

English-Learners as Subgroup: A Genealogical-Raciolinguistic Analysis of English Learners in the School District of Philadelphia

Sydney Negus

University of Pennsylvania

This paper is an analysis of the subject positions at play in School District of Philadelphia (SDP) discussions and policies around English learners (ELs) evident in a meeting of the Board of Education focusing on ELs in 2019, and in official district policy. The discourse of subgroups emerges as a primary theme, with ELs positioned by teachers, board members, and district employees as having lower achievement, and thus more needs, than other groups. Within this discourse, the EL population is further divided into sub-subgroups (such as long term ELs and newcomers), which are positioned as needing even more than other ELs. This positioning of ELs as a needy subgroup sits in tension with district-stated educational principles of avoiding deficit framing of any student. In this paper, I use genealogical raciolinguistic methods within a discursive approach to language policy to delineate the subject positions created in this subgroup discourse. Subject positions are considered from a raciolinguistic perspective, drawing on theories about biopolitics, diversity talk, and audit culture to argue that even when race is not explicitly discussed, EL subgroup discourse is still a continuation of a long history of positioning certain racialized groups of students as being unusually needy and in need of intervention within a broader educational hierarchy. The tensions inherent in the educational discourse of diversity-as-asset are also discussed in the context of ELs.

In this study, I analyze the policy discourse of School District of Philadelphia (SDP) around English learners (ELs). SDP is a large, urban school district. At the time this paper was written in 2022, it consisted of 216 district schools with 114,902 students (and another 68 thousand in charter and alternative schools). In the current 2021-22 school year, 15% of all district students are designated as ELs (School District of Philadelphia Open Data, 2022). English learner education in the district is overseen primarily by the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs, located in the central office (colloquially referred to as “downtown” or by its address as “440”).

Language policy in U.S. schools is complex and varies from locale to locale, but no school or school district operates in a policy vacuum. Discourses circulating in one school district will bear similarities to discourses elsewhere. I analyze policy discourse around ELs of SDP to gain insight into not only what kinds of discourses are present, but more importantly, to understand discourse as a process. How are policies enacted through discourse, and how do different discourses build on one another (or even come into conflict with each other)?

**ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF
ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**

In this paper, I will first establish my conceptual framework, which is based in the Discursive Approach to Language Policy (Barakos & Unger, 2016). I will conduct a literature review of audit culture, diversity talk, and policy research conducted on SDP at the district level before establishing my methodological approach. Afterward, I will provide an analysis of a Board of Education meeting, followed by an intertextual policy reading of Policy 138. I will discuss the implications of my findings before concluding with some future directions.

Conceptual Framework

My theoretical framework for this paper is based in the Discursive Approach to Language Policy (DALP) introduced in Barakos and Unger (2016). This approach conceives of language policy as “a multilingual phenomenon that is constituted and enacted through discourse” (p. 1). The discursive nature of policy is the first key to DALP: policy is something that happens and can be traced by examining interactions as texts situated within sociohistorical contexts. The second key is criticality, which extends from the recent critical turn in both discourse studies and language policy research. DALP grew out of the fields of language policy research, or language, policy and planning (LPP). It is an interdisciplinary field of study which attempts to understand how language policies are both made and implemented. The term “policy” has grown to encompass a broad range of objects of study, from documents to people (Johnson, 2013; Johnson & Ricento, 2013). Early LPP research was focused largely on the “planning” portion, working to promote unified language use in postcolonial contexts (Haugen, 1959). Later LPP research took a social turn, rejecting positivist notions and reconceptualizing language as something primarily social and situated in cultural and historical contexts (Fowler et al., 1979). Around the same time, there was also a critical turn in LPP as scholars began interrogating how language policy is both shaped by, and actively shapes, power dynamics in society (Ruiz, 1984; Tollefson, 1991). Critical Language Policy research (CLP) developed alongside the critical turn in discourse studies popularized by Fairclough (2003) with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CLP and CDA are both problem-oriented frameworks. They analyze policy and discourse to understand how power is working, and ultimately to disrupt power and work toward equity. DALP unites critical discourse and critical language policy research into one project (Barakos & Unger, 2016).

Power is a large and amorphous concept. In this paper, I will conceptualize power using the Foucauldian view of biopolitics. Biopolitics is the idea that modern states categorize subsets of the population and, to better manage these subsets, position some groups as being superior or inferior to one another (Foucault, 2006, 2008). During the colonial period (and continuing into today), this sorting categorized people as being fully human (white) and then varying degrees of less human based on race (Wynnter, 2003). Flores and Rosa (2015) have extended this racial sorting to a raciolinguistic sorting, arguing that language and race cannot be separated and that language ideologies are inextricable from the other ideologies used in this biopolitical sorting.

Using this conceptual framework, I will investigate how, during one meeting, a group of people enact language policy by discursively forming ELs as a subset of the student population which needs to be monitored for the purposes of

management. They do not do this in isolation, but in a sociohistorical context in which one language (English) is positioned as having the most power and value.

