

**Interviewing Families of English Language Learners:  
Teachers' Preconceived Notions and Intercultural Norms**

Dr. Hema Ramanathan

Associate Professor in School Improvement

1600, Maple Street

University of West Georgia

Carrollton, GA 30118

678-839-6058

[hramanat@westga.edu](mailto:hramanat@westga.edu)

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The concepts of effective teaching are predicated on teachers taking into consideration students' needs, framed by factors such as culture and socio-economic status, reminding teachers they primarily teach students, not the subject (Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf, 2006). Culturally appropriate pedagogy, in turn, is predicated on the differences between the profiles of the teachers and the changing face of the student population. Ninety percent of the teachers are White and monolingual, most of them attending college and eventually teaching less than 100 miles from where they were born with limited experience of minority cultures (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000; *Teacher demographics*, 2004).

The rapidly changing demographics in the country, with a remarkable 300% increase in ELL population in Georgia, requires teachers to teach students who are increasingly unlike themselves, challenging existing teacher assumptions about their students. Effective teachers have to make a special effort to understand the family culture, backgrounds and lifestyles of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

A majority of the activities in teacher education programs aimed at acquainting teacher education students (TES) with the characteristics of diverse populations are cognitively based. The affective component of teaching is often difficult to address and frequently overlooked. The assignment of interviewing English Language Learners (ELLs) and their families is designed to help teachers better understand the familial, cultural and social influences in the lives of the linguistically different students, connecting the TES with the wider community of the ELLs, specifically the parents.

This was a required assignment in teacher education programs at two institutions and was offered at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, with a total of 53 students

participating in it. This paper describes the activity with the response of students, both undergraduates and graduates, illustrating the perceived difficulties and benefits.

## **Description of Activity**

### *Instructions*

- Identify an immigrant family that has been in the US for less than five years.
- The family must have at least one child who is in a K-12 school in the US.
- Interview the family in their setting, preferably at their home when all the members of the family are present. The interview must last between 60 and 90 minutes. Take notes during and immediately after the interview. It is not necessary to tape it in any way.
- The interview paper should be 6-8 pages long. Briefly summarize the interview (2 pages) and critically analyze the issues (4-6 pages).

### *Rationale*

The purpose of this activity is for TESs to understand the whole child who is an immigrant. The experiences, lifestyles and values of the TESs, who are most likely to be native-born, are likely to be very different from those of immigrants. The interview is designed to further TES' investigation of schools in the U.S. and how particular socio-cultural and political climates may impact upon schooling experiences, perhaps contrasting this with beliefs and practices in the immigrant's country of origin. Most TES may not have the experience of being an immigrant; they can, however, do the next best thing: look, listen and learn from someone who has lived that life.

The immigrant experience is an extraordinary one and interacting with immigrants personally on their own ground, where TES will be an invited guest is an essential learning experience. For the most part, immigrants encounter school authorities in circumstances not of their choice and where they do not have power. If TESs were to go on the home ground of immigrants, rather than a neutral ground like a restaurant, it will empower the immigrants while at the same time making TESs experience, however, briefly, of the effects of disempowerment.

### **Student response – Pre-Interview**

A few students recognized the effect of personal interaction and had a positive response to the activity. They looked forward to meeting the ELLs and learning more about them and their culture. As one student said,

To me, I think a great way to get a better picture of what is really going on for ELL students and families is to simply talk to them. We can read information in a book, but I don't think that's going to have the same impact as actually going out and talking to families about what's going on.

However, not everyone agreed with this student. Most TES had grave reservations about the assignments. They were apprehensive about conducting interviews with strangers and put forward objections ranging from personal safety to misgivings based on culture. Their initial response was to try to negotiate the parameters of the assignment.

Many students were unaware of the stereotype they projected when they objected to risking their safety by going into neighborhood they deemed unsafe and dangerous. Since many of them did not live in neighborhoods that were contiguous to predominantly minority

communities, going beyond their physical comfort zone to meet immigrants was a challenge not all of them relished. They were unconscious of buying into the prevalent stereotype by characterizing all immigrants as poor, probably illegal, and living in dangerous neighborhoods. This was reinforced by some schools that explicitly discouraged them from making home visits for the same reasons.

