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STRESS AND COPING OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Paul Chamness Miller, Editors

Stress and Coping of English Learners

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Stress and Coping of English Learners

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the English learners
whose lives are affected by what we do in schools and
the teachers who teach them.

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands,
that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language,
that goes to his heart."
~Nelson Mandela

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEMATIZING THE EXPERIENCES OF ENGLISH LEARNERS IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Although, in an ideal world, all schools are concerned about both the academic and affective aspects of their learners, a lot of the contemporary literature regarding English learners (ELs) primarily focuses on the difficulties of language acquisition and other academic concerns (e.g., Haager, 2007; Meyer, 2000; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012) such as content-specific instruction (e.g., Chval & Chávez, 2011/2012; Gaskins, 2015; Li, 2012; Nutta, Bautista, & Butler, 2011; Thornton & Crúz, 2013) as well as assessment (e.g., Hakuta, 2014; Lenski, Ehlers-Zalava, Daniel, & Sun-Irminger, 2006). Indeed, these issues are important and play a significant role in the overall well-being of ELs, but a very essential consideration that has commonly been overlooked is the relationship of the learner's

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socioemotional needs to academic success due to the focus on the standardization of learning (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). The experiences and needs of ELs vary significantly and extend beyond academics.

Presently in the United States, there are about 4.5 million learners whose schools have officially labeled them as English learners (ELs) and who are enrolled in a support program for ELs. This number represents about 9.5% of the entire student population (NCES, 2015). It is important, however, to note that this only represents those who continue to receive some sort of service from the school, but it does not include students who no longer qualify for such services. Furthermore, there are a number of issues that may affect the quality of education that ELs receive. There is a lack of consistency in a number of a different areas: (a) how EL specialists are certified, or even if they must be certified to be an EL specialist, (b) what type of assistance is provided, (c) how long ELs may receive services, and (d) what curriculum should be used, just to name a few ("Quality Counts," 2009). The fact that ELs make up nearly one tenth of the school population indicates the need for schools to be prepared to meet the needs of this population, whatever they may be, and for there to be a consistent set of standards to which schools and state boards of education are held accountable.

Another area of inconsistency is in how we refer to (i.e., label) ELs. As Dillon (2001/2014) points out, labeling has been used in the educational system for a long time to differentiate one group of learners from others, but not necessarily for the purpose of helping students succeed. Labeling can be hurtful and have an impact on the success of some learners. Despite these problems, "labeling does not need to be a dirty word; but labels do need to be grounded in thoughtful interactions" (Dillon, 2001/2014, p. 103). We have chosen to use the term *English learner* (EL) throughout this volume to discuss the stress and coping of this particularly vulnerable population because EL is inclusive of all types of students we discuss, whether refugees, immigrants, or children of immigrants. They share one commonality—they are trying to learn English in a system that disenfranchises them. It is true that learning English is not all that defines them, nor is it the only reason they may be struggling with school, as several of the chapters in this book reveal. Although we certainly support scholars' choices to use terminology that they believe is most appropriate, we do not want terminology to distract us from the real goal of this volume: to raise awareness of how several groups of learners who may appear to be so different may share similar struggles so that we educators and researchers can take action and bring about change in how our schools function.

CHALLENGES THAT ELs FACE

The inconsistencies described in the previous section contribute to the challenges that ELs face on a daily basis, but it is also important to avoid generalizing their challenges because their experiences and needs are significantly varied due to a large number of variables. One such variable is the learner's place of birth. Some learners were born outside the U.S., while others were born in the U.S. but their first language is not English (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007); a common misconception is that all ELs are immigrants, but this is simply untrue.

Other individual characteristics have been observed to influence the experience that ELs have in educational settings. As with any group of learners, ELs' personalities vary greatly. Some make friends easily and are not shy, while others are more introverted and find making friends to be difficult. Given the many attributes that make each EL a unique individual, the chapters in this volume reveal that there are many factors that may have an impact on the learner's socioemotional well-being, as well as her or his academic success, because of the unique challenges this population of students may encounter.

Additionally, ELs who are also immigrants are often uprooted against their will (e.g., parents deciding to relocate or fleeing due to war), leaving behind their friends and extended family, their heritage language familiar schooling expectations and environment, and culture. Losing these securities and others illustrates an all-too-common situation where these children or youth no longer feel safe and may find themselves in an educational system that is not designed to meet their needs.

