

## Intercultural Manifestations of Racial, Language, and Class Privilege in Schooling: An Autoethnographic Tale

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**ABSTRACT:** In this autoethnographic tale, I tell the story of my own family's experience with race, class, and language privilege. In particular, I focus on my children's experience with elementary schooling in the United States and Hungary. Their intercultural education experience vividly illuminates the socially and culturally constructed nature of race, class, and language privilege and the many ways these privileges are manifest in schooling.

**KEYWORDS:** autoethnography, invisibilization, second language learners, Whiteness, privilege

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Throughout my career as a critically oriented teacher educator and scholar, I have focused on better understanding the educational experiences of English language learners (ELLs). In particular, I have studied the barriers to successful education ELLs experience as a result of the “system of advantage based on race” that is racism (Tatum, 1999, p. 7; Marx, 2004, 2006, 2009; Marx & Saavedra, 2014). Over time, I have come to recognize the intersections of racism (Tatum, 1999; Wellman, 1977), classism (Gorski, 2013), and linguicism—language discrimination (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995)—that give ELLs a triple disadvantage in schooling. The forces that work against ELLs are typically subtle and passive, rather than obvious and active. Daily discrimination takes the form of low expectations, poor or absent language assistance programs (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Torres-Guzmán, 2007), lack of high quality educational opportunities (Marx & Saavedra, 2014; Valenzuela, 1999), and deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997, 2010). A colleague and I have also written of *invisibilization*, the phenomenon we have frequently observed in which educators ignore the needs—even the existence—of ELLs, often with the rationale that ELLs prefer not to have the attention of the adults in

the school (Marx & Saavedra, 2014). Together, these many disadvantages ensure that ELLs remain an underclass in US schooling; they may also ensure that the privileged status in schooling is reserved for White, native-English speaking children of the middle and upper economic classes (Marx & Saavedra, 2014).

The amalgamation of privileges experienced by White, native-English speaking children in the United States is often taken as a given and has not been closely examined in the literature. In the autoethnography I share here, I tell a story of my own children's schooling that illuminates the privilege side of the race, class, and language coin, what McIntosh famously refers to as an "invisible knapsack" of privilege (McIntosh, 1988/1997). In this story, I focus primarily on my daughter, Zoey<sup>1</sup>, because, at the time, she had experienced more public schooling than her younger brother, Logan. Like me, my children are White, native-English speaking, and living in the upper-middle economic class. After their schooling began in the United States, we moved to Hungary for one school year where many of their privileges were amplified, additional privileges were gained, and some were lost. When we returned to the United States, their experience abroad initially disadvantaged them in schooling. This intercultural education experience vividly illuminates the socially and culturally constructed nature of race, class, and language privilege and the many ways it manifests in schooling. I hope this story will resonate with other parents, educators, and scholars who are interested in learning more about the ways passive, subtle, everyday social privileges can serve to incrementally and unfairly advantage or disadvantage their own families.

### **Autoethnography**

I understand autoethnography as a methodology "with its foundations in ethnographical research [that] brings together the study of self (auto) in relation to culture (ethnography)" (Kovach, 2009, p. 33). Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012, p. 210) explain that autoethnography centers "the researcher as a site of cultural inquiry within a cultural context, breaking open the dichotomous notions of the self/other within empirical traditions." Scholars of autoethnography (e.g., Chang, Nqunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 1997) understand that researchers are more than just scholars. We are multidimensional human beings who are influenced by and influencing the world around us, just like everyone else. Bochner (1997) argues that it makes no sense to divide the theoretical from the personal. Scholars, he writes, "learn to hide our personal self behind a veneer of academic and theoretical detachment, fostering the misconception that it has no influence, no place, no significance in our work" (p. 433). "Yet," he continues, "It is rare, indeed, to find a productive scholar whose work is unconnected to his or her personal history" (p. 433).

