

# FOLLOW THE LEADER | TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

## IMMIGRANT STUDENTS ARE RURAL STUDENTS TOO

WORDS BY HUSEYIN UYSAL



Shortly after my arrival to Gainesville, FL from Turkey to study for my PhD in 2015, I was on a road trip in north Florida and Georgia. Somehow, I happened to notice that “rural” was a label associated with the white American population. However, now I know that students in rural districts increasingly come from more diverse backgrounds. Also, cultural and linguistic diversity is on the increase in schools in rural areas with low density of population.

Let’s take Suwannee as an example. The total percent of the immigrant population who were born outside the US and reside in Suwannee County is around 5.76. They are not alone in this trend, as the research of Dr. April Burke of Central Michigan University has revealed. This trend is an indication of the need for schools in rural areas to find ways to meet the needs of an emerging linguistically and culturally diverse population. This includes students for whom English is not the first language and who are learning English when they start school. So-called English language learners are at a particular risk if educators do not address their specific needs.

Let’s take Alejandro - our hypothetical student. He arrived from Mexico as a high schooler speaking fluent Spanish but very little English. His first day in school was confusing: he did not know where to go, what to do, how to make friends... His teachers were friendly but could not communicate with him in Spanish. Nor did they have any expertise in teaching English as a second language for him to learn mathematics, science, and American history. Over time, he learns English but not without experiencing an academic set-back that results in failure on standardized tests. It does not mean that he is cognitively incapable or stubborn against learning the content. But the linguistic challenge does not allow him to use his resources, all of which has a large influence on the construction of his social identity. His parents and the school assign multiple responsibilities to him compared to his American born peers: translating for his parents, earning money, having high grades, acquiring the bits of American culture... As a young man with multiple expectations, Alejandro is literally stuck between two worlds. Therefore, he gradually develops a unique identity that allows him to have a foot in both camps. But this may not save him from being viewed as an “unintegrated immigrant” by the local society and even the school.

Alejandro cannot get out of this predicament alone. We need to promote advocacy for ELLs among all school personnel so that schools and families can partner and work together to support his learning and success in school. The same holds for giving his American peers an awareness of language learning through any foreign language class for communicative purposes. This way, schools can provide an opportunity for tolerance and empathy among students. School personnel can develop an understanding of what it really means to be learning a foreign language.

So, we, as educators, are capable of sustaining more diverse and immigrant-friendly environments at the micro-level. We need to ask ourselves this question: “Are we doing our part to start a change in the society?” I hear a friend of mine from Suwannee County uttering “if the creek don’t rise...”. But I think it is urgent for teachers to be involved more to prevent the overlooking of the English language learners in rural schools. Rural schools need to recognize their differences and support their linguistic resources (both for English and Spanish). After all, immigrant populations in rural America that are from various cultural backgrounds are also in the game now -in addition to those in the urban areas- and have a critical position in determining the new *e pluribus unum*. I am hopeful that projects with an equity focus on embracing diversity and promoting linguistically responsive teaching will support the change. They will send the message that these students are not too different from their American peers in rural areas. Then, I would love to be a fly on the wall and see what happens with Alejandro attending school in rural Florida.

*Huseyin Uysal is a PhD candidate and an AACTE Holmes Scholar at the College of Education at the University of Florida. His scholarly work is grounded in inclusivity and equity in language minority schooling.*