Implementation of Supportive School Programs for Immigrant Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT: The growing number of immigrant students in the United States continues to affect school programs. First, the author describes the issues that challenge immigrant students, including varying levels of language and academic performance, funding and school resources, and flexibility and accountability. Then, the author discusses what school leaders can do for these students, such as provide supportive school programs and services. In reviewing the characteristics of successful programs, school leaders can better understand how to work effectively with immigrant students. The author concludes with recommendations on evaluating programs and services for immigrants.

KEYWORDS: challenging issues, immigrant students, school leader, supportive programs

THE FLOW OF IMMIGRANTS CHANGES the demographic character of U.S. elementary and secondary schools. Currently, approximately one in five students in kindergarten through Grade 12 is the child of immigrants. The student makeup includes foreign-born U.S. citizens, native-born children of immigrant parents, and undocumented immigrants (Fix & Passel, 2003). Also, first- and second-generation immigrant students are the fastest growing population in U.S. schools (Capps et al., 2005). Thus, U.S. schools have not only been struggling to serve the existing population of immigrant students but also face a future increase in this population. Immigrant education is a current issue in educational policy circles that educators should address (Gershberg, Danenberg, & Sanchez, 2004).

The Emergency Immigrant Education Assistance (EIEA) Act of 1984 authorized funds to provide needed services for immigrant students. The Emergency Immigrant Education Program (EIEP; Houston Independent School District, 1997) is designed to help immigrant students, those who are born outside the United States and have attended school in the United States for fewer than 3 complete years (Landerman & Sonnen, 1999). The purpose of the EIEP is to help local education agencies (LEAs) to provide high-quality instruction to immigrant children and youth, help these children and youth with their transition to U.S. society, and meet the same challenging state performance standards that school officials expect of all children and youth.

Immigration Trends and Effects on Schools

The larger trends of immigration reflect the composition of the school population. About 40% of foreign-born immigrants are limited English proficiency (LEP) students. The largest share of foreign-born immigrants is found in middle and high schools rather than in elementary schools (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Over 50% of second-generation immigrants are LEP students at the elementary level. Furthermore, most LEP students are native-born students (children of immigrants or children of native-born parents; Capps et al., 2005).

By 2000, the five states with the highest percentage of LEP elementary school students were California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois, which represented 68% of the total number of LEP students in the United States. However, the population of immigrant students is growing the fastest in other states. These growing immigrant student populations are dispersed across all regions of the United States (Capps et al., 2005). The states with the fastest growing numbers of immigrant students also have the fastest growing numbers of LEP students (Fix & Passel, 2003).

Immigrant students are largely served in high-LEP schools, which are located primarily in urban areas. Most LEP students attend schools in which less than 1% of all students are LEP students (Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). The new pattern of segregation of
LEP students may be emerging because these students in high-LEP schools are isolated from mainstream education (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000). In addition, the educational services (e.g., quality of school personnel and instructional techniques) of high-LEP schools are different from those of low-LEP schools. For example, high-LEP schools are more likely to have unqualified teachers and substitute teachers. However, in high-LEP schools, native-language instruction is more prevalent (Cosentino de Cohen et al.).

**Challenging Issues for Immigrant Students**

There are three issues related to immigrant students’ education in the United States that educators should address, including language and educational achievement, school resources and funding, and flexibility and accountability.

**Varying Levels of Language and Educational Achievement**

*Diversity of students’ language proficiency.* Immigrant students enter U.S. public schools with different levels of language proficiency and educational achievement. Language proficiency of immigrant students varies with country of origin (e.g., 56% of immigrant students are Hispanic, yet they represent 75% of LEP students; 22% of immigrant students are Asian, yet they represent 13% of LEP students; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000). Although 25% of immigrants come from countries in which English is the dominant language, this does not mean these students can properly use American English. Educators need to appropriately assess proficiency in the English language among immigrant students prior to enrollment (Beutler, Briggs, Hornibrook-Hehr, & Warren-Sams, 1998).

