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### Cultural Melting Pots: Strategies to Mitigate Culture Shock for Immigrant Students

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**Cultural Melting Pots: Strategies to Mitigate Culture Shock for  
Immigrant Students**

by

**Luis Sanchez Martinez**

**B.S., Physical Education, University of New Mexico, 2020**

THESIS

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**ABSTRACT**

With the increase of immigration and diversity in the United States, challenges with integrating various student backgrounds in public education have risen over the last several years. While student success is the priority for teachers, it has been challenging to keep students engaged, motivated, and culturally respected. By offering strategies to school administrators, counselors, and teachers including physical educators, to integrate culture and school content with the purpose to create successful students and build a stronger community. Furthermore, present psychological effects when children move to a new country.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Background Information

Since the founding of the United States, it has been a country that has accepted people and families from different nationalities throughout different periods. One example is the Irish during their famine in 1845. Often, people entering the country include families and their children. It is a complex process for these children to acclimate to a new country's culture and environment. Through physical education, strategies can be implemented to mitigate culture shock by creating an engaging and safe environment for immigrant students through physical activity and culturally relevant physical education while developing motor skills with the integration of learning the primary language and culture of a new country of origin.

Given the history of the United States accepting various immigrants, including documented, undocumented, asylum seekers, etc., it is best to combine all into one term as an immigrant. The term immigrant will be "used to describe a particular group of people who settle permanently in a new country" (Stanec et al., 2016, p. 248). Many of these immigrants are attracted, or forced to leave, for many societal reasons that include violence, oppression, political corruption, famine, economic hyperinflation, lack of opportunities, and natural disasters. All these people, more specifically families, are migrating from one country to another with the hopes of a better future for their household, more specifically, their children.

Since the 1970s, we have seen a steady increase in the percentage of migrants entering the United States. Although the data shows about 40.8 million total immigrants in the United States, so many people are unaccounted for because there are countless undocumented

immigrants and their fear of being deported if someone finds out that they arrived in the country illegally (Stanec et al., 2016). With our most recent 2020 census, and its volatile political climate, I expect there to be a dip in the number of people who declare themselves as either foreign or immigrant because of the undocumented people's fear of being deported. With the 2012 data collection of the immigrant population in the United States, about six percent are children (Stanec et al., 2016).

Because of the diversity of the migrants, physical educators, and educators in general, should understand that not all immigrants face the same barriers to achieve academic success (Stanec et al., 2016). All immigrant students face a unique combination of the barriers presented to them. These include financial stability, transportation, communication, language, technology, cultural responsibilities, family responsibilities, lack of healthcare, lack of nutrition, psychological and emotional support, and the lack of basic resources such as school supplies, clothing, etc. These barriers can present themselves and disappear throughout an immigrant's childhood.

For these children, they enter the United States knowing only their native culture and practices and are forced to assimilate to western society. This leads to the culture shock that many immigrants face. We can broadly describe culture shock as a negative, passive reaction to a set of noxious circumstances, but also the active process of dealing with change in an unfamiliar cultural environment (Ward et al., 2020). We typically see culture shock as a negative experience, and as educators, we must be patient with students and parents.

A significant challenge that has been more noticeable over the past several years has been the community's perception and political stance on immigration, especially in the United States, where each state varies in its political stance. "Similarly in the United States, the majority of

Americans are more likely to agree that immigrants burden the country because they take jobs, than they are to acknowledge that immigrants strengthen the country because of hard work and talent" (Ward et al., 2020, p. 198). Unfortunately, the United States is not the only country that this negative perception about migrants has plagued. These negative attitudes towards migrants bring another challenge, and barrier, for them to overcome. Also, within the United States, it has been suggested that there is a difference in reception between light and dark-skinned immigrants (Ward et al., 2020). As educators, we must try our best to have similar positive interactions between light and dark-skinned migrants who enter our community and school without discrimination.

Aside from the physical adaptations, such as moving, there are also psychological adaptations that a migrant faces, including children. Research regarding the psychological health and adaptation of migrants reported low self-esteem, hopelessness, dread, sadness, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms. There has been documentation of immigrants who have dealt with depression, suicide, and chronic illnesses (Ward et al., 2020).

A significant adaptation that migrants face is battling loneliness. Students need support and connections in and out of the classroom. Not only are social interactions important, but also information and access to available resources, especially in schools, such as food drives, shot clinics, athletics, counselors, etc. As educators, we should be aware of the students' mental health, and it shows the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in physical education. Not only are psychological adaptations noticeable, but also social-cultural adaptations are seen in migrants. Evidence has shown that social skills are lower for migrants than native-born (Ward et al., 2020). For teachers, we must continue to be patient with the students as they adjust to the different social cues and skills in the new country, especially in the United States.



