there in mainstream classes who have literacy needs that you know the mainstream teachers going to need to address (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

## 4.2.7 Integration

Greene discussed another aspect of mainstreaming that leads us into the discussion on integration: “the mainstream [...] also exposes [the ELLs] to other students who they do not meet normally, if they were left to their own social devices” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). All interviewees agreed that integrating students is challenging. Children, adolescents and adults all choose their friends, and they socialize with people they are comfortable with. In the words of Greene: “I think that when you are a teenager you are so self-conscious anyway [...] they have to want to, you can’t make them to be friends with people they are not friends with” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The situation at Little Hills was described to us:

[Y]ou can walk through the cafeteria, this is always a good way to judge, the white kids are with the white kids, and the black kids are with the black kids, usually kids find each other, and I don’t know if that is a bad thing. I think that in a school that is this big, it gives you sort of a group identity, support, you know (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

However, Smith expressed concern regarding the school’s integration efforts.

I don’t know what to do as far as integrating kids here, I mean I think it has to be a constant effort on the school’s part, kind of push that, and that is not something of the utmost importance at our school. [...]. [S]ome schools really focus on that, and really try to make sure that you understand about the different cultures and the diversity and the awareness of getting to know other people, you know, and others don’t (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The diversity of the student population was brought up as a factor concerning the education of the ELLs. Roberts viewed the diversity as somewhat problematic, and compared the United States public schools to those of Japan.

[W]e teach all kinds of kids. You know, we don’t have all the white kids, all, you know, or with parents who have a certain, ahm, feeling about school or support about school, but we teach them all. It’s very challenging in that way because you’ve got lots of, it ah it’s a huge mix. And I think that’s a, when you compare the American school system to, ah, look at Japan, mostly you have Japanese kids in there, you have got more culture. That’s not true here. And it’s not that it’s a bad thing, it’s just a different way to educate people. It is more challenging, and I think, uhm, you do have to think outside the box [laughs] (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

At Little Hills all the ELLs have their lockers in the same hallway, where they also have all their ESOL classes. Many ELLs spend most of their days in ESOL classes, where the majority of the students are of Hispanic background, and in between classes they encounter mainly other ELLs. As mentioned earlier, 30 per cent of the school population is of Hispanic background, which means that the Spanish speaking community is large. We believe that as a consequence of this, ELLs might not

necessarily feel the need to learn English in order to integrate or survive. Smith discussed this, and suggested that in order to help students integrate, the school could have ESOL classrooms in different halls, instead of grouping them all together. This she argued would benefit the ELLs, as they would be more exposed to English (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

While the school policy states that the students are to speak English at all times in the classrooms, this was not strictly enforced. When observing ESOL classes we noticed that much of the student interaction took place in Spanish. Furthermore, when we walked through the hallways in the ESOL wing, we heard more Spanish being spoken than English. The exposure to English was thus somewhat limited.

#### 4.2.8 Extra-Curricular Activities

One strength of Little Hills High School was, according to the interviewees, the extra-curricular activities the school has to offer their students: “We have every sport you can imagine, we have every club you can imagine” (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). When we were guided around the school, the teachers were very keen on pointing out all their sport facilities and awards they have won. Sports are an important part of the school’s image and mentality, and were described as having a highly integrating effect. Both teachers and students were very proud of the two basketball teams, and we noticed engagement across the whole student body. On the teams are students from different backgrounds, and being part of a team may help the students: “we’ve got some kids who’s started being involved in wrestling and soccer and then they start to feel more of a connection to school, not just in the classes, but outside of the classes” (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Parker gave an example of one student in particular: “[he became] really involved, in extra-curricular activities, and that helps a lot too. He’s been kicker for the football program, so he’s getting really involved in the school, and more interested. And he’s really, he’s come a long way. He had been involved in gangs at the beginning” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). However, it can be difficult for many of the ELLs at Little Hills to partake in extra-curricular activities. While Little Hills has a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, there are also many students competing to be on the teams. Many of the students born in the

United States have grown up within the American culture, and have been playing the popular American sports since they were young: “loads of these kids here at high school have been in those sports since they were little, and so for you to come and join on and learn a new sport it is very difficult for [the ELLs]” (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The combination of high competition and cultural background was described as an obstacle for many ELLs: “for [an ELL student] to come and join on and learn a new sport, it is very difficult for them” (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). As described above, most ELLs at Little Hills High School are Latinos, coming from a culture where the number one sport is football. Basketball, American football and other popular American sports do not have a strong position in Latin America. This was reflected among the students at Little Hills: “if you go to a soccer game you are going to see more Latinos than in a tennis match, and I mean, that is not to be stereotypical it just seems to be the way it goes, not that we don’t want them to integrate more but they just ... ” (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The background of the ELLs can thus be one obstacle for integration through extra-curricular activities.

The ELLs socio-economic background was described as another possible obstacle. Many of the ELLs have to work after school hours to help and support their families (This is discussed in detail in section 4.4.7). This leaves little time to join in the school’s different teams and clubs. Additionally, “it is really expensive to be in those after school activities, so a lot of it comes down to money” (Interview with Smith, March, 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

### 4.3 Teacher Factors: Outside of Student Control

In this section we discuss *Teacher Factors*. Examples of teacher factors include teacher instruction, teaching methods and cooperation among ESOL teachers and mainstream teachers. This section focuses mainly on what the interviewees at Little Hills High School believed they could do in order to facilitate ELLs’ achievement. However, the teachers did not work in a vacuum, but were indeed dependent on the context. Political factors and how these were interpreted and handled by the school created boundaries for

the teachers. Therefore, teachers were dependent on resource allocation, course plans and syllabi, all decided over their heads.

### 4.3.1 The ESOL Department

The third theme that we discuss is that of the teachers themselves. The three interviewees who were teaching at the time of our investigation, Heinz, Roberts and Parker all agreed that the teacher collegiate in the ESOL Department was strong. They all felt safe, comfortable, supported and important, and they all mentioned good relations with their colleagues as one of the things they appreciated most about their jobs (Interviews, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Heinz expressed her feelings for her workplace: “I love the students and I love the people I work with, and I think the school is well organized, and the district is very well organized, and they work hard for kids from different ethnicities, they don’t just deal with” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The strong relations between teachers that were described to us also made the teachers’ job easier, as Heinz continued to explain how everyone in the ESOL department shared with each other.

And in this department we are really fortunate, everybody shares everything. We have a, a share drive. When you have designed some sort of lesson or something that you feel works very well with the kids you put it on the share drive and then anybody in the school can access that, and use it. And it saves, she and I teaches the same class and so I’ll do one piece and she will do another and we just share back and forth. [...] [W]e can go to each other and say, this is not working, what do I need to do (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

This sharing of material was described to us a very important resource, and in the end something that benefited the ELLs. Not only did the teachers save time not having to plan all their own teaching allowing them to focus on other needs of their students, but the lessons and the material uploaded was constantly being used and revised, resulting in highly efficient lessons (Interviews with Heinz; Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In our opinion, one good reason of preparing and documenting lesson plans together is that it helps teachers to consider important elements before instruction. Further, we deem it enhances successful teaching. Heinz ended her discussion on the sharing of material by saying something that we believe is an important realisation: “I mean I have been teaching 15 years, people have been teaching longer and we still come to each other and say, ok what are you doing with this kid, it is not working for me. And we get help”

(Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). By sharing thoughts and experiences with each other, teachers could discover how to employ a range of behaviour management techniques for different students and classes, and consequently provide each other with tips with approaches they might not have considered. We believe that the realisation that you do need help, and that you can learn from your colleagues is important.

