

## **English Learners and the Risks of Suicide**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary literature regarding English learners (ELs) primarily focuses on issues related to language acquisition and other academics. A very important consideration that has commonly been overlooked is the relevance of the learner's socio-emotional needs over academic success. Research on adolescent suicide reveals a distinctive set of characteristics of suicidal ideation and behavior that has also emerged in the literature about the difficulties that ELs face. In this paper, the authors explore the connections between ELs' affective responses to their struggles and the characteristics of suicidal adolescents and young adults. Connecting the two enables teachers, school counselors, and other school personnel to make implications for recognizing language learners who may be at risk of suicide or other suicide-related issues. The authors maintain that it is imperative for public scholarship to include discussions on ELs, their struggles, and their susceptibility towards suicidal activity.

### **Introduction**

In reviewing the research on adolescent and young adult suicide, a distinctive set of characteristics that describe suicidal ideation and behaviors coincides with literature about the experiences of English Learners (ELs). We found, however, no research that examines the relationship specifically between the characteristics of suicidal adolescents and ELs'

responses to these experiences. Existing research related to ELs in the affective dimension mainly supports the effects of discrimination and/or depression (Cristini, Scacchi, Perkins, Santinello, & Vieno, 2011; Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; Patel, Tabb, Strambler, & Eltareb, 2014; World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). Connecting the two areas of research may enable a proactive stance in making implications for recognizing language learners who may be at risk of suicide or other suicide-related behaviors such as eating disorders, self-cutting, depression, reckless driving, and sexual promiscuity, among others (Kann et al., 2014).

Elevated risk factors for suicide and other self-destructive behaviors include students who are “viewed as different from their peers” and students who are “often subject to exclusion, harassment and discrimination” (Society for the Prevention of Suicide [SPTS], 2015, Slide 9), two descriptions that align with the experiences that many ELs endure. At issue is students’ emotional health and safety, the impact of schooling, and the negative interactions that occur at school (Rishel, 2007). In order to educate diverse student populations, it is imperative that public scholarship include discussions on ELs and how the learning environment may influence their susceptibility towards suicidal activity, because globally, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people aged 15-29 (WHO, 2014, p. 22).

Especially important for educators and school personnel who experienced the death of a student by suicide, the gripping aftermath of reflecting on what could have or should have been done often weighs heavily in their minds and hearts. We can sigh at the disheartening and unnecessary loss of lives, yet we must also address the circumstances surrounding their ultimate decision to die. We have a choice to begin exploring the connections between the characteristics of ELs who experience the roughness of immersion, as well as schooling that fails to meet their needs, and the similarities to young people who die by suicide, or we can ignore it now and wait until statistics point it out for us in the years to come. The authors broach the urgency of this topic now in order to provide the awareness of possibilities of which most are unaware.

## **Background**

Although in an ideal world all schools are concerned with both the academic and affective aspects of their learners, contemporary literature regarding ELs primarily focuses on the language acquisition and other academics (e.g., Haager, 2007; Meyer, 2000; Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012), 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, 20014; Lenski, Ehlers-Zalava, Daniel, & Sun-Irmingier, 2006). While resources available for teaching and learning are plentiful and varied for all content areas and grade levels, a very important consideration that has commonly been overlooked because of the current focus on the standardization of learning is the relationship of the learner's socio-emotional needs to academic success (Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

### ***Struggles of ELs***

It is important to note that the experiences and needs of ELs vary significantly. For example, some learners come to school as immigrants, while others are born in an English-speaking country (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007); some have been in English-speaking educational settings their whole life, or at least for several years, while others may have recently arrived from their home country. As with any group of adolescents, some ELs are outgoing and make friends quickly, while others are more introverted and struggle to make friends. Given the unique variables that each EL brings to the classroom, research reveals that there are many factors that may affect the learner's emotional and academic success because of the distinctive characteristics this population of students possesses.

First, 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, the language (and consequently the ability to communicate), familiar schooling expectations, environment, and culture, all of which create an environment where these children or youth feel safe and offer greater potential for academic success. This potentially stressful experience poses significant threat to the wellbeing of the individuals involved (Cristini et al., 2011).

