



Immigrant Students in the U.S. Public Schools: Preliminary Findings of a Pilot Study

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This paper describes insights gained from a small pilot inquiry on the impact of immigration on selected school districts and on immigrant students and their families. Data were collected from State education agencies on major locations and countries of origin of new immigrant populations. This was followed by extensive telephone interviews with officials from five disparate local education agencies that were experiencing the impact of immigration. A variation of this paper was subsequently published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (*Principal Leadership*, March 2004), and was summarized as one of the 12 best articles in recent periodicals and reports reviewed for condensation by *The Education Digest* (2004).

Immigrant Students with Disabilities in the U.S. Public Schools: Preliminary Findings of a Pilot Study

The current nature of immigration into the United States is a departure from that experienced early in this century, and is broadening the scope of cultural and linguistic diversity. Today's immigrants come from a wider spectrum of cultural and political/historic backgrounds, which influence their cognitive styles and affective responses to the acculturation process (Collier, 1999), and they also present a broader range of language origins.

The United States has been receiving one million immigrants per year; nearly 80 percent are non-white, and 70 percent are from Latin America or Asia (Chinn, 2000). Among these new immigrants are a number of refugees who have fled from, or are not able to return to, their countries because of real dangers of persecution or violence (Wilkes, 1994). Among all refugees and displaced people in the world, 78,000 to 90,000 are resettled annually in the United States. Whereas nearly all refugees from Southeast Asia once received English language training, work orientation classes, and (for children) primary and secondary schooling in processing centers prior to entering the country, services such as these have been discontinued (Pfleger & Ranard, 1995).

Language-minority students are the fastest-growing population in U.S. public schools (Pompa, 2000). Between 1991 and 1999, the number of language-minority school-aged children in the United States rose from 8 million to 15 million, and the number of K-12 students classified as limited-English-proficient (LEP) increased from 5.3 million to 10 million (Escamilla, 1999a).

While eight languages comprise 85 percent of linguistic diversity (Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian, and Navajo) (Escamilla, 1999b), 350 language groups are actually spoken in school districts across the United States (Escamilla, 2000). Although levels of education and literacy improved throughout the world during the 20th century, the new immigrant population is quite heterogeneous with regard to former and current socioeconomic status, prior education, and literacy in the native language. Both rural and urban districts are experiencing increasing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity as a result of immigration, and the nature of this diversity is creating an impetus to reframe the discussion of appropriate education for LEP students (Pompa, 2000).

Definitions and Limits

Districts that qualify for funds from the Emergency Immigrant Education Program (of the federal Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students) use that agency's definition of "immigrant student," i.e., students not born in this country who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for less than three years and who are between the ages of 3 and 19." Otherwise, definitions and classification systems vary, and some are more specific than others. Some States categorize

immigrant students by language, some categorize by country of origin, and some do both. Some States appear to group immigrant students within the whole population of LEP students, while others have disaggregated the data to identify those LEP students who are immigrants. In some cases, English is the linguistic origin, but students may speak a patois or dialect, so that English is actually their second language, although they may be classified as English speakers. Further, in large urban districts, there is often a census undercount, composed largely of documented and undocumented immigrants (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999).

There have been activities in some States (e.g., Arizona and California) to limit immigrant students to a specified number of days to learn the English language. Some advocates predict a great increase in special education referrals and enrollments if immigrant students are thrust into the academic mainstream after limited days of instruction in the English language (Loero, 1999). In fact, "quick-fix programs are exiting students prematurely . . . (and) so severe is the gap between bilingual, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL), and all-English classes that the rate of referral for culturally/linguistically diverse students for special education and other compensatory programs quadruples after being exited from bilingual or ESL classrooms" (Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon, & McLean, 1998, cited by Escamillo, 1999b, p. 4). Research has consistently shown that English language learners require at least five years to catch up *academically* in English, although they may be *conversationally* fluent within two years of starting to acquire English. In turn, this raises the question of when to include language-minority students in high-stakes testing (Cummins, 2000).