Autoethnography allows scholars to weave together the personal and the professional, using their own lives as data. While many autoethnographies, particularly in the humanities, present story alone, encouraging readers to make connections to the evocative and emotional qualities of oftentimes wrenching tales (e.g., Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Denzin, 2006; Jones, 2005), the autoethnography I present in this paper is a

blend of the personal, the emotional, and the analytical (Anderson, 2006). By that, I mean that I share here a personal story that is meant to be emotional and heartfelt, but the experiences of my family can also be analyzed and contextualized using relevant theory and literature. Our stories are bigger than ourselves, and scholarly literature helps me explain the connections between our own lived experiences and the larger society around us.

In this autoethnography, I frame the very personal story of my children's education in the United States and abroad within a theoretical discussion of race, class, and language privilege, privileges that metamorphose in their cultural contexts. Through this framework, the story has a critical orientation. As Boylorn and Orbe (2014) explain, "Critical autoethnographers are invested in the 'politics of positionality' (Madison, 2012) that require researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity" (p. 15). Autoethnography can be an excellent critical tool for studying racial and other privileges in education because it "challenges our assumptions of normalcy, forces us to be more self-reflexive, and instructs us about our professional and personal socialization and how we participate in socialization in our schools" (Hughes, 2008, p. 27). A critical take on autoethnography allows me to illuminate the typically invisible privileges my own children experience in their schooling.

In this moment, autoethnography is taking many different forms (Hughes & Pennington, 2017); it is well-recognized as an example of "blurred genre" (Jones, 2005, p. 765). This flexible feature of autoethnography allows it to morph into various forms, reflecting the lives, personalities, interests, skills, and desires of its authors. Thus, the autoethnography I share here is one person's take on the genre. Based on memories, detailed journals, conversations, and photographs, as well as relevant literature and theory, this autoethnography is told through my perspective as a parent, as well as a scholar of race and language.

### **Telling the Stories of One's Children**

When I first began drafting this autoethnography several years ago, I asked my daughter, then in elementary school, for her permission to share her story. Given some of the struggles she had faced in schooling, I was a little nervous she would not give it to me. Well, she did give me permission, but only after emphasizing what a bad experience she had living in Hungary. Along with her permission, she wanted assurance that I would not paint a rose-colored picture: multiculturalism through my eyes not hers. I have tried very hard to honor that agreement here. As I have rethought and rewritten the story, Zoey has grown into a teenager. My son, who was such a little guy when I started, is now wrapping up elementary school. He is curious why I would want to share something so private with a wide audience of strangers. I talked to him about the value of sharing personal experiences so others can learn from and find connections to them. I also explained how pseudonyms can protect our identities. Satisfied, he gave me permission to include him in the story. Before beginning the first draft, I asked my husband for his consent as well. Thus, this story is approved by the main characters in

it, as well as my university IRB. However, the evolution of “ownership” of this story is something I continue to think about. The autoethnography I present here shares my perspective on my children’s schooling experience. They undoubtedly have their own interpretations. In the future, I imagine co-authoring with them if they have stories they would like for us to tell together.

### **American Schooling**

As I stated earlier, it seems to me that my own children, White, native-English speaking, and upper-middle class, have been warmly and systematically included in their educational experiences, in contrast to the experiences of many ELLs. At the time when this story is set, they had both attended two different pre-schools in the United States, and my daughter had also completed kindergarten and first grade. This story takes place in the elementary years when my children had one or two ELL classmates and classmates of color, but most of their classmates were like them, native-English speaking Whites, as were nearly all their teachers and principals/directors. Given that 82% of US teachers (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013) and 80% of US principals (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013) are White, and that an estimated 97% of teachers speak only English (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996), these characteristics were not surprising; one could even say they were unremarkable.