Literature Review

Having established my framework, I now describe some additional research which I will use to contextualize my analytic findings. I will be drawing on two important concepts: audit culture (DeCosta, Park, & Wee, 2019; Strathern, 2000) and culture and diversity talk (Urciuoli, 2009). I will also ground my work in previous language policy research done in the School District of Philadelphia (Johnson, 2009, 2011).

Audit culture is defined by Strathern (2000) as a culture involving the application of principals of financial auditing, with its focus on efficiency, regulation, and accountability, to other areas of society. In the case I am investigating, the area of society is education, specifically of ELs. DeCosta, Park, and Wee (2019) examined the extension of audit culture to the realm of language, arguing that organizations must give “a public accounting of why resources (of time, money, manpower) might be allocated toward developing skills and proficiency in some languages instead of others” (p. 400). This public accounting requires constant self-monitoring by organizations to determine if their language policy is successfully serving their target clients. The research context of DeCosta, Park, and Wee’s (2019) study is foreign language education, a context which suggests accountability for the selection of “some languages instead of others” (p. 400). I will take these authors’ logic of auditing, self-monitoring, and accountability and adapt them to the context of K-12 education of ELs.

Another important concept used in my analysis is that of diversity or culture talk. In her 2009 paper, Bonnie Urciuoli investigates “culture” talk at a higher education institution, discussing how “culture” and “cultural diversity” came to have specific meanings at a primarily white institution (Urciuoli, 2009). She focuses specifically on how labels of “culture” and “diversity” come to be tied to very specific types of students. To call a student “diverse” in the university context is to point to the social information that they are not of the unmarked (white, middle to upper class, American) type. In the communications office, “diversity” is a persona that students from certain backgrounds carry with them into college for the benefit of the institution. Their “diversity” is transportable and commodifiable and can be used in promotional materials where the college is described as a place of free-flowing thought and cultural exchange.

There has not been a great deal of policy work done focusing on the district level in SDP (as opposed to the classroom level). David Cassels Johnson (2009, 2011) conducted ethnographic work on bilingual policy and practice in SDP in the post- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) period of 2002-2006, investigating how language policy operated across and within different levels of the education structure. He found that different district officials in charge of bilingual/English learner education understood and interpreted federal and state language policy in different ways, which had consequences for the policy decisions they made and the programmatic changes that resulted. I revisit the same context over a decade later, also focusing on district administrators, but additionally examining the discourse of Board of Education members, ESOL teachers, and various other persons present

Methodology

The data analyzed in this paper consist of a video recording and policy documents. The primary data source is a video recording of a March 2019 Board of Education committee meeting about EL student achievement. I selected this meeting to be the focus of my analysis because it a) is public-facing, and thus highlights aspects of EL education that organizational members deemed important enough for public attention and b) was attended by a multitude of people, representing a range of perspectives. This meeting has two main parts. The first part is a presentation by the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs (OMCP), which gives the board a presentation about the “EL landscape” and their plans and current initiatives to serve ELs. The second is a public comment session where teachers, parents, students, and community members may bring up concerns to the board about ELs in the district. The presentation represents one official discourse (or bundle of discourses) around ELs, and the commentary and questions from the board and the public represent other discourses.

For my analysis, I use the methodological approach outlined in Flores’ (2021) article on raciolinguistic genealogy, combined with a discursive approach to policy document analysis articulated by Allan (2008). Raciolinguistic genealogy combines the raciolinguistic perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015) with a genealogical stance, which Foucault (1984) explains must implicate an understanding of human history as a series of dominations, layered upon one another and rooted in rules and institutions. As a method concerned with historical analyses, genealogy in the Foucauldian sense does not chronologically account for events, but rather traces grids of intelligibility across contexts. Such grids of intelligibility are socially shared understandings of ways of being in the world, of the different roles or subject positions certain people are allowed to occupy, and of how different people are allowed to be seen and understood by society. Ruiz (1984) provides a similar concept specific to language with the concept of language orientations, which “delimit the range of acceptable attitudes toward language, and to make certain attitudes legitimate. In short, orientations determine what is thinkable about language in society” (p. 2). Orientations toward language can enact a positioning of language-as-problem or language-as-resource. Either way, the speakers of languages are understood as occupying normative subject positions which are delimited by socially shared ways of seeing people.

Allan (2008) operationalizes subject positions in her feminist work as something to identify and then trace across various documents, texts, and contexts in the course of conducting critical policy analysis. I used this method in my analysis, devoting a round of coding to identifying and tracing the subject positions discursively constructed for ELs during the board meeting. Allan (2008) emphasizes that when conducting policy analysis, it is important to note not just what is present (talked about or written about) in policy, but also what is missing or silent. This becomes very relevant when considering my data from a raciolinguistic perspective. Race and language cannot be separated from one another, but race is rarely explicitly mentioned in district discourse. I will not so much be looking at raciolinguistic subject positions as looking at the spaces of their absence.

