The literature on minority and indigenous children reports that those who move from one geographic location to another, whether as immigrants, migrants, or refugees, often struggle in school, if they have access to education at all. In urban educational settings, this struggle is more pronounced, as large numbers of children endeavor to attain the levels of educational achievement deemed necessary for their success.

Wealth, Education, and Minority Education

Worldwide, 263 million children and youth are estimated to be unenrolled in school, a large percentage of whom are from ethnic, linguistic, or religious minorities and from low-income households. Most of these live in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and West Asia; and a disproportionate number are girls. Depending on the country and region in which they live, educational quality, outcomes, and resources vary widely for these children.

Too often, schools in impoverished, urban, or isolated regions face an array of difficulties. A disproportionate number of minorities or immigrant groups attend lower-quality schools, and these schools tend to also have less-experienced teachers. Migrants with language barriers also tend to do less well in school, and few of their teachers are bilingual. In the United States (U.S.), in both public and private education, minorities are finding
themselves with even less opportunity to interact with mainstream students than in the past, which is not an encouraging sign. 8

Race and Poverty in the United States

The United States is a nation of immigrants like few others, and the contrasts between racial groups are often stark. 9 For example, almost half of the children in the United States live in low-income families; and almost half of those live below the poverty level. Approximately one-third of Caucasian and Asian children, but about two-thirds of African-American and Hispanic children, live in low-income families. 80 Poverty is a predictor, though not itself a causal factor, of difficulties in education, and urban and rural centers tend to have high proportions of students living in poverty.

Urban schools are increasingly composed of poor children, many of whom are immigrants. Immigrant children often suffer experiences similar to those of disadvantaged children. 10 In addition, immigrant children need to acclimate to a new culture while reconciling the loss of the only home they may have known; some need to heal from emotional and physical scars caused by having to flee a war-torn country, abuse, or harsh conditions as they leave their homes and arrive in another country.

The Council of the Great City Schools, a large organization located in Washington, D.C., works with more than 11,000 urban schools and some seven million students in the United States. Their statistics show that nearly 71 percent of their students qualify for free lunch programs—a service the U.S. Government provides to the poorest children in the country. Forty percent are Hispanic, 29 percent are black, and 19 percent are white. English language learners constitute 17 percent of the student population. 12 Educational statistics, corrected for income level, show that race still makes a difference in access to resources that ensure academic achievement.

Immigrants and Education

Historically, depending on their country of origin, skin color, language, schooling, and perceived economic benefit, immigrants and refugees have been either welcomed or considered a burden by the country to which they are relocating. In more recent times, as conversations about legal and illegal immigration have intensified worldwide, negative perceptions have increased. Looking specifically at immigrant children in the United States, the data show that they are more likely to be poor, to have less-educated parents, and to have more language difficulties than native-born children. For example, in 2007, 55 percent of immigrant children, compared to 41 percent of children of native-born citizens, were living in low-income families. 10 Regarding levels of education, data from 2012 showed that “29 percent of foreign-born children with a foreign-born parent, 24 percent of native children with a foreign-born parent, and 6 percent of native children with native parents had a parent with less than a high school diploma or equivalent credential.” 14 This is important, as the education level of the parents has been found to be the single best predictor of a child’s educational achievement. 15

One-fourth (24 percent) of children (ages birth to 17) in the United States today have at least one foreign-born parent. 16 This translates into a similar percentage of children in schools who have at least one parent born overseas, 17 a number that is much higher in urban areas. In some of the more international cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami, 50 to 70 percent of students are of immigrant heritage. 18 And because of the nature of most cities, where those who have more money move to the suburbs, many of the urban schools have extremely high concentrations of students of color, many of whom are immigrants from low-income families.