Although my son, Logan, received special education services in speech and my daughter, Zoey, struggled with reading early in her schooling, their teachers and principals have consistently told me how “bright” and highly capable they are. Of course I agree with this assessment. However, this asset-thinking seems to have obscured some areas where my children have struggled. Typically, I have had to be the agent tracking down special services for them when I suspect a problem. For example, as I witnessed the painful struggles my daughter had in reading and watched her fall behind in language arts, I anxiously asked her school to test her literacy skills. Results showed she was two grade levels behind in spelling. Rather than fan my worries, the school gently assured me that some children are just not very good at spelling and that Zoey would get better as she got older and had more access to computers and spell-checking programs. I was told how strong Zoey’s results were in comprehension. The school made no intervention. This is a strong contrast to the remedial interventions so many ELLs face in schooling (e.g., Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Valencia & Black, 2002). I find it hard to believe that an ELL two grade levels behind in one area of schooling would be dismissed as “bright” and able to catch up on their own. Another time, Zoey had interpersonal issues with a classmate, also White and middle class. The problems between the girls had been building for months and began to interfere with our daily lives. Frustrated that the school did not seem to be helping the situation, I shared my distress with faculty. Rather than express concern, they quickly assured me that both girls were smart, pretty, and had smart parents. Everything would be okay. These anecdotes illustrate that American educators working with my White, English-language-speaking, upper-middle-income children have typically reassured me rather than named any deficits or areas the children should work on. Again, I see this as a sharp contrast to the schooling experience of ELLs who daily struggle with low expectations and

remediation (e.g., Marx & Saavedra, 2014; Valencia, 1997; 2010). There is no doubt that my children are privileged in their US public education.

### Moving to Hungary

When my daughter was seven and my son was five, my family moved to Budapest, Hungary, the city my husband Zoli had emigrated from, so that he and I could serve as Fulbright scholars at local universities and also so that our children could learn Hungarian, adapt to Hungarian culture, and get to know the Hungarian side of their family (see Marx, Housen & Tapu, 2016, for the longer tale of this adventure). The first anchor point we made in Budapest was a good elementary school for Zoey. Before moving, Zoli talked with another Hungarian-American who recommended an *általános iskola* (public elementary school) in a particular, affluent neighborhood. Growing up in Budapest, Zoli had always wanted to live in this leafy, upscale area. He called the principal and asked if we might enroll our daughter for the school year. She responded enthusiastically, telling him that the school had rarely worked with children who did not speak Hungarian, but that it would be a good experience for everyone involved. Like American schools in prosperous neighborhoods, the principal was used to working closely with parents and was happy to accommodate us (Lareau, 2000; Norman, 2016). With the school decided upon, we rented a furnished apartment within the district boundaries, a short city bus ride away.

We arrived in Budapest a few weeks before the start of school to settle into the culture, figure out our neighborhood, and process all the bureaucratic paperwork necessary to work and live in Hungary for the year. Delivering paperwork to the *általános iskola* one day, we spoke to kind teachers with warm smiles who directed us to Zoey's first grade teacher. We found her in the hallway and said hello. A well-dressed, experienced teacher, she took a visible step backwards on her high heels when Zoli explained that her new American student, Zoey, spoke no Hungarian. Her body language and frustrated facial expressions told me she had no experience with children learning Hungarian as a second language; she also seemed surprised to hear about this new student. As she pulled back, Zoli leaned in to reassure her that the principal thought it would work, that he could help Zoey with homework, and that our daughter's education was our priority. His voice was calm and helpful, but I could see the alarm in his eyes. It made the alarm in my own heart grow. The teacher continued to shake her head and look upset, barely glancing at Zoey. But, the arrangements were already made and Zoey would start school in her first grade classroom the following week. Zoli and I stared at each other in incredulity as we walked away. The other teachers called out cheerful goodbyes as we left the *általános iskola*. We could not believe our bad luck. Before this moment, we had not realized that, for the year to be successful, the school would have to adjust to Zoey just as much as she would need to adjust to it.

