

Integrating Latino Newcomers in Indiana: Positive School Climates

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With significant increases in Latino students in the Indiana school system, there is a growing need to address how best to educate these students. There are no easy answers to this concern. It is impossible to generalize about Latino students' experiences and thereby provide educators with "fail-proof" formulas for how to best work with these students. Instead, this brief aims to provide educators with tools for further inquiry into the lives of their own students; it also aims to provide a bit more understanding about what some Latino educational needs are, and how to begin meeting these educational needs. In addition to the educational literature, this discussion will draw on recent studies conducted in several cities and communities around the state of Indiana that highlight ways that school climate can affect the integration Latino newcomers into Indiana communities.

Responsive, Respectful, Resourceful

In many respects, the qualities necessary for effectively schooling Latino immigrant children are simply the qualities of good schools for all students. However, immigrant students may suffer even more than non-immigrant students when schools do not have these qualities (see García, [Hispanic Education in the United States](#)). Three qualities that schools can strive to have in order to meet the needs of all students, and immigrant students in particular, are responsiveness, respectfulness, and

resourcefulness. Schools that have a **responsive** climate are receptive to the cultural values and social and economic needs of students. For Latino immigrant students, this might mean using more cooperative learning structures rather than ones that focus on individual achievement and assessment. This also might mean accommodating Latino parents who may, for various reasons, not get involved in schools in ways traditionally expected in the United States. Such reasons include modesty, lack of time because of economic survival demands, and different concepts of the expected role of parents in their child's schooling.

Schools that have a **respectful** climate cultivate an understanding and consideration of the "funds of knowledge" (González et al, 2005) students bring with them. This means building on the experiences that students bring into the classroom, rather than viewing them and their families as "lacking" knowledge. Respectful schools also value the unique cultural orientations of immigrant students, and honor their abilities. In addition, respectful schools communicate high expectations to immigrant students, and provide educational tasks that do not sell the students short because they are proficient in a language other than English. With the No Child Left Behind Act and the push toward English-immersion approaches to English fluency, it is especially important for schools to avoid framing the need to learn English as

the result of a linguistic deficit. Further, while many educators acknowledge that language differences within a student body are pedagogically challenging, especially if there are not ample resources to service the students' needs, neither the children who speak a first language other than English nor their language should be described as a "problem." Rather, educators should work toward seeing language and culture as **resources for learning**, while addressing ways the school can more effectively support language minority students. Schools can do this through competent bilingually assisted instruction which, ideally, helps to maintain Spanish proficiency. In addition, schools can promote a sense of achievement in Latino students by assessing academic ability, across different subject areas, in Spanish.

Schools that are **resourceful** seek and apply resources to meet all students' needs. This might include pressuring state legislature to dedicate more funds; seeking community and private-public partnerships for more resources; applying for federal grants; developing corporate partnerships for linking newcomer families to the Internet; and organizing and supporting after-school programs.

Ownership of All Students

While many schools struggle to meet their resource needs, especially in areas with rapidly growing student populations such as English as a Second Language programs, school personnel can work to utilize the resources that they do have in ways that best serve newcomer Latino students.

For example, in a recent study of responses to Latino newcomers in two Indiana communities (Levinson et al, 2007), researchers found that Latino students were primarily identified by their speaking of Spanish, and that the people who were therefore charged with the greatest responsibility for their education were

language acquisition specialists. Repeatedly, the researchers were told that Latino newcomer students "belonged" to ESL teachers.

Certainly, having ESL teachers who consider Latino newcomer students as "theirs" can help foster a positive student-teacher relationship in a critically important academic area for these students. However, when ESL teachers are the **only** teachers in school who consider Latino newcomers "their" students, the experiences of Latino students, their relationships with school personnel, and their membership in a school community become reduced to the linguistic dimension. School personnel can work to counter this by actively expressing that all students "belong" to all teachers. Such an attitude can work to build a stronger sense of an integrated and coordinated school community that is beneficial for everyone.

Motivating and Caring Schools

The research literature has shown overwhelmingly how important school climate is to immigrant educational achievement. Schools that cultivate a climate of responsiveness, respectfulness, and resourcefulness support and motivate all students. Motivation is paramount for immigrant students, especially as they move into the adolescent years and feel the pull of economic survival and the need to help out the family. If school is not felt as a welcoming and engaging place, other spheres of engagement become more important.

Schools can also attend to this challenge by offering close mentoring and giving attention to matters beyond academic instruction. Schools might develop a "buddy" system or use the "jigsaw" classroom method as described by Elliot Aronson. In addition, schools can create a sense of belonging for immigrant students through positive attention to students' linguistic and cultural heritage, and by encouraging meaningful parental

involvement that respects both parents' demanding work schedules and their values.

Lastly, schools can create a climate that is positive for immigrant student achievement by addressing the peer cultures of young children, adolescents, and teenagers. Schools can work to build on aspects of students' peer culture that are constructive and affirmative, and work to offset some of the cruel divisions that kids, especially

adolescents, often create or sustain.

Researchers like Laurie Olsen have found that immigrant students are often socially marginalized from other peers, especially when schools attempt to facilitate language instruction and academic transition through separate programs in a school. Separate programs such as this can work to legitimate a two-track system and to keep the immigrant kids isolated, appearing to be "different."

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