

**Immigration as a Context for Learning:
What Do We Know About Immigrant Students In Adult Education?**

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Abstract: The concept of diversity in education has received much attention in the social science literature, and since the mid-eighties, it has been receiving some attention in the literature of adult education. Diversity in adult education has focused primarily on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation and how these contexts impact teaching and learning. Little attention has been paid to culture and migration and how they influence learning among foreign-born students. This presentation will highlight the need for adult educators to give attention to the concept of immigration as a context for learning in adulthood.

Introduction

Every wave of immigration to the United States has brought about significant changes to the country and its institutions. It is no surprise, then, that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, immigration continues to be a powerful force shaping the country's demographic landscape. This current wave of immigration continues to influence all aspects of American life ways. Unlike past waves of migration, today's immigrants are not drawn from Europe, but predominantly from the developing nations of the third world. As a result, the American population is becoming more diverse than ever before (Schuck, 1998). This wave is perhaps more controversial than earlier ones because it has been dominated by people of color, thus contributing to the browning of America. This dramatic shift in the composition of today's population speaks to the urgency for institutions of higher education to understand and appreciate their role in the immigrant experience in the United States. Of course, colleges and universities have always been a desirable route for immigrants who see higher education as a pathway to a better life, either for themselves or for their children. It is no surprise, then, that adult and higher education have a significant role to play in helping immigrants meet their needs for economic uplift. Before educators can appreciate their role in educating these newcomers, they must first gain insights into the demographic profile of today's immigrant Americans, understand the conditions under which they migrate, and understand how culture and early socialization influence learning and classroom dynamics. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to make visible some of the sociocultural issues of migration and how they influence immigrant students in adult and higher education.

A Current Portrait of America's Foreign Born Population

According to Schmidley (March, 2002), the estimated foreign-born population of the United States was 32.5 million, representing 11.4 percent of the U.S. population. This number is an increase of 13.5 million or 47 percent over the 1990 census figures. This increase is primarily the result of immigration from Asia and Latin America (Camarota, November 2002). As of 2002, 52 percent of the U.S. immigrants were from Latin America (made up of the Caribbean, Central America, and South America) and 25 percent from Asia (Schmidley, March 2002). The Latin American countries with the highest representation of immigrants in the United States were Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador. The Asian countries with the highest immigrant rates included China, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, and Korea (Camarota, November 2002). In contrast, only 14 percent of the foreign-born population came from Europe, a significant shift from the 62 percent recorded in 1970. Overall, according to current population reports (Camarota, November 2002; Schmidley, March 2002), the largest wave of immigrants

arrived between 1985 and 1990, when 75 percent of the Salvadoran immigrants, more than half of the immigrants from Korea, Vietnam, and China, and nearly half of the Mexican and Filipino immigrants arrived. As a result, the racial and ethnic composition of the foreign-born population now consists of more than 75 percent people of color. Moreover, many of the newcomers speak a language other than English in the home. In fact, over 95 percent of Mexicans, Cubans, or Salvadorans speak Spanish in the home, and 95 percent of the immigrants from China, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam speak an Asian language. In addition, about 80 percent of those from Italy and 58 percent of those from Germany spoke a language other than English. Also worth noting is the fact that over 43 percent of foreign-born immigrants fall between the ages of 25 and 44. Of those over 25 years of age, 67 percent are likely to have graduated high school. The highest percentage of high school graduates was found among Asians (83.8%) and Europeans (81.3%), compared to those from Latin America (49.6%). Immigrants from Latin America, including those from Mexico, have the lowest rate of high school completion at 37.3 percent (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Additionally, as many scholars have noted, a defining feature of today's immigrant population is the diversity of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Occupationally, the new immigration encompasses the full spectrum of jobs, from migrants who perform unskilled labor to skilled immigrants who hold professional and technical jobs, including engineers, mathematicians, computer scientists, natural scientists, teachers, and health workers (Alba & Nee, 1999). Therefore, today's immigrant population reflects a pattern of demographics that reveals deep polarization between the most educated and wealthiest and the least educated and poorest. This emergent pattern of immigrant adaptation seems to follow a new hourglass segmentation found in the U. S. economy and society (Sparks, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Noticeably, there are those immigrants who are quickly achieving upward mobility, primarily through education and high-tech jobs, while on the opposite end of the hourglass, large numbers of low-skilled workers find themselves locked in low-wage service jobs. Those in between approximate norms of the majority culture and disappear into U. S. cultural institutions without much notice (Sparks, 2003). This polarization in the composition of the immigrant population suggests that planners of adult and higher education programs face a challenging task as they attempt to meet the variety of needs and expectations that immigrants bring to the new country.