Despite our trepidation, Zoey settled into school easily. One boy in the class spoke English fluently; his mother and the teacher made sure he sat next to Zoey on the first day. Although initially unhappy with the situation, the teacher was consistently kind

to Zoey and the children were likewise warm and welcoming. Our daughter has an outgoing, gregarious personality, which helped her handle the new school environment well. Each day, she got up, got dressed, packed her backpack, and headed up to the bus stop with Zoli or me. She seemed intrigued with this new adventure, curious about each day. Not once in the first few weeks did she cry or refuse to go to school. I was impressed with her courage and relieved the school year started out well.

### Americanness

Something that certainly helped Zoey's situation was the high regard Hungarians tend to have for Americans and the United States. While the United States certainly has its critics around the world, and the US reputation changes with its political leadership, during our year in Hungary, we heard mostly positive comments regarding the United States. Many times, I heard the US Constitution referred to with reverence by Hungarians, particularly when contrasting it to their own shape-shifting constitution, first written in 1949, greatly amended in 1989, and then entirely rewritten in 2011 at the will of the political party in power (Trócsányi, 2011). Word got around the *általános iskola* that an American was in the school and children were curious to meet Zoey; many older or shyer children observed her from the halls or upper floors just to see what she looked like. One of the English-speaking teachers eagerly chatted with Zoey in the hall and invited her to talk with his classes. Zoli and I realized that the principal likely was eager to work with us because having an American in the school was prestigious. There is no doubt her Americanness privileged her and made the initial transition into school relatively easy for Zoey.

### Whiteness

Part of the positive regard for Americans in Hungary is certainly overlaid with the privileges of Whiteness (Marx, 2004, 2006, 2009; Marx & Saavedra, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993). "Race" as a term to name an amalgamation of ethnic heritages is not commonly used in Europe as it is in the United States. In Hungary, the word conjures memories of Nazism and is largely taboo. Nevertheless, Whiteness is unmarked and privileged, as it is in the United States and many places around the world (e.g., Allen, 2002; Gillborn, 2005, 2013; Lan, 2011). The original seven *Magyar* tribes that formed Hungary (*Magyarország*) around 900 AD came from Eurasia (Róna-Tas, 1999). This original group was unique ethnically and linguistically. Hungarian is not an Indo-European language—it is distantly related to Estonian and Finnish, but not to any other European language. In their earliest years in the Carpathian Basin, many *Magyars* intermarried with the people they conquered. Later, the Kingdom of Hungary was overrun by the Ottoman Empire, which occupied Hungary for more than 150 years (Lendvai, 2003). Overlapping this time and continuing until 1867, Hungary was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruled by the Habsburgs of Austria. During the latter half of this arrangement, great numbers of Germans settled in Hungary; some mixed with

the local population and some maintained isolated ethnic groups (Lendvai, 2003). In more than 1000 years of existence, Hungarian borders have shifted numerous times. Thus, Hungarians are generally of mixed ethnic heritage. They are proud of their long history and unique ethnic and linguistic heritage.

Despite this mixed racial inheritance, Hungarians of the dominant ethnic group appear White, with as much variation within that rough categorization as anywhere else. Ethnic groups with darker complexions are marginalized in Hungary. The Romani people, in particular, are the most maligned ethnic minority group, historically and into the present, in Hungary and much of Europe (e.g., Fonesca, 1996; Gehring, 2013; Hancock, 2002; Miskovic & Curcic, 2016; Vidra & Fox, 2014). Most Romani in Hungary live in the southeast area of the country, many in marginalized forest communities without running water or electricity. There were a few Romani children in Zoey's *általános iskola*, although, as an American, I could not make this distinction. Racial categorizations are socially constructed (Banks & Banks, 2007). To me, these children looked Hungarian – or White. As a native Hungarian, Zoli readily recognized members of this racialized group. Over time, I grew able to recognize them as well, though never automatically.

