



Navigating English Learning for Migrant and Immigrant Students in the USA

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Abstract

There is a controversial national debate taking place in the United States regarding immigration policy. Migrant and immigrant children are impacted by social and educational inequalities and are often entangled in the political climate that surrounds them [1]. Unfortunately, migrant and immigrant children who are entering schools are caught up in the multiplicity of challenges facing educators and families. Educators are often unprepared and feel overwhelmed with large classes, meeting the initial requirement to screen all entering students to determine their language level, and coaching other teachers. Meanwhile, families are attempting to navigate a new system and understand the expectations [2]. The opportunity to learn English and access educational resources is tantamount to bridging the gaps that these students are facing to navigate this new school system and environment. This presentation/manuscript examines strategies for English learning for migrant and immigrant students in the USA. It features research, pedagogy and curriculum that promotes optimal English learning for students grappling with access to quality education programs. Students are exploring their own identities and learning to speak English in diverse classrooms with numerous native languages and educators who may be unprepared to meet their needs and are following a standardized curriculum. To celebrate the genius of children who are becoming successful in language rich contexts that do not meet the “one size fits all” curriculum, strategies are suggested that can be assessed informally and include multiple media [3]. This study and investigation will follow up on the crucial questions that relate to embracing English learning, new technologies, and initiating academic success through proactive educational strategies including a paradigm shift to incorporate a translanguaging pedagogy for emergent bilingual students leading to relevant and purposeful accomplishments. The information presented lends itself to a variety of student ages, levels, and settings, and can be applied across the curriculum.

Keywords: *Migrant, Immigration, English Learning, Educational Strategies*

1. Introduction

The controversy surrounding the topic of immigration has become contentious in the United States. Numerous opinions exist depending upon political party and proximity to the USA border. As educators, we aspire to provide a quality education for all students, and it is not our role to become embroiled in political battles or border disputes. We endeavor to create an open, welcoming setting for our students and foster and encourage respectful experiences in our classrooms and beyond. In an effort to serve students in our classrooms and provide them with the essential language skills and knowledge to speak, read, write and comprehend English, we are challenged in our efforts to secure the support, resources and educational materials necessary for their success. We endeavor to serve the achievement needs of these ethnically diverse students and provide a positive space for them to interact and learn so that they can reach their full potential. The objective of this study is to provide an overview of the fluid and constantly evolving learning experiences that migrant and immigrant students and their teachers face as they grapple with educational, cultural and socialization issues. Successful classroom methodologies grounded in research tailored to meet the needs of migrant and immigrant students must include flexibility and attention to affective domains as well as concentration on the development of English competency. Simultaneously, the four key elements of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are essential skill areas to learning English and need instruction and practice for cognitive function. Suggestions are provided to



strengthen immigrant and migrant student opportunities for academic, particularly linguistic success. It has become evident that a deep and intrinsic relationship exists between language learning and socialization. These factors have a tremendous impact on the outcomes our students realize, and programs geared for their success are essential. Students require sufficient access to appropriate learning opportunities to realize their potential. This manuscript and presentation will explore ways to meet the needs of migrant and immigrant students as they seek to learn and grow. The topic will require continued attention and sensitivity.

2. Review of the Literature

The terms migrant and immigrant students require a clear definition to comprehend their educational situation and examine the learning opportunities and challenges that they face accessing a quality education. A **migrant student** is a child who is highly mobile or has parents or guardians who are highly mobile. This includes children of migratory agricultural workers, migratory fishers, and workers in seasonal industries or positions. Migrant students move regularly from one residence and school district to another, which can affect their access to education [4]. Kindergarten-12th grade public schools in the United States must be open to all students, including migratory children, regardless of their or their parents' immigration status. Additionally, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits public schools from discriminating based on race, color, or national origin [4]. An **immigrant student** is defined by the United States federal government as the term "immigrant children and youth," which is defined in section 3301(6) of Title III, refers to individuals who: (A) are aged 3 through 21; (B) were not born in any state; and (C) have not been attending one or more schools in any one or more states for more than three full academic years [5]. Christensen emphasizes "putting out the linguistic welcome mat," and focuses on ways to cultivate a classroom environment for students of diverse backgrounds and celebrate all languages spoken at home. She emphasizes an environment that shows students the "power of language," in any language, and not that there is a language of power, often assumed to be that of Standard English [6]. Tateishi further explains the importance of taking a chance with words and phrases to relate positively to one's surroundings and navigate the new language learning environment [7]. Hirvela explains the concept of a "language shift" and states that "losing a first language has a negative effect on the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development of language minority students, as well as the integrity of their families and the society they live in" [8]. Teachers face a tremendous amount of stress dealing with the public perception of their profession. Their enthusiasm and willingness to meet the challenges of serving migrant and immigrant children is crucial. They can be the greatest advocates for their profession by "taking back the narrative and telling the public about the realities of their jobs." [9].

