

# STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OUTCOMES OF IMMIGRANTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN AN URBAN CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF GREAT STRIDES AND HOPE

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Almost two and half years ago, I embarked on a dissertation project for my doctorate in Urban Education Studies and Teacher Education. I was curious to explore the achievement outcomes of immigrant students (from non-English speaking countries) and English Language Learners (ELLs) in an urban classroom. This study entailed understanding how urban teachers supported this population of students throughout their learning processes, as well as how teachers made sense of and carried out instruction for this group of students in today's urban classrooms. My ultimate goal as a teacher educator was to translate what I learned from this study into principles and practices to be shared with new teachers. After several setbacks related to finding a suitable site, I received permission to conduct the research in an urban high school within five miles of a large Midwestern state capitol. The population in this school district was dense and homogenous, with huge housing and other socio-economic disparities between the rich and poor. Stratified in the middle, the southern, northern, eastern, and western boundaries of the district were bordered with more affluent wealthy suburban district.

For many years, this urban high school had been trying to cope with problems common in urban schools such as excessive discipline, high dropout rates, bullying, and low academic performance (especially for ELLs and immigrants). According to the [State] Department of Education (2015), only 37 percent of students from this school enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation compared to the state average of 64 percent. Additionally, this school had 69 percent of graduates who needed remediation, while the state average was 31 percent. It was a requirement for every student at the school to take a test after completing English 10. Students had to pass this end-of-course test required by the State to graduate from high school. In the four years before this study, as few as one in ten students passed this end-of-course test and the pass rate was even worse for immigrants and ELLs. The school administration tried to disrupt this pattern of failure by implementing a pacing guide, prescribed curriculum, and multiple practice tests, but these measures had been largely ineffective. At the beginning of the school-year of 2015-2016, the school administration decided to try something new, a co-teaching arrangement for English 10.

I was able to locate two teachers. The first teacher was an English as a Second Language (ESL) certified specialist with a Master's degree, who once worked with refugees and also taught overseas for a year and the second teacher was an English Language Arts (ELA) specialist with a Bachelor's degree. In addition, seven immigrant students from non-English speaking countries from Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East and South America and ELLs participated in the study.

## Student Achievement Outcomes in an Urban Classroom

Data for this study was collected via classroom interactions, interviews, focus groups, field notes, informal conversations, and numerous student artifacts such as written assignments, presentations, student work, and grades. Analysis of the data provided emergent evidence related to the following findings.

### Teachers' Nature of Instruction

Teachers exhibited skills of using inclusive strategies to create fair and equal opportunities to learn academic content (Equity Pedagogy). This was evident during their interactions in which they did not show preferential treatment toward students based on race, gender, immigration status, cultural and linguistic heritage, nationality or creed. For example, toward the end of each class session, teachers always gave all students a chance to speak or share their thoughts and ideas. The teachers created an environment where every student felt safe and respected by denouncing bullying and encouraging students to respect and value one another.

Furthermore, teachers incorporated culturally relevant learning resources and experiences in class by contextualizing lessons to

reflect culture. They incorporated students' language into the learning environment, voiced cultural affirmation, and included relevant cultural artifacts. During daily lesson observations, I noted that the two teachers' pedagogy was based on inclusive learning practices that respected all learners and their individual differences. They provided meaningful, and yet very challenging learning experiences that included students' experiences, beliefs, and values. They supported students by using self-assessment and grading policies that were accurate and fair to everybody. During the second interview, one of the teachers explained why using cultural references both in verbal and non-verbal forms to communicate instructional demands was motivating and boosted the students' self-esteem:

I like the group aspect of class discussion. In groups, students learn to cooperate and not act as competitors, and when I go around listening to them, I feel humbled to hear many stories they discuss and share with one another. I think they learn better among themselves than me acting like pouring knowledge in their heads. I encourage them not to feel ashamed to draw inferences from their native languages (e.g. Spanish, Arabic, Dinka) so that they feel welcome and accepted. I also ask them personally to tell me statements or words of cultural affirmation in their native language and use them in encouraging them to contribute to classroom discussion.

Additionally, teachers used inquiry and critical reflectiveness to drive learning. This was evident in how they challenged their own beliefs, values, cultural practices, and the structures around which were supporting the status quo of alienating ELLs, immigrants, and the marginalized urban students. During our third interview, teachers expressed how slow the district was in addressing the needs and welfare of students like providing appropriate books and laptops which were supposed to be delivered five months ago.

Teachers held high expectations of all students with regard to academic rigor. They showed that the immigrants and ELLs were diverse in talent and ability just like any other group and challenged them to work hard. They focused on high risk students and pushed them toward the same standards as required by the state. They scaffolded the development of self-efficacy, personal identity, and agency in their instructions and interactions. They also shared the responsibilities of scaffolding students to meet their learning, emotional, and career goals by bringing career advisors to class and letting students write essays about their career goals once a week.

