



The Importance of the Professor in College Classroom
Climate for Immigrant Students

By Becky Boesch

Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study examined the role that professors play in classroom climate for immigrant students within their first two years in higher education. The research questions were 1) How are immigrant students generally experiencing the climate of higher education classrooms? 2) How specifically does the immigrant student's perception of the student/professor relationship influence classroom climate? The participants were 12 sophomore level immigrant students who self selected to be part of the study. Results indicated that professors play a critical role in creating either a positive or negative classroom climate.

In recent years, the immigrant population of the U.S. has increased dramatically. "Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population increased by 47 percent" (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2007, p. 12). This increase has caused educational institutions to try and understand this population and their needs in order to aid in their academic success. While this awareness has surfaced significantly in K-12 education, higher education continues to lag behind in its understanding of this population. According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b), estimates show that immigrants accounted for about 23 percent of all undergraduate students in 2007-2008. And yet with almost one quarter of undergraduate students being immigrants, Gray, Rolph and Melamid (1996) found in a study of 14 carefully selected institutions that "campuses collect little or no data on immigrant status" (p. xii) and the assumption among these institutions was that, apart from language issues, immigrants were doing fine and didn't need specific interventions. One finding that challenges this assumption that "all is well" was a study conducted in 2007 by the Institute for Higher Education Policy to understand the barriers legal immigrants face in achieving a postsecondary education. They found that "immigrants in American higher education...lag behind the total U.S. population, especially in terms of earning bachelor's degrees" (p.31). Perhaps immigrant students aren't doing as well as we suppose. Higher education needs to recognize immigrants as a significant student population and conduct more studies to determine how they are transitioning into college and how postsecondary institutions are aiding or thwarting their learning. It is critical that we study these students' experiences as they enter the university to try and avoid retention problems and to encourage academic success. To that end, this study examined one small piece of that experience, the college classroom climate and particularly the role the professor plays in this dynamic as immigrant students enter higher education.

Because the term "immigrant" has been used in the literature to describe a wide range of populations which are often quite different and

distinct, the meaning of “immigrant student” was narrowed to the following three criteria for this study:

- Traditional college age students (18-21 years old)
- Students who have graduated from an American high school but may have begun their K-12 education in another country
- Students for whom English is a second language.

The reason for defining immigrant students as such is because studies indicate that immigrants who fall under these criteria are potentially most disadvantaged academically. For example, Boshier and Rowekamp (1998) found that “refugee/immigrant students who are most ‘at risk’ at the post-secondary level are those who experienced interruption in their L1 (first language) education and completed high school in the U.S.” (p. 37). The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2007) also found these factors to be the most detrimental to immigrant student success.

Literature Review

Every classroom creates its own climate based on “its psychological context, defined in terms of what the student expects as a consequence of contemplated behavior. Such expectations are based [in part] on interactions between the student and the teacher...” (Vasquez, 1998, p. 243). Although no studies have specifically focused on classroom climate and immigrants, it has long been understood that the classroom experience is critical to student success and that professors play a key role in this. Freeman, Anderman & Jensen (2007) examined how a college freshman’s sense of belonging which is one aspect of classroom climate impacted student motivation. Studies from elementary (Solomon, Battistich, Kim and Watson, 1997) and junior high school students (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000) “suggest that students’ sense of belonging may be fostered in settings characterized by effective instruction, including an emphasis on mastery of meaningful content; warm, respectful interactions between instructor and students; cooperative interactions among students; and smooth organization” (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007, p. 205). Similarly, Freeman, Anderman & Jensen (2007) found in their study that three teacher characteristics – exhibition of warmth and openness, encouragement of student participation, and demonstration of clear organization (p. 210) – hold true for college freshman as well. Sass (1989) also found several teacher characteristics that were necessary for student motivation in the college classroom. Motivation is also related to classroom climate since climate can encourage or discourage motivation. The teacher characteristics which contributed to positive motivation were

1. *Enthusiasm*. Teachers in these classes have high energy levels, and their interest in and enjoyment of the subject matter are obvious....
2. *Relevance (relatedness)*. Course material is seen as relevant, applicable, and important by the students....Teachers often make this relevance explicit through explanation and examples.
3. *Organization (well-planned. prepared)*. Teachers of these classes do not “wing it.” Their classes are organized and their preparation is obvious....

4. *Appropriate Difficulty Level.* Most see the class as challenging but “doable”....
5. *Active Involvement.* Students are actively engaged in the classroom learning, which may involve group discussion or other hands-on activities....
6. *Variety.* The same instructional techniques are not used in every class....
7. *Rapport.* The teachers are perceived as approachable and friendly. They appear interested in the students and their learning....
8. *Use of Appropriate Examples.* Course material is made real, concrete, and understandable through the use of appropriate examples and related anecdotes... (p. 87).