Ethnolinguistic populations face significant challenges demonstrated through increased dropout rates and struggles in schools. The state of Michoacan, Mexico, has become a transnational area frequently associated with places in the USA where multitudes of migrants work and live. There is a strong cohesiveness between cities in the USA and this area of Mexico as people blend their education, social network and families among both locations and interact frequently. They constitute a transnational community which lives on both sides of a nation state border [10]. Because the linguistic and cultural diversity of populations in USA schools are continuously increasing in number, and globalization is significantly impacting academic achievement, it is imperative that we focus on serving the needs of migrant and immigrant students who are often struggling to adapt to a new education system, community and environment [11]. It is crucial that we reduce the underachievement of students of color and ascertain influences and expectations that are impeding their progress. Research on immigrant students in the United States provides graphic illustrations as to why immigration is responsible for achievement patterns of some ethnic groups, many who are caught in a sociocultural paradox [12]. Culturally responsive teaching will benefit students and provide positive effects and outcomes as their needs are met and the quality of their education improves.

3. Reexamining Migrant and Immigrant Education

Public schools must offer language assistance services to kindergarten-12th grade multilingual students who have limited English proficiency, including migratory children. Schools must identify these students as English Learners so that they can receive services to enable them to meaningfully participate



in the school's educational programs [4]. The most recent term to describe these students has transitioned to "multilingual learners." Furthermore, public schools must make information about enrollment, classes, and other educational programs and activities accessible to parents and guardians who have limited English proficiency. Schools can accomplish this by providing accurate written translation or oral interpretation [4]. Cultivating a classroom environment for students of diverse backgrounds requires attention to complex educational and social factors. Financial resources in the family and also in the school district may also be a contributing factor in migrant and immigrant students' abilities to realize their educational dreams. Equity has still not been achieved in school textbooks and classroom experiences particularly in math and science. It is essential to teach English to multilingual learners without excluding them from core courses. Immigrant students may be traumatized from the very process of their journey to the United States and the new experience of adapting to the school setting is a major adjustment. These students may not understand the procedures and expectations associated with classrooms in the United States. Other students may be homesick, separated from family members, and missing the life that they have left behind. Many are in living conditions and situations of poverty. They may be hungry and malnourished. Even the most well adjusted and secure students who have been living with family members will still face significant adjustment issues coping with a new educational environment unlike the one that they left behind. What can be done to strengthen the learning experience and show compassion and understanding for migrant and immigrant students with unique backgrounds? In a conversation with the mother of an adopted student from China, she explained that it is important to recognize that these children may be starting at a different point from traditional students. Because they are coming from another country, they may be delayed physically, cognitively and mentally. For example, when their daughter arrived in the United States, she had lived in a foster home in China and her layered clothing resembled a snowsuit. Her hands had been covered and she couldn't roll over or crawl. Because of their introductory and initial language experiences, these children may embrace unique learning styles and be more of a visual or auditory learner, so it is crucial to meet them where they are at in their development [12]. Lowering affective variables often leads to increased learning and improved feelings and outcomes. Connecting with families whenever possible may achieve meaningful results. Gay suggests that teacher expectations significantly influence the quality of learning opportunities provided to students [13]. The following suggestions will contribute to academic and social/emotional gains: Language learning makes sense for students when they see a real need to learn English and are recharged and inspired by their accomplishments. When they are immersed in English and can access the tools needed for success, patterns emerge that invite continued success. Educators are successful when they create a work-based classroom that focuses on comprehension strategies. Differentiating instruction and tailoring educational experiences to the ability of students encourages their success and achievement across the curriculum. Ensuring that lessons are aligned with standards for students at the appropriate levels is crucial for student learning. Feezell explains that memorizing words out of context doesn't support deep comprehension. "The goal is to foster robust vocabulary instruction that includes flexibility" and incorporates student choice [14]. Gay points out that "Knowledge about general communication patterns among ethnic groups is helpful, but it alone is not enough." [13] Sociolinguistically based approaches to language and literacy education in language teaching is helpful to provide the learners with the appropriate rules of speaking and writing and raise their sociolinguistics awareness of the socio-cultural differences across languages. A concrete understanding helps students gain a deeper knowledge of what is being communicated and requested of them and allows for the ultimate success of each student.