Conditions of Migration

It is important to understand the sociocultural histories that shape the border-crossing experience and, hence, life conditions in the new country. While all immigrants share a history of leaving their homeland, the conditions under which they come are often diverse, and therefore, result in a different set of expectations of the receiving country. Today's newcomers arrive as labor migrants, professional migrants, entrepreneurial migrants, international students, and refugees and asylees.

Labor Migrants. This group consists of those who enter the country both legally and illegally in search of menial and generally low-paying jobs (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). The first avenue for entry among the labor migrants is the official and legal entry through the family reunification preference set forth in the immigration law. This law allows for spouses, parents, children, and close family members of US citizens and legal residents to enter the United States as legal residents. The second means of entry for this group is through contract labor. There is a provision in the immigration act for the importation of temporary labors when the supply of "those willing and able" is unavailable. In addition to the labor migrants who come legally, there

is a large population of unauthorized workers. As a result, labor migrants make up the majority of the illegal population in the United States. The Immigration and Naturalization Services estimated that 7.0 million unauthorized immigrants resided in the United States in January 2000, with the primary sending countries to be Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, China, and Ecuador (US Bureau of the Census Report, January 2003).

Professional Immigrants. The US immigration system gives preference to members of the professions and those with exceptional abilities, their spouses, and their children. Unlike some of the manual laborers, the members of this group tend to be well educated, come with professional degrees, and are usually not relegated to the bottom of the social strata. Evidence is beginning to emerge, however, that suggests many professional immigrants face a downward spiral upon arriving in the United States (Amott & Matthaiei, 1996). Some climb their way back, but for many, discrimination has a stronger downward pull than the push afforded by their qualifications and their ambitions to move up socially and financially. This is particular true of the Asian immigrants who, in many cases, come highly educated, but remain stagnant at the bottom of the economic and social strata (Amott & Matthaiei, 1996).

Entrepreneurial Immigrants. Throughout the country we see evidence of those who come under the status of entrepreneurial immigrants. They come with intentions to contribute to the economic or cultural development of the receiving country, through their work or their investment. People who are admitted under this category have management experience and may also have experience starting and/or owning a business outside of the US. The entrepreneur must show proof of sufficient funds to start or buy a business and must do so within a certain period of time (usually within two years). The most successful immigrant entrepreneurs have been found to be from Korea, Iran, Italy, Pakistan, Canada, Russia, and Japan (Camarota, November, 2002).

International Students as Temporary Immigrants. While international students are not considered permanent residents upon arriving into the United States, many later become permanent immigrants upon completing their education. Not surprisingly, the international student population in the United States has increased significantly in the last fifty years and is helping to change the landscape of America's higher education. For example, during the academic year 1954-1955, there were 34,232 international students enrolled in American institutions of higher education (Walker, 2000). As of the 2000-2001 academic year, this figure was at an all-time high of 547,867, representing 3.5 percent of the total graduate and undergraduate enrollment (Higher Education and National Affairs, 2003). As an increasingly large part of America's foreign-born population, their presence in higher education warrants attention.

Refugees and Asylees. A refugee is an alien *outside* the United States who is unable or unwilling to return to the country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. An asylee, on the other hand, is an alien *in* the United States who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution (Center for Immigration Studies Report). According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), "the United States has resettled more refugees than any other country and over the years has accepted about half the refugees whom the UNHCR has felt were in urgent need of a new country of asylum" (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Report). As a result, the United States has given refugee status to large numbers of displaced peoples of Indo-China, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Cuba, and to a lesser extent, Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

In conclusion, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) eloquently summarized the different immigrant groups by noting, "Today's immigrants come in luxurious jetliners and in the trunks of cars, by boat and on foot. Manual laborers and polished professionals, entrepreneurs and refugees, preliterate peasants and some of the most talented cosmopolitans on the planet--all are helping to reshape the fabric of American society (p. xxiii). While these groups are helping to shape the fabric of American society, they are also reshaping the culture of adult and higher education.

Immigration, Contexts, and Learning

For the foreign-born students who participate in formal education, the learning institution is not simply a site where they demonstrate old knowledge and create new forms of knowing. Rather, it is seen as a place where there is dynamic interplay between cultures, structures, and agency--where learning takes place within the contexts of home and host cultures, mediated by learners' sense of personal agency (Foner, 1999).

