The Necessary Reformation of English as a Second Language Programs to Preserve Culture and Resilience

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Introduction

Learning English as a Second Language is often a process that forces immigrant children to lose their culture, which destroys their resilience. The Pew Research Center conducted a study that concluded roughly half of foreign immigrants cannot speak English proficiently (Pew Research Center, 2022). Further, the Annie E. Casey Foundation finds that, of the immigrant children accounted for, over 10% have a significant difficulty speaking English and over 50% live in linguistically isolated households (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). The ability to communicate should not be a privilege, especially when considering the detrimental effects this will have on children in the long term: their natural resilience must be nurtured. Children are naturally resilient, specifically immigrant children who have faced adversity. The Society for Research in Child Development links natural disasters and struggles in home countries with the science behind childhood resilience (Masten 2014). While solutions have been proposed, the lack of specificity and continuous action have allowed the quality of English as a second language (ESL) programs to fade into the background. Because of this, ESL programs in the United States have around a 60% success rate, with a tendency to use the enrolled children as a diversity quota, minimizing their culture. In order to best solve the issue of language barriers in immigrant children, English as a second language programs must be expanded upon and reformed to foster resilience, improve potential for success, and protect the mental health of the children enrolled.

Natural Resilience of Immigrant Children

Immigrant children are inherently resilient. With the focus on natural disasters impacting resilience, Haiti remains a vital example. The January 12th, 2010 Haitian earthquake threw the country into a worldwide spotlight, and the response by Haitians was resilience and support (Rahill et al 2016). Case studies analyzed whether the resilience of Hatians in response to the earthquake was a result of past events that warranted the same process: various authors claim that wisdom, through repeated events, is a key factor of resilience. Children do not have the wisdom of adults, with their lack of time and experiences in comparison. Yet, the various definitions of resilience allow children to fit into one or more, similar to the Haitian situation: scholars used continuous methods of definition to create a category for resilience, and came up with various answers. The American Heritage Dictionary defines resilience as elasticity, or the ability to bounce back after being bent; Warner & Smith define resilience as the ability to solve problems; and Linley defines wisdom as the essential component of resilience. While these definitions all remain true to some extent, they were used as a means of defining the action taken in Haiti by the people following the earthquake. The unity amongst the survivors made the majority of Haitians go back to places of mass destruction to look for survivors, and find a way to rebuild what was left.

When children demonstrate “elasticity”, or the ability to solve problems, they are demonstrating their resilience; this needs to be nurtured, especially in a classroom setting. For immigrant children, the unity they have within their community can foster resilience and help them choose to be resilient following traumatic events, but there must be a hand-holding process when introduced to new classroom settings that helps to foster this response. Linking culture to language remains vital.

Protecting Potential Success and Mental Health

The protection of mental health is connected directly to potential success, especially when considering the psychological turmoil that many immigrants face. Tied to the idea of psychological distress is natural disasters, a linkage defined by the Society for Research in

Child Development; resilience can be a response to adverse conditions. Understanding what many immigrants face is necessary to "inform mental health and policy interventions," which can redefine the system in place now (Rahill et al, 2016). One professor at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota compiled research that supported the idea that pride in ethnic heritage and cultural practices are ways to foster resilience in migrant children facing adversity (Masten 2014). Protecting a cultural relationship, research shows, preserves resilience in children: using culture as a quota, on the other hand, reduces the students' culture and, consequently, their resilience. A further look into one middle school in particular, published in the American Educational Research Journal, finds that ESL students faced inclusion and exclusion simultaneously: the welcoming and unwelcoming of immigrant students (Gitlin et al, 2003). Despite the objections from teachers in this school district and ultimate lack of resources to constitute a successful ESL program, the district required one nonetheless. The result was an "us versus them" mentality developing between the White dominant student population and the isolated ESL program. The community support for diversity, mandated by the district, reduced the immigrants to a stereotype: having the children perform songs and dances, immersing the White children in bare minimum presentations only to succeed in isolating the ESL students further. Professors from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and University of Washington published a journal article that created a pipeline between poor childhood health conditions and lack of education to low socioeconomic status as adults; this is where the potential success is hindered (Perriera et al, 2011). Access to resources affects the mental health of immigrant children, whose higher mortality rate is associated in part with an increase of stress.

