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Original Paper

The Challenges, Influences, and Experiences of Slavic Immigrant Education in the U.S

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Abstract

In the today's diverse society, it is necessary for educators to understand and be familiar with the values, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and social and cultural contexts that have shaped the lives of their students in order to provide optimal learning opportunities. This article is a synthesis of research regarding the challenges, influences, and experiences of Slavic students in the United States at the primary and secondary school levels. Due to the lack of research concerning Slavic students in the United States, this article has examined literature surrounding the experiences of immigrant students, English Learners (ELs), and Slavic students in an attempt to find common ground.

Keywords

education, Slavic, English Learners (ELs), immigrant, multi-cultural

1. Introduction

With current estimates suggesting that one out of every five school age children is either newly arrived to the United States (U.S.) or has at least one parent who has recently immigrated (Strickland, Keat, & Marinak, 2010), one of the greatest modern challenges faced by schools in the U.S. has been equipping educators and pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to provide effective and appropriate instruction and education to the burgeoning populations of immigrant and non-English speaking students (Valentine, 2006; Vogt, 2009). Despite the fact that schools in the U.S. have steadily become more ethnically diverse, largely due to immigration, many educators, pre-service teachers, and educational institutions have remained underprepared to provide high-quality instruction to their immigrant and English Learner (EL) populations, therefore highlighting a demand for teachers to effectively address the needs of these students (Coady, de Jong, & Harper, 2011; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Flores, Painter, & Pachon, 2009).

Although immigrant children have composed a substantial and growing percentage of the school-aged population, few researchers have examined how young children and their families from Slavic backgrounds have adapted to and experienced education in the U.S. In order to assist in guiding the

development of instructional strategies and curriculum suitable to ensure that teachers and schools can provide more equitable opportunities for immigrant and EL students to learn, a deeper understanding of the social and cultural experiences, challenges, backgrounds, and needs associated with such populations is vital (Arens, Stoker, Barker, Shebby, Wang, Cicchinelli, & Williams, 2012; LeClair, Doll, Osborn, & Jones, 2009). Furthermore**,** educators and institutions must not only understand the needs and facets of these culturally and linguistically diverse populations, but must also develop positive attitudes regarding such diversity (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fitts & Gross, 2012). The purpose of this literature review is to begin to understand the challenges, backgrounds, and experiences associated with the education of Slavic immigrants at the primary and secondary levels.

2. Definitions

Although there has been much research surrounding immigrant populations, it is necessary to point out that much of the literature concerning these populations has centered around Hispanic and Asian cultures and communities (e.g. Huber, 2010, Ellis & Chen, 2013). In response to the overwhelming culture differential within the literature, it was necessary to circle the wagons so to speak and divide this review into three sections: a) immigrants; b) English Learners (ELs) and c) Slavic immigrants.

2.1 Immigrants

The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) has referred to immigrants as foreign born persons settling into a new country. First-generation immigrants are those who were foreign born and have left their country of origin, while second-generation immigrants are those who were born in the U.S. but have at least one foreign born parent (Pereira & Gentry, 2013). Regardless of the reason, they have often shared the common purpose of gaining a better quality of life (Maha, Domici, & Maha, 2011).

2.2 English Learners (EL)

Traditionally, ELs have been students whose English proficiency has not developed to the point where they can take full advantage of instruction in English, as they have lacked the necessary skills to learn in an English only environment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Vera, et al., 2012). In addition, a subgroup of ELs referred to as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) has gained attention in the education community, as seen in California's 2012 adoption of Assembly Bill 2193 section 313.1 which has defined an LTEL as an EL who has been enrolled in the U.S. school system for more than six years without having demonstrated an increase in English proficiency level above far-below basic or below basic (Assembly Bill No. 2193; Diego, 2013). Unfortunately, other states have yet to follow suit and adopt an official definition of their own.

2.3 Slavic Immigrants

Slavic immigrants have traditionally been divided into three linguistic groups – East, West and South- each consisting of various ethnic and cultural subdivisions, histories, and religions (Sacramento Superior Courts, 2013). While the majority of contemporary Slavic immigrants have generally spoken a form of Russian or Ukrainian language and have originated from the former Soviet Union or the

current constituent republics, there are at least a dozen Slavic languages spoken by approximately a half billion people, many of whom do not consider themselves culturally or ethnically Russian, and spanning an area covering over 1/6 of the dry land on Earth (Dagmar &Agata, 2008; Sacramento Superior Courts, 2013).