Examples of the Impact of Immigration on Rural and Urban Schools

Because food processing and other industries are locating more frequently in rural areas, many small communities are experiencing significant influxes of immigrant workers. Collinsville, Alabama, for example, is a rural Appalachian community of 2,000 residents whose Hispanic population increased 480 percent between 1990 and 1999. As of 1999-2000, LEP students constituted 36 percent of Collinsville's elementary students and 28 percent of the total school population (Alabama Department of Education, 1999). "The school and community were unprepared for the unexpected influx of a Spanish-speaking population that was not transitory. . . . 100 percent of Hispanic students drop out" (Alabama Department of Education, 1999, p. 3).

While there were only a few LEP students in Lee County (North Carolina's smallest county) in 1990, by 1999 the county had 1,100 LEP students speaking 18 languages other than English. Throughout North Carolina, the number of students speaking non-English languages nearly doubled between 1994-95 and 1997-98 (Manzo, 1999).

Other examples demonstrate the situation in major urban centers. For example, Dearborn, Michigan, has one of the largest Mid-East populations outside of the Middle East itself, including Shiite Muslims fleeing from persecution in Iran and Iraq, individuals who escaped violence in Beirut, Lebanon, and others (St. Peter,

1999). Minneapolis and Fresno, California, have the largest Hmong communities in the United States. Minneapolis includes approximately 20,000 Hmong speakers in grades K-12 (Minnesota Department of Education); "Hmong has been a written language for only about 30 years; therefore, most of the children come from preliterate homes" (Kang, Kuehn, & Herrell, 1996).

In Boston, students entering from at least 82 countries of origin comprised 6.52 percent of the total public and private school population in 1999-2000 (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1999). In 1999, New York City reported 105,534 new immigrant public and non-public school students from 196 countries of origin; the most sizable concentrations have emigrated from the Dominican Republic (the largest group), Jamaica, China, Russia, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Mexico, Ecuador, Haiti, and Colombia (New York City Board of Education, 1999).

In Dade County (Miami, Florida), immigrant students have been arriving from approximately 162 countries of origin but are speaking several hundred languages -- one cannot assume that country of origin indicates primary language. For example, immigrants arriving in Dade County from Venezuela may be moving to a new country for a second or third time, and thus include speakers of Spanish, Arabic, Cantonese, Estonian, French, Haitian, Creole, Indonesian, Italian, Khmer, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, and Zhongwen.

Nor can one assume that language will always indicate cultural identification. In some locations, students speaking Russian who arrive from former USSR countries are classified as Russian, which is the language they speak because it was the only one permitted by the Soviet government for many years. These immigrants may, however, be Kazakhs, Afghans, Armenians, Tartars, Asians, and natives of many other areas of the former USSR, whose cultural and religious roots are vastly different from those of Russians.

A Pilot Study of Education for Immigrant Students with Disabilities

A preliminary study was undertaken in 1999 to gather data from State education agencies on the estimated size of new immigrant student populations, their countries of origin, and districts where immigrant students are primarily concentrated. (This study is the source of State and district data cited above.) Subsequently, pilot interviews were conducted with officials in five disparate school districts experiencing significant influxes of immigrant students: Clark County (Las Vegas), Nevada, the fastest-growing school district in the United States; Lee County, North Carolina (a small, largely rural district); Prince George's County, Maryland (a suburb of Washington, DC); the Portland School Department in Maine (a medium-sized district); and Community School District #17 of the New York City Board of Education (the largest district in New York City).

Although these districts are dissimilar, their descriptions of several issues concerning education for immigrant students with disabilities (coupled with information from various States) were sufficiently consistent to justify the following tentative discussion. The discussion also briefly describes district practices that appear useful and major needs suggested by respondents.

Concerns About Education of Immigrant Students with Disabilities

Sequelae of Conditions in the Country of Origin

Deficits in academic preparation and low levels of native language literacy, among many immigrant students in both general and special education, are sources of concern in evaluation, placement, and instruction. Levels of teacher training in other countries vary, and education may have been complicated, prevented, and/or interrupted by various factors in countries of origin. The prominent issue in some districts is immigrant students who have never attended school, particularly when these students' ages are well beyond the primary level.