#### 4.3.2 Resources

As we described above, Little Hills High School has received substantial additional funds from being a Title 1 school, and some of that money has been used to upgrade the technology in the classrooms. Most classrooms that we visited had digital projectors; all had at least one computer. In addition to this, it was described to us how almost all the science and math classrooms had smartboards. Some classrooms that we observed that was not equipped with smartboards had digital overheads, and the use of visuals as a means of scaffolding instruction was emphasized: “And these rooms unfortunately were too small for the whiteboard, but almost every other classroom in the school has the whiteboards, and for the ESOL students the visuals are so important, for contextualizing stuff. So I do have the ladybug, and I do have the projector, and I use those constantly” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Greene mentioned the fact that the school spent a lot of resources on materials and planning, and thought that this was appreciated by the teachers as: “they are not forgotten, they are a priority here, you know, and our principal makes an effort to make sure that they feel they are taken care of, they know that they are important to us” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). In addition to this Greene claimed that the retention rates for teachers was higher at Little Hills than the county average, and while we have found no data to confirm this, we did get the impression that most teachers had either been at the school for a longer period.

### 4.3.3 Continued Education

When we asked the interviewees about their teaching philosophies, all but Greene, with whom we did not discuss teaching philosophy, brought up the importance of continued education. The interviewees gave several examples of how they had received additional training and resources: “We do look really hard at research-based methods for improving the kids, and [...] at this school we’ve been fortunate to get a lot of additional training. So they’ve trained us in technology, [...] and they keep upgrading our skills, which I really appreciate” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

In addition to keeping teachers and classroom updated with current technology, the teachers at Little Hills High School received additional training in other fields too:

Another thing is they bring in professors from the universities that have done a lot of study and research on what methods really help the kids and, uhm, teach us how to use those and incorporate those into our lessons plans, and I love coming to those trainings. I feel very strongly about continued education, for teachers (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

One such method the teachers at Little Hills had received additional training in is the SIOP method: “[A]nd, and we got SIOP training, are you familiar with SIOP? And that helped a lot, just to realize that we really need to have the student talk and speak academic language a lot more. And we had other teachers in the school trained too, who are not ESOL teachers” (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Parker estimated that 40 to 50 teachers had received this training, and mentioned that the school had extended the training to mainstream teachers as well:

[I]t started with the teachers who had the most ESOL students who were moving into their classes, so those mainstream teachers were coming in and getting training as well as the ESOL teachers, so that’s been a good thing. But I definitely think that the teaching of the students has gotten better, as we’re learning more and more about research with the students and, and the amount of time they really need to get the vocabulary that they need (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Parker also mentioned that that there was talk of extending the training to the whole school, but that the decision was pending (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The interviewees expressed excitement towards this additional training, and explained that this was the widespread attitude among mainstream teachers as well. The teacher cohort at Little Hills was positive towards learning new methods and incorporating ESOL strategies also into the mainstream classrooms. This cannot be said about teachers in the United States in general though, as we have seen above in section 2.3, only 43 per cent

of the respondents in a study by Reeves (2006) were positive towards additional training to work with ELLs.

Having this training was seen as a big push among the interviewees, and this not only for the ESOL classrooms: “it helps all students, it just that they are good strategies, and they help learners” (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This view is supported by Carrasquillo and Rodriguez (2006) and Clair (1995), who argue that it is important to have knowledge of second language acquisition in order to efficiently teach ELLs. Keeping up to date with current trends and methods in educations was described as a key factor for enabling ELL success and the following quote by Greene sums it up: “I think the strengths is [sic] that the teachers here are well-trained, and they are well-planned, and they spend a lot of time analysing what they do, so that they can always make an improvement” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.3.4 Instruction

When we discussed the ELLs achievement, the instruction in the ESOL classroom came through as an important factor. Heinz (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) discussed the importance of using visuals, and this was also something we observed (Observation, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011) during our classroom visits. Not only were the classroom walls covered with images, posters and helpful texts, but images and film clips were also integrated in the instruction. These different types of texts were used to scaffold the ELLs learning. One example of this that we both observed and discussed was the play *Romeo and Juliette* by Shakespeare; the ELLs were currently working with this play in the Language Arts classrooms, and Heinz described how it was carried out: “we’re going to teach the screenplay, ahm, so the kids can go up and act it. We can do readers theatre, it goes exactly along with the film so what they read is exactly what they are going to hear. So they’ll hear it, they’ll see it, they’ll act it, they’ll read it multiple times, and that really helps” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The content was scaffolded with both visuals and audio, at the same time as the ELLs were acting, and several of the senses were thus activated. The importance of scaffolding in the ESOL classroom is also discussed by Clair (1995) and Hinkel (2005), who both see scaffolding as a method for ensuring ELL achievement. When difficult content or language is scaffolded, the

ELLs can easier reach this knowledge, as they operate with support in their zone of proximal development.

In addition to scaffolding, the ESOL Department adapted most of the material for the ELLs. When working with the Romeo and Juliette script they used an abridged version, with the rationale that the original script would be too demanding: “we use an adapted script, because we would, it would just be too difficult for our students. So a lot of the language is the same, it’s what Shakespeare wrote, but the length has been shortened, because it’s just more than we can get through, and it is in old English” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The Language Arts department way of working with the classics was highly praised by Smith: “our language department does an amazing job with Romeo and Julia, and really making it modern, to catch the kids into it” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This was corroborated by Heinz: “they love it, they’re acting and they’re doing great and they really love it” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Still, Heinz expressed some hesitation towards using Shakespeare. She described that how when the school: “took 25 of our kids and tested them, they tested at 2.4 level [...], second grade is the average, not yet third grade reading level. But what are we giving them? We are giving them Shakespeare, ok” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The ELLs followed the exact same curricula as the mainstream classes, but were not able to keep up with the pace. Instead the ESOL Department focused on less material but greater depth: “I won’t cover all five acts, uhm, what we don’t do intensely we’ll do in film and writing, uhm, to get us all they way through. So we do it, and they do it, but it is very different from teaching mainstream kids, very different” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Heinz explained that the ESOL Department had found that this was a way that suited the ELLs better, and emphasized the importance of recycling and repetition:

[W]e probably do less material [but] in greater depth, because we find that’s how our students learn the best. It’s like, skimming over the top of 47 things and they don’t get any of it. And we also find that recycling over and over again, the vocabulary and the grammar, they need it. So you know with vocabulary it’s 8-15 repetitions per word, so it takes some time (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

One way the ESOL teachers worked with vocabulary and reading was with the computerized reading program mentioned above.

Parker (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011) continued to discuss instruction and touched upon the use of academic English:

I think we've gotten better with instruction over the past few years. I know that, um, in terms of incorporating more academic language to bring more opportunities for students to, ehm, work together with their speaking in class, so its not just the teacher asking something and one student answering and then only the, you know, only one or two students get an opportunity to talk and practice English, but giving more opportunities for them to work together on their language so that every student every day has opportunities to speak English, to work on speaking, and writing and reading. And I think that has gotten a lot stronger.

Concerning the discussion on the importance of academic English, Heinz referred to research on academic English: "you know the research is going to show you that to get academic English, the average is seven years, ok. That's what the research shows. To get "hi how are you English" is really fast. You know, you can do that in two or three years, where you can just converse with people on a daily basis" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The importance of academic language was also discussed by Greene (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011): "[The ESOL teachers] really focus on academic language and not [on] sort of descriptive language, and because of that I think that our students come out a lot better".