The first step of identifying ELLs highlighted how unaware TES were of the society they lived in. If they did not have an ELL in their class, they had limited ideas of the resources they could call upon to get in touch with immigrants. Local associations and ethnic community centers were not ready resources while walking into a local ethnic grocery store was a revolutionary idea.

Students thought it was rude and impolite to seek an invitation to an ELL's home, a practice alien to their own cultures. The rationale presented referring to this cross-cultural point did not convince them. They did not believe that in some cultures guests have a different profile and it may not be considered an intrusion to invite you into someone's house. They did not expect immigrants to be willing to share their stories with strangers.

### **Student response – Post-Interview**

On completing the assignment, TES acknowledged its efficacy, even declaring it the most significant learning experience in the course. One student wrote,

Personally, I really enjoyed the interview and thought it was most likely the most meaningful activity that we have done in this class. I got the impression that the rest of the class felt that the interview was very educational.

Organizing the meetings and setting up the interviews were themselves learning experiences. Many of them had difficulty scheduling a time for the interview. It brought home to them how busy the parents were. They realized that if parents did not show up for a PTA meeting in school, it was not because they were uncaring about their child's academic progress or ignorant of the role of a parent in this educational system. Rather, they learnt sympathy for parents who perhaps worked at two jobs.

In cases where interviews were initially scheduled and subsequently canceled. TES were initially irritated and unimpressed by the lack of politeness and professionalism, as they perceived it. However, making a connection with their readings, they recognize that this perhaps sprang from fear of being exposed to 'authority' of any kind; illegal immigrants' fears of being identified and perhaps deported became much more valid to TES.

This process of interacting with the ELLs bridged the theory-practice gap on many points. The sharing of information in the ensuing class discussion helped them see the wide range of socio-economic levels, languages and professions among immigrants rather than the monolithic stereotype of illegal, poor immigrants who batten on welfare. As a student noted,

The family we interviewed seemed to totally understand that they were stereotyped and it made them mad because they are no less a part of this nation than all of us. We need to push for positive stereotypes in our classrooms in order to combat the awful problems of negative stereotyping that some immigrant families must endure.

The warm welcome the TES received dispelled their uneasiness in 'forcing' their way, demonstrating how proud the immigrants were of their 'vibrant and pulsating culture, definitely worthy of note,' and that they 'love it and want to share it,' underscoring their emotional need to maintain ties with their 'home' country. It caused the TES to raise

significant questions such as the cost of assimilation and the place of the heritage languages in classrooms.

The meeting illustrated for the TES concepts they had encountered in their readings. Seeing ELLs act as interpreters reminded them of the added complexity of the roles ELLs play. They were particularly struck by the value most interviewees placed on education and the respect the interviewees had for the position of teacher. The families were particularly appreciative that (prospective) teachers had made the effort to learn about their culture.

Many TES experienced a frustration common among immigrants – the language barrier. In the process of interviewing families with whom they did not share a language, TES had to locate an interpreter or to communicate using signs or basic language items, mirroring the immigrants' struggle of negotiating life in a world unintelligible to them.

### **Final thoughts**

The obstacles to teachers making home visits are numerous. Schools and school districts discourage them for legal reasons. Potential lawsuits, by either the teacher or the students, loom large, prompting administrators to take the easy way out by either ignoring the option or by actively dissuading teachers from making these visits. Finite teacher time and energy are further considerations.

As an aspect of professional development, schools could organize a day before school opens when teachers go into the immigrant communities. This will open the eyes of the teachers to the students they can expect in their classroom while alerting students to the start of school. Teachers could venture out in pairs through the year, when they feel the need for it. If teachers do not want to make school bastions against the home cultures of the immigrant

students, they need to step out from behind those walls and meet the students on their own turf, in their own homes.

We need to create and build advocates for ELLs. The profound and deep understandings engendered by a home visit in both the affective and cognitive domains should make it a required activity in all teacher education programs. Teachers with a deep understanding of the range of issues immigrants face may help to lower the affective filter and make learning more effective and enjoyable. We may even see a decrease of ELLs mistakenly recommended for placement in Special Education classes!

#### References

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