For this analysis, I outlined the entire meeting in a table, noting timestamps, speakers¹, and what was being discussed. I included screenshots of the video at each time stamp in another column to capture the physical context and to have images of the power point slides which were frequently referenced during the presentation portion of the meeting. Throughout my analysis, I will pair images of the slide show alongside excerpts of the presenter's commentary on that slide. Participants experienced this meeting multimodally: they were seeing a slide show and interacting with it in various ways. A discourse analysis of this meeting would be incomplete without a consideration of some of the key elements of interaction. To that end, I coded the data in separate columns for general themes, noting interactions of interest, and I then I transcribed² those interactions before doing a second round of coding for subject positions. Afterward, I reviewed the meeting as a whole and looked at how the subject positions I had identified were appearing in various interactions.

My final analytical step was to examine Policy 138, the district's policy regarding the "English Language Development/Bilingual Education Program" (School District of Philadelphia No.138, 2018). Analyzing one discourse event can reveal a great deal, but the richest discourse analysis of language policy is often intertextual (Johnson, 2013). "Intertextuality," coined by Kristeva (1986) in her work analyzing Bakhtin's (1986) writings on dialogism, refers to how texts are always in dialogue with other texts, developing meaning between and across each other. Intertextuality is a useful concept for a genealogical stance to discursive policy analysis, since the notion of intertextuality underscores ideological imbrications and cleavages across sociohistorical contexts of texts and their production.

My guiding research questions are as follows:

1. What subject positions emerge in SDP discussions of ELs?
2. What logics and power relations undergird the positioning of ELs as a subgroup, and the creation of further sub-subgroups?
3. Are there tensions between circulating discourses, and if so, are these tensions resolvable?

A final methodological consideration is my position as employee in the Office of Research and Evaluation of SDP at the time of this meeting. I was not present at this board meeting, and I did not do any research of this meeting in my capacity as a district researcher. During my time at the district, I did research and program evaluation on the topic of ELs. These experiences influence my insights and provide me with an emic perspective.

Analysis

The meeting can be roughly divided into four parts: an administrative introduction (taking roll, accepting the minutes from the last meeting), a presentation delivered by Alexandra Ferris from OMCP, questions and comments on the presentation from the board, and then a public comment session where pre-registered members of the public could speak for three minutes each. Based

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout for both participants and for names of specific schools. The exception is the Newcomer Learning Academy. There is only one school of its type in the district, and it is impossible to anonymize.

² Transcription was done using modified conventions from Jefferson (2004). "?" indicates rising tone.

ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA
on my coding of this meeting, I identified four themes to focus on in this study: populations, subgroups, audit culture, and diversity.

Table 1
Board Meeting Outline (Total meeting recording length: 2:22:59)

Time Stamp	Meeting Component
0:00	Introductory administrative tasks
5:00	“Invited” presentation
57:02	Questions/comments
1:16:02	Public Comment

There were many participants in this meeting. To facilitate keeping track of speakers, I have listed below all the participants who appear in my analysis by name. There were additional people present, including assorted teachers, advocates, parents, and board members. Three students spoke, including one EL and two members of the Philadelphia Student Union.

Table 1
Participants

Board of Education	SDP	The Public
Amy McDonald (Co-Chair)	Janaya Waite-Rains (Office of Academic Supports)	Hannah Carpenter (ESOL teacher, Davies School)
Dr. Dan McCord (Co-Chair)	Alexandra Ferris (Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs)	Alice Chen (ESOL teacher)
	Barbara Downey (OMCP)	Lynn Berger (ESOL teacher)
	7.10%	Jeni Sanna (ESOL teacher)
	0.10%	Gaby Monari (advocate)

The meeting started with an official introduction and roll call by Amy McDonald, a board member who was co-chair of the meeting. She invited Janaya Waite-Raines from the Office of Academic Supports to present her report, and after an introduction Waite-Raines stated that the following presentation was “reflective of the goals within the Academic Supports Office” and turned to Alexandra Ferris to present.

Populations Discourse

The presentation was entitled “A Landscape of English Learners in the School District of Philadelphia.” Landscapes are common genre of report within the district in which a specific population of students is analyzed for demographic trends. These reports sometimes include maps, producing a literal “landscape” of

where certain kinds of students are in physical space within district borders.

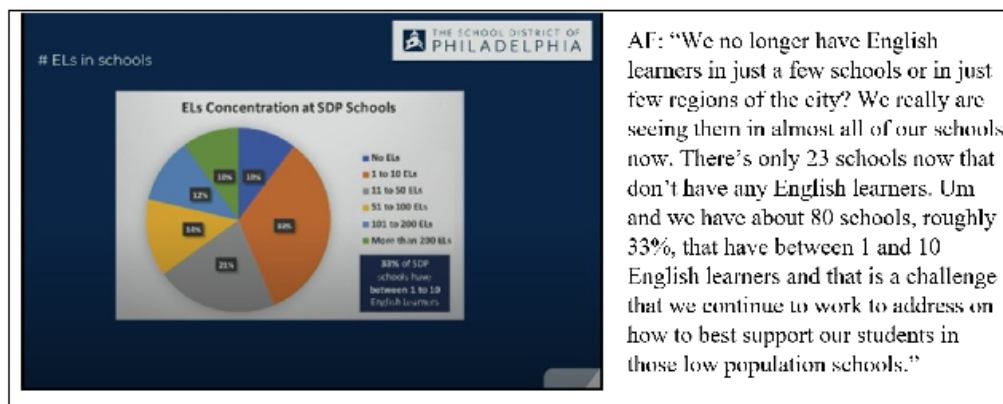


AF: “We have an increasing population of English Learners. On the left hand slide you’ll see that as of January 2019 we’re at almost 16,000 students. So over the past five years we’ve had a pretty steady increase in English learners. And then the right-hand graph shows our total percentage. So currently our English learners are 12% of the school district.”