Another related study by Myers (????) looked at how teacher affinity-seeking behaviors impact college classroom climate. Affinity seeking is “the process by which individuals attempt to get other people to like and feel positive toward them” (Bell & Daly, 1984, p. 111). In this study, *supportiveness* emerged as the most significant correlate to creating a positive classroom climate.

Students who perceive their instructors as being supportive may be more likely to view the classroom environment as being supportive as well. Teachers who engage in the use of supportive strategy may encourage student interaction, engage in the use of confirming responses, provide positive reinforcement and discourage student devaluation” (Myers, ? ??, p. 195).

Another significant finding was *present interesting self and trustworthiness*. “Teachers who are able to demonstrate their knowledge in a personable manner while at the same time conveying characteristics of responsibility and fairness may, again, be constructing a climate in which interaction is valued and encouraged” (Myers, ????, p. 196).

The above studies looked at all college students as a general population. But other researchers have added to our knowledge by looking at specific populations that potentially have significant overlap with immigrant students and how they experience the climate of higher education. The experience of racial minorities and women reveal that they are often alienated or silenced within the classroom which in turn can significantly impact their self esteem and academic achievement (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1997; Davidson 1996; Ogbu & Simons 1998; Swaminathan & Alfred 2001-2002). Research done into teacher/student interactions with minority students reveals several important elements in creating a positive classroom climate and environment conducive to learning. First, most research reveals that teachers should hold high academic expectations toward their minority students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & All 1999; Vasquez 1988; Trujillo 1986) otherwise those students experience the classroom negatively.

Research also indicates that teachers create a positive or negative

classroom environment by how they respond to a student's culture and language. In Davidson's (1996) two-year ethnographic study of racial/ethnic minority high school students, teachers were viewed positively who were "explicitly supportive of beliefs and values integral to [the] pro-academic identity – of the student" (p. 79). Conversely by ignoring or glossing over an immigrant student's culture and language, instructors can make their students feel "invisible" which, in turn, can create a negative learning situation (Swaminathan and Alfred, 2001-2002). Instructor support and understanding also needs to allay the student's anxiety towards speaking English to create a positive classroom climate. Alfred (2003), Kiang (1992) and Pappamihel (2002) found that a teacher's behavior could exacerbate this anxiety and thus negatively impact the classroom environment. Alfred (2001-2002) best sums up the importance of cultural and linguistic sensitivity in her study of anglophone Caribbean immigrant women. She found that within the postsecondary classroom that "some experienced marginality, alienation, and isolation" (p. 256). This marginality resulted in part "from the behavior of faculty....who initially ignored them in discourse communities and were not sensitive to cultural differences" (p.256).

While there has been some research on the experience of all college students and specific research on minorities and women in regards to faculty and classroom climate. No research to date has looked specifically at the immigrant college student and what role the professor plays in their experience. Are immigrant students like other college students and value the same characteristics in instructors? Are they experiencing the classroom climate positively due, in part, to their professor or are they, like other minorities and women, often being silenced and alienated by the actions of their instructors?

In order to understand how immigrant students are initially experiencing the classroom climate and what role the professor plays in creating that climate, two research questions were at the center of the study. First, how are immigrant students generally experiencing the climate of higher education classrooms? And second, how specifically does the immigrant student's perception of the student/professor relationship influence classroom climate? This study approached these questions through a exploratory qualitative study primarily because "one of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is...that not much has been written about the topic or population being studied, and the researcher seeks to build a picture based on their ideas" (Creswell, 1994, p. 21).

Methods

A qualitative approach reliant on in-depth interviews was employed to conduct this study for two reasons. First, because of the small number of participants, the study could only be exploratory. A second critical reason that this study was exploratory was because of the limited study of this population in higher education. "One of the chief reasons for conducting qualitative study is that the study is exploratory; not much has been written about the topic of population being studied, and the researcher seeks to build a picture based on their ideas" (Creswell, 1994, p. 21).

Participants

Participants in this study were attending an urban university with a diverse population of over 20,000 students. The participants were returning traditional age (18-21) sophomore students who had successfully completed their first college year as well as the required year-long first-year general education class. Sophomores were chosen to ensure that students would have enough college classroom experience to be able to articulate their college classroom climate experiences. Initially, 54 students were identified as eligible, based on the study's definition of the immigrant student articulated earlier, and invited to take part in the study. Of those students contacted, 12 students agreed to participate in the study – 10 female and 2 male.

Of the eight Asian participants in the study, three were ethnic Chinese, two were Vietnamese, one was from Cambodia, one was from Sri Lanka and one was from South Korea. The two Hispanic participants were from Mexico and Guatemala, the one Black participant was from Kenya and the one White participant was from Bosnia. The participants in the study displayed diverse educational and immigration backgrounds as well as varying English fluency levels by migrating at very different ages and entering the K-12 system at both the elementary and secondary levels. But even though they differed in these respects, they were of all of traditional college age (18-21), had all graduated from American high schools and all spoke English as a second language – criteria which has been associated with those immigrants which are the most academically disadvantaged.