3. Background

Although Slavic populations have been connected linguistically through the use of the Russian language, the vast array of sub-cultures, languages, dialects, and experiences that have characterized the sub-populations have remained remarkably diverse (Bicha, 1982; James & Martin, 2012; Kalogjera, 2007). As society has continued to become further mixed with varying cultures and subcultures, educators and schools have demonstrated a need to be better equipped to meet the demands of diverse populations (Calderon, 2011; Cochran-Smith, 2003). With such linguistic, social, and cultural differences represented, many educators, programs, and school institutions in the U.S. have remained under-prepared for their immigrant and EL students (Al-Bataineh, 2009; Beers, 2006; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Kagan & Dillon, 2006). Lack of understanding and preparedness has perpetuated the problems related to the socialization, educational equity, and success of immigrant students, especially those unfamiliar with the demands of American schooling, as schools have often been the first social and cultural institutions experienced by immigrant students and ELs outside their homes (Chui, Mori, & Chow, 2012; LeClair et al., 2009). Based on the changing demographics and the social and cultural differences among populations within the U.S., it seems imperative for educators to redefine assumptions, practices, and relevancy in order to provide optimal education experiences and instructional practices (LeClair et al., 2009; Stevens, 2011).

4. Literature Review

4.1 Immigrant Students

Currently, the U.S. is among the most culturally diverse nations in the world with numerous languages, cultures and experiences largely represented by immigrant households across the nation (Crosnoe& Turley, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Many immigrants have chosen to emigrate for a number of reasons, most notably related to the political, economic, religious or educational conditions of their native country. Upon further investigation of the literature, many factors have been shown to influence the educational outcomes of immigrant students, including, but not limited to: a) self-perceptions of academic ability; b) parental and community experiences, perceptions, and preparation prior to entering school, and; c) race, ethnicity, national origin, socio-economic status, and generation (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Maha et al., 2011). Furthermore, many immigrant students have reported high levels of discrimination, inequity, ridicule, harassment, vulnerability, interrupted schooling, and under-prepared teachers and institutions as having influenced their education (Chui et al. 2012; Peguero, 2011). Although immigrant students have often been exposed to and confronted with

negative barriers, such as high rates of socio-economic disadvantages and underprepared teachers upon entering school, research has shown, for certain populations, many of these risks and impediments have tended to decrease with time as many immigrant students have academically outperformed their native born peers post acclimation (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). This can be explained, in part, by evidence that has suggested the process of mastering both a native language and English, combined with their cultural identity, has provided immigrant students with access to an array of community and institutional networks which have fostered a connectedness to adults and families, socio-emotional school readiness, and interpersonal competence (Baum & Flores, 2011; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011).While evidence has pointed to eventual advantages among immigrant students, after socio-economic and language issues are addressed, it is important to note that the advantages have been more consistent among Asian and African immigrant populations especially those whose parents have been high-income earners, proficient in English, married, and well-educated (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2011).

Although many immigrant parents and families have often moved to the U.S. with high expectations and varying degrees of education and experiences, immigrant students' overall academic success and ability to overcome socio-economic disadvantages has been driven by their own attributes, the quality of their schools and teachers, and the resources and support provided by their parents (Baum & Flores, 2011). Furthermore, while many immigrant parents and families have tended to engage less in the involvement at school and expressed hesitation to accept intervention, immigrant communities have demonstrated strong family ties and support at home which have provided security and assistance necessary to meet the challenges of school(Baum & Flores, 2011; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). As the primary and secondary education systems in the U.S. have been shown to help improve the social, academic, and economic status of some, while disadvantaging others, research has demonstrated that immigrant student academic success has also been influenced by the experiences, knowledge, and perceptions their teachers held concerning areas such as language, ethnicity, culture, gender, and socio-economic status (Burbank, Ramirez, & Banks, 2012; Crawford, 2005; Cummins, 2005; Diego, 2013). In addition, the quality of the schools, teachers, peers, and neighborhoods where immigrants reside have been shown to influence their education experience for better or worse (Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2006). Though it has been obvious that the education system in the U.S. has played a critical role in the success or failure of immigrant students, the correlation of immigration, education, and social mobility has remained complex (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011).