What Works for Immigrant Children

Fortunately, some schools have achieved successes with these children and are beginning to understand what works. And what works for the urban poor in general is not so different from what works for immigrant students living in urban centers. The good news is that urban children are just as capable of academic success as students elsewhere. As one educator working in inner-city Detroit explained, “While many lower-income kids of color require different kinds of schools to succeed than do their majority middle-class suburban counterparts, these students have demonstrated that they are perfectly capable of strong academic learning and moving on to post-secondary studies.” 19

What follows is an analysis of strategies that work in urban schools with high poverty, high diversity, and a significant number of immigrant students. These principles or approaches that have universal application are grouped around some of the underlying causes of failure that minority students may either bring with them to the classroom or face upon arrival: issues with school administration, self-confidence, motivation, failure, curriculum relevance, and culture. If we can address these concerns, we can make school a much friendlier place for urban students, especially immigrants and minority children.

Solve School Leadership Issues

Improving education for all students begins with schools and school leaders, not with the students, who are not to blame for their
circumstances. Urban school districts are notorious for having issues with corruption, absentee teachers, and other administrative concerns. Leadership problems create a difficult environment for all students, but more so for immigrants and children of color, who are often already on the edge in a school system that frequently does not accommodate their needs. Leadership is key to enhancing the schooling experience for immigrant students. While Adventist education may do better than large public systems in the area of leadership, there is still room for improvement. Here are a few areas for consideration:

A safe, orderly, well-disciplined environment. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs makes the need for a safe environment clear, but too often school environment is not given enough emphasis in urban schools. Safety and order are basic prerequisites for learning.

Strong administrative leadership. If students are to do well in school, they need to see an administration focused on their needs and possessing a clear understanding of how to help them learn. Many school reformers include in this the ability to choose teachers and terminate the ones who do not do well.

Professional, caring teachers. Teachers of children in urban and underserved areas need to feel a sense of responsibility for their students, and also self-efficacy about their own abilities. They need to participate in staff-development programs relating to school improvement. Committed, caring teachers, ideally at least some of whom are from the students’ own ethnic group, have been found to be a key requirement for successful schools.

Build Self-Respect and/or Self-Confidence

Many minority and immigrant students, especially males, may not have had good role models or positive experiences in the past. Past failures may further deteriorate self-confidence in the school setting.

Adult relationships and school family. Multiple studies in resilience literature suggest that a sense of belonging is the only significant predictor of school success. It has also been shown that relationships with teachers or school personnel can replace missing family support and role models. Finding ways of helping students belong, such as advisory groups, is an important part of helping at-risk students succeed. This allows for personal advice on how to do well in life, not just in school. This is especially critical for immigrant students, who may be exposed to the new culture for the first time.

Cooperative learning. The use of cooperative learning structures is especially powerful for urban minority students. This may include peer tutoring or other forms of working together that build respect and teamwork, rather than competition.

Parental involvement. When possible, parents should be encouraged to participate in school events and activities. However, immigrant parents may find this especially difficult. Language, education, and work schedules are significant factors; some may even feel inadequate, shy, or intimidated because of their minimal education background. Schools can encourage participation by providing translators and translated resources for parents who do not speak the language of instruction, and by learning how the cultures represented perceive the relationship among teachers, students, and parents. Schools can also engage the family and community through partnerships, not only for apprenticeships or volunteering opportunities, mentoring, or special interest clubs but also for building stronger relationships among students, teachers, and parents.

Increase Motivation

For many students, the traditional values of family, church, and school have shifted to social and peer values. This shift results in school being irrelevant to students’ lives, and it means that the motivation to work hard and do well in school is lacking and needs to be overtly explained and inculcated. Motivation for some immigrant students may be an even greater challenge, depending on their background. Thus, an increased emphasis on nurturing interest is necessary to determine the reason for the lack of motivation. For some students, the underlying causes of lack of interest in school result from the negative experiences and traumas experienced in their home country prior to relocating. Here are a few suggestions for increasing motivation:

Rhetoric. Talk to students about achieving success. For example, teach students about a work ethic by putting up posters, slogans, and signs that communicate tips for success. Show them and help them experience the relationship between effort and achievement by verbally recognizing their hard work. For students whose parents did not go far in school, the only place to get ideas about how to do well in school and in life may be the classroom.