We believe that a focus on academic English could be a key factor for ELL achievement, as it prepares them for the language on the standardized tests. The ESOL department focused on giving more opportunities for ELLs to work together on their language so that every student every day has opportunities to speak English. This is in line with the SIOP model, and here we see a direct connection between the continued education of the teachers and the ELLs' achievement.

#### 4.3.5 Testing in Relation to Instruction

As we described above, having students passing tests is of great importance to United States public schools, as the AYP must be met or funding might be revoked. Therefore we believe that there is a lot of pressure on the teachers to make sure that the students pass the different standardized tests that are administered. The general opinion among the interviewees was that the amount and the type of testing affected instruction in a negative way:

You don't want to teach to the test. You want student to learn, you want them to be inspired. You want them to, you know, to want to, to know more and grow as a person. I feel like sometimes we get so focused on these tests (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

[T]here's a famous quote, from Albert Einstein that one of the teachers have outside their door that, just paraphrasing: everything that can be tested isn't important, and everything that is important can't be tested. I'm really, kids learn to bubble, but there is so much more (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Much of the final part of the spring semester was dedicated to test preparation, which many teachers felt collided with their normal teaching. Instead of being able to provide the ELLs with the language support and training they needed, the teachers felt forced to teach test content and testing methodology. That the teachers at Little Hills felt pressure to teach to the test is nothing unique to the context of our investigated school, which is confirmed when looking at research on testing. Abedi's (2003) research pointed out that 95 per cent of all teachers felt compelled to teach to the test, and that 80 per cent felt that this interfered with their teaching. This problem was highlighted by Parker, who questioned the benefits of having ELLs studying for content when they are struggling with English: "I mean it's a struggle, you have students in a class who are just really struggling with English, but they need to be in a world history class at that moment, because they are going to have a Portal Test [name altered]. You wonder how much world history they're actually getting when they don't have the literacy" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This did not mean that Parker opposed testing ELLs per se, but in addition to the amount of testing she was concerned about the timing of the testing: "I mean I think in terms of testing, maybe when some of them test it might be the wrong time. I don't think that it is wrong to challenge them, or to expect a lot from them. I think that they can give just as much as anybody else" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Research confirms Parker's thoughts; given sufficient amounts of time, research shows that ELLs can compete with native English speakers on all high-stakes test and in all subjects (Wayne & Virginia, 1997).

Furthermore, the tests were described as very hard for the ELLs. An example of a test question was given by Roberts (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011): "Ok you read a sentence: which of the following is the error in this sentence? Is it punctuation, is it grammar or, or how can you rewrite this sentence for better clarity? That's a really tough assignment for an ESOL student; it's hard for a native speaker".

Another potential problem for the ELLs regarding testing and instruction at Little Hills that we can see is the ESOL department's choice to study some areas in depth and skim over other areas. While the ELLs might spend several weeks working with Romeo and Juliette, there might only be questions on Hamlet on the tests. As the curriculum is the same for all the students, so are the tests. Teaching for language proficiency thus

collides with teaching to the tests, and the ELLs are left stuck in the middle. We believe that this has a negative effect on ELL achievement, something that we find support for in current research (Abedi, 2003; Wayne & Virginia, 1997; Wright, 2006). As the test content is not necessarily integrated in the ELLs' curricula, the ELLs will lack knowledge needed for achieving high results on standardized tests. Meanwhile, to score well on these tests, the ELLs also need to be at a certain level of English proficiency, something that according to the interviewees is better achieved by focusing on fewer elements but doing these in-depth: “[a]nd we also find that recycling over and over again, the vocabulary and the grammar, they need it. So you know with vocabulary it’s 8-15 repetitions per word, so it takes some time” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). It was also described to us that sometimes the ELLs can do much better than their test results show. We find support from Clark (1980) when stating that it is our opinion that this discrepancy can stem from the fact that the ELLs do not understand the testing methodology, that the format and the type of questions is unknown to them, or that they lack the language or/and cultural skills to decode test and express their knowledge.

#### 4.3.6 Relationship Between ESOL and Mainstream Teachers

The current situation when we did our investigation at Little Hills High School was that approximately 15 per cent of the student population were classified as ELLs. This corresponds to approximately 450 students. Working with these were twelve teachers in the ESOL Department, and while not all ELLs have all their classes in ESOL, the workload was quite high. A consequence of the high workload, and the schools aim to mainstream the ELLs as soon as possible, was that there were many students who had an ELL background in the mainstream classrooms, some of them being ELL-Ms. As mentioned above in section 4.2.6, 40 per cent of the student population had an ELL background. Approximately 1200 of the 3000 students had thus grown up with another language than English, or spoke another language than English at home. A complication of this is that there is no sharp divide between the ESOL and the mainstream classroom, and that the mainstream teachers will have relatively large proportions of students in their classrooms having special language needs. The connection between the ESOL

department and the other departments could therefore be of importance, and we discussed this with the interviewees.

Heinz and Parker described how the ELLs that exit ESOL for the mainstream classroom are supposed to receive extra interventions:

And then we try to work with the teacher to say, or work with the student in tutoring, or work with the teacher and say, well you know if they could listen to a CD that would help so they could do that, or they could get an adapted version, or they could read in their own language and read it in English. So we try to make suggestions to make it easier for the teacher and the student (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

But the students are supposed to be receiving uhm, uhm interventions, ah, as they go, I mean as they go into the mainstream classes. In ESOL they get dictionaries and extended time and we paraphrase directions for them, and they're supposed to get the same kind of interventions when they move into the mainstream classrooms, as long as they're still kind of under the ESOL umbrella. So that's one thing that we do is that we do, let the teachers know who those students are and what types of interventions they're supposed to receive (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

That the ESOL Department tried to communicate with the mainstream teachers was also mentioned by Roberts: "we try to communicate with, ahm, the teachers of those students, we sit down uhm, uhm, noticing you have an ESOL student, let us know if you have any problems or whatever (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The importance of this connection is also highlighted by Gonzalez (2004), who argues that mainstream teachers must be given support and guidance when integrating ELLs into the normal curricula. However, it was according to Parker not easy to make sure that the ELLs received this support: "Now, in terms of actually being able to ensure that that's happening, that's tough. I mean its like you want them to know, but then in terms of getting in there and seeing if it is happening, we don't always know" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The relationship between the ESOL teachers and the mainstream teachers was described as important for making sure that the exited ELLs received the right interventions. The ESOL Department tried to keep the mainstream teachers informed on what interventions each ELL required, but as the ESOL teacher also had their own teaching, this was an additional burden: "It's really hard for us to do that and carry a full caseload of our own students as well" (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Nevertheless, the interviewees did express some satisfaction with the current situation. Parker explained how the ESOL teacher could be involved after the ELL has exited ESOL.

[T]he mainstream teachers will come to the different [ESOL] teachers and ask them questions. Some are better than others, I know that I have some teacher that will e-mail me progress reports, so every time they go out to the families I'm on the list and see the progress report of that specific student. That's one way to kind of see how they're doing. And I have had teachers who, you know, they come and ask things at different times (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The weekly meetings at curricular level were described as another way of keeping the connection between the ESOL and the mainstream: "we have weekly meetings at curriculum level, so the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers all get together. And then, but because we teach different courses, [...] I'll alternate meetings every other week" (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Also discussed was the connection between the teachers of the same subject:

[W]e have teachers who're teaching both ESOL and Social Studies, Sarah Wong [name altered] for example is our world history teacher and she teaches two sections of ESOL world history, but she also teaches three Honours world history classes, so she, and she is actually the, ahm, she works with the, the mainstream world history teachers, so I think that connection is very close (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The interviewees tried to make the best of the situation, and expressed some satisfaction with the current situation. We do however see a further hindrance for the follow up on the ELLs after they had exited the ESOL classes in the fact that the teachers are separated physically. Each department has its own hall, and there is no common teacher lounge. This eliminates much of the everyday conversation that could keep the connection between ESOL and mainstream teachers closer.