In addition, some children manifest psychological and physical trauma, particularly those from places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Bosnia, Kozovo, Croatia, some Mid-East countries, and some countries of Central and South America, where children have been exposed to violence or war. Often, the families of these children are also traumatized. Rehabilitation and medical personnel generally have not been trained to treat individuals from non-U.S. cultures and languages who present post-traumatic stress disorders, brain injuries, and other conditions caused by exposure to violence. Even when conditions in the native country have not been traumatizing, new immigrant families generally experience migration stress (loss of familiar support systems and coping resources) and acculturative stress (learning to live within an entirely new fabric of life; loss of identity) (Adkins & Sample, 1999).

Cultural and Communication Barriers

Parental involvement in schools may be impeded by a lack of language mediation and a lack of information translated into families' languages and dialects. In addition, cultural variations in child care and child-rearing practices are often poorly understood by school personnel, and many parents exhibit fears of and reluctance to accept unknown interventions, treatments, and corrective devices. Further, culturally relevant learning styles, behavioral patterns, and multiple intelligences of both students and parents may be overlooked, underestimated, or misinterpreted by educators who are uninformed in this regard. Cummins (2000) points out several factors that contribute to long-term under-achievement among LEP students: (a) devaluing their cultural identities and placing them continuously at the wrong end of the power structure; (b) failing to engage students cognitively because the knowledge and skills they bring to school from their own contexts are ignored and their experiences are not validated; and (c) failure to involve parents of LEP students in planning for and working with these students.

Personnel Supply, Demand, and Competence

Numerous concerns are expressed about diagnostic staff who lack the language, cultural knowledge, and other skills necessary for accurate assessment of immigrant students. There is also a shortage of certified bilingual/English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers, most particularly those with skills for instructing students with disabilities, and there are concerns about a lack of cultural/linguistic understanding on the part of general and special educators.

In districts where general education teachers have completed the minimum training for endorsement in special education or ESL, the skills and repertoires of these educators are sometimes questioned, especially with reference to the demands of educating culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant students. Most respondents also focused on needs for competence in *reading instruction* among all instructional personnel.

Because there are severe shortages of professional personnel who are proficient in the necessary second languages, some districts have been forced to provide instructional services primarily through native-language paraeducators. This appears to be an extremely pressing issue. In cases where no one else at a school speaks a particular language, educators do not understand what the paraeducators are saying to the students or what the students are saying in response, and are therefore unable to evaluate in any immediate way the learning that may (or may not) be occurring.

Practices of Interest

In addition to extensive professional development being undertaken in the districts of all respondents, the following practices were described by one or more interviewees as valuable in developing adequate instruction and services for immigrant students overall, and for immigrant students with disabilities in particular. Some of these approaches have been implemented in numerous settings apart from those included in the preliminary study.

* *School-based community centers* provide services to support assimilation of immigrant families of school children. Such centers may offer preparation in English as a second language, parent workshops, computer training, translations, referrals to other agencies, and other services that are perceived to meet growing needs. Locating centers in school buildings helps parents to become more comfortable with the school environment in a new country.

* *Newcomer programs* provide intensive language development and academic/ cultural orientation for 6 to 18 months before immigrant students are placed in the language support and academic programs of the regular school. Newcomer programs are located in at least 18 States, and some are full-length high schools.

* Educators and district administrators *work with local religious and cultural leaders* to plan programs, services, and experiences for immigrant students and their families. These collaborations sometimes include medical personnel involved in local refugee resettlement activities.

* Immigrant students may have a *five-year high school plan*, rather than a four-year schedule. This is useful for students who have the desire and capacity to attend college but arrive in the United States too late to complete requirements or who need additional time for English language learning.

* *Specialists are assigned to each school* to assist teachers. One variation is the deployment of literacy specialists (general and special education teachers trained according to standards developed for this role), with libraries in every classroom. Another variation is the placement of learning strategists who assist general education, special education, and ESL teachers in designing instruction that responds to a range of learning styles.