Because of the narrowness of the study and the small number of participants and because this research was conducted at only one university, it cannot be broadly generalized to other second language immigrant populations in higher education. Also, it is possible that the limited number of participants who took part in the study may not reflect an adequately broad cross-section of sex, race/ethnicity, language, academic achievement and student majors. In addition, some participants' limited English proficiency could have also impacted the data. Since I conducted both the in-depth interviews in English and I am not proficient in the variety of languages represented, the study may be limited because all of the participants may have not been able to communicate their ideas fully and deeply. Additionally, this study only examined students who had completed their first college year. Thus, the study was not able to determine if immigrant students' perception of the climate of higher education classroom changes or how they themselves change within their college experience. In addition, this study was not able to understand the experiences of students who leave prior to completing their first year.

Procedures

After undergoing the appropriate human subjects review, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted using in depth individual interviews. Development of interview questions was guided by existing literature and exploratory focus groups with the students. In the interviews, the participants were asked generally if their classroom experiences had been positive or negative and what factors contributed to this. Then they were asked to talk about a college class that they particularly enjoyed and what, if anything, the professor did to contribute to this positive learning

experience. Finally, the students were asked to talk about a class that they particularly disliked and again, what, if anything, the professor did to create this negative learning experience. The interview questions are offered below.

1. Tell me about your classroom experiences. Would you say that they have been generally positive or negative? Please explain what factors have contributed to your perception.
2. Please think of a college class that you have taken that you particularly enjoyed. How, if anything did the professor contribute to this positive experience? What specific things did he/she do to create a positive learning environment for you?
3. Please think of a college class that you have taken that you particularly disliked. How, if anything did the professor contribute to this negative experience? What specific things did he/she do to create a negative learning environment for you?

The interviews were open-ended in nature to allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. In order to avoid any potential bias, the researcher who is a faculty member at the university was not known to any of the students, nor was the research an instructor or observer in any of the classroom sin which they were or had enrolled. Additional the interviews were conducted in a neutral location rather than the researcher's office to allow for a more comfortable atmosphere. The researcher used a voice recorder to tape the interviews in a neutral location on campus for both the interviewees and the researcher.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, careful analysis was applied in looking for patterns and reoccurring ideas as it related to classroom climate and the role of the professor in creating that climate. To ensure the accuracy of the data and analysis, the researcher relied on member checking, the process of allowing the interviewees to read the interviews as well as the interpretations from those interviews and make any corrections or address any inaccuracies. As Creswell (1994) advises categories or themes were taken back to the participants to ask whether the conclusions were accurate (p. 158). In addition, an ongoing review from an outside reader also provided an external check of the research process.

Results

Positive Classroom Influences. During the individual interviews, when asked to describe whether their overall classroom college experience had been more positive or negative, eight clearly stated that it had been positive, three were ambivalent about their experience and one student's college classroom experience had been mostly negative. When asked why their experience had been mostly positive, the majority mentioned their professor as the key factor. It appears from the information gained in the interviews, that professors played a critical role in establishing a comfortable and positive learning experience. Mary – all participants were

given pseudonyms – from Guatemala stated that she has enjoyed her professors because they “have been educated to think outside the box so it’s easier for me....” Sarah from Sri Lanka echoed this by emphasizing that the professors weren’t judgmental but rather someone who was “willing to accept you and...your level...and then try to help you, starting from you level.”

These comments as well as the importance of the professor in creating a positive classroom experience were fleshed out much more in the second individual question which asked them to discuss a specific positive classroom experience and what made it positive. Every student, without exception, mentioned the professor in describing their positive classroom experience. In fact, for three it was the number one reason, for four it was the number two reason and for three it was the number three reason. Karen, from Kenya, emphasized the importance of the professor in the following quote.

For me, if I have a good professor, my chances of succeeding are high. So it starts with the professor because that’s the person who I’m feeding information from...rather than the book. I’ve noticed that no matter how much I read the book, [if] there’s no professor, or the professor does not do a good job, I cannot... my chances of passing are not high.

Mary, From Guatemala, supported Karen’s sentiment on the important role the professor plays by stating that “they (professors) have a big role in presenting the classroom. They’re the ones that guide you.”

When asked about what it was about these professors that made the classroom experience positive, there were a variety of answers given. Listed below and explained in the pages that follow are the specific professorial actions (in order of frequency) that made their learning experience positive. It is important to note that often students gave multiple reasons for why their professor had contributed to their positive experience and therefore, far more than just one reason per student participant is identified.

Table 4
Reasons Given for Positive Professor/Student Relationship

Explanation	No. of Responses 12/12 responded
The professor established a personal connection between him/herself and the students within the classroom that established a positive relationship.	7
The professor was available outside of class.	7
The professor explained the material clearly and gave clear, reasonable assignments.	5
The professor seemed to enjoy teaching and was	4

motivated to improve his/her teaching and students' learning.