When Zoli told me that one of Zoey's friends was Romani, I suddenly understood why the teachers were so concerned about her and her siblings, why they thought she had an inferior home life, and why they said disheartening things about her parents. Although I was not fluent enough in Hungarian to understand these comments myself, Zoli had translated several of them for me. Teachers had shared their low expectations and concerns for this child's family with Zoli informally as he picked Zoey up from school in the afternoons. As many American educators do regarding African American, Latina/o, and ELL children (Marx, 2006; Marx & Saavedra, 2014; Valencia, 1997, 2010), teachers at the *általános iskola* understood this Romani child through a deficit perspective. Zoey's Whiteness privileged her at the *általános iskola*. She did not have to deal with the same low expectations and deficit thoughts as her friend.

## English

Another advantage Zoey had at the *általános iskola* was her native English fluency. As Lan notes, "English has become the most powerful 'global language' due to the political and economic hegemony of the United States" (p. 1681). Like her Americanness and her Whiteness, Zoey's English skills gave her powerful cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Thurlow, 2010; Tsuda, 2010) that many children and even some adults were eager to access. I was charmed to observe several first graders regularly greet Zoey, eager to practice the little bits of English they had learned in kindergarten. She was immediately popular as a result. I also heard many stories from Zoey about a few older kids who sought her out to curse at her in English. She was shocked and insulted by these actions, seething with anger as she told me. Just seven years old, she could not believe her teachers did not protect her from these events. I was disconcerted to hear this but realized the children were probably showing off their own linguistic and cultural capital acquired largely through television, movies, and other

forms of American media. Not one to back down from a provocation, Zoey learned to respond to these kids with more complicated, colorful language in English and Hungarian that got them to leave her alone and likely increased her social status.

Although Hungarians have been studying English in school since the mid-1990s (Dornyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006), just a few teachers at the *általános iskola* spoke conversational English. One such teacher also supervised a computer class where he allowed the children to watch any child-oriented entertainment on the computer as long as it was in English. Masterful at finding all the American TV programming and games she missed from home on the Internet, Zoey introduced her classmates to a plethora of US entertainment—including media we did not let her access at home—with the teacher's blessing. These activities made her even more popular with her classmates. While it caused her some aggravation, Zoey's native-English fluency greatly privileged her in school.

### Invisibilization

Although Zoey entered the *általános iskola* with a tremendous amount of linguistic and cultural capital, an outgoing personality that helped her negotiate a new school setting, and parents who constantly checked on her progress and well-being, by the third month of school, she was struggling. No longer excited to see what each new day held, Zoey often refused to get out of bed on school days, leading to much cajoling, bribing, and admonishing from her parents. Regularly, she told us how much she hated school. On the difficult days, once we finally got her into the school building, Zoli and I would linger at the gate feeling equal parts relief and worry. My heart ached for my daughter. I began to fear that our experiment with Hungarian school would be a failure. Even more, I worried that her confidence and sense of identity might be irrevocably harmed if we did not find a solution.

As we dug into this problem, I began to realize that Zoey was being invisibilized in her schooling – that is, she was being ignored (Marx & Saavedra, 2014). Once her initial novelty wore off, teachers remained kind to her but largely exempted her from the academic portion of schooling. Hungarian children are expected to have no literacy or numeracy skills when they enter first grade at age seven. Zoey had already finished first grade in the United States when we enrolled her in first grade in Hungary. We wanted her to be in school with her age mates—as Hungarian children begin school a year later than American children—and we wanted the school year to be less academically demanding because she spoke almost no Hungarian when we moved to Budapest. Although the school knew about Zoey's background, it did not make any accommodation for her, nor did it offer her any Hungarian language assistance. In this sink-or-swim environment, I could see that Zoey was starting to sink.

At first she enjoyed the lack of academic expectations: she made a lot of friends and became an excellent artist. While her classmates were working, she would create elaborate illustrations of European castles and princesses with long, windswept hair. Some days, she would use colored pencils to draw all the plants on the classroom's



windowsills in meticulous detail. I was amazed at her artistic talents but concerned that she had so much time to devote to them. As time went by, she could not fill all the hours of the day. Efforts to engage her classmates socially got her into trouble during class time. When reprimanded, she would smolder with anger, calling her teachers “*idiotas*” (idiots) when she was safe at home. Her attitude towards school became extremely negative. Like children everywhere, she wanted to learn. She did not want to spend her days killing time.

