

# PEDAGOGY OF THE IMMIGRANT: A JOURNEY TOWARDS INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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## **Abstract**

In the past two years, migration has been on the front page of newspapers around the world. In the United States alone, the most current data shows that there are close to one million immigrant students. These students face challenges such as high mobility and anonymity. Moreover, immigrant students have specific needs that must be understood, identified, and addressed by educators working with and learning from immigrant students and their families. In this article, I reflect about my experiences as an immigrant teacher, teacher of immigrant students, and faculty working in Teacher Education Programs. Through this reflection, I suggest teaching credential/initial teacher education programs must require future educators to analyse how mobility and anonymity, among other factors, impact immigrant students' learning practices. I conclude by providing recommendations and guidance when developing fully inclusive programs in both PreK-12/compulsory education school sites as well as in institutions of higher education.

## **Keywords**

Inclusion; anonymity; immigration; responsive; biliteracy

## **The global, mobile village**

All over the world, thousands of immigrant students arrive in classrooms where teachers and staff are modifying and adapting their practices to create a welcoming environment that will ease the transition and challenges immigrant families face when moving to a country with a new language and with a different culture. These flows of immigration have an impact both on the students and families arriving in a new community and on the educators receiving them into their classrooms. On the students' side, fear, stress, lack of belonging and anonymity are some of the obstacles as they are becoming little by little part of their new school and their new homes (Thorpe, 2011). For educators, they see how the demographics of schools and communities are changing overnight. Teachers, administrators/senior management and staff wonder, as Delpit (2006), points out, "We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don't even know they exist? Indeed, many of us don't even realize that our own world exists only in our heads" (p. xxiv). It is somehow difficult to visualise how schools and communities, across the world, will look in the next decades. However, as Suro (2011) states, "... we do know the future will be shaped substantially and in many different ways by immigrants and their children" (p. 254). If we are to prepare teachers for these new multilingual, multicultural and global classrooms, we have to redesign teacher education programs to better equip teachers with the pedagogy and methodology needed to meet the needs of immigrant students and their families.

In the last decade, teacher education programs have underlined the importance of preparing reflective and responsive practitioners ready to create inclusive classrooms. The idea of culturally and linguistically responsive methodology has been analysed through many lenses. Luke (2013) examines the processes for curriculum development and how these, in many instances, are guided by specific political agendas. Nieto's (2013) ethnographic studies provide examples of best practices when working with diverse students and their families. And Sassen's (2014) work explores how inequality and poverty are common trends that define immigrant students and their families. Their research has enlightened and continues to enrich my practices as a caring educator.

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In the following sections, I share how I have developed my pedagogy of the immigrant. Starting with an analysis of my journey both as an immigrant teacher and teacher of immigrant students, I later explain how these experiences have contextualised my current practices as faculty in higher education. The goal is to reflect on how I specifically prepare myself to coach teacher candidates who later will work with immigrant students and their families. The specific focus I am highlighting in my groundwork goes beyond how to enhance curriculum design and its implementation for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Though students' backgrounds and prior knowledge are essential when building an inclusive classroom, building an effective and mindful pedagogy of the immigrant calls for teacher candidates who understand, value and embrace the unique traits characterising immigrant students and their families.

### **I, the immigrant teacher**

In 1996, I arrived in Los Angeles as part of the Teacher Exchange Visitor Program (TEVP), a program sponsored by the California Department of Education (CDE) and the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (MECD) in Spain. Excited with the opportunity of working in a bilingual (English-Spanish) school, I started teaching in a small town located on the south side of a big metropolis. Close to ninety-eight percent of my students were identified as either Latino or Hispanic. Most of them had moved from México or countries in Central America—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala. Spanish was our link. Immigration was our shared experience. Yet, neither the common language nor the parallel journeys initially helped me to build a communal ground.

