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National Association of Educational  
Translators and Interpreters  
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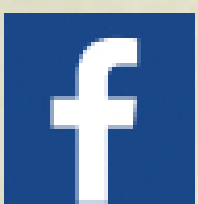
# What Teachers Did Not See in Salina and Carla

## By Taylor Svete

By overlooking traits of giftedness among English language learners, public schools in the United States frequently make the grievous mistake of placing high achievers with limited proficiency in English in special education classes, not realizing how this harms their social and academic development. Based on: <https://nrcgt.uconn.edu/newsletters/winter053/>

Salina's family migrated from Chile to pursue new opportunities for their children's futures. Salina was popular at school and thrived academically in Chile, but upon entering the school system in the United States, she struggles to make friends and hides her growing depression from family members as teachers overlook that she is a gifted learner, placing Salina in special education classes instead. In a program for high achievers, you are already only half as likely to find a Hispanic student like Salina than one of her White peers (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Her new public school is also one of the 13% without an ESL or bilingual program, even though 18% of children over the age of 5 in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home, and she is among the 8% of public school students that speak English "less than well" (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003, 1997; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Most public schools in our country still treat ELLs as drains on their tight budgets. Until school leaders and instructors recognize the ability to communicate in more than one language is a huge asset and not a handicap, students like Salina will almost always find themselves in special education classes where they do not belong, never making it into a class for gifted or high-achieving learners alongside their English-fluent peers. Yet, with the right support from teachers, other English language learners like intelligent young Salina would not have to be left behind in this way.







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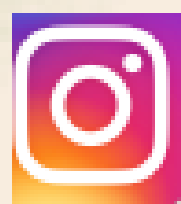
Sometimes it takes an “eye opening experience” for teachers to see the remarkable hidden talents of their ELL students. In one such case, Carla from Honduras astounded her teacher, Jo Ann Robisheaux, with a poem the fourth-grader authored for a class assignment after only two years of learning English. Ms. Robisheaux admitted that she was caught by surprise and her views about the expressive abilities of LEP students in their new language abruptly changed when Carla presented her with the following acrostic:

How wonderful it was  
On the boat  
Near the mouth of the river at  
Dawn. The sun was pointing at me  
Under the roof of the boat. The  
River was wonderful when the sun was pointing at me  
And the boat was soft in the water;  
Soft, very soft in the water.

By Carla (4th grade)



Unfortunately, instructors often view the ELLs in their class as blank slates, assuming these students lack the knowledge to keep up with their English proficient peers. However, as Ms. Robisheaux came to realize through the undeniably touching poem Carla turned in, ELLs’ unique circumstances often hold overlooked academic strengths and creative abilities just waiting to be developed. Carla’s imaginativity and the cultural sensitivity of her language in her writing completely transformed her instructor’s understanding of linguistically diverse students. Ms. Robisheaux began to pay more attention to procedures at her school to avoid automatically labeling LEP students as “slow learners.” By taking steps to become informed about the best practices for teaching gifted students, Ms. Robisheaux was able to adapt these strategies for her ELLs (Robisheaux, 1997).







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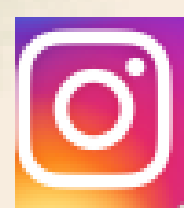
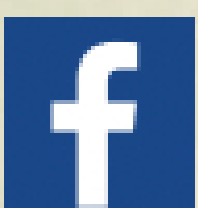
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Currently, most schools and districts approach talent development from a programming perspective: “We have a program. Which students qualify for these services?” However, several studies that highlight exemplary programs serving diverse populations of students found the successful programs shared certain philosophical approaches (Delcourt, 1994; Tomlinson et al., 2003):

1. recognition that a problem of underrepresentation of diverse students exists, and the inclusion in their written policies of intent to identify underserved populations,
2. increasing awareness among faculty of cultural impact on student academic performance, and focusing on individual needs of all students, with specific reference to characteristics of diverse populations of students,
3. the establishment of program support to help program coordinators and teachers make necessary changes to help develop the talent of these students, and
4. parental and community involvement, which is seen as vital to the success of these programs and each child’s education.

It can be concluded that a more effective and inclusive approach to developing student talent begins from the student perspective rather than a programming perspective: “We have students with strengths and weaknesses. How can we best serve them?” Once K-12 educators make small adjustments in how they view their LEP students, they will be able to help these learners reach their full academic potentials by scaffolding strengths to overcome other areas of academic or linguistic weaknesses. By looking at ELLs as individual wealths of experiences, cultures, and languages, teachers will then understand them as valuable contributors of precious knowledge not typically found in class curriculums.







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It is possible you have another “Salina” or “Carla” in your classroom already –an LEP student with traits of giftedness teachers have failed to see. In time, English language learners may surprise you with incredible talents and abilities as you take steps as a caring and informed instructor to uncover your students’ individual strengths in class. For new types of class assignments and improved methods of assessing your linguistically diverse learners, read more of the original article from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented and check out NAETISL’s thoughtful selection of resources in our online clearinghouses at <https://naetisl.org/resources>.



## Sources

Guadalupe (2005), Developing the Talents and Abilities of Linguistically Gifted Bilingual Students: Guidelines for Developing Curriculum at the High School Level.

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Robisheaux, J. (1997). Presentation at OERI/OBEMLA initiative on LEP students with outstanding abilities. Found in Angelelli; Claudia; Enright, Kerry; Valdes.

## About the Author



As a Marketing and Project intern for NAETISL, Taylor writes articles about language justice and the role of spoken language interpreters and translators in K-12 settings, and supports the work of NAETISL with various projects and administrative activities. The mission of NAETISL is incredibly important to Taylor as a lifelong advocate for social justice, sharing the passion and enthusiasm of all our members for ensuring equitable access for students and their families in K-12 education, regardless of gender, cultural and linguistic background, or their level of proficiency in English. Taylor graduated from Georgia State University Honors College with a Bachelor's in History in May 2021. She is fluent in English and Spanish, learning Arabic, and can speak, read, and write in Brazilian Portuguese at an intermediate conversational level.

