



Engaging Immigrant Students

For an educator who speaks only English, engaging immigrant English language learners (ELL) in the classroom can be a significant challenge. As a former classroom teacher, elementary school principal and guidance counselor, we have worked with immigrant student populations in K-12 schools. We have found that a good way to overcome the natural barriers of working with these students is by showing respect and helping them find ways to balance their native culture with their new setting. Our goals are for our students to connect with their new environment and become active participants in their classrooms.

Showing respect to immigrant students is often accomplished by acknowledging them and their situation. One way to do this is by learning more about the immigrant population. Gather information about the students' cultures either through research or by talking with the students and their parents. Also, allow students to educate others about their native language, traditions, and foods. If you make a genuine effort to understand their culture, ELL students may start to feel accepted, which can lead to them actively participating in the learning process. We have observed that our ELL students enjoy frequent ice-breaker activities that allow opportunities to discover more about their classmates and to share about themselves. "Time to Connect," as we call it, has helped our students identify the similarities and differences between their cultures as the cultures begin to blend in the classroom. Respect may also mean listening to parents and allowing them to offer suggestions. For example, you can show respect by honoring a parent's request to have children from the same culture placed together for support.

It's also important for immigrant students to find a balance between their native culture and the local culture. Many times, the gap between the two can be a psychological problem for students because they may struggle with maintaining their native culture's values as they try to assimilate into a new society. In past years, many of our students commented that they felt like "outsiders" because they were not accustomed to social cues and language. For example, we encouraged a group of immigrant high school girls to get involved with the local popular girls sports teams, but many of the students believed it was unfeminine to be athletic. The local community, however, placed a high value on these teams, so the immigrant females felt torn between the values of the two cultures. Through positive dialogue and genuine concern, we found a common bridge to help students be a part of this local society while still embracing their native customs and identity. Giving all students opportunities to explore multiple cultures provides one more positive step to creating a blended environment.

Also, factors that affect self-esteem and respect change with the social roles for our ELL students. For instance, a student's identity changes from being Latino to being Latino as a minority. School professionals can respectfully guide ELL students toward organizations to assimilate them into the American society and clubs. These organized social groups, such as foreign language clubs or soccer teams, can help them find others in the same situation, and the increased social interaction reduces students' feelings of isolation. These extracurricular activities help students interact with their peers, be respected, and feel productive in their new environment.

These are just a few ways that educators can help immigrant students make connections and feel accepted in their new society so that they can become active learners in the classroom.

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