For student migrants, aside from adjusting to the school system, they must also take into consideration their personal relationship between the culture they are accustomed to and the dominant culture in the community. These intercultural encounters and experiences are important because they will cause the person to assimilate, change, or reject their cultural identity. They can also become bicultural in which they combine and mix both cultures. If we have students who accept both cultures, it will be a positive outcome because they become accustomed to the new culture and do not leave their native culture behind. In some cases, unfortunately, there are cases in which people will reject all cultures and feel in a 'grey zone' in which they don't identify with either culture and causing further loneliness.

## Chapter 2

### Strategies for Those in Education

When we think of supporting migrant students in schools, we typically think of what can be done within the classroom. Although that is correct, that is a small part of the support that the students need in schools. There needs to be a healthy partnership between school leaders and the community. This includes all staff, PTA, alumni organizations, etc. What we see is, "Often, the cultures from which many of these students originate do not have the same formal help structures that exist in the United States, such as counselors and social workers, and rely mostly on informal structures, such as family and friends, for support" (Goh et al., 2007, p. 69). As teachers, we are on the front lines and must understand that these students most likely will not be accustomed to or be aware of the support available to them.

The ultimate goal is to build a bridge between the families of immigrants and the school community. This can be done with the help of school counselors. Because counselors are trained in various skills that involve human development, relationships, and counseling skills, they are the most suited to aid and support the development of the students' welfare (Goh et al., 2007). Having these skills and resources can be a great partner for the teachers and the rest of the school community to give more information and resources to the student because each immigrant child has unique circumstances.

These resources do not necessarily have to be directed at an immigrant audience but also for students who are native to the country and are accustomed to the culture and systems. This can also include lessons for students to understand better diversity and inclusion of students from different cultures and backgrounds. They can also lead in training for staff to understand culture

shock and be better equipped for the teachers to have migrant students. If a counselor or school staff member does not have the knowledge to equip teachers, there are conferences available, for example, the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research ([sietarusa.org](http://sietarusa.org)) to attend. At the high school level, college and career counselors can help students and families by having their offices open after school hours. Because many are unaware of how the post-secondary education system in the United States work, and they often work throughout the day, opening the office until later in the evening once a week will give parents an opportunity to ask questions and could receive assistance in navigating through the process of applying for colleges and universities or learn of financial aid that they are not aware of.

Another group that works with students that should provide more support is administrators. Goh states, "With the resources and authority at hand, administrators play the key role of empowering teachers and the school counselors and can either motivate and lead the entire school body toward multicultural coexistence or maintain the status quo of inherited educational practices" (Goh et al., 2007, p. 68). There are many strategies that administrators can use to raise the importance of cultural diversity and respect for those cultures. An example of an event that an administrator can help create is a cultural awareness week that allows students to share their background from their country of origin. Also, if there is not enough diversity in the school, allow classes to learn about a specific culture and display the information throughout the classroom, hallways, and within a school assembly. The administration can also support immigrant students by applying for grants to receive financial support for programs and services such as credit recovery courses, hiring nurses that can provide primary health care, dental care, immunizations, and translators if the district does not have the ability to provide such services.

The school or district can provide some of these services by creating a partnership with a local university.

As teachers, building partnerships with counselors and administration is vital for immigrant students to succeed primarily outside of the classroom. We want to use strategies to create a culturally appropriate environment within our classroom. Our goal is to create an environment that promotes growth and development for all learners, including migrants and those who are native to the country. The migrant students can have opportunities to reinforce the culture, language, and social norms of the new nation.

As educators who work with various cultures and backgrounds, especially immigrants, using the culturally relevant physical education (CRPE) framework will be beneficial to make the classroom experience more engaging. The process includes "(1) knowing the public (e.g., students, families, community), (2) identifying areas of cultural distance between goals, values, and cultural viewpoints of teachers, their students and their families, and (3) enacting strategies to bridge cultural distance so the perspectives of teachers blend more seamlessly with students, making the educational experience more effective, engaging, and worthwhile" (Richards & Gaudreault, 2016, p. 168). When teaching an immigrant student, we need to learn about their country of origin because each country is unique, and students will come with different experiences based on their country of origin. Also, we get to learn more about their home life, such as participating in extracurricular activities, working, taking care of siblings, etc. This information will help us better understand any classroom struggles aside from language and cultural barriers.