Back then, I thought that these two elements would help me to be seen as one of them, to belong to their community. Yet, the reality was that I was an outsider among my students. In some way, I did not see myself as an immigrant in the same way I viewed my students. How could I define myself as an immigrant? I was not escaping from poverty or persecution. I was not searching for a better life. This denial prevented me from a) embracing and appreciating the unique trait that my students and I shared: we all were immigrants, and b) contextualising my teaching within a pedagogy of the immigrant.

My first two years of teaching in California, I focused exclusively on the technical delivery of content. The technical component of teaching eclipsed the much-needed adaptive nature of effective and transformative teaching. Linsky & Heifetz (2002) discern, when examining the work educators do, between technical work and adaptive work. Technical work comprises tasks such as completing report cards, writing lesson plans, or taking attendance. On the other hand, adaptive work encompasses differentiated teaching, getting to know the students, making teaching personal, being aware of how students learn within a specific context and how the experiences students bring to the classroom frame this context. My training back in Spain equipped me with all the tools to become a technical teacher. Yet I was missing the adaptive piece needed to move from merely instructing to transformative teaching and learning. As Cranton (2006) explains, “Transformative learning occurs when, through critical self-reflection, an individual revises old or develops new assumptions, beliefs, or ways of seeing the world” (p. 4). Contradicting Palmer's (2007) words, I did not have the courage to teach. I was there to merely and purely instruct my students.

After those first two years, I began to reflect about our journeys—students and myself—to California. I wanted to know why my students and I moved to the United States; how we were adapting to the new society; when we determined that we were part of the new community; where we felt that we belonged compared to places in which we seemed disenfranchised. The turning point on this reflective journey coincided with the entry into my masters program. Reading and reflecting with colleagues and professors made me realise the importance of deconstructing and analysing my philosophy of teaching and its origins. It was not an easy dialogue by all means. However, it occurred at the right time to stop the perpetuation of technical work in which my teaching was falling due to my past training and personal fears. Somehow, I thought that if I were capable of effectively teaching my students, the achievement gap would be reduced, students would be successful and their families would respect and appreciate my work. Obviously, I was wrong. I needed to surpass my personal shell and enhance my teaching by levelling my experiences with the inherent trait my students and I shared—immigration.

The first step in this levelling analysis was to self-reflect on the epistemology of my denial and how this impacted my teaching. The truth is that I did not see myself as an immigrant teacher because my misconceptions and biases categorised immigration with a deficit label. As Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni & Clark (2005) explain in their research on immigration and the challenge to deficit theory, I was not capable of perceiving my immigration identity as an opportunity either to enrich my pedagogy or to connect with my students. Missing the basics of teaching—checking for students’ prior knowledge and prior experiences and connecting these to my own experiences—constrained infinite possibilities to develop and implement a culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (Nieto, 2013). It was only when I was determined to humble my teaching that I opened the doors for my journey as an immigrant to become a tool to fuelling and enriching my teaching.

The first time I designed a lesson with the idea of exploring my students’ journey and my own experiences, I felt teaching augmented the meaning of that journey and turned it into a prophetic vocation. Hooks (2010) describes the latter as the teaching that “demands of us allegiance to integrity of vision and belief in the face of those who either seek to silence, censor, or discredit our words” (p. 179). In my case, I had been hushing my words, repressing the experiences of my students and most importantly disregarding our identities as immigrants.

In this lesson, I asked my students to write their auto-ethnographies about their journeys and their realities. Our (I wrote one too) auto-ethnographies (different from an autobiography in including personal story *and* also links to public issues) completely changed the classroom culture. Students who were quiet before became the leaders in their group conversations. It seemed as if they had been waiting for someone to ask questions about immigration, to allow them to talk about their lives and the lives of their families. When reading and listening to the auto-ethnographies, my pedagogy and methodology were confronted and deconstructed by the power of their knowledge. We discussed themes such as: how neighbourhoods become richer with the culture and traditions immigrants bring to the United States; the challenges and successes immigrants face; and how all these experiences could expand our cultural and linguistic identity. I wondered about how can we educate our students, if we do not know who they really are? Moreover, how can we teach them if we do not train ourselves about how to explain who we are?