*Academic performance.* Because not all immigrant students have been included in national tests, the limited national data on performance (i.e., SATs) of both native- and foreign-born immigrant students makes it difficult to articulate how well they perform. When examining students’ school completion, dropout rates vary by immigrant group (e.g., Asian immigrants’ dropout rates are lower than those of Mexican immigrants) and different generations (i.e., first-generation students have higher dropout rates than do second generation students; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

*Participation in special education.* In addition, recent immigrant students have lower test scores and much lower rates of participation in special education than do native-born students. The rates of participation in special education for recent immigrant students also vary by country of origin (Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2003). Although the data show that immigrant students have lower rates of participation in special education, educators should still handle not only cultural and linguistic differences but also disabilities. Furthermore, family poverty and personal trauma that immigrant students have experienced may necessitate special education services. Also, educators need to distinguish between a language-learning disability and language difference (Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002). Therefore, educators should not neglect the effect of immigration on general and special education.

**Funding and School Resources for Immigrant Students**

On the basis of the concept of equity, educators need to address the relation between school resources and immigrant students (Schwartz & Stiefel, 2004). Educators should focus on how to appropriately apply funds to benefit such students. Furthermore, educators should determine the effect of funding on immigrants, including whether they can access supporting school systems and equalized educational opportunities when students have adequate federal funding (Landerman & Sonnen, 1999).

Although the implementation of supporting school systems must be through resources and funding, there is no specific legislation regarding resources for immigrant students except the federal funding through the EIEP (Schwartz & Stiefel, 2004). In addition, not all immigrant students can receive these funds, because districts (i.e., LEAs) may distribute funds to the specific schools. Immigrant students may not receive funds if they live in LEAs that do not qualify for immigrant funding (i.e., districts with a population that contains fewer than 3% immigrants; Landerman & Sonnen, 1999). Another issue is that federal funds are fixed; not all states can receive the same amount. Some states may get more funding, whereas other states may lose funding (Fix & Passel, 2003).

Schwartz and Stiefel (2004) have indicated that immigrant students are treated inequitably. For example, the nonclassroom expenditures (e.g., counseling and parental outreach) for foreign-born students were fewer than those for other students. However, less spending and large class sizes for immigrants may be compensated by having better qualified teachers. In general, educators need to consider factors that can affect spending on immigrant students, such as enrollment, poverty, limited English proficiency status, and part- and full-time special education status.

**Flexibility and Accountability**

Not all immigrant students and families are familiar with the U.S. school systems. They frequently face challenging educational experiences, especially regarding flexibility and accountability at the schools, once they enter school systems (Landerman & Sonnen, 1999).

**Flexibility.** When discussing flexibility, education policymakers aim to determine the effect of funding. LEAs can use the EIEP grants to provide supplemental educational services (e.g., bilingual educational services). The strength
of the EIEP is its flexibility in providing support for instructional activities and materials (e.g., field trips) not available through other sources. This process of support can also contribute to students’ education outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). At the same time, many practitioners do not want to specifically tie EIEP funds to student outcomes. Practitioners prefer to flexibly use funds to support other programs (e.g., social services) that may not be funded (Landerman & Sonnen, 1999).

**Accountability.** The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 has recently imposed the challenge of new accountability measures for immigrant students (Schwartz & Stiefel, 2004). The NCLB Act emphasizes testing by standardized tests and focuses on English proficiency. Schools may rely less on programs (e.g., bilingual education) that can address the deep needs of building English and native-language skills for immigrant students. Some of these students do not perform well on tests because they may have difficulties in learning English, which create high dropout rates (Capps et al., 2005).

Although school districts provide the resources and services for immigrant students through EIEP funds, accountability data for immigrant students are questionable. There is a limited amount of data regarding immigrant students and their performance that can be shared with teachers. In addition, no specific content standards can guide classroom instruction, and no specific student performance standards can articulate what students are expected to know. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate whether programs are effective for immigrant students (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

Because of the aforementioned challenges, immigrant students with and without disabilities need effective supporting systems to increase their access and engagement in schools. Educators should answer two key questions: What school systems can best prepare immigrant students for the future? and What school programs can accommodate their needs in limited resources and funding?

**Implementation of Supporting School Systems for Immigrant Students in the United States**

School leaders should provide supportive services for immigrant students to succeed academically and adapt to American society. At the same time, school leaders should consider developing positive learning contexts for immigrants before beginning to design programs, which may include the issues of sociocultural contexts (e.g., discrimination toward immigrant students), structural obstacles of U.S. schools (e.g., departmentalized and fragmented structures), and special education services (because factors, such as personal trauma and poverty, may increase the need for special education services even though some immigrant students are not identified; Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002; Walqui, 2000). Issues for supportive school programs include program design and implementation, features and components of successful programs, best practices in implementation, and evaluation of effective school programs.