Clearly, the myriad of structural constraints that immigrants confront in their new environment shape their motivation for learning, the activities in which they participate, and the perception of their experiences within the context of the learning environment. They enter specific schools whose immediate contexts, histories, memories, and commitments shape their organization and practices (Olneck, 2001). These practices are mediated by day-to-day routines and by the meanings participants give to them. Members, over time, internalize these practices as norms, thus institutionalizing them as a part of the culture. Similarly, the norms and values immigrants encounter in the new country also influence the learning experience. However, immigrants are not passive individuals who are acted upon solely by external factors. They play an active role in reconstructing and redefining the self and their role in the discourse of learning.

Also at play are the cultural understandings, meanings, and symbols that immigrants bring with them from their home society. These are critical to our understanding of their behavior in new cultures. Obviously, immigrants do not always reproduce their old cultural patterns when they move to a new country, but these patterns continue to have powerful influence in shaping new values, norms, and behavior (Foner, 1999). Similarly, as immigrants participate in educational activities, they interact with members of the culture who bring their own values, norms, and behavior into the learning environment. The learning experiences of the immigrant student must be understood within the context of these interactional dynamics.

Moreover, the interactions among the immigrant student, peers, and instructor within a particular learning environment are influenced by the culture and structure of the school; by perceptions key players have of one another and of themselves; by the diverse meanings each player assigns to schooling; by tacit as well as explicit pedagogical, curricular, and administrative practices; by the degree of discontinuity between immigrant and school cultures; and the structural characteristics and cultural practices of immigrant communities (Olneck, 2001). The results of these encounters, according to Olneck, are often made visible in the nature of the interaction, in the degree of acculturation immigrants experience, in the manner in which immigrants appropriate and utilize their educational experiences, and in the ways that schooling becomes a site for the construction and experience of ethnic identity (2001, p. 315).

Olneck further argues that the assumptions that students and teachers have of one another significantly shape the degree, quality, and consequences of interactions. These assumptions also influence immigrants' views of themselves as learners. The actions and behaviors resulting from these assumptions and cultural differences often result in social distance and marginality for immigrant students, even in the absence of malice or intentions (Olneck, 2001). Furthermore,

the resulting effects of these negative interactions can have consequences for learning in a multicultural classroom environment. However, Cummins (1986) and Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba (1991), speaking from the contexts of K-12 schooling, argue that the cultural difference or incongruence alone does not necessarily cause harmful impact on students. Rather, it is how the cultural difference is viewed and dealt with by the school instructors and staff that have had the most impact on students' performances and acculturation to school cultures.

Implications for Adult Education

This dramatic shift that is occurring in the composition of the United States population speaks of an urgency to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of newly arrived minorities. Evidently, adult education has an important role to play in providing meaningful education for immigrant people of color, particularly since 30 percent of those employed full time do not have a high school diploma (Camarota, November 2002). This figure is more striking when we consider individual countries. For example, 51 percent of immigrants from Latin America and 63 percent of those from Central America do not have a high school diploma. Not surprisingly, 21 percent of the immigrants from Latin America and 23 percent of those from Central America are living below the poverty level (Schmidley, March 2002). However, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) remind us that poverty among immigrants is not the result of their immigrant status or a lack of hard work, but a direct result of their lack of education. If we support the argument that education is the best predictor of economic success, then adult education has a significant role to play in providing effective education programs for immigrant Americans, since such programs could be their first exposure to the culture of America's educational systems.

In order to provide effective adult education programs for immigrant groups, we must first broaden our knowledge of their cultures, histories, and expectations and explore ways to increase their participation in adult education programs. For those who participate, we must improve their retention rate. The challenge, then, is to create an environment that would provide opportunities for each learner to thrive, despite the culture of origin or the context of their location within the typology of the immigration experience. In order to build such an environment, two conditions must be met (Alfred, 2002). First, we need to be aware of our own sociocultural histories and how they influence our views about different groups of learners, particularly our views on immigration and the assumptions we hold about different immigrant groups. Second, we need to develop knowledge about the diverse groups of immigrant learners.

There is a tendency to view diversity in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. However, the concept of immigration and how it intersects with other diversity constructs are often overlooked in the literature of adult education. When immigration as a form of diversity is acknowledged, there is often a tendency to group foreign-born students by geographical region, for example, Asian, Latin American, African, for example. It must be understood that within each geographical region, and within each typology of immigrants, there are differences of race, class, ethnicity, language, religion, political and religious beliefs, and the migration experience. These characteristics further define group membership. Acquiring knowledge about immigrant groups, their sociocultural histories, and their expectations of the new culture will enhance the intercultural competencies necessary to build and manage a more inclusive learning environment that would attract and retain today's foreign born.

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