* *Team teaching* and other types of partnering between special education and ESL teachers were described as particularly effective for immigrant students by some respondents.

* In one of the district surveyed, every special education teacher is required to complete *10 hours of ESL training* during his/her first year of teaching. This is more effective in districts whose immigrant population primarily speaks one or a few languages.

* A university in one district's service area has initiated a one-year alternative certification program to *train and certify immigrants who were teachers* in their countries of origin.

* *Career ladder programs* recruit paraeducators from the immigrant community and take a "home-grown" approach to offering teacher education to promising paraeducators who represent the languages and origins of students in the district.

* *Teacher exchanges* with Mexico have been useful not only in California and southwestern States, but also in places such as Dalton, Georgia, a small district whose Latino school population grew from zero to 49 percent during the 1990s (Pompa, 2000).

Although not discussed in pilot interviews, the work of the Center for Research in Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), at the University of California-Santa Cruz, merits mention. CREDE is developing projects and reports on immigrant student learning and parent participation, and has published the following *Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Learning* across cultural, racial, and linguistic groups in the United States and across age levels and subjects (Tharp, 1999):

1. *Joint productive activity.* Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students.
2. *Language development.* Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum.
3. *Contextualization.* Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of students' home and community.
4. *Challenging activities: Teaching complex thinking.* Challenge students to master cognitive complexity.
5. *Instructional conversation: Teaching through conversation.* Engage students through dialogue, especially through the Instructional Conversation.

NOTE: As of 2006, CREDE materials are distributed by the Center for Applied Linguistics at: <http://www.cal.org/crede/>

Major Needs Reported by Districts

Respondents to the pilot study were consistent in reporting the following needs.

* The *need for personnel* who are prepared and qualified to be effective with immigrant students who have disabilities is a paramount concern among districts in the pilot survey. Given national data about the supply of qualified special educators and ESL personnel, it is reasonable to assume that this is an extremely widespread need.

* There is an urgent need for parent handbooks, pupil evaluation team forms, and other *information for parents in many languages and dialects*. Translation is quite expensive, and few districts with influxes of immigrant students are able to provide parent materials across the many languages that are emerging. It is suggested that a clearinghouse be established to collect and share translated materials that districts could use as a basis for adapting and developing their own information for parents.

* *Psychiatric services* are needed for children and families who have been traumatized by violence. But there is an under-supply of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social workers, and others with the necessary skills. Immigrant students with post-traumatic psychological conditions are frequently referred to rehabilitation programs or other services that have a very limited understanding of their backgrounds, languages, and cultures.

* It is also reported that *preservice preparation* programs in special education serving heavily impacted areas are not always responsive to the skills and understandings required for instruction of culturally and linguistically diverse students. According to some respondents, preservice programs appear to emphasize cultural awareness at the expense of training in targeted instructional methodologies, while the reverse was reported by others. Ultimately, therefore, responding districts are increasingly engaged in comprehensive professional development across administrative, instructional, diagnostic, and support staff. At the same time, respondents believe it is imperative for college and university programs in proximity to impacted districts to work with public schools in a variety of mutual initiatives to prepare personnel, to contribute to meeting massive professional development needs, and to improve services for immigrant students with disabilities

Conclusion

Immigrant children and their families present wide-ranging challenges to urban, suburban, and rural school districts in the majority of the States. It is believed that many districts are not adequately staffed nor equipped to provide adequate services to assist immigrant students with disabilities in reaching their maximum potentials; that linguistic and cultural differences, communication barriers, and lack of understanding of prior experiences in immigrants' countries of origin interfere significantly in providing effective special education to these students; and that there is a widespread shortage of instructional, diagnostic, administrative, medical, rehabilitation, and support personnel with the competencies necessary for working effectively with immigrant students. The dimensions of this issue appear to be poorly articulated at the national level. This paper has summarized early findings of a pilot study that has attempted to describe some of these dimensions in order to call attention to these issues.

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