The professor had high academic expectations for his/her students.	4
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The professor set clear ground rules for mutual respect in the classroom.	3
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Personal connection within the classroom. A significant aspect which seven students highlighted was the fact that their professors created a personal, comfortable atmosphere in the class. The distance between teacher and student was lessened through a number of ways. This could be as simple as using their own personal lives in their teaching. Karen of Kenya stated that "Professors that have had an impact on me are those that use some of their personal experiences and analogies in teaching. It makes me connect with him or her a little bit better...." For Alina, from Mexico, it was as simple as the professor making sure that all students were included in class activities. Alina stated that "she (the professor) would ask a question and then if she noticed you had not spoken throughout the whole class then she would ask you to read or to answer the questions. It was like you were not afraid to answer even if it was wrong...." While using personal experiences and intentionally including students within the class learning involve little personal risk for the professor, for Mary, from Guatemala, the professor went beyond this and became open and vulnerable with her students. Mary stated that her professor began the class by sharing personal things about herself that related to the topic that they would be studying. Mary mentioned that "she was like, 'I'm really open and you can be open, too.'"

Another way that professors personally connected with their students was displaying empathy and understanding towards them in what some would consider insignificant ways. Alice, of China, reiterated a time in her class when a student spilt her juice in class. "She (the student) kept saying sorry to her and she said, 'No you don't have say sorry, things happen.' She like said, 'Stop saying sorry. It's okay.' It was really, really impressive." Similarly, both Tara and Yali noted that their professors empathized with the academic pressures they encountered. Yali stated that "he understood that most of us were freshmen and we weren't used to getting up that early." Tara mentioned that the way her professor talked was "very comforting and she...It's just like she was trying to tell the freshman not to worry much. You know. We'll take it easy on you. We won't grade that hard. This is how it's going to work...."

It is clear from most of these students' examples that the professor through his or her willingness to share about him/herself and/or exercise understanding towards students created a dynamic in the class where students felt a personal connection with their professor. This was also Candy's experience. She stated that she felt comfortable in the class because "you know them like friends and you feel comfortable to talk to your friends...." For Harriet, from Korea, it was not only a connection beyond the typical teacher/student one but also one of feeling appreciated and recognized by the teacher. Her teacher had actually visited her parents' store and recognized Harriet from that context as well. In addition, Harriet stated that "I felt like I was appreciated in that class because, like, I

would do good on the quizzes and so my TA would notice that. So, I felt like I was appreciated and that, you know, I kind of stood out.”

Professor availability. Besides this personal connection, most students also felt strongly that professor availability outside of class was critical to a positive classroom experience. This availability ranged from being accessible after class, by e-mail or through office hours to conducting extra study sessions on the weekend or evenings for students. Betty, from China, related how the professor’s extra time outside of class helped her succeed. “...when I went and talked to her, she actually...we went through my problem and she helped me go through that problem and pointed me to a direction that was positive. And, I ended up doing a good job on the paper or assignment....I was actually talking to her for more than an hour, talking about things.” Alina echoed Betty’s sentiments.

The professor was really available. She was really...if we e-mailed her, she would e-mail you back. And before every time we had an exam...she would have an extra class....And, it wasn’t really like a class, but she would cover what was on the exam and if you had any questions right then, you were answered. So, I think that was very helpful.

Clear explanations and assignments. Besides the personal connection professors created through class and outside contact with students, five students also felt that the professor’s ability to explain material clearly and assign clear achievable assignments/expectations contributed to their positive experience. Eric, from Bosnia, explained how his Anatomy professor made the material accessible through clearly prioritizing the information.

Well, anatomy itself has a lot of content...then the lectures, there was a lot of...content so he made it positive by emphasizing what we needed to know as opposed to what [was secondary]. For example, [he clarified] what kind of things were going to be a major part of the exam as opposed to what kinds of things were only going to have a few questions.

Sarah, from Sri Lanka, reinforced Eric’s sentiment that the professor clearly organized the material in order of importance. “...The way that the teacher was talking it was like you know that these are the things that you had to learn and this is what it is....Like here’s the topic and these are the things you had to know....” Tara, from Vietnam, also stated that the teacher’s constant use of examples helped make the material clear as well. So it for the above students it was important that the professor prioritize the information for them and also amplify it with examples. Karen from Kenya clarified further how the professor helps her learn.

Karen: [the professor] has to make it [the material] understandable. He has to simplify it in such a way that I can understand it.

Researcher: What does that look like? Can you give me an example of what would...does that mean he puts nice charts on the board that show the relationships of ideas or is

it because he asks questions in class? I mean, what is it?

Karen: Okay. It's highly interactive, you know, having [to] give well detailed notes and also, you know, encouraging students to work in small groups 'cause I do very well with that....engaging us in questionnaires: what do you think about this? You know, making sure that some, at least some people say something in class. I like to get my ideas out there, but if he can't initiate that, for me to want to say something [then] I cannot learn well.