Religion. Faith truly does motivate achievement. Contrary to the public stereotype that Christians are less academically proficient than nonreligious people, students in Christian schools in general, and Adventist schools in particular, have traditionally done better than students in public schools. In reports from various studies, Adventist students not only did well, they did better than...
their ability level would have predicted, suggesting that there is a link between religion and academic motivation.

The study by Jeynes showed clearly that the achievement advantage of religious students over nonreligious students holds whether or not the children attend religious schools. Thus, there is no support for the argument that religious schools produce better results only because they are small and private. Religious students who went to public schools still did better than their nonreligious classmates.

Feedback. Like anyone else, students respond well to monitoring and feedback. Some researchers are therefore urging teachers to do more formative assessments in addition to testing, and less teaching. Of course, what these researchers mean is that students do better when they have multiple opportunities to try something, coupled with feedback on how well they have done, ideally including time to make corrections before their knowledge is subjected to grading.

Incentives. School success takes time to achieve. While some feel that incentives reinforce a “pay to perform” attitude and should therefore be avoided altogether, sometimes students need rewards along the way because they have trouble waiting until the end of the semester to see their progress. And for those who are not motivated by school, other types of incentives or reinforcement may be needed in the absence of the joy of learning for its own sake. Providing appropriate incentives can help get students started on the path to success.

Trust. Teachers must provide ample evidence that they believe in their students. They should also design opportunities and activities to build trust among students. Peer mentoring programs help students build confidence and learn to be reliable in their responsibilities toward each other. Adult mentoring programs provide students with individuals in their lives who can listen, encourage, and push them to succeed.

Break the School Culture of Failure
Not all immigrants experience failure or failing schools, but many schools have low expectations of immigrants and minority students, and over time, this can begin to affect students’ expectations for themselves. Curriculum and instructional approaches employed by the school can perpetuate these expectations. In some schools, there is an overemphasis on basic skills, which can stimulate feelings of hopelessness regarding catching up or doing well. English-language learners are often grouped with weaker or slower students, even though their ability may be much greater than what they are able to demonstrate because of their lack of vocabulary. Breaking the culture of low expectations is possible, and the following have proved effective in this regard:

High expectations. Students who are caught in a rut of failure often expect teachers to lower the bar so that they can succeed. What they need, rather, is consistently high expectations, along with creative ways to help them achieve appropriate goals.

Scaffolded support for learning. Students lacking skills need support to develop them. Computer-assisted instruction can be used to supplement class instruction. Modeling, peer tutoring, and flipped classroom instruction are additional ways of supporting learning. Language learners, regardless of language, will need easier materials, with a lot of pictures, to help them build vocabulary and concepts in the different academic fields.

Test-taking skills. Students who do not do well on standardized tests may
need specific instruction in test-taking skills and activities to reduce test-taking anxiety. Tests are notoriously culturally biased, and immigrant students are at a disadvantage when it comes to standardized testing, especially. Some schools simply emphasize alternatives to testing, while other schools choose to teach test-taking skills specifically, explaining that doing well on standardized tests requires a special kind of knowledge that they might not get in their other classes but that is important to know. Developing a specific skill. Scores of books and movies have been made about individual school success stories revolving around students learning a skill: chess, calculus, writing, or by participating in extracurricular clubs such as Pathfinders where students can earn honors for developing specific skills. The implication is that if students can learn to do this one difficult thing, they will develop the self-discipline and commitment to do well in other areas of their lives. It does not seem to matter what the skill is—there seems to be some truth to the assumption. Success seems to break the culture of failure.

Dismantling ability grouping. Ability grouping, or tracking as it is often called, where brighter students are grouped together and given more challenging course work and weaker students are grouped and given “easier” courses, is a problem for nearly all students. In some instances, poorer-performing students are steered early into a nonacademic track. Tracking has been shown to reinforce the culture of failure, providing students who need the most help with the weakest teachers and removing peer-role models of success. This will not motivate achievement or provide opportunities for improvement.