Figure 1: OMCP presentation slide on EL population over five years³.

Here, ELs are a population that has shown a “pretty steady increase,” and now make up 12% of the total district student population. This presentation can be read as part of a biopolitical project which aims to sort district students into populations which can be categorized, tracked, and analyzed, with the intent to drive programming and “serve” the population (Foucault, 2006). The population discourse in this case went beyond merely identifying and mapping the current group of ELs in the district: it identified ELs as a subset of the population that is growing and spreading.

Next, ELs were analyzed on several dimensions, including in terms of their “concentration” in district schools:



AF: “We no longer have English learners in just a few schools or in just a few regions of the city? We really are seeing them in almost all of our schools now. There’s only 23 schools now that don’t have any English learners. Um and we have about 80 schools, roughly 33%, that have between 1 and 10 English learners and that is a challenge that we continue to work to address on how to best support our students in those low population schools.”

Figure 2: OMCP presentation slide on number of ELs in SDP schools

Here, ELs are not just a growing population in terms of sheer number, but also in terms of their geographic spread. They are no longer isolated in a few regions, they are a growing and spreading population, and they are almost everywhere: “There’s only 23 schools now that don’t have any English learners.”

OMCP’s purpose in positioning ELs as a growing population is likely to make the case for additional attention and services from the district: this population

³ Transcription was done using modified conventions from Jefferson (2004). “?” indicates rising tone.

ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

represents a growing proportion of the district's students and should have a corresponding growth in resources devoted to it. This discourse is situated within the logics of audit culture: OMCP needs to account for allocation of resources to some students instead of others. Within this logic of accounting for resources, establishing ELs as a significant population seems eminently practical and even required.

Population talk and concern for resources was not limited to the formal presentation. It also showed up in the public comment portion when a teacher, Hannah Carpenter, introduced herself by giving her school's stats:

HC: "I teach at Davies in Network 8, we have one of the largest ESOL populations of any school in the city. Nearly 37% of our 1200 students are enrolled in ESOL program and the numbers continue to rise, seemingly daily."

She talks about this rising population in contrast to what she calls a "sharp decline in the support and services that are provided." Like Alexandra Ferris, she is establishing the significance of the size and growth of a student population to situate the rest of her comment, which is about a perceived reduction in allocated resources: "although we've seen a rise in students in the past five years we've seen a sharp decline in the support and services that are provided. And not just in our school but districtwide." Within the context of a large public school district, these arguments for resources are not surprising. However, in establishing the need for resources, this population discourse is frequently couched in terms of "challenge" and "concern." Schools with high concentrations of ELs are growing and thus need attention. "Low population schools" are of no less concern, they are a "challenge that we continue to work to address." Within the discourse of populations, ELs are given a subject position of "member of a population of concern," or, to use the district term, "subgroup."

Subgroup Subject Positions

Within populations of concern and challenge, there are subpopulations which are of even more concern and challenge: "subgroups." The first mention of subgroups comes alongside a presentation slide cautioning viewers to interpret EL data carefully.

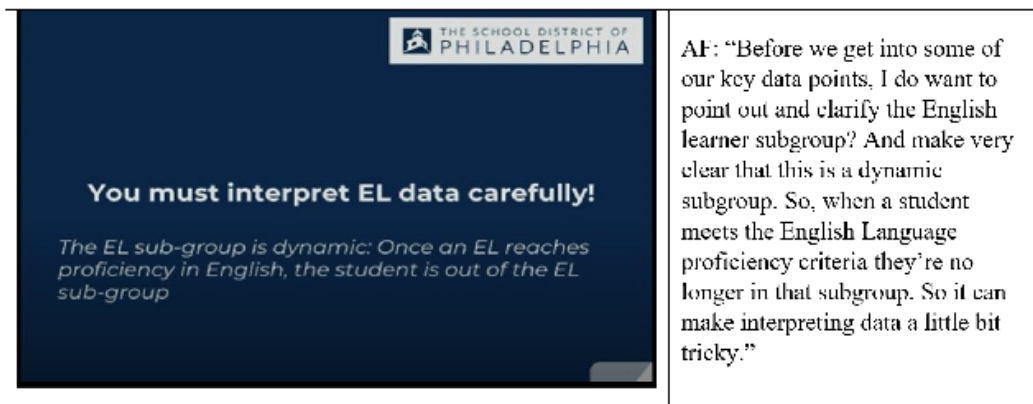


Figure 3: OMCP presentation slide about interpretation of EL data.

