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Maria M. Weant

University of North Georgia, mmwean5263@ung.edu

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Maria Weant

Dr. Allison

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Education for Non-English Speaking Latino Students

The history of the United States is full of stories of immigrants from other countries coming here to fulfill their “American Dream”. In fact, Charles Glenn states that “The United States is often called a ‘nation of immigrants’; more accurately the nation always comprised both of newcomers and those who worry about the impact of the newcomers on the existing society,” (Glenn, 2006). Immigrants have been coming here in large numbers more frequently in recent centuries. The influx of their entrance into this country has had a great impact on the United States. “Between 1820 and 1996, 63 million immigrants arrived in the United States. Germans were cumulatively the largest group, with 7.1 million, followed by Mexicans, with 5.5 million (60 percent of the Mexican immigrants over the 176 year period had arrived in the last 15 years),” (Glenn, 2006). Latinos are still a large part of the population and their numbers are only growing.

The necessity of educating immigrant children also became an important issue in the nation’s history. In earlier years, there was much opposition to providing education to children of immigrants. Even the founding fathers were strongly opposed to educating them. Benjamin Franklin, in 1752, asked the question, “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us rather than our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language and customs?” (Glenn, 2006). Fear was

definitely the foundation for these types of responses. Eventually the attitudes among the people began to change. A man named Calvin Stowe from Ohio, in 1836 warned that “unless we educate our immigrants, they will be our ruin..... The intellectual and religious training of our foreign population has become essential to our own safety,” (Glenn, 2006). This led the public school system to begin “Americanizing” immigrant children. A Stanford professor, Ellen Cubberly, argued that the “highest mission of public education was to ‘assimilate and amalgamate those people as part of our American race, and to implant their children, so far as can be done...’”, (Glenn, 2006). The goal then was to teach about the American culture and transform the child into the ideal “American,” therefore, trying to strip from them their national heritage and customs. There were also benefits to having immigrant children in the public school systems. It has been said that “immigrant children at the dawn of the 20th century transformed the institution in less than a generation. They helped inspire, among other improvements, the permanent residency of school nurse and health clinics,” (Celis, 2006). Health clinics in schools are sometimes the only type of healthcare that poor American children are able to receive.

In recent years and also in present time, “immigrant children once again made up the nation’s fastest-growing school population, a majority of them the children of Mexican immigrants,” (Celis, 2006). Latino students have a great influence in today’s public school systems. Many of these are children of immigrants who come to this country not knowing the language and customs. They are thrown into the school system and expected to conform to American public school standards. Different events in history have affected the way that schools integrate non-English speaking immigrants. The real question is: How has the American school system since 1997 used legislation to affect the education of non-English speaking Latino children?

To understand the current state that immigrant children are in today, background is needed to explain the history and concepts of programs aimed towards immigrant children. There are a lot of issues surrounding Latino immigrant children still today. Illegal immigration is a controversial topic and some people are not so welcoming to children of illegal immigrants. This is an issue that has been around for many years. “The U.S. Supreme Court ended years of political controversy and litigation in Texas when it ruled in 1982 in *Plyer v. Doe* that the state has an obligation to educate the children of undocumented immigrants,” (First, 1988). Many times immigrant parents do not know their rights and are sometimes pressured, when enrolling their children, to provide social security numbers and documents proving legal status. This is illegal, but it does occur.

The ESL (English as a Second Language) programs in the public school systems are widely known all around the country. These programs are in place to teach immigrant students English. They also have a set of standards for pre-K-12 ELL (English Language Learner) students. “Specifically, the three goals of English learning involve (a) using English to communicate in social settings (b) using English to achieve academically in all content areas, and (c) using English in socially and culturally appropriate ways. The standards stress that English language learners must develop abilities to request and provide information, to paraphrase a teacher’s directions, to work successfully with partners, to negotiate and reach consensus,” (Valdes, 1998).

The difficulty of learning a new language can also have a negative effect on immigrant children and their families. “While immigrant children and their families are exposed to stressors that make them vulnerable to social, emotional, and academic problems, they also tend to have limited support systems,” (Esquivel & Keitel, 1990). When a child is learning a new language, it

can affect their grades and how they excel in school. They may be scared to speak English in a group setting. This has been found to be related to “elective mutism among bilingual children. Even when a child has learned the conversational aspects of a second language, it may take 5 years, on average, to learn those aspects of language related to cognitive and academic functioning,” (Esquivel & Keitel, 1990). Another problem is how the some schools respond to the needs of non-English speaking immigrant children. They often do so by considering them as failures and even at times, they require them to repeat a grade or put them into special education programs. “The current widespread use of retention ignores research findings that show that most students learn better when promoted and given additional assistance,” (First, 1988)

Another concern about the education of immigrant children is the funds necessary to keep these programs in place. “In addition, today’s newcomers are arriving as tighter constraints on government budgets appear to be causing growing numbers of Americans to question the costs of social welfare services, education, health, and other programs for immigrants, especially illegal immigrants,” (The Future of Children, 1995). The need for these types of programs is not a priority for some Americans. People see the amount of money being used and only think in terms of numbers. Good, quality education does not come cheap. In fact, “education is one of the largest expenditures associated with immigrants, the major share of costs being born by states and localities,” (The Future of Children, 1995). Education is primarily a state matter and this limits the power of the federal government on schools. Funding and financing are left up to the individual states.