After learning more about the student, we can identify the differences in beliefs and how they experience the world. In doing so, educators can modify strategies to bridge cultural

differences for teachers, immigrant students, and students who are native to the country. We can create a culturally diverse environment and complete lessons in which all students are learning a culture, whether it's the dominant culture or the culture of minorities.

When presenting a lesson to students, specifically immigrant students, we want to focus on sight, sound, and symbolism within the environment we are teaching. The first effect, presence, can arguably be the most important because it is what they immediately see entering a hall room, classroom, or gymnasium and create a perception of what their experience will be while spending time in the environment made. Aside from bright colors, "Murals, collages, or reflective wall pieces can be utilized as methods by which to showcase diversity among these students and others in physical education classes" (Culp, 2010, p. 11). We want to provide imagery of people participating in physical activity from different genders and skin color.

Another practical strategy is to create classroom assignments that focus on topics related to physical education. For example, allow students to write, or draw, their understanding of terms such as endurance, coordination, balance, heart rate, etc. Furthermore, if able to read multiple languages, allow the student to write it in their native language so the student can feel more comfortable participating. This assignment can be done in groups, and the student can choose a partner that they are comfortable with for interaction with peers. Although we want students to be comfortable working with peers who might speak the same language, "It can also be helpful for a non-native English speaker be paired with a student who has mastery of the language" (Culp, 2010. p. 11). More specifically, be paired with a bilingual student, if possible, or someone who can translate the best the students' ideas that can be written or presented. The work completed by the students can be displayed throughout the environment for everyone to see.

The second effect is sound. There are cases in which students who cannot communicate audibly are placed at a more significant disadvantage (Culp, 2010). Students who cannot have a peer assist in translations are also at a disadvantage because there is a disconnect between both language and culture. For those reasons, nonverbal instruction can be an effective strategy to create an atmosphere comfortable enough for the student to participate.

Music as a starting and stopping cue is an effective strategy for students, especially at the elementary level. To create a connection with the immigrant population of the students, educators can create a playlist of appropriate music from the students' country of origin. For example, a teacher who works in a school or community with a large Hispanic or Latinx population, using music such as Latin and Reggaeton could build a connection between the atmosphere and their culture. If the teacher is having a hard time creating the playlist, ask the student, or students, for appropriate songs for a school setting.

Another strategy is creating rhythm and music units emphasizing cultural diversity. Creating an opportunity for students to present and teach, peers how to dance in their culture allows students to experience the diversity within the population. A physical educator can also create lessons with instruments from other cultures, such as drums, bells, and gongs. Music is an essential tool used by physical educators because, "Employed appropriately in class, music can stimulate the brain and form connections between the body and mind, while prompting memory and improving gait and coordination" (Culp, 2010, p. 11). Music also reflects the awareness of the teacher's audience and the school community.

The third effect is symbolism. When used correctly, it empowers students and reinforces the environment, ideas, and content positively while supporting the students in their journey of learning the culture and language. We want to avoid stereotypes, and negative imagery, toward

specific cultures and ethnicities. Also, we must prevent symbolism that is deemed offensive or taboo to particular cultures. For example, in Navajo culture, they avoid owls because they are considered helpers to evil spirits (Williams & Shipley, 2018). Especially for elementary physical educators who are using animals as cues for movement or using storytelling to integrate other subjects, this knowledge is vital to let the students know that their culture is respected and the environment is a safe place while they are getting accustomed to the new culture.

When entering the classroom, we can also use symbols and imagery to let the students know the instructions for the class. At the door to enter the gymnasium or any room, we can have a sign to let students know the first instruction. For example, an elementary teacher can have a sign written in English telling the students to sit in an orange square for the opening circle, and the orange should be written in the color to reinforce students what the word is in English and what the color represents while they are learning the language. By simply using Google Translate, if the teacher is not fluent in other languages, the sign can be written in the second language with the color square also written in the desired color.

Imagery should be supplemental to the demonstrations presented to students for each activity. A physical educator can create cards with imagery of the skill with the cues typed in English and a second language. We can also use imagery of the skill they are practicing as a visual aid. Ultimately, our goal is to provide a culturally responsive environment and supplemental material, so the students are not at a disadvantage.

Another consideration when working with immigrant students is respecting their religion. The Muslim community practice Ramadan each year. For all, "During the religious month of Ramadan, healthy pubescent subjects must abstain from both food and fluid ingestion from dawn to sunset during 29 or 30 days" (Trabelsi and Chtourou, 2019, p. 1). Those who participate in

Ramadan are at a caloric deficit because they only eat their pre-fasting meal until sunset, when they can eat their fast-breaking meal. Knowing when they can eat food is critical because the days can be longer in the summer compared to the winter.