4.2 English Learners (ELs) and Long-Term English Learners (LTELs)

Between 1995 and 2005 the number of students with limited English proficiency increased 105%; recent estimates suggest more than five million students are currently classified as ELs (LeClair et al., 2009; Li, 2013). These students have been more likely to have parents with lower formal education levels than their non-EL counterparts and come from low-income families (Calderon, 2008; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2009; Vera et al., 2012).In addition, parents of ELs

have faced unique obstructions to active involvement in their children's on-site school community, often due to negative or inaccurate perceptions toward immigrant parents, a lack of dominant language proficiency, work responsibilities, lack of childcare, and socio-economic circumstances (LeClair et al., 2009; Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Vera et al., 2012). Although cultural values, beliefs, and abilities can encumber their involvement at school and the utilization of community resources, researchers have demonstrated that parents of ELs have involved themselves in the education of their children at home in other ways, such as monitoring homework and asking children about their school day (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2006; Vera et al., 2012).

At school, ELs have often encountered issues related to policy or program interventions, insufficient resources, and ill-equipped educators (Calderon, 2011; Calderon et al., 2011; Coady, et al., 2011; Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Flores et al., 2009). Although ELs have comprised diverse levels of skills and competency, they have often been grouped together in English as Second Language (ESL) programs where they have received 30 minutes or less of instruction, without regard to individual needs, while attending general education classes for the rest of the day (Calderon et al., 2011; Diego, 2013; Flores et al., 2009). When compared to their native English speaking counterparts, ELs have also experienced a disproportionate amount of under-prepared teachers and ineffective instructional practices due to inadequate teacher preparation and programs (Flores et al., 2009; LeClair et al., 2009; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2009). Ironically, while there has been an increasingly strong body of research detailing the important role language support and instruction has played in developing English literacy, the number of ELs who have received primary language support has remained at approximately 5% (Diego, 2013; Olsen, 2010).

As the percentage of ELs making their way into ill-equipped mainstream classrooms has increased over the last decade, researchers have uncovered a new type of EL referred to as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) in grades 6-12 (Calderon et al., 2011; Olsen, 2010). Within the LTEL population, researchers have identified two main types of LTELs: those who have experienced extended periods of time in which they received inconsistent schooling, frequent movement in and out of and between bilingual education, ESL, and the mainstream classrooms in the U.S.; and those who have moved back and forth between the U.S. and their family's native country, while attending schools in both countries (transitional ELs) (Calderon, 2011; Diego, 2013; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2009; Olsen, 2010). In addition, this population, like most EL populations, has typically performed below grade level, as they have remained orally bilingual but limited in literacy skills (Calderon, 2011; Diego, 2013; Flores et al., 2009; LeClair et al., 2009; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2009; Olsen, 2010). Although school districts have been required to provide accommodating services to ELs, it is important to note that the U.S. Department of Education has not offered states policy suggestions in instructing, assessing, identifying, or placing LTELs, while state standards that guide curriculum for ELs have often differed little from those designed for native English speakers (Calderon et al., 2011; Flores et al., 2009).

4.3 Slavic Immigrant Students

While there have been many immigrant populations within the broader immigrant communities in the U.S., the Slavic population is one subgroup which has seen a large increase in people annually to the U.S. (Shipman, 2009). Although many Slavic families have not considered themselves Russian or Ukrainian, many outsiders have often made the assumption of identifying them as such (Dagmar & Agata, 2008; Sacramento Superior Courts, 2013). By 1956, the USSR had grown from an established union of four Soviet republics to one constructed of numerous constituent republics; although there exists over a thousand years of Slavic texts, enabling researchers to detail the histories of these languages and dialects, little research exists on the current experiences of Slavic students in relation to their education journey in the U.S. (Dagmar & Agata, 2008; Kalogjera, 2007; Sacramento Superior Courts, 2013). The scarce amount of research regarding the experiences of Slavic immigrants has identified communication issues and English proficiency as primary concerns for this population's success at school and in life in the U.S. (James & Martin, 2009; Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). Consequently, age, motivation, and exposure to language have also been identified as factors affecting English acquisition and therefore educational success (James & Martin, 2009; Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). Although many Slavic families have spoken some form of the Russian language, Slavic immigrant families have brought many differences in beliefs, values, social norms, stereotypes, languages and narratives to the U.S. (James & Martin, 2009; Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012).

