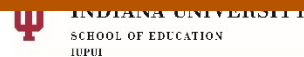




# Teacher Perspectives on Equitable Education for Immigrant Students

## *Equity Spotlight Vodcast Series*



### TRANSCRIPTION

**Dr. Hamann:** The purpose of this video is to introduce you to four teachers in Eastern Nebraska. Plus myself, a professor at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln). All of us with experience teaching immigrant students and all of us with expertise related to how to best serve the needs, as well as attend to the aspirations and opportunities of immigrant students. This Vodcast will share different perspectives from different folks. We're going to start this Vodcast, and we imagine this as the beginning of the series, basically by introducing ourselves, who are we, why are we on your screen. And then we're going to add on to that a handful of belief statements. I don't think it's easy to figure out what school is supposed to do unless we articulate what we think school is supposed to do, and then from that strategies will follow. Today we are recording who are we, and what do we believe comments, and to kick this off I'm going to start, just because I've already got the mic. My name is Edmund Hamann, although I go as Ted. I'm a professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln), and I'm also an equity fellow at the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. I began my career back in the early 1990s, leading an experimental bilingual family literacy program called Family Reading. Which had been co-developed by the National Council of La Raza and the Education Testing Service. The theme of considering immigrant students and families continued, I was the first in my work, but it continued when I wrote my master's thesis on bilingual paraprofessionals in Kansas, mediating between Spanish speaking households and primarily English speaking public schools, and then again when I wrote my dissertation on a partnership that connected Georgia's first majority Latino school district with a university in Mexico. That effort, the Georgia Project, included sending U.S. teachers on summer travel study to Mexico to learn about schools there. It included hiring Mexican teachers to serve temporarily as instructors in Georgia schools. It included a reimagining, revisioning, of the curriculum to be more responsive to those, in this case Mexican newcomers to Georgia. And then since then, first for the federally funded Northeastern Islands Regional Education Laboratory, which was then around university, and then more recently to the University of Nebraska. I have variously considered how school reform includes or excludes English learners, how school districts have responded to immigration enforcement actions, ICE actions in their communities, how curriculum can be adapted to be more accessible to international newcomers, and most extensively how schools in Mexico have received students with prior experience in the United States. In sum then, the biggest part of what I do is think about how schools and school systems respond to the transnationally mobile, whether students or parents, whether from Latin America to the U.S., or the U.S. to Latin America, and then how can they respond better. Chandra?

**Dr. Chandra** Fantastic! Hello, I'm Dr. Chandra Diaz. I'm currently a math educator

**Diaz:** Lincoln, Nebraska. The 2016-2017 school year will complete my nineteen years in education, where I have served as a middle school and high school math educator, as well as a high school administrator. The majority of my early teaching years were in a middle school with similar demographics as a Title One school. I taught math interventions, pre-algebra, algebra, as well as created curriculum for an ELL math class. I left that school to become an administrator in a high school with similar demographics. I work closely with the ELL Department for P.L.C., and established a family resource center ... and engagement program for non-English speaking families. To help facilitate this program at parent teacher conferences, we also created the cross-cultural student ambassadors. I had a short-lived experience in Denver, Colorado, where I worked in a public turnaround school that had a population of roughly half African-American and half Latino students. Later I worked in a public charter school that was over 90% Latino. The unique aspect of this charter school was their focus on enrolling ELL students and students with IEP's. Another aspect of my career that I enjoy is staff development and I'm very proud of the cultural proficiency staff development work that I've been a part of in Lincoln. That work has brought me here to share with you some of my experiences.

**Dr. Janet Eckerson:** Hi I'm Dr. Janet Eckerson, I work as a high school Spanish language teacher in the large diverse and urban Lincoln High School here in Lincoln, Nebraska. Before Lincoln High, I taught for eight years in Crete. It's a rural community southwest of Lincoln, home to a large Latino immigrant population. Before Crete, I worked briefly for a small diverse start up charter school in West Palm Beach, Florida. In the past ten years, I've taught primarily Spanish to Spanish speakers courses, these are classes aimed at developing literacy skills and students who hear and speak Spanish in their homes. I'm also active in several teacher professional organizations, like the Nebraska International Language Association and the Nebraska Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. In 2015, I completed my doctorate in Education with a dissertation focused on the professional learning needs of the Nebraska Spanish teachers who work with Heritage speakers of Spanish. The project brought together my two professional interests, which are supporting the development and maintenance of minority languages spoken by immigrant students, and facilitating professional development driven by teachers' own wants and needs.