Current Problems with ESL Programs

The format of ESL and English Language Learning (ELL) programs currently remains flawed. The goal of the programs should not simply be a basic level of proficiency, but to meet the same level of achievement as native speakers (Grant et al, 2003). This is dependent on teachers. Many teachers are not trained to work with nonnative English speakers, even when deemed as "specialists" in their fields: these teachers are trained to work with students who are below the benchmark for their grade, rather than for students who did not grow up speaking English. Additionally, adding diversity to the curriculum as a means to incorporate the immigrant students' culture is insufficient and even damaging because it is an attempt at inclusivity that is surface level at best. This conclusion, drawn by professors from the College of Education and Development from George Mason University, aligns with the school study published in the American Educational Research Journal; the us versus them mentality. Surface level cultural acceptance only serves to isolate further, ultimately encouraging the ESL students to give up their culture in favor of "Americanizing". Jenelle Reeves, who has a PhD in Language, Literacy, and ESL Education, finds that assimilation is what most schools with "tolerant" ESL programs strive toward; the desire to replace differences in language and culture as "quickly as possible" (Reeves 2006). This connects to the idea that "racism and repression are the same," an idea Nelson Mandela highlights in A Long Walk to Freedom. Mandela fought against the apartheid policies in South Africa, fighting for prison reform after enduring time in jail. His claim can be used to explain the fight for ESL reform, and the problems with it; the unwillingness to improve the programs forces these immigrant children to settle for a sub-par education. The system is setting them up to fail by subduing them based on something they have not yet had the chance to learn, and rather, using their culture as a means of surface level immersion. Treating children with rich, diverse cultures that can have a hand in fostering their resilience is instead treating

them like a quota, and subduing their potential for success by allowing education standards for ESL children to fall below the education standards for native speakers.

The Equal Educational Opportunities Act

Taking effect on August 21, 1974, the Equal Education Opportunities Act (EEOA) seemed to be an extension of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The EEOA mandated that schools could not discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin, and subsequently must provide English classes directed toward non-native speakers. Among the titles of this act are those discussing assistance financially, unlawful practices, enforcement, and remedies. Mandated through this act, students should have classes in their native language alongside English, but this isn't acted upon in many cases. Cultural and social barriers, oftentimes stemming in language, prevent immigrant students from reaching their full potential. Ultimately, the anti-discrimination practices that this act indicates are often disregarded by school districts. In 1991, the United States Department of Education issued a memorandum with the subject of developing programs for English language learners; this outlined the staffing requirements for teachers of the ESL/ELL programs. Stated is the claim that teachers in some states only need to be generally certified to teach non-English speakers. Other states claim to hire unqualified teachers due to lack of qualified options. These claims violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act that mandates alternative programs for English language learners that should be equal to the education received by native speakers.

Solution: Lesson Planning

In order to protect the resilience and culture of students while simultaneously teaching them language, steps must be taken to improve the current system. Haitian resilience has demonstrated that unity is a key factor in fostering the trait, and the understanding of this is vital in improving mental health. There are different methods implemented across the board, with Content Based Learning (CBI) being a leading one. Overall, even those who wholeheartedly support CBI as a practice claim that understanding the language of the student is important (DelliCarpini et al, 2013). The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy outlines a method of change, and this can best come to life alongside a method introduced in TESOL Quarterly. TESOL, or Teaching English as a Second Language, discusses the importance of lesson planning in engaging with the lesson and incorporating students' backgrounds (Pang 2016). Through lesson planning, it can aid teachers' comprehension: to teach is to understand, and lesson planning allows the teacher to be sure they are understanding the content. Moving on to transformation, where a teacher can, through lesson planning, take knowledge they comprehend and make it knowledge they can teach, and how they can teach the students to understand. Within these lesson plans, there must be a requirement that they cover the following throughout the year: prevention of language loss and preserving the mother tongue; positive and encouraging attitudes toward English language learners (ELLs); a focus on race, poverty, class, and the world (Grant et al, 2003). These requirements will foster resilience and enforce that the classroom is a safe space to learn, but more importantly, to understand.

A Different Approach: Speaking Freely

Those who oppose focusing on teachers' strict planning would agree that the student participation in the classroom is what really needs to be focused on. Giving an open, unplanned environment to students where they can talk freely and learn from asking questions rather than following a plan has had a beneficial effect on improving English in immigrant students. Warren Olivo, an assistant professor at Trent University, finds that the best method of learning is in practice. With strict lesson plans, results find, students are more constricted and follow the

traditional school structure, even when their content is different from native speakers. The traditional school structure promotes listening and being told when to talk, but for English language learners, talking “out of turn” can be the way genuine desire to learn is prompted. Olivo discusses the traditional classroom methods of discussion affecting the conversation about interracial issues: when discussing issues of substance, a teacher decides who gets to speak, and whose responses are inherently right or wrong (Olivo 2003). While this may not be the case with every teacher, the structure of classrooms is built against talking freely, which isolates students. Immigrant students who don’t speak English as a first language are disadvantaged by being forced to follow a structure meant to silence.

Conclusion

The methods explained above have a common goal in mind, equalizing opportunity for immigrant children by teaching language alongside preserving culture. The proposed solution utilizes lesson planning and base requirements to be an ESL teacher, all of which ensure that students feel supported in the classroom and are presented with the same opportunities. The proposed solution falls under the Equal Educational Opportunities Act, which supported anti discrimination policies on any basis, including race, sex, and ethnicity, among other factors. The limitations to the proposed solution is the cost of hiring teachers that fit the standards this new act will outline, and ensuring that the attention to detail is maintained. The implementation of the policy will be done on a nationwide level.

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