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An Innovative Reform of Secondary Education for Immigrant Students in Southeastern USA

Abstract

Migrant and immigrant education are both problematic and impactful in the U.S., which often identifies itself as "a nation of immigrants", though these concepts are currently criticized by a conservative government intent on building walls rather than bridges. Nevertheless, schools throughout the country have demonstrated an ability to provide immigrant students with quality instruction and a supportive environment designed to ensure their contributions to the nation. This paper will review a government-funded secondary magnet school for information technology in Southeastern U.S. that enrolls a significant number of first and second-generation voluntary immigrant students. Through an analysis of data obtained from questionnaires and extended focus group discussions, the authors will describe the challenges and achievements of these students, and the role their school's environment played in helping to create both a sense of belonging and opportunities for success.

Keywords: migrant education, secondary schools, ethnic discrimination, technology, USA

Introduction

In the past, the United States (U.S.) has seen itself as a "nation of immigrants". A notion that is being severely tested and scrutinized by the current administration in Washington, DC. Moving beyond this political quagmire, however, issues linked to migrant and immigrant education remain significant in the U.S. and worldwide. Fortunately, we can draw upon examples of U.S. schools that have demonstrated an ability to provide their migrant and immigrant students with an effective curriculum within a supportive environment.

The research reported in this paper focuses on first and second-generation immigrant students whose families chose to come to the U.S. for a variety of political, social and economic reasons. It reviews a public secondary magnet school for information technology with a large population of first and second-generation immigrant students. This school is located in the state of Florida, in Southeastern U.S. The paper explores the school's academic programs that immigrant and migrant students have taken advantage of to enhance their life chances. This paper also examines the challenges and achievements experienced by students, and how their school's positive environment has contributed to a sense of belonging and desire to become successful and productive adults. It explores how the students have not only survived, but have thrived by transforming formidable challenges into opportunities.

Research foci

The foci of this research include:

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(1) Immigrant students as the "other".
(2) Perceived work ethics.
(3) Educational opportunities for immigrant students.
(4) "Tech Academy's" positive and supportive environment.

Methodology

Site: "Tech Academy", located in a Florida urban, high needs neighborhood, was selected as the research site based on convenience and its unique history, current academic opportunities, and population of first and second-generation immigrant students. "Tech Academy" was founded in the early 1900's as the region's first secondary school for African-American students, and remained a segregated institution (by race) until 1970. Emerging from divisive desegregation legislation in 2003 the school was transformed into "Tech Academy", a secondary magnet school open to all students in the district, with free tuition and free transportation to the school (District, 2018).

In 2005, only two years since its inception, "Tech Academy" received Florida's highest rating of "A", and continues to maintain this rating. The school was also named one of U.S. News' "Top 100 Best High Schools in the U.S." in 2008, and was ranked as "Number One" by U.S. News for being the "Most Connected Classrooms in the U.S." in 2009 (U.S. News & World Report, 2009; Sheehy, 2011). Moreover, today "Tech Academy" remains only one of a few secondary schools across the U.S. where each student receives a laptop computer.

Participants: Teachers shared information about this research project during their scheduled classes, and purposive snowball sampling methodology was used to identify and invite all first and second-generation immigrant students to join the study. Forty percent (N=8) of the student sample (N=20) were first generation immigrants and 60% (N=12) were second-generation immigrants. Seventy percent (N=14) of the student sample were males, 30% (N=6) were females, and the average age of the sample was 17 years. Half of the participants (N=10) indicated that English was their home language, and half reported single or multiple languages spoken at home, such as Spanish and English. Twenty-five percent (N=5) of student families migrated from Asia or Central/South America, 50% (N=10) reported multiple country origins (parents originating in different countries/areas), 15% (N=3) migrated from the Caribbean, and the remaining 10% (N=2) migrated from North Africa/Middle East.

Seventy-five percent (n=15) of the students were in their final (4^{th}) year, with the remaining 25% (N=5) indicating that they were third or first year students at "Tech Academy". Sixty-five percent (N=13) reported an overall grade point average (GPA) of 3.8-4.0 (on a four point scale where 4 was the highest), while 25% (N=5) reported a GPA of 3.0-3.7 and only two students (10%) reporting a GPA lower than 3.0. Not surprisingly, 55% (N=11) reported their favorite subject areas as mathematics, science and IT, with the remaining students reporting that social science and humanities courses were their favorites. Indicative of a school that maintained high academic expectations for its students, 75% (n=15) of the student sample were enrolled in Advanced Placement/Honors courses, and 65% (n=13) were part of "Tech Academy's" dual enrollment program where students earned two years of college credit while still attending secondary school. Moreover, almost all

students reported obtaining one or more certification in Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Adobe, Photoshop etc.