**Dr. Hamann:** Thank you, Tricia?

**Tricia Gray:** Okay, Hi I'm Tricia Gray and I currently teach courses in Social Studies and Children's Literature in the Pre-Service Elementary Teacher Education Program at the University of Nebraska (Lincoln). Our student population is overwhelmingly a mirror of the current teacher population, white, middle class, monolingual, largely female. So our challenge is to prepare teachers who will step into classrooms in which their students will most certainly

look, learn, and live much differently than they do. This experience is familiar to me, as I grew up in a white, working class, small Nebraska town. My first high school Spanish teaching position was in an urban, suburban, high school in Kansas City, Missouri, with a predominantly African-American student population. When my family relocated to northern Minnesota, I taught Spanish for middle and high school students on the Leech Lake Indian reservation, in which almost 90% of students were Native American, and 100% were qualified for free or reduced lunches. I also taught summer courses in Spanish Language and Culture as part of the Upward Bound project at Bemidji State University, and after eight years there, I moved to Fremont, Nebraska where I taught Spanish as a second language and also developed and taught a course for Spanish speaking students. After four years, I left the high school to pursue graduate study full time at U.N.L., and I'm currently writing my dissertation exploring how newcomer students construct citizen identities at school.

**Dr. Hamann:** Thanks, Cara?

**Cara Morgenson:** Hi I'm Cara Morgenson. This is my third year as an English Language Learner (ELL) educator at North Star High School, which is home to the largest and a very wonderfully diverse student body here in Lincoln, Nebraska. We have a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches, some of the largest SPED and ELL programs in the city with roughly twenty-seven languages spoken in the building. I've taught all levels of ELL, one through four, as well as assisted in the curriculum writing and teaching of pilot ELL courses for graduation credit in Health and English, rather than earning elective credit. I have served on my Building Student Assistance Team to identify and provide interventions for struggling ELL students and have facilitated ELL student panel presentations for cultural purpose and seed building flex. Before my years at L.P.S., I spent ten months of abroad teaching English on a Fulbright scholarship at the University of Łódź in Łódź, Poland. I taught writing classes and academic skills courses to first and third year undergraduates in the Department of English Philology. During my time in Poland, I also prepared a series of presentations, which were open to the community on a range of topics relating to American culture and studying in the United States. I'm also working towards my Ph.D. at U.N.L., focusing on Educational Policy and Reform. I'm particularly interested in issues of gender equality, bridging community and school partnerships, creating content rich and social justice minded curriculum and assessments for ELL's, and also how we as educators construct, or do not construct, a positive classroom communities for our most marginalized students and their families.

**Ted Hamann:** Thank you. So what we're going to pivot and do now is in a sense articulate our education philosophy as a kind of belief statement, and this is a prelude to subsequent videos, which will talk specifically about

classroom strategies that might particularly engage or be effective with immigrant learners. Before one talks about how to best teach immigrant students in schools, I think it's important to clarify one's underlying beliefs about schools and immigrants because the answer to what ought to happen is dependent on those beliefs. First and most importantly, I believe that schooling's moral justification comes from being helpful to all. How to be helpful may vary by student and by type of student, but that schooling should be helpful, that is broaden students' opportunity horizons as they get older, should not be in question. For this belief, I find an important echo in the U.S. Constitution's 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, which promises that all persons are guaranteed equal protection under the law. Not all citizens, all persons. Protection regardless of race, as *Brown v. Board of Education* clarified, regardless of language background and skill with English, as *Lau v. Nichols* promised, and regardless of documentation status, as *Tyler v. Doe* asserted. That said, I do not believe schools are automatically helpful to students or parents. Indeed schools can be places of bullying, restricted opportunity, unequal discipline, and so on. So it is important to scrutinize what actually happens, not just what ought to happen. Finally for now, I don't believe that being equal and being fair necessarily mean being homogeneous. Not every kid needs the same thing from school. The child who comes to school knowing how to speak Karen, or Swahili, or Spanish has a right to have that language competence recognized, supported, and built upon. That doesn't mean that all kids need to be taught Karen, Swahili, or Spanish. It's misleading then to appraise whether a school is just by asking if the school is providing everyone the same thing.  
Chandra?