**Program Design and Implementation**

A school system needs to be well prepared before immigrant students enroll. Promoting the success of these students and of the student community as a whole should be the primary purpose in implementing changes in school systems. School leaders should develop approaches for establishing effective education for immigrant students at elementary- and secondary-level schools (Lucas, 1996). In designing programs, school leaders need to consider the following to meet immigrant students’ needs: what approaches or programs should be included, what supporting services should be provided, and what factors school leaders should consider in implementing a program.

**Included approaches or programs.** Because there is only one federal funding program, EIEP, school leaders should develop alternative approaches (e.g., English as a second language programs, sheltered English content programs, bilingual education programs) and encourage district and state support to serve immigrant students. The importance of such programs is to support these students and their families throughout the school system. When school leaders handle operating programs, they should consider the following: what programs they choose to meet students’ needs, what relevant policies may affect students’ learning, and how to collaborate with local and state-level government officials.

On the basis of survey data that Gershberg et al. (2004) collected, the primary challenge that immigrant students encounter is English language and academic development in school. In California, schools offer state-funded and administrated programs that help meet immigrant students’ needs, including the Community-Based English Tutoring Program, English Language Acquisition Program, and English Language and Intensive Literacy Program. LEAs received funding to initiate these programs that serve not only immigrant students but also English language learners. These programs help students who have language difficulties meet the state’s academic and performance standards. Also, LEAs used funding for other student needs, such as transportation services (to and from programs; Gershberg et al.). School leaders need to consider how to spend appropriately on a language acquisition program. A large share of foreign-born immigrant students are in the secondary level (i.e., middle and high schools), but spending on language resources is specifically focusing on the elementary level (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

In addition, newcomer programs are designed to help recent immigrants (those who arrived in the United States
fewer than 3 academic years ago) adjust to school and society (Lucas, 1996). Newcomer programs are unlike other programs because they include the comprehensive delivery of services for immigrants. The focus of these programs is on not only academic development, but also supportive services tailored to students' special needs (e.g., survival skills and cross-cultural communication skills). Educators need to consider the following procedures before designing newcomer programs: (a) planning (rationale for the planning program), (b) legal requirements (whether to provide resources to meet students’ needs), (c) intake (standardized procedures for identifying students’ needs), (d) staff, curriculum, and instruction (school qualification of school personnel and content courses on the basis of district requirement), and (e) evaluation (measurement of students’ progress; Chang, 1990; Friedlander, 1991).

Another approach is to develop alternative school programs, especially for immigrant students at the secondary level. These are not temporary programs. School leaders need to consider that some of these students may not attend school at the regular time. Also, school leaders need to provide these students with alternative school programs for studying, such as late-afternoon academic programs (Lucas, 1996).

Last, school leaders cannot ignore the fact that the dropout rate of students with disabilities is twice that of general education students. School leaders should consider supportive services also for immigrant students with disabilities, which include organizing school learning environments to offer quality of instruction and early intervention programs for immigrant students with disabilities, partnering with immigrant parents in designing IEPs and providing parents with comprehensive information, and using fair and equitable assessing procedures to identify students’ special needs (Smith-Davis, 2000; Spaulding, Carolino, Amen, & Smith, 2004).

Supportive services. In addition to challenges of language and communication, immigrant students need to face other major challenges, such as fear of legal issues, parental participation and involvement, and general health and social services concerns (Gershberg et al., 2004). Therefore, immigrant students need not only language and academic development, but also comprehensive and supporting systems to help them succeed. School leaders should provide supporting services to work effectively with this group and their families. They should also provide a broad range of supporting services on the basis of students’ needs, such as counseling, parent outreach, and career education (Friedlander, 1991).

