

Chapter 11

Living on the Fringe: Immigration and English Language Learners in Appalachian Ohio

Joy Cowdery
Muskingum University, USA

ABSTRACT

As rural Appalachian schools in Ohio struggle to overcome institutional bias and lack of understanding to accommodate the needs of the growing population of immigrant students from diverse countries immigrant parents struggle to fit into a new cultural environment and to secure the best education for their children. This qualitative study of twenty-nine southern Ohio counties examines the barriers and opportunities that each face and suggests ways of closing the educational, language, and cultural gap.

INTRODUCTION

There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education (Lau vs. Nichols (1974)).

Teachers must have a working knowledge and understanding of the role of culture in language development and academic achievement.

The Midwest is seeing more immigrant growth because more immigrants perceive that

rural Midwestern communities can provide living wages and low living costs. Unfortunately, there is an ethnocentric attitude directed to many situations with which the locals are unfamiliar. Many cultural experiences that Appalachian parents and teachers assume are universal can be confusing to the new community members. Cultural differences can isolate parents. Perhaps the most difficult and frustrating cultural clashes for parents come because of the lack of help they can give their children in school and the lack of resources schools have to help them. Populations of immigrant and English Language Learners in rural Southeastern Ohio are steadily growing and inadequately supported in schools and communities. It is essential for educators to meet the needs

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of all children and to provide the best education for Ohio's students, including those whose first language is not English.

Nestled in the Southeastern quadrant of Ohio in the rolling foothills of the Appalachian Mountains are small cities, towns, and countryside identified as the 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio. For the 1.48 million people who reside here, change has always come slowly (Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education). The majority of the population can trace their English, German, and Scot-Irish ancestry back several generations to original settlers of the first opening of the Northwest Territory that would eventually become several Mid-western states. In generations past, the hills and rivers had provided protection, but also isolation for the mostly rural populations. Families acquired land and passed it on to succeeding generations. The general population had ebbs and tides of European immigrants over the years, but most were very assimilated into American culture by the time they had settled into the hills. The face of the area remained white and English speaking. Never a booming economic center, in former times, the rivers and coal mines had at least provided a living wage for most residents. In the past fifty years, unemployment has increased as coalmines and chemical plants have shut down or moved. Now, almost 20% of the population lives in poverty (Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education). While young people moved into more urban settings for economic reasons, primary families remained rooted in their original communities. An Appalachian culture continues to dominate the social climate. General characteristics that are often associated with Appalachian people include individualism, protestant religion, family-centricity, love of place, humor, patriotism, and hospitality (Jones, 1994).

Educating students in rural school districts in the United States has always held economic and cultural challenges. One of those challenges is the greater distances between schools and districts which may affect student access to special pro-

grams, teacher access to professional development, and administrator access to financial resources (NCES, 2002). Rural school populations also face the combined challenges of low tax bases, isolation from job-growth centers, an aging population and a heavy concentration of households living in or near poverty (NCES, 2002). Unfortunately, the 127 Southeastern Ohio schools remain the poorest in the state. The average student expenditure is \$400 less per pupil than the state average and continues to decrease, and teachers' salaries average \$4,400 less (Ohio Appalachian School Districts Vital Statistic Report). The student drop out rate is 15% higher than the state average (Ohio Appalachian School Districts Vital Statistic Report).

Given the history of the Appalachian area, until recently the schools had seen very little change in the faces of the students they had served for the last fifty years. The idea that they would need to begin to accommodate students who looked very different, spoke another language, and had a very different culture did not seem pressing. While urban areas in Ohio were developing ESL programs to meet the needs of a rapidly changing population, Appalachian Ohio schools were still struggling to "make due" with few resources for the dwindling population of the same students from families who had attended these schools for generations. Caught unaware in the last ten years by a surprising number of new residents who didn't speak English, Southeastern Ohio schools are now struggling to gain information and funds to teach their newest students. Not only is there a need to bridge language differences, but also to bridge cultural differences as well. Nuclear versus extended families, an emphasis on the individual as opposed to the collective, competition versus interdependence, scientific versus intuitive ways of knowing, and verbal communication patterns rather than nonverbal patterns are often competing and contradictory to Latino and other cultures and may create distress for some students, teachers, and parents. (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

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