Whether the EL is an immigrant or an individual born in the U.S. he or she is likely to have struggles particular to his or her life and circumstances that differ from non-ELs. Those who find schooling difficult, regardless of their place of birth, may experience a sense of alienation, challenges with academic expectations, a loss of self-esteem, a lack of language support, and a sense of irrelevance to the curriculum. These experiences come at a high cost, as the pages of this volume reveal.

Sense of Alienation

Alienation is a common experience for many ELs as they attempt to navigate through the cultural, familial, academic, and social settings of their lives in and out of school (Lee, Butler, & Tippins, 2007). Some ELs associate blame with their heritage culture as the reason for not fitting in at school and reject their heritage culture in an attempt to fit in with peers (Fillmore, 2000). Another important struggle that commonly surfaces for

ELs is the pressure from family and friends to speak the heritage language, while being told by society that the heritage language has no worth. ELs may find speaking the language of their homeland frustrating because of the alienation they experience at school. Caught between two worlds and having to choose between honoring the requests of family and fitting in with peers becomes a cyclical pattern that adds pressure that many other students do not face. Choosing to reject his or her heritage culture and language, as Fillmore (2000) notes, may create a barrier between the EL and his or her family, friends, and local community.

Alienation may also come because peers may view ELs as outsiders due to perceived linguistic and cultural differences. Furthermore, schools may be ill-prepared to help newcomers adjust to the way school functions in the new environment; this failure can further alienate them from teachers, administrators, and school itself (Curran, 2003; Fillmore, 2000).

Academic Challenges

Academic challenges are common for too many ELs. Differing pedagogical approaches used in U.S. schools and schools in the home country of ELs can come as a surprise and contribute to the academic challenges that an EL could face. For example, education in the U.S. has largely shifted from a teacher-centered to a more student-centered approach, where students are engaged in collaborative activities, encouraged to ask questions, and included in decisions about their learning. In contrast, many ELs come from settings where the teachers are the givers of knowledge and students are viewed as sponges meant to simply regurgitate what they are told. ELs may find it difficult to adapt to this significantly different pedagogical approach of learning, and teachers may not be equipped to help learners transition to this new learning environment (Delpit, 2006; Igoa, 1995; Lee et al., 2007; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005; Zhang & Peltarri, 2014).

In addition to discrepancies in pedagogical approach, ELs are also susceptible to "cognitive load" (Meyer, 2000). A high cognitive load occurs when classroom content, assignments, and activities may not be culturally salient to the student (Ortiz-Marrero & Sumaryono, 2010; Reeves, 2004). For example, an assignment asking the class to write about an unfamiliar experience, such as their first trip in an airplane, creates a high cognitive load on learners who have never been on an airplane. Failing to consider the learner's background knowledge along with the lack of appropriate scaffolding makes schooling extremely taxing on the EL. Experiences such as these may challenge the EL's sense of confidence, destroying their self-esteem (Chang, 2010; Rodriguez, Ringler, O'Neal, & Bunn, 2009).

Linguistic Challenges

One challenge that ELs face related to language is developing communicative competence (Canale, 1983), learning to communicate with peers, teachers, other school personnel, and even family and the community. However, before achieving communicative competence in the new language, the EL might experience anxiety related to language use, often called "language shock" (Meyer, 2000). Several of the authors throughout this volume describe the effects of language shock on ELs. In the classroom, the continual communication in an unfamiliar language, along with the challenges that may occur in acquiring academic English (e.g., content-specific knowledge), contributes to this anxiety. Linguistic anxiety is further exacerbated by the intolerance that others have towards nonnative-like linguistic skills (see Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Olsen, 2000). These negative experiences can hinder academic success and prevent academic and linguistic achievement by triggering the learner's affective filter (see Krashen, 1982).

Attitude Towards ELs

Contemporary education has placed emphasis on standardization in the curriculum. ELs are, consequently, viewed as an afterthought at best, and completely excluded at worst (Cummins, 2000, 2001; Cummins et al., 2005). ELs are often viewed as a "problem" to teachers, requiring too much time or posing too big of a burden, regardless of the actual ability and skill set of the student (Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004). Rather than valuing what ELs can contribute to the classroom, such as their first language and cultural heritage, which could enrich the learning environment for everyone, schools often take a subtractive view toward ELs, considering their heritage as a hindrance. Consequently, the expectation is for ELs to abandon their first language and culture and assimilate to the dominant culture of the school, exacerbating communication barriers between the school, the learner, and the learner's family (Roxas, 2010).