Here, ELs are defined as one subgroup. A student can leave that subgroup by meeting English proficiency criteria, which makes ELs a dynamic subgroup that is difficult to pin down in the data. Further subgroups within the EL subgroup emerge throughout the course of the presentation, and the comments from the board and the public afterward, discursively populating the EL subgroup with numerous possible subject positions. These variations on the subgroup subject position are clearly described in a later slide:



Figure 4: OMCP presentation slide defining EL subgroups.

It is notable that “Reclassified/Exited ELs” are included in this list. Even when a student has met the criteria and is no longer in the EL program, they are still marked with EL-ness and occupy a subgroup subject position. This was emphasized shortly after this slide was presented when a board member asked how former ELs were tracked for college and career outcomes even after they had left the district. This board member referenced her job teaching at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) and said that CCP “gets a lot of your students” and that “many are not college and career ready. How are we looking at that disconnect?” Another board member asked “when they move out of ESL. EL. You know. Uh do you track them for a while to see whether or not they actually are demonstrating that they can grasp the learning in our language, you know, in English?” In the presentation and in the accompanying interactions, exited ELs are discursively shaped into a population of concern requiring tracking and management even when they are no longer in district schools.

In addition to exited ELs, other sub-subgroups identified on this slide appear repeatedly in discourse throughout the rest of the meeting. Newcomers are described as needing specific and additional resources, with one ESOL teacher saying: “Our newcomers are struggling with adjusting to a new language, culture, and environment, in addition to learning academics... our most recently arrived newcomer English learners have instructional and sociocultural needs that differ from those of native English speakers.” Another ESOL teacher at the high school level said that “we have several newcomers that are coming to us... not with the equivalent education of say a third grader or fourth grader in in America.” Concern over incoming students’ education levels is discussed with yet another sub-subgroup label, SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education). A

**ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF
ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**

speaker from a nonprofit serving refugees talked about “those SIFE students we heard about who are still learning English. And the fact that students’ intense linguistic and emotional needs can’t possibly be met by traditional high school rostering.” A teacher at the Newcomer Learning Academy said “Some SIFEs arrive to our program with no literacy skills in any language which poses even greater challenges to their teachers and counselors on how to create a pathway to their success, due to the lack of resources we are able to provide them.

There are two themes of note in the discourse around these groups of students. First, they are described in terms of “need.” They have: “needs that are not met effectively,” “intense linguistic and emotional needs,” and “instructional and sociocultural needs that differ from those of native-English speakers.” Their needs stem from deficits. They “arrive to our program with no literacy skills in any language” or without “the equivalent education of say a third grader or fourth grader in in America.” They are both challenged and challenging. They struggle “with adjusting to a new language, culture, and environment, in addition to learning academics,” and their lack of skills “poses even greater challenges to their teachers and counselors on how to create a pathway to their success.” They occupy subject positions characterized primarily by *need*.

The second theme which emerges throughout subgroup discourse is the biopolitical idea that subgroups such as these need to be monitored and analyzed for management purposes. When discussing exited ELs, a board member asked if “when they move out of ESL...do you track them for a while to see whether or not they actually are demonstrating that they can grasp the learning in our language, you know, in English?” The presenter, Alexandra Ferris, responded “Yes, we monitor them for four years. Two previously, now four.” Another board member also asked about exited ELs and how OMCP tracks college and career data after they have left the district. The Chief of Academics Janaya Waite-Raines responded that they have one year of matriculation data, and that they are working with the research office to track longer term and in even more depth. This subgroup population needs to be “tracked” and “monitored” even beyond their time as district ELs.

This tracking and monitoring are not framed as part of a biopolitical project by speakers in this meeting, of course. Monitoring is generally framed within logics of accountability and audit culture (DeCosta, Park, & Wee, 2019; Stathern, 2000). A lawyer from the Education Law Center said in her public comment that “the district cannot know whether its students are receiving an effective language instruction program without robust data collection and annual analysis at each school building level throughout the district.” Data must be collected to prove effectiveness (and, it is implied, ensure equity for ELs). Waite-Raines referenced effectiveness frequently in the meeting, at one point saying that she will not grant OMCP permission to open a second Newcomer Learning Academy without data demonstrating that the first one is an effective program. Her emphasis on demonstrating effectiveness is in line with an audit culture in which organizations need to continuously monitor their services to justify resource -allocation. In this case, the district as an organization needs to monitor whether they are serving their clients, EL students. However, this monitoring is ultimately biopolitical. It is carried out by looking at student data: how are they performing on standardized tests; how quickly are they reaching English proficiency; are they graduating and

entering college or the workforce? The district is not conducting in-depth program evaluations at every school and across every program, nor are they interviewing every EL about their experiences in the program. Students are being monitored just as much as, if not more than, the district that is supposed to be proving that it serves them.