So, for Karen, the use of a variety of learning methods seemed to help make the material understandable. This need for clarity in the presentation of material also translated to the assignments as well. Yali, from Cambodia, stated that her professor took the time in class to help the students tackle their assignments. She elaborated that, "he gave us a lot of time both in class and in mentor session to go over our work...." For her, this really helped her understand the material.

High academic expectations. Four students also felt that the professor's high academic expectations for them also contributed to their positive experience. Sarah, from Sri Lanka, stated that her class was so difficult that the students were compelled to form study groups which made the experience extremely positive. She further amplified that "...even though the teacher didn't ask us to work in groups, what he wanted was us to work in groups because he made the methods so tough." Eric, from Bosnia, clarified how academic rigor makes a class worthwhile. "It's a hard class and you have to put a lot of hard work into it, but in the end you do go to class looking forward to it because you know you're going to learn something really interesting." Betty, from China, further explained how a class with academic rigor made learning meaningful. She stated that

...I wasn't actually looking forward to the class in the fall term because it was so hard because of what she (the professor) expected. But, as I worked harder and harder, I actually really liked the class and I feel that the class had meaning....

Concerned with improving teaching and learning. Besides academic rigor, the same number of students felt that having a professor who clearly enjoyed teaching and was committed to improving their teaching and students' learning contributed to a positive classroom experience. Both Tara and Eric stated that seeing that their professors were excited about the material they were teaching helped them be excited about it as well. Alice, from China, stated that her professor regularly checked with students about how they were doing. For example,

she was always concerned whether you're doing well on the assignments....She asks who started and who hasn't started the homework....she started asking quite often at the beginning, but at the end she didn't ask that much because when you have problems, students get to have a chance to e-mail her.

Candy, from Vietnam, noted that her professor was not only concerned

about her students' development but her own as well. She states that "she let us, like, let her grow" through regularly soliciting suggestions from students through e-mail on how to improve the class. Tara, from Vietnam, reiterated Candy's sentiment that her professor's effort to improve herself contributed to her positive classroom experience.

Established mutual respect. Three students also noted that their positive classroom experience had occurred because the professor clearly demonstrated respect for the students' experiences and in two students' cases clearly set out guidelines of respect amongst the students themselves as well as the professor. This produced an atmosphere of openness towards diverse viewpoints. Eric, of Bosnia, stated that his anatomy professor welcomed students to share their outside personal experiences that related to the material at hand. For Mary and Alice, the professor deliberately set up class expectations around respect. Alice related the specific actions her professor took.

She started the class with just a simple speech. It's like introducing herself to the class. And....she asks people to write down what they are sensitive about. What other people can tell when they look at you. And that surprises me because everyone puts what they, the most sensitive things on it. And she wrote it out and nobody knows who wrote things and stuff. She just wrote it out so people might be sensitive about the topics and gives us background, like we try to avoid talking about things and be negative about it. So that made the whole class very positive in a way.

Mary, from Guatemala, had a similar experience where "there was no limit as long as you weren't like intentionally hurting somebody....I don't know, it just seemed like all of us had our own views but still knew about others and we kind of respected that."

Negative Classroom Influences. As with the positive experience, when asked to describe a specific negative classroom experience, it seemed that the professor's contribution was equally significant with 11 out of the 12 students specifically identifying a class that contained a negative experience with a professor. Five students gave the professor as the main reason that they had a negative experience. Once again, note that even though eleven out of twelve students responded that professors had contributed negatively to their learning, those eleven students often gave multiple reasons. The specific reasons given as to how the professor contributed to this negative experience are listed on the following page and will be explained in the pages that follow.

Table 5
Reasons Given for Negative Professor/Student Relationship

Explanation	No. of Responses 11/12 responded
The professor's explanation of material and assignments was unclear and grading expectations were vague and	6

inconsistent.

The professor intimidated the students so that they felt insignificant and/or stupid.	4
The professor was unavailable or unwilling to help students outside of class.	4
The professor covered too much content too quickly and had unreasonable work expectations.	3
Cultural and/or linguistic barriers existed between the professor and student.	2

Unclear explanations and expectations. For half of the students, the professors' lack of clarity significantly contributed to their negative classroom experience. This lack of clarity first connected to the professor's explanation of the material. For many of the students this meant that while the professor presented the material, he/she did not organize it in such a way that made it coherent for the students. Karen summed this up.

She knew the material but there's one thing I've to come to realize that to be a teacher you really have to know how to get the material across. That's part of understanding that, no matter how hard it is you have to break it down in steps to make sure that it is understood. And that's why I did not connect with her.

Several other students reiterated a similar idea that the professor presented the material more globally instead of breaking the material down into discrete digestible chunks and because of this the students were not able to comprehend the material. Harriet, in relating her negative experience stated that "it was just her way of teaching, and it just didn't fit what the students wanted because she kind of said things in like a round about way." Betty further expounded that part of making the material understandable was to apply it in class. She commented that "I don't think that he goes over the material very well. We don't do any problems in the class. He expects you to just do it by yourself and look at the answer book." Yali also stressed that the professor's organization of the material within the allotted class time was critical to her understanding. She stated that "his lectures weren't very cohesive. So, it would take forever for him to present his lectures. I mean I don't think he ever finished any of his lectures."