While American teachers often rationalize invisibilizing children learning English as a second language as not wanting to call unwanted, embarrassing attention to the children or not wanting to unfairly advantage a stigmatized language and ethnic/racial minority group (Marx & Saavedra, 2014), Zoey’s situation at the *általános iskola* seemed different to me. After all, her own cultural and linguistic capital was highly valued by her classmates and teachers. Rather, it seemed that her invisibilization was connected to the school’s lack of experience working with children learning Hungarian as a second language. I wonder now if the adults in the school felt uncomfortable contacting Zoey’s parents. I understand that I was hard to communicate with as a Hungarian language learner, but my husband is a native Hungarian fluent in the language. He tried to talk informally with the teachers every day as he picked Zoey up or dropped her off. No matter, our daughter was ignored in the classroom and she grew distanced from and angry about her schooling as a result. This is one small taste our family had of the poor school environments ELLs in the United States routinely deal with, despite the myriad privileges that otherwise advantaged Zoey.

### Intervention or Activating our Privileges

Zoli and I could see the Hungarian schooling experiment crumbling before our eyes. Feeling panicky, I pressed him to call the principal and ask for a meeting. Eager to accommodate us, we found ourselves sitting around a small table in the principal’s office a few days later. Politely but firmly, we emphasized that Zoey was bored and unhappy, that she had already learned first grade curricula, and that she did not seem to be progressing academically. We were also worried that, several months into the school year, she was not speaking any Hungarian. The principal patiently nodded her head in response to each of our concerns. Clearly, she was used to dealing with anxious parents. She explained that the curriculum would grow more difficult as time went by and as Zoey’s language skills progressed. We asked for a Hungarian language tutor that might help accelerate her language skills. The principal did not feel this was necessary, but agreed to help us find a tutor if we insisted, which we did. The principal also told us that Zoey’s teacher always had the quietest, kindest, and most well-behaved students in the school. That’s why she had put Zoey in her class. Finally, she recommended a private English-Hungarian bilingual school in Budapest that might work for Zoey if time and language assistance did not. However, she felt confident that the problems could be solved at the *általános iskola*.

Zoli and I left this meeting with a great sense of relief. The principal seemed to listen to us and understand our concerns. The bilingual school offered us a safety net if

things did not start getting better. A few weeks later, the principal called us with the name of a teacher who would be happy to tutor Zoey in Hungarian; she would meet with Zoey twice a week during electives time. As this was beyond her teaching responsibilities, Zoli and I paid her in cash the going rate of about \$7 an hour. Zoey's confidence increased noticeably with tutoring; within a few weeks, she was experimenting with the language. A few months later, the school had an open house and invited parents to attend a lesson. I observed Zoey's teacher present a grammar lesson where she personally checked with Zoey about each key point she was making. The teacher would lean in, check the work on Zoey's desk, whisper some comments in her ear, and then give our daughter an affectionate squeeze as she moved away to lead the class on the next point. I asked Zoey later about this attention and she confirmed that, "Yeah, she always does that." Zoey also told us that this teacher commented on how well she was doing in her second language, pointing out her achievements to the whole class. Just a few days later, she greatly surprised me by gushing, "I love school!" These words melted my heart – I feel that same glow now, several years later as I recount this story. I hugged Zoey with all my strength, so happy for her happiness. Clearly, the intervention worked. Zoey had a successful school year. She made a lot of friends and got better grades in her Hungarian first grade than her American first grade. By the end of the school year, she had conversational fluency in Hungarian. The last day of school, the teacher gave a short speech where she emphasized how proud she was of Zoey. I could not understand all the words, but I definitely understood the message: Zoey was included in the class; she would be missed.