4. Outcomes for Educators of Migrant and Immigrant Students

The challenges for educators continue and will require continued attention and sensitivity to promote students' success and minimize equity gaps. There are significant connections between relationships, culture, communication, and education. These linkages are crucial to educational success. Attitudes and challenges to learning are oftentimes deeply rooted in communication and effective interactions. Most educators are inspired by the opportunity to serve immigrant students and meet diverse student needs, yet simultaneously challenged and concerned by the limited resources and significant adjustments that these students require. Educators are sincere about supporting and engaging students,



yet are faced with time management issues juggling the responsibilities of testing students for placement, designing curriculum to meet their needs, seeking appropriate resources, and teaching native English-speaking students in their classrooms. At the end of the day, they are tired! It is crucial to provide relevant professional development to educators and prepare teachers to identify and work with migrant and immigrant students. Interaction among colleagues addressing multiliteracies and methodologies is essential and English language teaching professionals will benefit from positive interaction. There is a need for wider recognition and extensive flexible educational programs. We must support promoting and strengthening educators as they grapple with the challenges of meeting the needs of their students who face a multiplicity of challenges. Teachers have the opportunity to embrace students' immigrant identities that have been shaped by their history of migration [15]. Because xenophobic language or discrimination may be experienced by these students, educators need to create a platform and voice for their students and support a space for them to explore and express their feelings. Some students may have experienced trauma and fear the classroom setting and accompanying expectations or classroom dynamics, negatively impacting student outcomes. Schools who hire diverse staff and provide professional development that emphasizes cultural responsiveness will support students in myriad ways. In a conversation with the father of a student who was adopted from Russia, he explained that his son was not speaking the English language well, so it was determined that he should be held back a year following pre-school. Although he is older now, he is making excellent progress and recently received grades qualifying him for the honor roll. His father credits the public school system and educators in the State of Florida who addressed his needs and developed an individualized education plan (IEP) with specific guidelines to ensure that he received unique assistance from Exceptional Student Services including specialized vision and medical assistance [16]. Furthermore, this student's father emphasized that it is also the parents' responsibility to impact their child's education in addition to the responsibility assumed by the school and educational system [16]. Resources that include counseling and language integration support students and encourage their meaningful engagement and success [15]. While it is understood that the majority of multilingual learners in the USA speak Spanish as their native language, it would be helpful to provide more bilingual resources in additional languages [16]. Moreover, as immigrant and migrant students see their experiences valued through culturally responsive activities, curriculum design and relevant methods that are implemented with them in mind, they will benefit. Interpersonal relationships and knowledge building through storytelling are one strategy for validation and student success [15]. Sonia Nieto emphasizes looking at your own perception and beliefs about multicultural education and multilingual students. She suggests that one's own beliefs and attitudes impact whether a student feels accepted or excluded. Educators who understand their perspectives have the ability to be inclusive and set examples for others while positively impacting the process of learning [17].

5. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

It is essential to pursue continuous improvement and research-based knowledge to serve migrant and immigrant populations and to help them thrive and achieve their goals. Mainstreaming multilingualism and strengthening equality in education for culturally and linguistically diverse learners is crucial for reaching goals and attaining success [18]. Culturally responsive teaching, effective communicative interactions, family engagement, and professional development for educators are essential to achieving positive effects and outcomes for students, and to influencing academic achievement and improving the quality of their education. Dedicated educators should be recognized for their efforts and commitment to enthusiastically serve migrant and immigrant students and create a positive culture of learning. Creative and effective strategies that are flexible and can meet the challenges experienced by migrant and immigrant students of all ages are essential for achieving significant accomplishments and educational success.

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