Data Collection: Basic descriptive data were obtained from first- and second-generation immigrant students at "Tech Academy" through anonymous questionnaires, and qualitative data were obtained through extensive focus group discussions open to all first and second-generation immigrant students. Analysis of qualitative data focused on demographic features and addressed key issues such as students' experiences as the "other", and factors that fostered positive academic and career opportunities at "Tech Academy".

Theoretical considerations: building upon and moving beyond the work of John Ogbu

This research builds upon, yet moves beyond the scholarship of John Ogbu that initially focusing on the education and school performance of minorities in the U.S. Ogbu's (1978) initial conclusion was that the difference between the school performance of minority and dominant group students was due to the unequitable treatment of minority groups in society. However, Ogbu began to realign his research in the 1980s to focus on an analysis of the differences in school performance between various minority groups, which he defined as "voluntary immigrants" and "involuntary immigrants" (Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Voluntary immigrant minorities, according to Ogbu, were those who, to some degree, willingly left their homelands for what they regarded as better opportunities for employment and expanded social/religious freedoms in the U.S. (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998, p. 164). Conversely, "involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities" were "people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved" (p. 165). These involuntary minorities were brought to, or made part of the U.S. against their will, and they usually experienced less success economically and academically than what Ogbu termed voluntary minorities. Involuntary immigrants often experienced "greater and more persistent cultural and language difficulties" than their voluntary immigrant counterparts, and thus did less well in school (p. 166). However, though Ogbu has provided an invaluable lens to observe and to understand the impediments of being the "other", the work also suggests a more positive experience for voluntary immigrants, socially, economically and academically. Our research will ask if voluntary immigrants at "Tech Academy" are succeeding, and if so, what factors might be responsible for these achievements. Future research will ask if involuntary immigrants (African American students at "Tech Academy" in this instance) also have the opportunity to succeed in a supportive and nurturing school environment. This paper will explore experiences of voluntary immigrants whose academic performance may depend more on the type of school, than on their categorization as voluntary or involuntary immigrants.

Immigrant student demographics

Not surprisingly, students from immigrant households currently represent 23% of all public school students in the U.S., a significant increase over 7% in 1980. Perhaps because of its geographic location, the state of Florida has exceeded this national level of immigrant students enrolled in public schools as 29% of all

households in Florida were classified as immigrant, the sixth highest rate in the country. Conversely, school dropout rates for first generation immigrant students declined from 27% in 2006 to 10% in 2016. This declining dropout rate is even more significant given that in the U.S. immigrant households are often concentrated in high poverty, urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

As Florida shares the Gulf of Mexico with many of its Caribbean and Central American neighbors, we find that about 14% of Florida's immigrant students originated from Mexico and 16% from Cuba (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Predictably, given its location, 78% of all immigrant households in Florida reported that Spanish was the first language while 9% of the homes reported Haitian Creole as the language spoken at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Thematic findings

(1) Immigrant students as the "other"

No student is immune to the effects of the current spate of bullying in U.S. schools, including declined levels of achievement and attendance as well as increased self-esteem issues. Recent research (Strohmeier, Spiel & Gradinger, 2008) has focused on the impact of bullying on the health and welfare of all students. Unfortunately immigrant students, who are often portrayed in roles as the "other" based on their unique language, ethnic origin and/or cultural practices, may suffer higher levels of bullying than their white, nonimmigrant counterparts may. Fortunately, the first- and second-generation immigrant students included in this research managed to avoid the more devastating effects of bullying that have occurred at their previous schools, though memories of not "fitting in", and being labeled as "other" still suggests a mild form of bullying by exclusion. It is significant to note that all students included in this study agreed that "Tech Academy's" culture did not include the negativity associated with bullying and "othering" experienced in their former Florida secondary schools. A tangential, yet cogent issue linked to "fitting in", was mentioned by several students who had bicultural nuclear families. For example, they mentioned the angst experienced by being too Mexican for one social group, while not being Mexican enough for another student population.

Clearly, the issue of being the "other", and thus not a reflection of the dominant school culture, appeared to be of critical importance during focus group discussions, as well as in the literature, such as Dabach et al. (2017). Three themes emerged from these conversations. First, quite interestingly, and reflective of the previous comment about being too, or not enough Mexican, multiple students shared the problem of not being sure whether they belonged within an American culture, or their home county's culture. Second, many students in our focus groups shared that they had attended another public U.S. school before enrolling at "Tech Academy", mentioning that they never felt that they actually belonged within their previous school's culture. Third, and perhaps most important, students reflected a sense of truly belonging at "Tech Academy", perhaps because none of the focus group students mentioned a need to identify with a dominant school culture, if in fact it actually existed at "Tech Academy". In sum, though perhaps a confusing concept initially, the students experienced a sense of belonging, as none belonged to a

dominant school culture. The following student quotations demonstrate these perspectives:

> *In other American public schools, they don't know how to talk to me and they don't understand why I wear a hijab.* (Focus Group Student, F3)
>
> *Most of the people who come to this school have been outcasts at some point – we come from places where we were the "other".* (Focus Group Student, M2)

(2) Perceived work ethics

Though not a primary focus of this study, an interesting sidebar occurred during focus group discussions when students discussed their parents' perceived appropriate work ethic now that they were living in the U.S. In short, their responses tended to reflect the following parental messages: first, focus group first- and second-generation immigrant students mentioned significant and strong messages emanating from their parents regarding the need to work hard and to succeed in school, now that they were living in the U.S.; second, students often felt that their own parents' sacrifices were reason enough to work hard and to succeed in school, and later in a career. The following two quotations reflect these perceptions:

> *You want to do so much for them. They gave up things for you, so you want to do well so that you can give back to them.* (Focus Group Student, M3)
>
> *I tell them I want to be a psychologist – but what I hear is that I need to be a surgeon and get those big bucks. My father works in maintenance.* (Focus Group Student, M1)

(3) Educational opportunities for immigrant students

Reflecting on perceived school experiences in their home country, had they not immigrated to the U.S. and enrolled in "Tech Academy", our first- and second-generation immigrant student sample responses followed two lines of thought. First, reflections on schooling experiences at "home" centered on the themes of a strict and sever educational environment (whether based on their own experiences by first-generation immigrant students or based on experiences transmitted to them by their parents). Second, our "Tech Academy" focus group strongly emphasized the superior educational opportunities available in the U.S., as compared to perceptions of education in their home countries. Excerpts from these focus group discussions solidify their negative perceptions of education in their home countries:

> *Teachers can hit students for even the smallest thing, like a haircut.* (Focus Group Student, M6)
>
> *Because of the economic crisis at home, teachers don't even show up at private schools.* (Focus Group Student, M7)

(4) "Tech Academy's" positive and supportive environment

During the 2018-2019 academic year, student enrollment at "Tech Academy" reached 628 (in four grade levels), a significantly smaller institution than most secondary schools in Florida, which can enroll up to 3,000 or more students in densely populated areas. Overall, 43% of "Tech Academy's" students were classified as belonging to a minority group (over half of this population consisted of first- and second-generation immigrant students). In comparison, 61% of all students in Florida, and 50% of all students in the U.S. are members of a minority group

(which challenges the concept of minority, unless considering issues of power and voice rather than numerical participation). Clearly, economic status can also place individuals in a less powerful, minority status. In the case of "Tech Academy", 43% of its students were deemed economically disadvantaged, which was slightly better than state's rate of 59% and the nation's average of 48% (Florida Department of Education, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a, 2017b).

Countering conventional perspectives on the questionable academic abilities of minorities and lower SES children, "Tech Academy's" students are clearly recognized for their academic achievements. For example, the school proudly boasts a 97.7% graduation rate, particularly when compared to Florida's 80.7% rate and the national average of 84% (Florida Department of Education, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

This significant academic achievement is explained by "Tech Academy's" ability to provide a supportive and appropriate educational environment for immigrant students, as highlighted below:

1) Students may participate in "dual enrollment" programs that allow them to earn credit for the first two years of university while still enrolled at "Tech Academy".
2) Students may enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses.
3) Students can obtain certification in computer programming languages.
4) Information technology and computer skills are incorporated in general education and specialty courses.
5) Students may take advantage of internship and job shadowing experiences, which enhances their ability to obtain appropriate future employment.
6) As a public institution, each student pays no tuition, receives a laptop, and enjoys free transportation to school, as long as they reside within the county.

Beyond these significant institutional advantages, however, student focus groups emphasized the notion of feeling accepted within what they perceived to be an extremely welcoming and supportive environment. Moreover, students reflected upon the notion that they were able to exercise their own academic and social choices, instead of living down to the expectations for "others". The following comments clearly articulate these perceptions:

> *Here you have opportunities, no matter who you are.* (Focus Group Student, F6)
>
> *"Tech Academy" prepares for life in a technology workforce.* (Focus Group Student, F5)

Concluding remarks

Moving beyond a current fixation on dysfunctional school experiences, this research has suggested a positive alternative, particularly with regard to first- and second-generation immigrant students in the U.S. Expanding beyond Ogbu's theories of voluntary and involuntary minorities, this paper provides clear examples where voluntary immigrants (who are also perceived as minorities) have moved beyond negative perceptions of academic ability to achieve, to the best of their abilities, within a supportive learning environment. Through numerous focus group discussions, this paper has documented a process whereby students have built upon family expectations, a supportive school environment, and a sense of belonging to

rise above "otherness" to achieve personal academic and career goals. Clearly, the positive and supportive environment of "Tech Academy" provides us with a model for moving beyond bullying and negativity to provide every student, including first- and second-generation immigrants, with access to an equitable and progressive education.

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