When students asked questions to try to gain clarity, it didn't help either because the professor didn't or couldn't answer the question. An exchange with Karen from Kenya illustrated this.

Karen: "...she would explain but I would get lost and if I back tracked and asked her how did you get here, the way she would answer your questions were not the way you expected her to answer.

Researcher: So her initial lectures were confusing?

Karen: Yeah.

Researcher: And when you'd ask for clarification, did you feel like your questions were not really answered?

Karen: They weren't answered the way....She didn't give me back what I was looking for. And I know it came down to that teaching technique.

Because of the professor's seeming inability to answer his questions, Eric lost confidence in the professor. He stated that "She is bad at explaining things and then if you asked her questions, she wouldn't really answer them. She would kind of start to answer them and then she would confuse herself...because she would stop and then she would like try to think about it and she would say, 'Oh, no it's not that,' and she like, erases something off the board."

The professor's inability to convey the material clearly also manifested in unclear assignments and expectations. Harriet from Korea stated that

When [her professor] talked about something, we wouldn't really understand what she was talking about. When she assigned us homework, you know, like assignments, we would all be confused about what exactly she wanted, like in a paper, what do you want us to write. You know, how many annotated bibliographies do you want us to write? We were kind of confused. She wasn't really clear about the due date for this.

Not only were professors unclear on the assignment expectations but there was also a disjuncture between what was taught in class and what was assigned or tested. Betty, from China, stated "he just lectured on what the chapter was about, but I think it was not in a very specific way. But in his tests, he looks for specific stuff and if you don't actually have the wording right, he takes off points." Candy, from Vietnam, felt that the assignments her in class weren't clear but also were not weighted fairly. She reiterated a time when she did an extra credit assignment which was worth only 1 credit which she did not do well on because she didn't have enough opinions in the piece – something she wasn't clear on from the initial assignment. Her closing comment poignantly summed up her frustration. "It's only 1 credit but why did she make it so hard?" Besides not weighting the work fairly, Candy also found that the professor's grading was inconsistent. She stated that

she didn't clarify what to expect on points. Sometimes she gives 5 and sometimes she gives 10 and I don't know why. You know when I brought back my exam and asked her, then she saw something and then that changed my grade up. If I didn't recognize my points, then I would have failed.

Intimidation and lack of respect. Another aspect of disrespect which contributed to four students' negative classroom experience was the attitude the professor displayed towards the students in terms of their intellectual abilities. Some students felt that their ideas were not respected. Mary, from Guatemala, related her experience in this area:

Mary: ...In the beginning it seemed like we were going to

take short stories and interpret them, how we saw them, and that was going to be the lesson. Like, read these stories and interpret them how you see them. But every time we go have a class discussion, there's always one way she'll, that she sees it and she'll make the comments. She makes you feel stupid.

Researcher: Like what kind of things will she say?

Mary: She'll be like, what does this line mean and you'll say, "Oh, this is what it means." And she'll be like, "Not that's not what it means." And it's like, that's how I interpreted it.

While Mary's ideas weren't respected in the classroom, Yali was made to feel stupid because she didn't know what the professor thought she should. When she went to see her art history professor about a paper that she wanted to improve, she felt both intellectually inadequate as well as dismissed. She shared that "he made me feel like I should have known."

Karen similarly experienced the feeling that she was "stupid". She explains that "you would ask a question and she (the professor) would either respond 'That's a silly question.' 'You can look that up in the book.' 'That's too simple.' 'You ought to know that by now' and she would also get mad." Harriet, from Korea, felt actual fear towards her teacher because of his inflexibility and unpredictability. She shared that

He was...controlling.... He was this big guy and so, kind of demanding..., and maybe, not even fair, kind of?...It's not he wasn't fair. He kind of acted in a way that, since he was the mentor, he was always right and what he said is correct....We were so intimidated. All of us were kind of intimidated, kind of even frightened....It was so weird. Some days he would be nice to us and the next day he would be like so pissed off.

Karen was equally intimidated because "you know, it kind of makes you fear her [the professor] because you don't want to be put out there in front of everyone and be told your question is stupid and such." Once again, the degree of alienation the students experienced in the class varied by degree, from frustration to actual fear, depending on the level of perceived intimidation.

Professor's unavailability or unwillingness to help. Another aspect which four of the students found problematic was the professor's lack of availability both in attitude and time. For most students who experienced this, this lack of availability was an attitude that professors projected in class. Alina, from Mexico, never approached her professors because "when a professor is available, she encourages you to see her after class, to e-mail you questions. And these professors just kind of focused on the subject and never really asked if you had any questions...." Candy, from Vietnam, also sensed this unwillingness to talk about an assignment so she didn't even approach her professor. Bill, on the other hand, did e-mail his professor when he was having difficulties with the way the class was being taught.