That moment when I told my students that I myself was an immigrant, it seemed an essential element for effective culturally and linguistically pedagogy appeared: Trust [*confianza*]. Where before they were hearing and repeating my words, now I felt they were listening and creating their own voice. From that moment on, trust guided our teaching and learning. The classroom became the ‘we’ space I wanted it to be, in which we analysed and utilised our immigrant experiences to build critical thinking, respect and appreciation for what each one of us brought to the learning processes (Rodríguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013).

Reflecting on my technical and adaptive work, entering my masters program, designing the first lesson, the auto-ethnographies and humbling my teaching came together to set up the foundation of my pedagogy of the immigrant. The next step was to solidify my teaching within this new pedagogy.

### Teaching and learning from immigrant students and their families

After this first lesson, I began to better understand the rationale, expectations and dreams my students and their families had when moving to the United States. Moreover, the way I unfolded the curriculum and the standards turned into a new task. In each lesson, I intentionally added a view through the reality of immigration and how this affected, enhanced and empowered the way students, their families and myself viewed the topics we were discussing in class. The goal was, as Tzotzou (2013) explains when examining the idea of progressive education, to enable us, “to learn how to learn by [our] own efforts” (p. 22). Further, the intent was to examine themes through our immigrants’ eyes and to understand how our immigrant experiences provided us with a new, critical view when dialoguing about topics such as the social, linguistic and economic status of our language, Spanish, compared to the academic language, English. Embracing our identity as immigrants transformed the way we learned and how we taught each other.

Within this framework, I was able to contextualise my teaching by juxtaposing our immigrant experiences with the knowledge from those whom we were studying—i.e., Sandra Cisneros, Tupac

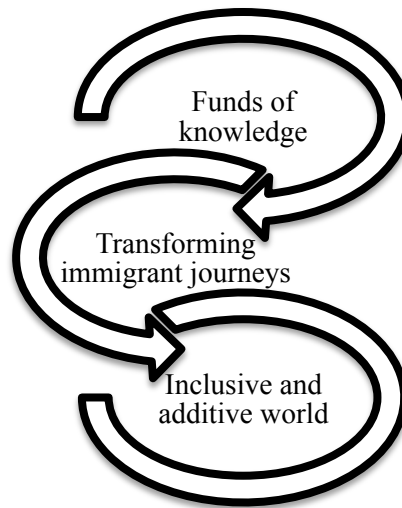
Shakur, Francisco Jimenez, and Howard Zinn among others. When reading Sandra Cisneros' (1991) *The House on Mango Street*, we explored how Esperanza (the main character) faced similar fears when moving from house to house in her city, Chicago, as the anxieties we confronted when we arrived in the United States. Examining the book *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997) by Francisco Jimenez, we were able to extend the analysis of immigration with the idea of migration: students and families who after arriving to the United States begin to move from city to city or across different states in search for a secure income. Discussing the poem *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*, written by Tupac Shakur (1999), allowed us to visualise how anonymous a beautiful flower could be among the homogenous cement. In visualising the rose, we realised that being immigrants carries the burden of anonymity, but it was in our power to either succumb and remain isolated or to reach out and build a bridge with a new language, another culture and different surroundings. Analysing excerpts of *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn (1995), we learned that each individual story an immigrant carries enhances and contributes to the history of his new home.

Two key elements guided these analyses: the idea of critical literacy defined by Vasquez (2004) as the practice to *reading and speaking with the students* rather *reading and talking to the students*, and the concept of funds of knowledge, "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 133). When reading texts, we utilised our funds of knowledge to deepen the author's message. We examined the assistance families in the community provide to each other when a child is sick or when one family is struggling with their finances to better understand how Esperanza and Francisco valued and relied on the support of those who helped through their struggles.