#### 4.3.7 Relationship Between ESOL Teachers and ELLs

There was however another way for the ESOL teachers to keep track of the ELLs as they exited into the mainstream, and that was by a continued relation with the ELLs themselves. This continued relationship was something that was emphasized in the interviews. Roberts described how close relationships could sometimes get: "it's kind of funny when they come in, not speaking any English. In the lower classes, you are sort of their mother, you know they will never forget you were the one who threw out that lifeline for them, so they tend to get very close to you, like your family" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Parker had similar experiences, and discussed how the close relationships between student and teacher often continued even after the ELLs exited

ESOL. It was explained to us that the ESOL department was very keen on letting the ELLs know that they could always come back for support and help: “We do tell the students, uhm, come back and see us, and if you have trouble come back right away, don’t wait until you are in big trouble” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Roberts described a situation of a student who had exited ESOL: “they do have to have support. She is a very, very bright student, but she needs someone here at ESOL to sort of hold her hand as she goes out, and uhm, she, because she was very, very scared in the beginning, but she has done very well” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). We believe that what Roberts describes here could function as a complement to the ESOL mainstream relation, and ease the ELLs’ transition to the mainstream classroom.

In addition, and as Greene mentioned, the ESOL teachers’ support can be important if the student comes from a less supportive home environment: “We have students who do well with no support at home but we try to give them support here, you know, they have a relationship with their teachers. And the teachers know that they are interested in doing well but that they need extra help (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

To end the discussion on the teachers’ importance on ELL performance, we quote Greene who ended her discussion on what influences ELL achievement with a discussion of the teachers:

I think that the thing that most influences is the quality of teaching. But we hire quality teachers, you know, we try to make sure that we have the right people teaching the right thing and to the right kids, so, we have been very lucky here, we have very talented people, and we keep them here because of their strengths, [...] we try to find the right thing for the kids and for the teachers (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

## 4.4 Student factors

In this section we discuss *Student Factors*. The rationale behind having this theme is that it describes factors regarding the students’ lives outside of the school environment. That is, what the students do on their spare time, their home situation and their previous education. As with the preceding themes, and maybe even more important to emphasize here, there is a dependence on context and the factors previously mentioned; the students are themselves not responsible for, or in control of, much of what we have included in this section.

#### 4.4.1 ELLs' Previous Education

One aspect discussed by the interviewees that came forth as important when considering the ELLs' achievement was their previous education. All interviewees discussed this, and some came back to this again and again.

The one [factor] that I think is more [significant] than anything is their educational background. You know, if they come from a county, if they come from a place where they have strong education, it doesn't matter so much about their language. They can, they tend to excel, or they tend to move very quickly out of ESOL (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011),

"I'd say educational background more than anything" (Interview with Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011),

"The successes tend to be the ones who come in with a strong educational background" (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The ELLs educational foundation, both with regards to previous knowledge and study technique, was described as crucial to consider when looking at the ELLs' achievements. This view is supported in much of the research on the ELLs educational level (Decapua, Smathers & Tang, 2007; Hinkel, 2005; Nesman et al., 2001; Sharkey & Layzer, 2000). Students coming in with a solid educational background, without gaps or interruptions, could often pass through ESOL quickly. Roberts described this: "it's, it's amazing to watch because they're, they have it in their language, and the transfer occurs so rapidly" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). For these students, the key for success was acquisition of English, and once they had learned enough to exit ESOL, they often achieved well in the mainstream classroom. Their English acquisition was also described as benefiting from the previous education, as most often the students with a continued and full education had the study habits and learning patterns in place (Interviews with Smith; Roberts; Parker, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Unfortunately, not all ELLs had this solid background; this was especially not the situation for many of the ELLs who had recently immigrated to the United States. Some ELLs at Little Hills had a refugee background and an interrupted education; some had only been through a few years of elementary education in their home countries, but still had to go straight to high school when entering the United States. Heinz: "For students who come in without those study habits in place and not actually understanding how do we get from point a to point b, and how does my actions affect my academic performance, then you are not only teaching language you're also teaching study skills, how do I learn" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Entering a United States high school in

the late teens without having learned how to study was described as a huge disadvantage. As mentioned above, the ELLs have a limited period of time, until they are 20, to graduate. During this period of time, some ELLs might struggle learning basic study techniques: “stuff I never thought I’d do on a high school level: notebook checks, you know, how to take notes. We’re really going way back” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011), while other ELLs might be struggling with even more basic learning: “it’s not like you are just teaching them a new language, sometimes you are teaching them to read” (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Roberts discussed this and mentioned that this was a problem for many of the teachers at the ESOL department, as they were trained to teach high school students, not basic literacy.

As teaching basic literacy differs quite a lot from teaching Romeo and Juliette to high school students, we wondered how the teachers coped with this challenge. Heinz was of the opinion that the ESOL teachers did a good job, and explained this: “we work really hard and [the ESOL teachers] do well at the basic level, because they can teach them the orthography, and they teach them some phonics. So they do very well at the basic, the beginning level” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Heinz continued to discuss this, and added the importance of vocabulary: “Ahm, so we focus on, really hard on vocabulary, most frequent vocabulary and we have it set out at the different levels, what they need to cover at each level. Not only for the content but also for the high frequency words. So that has helped a lot to strengthen the programme” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The additional training we discussed above in section 4.3.3 also included additional training on teaching literacy. Roberts explained how they were currently learning the importance of teaching vocabulary:

Well, we, what we’re on now too is literacy. I think we go back to that, because it is so important. We’re taking a lot of classes, we’re ah, learning the importance of teaching the vocabulary, the first 2000 words, because we realize that our students don’t have those. And that’s not something we were really trained to do, we were trained to teach high school students. So we had to go back and fill in some of those gaps. It’s been interesting, all the literacy training (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

A problem described to us with this basic level of education was the time it required. While the ELLs were under a lot of pressure to graduate, Heinz estimated that “they need probably five years at the basic level” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). The transition into mainstream classes could prove too hard, as when: “they move up it just gets harder and harder [...] the level of English is too high” (Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup>

2011). As a result of this sometimes too big of a gap between levels, some of the ELLs “circle around and in the bottom parts of high school, you know the lower classes, and they can’t really make it out of those, simply because they do not have the time, and time is such a factor” (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Sometimes the ELLs were not missing study skills or basic literacy, but had never encountered certain elements or subjects studied in the United States. Roberts described how she noticed that some of her stronger ELLs struggled when they were studying poetry while working with *Romeo and Juliette*: “I asked: how many of you have actually studied poetry, [...] in your school in your country, and I had some students who hadn’t. So they don’t have that background knowledge that some other students have” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.4.2 Use of ELLs’ L1

During one observation (March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011) we saw how one teacher, not a participant in this study, used French to help a newly arrived student. During some of our interviews the topic of the use of the students L1 in the ESOL classes came up. While some of the interviewees made use of this, they tried hard to keep everything in English, with the rationale that not all ELLs shared the same L1. In relation to this, Heinz discussed the use of the students L1, and in particular Spanish, as a means of scaffolding: “you know it is interesting. There are so many cognates between English and Spanish, but the kids, uhm, some of the kids we have are not highly literate in their own languages, so they are not recognizing the cognates at this level” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). While there are a lot of cognates between Spanish and English, Heinz was surprised how little use she could make out of this.

