English Language Learners are often invisible in our schools when they first arrive from their countries. This keynote will highlight some of the work Alicia has done in her school, and some ideas for how to help make our new ELL students more visible and feel a part of their schools.

Imagine that you are a 14-year-old girl from a warm, sunny island country with palm trees waving in the wind, and friendly people greeting you outside. Familiar foods and sounds are all around you. But, your life is about to change in ways you could not have imagined. You have agreed to leave all that you know behind in exchange for better opportunities for your future. You face many “firsts” in your life: the first time on an airplane, the first time to leave your country and all that you know behind you; the first time you will see snow and experience real cold. You arrive in a small New England town on a freezing day in March. Though you barely know your father, your new home will be with him. And although you are reunited with your half-siblings, there is a huge hole in your heart because your mother is back in your country and not with you.

A few days after your arrival, you have to take a test in English. You had studied some English, but what you know is not helpful at all on this test. The building where you now go to school is much bigger than your old one, and there is no patio to sit in during your recess and lunch. You are inside all day and it gets cold and dark so early. The days go by in a confused haze - you get lost, you do not understand your teachers, other students act as if you are not there, the cafeteria food tastes bland.

Suddenly, you feel invisible. In your country, you had many friends, but here, you are alone. There is some relief in your ELL classes, where you can communicate using Portuguese with your Spanish-speaking teachers. You have always loved math and have been a great math student, but math is really difficult
suddenly; it’s not just numbers, but so many words - and all in English. In addition to all the new sights, sounds and feelings, you must now learn to swim in your physical education class. You have goals in life, and you have a burning desire to learn. Yet here, you cannot even communicate your basic needs.

This was my student 4 years ago, when she arrived from Cape Verde. She was already bilingual in Portuguese and Crioulo, but knew little English. However, she made her goals clear from the start: she wanted to do well in school, learn English, and perhaps become a flight attendant one day. Her sacrifice to come to the United States in search of better opportunities, her resilience, and her family’s support provoked awe in me. Separated from half of her family, this student understood the importance of learning English and studying hard to achieve her goals.

One day after only having been here a month, she went to our afterschool program to get help. She was told by a volunteer that he couldn’t help her because he didn’t understand her. Frustrated, she came to my classroom and cried. The volunteer didn’t mean to hurt her. We sat and cried together for a few minutes and I tried to promise her that things would get better soon, and that she had made huge progress in a short amount of time.

ELL students in Amherst are a very diverse group. Just in the last four years my students have come from Nepal, Korea, Japan, China, Cape Verde, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Haiti, Pakistan, Austria, Cambodia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Sweden and Italy. This year I have another incredibly diverse and wonderful group of students. These beginner students remain invisible to their English-dominant classmates. It isn’t mean-spirited; mostly, they don’t know how to communicate with the ELL students - so they don’t at all. An ELL student has to be either fluent enough or social enough to break through this barrier.
How many of you have been in a situation where you could not communicate effectively with people because of a language barrier? Or lived in a country where English was not the dominant language? I grew up bilingual, and I was good at learning my third language, French. Even so, when I spent a year in France in college, I don’t think I spoke at all for 2 whole weeks. I felt disempowered and invisible myself.

How can we help our ELL students be more visible in our schools? I don’t have all the answers. However, here are 5 ways to help you get started in making your ELL students feel a part of the community.

Get to know your students’ stories.

I remember when I taught Spanish and had 120 students, and getting to know them all was easier said than done. But do what you can. Many teachers I work with do some sort of questionnaire or letter exchange with their students. This is a great way for all students, especially ELL students, to tell you about themselves. You can even encourage them to write in their language if it is one you can get translated easily or that you understand. A personal letter is a huge step up from the index cards with important information that I remember being asked to fill out when I was a student. Now, despite all the work and pressures we have as teachers, many teachers are invested in getting to know their students because we know that it’s all about the relationships we establish with them.

Help your students get involved in class.

Even though they may not have a lot of English you can find small ways to involve them in your class. I find that my students are often eager to help pass papers out, give out stickers, and even volunteer when they know answers. Ask them about their countries - these can be great learning moments for all your
students. We need to not only encourage them but also give them ways of being involved.

**Make connections with their families.**

Don’t rely only on the ELL teachers to do this. Reach out to the families of your students. Invite them into class presentations. Invite them into your class to talk about their experiences or to cook and share the dish with the class. Call them - or if language is a barrier, find someone to call for you. Another piece I need to improve on myself - don’t only call home for punitive or negative reasons. The parents of my ELL students are often thrilled when they are able to participate in their child’s school day somehow. As the parent of a student from Colombia told me last year, “Uds. son las segundas madres” - you are the second mothers. I find that many ELL parents feel this way about the teachers; they feel their children should listen to their teachers and respect them as if they were another set of parents.

One day, the dad of the student I mentioned before showed up outside my classroom door. At first, I was worried and thought maybe something had happened. I stepped out to speak to him and he said “I was just coming by to check on my daughter. How is she doing?” I told him what a hard worker she was and how she was progressing fast. He told me that he was stopping in at each kids’ school - and there were 5 of them in different schools - to check up on them. Today, he probably wouldn’t be able to just drop in anymore, but it showed me that there are all kinds of ways for parents to show their interest in their children’s education.

**Make them visible - literally.**

For the last 2 years I have had my ELL pullout students work on a newspaper. They learn about the newspaper pyramid of writing, they generate
ideas, they gather information or interview people, and then they write articles. I group the articles into sections and edit them. The first time I had students help with the layout; the second time I did it myself because it became too difficult. Now we are a Google school, so students could potentially work on a document together. After everything was finished, we took pictures. The students see their names, photos and articles in a final published document, which we celebrate. Then I distribute the newspaper, online as well as hard copies, to my entire district (including the superintendent’s office). Also, students can email the online copy to people in their home countries. They are proud to see the final product (I brought some so you can see) and in this way, they have a presence in our school.

Advocate for them.

Often, ELL students have too much already going on, or are shy or not accustomed to advocating for themselves like some of our mainstream students may be. Whether it is with the teachers at my school, or during meetings with administration, I like to bring up issues that core teachers may not have at the forefront of their minds. As we know, good ELL practices are good for all students, so it never hurts to share suggestions or tips. Likewise, if you need help with your ELL students, reach out to the experts in your building. I also blog about my students often, touching on challenges or success in my own work.

Back to the student I told you about. One day at the dismissal bell, I noticed a note she left me on the whiteboard. It said “Dear Ms. Lopez: Thanks for you help me.” I took a picture of the note and put it up near my desk. On difficult days, I look at her words and continue to be inspired by them. The English may not have been perfect, but the sentiment was. We said good-bye on the last day of school,
both of us with tears in our eyes, but I knew that she would be okay. That student ended the school year with A’s and in the three short months she was here, she learned to swim and she had read her first entire books in English. In high school, she started a Cape Verdean dance group, played soccer and basketball and ran track. Now a Junior in high school, she has moved to the advanced ELL classes, is very social and still involved in many extracurricular activities, gets A’s, and is a part of her school community.

Now, people SEE her. She is no longer invisible. Do what you can to help your ELL students be seen, too.