Another significant point that is important to consider is how stereotypes influence the schooling experience of ELs. Walker et al. (2004) found that 70% of the teachers they surveyed admitted that they did not want ELs in their classroom and half of their participants expressed that they were not interested in EL education, even if such an opportunity presented itself. Chhuon and Hudley (2010), for example, found that teachers and school administrators had negative, and even hostile, attitudes towards Cambodian male students, lumping them in with their discriminatory beliefs about male students of color in general.

The negative attitude toward ELs is not only seen in the curriculum and in the classroom itself, but even in the "hidden" curriculum of the school district. For example, it is not uncommon to find the services provided to ELs to come from uncertified individuals, some of whom have had no particular education in working with ELs. Furthermore, as Chen (2010) found, the "ESL Room" is often not even a classroom, but a closet or storage space. It is also common for an EL teacher or tutor to be spread thinly over multiple schools and often helping many students to the point that the ELs do not get the individual help that they need or deserve (Chen, 2010; Roxas, 2010). We discuss the effects of the hidden curriculum in greater detail in the final chapter of this volume.

BEING AN ENGLISH LEARNER

Helplessness is likely to develop in situations or educational environments where students sense a lack of control (Hsu, 2011). ELs are required to learn a new language, attempt interactions with peers who do not share a language or culture, and endeavor to learn academic content in a milieu that is often completely unfamiliar and often hostile. They may also find their peers unwilling to make friends with them. Not only is this completely foreign experience scary in and of itself, but relationships with parents, teachers, administrators, peers, and even the community contribute to the potential breakdown in meeting the emotional and academic needs of immigrant ELs.

Research is beginning to reveal that ELs struggle not only with academics, but also with identity. Chen (2010) found that the way schools label individual students creates confusion. In her case study, the student was forced by the school to receive EL services that were neither wanted nor found to be useful. At the same time, the student was also placed in an advanced mathematics class. Consequently, this student struggled to find his place in a school that sent him conflicting messages. When educator expectations are low, there is the risk of ELs adopting such opinions and fulfilling such expectations (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Roxas, 2010). Roxas also found that teachers may adopt a belief that they need to "protect" ELs, rather than empowering the learners and helping them build their own confidence. Such actions also undermine ELs' confidence.

Not only is confidence and self-esteem at issue, but alienation at school and/or at home can also influence the mental health of ELs. Cho and Haslam (2010) found that having a sense of connectedness to school and to family was a significant factor for the mental well-being of immigrant learners. They further found that having an intact family was also influential. For example, when a family is separated, either geography or by

divorce, this separation contributes to higher levels of stress that can lead to suicide ideation and other mental health problems (Rishel & Miller, in press). In order to address the sense of alienation that ELs may be feeling, there is evidence that encouraging ELs to acculturate, where they hold onto their heritage culture and language while incorporating the local culture and language into their lives, may nurture greater mental health than the more typical subtractive approach of assimilation that is often expected of ELs (Chae & Foley, 2010).

All of these challenges, both academic and socioemotional, coupled with the lack of the school's ability to adequately meet ELs' needs, continue to perpetuate significant gaps between ELs and non-ELs. Perhaps most troubling are gaps in state and federally mandated standardized test scores between these two populations of students (Valdés & Castellón, 2011). The gap is further illustrated in graduation rates, with ELs at 62.6% as a national average, while the national average in 2014 for all students was at 82% (Mitchell, 2016).

Stress and Coping of English Learners addresses the many ways that ELs face academic and socioemotional stress in the K–12 school environment, the consequences of this stress at school, how they cope with this stress, and how school personnel and families can provide support and help. While enrollment in school programs offers assistance to many ELs, it often fails to provide the socioemotional support that ELs need as they navigate the rough waters of schooling. American schooling is often not prepared and/or unwilling to help ELs as they adapt to an unfamiliar language, culture, social norms, communication techniques, and teachers' expectations. Given the proper foundation and emotional support, ELs will be positioned for greater academic success, comfort at school, and a decrease in their sense of alienation in both the school environment and at home as they try to negotiate between two cultural environments.

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