As a parent, I was enormously pleased and relieved when Zoey's Hungarian schooling became a welcoming, safe environment where she was an integrated, meaningful member of the class with full access to the education offered. In examining her schooling, I can see how our many family privileges helped ensure that Zoey's education would be successful. First, our upper-middle class economic status allowed us to choose a school in an affluent neighborhood where principals and teachers were used to working closely with parents (Larue, 2000; Norman, 2016). After the school was found, we were able to afford a furnished apartment in the school district boundaries. When we had to pay for supplementary Hungarian lessons, we had no trouble affording them. We also knew we could afford a private bilingual school if it seemed like our only resort. Second, my husband's status as a native Hungarian with native Hungarian language skills ensured that we could communicate with the school when problems arose and when we had concerns or questions. He regularly chatted with Zoey's teacher and the other parents when he dropped her off or picked her up from school and did not hesitate to call the principal when we were worried. In contrast, no parents in the school ever spoke with me as a non-fluent speaker of Hungarian. While the school guard always greeted me with a warm "Hello!" in English, I could tell Zoey's teacher felt uncomfortable trying to communicate with me. Without Zoli, I would have had no idea what was going on at my children's schools, a situation experienced by some of the other Americans we knew living in Hungary (see Marx, Housen & Tapu, 2016) and a common occurrence for the families of ELLs negotiating their children's schooling in the United States (Bickmore, 2013). Third, our status as Americans and English speakers likely offered some prestige to the school that the principal was eager to accommodate (Allen, 2002; Lan, 2011).

Fourth, as highly educated, upper-middle-class, White Americans, we felt we had the right to push for a better schooling experience for our daughter (Lareau, 2000; Norman, 2016). We suggested language lessons based on our own expertise and experience with second language learning. Our Whiteness was not a marked characteristic in Hungary, but our shared Whiteness with the majority culture always worked in our favor and likely fed our confidence when pressing our concerns with the *általános iskola*. Finally, we were privileged in that the year in Hungary was an optional year-long adventure, a break from our American lives. If we had needed to return to the States, we simply would have bought plane tickets and moved back home, something another American family we met in Hungary had to do. This privilege reminded us that there were always other options if we ran into serious problems. There is no doubt that our many privileges as a White, American, English-speaking, highly educated, middle class family allowed us to ensure Zoey had a successful school year in Hungary.

### **Back in School in the United States**

Back at home in the United States, Zoey and Logan both started the next school year in our local public school, a school that was new to both of them. In filling out paperwork, I listed the children's native language as English but wrote in that we spoke Hungarian in the home, in addition to English. I knew that mentioning this second language could put my children at risk of low expectations and intervention, as is so common in public school (Valencia, 1997; 2010). Only later did I learn that a non-English language on the home language survey mandates English language evaluation. At the time, I was proud of their achievements and thought of their Hungarian skill as a tremendous asset; I just could not omit it on the paperwork.

### **Dealing with Deficit Thinking**

Having missed a year of American schooling, Zoey and Logan were a bit behind academically at the first of the year. Rather than assure me everything was all right and my "bright" children would easily catch up, the children's second language skills were noted as a point of concern. Because Zoey was on grade level in math, but a little behind in reading, her teacher suggested that we address this deficit by enrolling her in the school's English as a second language (ESL) program. Stunned, I told her that Zoey's first language was English, that she was fluent in the language, and that her reading was behind—as it had always been in US schooling—not her first language acquisition. Hungarian, I had to explain, was Zoey's still-developing second language; it took nothing away from her first. The teacher apologized to me and the matter was dropped.

A few weeks later, I attended an individualized education program (IEP) meeting for Logan to get his speech lessons back on track after our time away. The district had a thick file with his name on it as he had started speech when he was three years old. For this meeting, however, the main topic was Logan's Hungarian skills and how they were

inhibiting his English. I found the discussion almost comical as, all year long in Hungary, Zoli and I had worried that the kids were not learning enough Hungarian. It was surreal to now credit their still-limited Hungarian with hindering their English. Finally, the speech therapist joined the meeting and put an end to this discussion. About a year later, I discovered that Logan was attending ESL classes. My research told me not to be surprised by these events, but my common sense was shaken. How could multilingualism be constructed as a deficit? It blew my mind.