Diversity

Throughout the meeting, the EL subject position was frequently described as being diverse, and this diversity was described as an asset (except for when it was not). The first instance of diversity talk came at the beginning of Alexandra Ferris' presentation. The second slide, after the title slide, listed the "Guiding Principles" of the work of her office, OMCP:

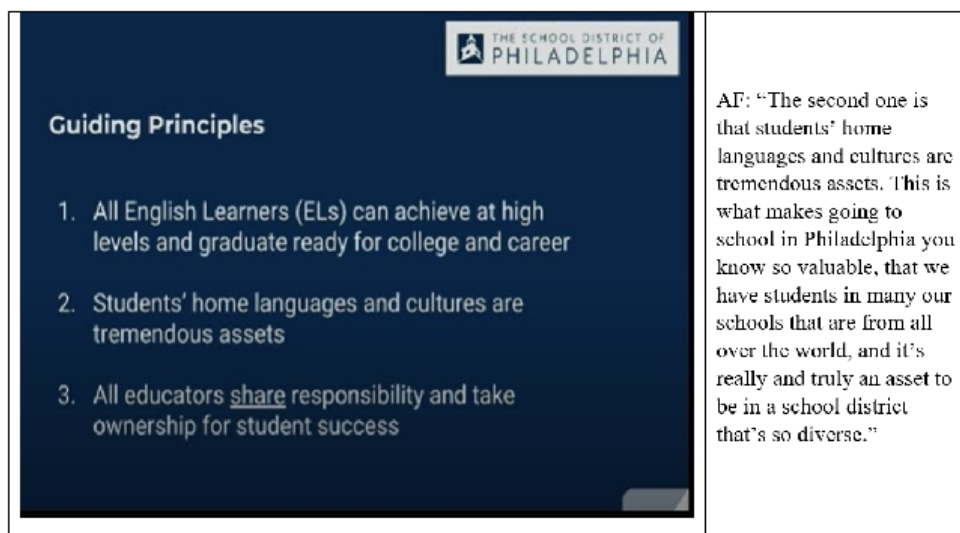


Figure 5: OMCP presentation slide establishing OMCP guiding principles.

She explicitly described diversity as an asset. She defined diversity globally, saying that having students from all over the world is what makes the district diverse, and the experience of going to school in Philadelphia valuable. From the beginning, she is trying to position English learners within an assets-based framework, an alternative to a deficits-based approach. The idea is to focus on what learners, particularly those from minoritized groups, bring to the table, instead of focusing on what they lack. This concept has grown out of research done by Richard Ruiz (1984) on language orientations which argues that educators and policy makers can either orient toward language-as-problem, language-as-right, or language-as-resource.

Diversity-as-asset is brought up by other speakers throughout the meeting as well. Lynn Berger, a teacher in the New Learner Academy (NLA) at Franklin Learning Center, described the NLA program as follows: "Our program is for students aged 14-21 who are recent arrivals to the United States. We are lucky to serve students from all over the world, but most are from countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and Africa." In saying that they are "lucky to serve students from all over the world," she is aligning with a diversity-as-asset perspective. What was not discussed by either Ferris or Berger is for whom diversity is an

**ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF
ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**
asset. Diversity is

“what makes going to school in the district so valuable,” but how diversity benefits the diverse ELs themselves is never really discussed. Instead, the discourse is dominated by the challenges presented by ELs having unique needs. The value of diversity is vague and conferred upon the district and on the teachers who are “lucky to serve” this diverse population. As with the case of diversity in university settings (Urciuoli, 2009), diversity here is a commodity that can be used to describe the district as a certain kind of place that other (unmarked) students can benefit from.

Speakers did, at times, make the assets/deficits discourse explicit. A board member, Melissa Keen-Murillo, talked about what she saw as a problem in how ELs were viewed by people who are not ESL teachers: “We did our best, we really tried, put all of our efforts in, but’ right? There’s this barrier, there’s this deficit, there’s this lack of.” She then talked about the importance of a growth mindset, looking at “funds of knowledge,” and “figuring out how we’re going to use our partners and assets in our community and our resources.” Here, she brought the discourse back to assets. This somewhat locates the assets within the students, but she also locates assets with partners, community, and general “resources.”

There is a tension between the diversity-as-asset discourse and the populations discourse within which ELs occupy a subject position as members of a subgroup with many needs. Berger, the NLA teacher who spoke about being lucky to serve students from all over the world, criticized “a focus on test scores and attendance that paints our students as scapegoats and not as assets.” This was the same teacher who also said that “Some SIFEs arrive to our program with no literacy skills in any language which poses even greater challenges to their teachers and counselors.” Within one three-minute statement, she portrayed her students both as underappreciated assets and as needy challenges who are, for literacy-oriented academic purposes, languageless. She was not the only speaker trying to thread the needle between the project of valuing EL diversity and the project of constructing ELs as a subpopulation in dire need of additional resources.