#### 4.4.3 Motivation

Another factor that the interviewees described as crucial for understanding the ELLs’ achievement was motivation. Many ELLs were described as being hesitant to exit the safety of the ESOL environment, as they feared both the transition and the new

environment. Not only is there a transition to an all-English, less supportive classroom, but there is also a transition into a whole new group of students. The change into a new group of students was described as being demanding, as group dynamics were not always welcoming. This hesitation became evident when the students by purpose failed their ACCESS test, consciously underperforming in order to be able to continue in ESOL. Parker:

So there's a real communal sense, and so we have to, you know, if some kids they don't score well in the ACCESS test but we know that they failed it on purpose to stay in the ESOL, we push them out. We say: you know what, we know what is going on here, bye (laughs) time to move on. And they're surprised, I mean it's a transition and they are a bit nervous about it and we always tell them come back and talk to us (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Many ELLs were described as lacking self-confidence with regard to their academic abilities, thus needing a push.

In connection to this are the possibilities for the ELLs to pursue higher education. Many ELLs were described as lacking an ambition to enter higher education. Thus the interviewees sometimes found it hard to motivate the ELLs to exit ESOL and get into as high level of classes as possible and to get as good grades as possible (Interview with Greene, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Important to consider here is the strong connection between the educational level of a student's parents and the student's own achievement and goals (Davis-Kean, 2005). As many of the ELLs had low-educated parents, this would suggest that higher education was not a part of many ELLs' envisioned future.

To help motivate the ELLs and to show them the possibilities of higher education, the teachers sometimes did field trips to different colleges in the Atlanta region. Smith described how she took some ELLs to Georgia Tech, and Parker described how they recently had taken some students on a field trip to another college: "just to show them what some of the schools are, what it would be like. I don't know how many of our students have seen that, or are really considering that as an option" (Interviews, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Both Smith and Parker described field trips as a good way to motivate the ELLs, and all our interviewees agreed that motivation was a key factor for ELL achievement.

Another way of increasing the ELLs motivation that was mentioned was to work with portfolios and formative assessment. In the past the school had worked with portfolios, allowing the ELLs to track their progression: "For a while they did portfolios to show students progress, I like being able for the students to see: this is my writing at the beginning of the year, this is my writing at the end of the year, and see the progress"

(Interview with Heinz, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Portfolios were not used anymore, but the computerised reading program mentioned above did have a similar function, as it allowed tracking of progress. Heinz liked this: “I think that’s really motivational for them. (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.4.4 ELLs’ Parents’ Education

The ELLs’ parents’ educational level was discussed during our interviews, and was described as something important. Greene spoke about her own educational background and compared this to that of some of the ELLs: “if your parents didn’t go to school, they are not going to make you go to school necessarily, you know, and if you come home and complain... When I went home and complained my parents like: the teacher is always right” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). While many ELLs have parents lacking higher education, some have parents lacking high school, or even basic education. Thus, the parents’ educational background does not only influence the ELLs view on higher education, but also their high school education. Greene continued to describe this:

[I]f your parents are not very educated, it is sort of hard for them to connect to you about high level learning, with the effect that while the parents want them to have a good education, [...] they don’t realize what a huge commitment that is for them as a family, you know, to get your child to school every day, and make sure that they are present for tests (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

The parents’ educational level does not only affect the student’s motivation, but also the level of support they get from home with homework etcetera. Greene described the way education is perceived by the ELLs’ parents as being very important. To help their children’s education Greene argued that the parents should: ”make school a priority when [the ELLs] are very young, and say, you know, school is very important to us. You interest them in their education, and as they get older, they sort of take on the ownership of that” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

#### 4.4.5 Exposure to Target Language at School

The interviewees also discussed target language exposure, which they considered a crucial factor for achievement. In the classrooms the ELLs were supposed to speak

English at all times, even though some teachers allowed for some L1, as this could be a form of scaffolding and facilitate learning. The language in the hallways was not controlled however, and especially in the ESOL hallway did Spanish dominate: “it is a struggle because the students who come and don’t speak any English at all, let’s say a kid comes from Mexico he doesn’t speak any English at all, then, the majority of his classes are gonna be ESOL classes, and they are gonna be down in the hall, so they are surrounded by Spanish all day” (Interview with Smith, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This was described as a problem when it came to the English acquisition, as the interviewees considered immersion to be very important. Smith described a Vietnamese girl’s language acquisition:

There are less than 20 ESOL kids at my children’s school. My son won the spelling bee for the school this year but the girl that was the runner up has only been in America for a year and a half. When she came from Vietnam she didn’t speak any English at all but because she is in an ESOL class with three kids, she has learned, and she wants to because there aren’t any other kids that speak Vietnamese... apart from her siblings, so she wants to be a part of the culture and the ESOL kids at my children’s school, they don’t have a choice but to learn it, and then they have the opportunity to learn it in such small groups, the class sizes being smaller, I mean that is a perfect situation for them (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

This situation is quite the opposite for the majority of the ELLs at Little Hills, as close to 33 per cent of the student population have Hispanic background. We believe that the incentive to learn English decreases, as a third of the student population will understand the ELLs’ L1. The Spanish speaking ELLs can socialize and make friends without learning a single word of English.

One unexpected effect of the dominance of Spanish among the ESOL students was described to us by Heinz: “some of my kids who are Chinese and Korean can speak as much Spanish as they can speak English, so they’re trilingual whether they want to be or not” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). While this might not necessarily enhance the Chinese and Korean students’ English acquisition at first, Heinz believed it could increase their overall language abilities.

We believe that many cognates exist between English and Spanish, and that this in the long run could be very beneficial for the students. In fact, we believe that the native English-speaking students would benefit from learning Spanish, creating a bilingual environment. Bilingual programmes are however another discussion, and nothing we will pursue here. Above we discussed the opinions of some of the interviewees that the school does not do enough to integrate the students, and here we can see one effect of this segregation. Having all the ESOL students in one hall creates an environment

where Spanish is the major language, and we believe the ELLs would be more motivated to learn English if they had been better integrated with the rest of the school environment.

The amount of English the ELLs encountered outside of school was another factor the interviewees pointed out as important. Smith described how: “there are parts of Atlanta where you can completely get around and not speak any English at all”, and argued that if the ELL goes home to an environment like this after school, their language acquisition would suffer (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). We informally talked to one class that we observed, and out of eleven ELLs of mixed but mainly Hispanic background, only six spoke English at home. Almost half of the ELLs only spoke English when at school. When they did speak English at home it was mainly with brothers or sisters, seldom with parents (Observation, March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011). While we by no means claim this to be representative numbers, this is interesting. In line with the teachers at Little Hills, we believe in immersion, but this immersion should ideally take place on many levels, and throughout the student’s day, not only in school.