**Dr. Chandra  
Diaz:**

Thank you. Yes, I believe that public schools have provided learning for many people and could be a source of liberation and equalization. As communities experience change in their demographics, it is critical to address the needs of those changes. As a Latina in education, I have and continue to work towards effective changes in the system that benefit all students in a culturally responsive manner. Although not a terribly radical notion, the institution of education, I.E. schools, has the ability to span out beyond the walls to fill in other areas of society and family. The disconnection of public education from all communities has resulted in stratification and isolation, which has been my motivation in my own instructional practices. All students and all children should be afforded a form of education that alleviates economic and other social disadvantages in our society. There is a great responsibility, and a burden, that writer Lisa Delpit reminds me. That parents and guardians assume their children are well cared for when they are in my classroom. As an educator who cares about school experiences for all children, I also pay special attention to certain populations within my classroom and in my school. One population that can be very vulnerable are my immigrant and refugee students. I believe that my role as a math educator does not simply mean responsibility for pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, or other routine issues for only English speakers. Rather, I believe my responsibility is to

all students, which includes my English Language Learners. And their success relies heavily on my ability to be a responsive educator. My responsiveness includes attention to building community within my own classroom. Immigrant and refugee students are enrolled into mathematics courses upon their arrival in our district, and I hearken to the words of Ridge when she suggests that when educators give examples that do not include everyone, it creates a disequilibrium, as if they didn't exist. Creating an authentic, caring, culturally responsive, and welcoming environment is at the crux of what I do on a daily basis.

**Dr. Hamann:** Thanks.

**Dr. Janet Eckerson:** One thing I believe about teaching is that where, when, and with whom we work really does matter. On the one hand, I believe in normalizing science of education. That there really are better, more effective ways to do the work that we do, and that some best practices are indeed better than others, and of course in this age that we can learn things from data, but on the other hand I think we all teachers know that tips and tricks for classroom management are careful instructional planning or technology, things don't automatically produce engaged and meaningful learning for all of our students. We know that something that works for one student or one class won't necessarily work the same time around with a different student or a different class, and this is because education is deeply contextual. So for me the point of teaching then is not just for me to hone a series of specific effective classroom practices, that when I apply them result in learning in my students. Rather I believe it's about cultivating the relationships between my particular students and this particular teacher, and between those particular students and their particular world, through the content I teach. Cultivating those relationships, making deliberate decisions about our practices, in function of who are working with, that's something that requires judgment, and that's why I really believe that teachers matter. Developing, understanding, and respecting our professional judgement matters, and that it's on us to become the experts of our own context. Our students, our schools, our communities, because that context matters. When it comes specifically to teaching immigrant students, I believe that changing our orientation from deficit to enrichment is one of the most powerful things that we can do. I feel like we tend to frame immigrant students and their family's needs in deficit terms. Like he needs to learn English, or her parents

don't understand why this is so important, and then our educational interventions and services come from this orientation. We keep ELL students out of mainstream courses until they learn English, or we create courses that are meant to teach parents about how our school works. And I'm not saying these things are bad ideas, however a powerful thing that we can do is start to view our students and their families as enriching, and not just problematic. ELL immigrant students are emerging bilinguals, not language less English learners, and while her mother may not know how to access her daughter's grades online, she may have traveled across five countries and seen and done things that you and I may never see nor do. Students and their families have stories, experiences, talents, skills, and perspectives that enrich their experience of the world, and can enrich ours as well. I really believe that when we start to see students in this way, we start to do things differently, and ultimately that will improve the experience of school for immigrant students, and ultimately improve the outcome of that educational experience.

**Dr. Hamann:** Thanks, Trish?

**Tricia Gray:** Okay, so for me the aim of teaching is the core from which all my decisions and questions emerge. So the question for me becomes, what is my ultimate aim in teaching? Especially within our very durable institution of schooling. When I teach I aim for the development of citizens, small "c" citizens, who are able to name and to deliberate about shared problems, and improve life for all citizens. This implies that students need opportunities to hear different perspectives, and to have the skills to communicate their own realities, hopes, and desires, as well as to regard one another as equals. However, I also acknowledge that our society functions within institutions, including the institution of schooling, with grades, rankings, predetermined curricula, and tracks that isolate specific groups of students from others. Learning the hidden rules of the game of school is one way to bridge the cultural chasm between school and home that many students have to navigate. So developing as a citizen also implies coming to know and understand the unwritten rules of how society is structured. This chasm is wide for most immigrant and migrant students, especially those who

