

Chapter 42

Ready Together: Professional Development for Educators Working With Students in Immigration Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Many challenges that English learners (ELs) face are compounded for children and families from undocumented immigrant backgrounds. Educators, school support staff, community-based organizations, and other service providers play key roles in advocating during a sudden immigration crisis. A sudden immigration crisis occurs when children experience the sudden loss of a caregiver or family member due to deportation procedures. This chapter describes a “Ready Together” (RE-TO) rapid response initiative, which consists of three components: First, it provides a rationale as to why teacher education programs should prepare future educators to respond in case of sudden immigration crisis. Second, it conceives of a “rapid response team” for schools working with students from diverse immigration backgrounds that includes roles and responsibilities for administrators, counselors, and teachers, and third, it provides examples of emergency preparedness plans, workshop topics and materials that prepare families with documents and directives in case of a sudden immigration crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In shifting the educational paradigm surrounding practices for English Learners (ELs) in U.S. K-12 public schools, much attention has been paid to the various roles played by educators relative to linguistically diverse students. Are they content teachers? Language teachers? Evaluators? Counselors? Advocates? While educators may occupy any or all of these roles, the current “demographic imperative” requires

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that responsibility for effectively reaching ELs belong to entire school or district communities, rather than with a small number of English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingual Education (BE) specialists (García, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009). Still, successfully educating English Learners (ELs) is a highly complex endeavor, as ELs are one of, if not the, most diverse student sub-groups. ELs can vary along lines of first language (L1), country of origin, background experiences, formal schooling time, family immigration status, socioeconomic level, and exposure to English learning contexts, to name only a few (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010).

One factor that can potentially impact EL performance in school is their family's immigration status. Some ELs may belong to families who have one or members that can be considered *undocumented*, or who are residing in the United States without official authorization to be in the country, either because they entered without permission, or they stayed past the terms of granted permission (such as from a tourist or business visa). To date, 11.1 million people or about the 3.5% of the total population in the United States may be considered undocumented immigrants (Warren & Kerwin, 2017; U.S. Pew Research Center, 2016). However, this number typically refers to adults, as children who are minors should not be held responsible for entering the country if brought with their parents or if they arrive as unaccompanied minors. According to the latest reports in immigration status in the U.S., there are 43.3 million immigrants or about 13.5% of the population with various immigration statuses. Over 16.7 million people in the U.S. have a family member in the same household who is undocumented, with almost 6 million U.S. born children currently living in households where one or more family members are undocumented (Mathena, 2017; Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Krogstad, 2018). They constitute what are known as “mixed-status” households where one of the parents and/or older brother or sister are undocumented while the other members of the family are U.S. residents or citizens, including the majority of their school-age children. In other words, a mixed-status family can have varying legal statuses, the most frequent situation is where the younger children have citizenship by being born in the United States and at least one parent or older sibling is a non-citizen (Mathema, 2017).

Regardless of immigration status, children are allowed to enter and remain in U.S. public schools as per the U.S. Supreme Court precedent established by the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* case (Wright, 2015). This ruling indicates that all children—even those from undocumented families—have a constitutional right to receive a free public education and college counseling services in grades K-12, regardless of their citizenship status. As such, it is highly likely that educators will be working with immigrant ELs who live in fragile immigration situations, wherein it is possible that one or more family members may be subject to legal action or even deportation without warning. Schools and teachers may be the first and/or only places that children will know to turn to for help should such an event occur.

We based the present chapter on our experiences with schools and families in South Texas, an area known for high rates of immigration and mobility. For example, 1 in 10 children in the U.S. currently live in Texas (a little over 7 million). From this, one-third of Texas children (about 2.4 million) live with one or more parents who immigrated to the U.S. (mixed-status families). However, 96 percent of all Texas children are U.S. citizens (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). First, this chapter will discuss how educators can adopt the role of advocate for their ELs. Second, we articulate a rationale for assisting students in case of a *sudden immigration crisis*, or an event wherein children experience the sudden loss of a parental figure or family member due to deportation procedures. Finally, the chapter will describe the steps that educators might take to develop a “Ready Together” (RE-TO) stance and create rapid response teams to swiftly and deftly respond to potential immigration crises among their school-going communities.

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