In this meeting, diversity talk allowed speakers to talk about minoritized students and their minoritized languages without ever mentioning race, discursively constructing language as a source of diversity that is also simultaneously raceless. A raciolinguistic perspective tells us that race and language cannot be separated (Flores & Rosa, 2015), but race and language were very much separated in the discourse about district ELs. It is significant that the only time racism was explicitly mentioned was when speakers were technically off topic. During the public comment portion of the meeting, a student from the Philadelphia Student Union read a statement about the recently established Policy 805, which dictated that metal detectors should be utilized in all high schools. Another student spoke on the same topic later. As the first student described it, the policy claimed to be in the name of safety and consistency, but he argued that it “could instead have the possibility to create an environment that criminalizes [students].” He went on to say, “I think we should look deeply into the issue when we’re talking about potentially adding elements of what I see as structural racism in the school to prison pipeline in schools where we have predominantly black and brown students.” This is the only explicit mention of racism in the nearly two and a half hours of this meeting. ELs are diverse in their languages and in their needs, but

not in their race. Talk about language is everywhere, but in the discourse of this meeting, language is raceless.

Policy 138

To gain an intertextual understanding of the discourses present in this meeting, I will now examine Policy 138, the official SDP policy document regarding ELs which was adopted by the School Reform Commission⁴ on January 18, 2018. It outlines the principles, regulations, and responsibilities involved in the “English Language Development/Bilingual Education Program.”. Policy 138 shows a specific conceptualization of the appropriate approach for EL instruction at a point in time. I do not use the word “appropriate” merely as a matter of course. It appears in the introductory Purpose section of the policy, which states that SDP: “shall provide a culturally and linguistically appropriate planned instructional program for English Learners (ELs), which builds on students’ home language and culture.”

The idea of building on students’ home language and culture shows up throughout the policy, referred to as an “asset-based” approach: “In all language programs, students’ home languages and cultures, as well as their educational experiences from the home country and family, shall be valued as a strong foundation for the acquisition of another language.” This is the assets-based approach which shows up in OMCP’s guiding principles in their presentation to the board a year later, and it contains the same tension between calling an approach “asset-based” and implying that the assets are insufficient. The students’ home languages and cultures are not being valued in and of themselves, but as a foundation for acquiring English. Another part of the *Purpose* section states the goals of the program: The first goal is ensuring that ELs can access grade-level academic content standards, and the second goal is to develop “advanced levels of English with support for the students’ integration and participation in the community.” ELs, according to this language, do not seem to be able to participate in the community until they acquire advanced levels of English. “Integration” as a goal is also interesting. “Integration” does not seem far removed from “assimilation,” and is a concerning goal made seemingly harmless by the raceless discourse.

Audit culture also makes its presence known in Policy 138: “The programs shall be evaluated regularly for effectiveness in developing students’ language proficiency and access to grade-level content.” Waite-Raines’ talk about evaluating programs a year later uses the same discourse of effectiveness. Audit culture “effectiveness” discourse appears again in “The district’s plan for ELs shall include...effective curriculum and programming to meet the needs of ELs at varying levels of proficiency, including newcomers, students with interrupted or limited formal education (SLIFE) and older ELs (18-21).” Here we also have the identification of subgroups which appears later, although the populations of concern seem to have shifted slightly in that time. SLIFEs have since become SIFEs, and older ELs have been traded out for “6+ years” ELs. “Exited ELs” do not yet

⁴ The School Reform Commission was a state-appointed governing body of the School District of Philadelphia from 2001-2018, when the SRC dissolved itself and transferred control to a Board of Education appointed by the mayor of Philadelphia. At the time Policy 138 was adopted, the SRC was still in existence.

**ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF
ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**

appear as a population of concern, they are only mentioned in a sentence about families of exited ELs being notified in their preferred language. Newcomers are the only completely unchanged group.

Discussion

Within a biopolitical logic of managing student populations, ELs are discursively positioned as subjects who require additional levels of management. The subject position of “subgroup member” encompasses other subject positions: newcomer, long-term EL, SIFE, and exited-EL. The positioning of ELs into this subjecthood occurs within discursive logics of biopolitics, neoliberal audit culture, and raciolinguistic ideologies. In the logic of the biopolitics, EL subgroups are a population of concern which must be monitored. In the logic of audit culture, those who occupy the subject position of “educator” must account for the allocation of resources to ELs by discursively constructing them as a growing population of extraordinary need. Viewed through a raciolinguistic perspective, the EL subject position is somehow diverse, but not racially diverse. Within district discourse, race and language are unrelated and the EL subject position is raceless. In district diversity discourse, ELs are a diverse population with assets, but the assets do not seem to benefit ELs, because they are, as discussed, a deficit population of need.

Many of these discourses were present in Policy 138, but it was in the interactions of the board meeting a year later that we can see these discourses being enacted and elaborated upon by policy actors. Discursive analysis of the board meeting also provided an opportunity to look for what Allan (2008) calls “policy silences”. The lack of race in the policy document very clearly becomes a silence during the voicing of the policy through the meeting. The only speaker who brought it up were not addressing the designated topic of the meeting. The assets-based orientation outlined in the policy bubbles up across various speakers talking about diversity in the meeting, but as in the policy document, it is never clearly articulated what diversity means and who it is for.

