



Anti-immigration sentiments and the true benefits of inclusivity

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The summer of 2018 has been marked by heavy-handed anti-immigration legislation and executive orders that will inevitably affect English Language Learners (ELLs) in significant ways. The author examines explanations for the rising wave of anti-immigrant sentiments and discusses research that affirms the true benefits of inclusivity.

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When I was recently asked to report on legislation affecting English language learners (ELLs) in Georgia, I found that reports on this topic are generally timelines, beginning with the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Education Opportunity Act, and the Bilingual Education Act. Such reports outline court rulings that demonstrate an evolving, even if recursive, understanding of the rights of ELLs to an equitable education. For instance, the *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) ruling includes mandates for how to achieve equity in education for all ELLs: court-ordered ELL taskforces to determine effective, research-based teaching models, cost studies to determine appropriate funding levels to meet ELL learning needs, and evaluation measures to determine the efficacy of such

decisions. These foundational rulings remain critical in working towards educational equity even if questions they posed still linger today: Educational researchers and policy makers continue to seek ways to assist English language learners without segregating them, for example (Moon, 2018).

Official reports, however, do not usually include explanations of how anti-immigration federal and state laws indirectly affect ELL students' educational outcomes. Laws such as Arizona's SB 1070 (2010), targeted at immigrant families, had required immigrants to register with law enforcement and made the harboring of undocumented immigrants illegal. Despite being struck down by the Supreme Court in 2012 and never fully implemented, detrimental effects of the anti-immigrant sentiment that the controversy fanned affected Latinx health, safety, sense of well-being, and educational outcomes for years later (Flores, 2017; Orozco & Lopez, 2015; Santos, Menjivar, & Godfrey, 2013; Toomey et al., 2014).

In fact, much legal debate that goes on at the state and national levels affects students' lives much more deeply than their ACCESS scores or the method of instruction chosen for them will. Those of us who teach already know this; we grow to love many of our students as if our own children. We take ownership of both their success and their failure, feeling pride in their achievements and providing solutions and encouragement through their frustration because we understand that struggle attends learning and growth. Through interactions marked by vulnerability and risk-taking, we get to know our students as children and adolescents who have the same innocent wonderment, expressive fears, animated disappointment, and excitable natures as the children in our own families. We love them, we care about them, and we want them to

be happy, healthy, and successful in life. In short, our shared experiences with our students forge bonds built around the dynamics of struggle.

The summer of 2018, however, marked by a deluge of executive orders and Federal Supreme Court (SCOTUS) decisions made with the express goal of unmaking decades of hard-won social justice work, has brought a new kind of struggle for our students. In June, the world watched in horror as more than 2,000 adolescents and young children were taken from their parents at the borders they had crossed to escape abject poverty and violence in Mexico and Central America. Images of children in cages, branded into our hearts and minds, led even people associated with hardened, unwelcoming views about otherness to openly express disquietude. In July, SCOTUS set down a decision to uphold Presidential Proclamation No. 9645, a travel ban from six Muslim majority countries, thereby enacting President Trump's explicitly stated desire for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," according to his own website (Sotomayor, 2018). Writing the dissenting opinion for herself and Justice Ginsburg, Justice Sotomayor contends that the Court's decision disregards the Establishment Clause, which forbids the United States government from exhibiting disfavor or hostility towards any religion. Justice Sotomayor catalogs numerous anti-Muslim sentiments that President Trump has openly expressed, noting that because this animosity towards Muslims began well before the 2016 election, President Trump's claim of (nondisclosed) national security concerns is not credible. Justice Sotomayor reminds us that the SCOTUS decision belies a national identity that places the First Amendment as its centerpiece. We enjoy thinking of our nation as one built by immigrants, finding great strength in diversity, and we hold our personal liberties as an

exemplar to the rest of the world to aspire towards (Sotomayor, 2018). The truth is, we do not yet know all ways that the Supreme Court decision and the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies will affect our students, but history has shown that they will not go unscathed. These decisions have and will continue to hit our society hard (e.g., Sadowski-Smith & Li, 2016; Sanchez, 2017), but they will be particularly damaging to ELL students and their families, even those far removed from border cities and airports. These decisions will inevitably make both teaching work and equity work challenging.

Linguicism, immigration status, race, gender, and socioeconomic status have always intersected to complexify the ways in which hostility is raised and leveled against many of our ELLs. Yet institutions that have, at least for the past three decades, sought to protect the civil and educational rights of ELLS now try to legitimize sentiments that challenge basic human rights. This fear and distrust of outsiders is not driven by immigration data—border crossings dropped 80% from 2000-2017 as part of a trend that began under the Bush administration (Lee, 2017)—nor is it fueled by real threats of Islamic terrorism (Horgan & Shortland, 2018).

Researchers have offered several explanations for the rising anti-immigration wave. Mutz (2018) reports results from a Pew Research poll suggesting that white privilege—perhaps the only vestibule of power available to poor, uneducated white Americans—may lie beneath uncomfortable feelings towards outsiders that have fueled Trump's anti-immigration agenda. Massey, Durand, and Pren (2016) explain that our perception of warmth and competence of out-group members drives our behavior towards them. The social structure hypothesis (Fiske et al., 2002) holds that individuals

are apt to consider people possessing power and wealth to have competence, while “attributions of warmth help maintain the status quo” (p. 881) by positioning those we view as our competition as cold or unfeeling. Thus, when a public narrative posing immigrants as invaders and criminals (e.g., “illegal”)—as a well-established method of instilling fear of others—joins with politically-crafted narratives that exploit social stereotypes of poor migrants as incompetent and here to take our jobs, it results in hostility towards them and to the ill-informed policies we see today. Regardless of the causes, social science research supports more fluidity between borders, acknowledging that solutions to labor supply and demand are found between borders.

There are real economic benefits to diverse inclusion in the form of increased revenue, born through increases in innovation, retention, morale, and client engagement (Kaplan & Donovan, 2013), and an increasing body of research suggests that the power of diverse groups to solve problems and make innovative decisions is so powerful that the diversity of group participants outweighs even the IQ of group members when it comes to solving a complex problem (Johnson, 2018). Perhaps Americans will grow to welcome guest workers, residents, and new citizens of diverse backgrounds only as they gain awareness of and appreciation for the benefits of diverse skills, experiences, language resources, and worldviews that migrants—in reality—provide. As ELL instructors, we are in a unique position to demonstrate the insights that our students offer in group dynamics while also affirming, valuing and appreciating them. Gorski (2018) outlines 12 strategies for enacting what he terms “equity literacy” (p. 19). Among these strategies, the “most fundamental of them all” involves a commitment to making “equity, not *culture*, or *cultural diversity* or *cultural competence*

the center of our conversation” (p. 17). This includes understanding of implicit biases and a recognition of how implicit bias affects our students. A commitment to equity means redressing of inequities, through the creation of a “bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students” (p. 20). If we are to advocate for our ELLs, we must reject deficit views that pervade our schools and classrooms, fueled by larger political conversations, instead seeking ways to facilitate the extraordinary contributions of thought, experience, and skills that they and their families offer.