Critical literacy and funds of knowledge also enhanced my teaching in other subject areas. When my students were having a hard time learning how to multiply three digit numbers by two digit numbers, I invited the father of one of my students to explain the method used in Mexico to solve these problems. Seeing him teaching my students and looking to his daughter's smiling pride reaffirmed the idea of teaching and learning, as cooperative and communal task parents, students, and teachers have to confront together. To reinforce this idea of cooperative education, I developed an after-school biliteracy program where I met with parents to read and analyse the same texts we—students and myself—were reading in the classroom. Reading and talking with parents strengthened the idea of inclusive and additive education (Barlett & Garcia, 2011).

To expand inclusive and additive education, I invited parents to participate in 'Career Day.' During this day, schools typically invite doctors, lawyers, nurses, businesswomen and men. I wanted to show students and everyone in the school that a mom staying at home and taking care of the whole family is as difficult as any other job. Moreover, my students' parents have the same entrepreneurial skills when they decided to have their own gardening, carpeting or restaurant business. Inclusiveness in our classroom, the '*We*' space, was strengthened by our experiences, language and culture, which became the springboard to develop competency in English as well as to integrate ourselves in the 'American' society by adding new layers in our identity rather than by assimilating ourselves and losing the essence of who we are: immigrants constantly evolving, learning, and caring.

At this point the initial stages of my pedagogy of the immigrant evolved into a more complex teaching and learning. The pedagogy of the immigrant (Figure 1) was shaped in an inquiry-based environment where students, parents and myself constantly reflected on: a) how we used the funds of knowledge/immigrant experiences as tools to enrich the texts analysed and discussed in the classroom; b) how we constantly transformed and questioned our learning journey (Kozol, 2012); and c) how we as immigrants are essential when constructing a more inclusive and additive world.



**Figure 1: Pedagogy of the Immigrant**

The next step took me, after I completed my doctoral program, to share my own personal journey with teacher candidates. The challenge and goal at that point turned into equipping teachers with tools that would guide them when designing lessons that draw upon the richness immigrant students bring to the classroom and ensure their academic and professional success within and outside school.

### **Immigration: A key component of multicultural education**

Multicultural education in teacher preparation programs focuses mostly on the idea of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. Though this idea is pivotal when educating pre-service teachers, oftentimes, programs fall short in exploring the unique traits and characteristics of immigrant students and their families. Immigrant students are commonly included within other groups such as second language learners; however, avoiding a deep analysis of the inherent nature of immigrant students limits how teacher preparation programs educate pre-service teachers. Program completers exit preparation programs ready to differentiate instruction based on the language needs of their students and to augment their lessons by including students' cultural backgrounds. Yet their understanding of how immigration determines the way immigrant students behave, perform, engage and evolve within the classroom is repeatedly minimal. Thus, since my first appointment in tertiary education, I have made it a priority to include an analysis of immigration in each course I teach in teacher preparation programs.

Regardless of the course, I always share my journey as an immigrant teacher and my experiences teaching immigrant students. Explaining who I am, where I am coming from and how my practices have evolved to better meet the needs of students helps pre-service teachers who might be resistant to identify themselves as immigrants to open up and to make their voices heard among their classmates.

Dialoguing about immigration, we—pre-service teachers and myself—discuss how some flows of immigration have more positive connotations than others and how education has been shaped by the perceptions of immigration. For example, we converse about how earlier European immigrants to the United States—Italian, Irish, and German—are now perceived, valued and embraced differently than immigrants coming from Mexico, Central America and Asia. We talk about how stereotypes impact the way we teach and how we facilitate inclusion in the classroom. The goal of these conversations is to explore the idea of pedagogy of the immigrant and how this calls first for a self-evaluation of personal biases and how these might shape methodologies, to later being able to openly dialogue with colleagues, students and parents about the factors that define immigrant students (Quezada, Lindsey & Lindsey, 2012).

The analysis of how the factors defining immigrant students differs depending on the core of each course. In the methods course on how to teach English learners, I focus on why, how and when language acquisition processes are impacted by the stress, fear and anxieties that immigrant students might experience when moving from their home countries to California. Concurrent with this idea, we

deconstruct fallacies such as the idea that immigrant students usually are under-performers and have negative attitudes towards schooling and learning (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2015). On the other hand, when I teach courses on diversity, I ask students to analyse case studies on immigrant students and to develop a school-wide action plan involving administrators, staff, teachers, students and parents working together with the idea of inclusive education.