Taking a genealogical stance to discursive policy analysis, one could further trace the subject positions made available to ELs in Policy 138 and in the board meeting back through the national context. No Child Left Behind (the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA) called for tracking and monitoring ELs as part of a larger education accountability project (Johnson, 2009, 2011). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 shifted framing somewhat to an equity lens, wherein monitoring ELs ensures their equitable education. The term “subgroup” itself comes from ESSA, which mandates monitoring of various subgroups such as economically disadvantaged students and racial groups. ESSA also marked a juncture when concern about diversity and culture started to appear, but still within the logic of audit culture monitoring. Audit culture discourse continues to shape the grid of intelligibility or the orientation within which ELs can be seen to exist as students.

My findings in this paper raise important questions: Is it possible to have an assets-based approach within a discourse which positions ELs as subgroups and then tracks them within the logics of audit culture? Is the assets-based approach incommensurable with discourse in which ELs are a subpopulation to be closely watched out of concern for their high levels of need? In the discursive construction

of the subgroup subject position as it was constructed during this board meeting, ELs can bring diversity assets to the table, but they cannot make use of them. Others enjoy their diversity as asset, while for the subgroups, their diversity remains a source of challenge and concern which needs to be addressed with extraordinary effort and resources.

Conclusion

In this paper, I conducted discursive policy analysis using a raciolinguistic genealogical method. I examined a policy document and performed a discourse analysis of a meeting, and looked at how these two texts “talked” to one another, painting a picture of the policy and discourse landscape around ELs in SDP. This landscape is one of monitoring ELs as a subgroup. This subgroup discursively acquires characteristics throughout the meeting which echo official policy: ELs are diverse assets, and ELs are uniquely needy and challenging. The subject position occupied by ELs is a complex and contradictory one.

There were far more discourses of interest and possible analytical paths to explore than fit within the scope of this paper. Within these constraints, I focused on “subgroups” for genealogical tracing purposes. My analysis would benefit from further consideration of the grid of intelligibility shaped by NCLB and ESSA, and investigation even further back into the origins of this grid. It would also be fruitful in terms of intertextuality to investigate how policy is being enacted in SDP across a wider range of interactive contexts. What discussions are happening in district offices and at schools? How do various policy enactors talk about ELs, and how does that track into the decisions they make? Diversity talk (and its racelessness) should also be examined across different contexts and interactions. The polycscape of English learners in the School District of Philadelphia is a rich source of potential insights into English learner discourse and policy.

Sydney Negus (snegus@gse.upenn.edu) is a Ph.D. Candidate in Educational Linguistics at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on the intersection between policy and discourse in the area of multilingual student education in the School District of Philadelphia

References

- Allan, E. (2008). *Policy discourse, gender and education: Constructing women's status*. Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. The University of Texas Press.
- Barakos, E., & Unger, J.W. (2016). *Discursive Approaches to Language Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- DeCosta, P., Park, J. & Wee, L. (2019). Linguistic entrepreneurship as affective regime: Organizations, audit culture and second/foreign language education policy. *Language Policy*, 18, 387-406.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 76-100). Pantheon Books

- ENGLISH-LEARNERS AS SUBGROUP: A GENEALOGICAL-RACIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA**
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*. Ch. 11. Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*. Ch. 6. Palgrave Macmillan
- Flores, N. (2021). Raciolinguistic genealogy as method in the sociology of language. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2021(267-268), 111-115
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing Appropriateness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171.
- Fowler, R., Hodge, B., Kress, G., & Trew, T. (1979). *Language and Control*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Haugen, E. (1959). Planning for a standard language in Norway. *Anthropological Linguistics* 1(3): 8-21.
- Jefferson, G. (2004). "Glossary of Transcription Conventions." In G.H. Lerner (ed.) *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation*, 14-31. John Benjamins.
- Johnson, D.C. (2009). Ethnography of language policy. *Language Policy* 8: 139-159.
- Johnson, D.C. (2011). Critical discourse analysis and the ethnography of language policy. *Critical Discourse Studies* 8(4): 267-279.
- Johnson, D.C. (2013). *Language Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, D.C. & Ricento, T. (2013). Conceptual and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning: Situating the ethnography of language policy. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 219: 7-21.
- Kristeva, J. (1986). Word, dialogue, and novel. In T. Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader*, 34-61. Basil Blackwell.
- Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal* 8 (2),15-34.
- School District of Philadelphia Open Data. Accessed 2022. <https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/open-data/>
- School District of Philadelphia. (2018). English Language Development /Bilingual Education Program. (Policy No. 138).
- Strathern, M. (2000). The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3), 309-321.
- Tollefson, J.W. (1991). *Planning Language, Planning Inequality: Language Policy in the Community*. Longman.
- Urciuoli, B. (2009). Talking/not talking about race: The enregisterments of culture in higher education discourses. *Journal of linguistic anthropology*, 19(1), 21-39.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation— An argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3. 257–337.