

English Language Learners and Their Families: Paradigm Shifts

Alexis Harvey

Schools play an integral role in helping to educate students about more than just material required to pass assessments and meet federal and state mandates. School can act as a vehicle to encourage learning about other cultures that may be represented in population of the school. Students from other countries bring with them their own cultures, values, and traditions that may enhance the educational experience for their age peers. This may lead to greater awareness of and exposure to cultural differences which could positively impact school climate and break down barriers that divide individuals. This process of breaking down barriers and building cultural competence can occur in any level of instruction, but in the early elementary grades this process may not be as difficult as young children may not have been exposed to attitudes that develop biases. It is important for educators and school administrators to foster positive relationships with the parents of all students regardless of their ethnic background. Policies should be created by school localities and states that make relationship building with families of English Language Learners (ELL) more of a priority, especially in the formative early years of a students' educational experience as home life is an overriding factor in the lives of early elementary students.

Current mandates, both federal and state, require that certain content is taught in order to facilitate learning that will meet the requirements of a particular mandate. These required content materials may not be aligned with the needs of ELLs or honor their cultural heritage. Spencer, Falchi, and Ghiso (2011) stated, "... mandates delineate the types of literacy that 'count' in academic settings and also forward powerful messages about which cultural and linguistic identities are valued and which are excluded" (p. 121). Different states have different mandates for what are considered to be acceptable cultural or linguistic groups. Very often this determination is made, in part, due to the level of diversity in particular state or locality and the number of students in need of ELL services. In states such as New York, Florida, or California, the

volume and mixtures of diversity are higher than many other states. States and school localities with high numbers of ELL families may include curricula that explore the aspects of community diversity and tolerance building, to the extent the curricula also meets state standards of learning which may not be compatible with conflicting community values and beliefs. This may lead to policies that may have a negative impact on young learners and ELLs. Spencer Falchi, and Ghiso (2011) concluded, "Early literacy policies have the potential to alienate and continue to disenfranchise those students are already most vulnerable in the educational system, and to drive from the profession teachers who attempt to mitigate the mandates" (p. 122).

Parents, students, and teachers need to feel that they are in an environment that allows them to explore and embrace other cultures without being judged or ostracized for their beliefs. This may require time and positive exposure to other cultures in order to move beyond their misconceptions and distrust. Administrators and teachers in diverse schools may need to look beyond the traditional notions and actives that build parent- school relationships and express a willingness to open the school to a more democratic form of engagement with families. Policies, at the present time, do not include provisions for fostering and building relationships with ELL families, as academic concerns are given priority. However, school districts across the country, particularly those that are located in areas where diversity abounds, are continually challenged to address both the academic and social needs of students, which can include attempts to generate greater parental involvement. Norgurea (2009) advised:

Theoretically at least, education should serve as a means for immigrant children to escape poverty. For this to happen, education must serve as a source of opportunity and a pathway to a better life just as it has for other groups in the past. For this to happen school must not treat immigrant children as though their

inability to speak fluent English is a sign of cognitive or cultural deficit. They must reach out to their parents and work with them, and they must find partners who can provide and support their children's needs. (Para. 29)

When working to create policies that support families for whom English is not their first language or who arrive from other English speaking countries with different cultural values, it is important to make these individuals feel as though they will be accepted and respected in their role in the school environment. Students also need to be reassured that their language and culture will not become barriers to building positive relationships with teachers and other students. Those who generate and write policies in school districts and state departments of education must not be only concerned about communicating the tenants of a policy using political rhetoric and accepted policy language, but must be written in generally understandable terms that can be easily translated into multiple languages that are represented throughout a district or state. This will provide inclusiveness for all who wish to become part of the greater discussion. There is an additional underlying message being given to ELL parents, that their culture and language may not be accepted or appreciated. Spencer, Falchi, and Ghiso (2011) state,

Language is inextricably linked to identity. As such, the policies are not just a matter of linguistic bias; they communicate to children that their very cultural beings may not be fully realized in schools (p. 121).

The role of parents needs to be viewed as an essential and important part of the learning process, particularly for young children as they are greatly impacted by their home life. It is the task of state departments of education and school districts to promote policies that make building parent- school relationships as important as building student academic knowledge. This could have a positive effect on drop- out rates, literacy development, efficacy building, and strengthening of communities. The approach and attitudes about ELL families should change, and they should be given an opportunity to participate in the process of policymaking. As Pushor (2011) advises,

A more honoring and respectful approach is to start with our work with families and communities by looking in a different direction – inward. The only

thing we truly have is ourselves. When we examine how our beliefs and assumptions shape our practices in reaching out to families and communities, what new possibilities do we see?

Educational policymakers have to be cognizant of not only the values and cultural dynamics of ELL families, but the values and ideologies that exist within the greater community. Fowler (2009) argues, "... today's school leaders must have a general understanding of the political idea that that swirl around them in order to think intelligently about education policy" (p. 106). This includes awareness of competing values, conflicts, ideologies, and beliefs about ELL families and policies that seek to be more inclusive of diversity. In many parts of the country, there exists tension and distrust about families and individuals that come to the United States. Some of this tension could stem from the popular media, political advertisements and campaigns, and simple misunderstandings bought about by a seeming lack of cultural competence. Schools are in a unique position to foster positive change and increase acceptance of those who come to this country seeking a better life or refuge from political or social oppression. Policies should include provisions for supporting ELL families and students in fair and inclusive ways that can begin to build trust and greater efficacy.

References

- National center for educational statistics.
(2011). Retrieved from
<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>
- Noguera, P. (2009). Getting ready for the new majority: How schools can respond to immigration and demographic change. *In motion*, Retrieved from
http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pn_newmaj09.html
- Pushor, D. (2011). Looking out, looking in: A partnership approach respects the strengths and knowledge of students' families. *Educational leadership*, 69(1), 65-68.
- Spencer, T. G., Falchi, L., & Ghiso, M. P. (2011). Linguistically diverse children and educators (re)forming early literacy policy. *Early childhood education journal*, 39(2), 115-123.

About the author

Alexis Harvey is a PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on K-12 General Administration.