Factors for implementation. To work effectively with immigrant students, the factors related to program implementation should be addressed, including (a) program location (separate site or not), (b) program structure (what course content should be included), (c) transition to other programs (how long immigrant students stay at a newcomer program before moving to mainstream classes), and (d) registration and placement procedures (students’ information from registration procedures used to identify students’ needs; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998). At the same time, school leaders should decide which program option is better by examining local resources and the previous education experiences of immigrants. The most important goal is to help immigrant students perform well with regular content (Chang, 1990; Lucas, 1996).

Features and Components of a Successful Program

Even though model programs for immigrants could not be replicated, the quality of programs must be based on the concrete features (Mace-Matluck et al., 1998). School leaders should identify the features of schools that promote the success of these students. The features of programs tailored to the needs of immigrant students include the following elements (Adger, 1996; Chang, 1990; Mace-Matluck et al., 1998; Walqui, 2000; Walsh & Prashker, 1991):

1. Build strong leadership at the school sites: All school personnel share a unitary vision of change and believe that change is well worth the time and effort.
2. Provide students a multitude of support services such as group counseling, peer tutoring, and career education.
3. Place high importance on parental involvement.
4. Guide selection of students’ courses and programs on the basis of academic preparation for immigrants.
5. Provide access to content and promote engagement by using students’ first language in classes.
6. Respond to students’ needs through flexible curricula (e.g., individual learning plans) and scheduling (e.g., offer working immigrant students opportunity to attend classes during nontraditional school hours).
7. Adequately train and license qualified teachers.

In addition to learning from the aforementioned features of successful programs, school leaders also need to ensure implementation of programs that involve all learners, school staff, and the whole community in co-constructing achievement for all (Chang, 1990). No two programs are identical, but school leaders should pursue the same goal: to help immigrant students succeed in U.S. schools.

Evaluation of Effective School Programs

According to legal requirements (e.g., EIEA), school leaders must attain the goal of educating immigrant students by maintaining and developing high-quality instructional programs and services (California State Department of Education, 1999; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000). The guidelines for school leaders and districts are as follows:
1. Establish criteria (for considering the implementation of a program), and document the provided services to determine the effectiveness of the program.

2. Use standards to guide and evaluate language instruction (i.e., how well do immigrants perform on speaking, reading, and writing English) and core curriculum (i.e., how well do immigrant students master the core subjects).

3. Use students’ performance data to identify students’ grade level and at-risk students.

4. When gathering performance data, consider immigrant students’ English language proficiency, progress in learning the core curriculum, and graduation and attendance rates.

5. Organize data and form conclusions on the effectiveness of the program.

6. Improve programs by using data as a guide, and collaborate with teachers and administrators to decide how to improve programs for immigrant students.

Conclusion

Immigrant students and families encounter numerous challenges in the majority of U.S. school districts. Many school districts are not appropriately staffed or equipped to provide comprehensive support to help immigrant students (with and without disabilities) in reaching their potential (Smith-Davis, 2000). School leaders should serve as gatekeepers to ensure that competent school personnel work effectively with all immigrant students. Furthermore, school leaders should help immigrant parents understand the issues regarding school practices, such as enrollment procedures, the choices of school and language programs, and the rights to other related educational services (Gershberg et al., 2004; Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

Because schools lack valid and reliable measurements to identify ELLs, there is confusion as to whether immigrants should be viewed as ELLs. School leaders should consider how to appropriately address immigrant students’ needs (e.g., whether schools should use funding for building language programs). In addition, research data could not explain the correlation between funding and students’ outcomes (i.e., whether resources helped students accomplish their academic goals; Landerman & Sonnen, 1999; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2004). However, the most important step school leaders need to take is to ensure that immigrant students receive resources based on educational needs, rather than newcomer status. Also, school leaders need to consider how best to expand the limited resources they have. In addition, they should determine whether additional funds will cover the additional costs of education (e.g., hiring teachers with language credentials) for immigrant students (Gershberg et al., 2004).

Implications for current and future education policy and practice for immigrants should be identified, such as the need to gather information to develop successful practices (or build effective programs), obtain more rigorous evaluation of these programs in and across school districts, and conduct more research to help identify the appropriate program design for a specific group of immigrant students and their educational goals. Educators should be strongly committed: “It is the school’s responsibilities to get students on the right track—the track called success” (Schnur, 1999, p. 52).

NOTE

1. First-generation students are foreign-born immigrants; second-generation students are native-born immigrants.

AUTHOR NOTE

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REFERENCES