arrive at the age of high school, some having had little to no formal education. We can and should orient our work with immigrant and migrant students toward what Angela Valenzuela calls attitude schooling. Drawing out and building on the experiences they do have, as opposed to deficit-based instruction that simply seeks to remediate the areas in which they're lacking, such as limited or no proficiency in English. However, we can't privilege the ideal for the pragmatic. If equality is our aim, we have to be realistic about the deficiencies immigrant and migrant students have in order to afford them a fair shot at experiencing belonging and navigating the institutions that are undergirding our society. So what does it look like on the ground. I think we have to ask, how can the established daily routines of school change in response to the immigrant and migrant students we have. I'm thinking of the mundane things like daily announcements, school lunch choices, scheduling, and parents or family correspondence. Also what deficiencies do our faculty and staff have in relation to the needs of students in their classrooms and how do we help them build the bridge. What are schools doing to help the teachers and staff meet their students halfway? Also how are immigrant and migrant students being purposefully integrated into the school community? Are they interacting with established residents on a consistent basis, and specific to high school immigrant and migrant students, how do we help them to "quote beat the clock" and achieve graduation requirements the before they age out of school. Finally, do we acknowledge and forgive ourselves the growing pains that we as schools and teachers undoubtedly experience as our communities grow and change in response to our change changing demographics?

**Dr. Hamann:** Thank you, Cara?

**Cara Morgenson:** We currently find ourselves at a profound intersectional crossroads in American society. With politics, values, and institutions, and varying states of a people in reform. A perfect world vision of reform, being what it may. Teachers, regardless, have an obligation to revise our practices to help all students navigate the institutions of education in which they're placed, as they currently exist now. This navigation, while streamlined as the best-fit system, will require

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revised pathways and scaffolding for many students. Authentically preparing them for the systems and for their futures. Be that college, or work or, starting a family. While it's important to celebrate our teaching strengths, we also need to assess the areas in which we need to seek further training and professional development. Particularly highlighted by the changing demographics we experience in our classrooms. Amongst schools with immigrant and refugee populations, the demographics can change very rapidly depending on what's going on in the world around us, natural disasters, violence unfolding. A group of immigrant students with strong academic skills, consistent access to quality education, and a safe strong supportive family may be followed up by a group that has experienced less consistent academic experiences and with fewer academic skills, and they may have spent months or years in a refugee camp or maybe otherwise unable to access quality schooling due to gender, age, or ability. Students who are the survivors of trauma that they may choose to never share with us. Our students may come to us with what some might consider a deficiency that trumps all other abilities, a lack of English language skills. What is often not so recognized is an astounding bilingual or even multilingual ability. Job and career skills that could earn quality employment if it weren't for the obstacles of visas, work permits, and certifications. I think back personally so often to a student that I had who was trained to be a pastry chef, and who has now found himself at age 20 back in a high school classroom trying to earn his diploma so that he could pursue that career still in the United States. Particularly for secondary ELLs, we are in a race to accelerate a truly daunting process, which is often a white, standard, academic, English acquisition process, pairing it with grade level content upon which there are sometimes no previous foundations to build. Getting our students to graduation and preparing them in meaningful ways for life after high school is an inconsistent feat, but a possible and critical pursuit. It is startling to me when from some educators I overhear the phrase, "the kids who can't speak English", and there's a particular stress on the "can't" as a permanent deficit rather than a "not yet we're still learning", and there's also a clear statement of "these are not my kids." Which begs the question whose kids are these immigrant and refugee students if they do not belong to all the teachers that they have in their classes? I feel that there must be a



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professional conversation about the roles of educators and working with ELL, immigrant, and refugee students and their families. Are ELL teachers cultural brokers, solely responsible for the English language acquisition process, or is that something that we share across mainstream. How can we prepare mainstream teachers to provide appropriate accommodations for ELL's? How are we intentionally incorporating practices of inclusion and cultural connectivity in our curriculum, and instruction, and welcoming our immigrant and refugees students to our school buildings, and our classrooms? When do we leave these students, and equally important their families, out? Thinking from curriculum, to daily routines, to extracurriculars, and special events like pep rallies, and what are the consequences of those decisions.

**Dr. Hamann:** Thank you.