Correspondingly, the teachers showed skills of building a community of learners in class. They exhibited rapport, empathy, and willingness to bridge the gaps between immigrants and non-immigrants, including differences in language, culture, race, nationality, and gender. This was evidenced in the ways they showed warmth, friendliness, and listened to all students. They designed lessons for diverse students to work together and shared their personal experiences. During an interview, one of the teachers showcased this disposition:

Building a class community is an excellent litmus test for successful teaching. I like doing this with a firm belief that human connections are great for growth. We all need each other and learning can't take place in a vacuum of human connections. This is why we try in this class to foster a reassuring sense of belongingness to all students, encourage them to work collaboratively and even resolve conflicts with fairness and peace.

## **Teacher Support**

Teachers needed networks of support from within and outside the school. During interviews, teachers acknowledged that they benefited greatly from professional development opportunities within the school, those initiated by the district, and their co-teaching arrangement. They opened up to other teachers, school administrators, and district supervisors in order to be successful. They stated a belief in the importance of building a community of support beyond the classroom. They also reached out to parents, career professionals, and examination experts for help and input. They even reached out to the legal experts to understand federal legal laws pertaining to immigration policies and their role as teachers. During the final interview, one teacher touched on this issue:

My English Language Arts (ELA) background did not provide me with so many avenues to work with ELLs and immigrants nor even had a rigorous cultural diversity class during my teacher preparation program. Honestly, faced with my own inexperience and the exigencies of language and cultural pluralism, I have had limitations on my part and I thank my partner, the school administration, the district, and community experts for their support. This has been a very transformative and eye opening experience for me and I continue to learn a lot (Interview, January, 2016).

## **Students' Growth**

As a group, students evidenced growth as learners. They showed growth in their construction of self and identity. They developed a set of beliefs and values and saw their environment in new ways with new prospects (sociocultural understanding). They also grew in their self-esteem, came to believe in themselves more, and became determined visionaries (self-efficacy). During the third focus group interview, one student expressed the following sentiment:

I feel like that I have grown and I am different this time. I am a dynamic individual. I have changed in my thinking about life, I have grown in knowledge and I now know that I have power to contribute something in this class, this school, the community around and even beyond. I think I now know myself better than before. My classmate, my teachers, and the school community have made me grow and believe more in myself. I was shy at the beginning of this year and had very few friends but now I have many friends and I feel happy (Focus Group, January, 2016).

As individuals, students made progress toward being fully effective students and future community members. They developed from less confident individuals to confident people capable of being successful and self-reliant. For example, one immigrant student said:

I learned more about what I can do as a human being, my dignity, my human rights, my civil rights, and how I can step up for myself and for others. I gotten a new perspective on how to get what I want which I felt was not possible before. I have learned more from my teachers who are calm, compassionate, and confident in their abilities in dealing with me, sharing these values through personal reflections and assignment. I have learned more about American politics, values, and even world politics which have opened my eyes (Focus Group, February, 2016).

The English 10 class also became a community of learners because each one of them did their part. The curriculum and instruction included sharing stories about problems immigrants and ELLs faced. For example, at the beginning of the year, I observed sporadic tensions between nonimmigrants and immigrants in the class, but it was significant to note how students eventually began to champion for their classmates. They formed an anti-bullying group that went around the whole school performing plays to sensitize other students. They volunteered in the communities spreading the word of peaceful existence and being a good neighbor to others. Through personal story sharing, students realized that it requires great sacrifice to leave ones native home. Thus, the climate and overall learning experiences transformed the students not to fear diversity but embrace it with dignity, confidence, and pride.

Academically, students' learning growth became evident virtually across the spectrum through increases in their grades. For example, one ELL second generation immigrant student acknowledged that despite his struggles and disability status, he was progressing well. With his job and ambition to go for heating, ventilation, and air cooling (HVAC) training, he knew that he needed to work hard and obtain a high school diploma. From mid semester, he began attending tutoring twice a week in order to improve his grades. He stopped playing soccer which he enjoyed so he could focus on his academics. His progress report showed improvement. He had an F in September, C- in October, C+ in November, and B in December. In addition, another immigrant student said this during our third focus group interview:

I want to improve my English. We have no ends meet and no relatives here and school is what can make me share the American dream. This is why I am working hard and improving my English. I like math, science, and social studies and I want to go to college and become a pharmacist.