A common assignment in most of the courses that I teach asks students to write their auto-ethnographies. As my students in K-12 settings wrote about their journey of immigration, I want pre-service teachers to examine their roots and their journeys and their families' journey in the United States. Naidoo (2014), when explaining Denzin's (2006) and Berry's (2011) views on auto-ethnography, defines this as a path the researcher [pre-service teacher] walks "to achieve a more egalitarian society, making clear where power, privilege and biases lie" (p. 5). Aligned with this framework; I want pre-service teachers to think about their biases when teaching immigrant students, how power is used in the classroom and why oftentimes educators avoid talking about privilege using equality as the shell that prevents examining the struggles others who are not as privileged suffer to overcome challenges such as high mobility and the lack of sense of belonging (Rodríguez-Valls & Torres, 2014). The desirable outcome when writing auto-ethnographies would be to foster among pre-service teachers a pedagogy of the immigrant that promotes and implements equity rather than equality.

There is much more than could be done when rethinking the requirements and experiences pre-service teachers complete in teacher preparation programs and in-service teachers could incorporate when thinking about the new demands in education. In the last three sections, I have depicted my personal journey from denial to exploration and discovery to augmentation and refinement of practices. It is, as Pedro Noguera (2008) points out, an unfinished business but he reminds us to be optimistic because there are "teachers who are so talented and committed that they manage to find ways to enable their students to achieve well beyond the expectations that others hold for them based on their race and class" (p. 284). I recognise that my enthusiasm probably makes this journey sound easier than it was. It has been hard at times to distance myself from the text. Whether from talent or commitment, or perhaps both, this has been my way to enable students to achieve well beyond what might have been expected of them.

### Next steps

It seems obvious that the flow of immigration will increase in the next few years. Poverty and inequality are pushing hundreds of thousands of families to move to new countries. How well I prepare myself to educate pre-service teachers will have an impact on their students' awareness and perceptions about accepting and embracing diversity as part of their societal reality. Thus, my own education and reflection have a pivotal role when working with the new generation of democratic and participatory citizens to contest the xenophobic sentiments towards immigration. Žižek (2013) cautions us against what he calls the *global apartheid society*: "I see this problem of *exclusion*, which is no longer about the old class division between workers and capitalists, but simply not allowing some people to participate in *public life*. They [immigrants] are considered the invisible ones" (p. 63).

If I am to educate immigrant students to become visible, and to actively and fully participate in their new societies, I have to prepare teachers on how to create safe spaces in which immigrant students can express their fears and anxieties; in turn, their classmates learn from them as they embrace immigration as an intrinsic trait of their identity. The creation of safe spaces must be a cooperative effort that I have to foster. I must be the link between teacher preparation programs, school districts, and stakeholders. I need to secure the commitment across agencies to ensure that immigration is more than stories shared by students in the classroom. As Perez (2011) claims, "It is important to move away from conceptualizations of immigrant students as taking up resources, and toward a view that they are deserving of an investment of resources" (p. 150). Immigration must be seen as the engine that transforms obsolete views on identity. I have to create spaces where politicians, administrators, teachers, students and their families work together to develop a new conceptualisation of identity.

In this article, I have depicted my personal investment and commitment to constantly refine my pedagogy. The analysis shared here was a personal decision I made to better understand and meet the needs of my immigrant students. The outcome benefited both my students and myself. Moving

forwards, this self-reflection and analysis is important for all teacher candidates. Pre-service teachers will benefit from courses or assignments which require research into the impact of immigration on students' health, well-being, and scholastic performance.

Education in an era of diaspora calls for the full inclusion, participation and presence of all students and their families in the teaching and learning occurring in schools. Just as immigration implies moving from one place to another, pedagogy of the immigrant implies moving the center of teaching from us—the teachers—to involving the identity and community of all our students.

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