Past class-action lawsuits have also brought to light problems of the education of immigrant children. Demonstrations helped to put the wheels in motion for some cases. One example of this happened in 1968. In East Los Angeles, thousands of immigrant students or

students of immigrant parents, walked out of five schools demanding better education. “The 1968 demonstrations—pointing out inequalities of school funding, among other deficiencies—helped produce stronger curricula, more college-prep courses, and eventually the hiring of more Latino teachers,” (Celis, 2006). This inspired a smaller demonstration weeks later by Latino students in Texas. This demonstration was led by 400 Edgewood high school students in West San Antonio and led to a class-action lawsuit filed by parents of students. This in turn, led to a Supreme Court decision in 1973. “In *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, parents sued the school district under the equal-protection clause of the U.S. Constitution after they learned from their children that Edgewood sometimes lacked enough money to purchase chalk,” (Celis, 2006). The Edgewood families lost the lawsuit, but it did eventually create a reform in their school system. This resulted in more funds for poor and immigrant populations in their community.

Another famous court case concerning immigrant children’s education was *Lau v. Nichols*. “In *Lau v. Nichols*, the suit was brought on behalf of eighteen hundred Chinese American students attending San Francisco public schools. Their complaint is that they are being denied education opportunity because they do not speak English,” (Sugarman & Widess, 1974) The case was decided by the Supreme Court, “that San Francisco was violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by failing to provide programs that met the needs of several thousand pupils of Chinese ancestry who did not speak English,” (Glenn, 2006). This case was especially significant to all immigrant children, most importantly because it used the legislation of the Civil Rights Act to determine their decision.

Legislation has made a huge impact in the way that immigrant children are being taught today. One of these is the California’s Proposition 227. This was passed in June 1998 with 61

percent of support. “The main goal of this initiative was to dismantle bilingual programs in public schools and replace them with programs emphasizing early English acquisition,” (Bali, 2001). Bilingual education had been the norm in California. Bilingual education means that students are taught in their native language to read and write. After this, they are transitioned to normal English instructions after a number of years. Another version of this is transitional bilingual education. “Traditional bilingual education (TBE) programs have a different goal: they provide support in the home language while the pupil becomes proficient in English... A 1980 survey found that local districts in thirty-eight of the fifty states provided TBE for Spanish-speaking youngsters,” (Glenn, 2006). This legislation went against these types of schooling methods and decreased the amount of bilingual programs in the state. The modification in this system dramatically changed the way that immigrant children were traditionally taught. The new system created a need for more training and brought in different standards to the way that immigrant children were taught English.

The state of Arizona followed suit and enacted their own legislation regarding bilingual schools. “In November 2000, Arizona voters approved Proposition 203 (English Language Education for the Children in Public Schools). Proposition 203 states that ‘all children shall be placed in English language classrooms’; thus all public schools were required to adopt and implement Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs for their students who are ELLs” (Kaplan & Leckie, 2009). This caused students not to be placed in bilingual programs. Instead, they were placed in mainstream classrooms. Some teachers felt that they were not prepared to meet the needs of these new students.

From these different types of legislation, there are programs in place now that could benefit children of immigrants. One of these programs is immersion schools. While typically

immersion schools are used to teach different languages to native English speakers, this program has conformed to the Latino community's needs. There are now schools in place that teach not only native English speakers, but non-English speakers as well. This is called a dual-immersion program. "A dual-immersion program serves the needs of both native Spanish as well as native English-speaking students," (Tedick & Walker, 2000).

Another program that was developed is called "English Plus." This program was created by an organization in Washington D.C, the League of United American Citizens. This program was made as a supplement to the traditional ESL programs. They use a different variety of strategies in helping to teach English to immigrant children. "These strategies might include providing the necessary language support for children- as they learn English and their other subjects in an all- English program- by using teachers who speak the students' native languages or by using peer and adult tutors," (First, 1988). This different approach also helps immigrant students by providing role-models and giving them access to mainstream curriculum.

With the legislation that has been passed all around the country, the education of immigrant children has made great improvements. There are more available programs to choose from. Another result is that more funding has become available to schools that have a higher population of immigrant children. More importantly, immigrant children are now receiving the attention, focus, and resources offered by the school systems that were not always available in the past. While improvement is still needed, the changes so far have been fundamental in educating non-English speaking immigrants.

There are many reasons why immigrant children come to the United States in the first place. They could be escaping war and violence, have entered the country illegally, or are in search for a better life and improving their circumstances. Whatever the reason, all children, no

matter what background, have the right to education. Unfortunately, attaining that education can become difficult if they do not know the English language. This is why the public school systems are so important for a child. “Because most recently arrived immigrants speak little or no English to their children, the home is not a fertile place to improve children’s skills in English. Public schools remain the frontlines in the effort to provide immigrant children with equal access to a productive future,” (First, 1988). This is especially true today, as the Latino population keeps on increasing. “According to the 2000 Census, more than one of every seven children between the ages of 5 and 17 speaks another language at home,” (Kaplan & Leckie, 2009). Latino children are an important part of the American culture today. Children, in general, are a big part of any society. They are the future and should not be let down by the American education system.

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