Limited research has shown varied results on fasting during Ramadan and physical activity. Still, as educators, we should be aware that there is a possibility that our students who participate in Ramadan may have cognitive and physical impairment during the school day. Trabelsi and Chtourou mention a list of recommendations to mitigate possible adverse effects of physical activity during Ramadan. Recommendations include avoiding teaching in hot and humid weather, allowing time to rest in shaded areas, focusing on skill and technique development instead of intensity, include nutrition or health unit that can be complementary or supplemental to required health courses to better equip students who participate in any kind of fasting, be alert to signs and symptoms of dehydration, educating on the importance of adequate sleep, etc.

Another group of immigrants to consider is those of African or Caribbean origin. These immigrant students, especially those from Caribbean countries, are often mistaken for African Americans. One student who participated in a research study mentioned, "Most of my teachers identify me as a native-born student [African American to be precise] with an American culture and educational experience. However, I'm from the Caribbean with a different cultural upbringing and had my primary education there" (Kumi-Yeboah, 2021, p.18). which can be considered offensive because teachers fail to understand their personality, culture, and background is different from those who are African American.

Although research is limited in teaching students of African and Caribbean origin, a few strategies can apply to all students from other countries. "Teachers agreed that Black immigrant



students represented unique stories, cultures, values, languages, and beliefs" (Kumi-Yeboah, 2021, p.18). As teachers, we must start by creating opportunities in which the students can trust us. Getting to know who they are as a person and allowing opportunities to express their stories, experiences, and culture will take time, and we must be patient with the students. Also, it's as simple as learning to pronounce the students' names correctly.

Immigrant students will do their best to be respectful to their teachers, but it will look different from what we expect. It is common to have students avoid eye contact when speaking directly to someone with authority. Furthermore, it is considered disrespectful. Some cultures also believe a person's title to be important. Students will, at times, call you solely based on your title as a sign of respect. For example, Mexican students will call a teacher 'profe', or professor, as a sign of respect for a teacher's title within the school. As teachers, we should never consider any of these examples as a sign of disrespect and should not attempt to force the student to change.

Over the last several years, we have seen a trend showing the increase of immigrant students entering the United States from around the world. For minors, choosing to leave is out of their control, and there is a plethora of factors that pull or push people to migrate to a new country, whether documented or undocumented. Unfortunately, the children entering a new country often face many cultural, psychological, and environmental challenges. They are forced to quickly adapt to those challenges independently or with their parents or legal guardian. This leads to new stressors and affects the child's mental health and culture shock.

The current demographic of most teachers has made it a challenge to understand student backgrounds who have diverse backgrounds. "According to recent national statistics, about 80% of the teaching force is white and 77% of teachers are women" (Flory & Wylie, 2019, p. 1320).

Although many teachers know that they must be able to teach to a culturally diverse group of students, including those who are limited in speaking English, they feel ill-prepared for the task at hand (Richards & Gaudreault, 2016). By adopting culturally relevant physical education (CRPE), we create an environment for students whose culture is dominant to experience various cultures and ultimately teach students to be culturally competent. The United States Department of Education defines cultural competency "as the ability to understand and appreciate other parts of the world, religion, cultures, and points of view" (Olsen et al., 2020, p. 40).

By using sight, sound, and symbols, we can create an environment where immigrant students can be a part of the instruction given in class. Using imagery shows the students what to do, music as starting and stopping cues with culturally diverse music, and symbols that include translations of instruction and activities. While using symbols and imagery, we must be careful not to use anything offensive or that can be considered taboo. We must be respectful of the students' values and beliefs. For those who practice Islam, Ramadan can harm the students' physical and cognitive performance at school. An educator should attempt to mitigate any impairments while the student is in their classroom during Ramadan.

Aside from instruction and classroom environments, we must build a rapport with these students. This will only happen with multiple interactions throughout the school year. To gain students' trust, we must allow them to speak about their values, beliefs, school experiences, and personal experiences before entering a new country. This relationship will ultimately result in immigrant students being engaged in the class.

## Chapter 3

### Conclusion

Although these strategies are primarily for physical educators, many techniques are transferrable to traditional classroom settings. As educators, we want immigrant students to feel that their backgrounds, beliefs, language, etc., are not devalued while exposing them to the dominant culture of the community. At the same time, we want to teach those who are native to the country how to interact with various cultures, ethnicities, and languages while being respectful with their social interactions with immigrant students. Thus, this creates future adults who can contribute and collaborate with societies and communities with diverse populations, but it presents a challenge for educators to create an engaging environment. Working with culturally diverse people from different countries is still a learning experience for all teachers.

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