Bill: The students...would never ask a question because [they] don't know the subject. I don't know what he is talking about so I can't ask a question. Does he know we are there or not? I try to e-mail him and talk about it.

Researcher: Did he respond?

Bill: He kind of responded but the way he was giving the lecture stayed the same.

Researcher: So he didn't listen to your e-mail because he didn't change his behavior?

Bill: I guess.

Yali also tried to talk to her professor about a paper she had written. She shared that "...I wanted to ask him about 'oh what is this that you wrote because I couldn't read it.' I got a B on it. 'Oh,' he said, 'that's a good enough grade.' So I felt like he didn't want to take the time to actually go over the paper. So, I was kind of bothered by that."

Overwhelming content and work expectations. Another area that contributed to students' negative classroom experience was the unrealistic classroom expectations of the professor. These expectations surfaced in the amount of content the professor presented, the fast pace at which she/he presented, and unrealistic grade expectations. Bill commented that "the subject was Biology I and when he tried to teach, you have to memorize all different kinds of names of plants and special types of animals....[I] cannot memorize it. Too much to memorize...whole sections....almost the whole book....It's just too much for me." Alina, from Mexico, felt that her professors moved through the material too fast for her to grasp it. She stated that "it seems to me that it was going really fast and I had no previous knowledge of that so it was kind of hard to stay on the same page." Betty from China, felt that her professor expected too much. "I think he grades too hard. Like, even if you have a general idea of what the answer is he doesn't give you that many points....he wants something really specific."

Cultural and linguistic barriers. Finally, for two students, culture and language posed problems for them in their relationship with their professors. For Bill, from China, it was the professor's insensitivity towards or ignorance of the language needs of his ESL students. The following interview excerpt illustrated this.

Researcher: Was there anything about his teaching that made you dislike the class?

Bill: He talked too fast....and used too many big words....The classroom is 300 students...huge...and he just...he kind of ignored the people from the other countries. He just focused on the students who know English pretty well.

Researcher: Oh...can you give me an example of when you realized that? When did you realize that he was ignoring students who didn't have English as their first language?

How did you know that?

Bill: By his way...by his way to talk...When he's giving a lecture, he just always used those big words and [I] don't know what they mean. I think if he is trying to teach, why doesn't he just break down those big words in a simple way? Does using those big words make him feel better?

While the difficulties that Bill had could be attributed to simple ignorance on the part of the professor as to the needs of ESL learners, Mary's experience shows a complete disregard for the cultural sensitivities of her students. Mary related that

My friend took her same class and there was a story where they used the word "nigger" ...in the story....now I can know that's ...not ...verbally calling somebody that, so I can see why that's literature.... But in the class discussions if there's an African American next to you and you're saying "nigger" all the time....I can understand how that can hurt. And she (my friend) raises her hand and she's just like, "Can we not use the word 'nigger' you know, like out loud. I understand how it's in the book but can we change it?" And she (the professor) was like, "No, that's what it is. That's how literature is." And she refused to change it for her knowing that it really, really hurt her.

The immigrant students were clearly frustrated or offended when their language needs or cultural identities were not respected.

Discussion

This study raises more questions than it answers. It appears the professor is a significant player in establishing classroom climate and in making the atmosphere conducive to learning for immigrant students when they enter college. This is clear in the number of students who stated that overall their classroom experience had been positive and when asked why it had been positive they attributed it primarily to their professor – not their fellow classmates, not by content or pedagogy, and not by class size or type which are the other key players in creating classroom climate. Likewise, when asked about a negative classroom experience the majority articulated that it was due to the professor.

Similar to the studies that have been conducted with all college students, what immigrant students value most are professors that create a personal connection involving mutual respect with their students both inside and outside the classroom and professors that clearly enjoy teaching and want to improve their practice. In this study, the most critical area that contributed to a positive classroom experience was the professor's attitude and commitment to the students and his/her teaching. For seven students, it was the professor's personal connection with the students both inside and outside of class that made their experience positive. In addition, for four students it was important that the professor be committed to an improvement of his/her teaching as well as the students' learning. Conversely, immigrant students had negative experiences when the professor created a distance between him/herself either partially through making students feel intimidated or through insensitivity to the students'

cultural and linguistic identities. What seems to emerge from those data is that, for these immigrant students, it was critical that the professor was genuinely concerned about students and their learning in the classroom.

