

School policies, biased teachers hamper immigrant children's learning

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(Phys.org) —U.S. high school "sink or swim" placement policies that propel immigrant students into courses that they're linguistically and academically unprepared for – or conversely, that funnel all newcomers into remedial courses or service-oriented vocational programs – may undermine these students' academic success and their motivation to learn, new research suggests.

A lack of academic support in mainstream classrooms and limited interaction with peers who are [native English speakers](#) can be detrimental to immigrant students' language learning, self-esteem and motivation to succeed, according to researcher Liv Thorstensson Dávila, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the College of Education at the University of Illinois.

Dávila's research with immigrant students attending high school in the U.S. – and with immigrant young people in Sweden – may provide insight into why a significant portion of this population is less likely to graduate from high school or college and more likely to end up living in poverty than many of their native-born classmates.

In a study published recently in the journal *Power and Education*, Dávila examined the social, linguistic and academic challenges encountered by a group of young refugees attending an urban high school in North Carolina. The school, which the researcher identified by the pseudonym Franklin High School in the study, has high rates of poverty and dropout and low scores on state-mandated tests.

The refugee teenagers that Dávila studied, who ranged in age from 17-19, had emigrated from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. All of the students had interrupted or limited [formal education](#) but viewed education as the link to good-paying jobs and success in the U.S.

Dávila conducted multiple studies with the group that were based on interviews with students, teachers and other [school officials](#), as well as [classroom observations](#).

According to an assistant principal at the school, the refugee students' academic progress was hampered by teachers' conflicting stereotypical beliefs about Asians as the "model minority" – highly intelligent and motivated, obedient and quiet – and English language learners as "intellectually deficient."

Refugee students who didn't fit the model minority stereotype were in danger of being viewed as "problem students" and burdens on their teachers. And some of the students internalized those negative expectations, believing that teachers thought they were poor students and unlikely to succeed academically. While all of the refugee students expressed a strong desire to graduate, many believed that they didn't have the intellectual capital to do so and harbored doubts about their abilities to succeed in college and the job market.

Although many of the refugee students desired more academic support, some were reluctant to request it, and most of them believed that their academic needs were overlooked because they were quiet and well-behaved in class, an assumption that was echoed by an assistant principal.

"The squeaky wheel gets the grease," the assistant principal said. "Because (the refugee students) don't cause trouble, they don't get help. Really the biggest fallacy is that they are doing well."

Overwhelmed by a host of challenges that confront teachers in many schools, including student behavioral problems, large class sizes and adapting curricula to mandated testing requirements, teachers at the North Carolina school were short on time and resources to provide extra help to struggling students.

Some students felt academically and socially isolated because of their lack of English fluency, which caused some to withdraw physically and psychologically. Other students attempted to engage with material in the classroom but were distracted by [classmates'](#) disruptive behavior.

Meaningful interactions with English-speaking peers, through cooperative learning activities or peer tutoring, are critical to immigrant students' success, as are "critical peripheral spaces," courses or activities such as art and music classes, athletics or Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs that aren't exam-driven and promote peer interaction, Dávila said.

Although the study sample was small, with only eight students from two Vietnamese ethnic groups, the findings are consistent with Dávila's studies with Latinos and other minorities, all of which suggest a need to strengthen teacher education programs in the areas of globalization, multiculturalism and support for English language learners.

"In educating teachers, we tend to focus on the U.S. – and with good reason – but when you have a child in your class who's from another country, it might be helpful to know something about that child's country, or the school system in that country, or a conflict that may have brought a child here," Dávila said.

Classrooms should present welcoming environments that encourage immigrant students to share their knowledge and experiences with their teachers and peers and that promote students' bilingualism or

multiculturalism as assets rather than deficits.

Adapting curricular materials to students' unique needs, monitoring students' progress during transitions to mainstream classes and providing additional resources and support, such as weekend or summer programs that offer extended learning time, could help ensure immigrant students' success.

"What's needed is more awareness of the needs of English learners at the [high school](#) level – more support, more teacher training, some sort of marrying of policy and practice here and a better understanding that one size doesn't fit all," Dávila said. "We need to re-envision the structures in our schools that lead kids down certain paths, for better or worse."

Some policies and practices set immigrant students up for failure, such as immersing them in classes for which they're not linguistically or academically prepared and graduation requirements that all [students](#) pass specific courses or write research papers when their English language skills are limited, Dávila said.

In Sweden, where Dávila has a study under way at an elementary school that has a large population of [immigrant students](#) from East Africa and the Middle East, federal law mandates that children be provided instruction in their native language if parents request it.

"That's not something that's guaranteed in the U.S.," Dávila said. "If you happen to be in a school where if you're a Spanish speaker you can receive bilingual or dual language education, you're in a good position. But most children, especially at the middle and secondary levels, don't have that guarantee."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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