Make the Curriculum Relevant

In many parts of the world, the regular school curriculum not only often focuses on events determined by the majority culture and rooted in the country’s colonial past, it also frequently shields students from learning how to function in real-life settings. In many parts of the world, the regular school curriculum not only often focuses on events determined by the majority culture and rooted in the country’s colonial past, it also frequently shields students from learning how to function in real-life settings.
strengths and weaknesses of the specific students, but in the end, they must be able to hold their own in the ways that society measures success: on standardized tests, in the college classroom, and on the job.

Breaking down the concept of “children of color.” Whitmire suggests that blacks and Hispanics need to be taught differently and not lumped together as “children of color.” He explains:

“At successful all-black schools, school staffs build cultures based on social justice and employ highly structured curricula that emphasize verbal instruction. . . .

“At successful Hispanic schools, you are more likely to see a school culture based on connections to family with teachers employing an unstructured curriculum emphasizing visual instruction.” 54 This is a concept that clearly needs further study and experimentation. In a highly diverse setting, we cannot afford to pretend that all students need the same things, given what we know about learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Appropriate language. English-language learners, typically immigrant students, may need different types of materials than those who speak the native language(s). Poor readers may need a greater quantity of easier materials with pictures that will help them bridge the gap from where they are to where they need to be. Language is key to school success, and improving language skills will often improve other skills, such as math. 55 This is an imperative for immigrant students.

Reduce Cultural Conflict

Many students, especially immigrant children, find a large gap between their home culture and the one they experience at school. Because culture is rarely talked about—we presume that everyone knows certain things—minority and immigrant students are often expected to know things they have never heard, seen, or experienced. Sometimes this gap is more of a conflict, where school values contradict values learned at home. 56 Majority culture must not be set as the norm; standards can be articulated from universal values and principles for living such as fairness, equality, empathy, cooperation, and others that have a place in most cultures.

Teaching culture overtly. Many minority students do not come to school with the set of social skills expected for a privileged-class lifestyle. Immigrant children often bring totally different worldviews to their new homes and educational settings. Students need to know that their own culture is not bad but that they need to learn a second culture in order to be successful in the mainstream job market of their current environment. Becoming multicultural is a tool they can use for success. According to Doug Ross, “When you think about it, it’s not surprising that expecting poor children living in class-segregated communities to flourish in a middle-class [privileged-class] world would require they be taught how to do it and given the chance to practice in real middle-class education and work settings. Schools that focus only on the 3 Rs, and are not organized to teach such beliefs and behaviors, consistently fail to produce students who meet the broader community’s expectations of graduation and post-secondary success.” 57

Culturally appropriate teaching methods and curricula. Differing approaches that favor the cultural preferences of the students will meet with more success than textbook methods. Schools cannot provide every child with a teacher from his or her culture, even though evidence suggests that this is helpful to their progress. 58 Including celebrations of students’ cultures and guests from a variety of ethnic groups could at least help to increase the relevance for all learners and, therefore, increase immigrant children’s interest in succeeding in a new environment.

Reducing prejudice. Celebrate the cultures that are found in your classroom. Provide opportunities for students to share their cultures with the rest of the class. Design materials and activities to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice. Discuss conflict and how to deal with it peacefully. Teach equity and social justice, and look for opportunities to practice them both in the classroom and in the community. 59

Conclusion

As Christian educators, we need to celebrate all learners and seek to educate according to the immediate needs of our students. As student populations—especially in urban centers—grow more diverse, schools must become more culturally responsive. Our schools must provide scaffolding in areas where students experience knowledge gaps and need to succeed—language, computer skills, and math. Classrooms need to have general-knowledge materials with lots of pictures, materials that celebrate the cultures represented in the school, and materials that are appropriately designed for language learners.

Schools must emphasize equity and cultivate an environment where teachers and students develop bonds of trust and acceptance. They must teach in interactive ways, engage parents and communities, and provide all students with access to meaningful and rigorous curriculum and learning experiences. Adventist schools in urban settings must encourage faith development, maintain high expectations for all students, and explicitly bring students’ diverse backgrounds and cultural resources into the curriculum in purposeful ways by tapping into students’ multiple ways of knowing and representing.
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59. Several resources are available to
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