#### 4.4.6 Support From Home

The ELLs’ home situation was according to the interviewees important on many levels, and the parents’ immigration status, economic situation, educational background and the language spoken at home have all been discussed above. In addition to this we were told that the general family situation was of great importance for ELLs’ achievement. Greene: “[...] and the support that they get at home. If home is very stressful, you know, violent or abusive, it is not easy to pay attention to your Geometry class” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Another family related factor influencing ELL achievement brought up during our interviews was that of transitions. Heinz described what she described as a not uncommon situation:

We have students who lived with grandma and grandpa for the last seven or eight years in their home country, and then mom and dad are here making money to bring them up, and so when they say ok it’s time, and grandma and grandpa don’t want the kids to leave, the kids don’t remember mom and dad that well, grandma and grandpa are their mom and dad. So they got the trauma not only of a new language and a new culture, but essentially a new family (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

With an immigration experience such as the one described above, the ELL faces not only a new language and culture, but also have to deal with huge family transitions and trauma. Another family transition described to us was discussed above (see section 4.1.1), when undocumented parents were forced to leave the United States, leaving their children behind. Even though the children might stay behind with other family members or relatives, we believe that the separation itself can cause trauma. Parker told us a story about a boy whose parents had been forced to return to their home country:

Enrique [name altered] [...] was here living in an apartment, [...] didn't have his parents here, and there was a family who just took him in, and they had heard about his story through Greene and Smith. [...] I really think that they put those interventions in that he needed. He didn't really have that strong educational background, but he had that support, and I think that because he was with them and they supported him through, he actually graduated (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

All this testifies of the importance of home support. We argue that having a stable and supportive environment outside of school can be very important, as many of the ELLs are going through a lot of culture shock and learning related to issues in school. The ESOL teachers tried their best to support the ELLs missing that safe home environment, and we got the impression of the ESOL teachers that we encountered were very compassionate and genuinely caring.

#### 4.4.7 Work Outside of School

Related to how the families supported the ELLs is how the ELLs had to support their families. Many ELLs came from families with economic problems, and the majority was entitled to free or reduced lunch. Smith described how the economic situation for many of the ELLs' families had become considerably harsher since the financial crisis of 2008: "[The economy] is down, and in Atlanta it's particularly down for Hispanics. We have a lot of Hispanics working in construction and construction boomed in Atlanta for the last 10 years, of just new houses everywhere, and now that's really stopped, you know it just stopped. So it's harder for folks to earn a living, and that's a factor" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Smith continued to describe how this had resulted in financial troubles for many families, and put more pressure on the children to help supporting their families. While some ELLs' household support was limited to acting as: "baby-sitters for their younger brothers and sisters, so they can't stay after school"

(Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011), some were working. Most ELLs working had part time jobs, but some worked full time outside of school:

I had a girl that came into my office the other day, and her teacher was so fed-up with her, she was not doing what she is supposed to do, and I thought what is the problem? She goes: well, I work every night until two in the morning, and I said: we [...] need to [...] do something different, because you can't get up at five o' clock in the morning after you go to bed at three o' clock at night. And you are not doing any homework (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

It is our opinion that a situation like this, and also situations not as extreme, will have a negative effect on any student's performance. Working extra a few hours a week to increase your pocket money is one thing, working full time supporting your family another. This we believe affect the ELLs' achievement in several ways; there is less time for homework, the student will be tired and lack energy in school, and the student will not have time to participate in extra-curricular activities. Another possible negative aspect of working this much outside of school is that there might be very little exposure to English. Most Hispanic high school students are likely to work low paid jobs where no qualifications are needed, and most co-workers will be Hispanic. Additionally, ELLs not having to help support their families could have been affected by the decline in the general economy as well, if this meant that their parents had to work longer or harder. We have above seen how important a supportive home environment could be. With highly absent parents the ELLs might lack this support, as their parents might lack the time to help with homework etcetera.

#### 4.4.8 Teen Pregnancy

While not that common, and not a problem concerning only ELLs, pregnancy was brought up as a factor affecting the ELLs achievement. Greene said that there were currently 40 students pregnant at Little Hills (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Smith told us that: "eleven or twelve years ago they tried to get a day-care in the old building because they saw there was such a need, that all these kids were not coming to school or were dropping out because they couldn't afford childcare, and so... they tried to get it but the county did not want that" (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Those who stayed on track towards graduation were often those with families who could take care of the child. This was explained to us as "especially [common with] the Hispanic families,

[where] the moms take care of the babies when the girls come back to school” (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). After giving birth: “[the mothers] get six weeks homebound which means they have a teacher that comes to their house to check on them, but they only come like two times a week” (Interview with Roberts, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). Roberts was of the opinion that being a mother with a new born child could have huge effects on the students’ achievement: “yeah, it is not the highlight of your educational career, six weeks after having a baby, I mean...” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). These six weeks and the support offered was described as inadequate, and Greene, who had a lot of contact with ELLs in difficult situations, was of the opinion that: “students who decide to become parents in high school, that is a really devastating thing for their education” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

All in all, the ELLs’ life outside of school was described as very important to understand the ELLs’ achievement, and we finish this section on student factors with a sober conclusion by Heinz: “I think a lot of those factors are outside of our control, and we can try to be understanding and help these kids and give them an extra day to get something done, but we can’t change it unfortunately” (Interview, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2011).

## 5 Conclusion

Immigration has been one of the most critical demographic factors in the United States during the past three decades. The adaptations of each wave of immigrants have depended on social climates under different laws and policies. As a result, ESOL programmes have experienced a great deal of changes, based on United States' educational system and its social and political transformations.

Recent immigration differs from that of the past and rapid immigrant population growth has become a challenge in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. The most significant increase in recent immigration in Georgia has occurred in the area of Atlanta, resulting in the emergence of new ethnic communities in urban schools, located in low-income neighbourhoods. ELL students speak other language than English at home and schools have the task of providing education for these students. In addition, ELLs bring with them different life experiences, educational traditions and cultural communication patterns. Obviously, teaching English to ELLs while trying to incorporate them into United States society is not an easy task.

For immigrants, both documented and undocumented, it means that they need to build a new social, economic and cultural life in the United States. This also applies to their children, who need to learn a new language and learn how to function in a new society. The struggling process of immigrant students in assimilating to United States culture and society is hard on them, and sometimes discouraging. One major issue, however, is to acquire proficiency in English and subject knowledge, in English-only programmes.

As mentioned above, there have been several influential ideas and approaches to ELLs' education over time, depending on very different educational philosophies. Since the NCLB Act of 2001, standardised tests and English language proficiency standards have been implemented in the public school system, in all states in the United States. This current legislation seems to play a key role in improving the education of

ELLs, influencing the ways in which these students experience their educational achievement. Although the school system aims at ensuring that resources are given to ELLs to help them to succeed at school, the high-stakes testing may not address the needs of ELLs.

The American public school system has become embedded in a particularly standardised teaching to the test model. In addition, the law makes federal funding for States dependent on student progress. Further, high-stakes tests results determine whether a student can be promoted to the next grade, or whether he/she can graduate from high school. These trends in legislation of high-stakes testing have become an obstacle in serving the needs of ELLs, setting demanding targets for ELLs' achievement. Consequently, ELLs' performance is measured on standardised test and often yields inaccurate results.

The fact that ELLs are underperforming their peers in all content areas, and especially in English is not new. The performance gap has been attributed to a number of significant factors by our interviewees at Little Hills High School, such as the student's home situation and the student's previous schooling – among other factors. Additionally, a central issue is the use of high-stakes tests and insufficient measurement tools in assessing ELLs' skills and knowledge. It is important to note that ELLs require an average of seven to eight years to achieve grade-level academic performance in English. Seen from this position, standardised high-stakes testing, particularly in English, places ELLs in a disadvantage position. According to our findings, high-stakes testing is unable to assess ELLs' knowledge due to a language barrier, and hinders these students from performing well on standardized tests. In addition, high-stakes tests contain cultural bias, and some questions are grounded on cultural assumptions, which becomes another major disadvantage for ELLs. Simply stated, ELLs are tested with high-stakes tests, which were originally created for English native speakers. Nevertheless, we believe that accommodations could be implemented in tests to allow ELLs to demonstrate their abilities. For instance, reconstructing questions could make the testing more fair and valid. On the one hand, language complexity can be reduced by simplifying the language, or by removing unnecessary items of the reading. On the other, the issue of cultural biases could be addressed by constructing test questions in a manner so that ELLs can easily understand. We also believe that assessments for ELL students could be based on several criteria, rather than on standardised tests, only.