### **Re-emergence of Privilege**

While their year in Hungarian school and their developing Hungarian language skills were initially assessed as deficits, within a few months, both kids were doing well again academically. Little by little, their worldly experiences were recognized as important cultural capital, and soon enough they were again characterized as “bright.” Their Americanness, their Whiteness, their upper-middle-class stature, and their eventually recognized native English fluency helped them assimilate back into American school and regain their privileged position. At the same time, this school was more diverse than any they had previously attended, and their budding multilingualism gave them important linguistic, cultural, and social capital with many of their classmates. Logan, in particular, identified with his ELL classmates. Visiting his classroom, I would often find him and a friend originally from Mexico with an arm around one other. “We speak two languages!” they would tell me excitedly, eyes shining bright with this connection.

### **Conclusion**

The experience moving our children in and out of American and Hungarian public school made the racial, class, and language privileges that benefit them invisibly much more apparent. I have often thought of these privileges as the background over which a scene is painted: although it frames the scene, it often goes unnoticed. Think of the serene sky behind a city landscape or the darkened room at the back of an intricate portrait. The background serves to highlight the main object of the painting, drawing attention to that object rather than itself. Similarly, racially, economically, and linguistically privileged children often find their talents, abilities, and personalities highlighted more so than their background race, class, and language, although these background characteristics frame their individual qualities.

My children’s different schooling situations allowed many of these background privileges—class, Americanness, English fluency—to be noticed as advantages and become highlighted when they had previously been backgrounded. They also allowed Zoey to experience the disadvantage of invisibilization, something she had never suffered as a native-English speaker in the United States, but a condition that routinely affects ELLs and their families (Marx & Saavedra, 2014). Invisibilization erases a child’s individual characteristics, painting over them with the broad strokes of their background

qualities (American, ELL, Mexican, Spanish speaker, etc.) Essentially, invisibilization paints a child out of their own picture. It is no wonder Zoey hated school when she was experiencing this phenomenon. In Hungary, Whiteness was unmarked for our children, just as it is in the United States as both countries privilege European heritage (Allen, 2002; Lan, 2011; Gillborn, 2005, 2010). But, in both places, it advantages our children in passive ways that are most noticeable when compared to other children who do not receive this privilege, such as ELLs of color in the United States and Zoey's Romani friend in Hungary.

Our experience returning to American schooling was perplexing. My husband and I had emphasized the importance of worldliness and multilingualism to our children throughout our year in Hungary. We regularly told them these qualities would make them more intelligent and give them myriad opportunities in life. The school's seeming dismissal of these experiences as valuable and its apparent equating of Hungarian schooling and language with no schooling or language deeply troubled us. Our disagreements with the school's assessments were kindly but continually disregarded, despite our maintenance of racial and class privilege. It seems that we lost some of our language and cultural privilege with our sojourn in Hungary. Perhaps the school no longer viewed us as wholly American. Of course, our children regained all their privileges over the course of their first year back in the States. These barriers were not insurmountable to us, thanks in great part to our privileges.

Autoethnography is a useful methodology for shedding light on the personal nature of race, class, and language privilege. Although these privileges are institutionalized across society, they are continually reproduced in the lives of individuals (Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 1988/1997), a phenomenon this story seeks to highlight. Examining my own family's privileges illuminates the complex tapestry they weave: we, the schools, the principals, the teachers, the students, and society at large all added to and nurtured these privileges, ensuring that Zoey and Logan would succeed in their schooling. This understanding of privilege as a complicated, interconnected tapestry woven with threads from many different sources sheds lights on how difficult it is to dismantle.

### Notes

1. All names in the essay are pseudonyms. Some identifying characteristics have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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