Also, like all college students, immigrant students perceive clear organization and delivery of the material as well as reasonable learning expectations positively. For five participants, the professor's clear delivery and explanation of material and assignments seemed critical to their positive experience. Conversely, for six participants, the professor's unclear explanations and assignments were reported to contribute to their negative classroom experience. Another factor that seemed to contribute to the negative classroom experience for three students was their professor's unreasonable expectations in terms of workload as well as the amount of content covered. Like all college students as well as minority students, immigrant students want their professors to have high academic expectations and to be easily accessible both inside and outside of the classroom. However, unlike other minorities, it doesn't seem as important that the professor overtly recognize an immigrant student's cultural and linguistic background in order to create a positive classroom experience. Instead, it seems critical that professors display a sensitivity towards the cultural knowledge and linguistic needs of their students.

So, for professors to create a positive learning environment for immigrant students, it seems essential that they create a personal connection with their students and genuinely care about their learning. This commitment should surface in their commitment to excellence in teaching, clear delivery of the content, sensitivity to the students' cultural and linguistic needs and high expectation for academic achievement in the classroom.

Implications for Practice and Further Study

While these findings seem to coincide with much research on classroom climate for other college student populations, there may be differences in both degree and kind with immigrant students. As with all college students, professors need to demonstrate an ethic of caring and personal connection with their students in order to create a positive classroom environment. Establishing a personal connection with immigrant students however, could be different than establishing one with most college students. As the previous literature hints, most college students see student interaction in the class as one way to establish that personal connection. This seems to not be this case with immigrant students as may be reflected in the fact that many immigrant students are quiet in class and may be reticent to join in groups either because of lack of cultural understanding and/or language barriers. And unlike other studies with minorities and women, the students in this study did not express the feeling that they were being silenced in the classroom. Exactly what is the best way to establish a personal connection with immigrant college students? Perhaps, faculty should connect one on one with these students either through office hours or other technology such as e-mail. Further study is needed to answer this question.

Another aspect which could be different in kind is providing clear organization and reasonable expectations on content and assignments. Professors need to present information in a way that is well organized.

However, with immigrant students this presentation seems to require certain elements. First, the material needs to be scaffolded in such a way that students can recognize what is important to know and what is not as important. This may be because immigrants are operating in a second language and may not yet have the proficiency to distinguish between key material and supporting material. In addition the material needs to be applied either to examples or with problems so students can see it "working". Again, this may be because immigrants need to compensate for operating in their second language or because they lack cultural capital. Again, because of immigrant students' differing level of cultural knowledge and linguistic ability, an assignment which might appear reasonable to a mainstream college student may appear unreasonable or unclear to an immigrant student either due to cultural or linguistic limitations. Both immigrant and minority students want to be held to high academic expectations but does that mean the same for all college students? Some professors when they know immigrants are operating in a second language will expect less of them and hold them to a lower standard. This misguided empathy could negatively impact the immigrant student's classroom experience because the students know they not expected to "do" as much. How does one hold immigrant students to a high academic expectation but not overwhelm them? This study cannot answer this question but it is one that should be considered.

Also, again like most college students, for immigrant students positive classroom climate is attributed in part to professors who provide a climate of respect. But are the ways in which professors establish respect the same for both of these populations? Perhaps not, since for some immigrant students a negative classroom experience was attributed in part to a professor who intimidated students or for whom cultural and/or linguistic barriers existed. What exactly does this mean? It would seem that professors would need to be culturally and linguistically sensitive to the perspectives and needs of their immigrant students. This additional knowledge would not be a necessary requirement for mainstream college students. This could be very challenging in some respects given the diversity of immigrant groups in any given classroom. Developing faculty sensitivity through the examination of faculties' own cultural assumptions would go a long way towards the development of empathy to their students "ways of knowing."

Institutions of higher learning could aid professors in becoming more aware of immigrant students in their classrooms and how they can create a welcoming environment for them. Various workshops could be offered that examine challenges students face in terms of second language challenges and differences in cultural understanding and communication patterns. With the dramatic increase in this population in college, it is important faculty development opportunities be given to help not only professors but their immigrant students as well.

Attention to these aspects in teaching will help all students, not just immigrants. But for immigrants, exploring these areas more deeply and making the necessary adjustments could have an even more significant effect on their experience in the classroom because for them, the professor seems to be THE central factor in their classroom experience unlike minority and mainstream students for which professors seem to play an

important part in establishing classroom climate but peers, class type, and content also contribute significantly to the classroom experience.

Conclusion

With immigrant student numbers approaching nearly 25 percent of the undergraduate population in the United States, significant attention needs to be paid to this population and their college experience. The implications from this study indicate that professors have a significant responsibility in creating a positive classroom experience. More research needs to be done in order to find out in what ways immigrants are similar or dissimilar in the way they experience classroom climate and the specific role the professor plays in it. What does it mean for immigrant students when their professor displays an ethic of caring? How is this ethic of caring demonstrated? What does it look like when professors present information that is clear and assignments that are approachable for immigrant students? Are there specific organization of presentation of material or instructions that are helpful? How can professors demonstrate respect for immigrant students? This study has only just begun to answer these questions.

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Becky Boesch, is an Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Graduate School of Education, Portland State University. She can be reached at Becky Boesch [drbb@pdx.edu]

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