### **A Case Study of Great Strides and Hope**

I identified this commentary as a case study of great strides and hope because the findings above shed light on how scholars and practitioners can find a means toward more equitable outcomes for ELLs and immigrants. Students' achievement outcomes were a result of the teachers' expression of care, rapport, higher self-efficacy, and their inclusive strategies to create fair and equal opportunities to learn which prompted students to work hard. Likewise, students experienced rapid transformational growth that modeled their teachers' feelings and aspirations. Specifically, there was significant growth in their academic achievement, identity growth, self-efficacy, and sociocultural aspects.

We know from research that teachers' dispositions play a huge role in instructional and overall educational outcomes of students (Villegas, 2007). That means, teachers personal habitual inclinations, attitudes, beliefs, and temperament have huge effects on how students learn and succeed. Historically, students from low-income and racial/ethnic minority groups have scored lower in academic achievement tests, have been over represented in special education programs, have had lower academic tracts, and have dropped out of school at a higher rate than their white, middle class peers (Sleeter, 2013). However, students in this study reported that their teachers treated them with respect, facilitated the classroom as a community of learners, and designed their activities in a conversational model.

Furthermore, teachers' instructions involved integrating new activities with prior knowledge, facilitating instructions with a critical stance, and promoting conversational teaching at a higher rate. As a result, students achieved academic efficacy and came to believe in themselves more. Correspondingly, the findings shed light on the value of co-teaching to immigrants and ELLs that could lead to improved teacher development and preparation programs. When developing units of study, classroom procedures, and lesson plans, the two teachers worked together integrating academic language and literacy instructions with clear objectives that connected to students' experiences and needs.

### **Concerns Which May Merit Deeper Inquiry**

In this commentary, I would like to emphasize that this case study was not designed to generalize all immigrants from non-English speaking countries and ELLs, nor to exemplify them against all other minority groups. However, it was intended to provide a snapshot of these students' achievement outcomes in an urban classroom from two highly qualified teachers. However, further exploration is needed to see if the same could be true to one specific immigrant group like Asians or Africans in another location other than the Midwestern urban context in which this research was conducted.

Furthermore, during individual teacher data analysis, I noted that the instructor with ESL certification, foreign experience, certification, and a Master's degree performed better in many categories than the teacher with ELA certification, no foreign language experience, and a Bachelor's degree. For example, I noted that students suffered in classroom management and behavior in the absence of the ESL certified teacher. Nevertheless, their good collaboration and co-teaching skills made a huge difference to students and the ELA certified teacher gained more confidence and skills throughout the course of the year. The association of these factors need to be further explored.

Finally, while this study was specific to immigrants and ELLs, I did not specify their immigrant statuses like refugee, HB-1 visa, etc. I was warned by district administrators not to disclose or explore students' immigration status. Therefore, any analysis of the impact of student's immigration status was not in this study, even though such information might have added insights into ways to improve the conditions for students and reduce disparities in school systems.

### **Conclusion**

This commentary sheds light on the need for advocacy and finding the means toward more equitable outcomes for immigrants and ELLs in urban schools today. The goal of this study was to present a research-based case study of the student achievement outcomes of immigrants and ELLs in an urban classroom. This study acted as a great stride and hope not only to students but scholars, practitioners, and teacher educators interested to advocating and advancing the teaching and learning experiences of this population. Many teachers in urban schools struggle to address the unique needs of immigrants and ELLs (Lee, 2012). The rapid increase of immigrants has not been matched by sufficient growth of instructors' understanding and preparedness in how best to plan and carry out good instruction (Samson & Collins, 2012).

This implies that teacher educators could be better equipped to provide new urban teachers with appropriate tools, skills, and best practices for supporting immigrants and ELLs in their unique learning challenges in order to function in the American social, economic, and political environment. Concurring with Clarkson (2009) the issue of effective urban teacher preparations (UTPs) cannot be underestimated. Statistics show that the majority of ELLs and immigrants are falling through the cracks; have low attendance rates; are underrepresented in higher education, and eventually find themselves in low-income, stratified neighborhoods because the type of education provided to them is foreign, and the care, compassion, and understanding by teachers has been missing. Therefore, it is essential that learning to teach today embodies teaching values that support and strengthen individual uniqueness, cultural pluralism, and exploring the emerging new lifestyles of accepting immigrants and ELLs as assets (Borjian, & Padilla, 2010). Thus, UTPs serve the crucial role of shaping attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of candidates who will touch the future generations in the classrooms. Students need highly effective teachers like the two in this study. Nonetheless, a good education should be a public good with the potential to integrate everybody into the socioeconomic and political sphere of American life (Ladson Billings, 1995).

Lastly, the prospects explored in this commentary which brought significant outcomes to students are not exhaustible. It is my hope that these findings be strongly deliberated by teachers, scholars, and practitioners in educational systems interested to doing more and moving toward more equitable outcomes for immigrants and ELLs. Moreover, the future of the American workforce depends on the student population in our urban schools today.

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