Another significant factor is that the law requires students to exit high school programmes at the age of 20, regardless age of entering the programme. This requirement makes it very difficult for ELLs to graduate on time. Nevertheless, the option of attending on-line courses or summer school is given to students who wish to work towards a high school diploma.

The current testing policies require schools to show that they have made AYP, and how ELLs perform on high-stakes tests affects the evaluation of educators, schools, districts and states. Because of this fact, and the emphasis placed on short-term results, we believe teachers focus on teaching students how to pass tests, instead of focusing on teaching content to better meet the needs of the students. We deem that the reliability and validity of high-stakes testing results is questionable. Yet, the quality of school programmes is measured, and the federal government holds schools responsible for yearly fluctuations. By and large, accountability should not concentrate on labelling and penalising schools, but rather on making sure education, tests and assessments for ELLs are fair, reliable and valid. NCLB has resulted in undue pressure being placed on teachers and students due to the increasing frequency of testing. We feel that the use of high-stakes testing is divisive to student learning, and cannot see any link between increased testing and increased achievement.

A number of federal efforts have been made over time with the objective of establishing English as the official language of the United States. Currently, there are laws at the state level declaring English to be the official language in thirty-one states. The goal is to achieve linguistic uniformity and enhance the role of English, ensuring its status over other languages. In this regard, the complicated on going debate over immigration policy has been reflected in the proposals of declaring English the official language of the United States.

According to our findings, some federal laws have intended to reduce the number of immigrants in the United States. As an attempt, many states deny medical care to undocumented immigrants and their children. During our interviews at Little Hills High School the teachers were very aware of immigration policies. What is more, they showed concern about how these immigration laws are affecting ELLs' academic achievement. For example, a great number of ELLs and/or their parents are undocumented in the United States, and therefore at risk of being detained and deported to their country of origin if caught by the police. Most noteworthy is the current law in the state of Georgia – among other states – regarding higher education. Undocumented

students are allowed to attend university, however, they are considered international students. This implies that instead of paying in-state tuition of around 10,000 dollars annually, they are charged about 50,000 dollars for an academic year. Our findings show that both undocumented and documented immigrants often come from low-income households. Following that fact, we feel that university tuition fees are discouraging immigrant students in the United States.

Overall, the political climate is very negative towards undocumented immigrants, and immigrants in general, who are said to be threatening the English language and the country's cultural unity. We believe that 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers need to recognise the issues and new patterns in immigration experiences, because it is of outmost importance to understand in what ways policies and implementations are changing and pressuring the lives of ELLs students, and their families.

Immigrant adaptation to a new country can be a hard process for students, leading to a stressful life. Most of the ELLs at Little Hills High School are forced to help support their families in different ways. For example, while some baby-sit their younger siblings while their parents are at work, other students work full time after school hours in order to help economically. We believe that home obligations and jobs in low-paying fields have a negative effect in ELLs' interest in learning. Firstly, family obligations get in the way of ELLs' education, limiting their academic performance and leaving them at risk of succumbing school. Secondly, the fact that most of these students live in non-English speaking households limits them from exposure to English and American culture. Thirdly, ELLs usually socialise with other ELLs of similar language background only, both inside and outside school. At Little Hills High School, for instance, white students socialise with white students, black students socialise with black students, and Latinos socialise with Latinos. According to our interviewees, 30 per cent of the student body at the school investigated is of Hispanic background. This means that in the ESOL programme nearly all students speak a common foreign language. Since the Spanish speaking community is large, these students may not feel the need to learn English to immerse and survive in the school environment. At Little Hills, the teachers argued that the school did not make enough efforts to help the ELLs to integrate. However, we believe that interest in integrating on the part of the student is an equally important factor. Finally, extra-curricular activities also play an important role when it comes to integration and language exposure. We believe that being part of a team may help students to immerse in American culture and gain English proficiency. Unfortunately,

most ELLs come from low-income households and lack resources and spare time to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Cultural and family factors such as beliefs, traditions and values are associated with particular lifestyles. For example, Hispanic families are very family-oriented. The subject of pregnancy was brought up during our interviews at Little Hills High School in relation to factors of ELLs' dropouts, especially among Latina students. Because of Hispanic cultural expectations, we believe that teenage Latinas may feel a tension between starting a family and academic success. Although this matter is outside school control, we believe that educators could focus on education among Latino students. That is, working towards increasing student awareness of the importance of continuing their education, to ensure their graduation from high school.

Further, parents can positively influence students' learning and enhance motivation. However, poorly educated parents may lead to a lack of parental involvement in education. According to our findings, this is usually the case when it comes to ELLs' education in the United States. In truth, if an ELL student lack family support the student is more likely to drop out from school and thus, not graduate from high school. This is especially true for students who struggle at school and do not experience the necessary parental involvement and encouragement, in order to overcome the challenges of an education. Examples of family support include helping children/teenagers with homework, reading with children/teenagers and showing interest in their learning. Certainly, low-educated parents may find it difficult to provide their children with homework support. Similarly, these parents may find it difficult to connect to their children about high level learning, as our findings indicate.

An additional factor which we deem influences the educational support that parents provide for their children - and which was not mentioned by the educators at Little Hills High School - is the relationship between teachers and parents. Schools and families should work together in fostering positive attitudes. It is our believe that school support along with parent consistency play a key role in helping students to stay in school.

Last of all, a key predictor of ELLs' school success is their previous education. That is, the ELLs' educational foundation, both in terms of previous knowledge and study technique is a factor of utmost importance when looking at student's achievement. For example, ELLs who arrive in the United States with a solid educational background understand the process of learning and thus tend to pass through the ESOL programme quickly. According to our findings, for these students the key for success is to acquire

English. Once their English meet the requirements to exit the ESOL programme, they often achieve a positive outcome in the mainstream classroom. On the other hand, ELLs who have experienced interrupted education or are illiterate in their own language struggle with learning English and basic study techniques. In other words, they do not have the study habits and learning patterns that ELLs with a more solid background may have obtained in their early childhood. Furthermore, Hispanic students that are not highly literate in their own language are not able to identify the many cognates between English and Spanish, whereas highly literate ELLs are. Of consequence is also the fact that the current school system requires students to leave high school at the age of 20. We believe that the low-educated ELLs' situation may result in frustration and distress. Additionally, these ELLs students may be unable to reach their potential due to not being able to fill in their academic gaps. Unfortunately, their poor academic background in combination with current educational policies may limit their opportunities of obtaining a high school diploma.

All things considered, we feel that the better educators understand the ELLs' backgrounds, the better they can understand the ELLs' challenges. Hence, awareness is a significant factor working towards meeting the ELLs' needs. To conclude this section dedicated to student factors influencing the academic achievement of ELLs in the United States, we would like to state that the educators at Little Hills High School were admirably aware of their ELLs students' situation and policies, in all regards.