Other studies have shown social, cultural, and linguistic differences, backgrounds, and experiences to influence the education of Slavic students and the way they connect to the host society (Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). In their native country, for instance, Slavic immigrants have described a strong focus on discipline, high academic expectations, and an emphasis on respect and teacher authority (Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). In addition, they have further expressed that the degree of teacher helpfulness and discipline, as well as level of parental involvement and abilities, has been major factors that shaped their education and language acquisition in the U.S. (Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). Within Slavic culture, the teacher was often seen to shape a student's personality, with emphasis on obedience, self-discipline, and conformity; whereas in the U.S., Slavic students felt they had to adjust to the freedom of expressing their own personal opinions due to a prior fear of negative consequences (Sanatullov & Sanatullova-Allison, 2012). In addition, Slavic immigrants have also traditionally faced discrimination and the conflicted desire to adapt to the American way of life while preserving their cultural identity (Kalogjera, 2007). Because there is little research in the area of Slavic immigrant students' experiences, it appears reasonable to suggest that a closer, more in depth look into the narratives, experiences, perceptions, and challenges associated with this population will provide valuable insights. With such scant research concerning the widespread influence of policy, programs, and teacher proficiency and self-efficacy towards Slavic immigrant ELs, it also seems necessary for educators to utilize the narratives and experiences surrounding this

population as a means to develop a deeper understanding of the influence of social, cultural, and policy issues regarding Slavic immigrant students and ELs.

5. Discussion and Implications

Although immigrants, ELs, and Slavic persons are not always one and the same, the overlap of similarities is clear. Thus, one might conclude that the transition from native country to one where families must acquire housing, health care, car insurance, and transportation on their own has contributed to the burden of stress associated with Slavic students' acclimation and education. The literature examined in this review has attempted to bring to light not only the lack of research and understanding of the experiences associated with Slavic immigrant ELs' education in the U.S., but also the complexity and importance of such research. In this respect, immigrants, ELs, and Slavic students are as likely to experience advantages and disadvantages related to: a) their family's social and cultural beliefs, experiences and language proficiency; b) the communities and neighborhoods where they have resided; and c) the quality of their schools' and teachers' preparation and knowledge (Arens et al., 2012; Baum & Flores, 2011; Conger et al., 2011; Maha et al., 2011). In order to address the needs of Slavic immigrant students in the U.S., educators and schools must deconstruct and re-examine the ineffective programs, practices, and outdated modes of thinking related to specialized immigrant populations. Furthermore, it is this educator's conclusion that further investigation, utilizing narratives and experiences associated with Slavic immigrants' education in the U.S. will likely serve to provide teachers and schools with the knowledge, tools, and information necessary to foster and sustain a socially and culturally cohesive school environment that affirms and draws from the identities of these students.

6. Conclusion

From a deficit of language, identity, friends, status, abilities, and familiar norms and values, to poverty, interrupted schooling, and under-prepared teachers and institutions, a student's culture and language are a part of what influences who he or she is and becomes (Calderon et al., 2011; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Gunning, 2003; Peguero, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In order to develop more vibrant and responsive teaching practices, it is vital for schools and educators to value, understand, and build upon their students' cultures, identities and linguistic diversity (Calderon et al., 2011; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Diego, 2013; Gunning, 2003; Peguero, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, research in the vein of Nieto (1994) has long suggested that the assumptions held by teachers toward students that come from a culture at odds with American society will have an effect on school and possibly condemn students to failure (Nieto, 1994). In addition, other research has shown that students whose education has reflected the collaborative relationships between the culture of their family and the culture at school have participated more confidently in class (Cummins, 2005; Fitts & Gross, 2012). Therefore, in order to provide optimal education experiences to their students, teachers must develop critical cultural or

socio-cultural consciousness and competence that utilizes community, family, and cultural resources in order to better understand their students (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Diego, 2013; LeClair et al., 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Throughout human history and across numerous cultures, narratives and perspectives have been an important part of meaningful human understanding and expression as they have been related to issues and contexts of the past and present. In order to relate to or understand unfamiliar cultures, educators must be familiar with not only the social and cultural contexts of immigrant students' lives, but also the values, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that have shaped them. Rather than viewing culture from the dominant perspectives that have driven society, schools and educators must learn to understand human culture and language in a multidimensional, evolutionary, way.

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