



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from The Multilingual and Multicultural Center

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Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education THE UNIQUE AND COMPLEX PROFILE OF HISPANIC LEARNERS

The geographic proximity of the United States to Central and South America and the Caribbean has provided the United States with a rich landscape of learners in our schools. This *Bulletin* examines the background complexities and characteristics of English Language Learners (ELLs) from this Hispanic context and what to consider when teaching this population.

GEOGRAPHIC AND ETHNIC VARIETY

The population of learners of Spanish-speaking background in Portland schools is geographically and ethnically diverse and growing. In numerical order, the families come principally from:

El Salvador. This indigenous Central American country experienced a civil war in the 1980s and more recently a devastating hurricane, the result of which has been a steady migration to the U.S.

Dominican Republic. This poor Caribbean island nation has a shared border with Haiti and a strong African heritage.

Mexico. Originally extending into much of present U.S., the current shared border is beset with a large number of undocumented workers seeking employment. Mexicans commonly have a variety of Spanish

and native Indian ethnicities and have been more recently dispersed throughout the U.S. seeking economic opportunity.

Peru. This Andean mountain nation has a particularly strong indigenous ethnicity and a penchant for overcoming long distances and hardship to seek economic opportunities in the U.S.

Honduras. A recent calamitous hurricane has augmented the impoverishment of this Central American country.

Guatemala. This culturally rich mountainous, largely Indian, nation in Central America is recovering from a long and brutal civil war.

Puerto Rico. This is a U.S. protectorate whose disenfranchised residents have U.S. citizenship and unlimited travel opportunities to and from the mainland.

Cuba. Since the Castro-controlled government of the 1950s, this Caribbean island nation, with a strong African heritage, is the only country whose population in the U.S. has automatic refugee status upon arrival.

Columbia. Drug wars and civil turmoil in this beautiful African/Spanish/Indian influenced South American country are potent incentives for many to seek better opportunities in the U.S.

SOCIOCULTURAL CHALLENGES

Immigrant families normally experience isolation in the U.S., at least initially. For Hispanics, separation from large and cohesive extended family structures in the country of origin, the decentralized nature and inaccessibility of commercial and welfare services, employment in low-paying jobs, and generally low English proficiency create separation and alienation. The disempowerment caused by being disenfranchised and the fear of deportation among the undocumented has resulted in the creation of a subclass of people on the edge of poverty with limited access to health, medical, or educational opportunities. Those with visas also are limited in eligibility for social services by the 1996 Immigration Reform Act.

For school-aged students, these challenges lead to potentially troublesome educational outcomes:

- lengthy separation from one or more close family members can lead to behavioral and adjustment problems;

- lack of access to community services due to parents' immigration status can lead to a lack of social and medical services, as well as to an inability to qualify for greatly-needed loans and scholarships for post-secondary education;

- the desire/need to work, juxtaposed with inaccessibility of financial aid for education, contributes to a lack of motivation for schooling, and a higher than average dropout rate. An additional cultural motivator for leaving school early is the fact that age 15, not 18, is considered adulthood across Hispanic cultures.

Any combination of these challenges can cause loss of self-esteem, a shifting power structure within the family dynamic, a consistent struggle to prevent impoverishment, and a vulnerability to high dropout rates and teenage pregnancy and gang recruitment.

THE ACADEMIC EMPHASIS

Not all Hispanic students fall into the above-mentioned challenges, but many do. It would be presumptuous to declare any magic solution for helping Hispanic learners succeed when environmental constraints are frequently overwhelming. Here are some suggestions for an academic response:

1. Talk to them. Understanding their cultural context and personal challenges can at least foster a climate of empathy rather than resentment towards their uncooperative or ambiguous response to learning. Many Hispanic students have unique difficulties remaining in school, let alone achieving academic success.

2. Engage Hispanic students as apprentices in negotiating understanding of and success with academic content. This is best done through *an emphasis on interactive activities and a highly social and interactive approach to learning.* The cultural tendency of Hispanic students is to value and need a great amount of social communication for processing their learning.

3. Demonstrate an interest in and provide models for scaffolding of content with clear and explicit explanation and consistent modeling. This will help to ensure comprehension as long as there is constant language practice to embed learning through integrated uses of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing domains.

4. Orchestrate interactive involvement by asking and answering questions, explaining meanings, clarifying ideas, giving and justifying opinions; having students interact in pairs, triads and small groups; and using jig-saw activities, debates, lab experiments, etc., as ways to foster student interaction.

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