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Educational policies are influenced by social, political and economical factors. These policies in education affect teaching practices and the education of ELLs. Educational policies implemented by the federal government are negotiated at the State and district level. Thereafter, the counties run the public school system. Despite the fact that the federal government has no official control over the United States public school system, our findings showed that public schools are very dependent on federal funding. In this regard, schools labelled Title 1 receive additional federal funding, due to the high level of economically disadvantaged students. However, Title 1 funding must be used under the Title 1 provisions of NCLB. According to our findings, the NCLB Act mandates that the funding is authorised for resources such as instructional material or professional development. To illustrate, the ESOL programme at Little Hills High School is aligned to the federal rules of NCLB. For example, the school has used the Title 1 funding to

hire highly qualified teachers with academic preparation in English as a second language, or bilingual personnel – among other high-quality resources. While this might be a problem at some schools, it is our opinion that Little Hills used the funds in good ways. All the projects, plans and purchases described to us had a clear focus on the students' success.

In conclusion, the Title 1 funding provides schools with disadvantaged students resources for high-quality educational programmes. Despite the fact that the federal government has no official control over the public school system, our findings revealed that it has control over classroom practice and thus, control over the ways in which ELLs are educated.

When it comes to public funding, it has been reduced and local governments wrestle with budgets, and school districts with reduced funds must still comply with regulations. At Little Hills High School the teachers broached up the cuts on personnel as a main consequence of reduced funding. Obviously, the school's lost positions and cutbacks on resources had consequences, which affected students through class size, personnel, teachers' schedule and work environment. Indeed, teachers had less time for students and basically no time to collaborate with one another. In addition, this situation forced teachers to plan their lessons at nights and at weekends. Despite these negative factors, the ESOL Department at Little Hills appeared to be a very successful department. Strong relationships among teachers and strong commitment for both workplace and students were key features of the ESOL Department at Little Hills High School. Another feature, which we deem was excellent, was the sharing of material. Uploading class material for everyone to see and use is a great source, which reduces workload for teachers. Further, we believe that teachers can learn from each other as documented lesson plans help to consider important elements before instruction, which in turn enhances teaching practices.

According to research discussed above, half of all United States' teachers feel they do not need any kind of in-service professional development to work with ELLs. Important to note is the fact that not all states require teachers who work with ELLs to have special training. In contrast, continued education seemed to be a high priority for the teachers at Little Hills. We deem that additional training can provide mainstream teachers with positive attitudes and new methods on how to incorporate ESOL strategies into the mainstream classroom. Therefore, we believe that to better serve the

literacy needs of ELLs, additional professional development could be mandatory in all states, for both ESOL and mainstream teachers.

When it comes to instructing ELLs, the ESOL teachers at Little Hills adapted most of the material, like using abridged versions of texts and scripts. The ESOL classes followed the exact same curricula as the mainstream classes, however, the ESOL teachers focused on less material but greater depth. They also focused on repetition and incorporation of academic English. In addition, the ESOL teachers used visual aids to scaffold the students, such as posters on the walls and film clips. Noticeably, the ESOL Department instructed the ELLs in this way because they found it beneficial for the students. We are in favour of this approach and believe that the use of scaffolding is of utmost importance to achieve knowledge. We see scaffolding as an important tool in the ESOL classroom – and in any classroom – as students operate with support in their zone of proximal development. In the same way, a focus on academic English is crucial for ELLs' achievement, as it prepares them for the language standards on the standardized tests.

The school of our investigation had the policy of pushing the ELLs students into mainstream classes as soon as possible. One important feature of mainstreaming ELLs is that they were placed according to their subject knowledge and not to their English proficiency. We believe that this approach can help accelerate English acquisition. Firstly, ELLs can learn faster having English proficiency peers as models. Secondly, it can help ELLs to feel more integrated and included in their sense of belonging – rather than being separated in ESOL classes. The downside is however that in the beginning of the transition, students might lose out on valuable subject knowledge. Nevertheless, considering the limited amount of time students have to graduate in the United States school system, we believe that swift mainstreaming is in favour of ELLs. From this perspective, it is important to mention that not all classes at Little Hills were given as ESOL classes, meaning that without entering the mainstream classroom the ELLs would not be able to attain the credits needed for graduation. In this regard, we feel that swift mainstreaming may help students to stay on track to graduate.

At Little Hills High School there were about 450 ELLs at the time of our investigation. Some of these students were attending only ESOL classes whereas others were in mainstream classrooms too. Of those ELLs who attended mainstream classrooms, some were ELL-Ms. That is to say, when an ELL is transferred from the ESOL programme to the regular programme he/she is periodically monitored for two

years. At Little Hills High School portfolios and reports of all aspects of the ELL student performance were carefully revised during those two years. Moreover, the mainstream teacher with support of the ESOL teacher assessed the student's English mastery.

As one can see, large proportions of students with special literacy needs were attending mainstream classrooms. By and large, we feel there may be a need for greater collaboration between ESOL teachers and mainstream teachers. We believe that if teachers work at creating a close collaboration, it can lead to a shared commitment, resulting in higher student achievement. Clearly, at Little Hills High School the teacher body ensured that the exited ELLs received the right interventions.

In a similar manner, the relationship between ESOL teachers and the ELLs who had exited the ESOL programme was very tight. That relationship was built on trust and support, functioning as an efficient means of enhancing the education of the ELLs students.

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To sum up we return to where we set out. The question guiding this research has been on the topic of achievement, and we wanted to explore an urban high school: What do five ESOL teachers at Little Hills High School believe influence ELLs' achievement?

As we have seen, a wide array of factors were discussed by the interviewees, and they believed that the ELLs' achievement was influenced by much more than just the immediate school environment. The ELLs' whole life situation, with all that it entails, affects their achievement, and the complexity of this became obvious to us. We have tried to convey this reality, and let our interviewees' voices explain the situation.

While doing this research, we have learned a great deal; not only have we had an invaluable insight into the American educational system, but we have also learned to critically examine underlying political trends. This investigation has provided us with new tools that will assist us in our teaching, and also in possible continued studies.

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# 7 Appendixes

## 7.1 Appendix 1: Interview Guide

### Background

- Age, years at school, years teaching
- Education
- Experience of working with ELLs
- Programs and subjects taught, other duties

### ESOL Program at Little Hills High School

- Can you tell us a little about the ESOL program at Little Hills High School?
- What are the guiding principles?

### Factors Determining ELL Achievement at Little Hills High School

- How would you define student achievement?
- What would you say influence ELL achievement at Little Hills High School?

### Teacher Possibilities Within the ESOL Program

- To what extent can you decide what and how to teach?
- How do you view the relationship between teaching and testing?

### Principles/Theories Guiding Your Teaching

- How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
- What theories guide you in your teaching?

## 7.2 Appendix 2: Home Survey

### Atlanta Public Schools HOME LANGUAGE SURVEY

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex:  Male  Female

Parent/Guardian Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Federal and state laws require the following information be collected about the primary and home language of every student upon enrollment in the school district. Please complete a survey for each child you are enrolling in the school district.

1. What language did your child learn when he/she first began to talk? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What language does your child most frequently speak at home? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What language is spoken by you and your family most of the time at home? \_\_\_\_\_

If a language other than English is indicated for any of the above questions, the school district will test your child's English language proficiency to determine eligibility for initial and continuing placement in an English language development program. You will be notified about the results of this testing.

4. If available, in what language would you prefer to receive information from the school? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent or Guardian's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

OFFICE USE ONLY			
Student ID #	Date Distributed	Date Received	