Discrimination in their new environment may occur and may even be ongoing, especially for "refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants" (WHO, 2014, p. 36), contributing to "the continued experience of stressful life events such as loss of freedom, rejection, stigmatization and violence that may evoke suicidal behavior" (p. 36). When the familiarity of home is gone, ELs may find themselves vulnerable, learning a new language, navigating in a school whose expectations are not clear, and classmates who fail to welcome 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 needs of immigrant ELs. The struggles of ELs can be daunting, particularly in relation to the amount of time they have lived in the country.

***Alienation***

Some ELs quickly experience the effects of alienation as they attempt to survive cultural, familial, academic, and social pressures (Lee, Butler, & Tippins, 2007). Interactions with peers may lead them to associate their heritage culture with being different and the cause of not fitting in at school; consequently, some ELs reject their heritage culture in an effort to fit in with peers (Fillmore, 2000). Yet their peers may continue to view them as outsiders regardless of their effort. Furthermore, a school's lack of preparedness to help ELs adjust to their new environment can alienate them from teachers, administrators, and school itself (Curran, 2003; Fillmore, 2000).

Another important struggle that commonly surfaces for ELs is the pressure from parents to speak the heritage language at home. Caught between two worlds, ELs often find speaking the language of their homeland frustrating because of the alienation they experience at school. As a result, they regard their language as a hindrance to school success in the form of social acceptance (Fillmore, 2000). Having to choose between honoring the requests of their family and fitting in with peers becomes a cyclical pattern that draws ELs away from just being kids, which in itself adds pressures that many other students do not encounter.

***Academic Expectations***

In terms of academics, there are struggles that are common to many ELs. Those with prior schooling experiences in their home country are often surprised at the different pedagogical approaches used in their new schools. In many countries, education has moved from a traditional, teacher-centered approach to being more student-centered, where students are encouraged to ask questions, take leadership roles, and make decisions about their learning. In contrast, ELs may come from educational settings that use a traditional approach where the teachers are the authoritative imparters of knowledge, and the students are merely empty receptacles. School staff and teachers may be unaware of how to respond to this dichotomy in order to help the learner transition to this new learning environment (Delpit, 2006; Lee et al., 2007; Zhang & Peltarri, 2014).

Another academic difficulty is "cognitive load." Many assignments, activities, and even the content of some classes may not be culturally salient to the student, consequently making schooling extremely taxing on the EL (Meyer, 2000; Ortiz-Marrero & Sumaryono, 2010). One possible consequence of academic difficulty especially affects ELs who excelled in school in their home country. Where formerly the student was considered a high achiever, he or she may now be cast as someone with learning difficulties who needs extra services and may experience negative attitudes from teachers and classmates. In such cases the

learner may lose self-esteem (Chang, 2010; Rodriguez, Ringler, O'Neal, & Bunn, 2009). This is also magnified by aspects of alienation and a lack of acceptance by peers, as previously noted.

### ***Language Difficulties***

The most obvious cultural barrier is learning in a new language, which often leads to “language shock,” the anxiety that is felt when immersed in an unfamiliar tongue (Meyer, 2000). In the context of the classroom, this angst results from the sustained use of a new language without proper support. The worry related to language is further exacerbated by the intolerance of others towards non-native speakers of the language (see Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Olsen, 2000). It is believed that anxiety such as this can hinder academic success and prevent successful language acquisition by triggering the learner’s affective filter (see Krashen, 1982).

### ***Curriculum Exclusion***

With the craze of standardization in the curriculum, ELs are frequently an afterthought, at best, and completely excluded at worst (Cummins, 2000, 2001; Cummins et al., 2005). ELs are often viewed as a “problem” to be eradicated, regardless of the actual ability and skill set of the student. Rather than valuing ELs’ first language and cultural heritage—which could enrich the learning environment for everyone—schools often expect them to abandon their first language and culture and assimilate to the dominant culture of the school. This subtractive attitude toward ELs also creates communication barriers between the school and the EL’s family.

The environment described here is largely beyond the control of the learner, where ELs are required to learn a new language, negotiate interactions with peers, and strive to learn academic content in a milieu that is often completely unfamiliar and hostile. Helplessness ensues in such a situation where there is a sense of uncontrollable variables affecting success (Hsu, 2011).

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

The area of suicide as it relates to ELs is a topic that is unexplored. Before designing studies that address this topic, it is important to establish a theoretical understanding of the experiences of many ELs as related to their mental health. That is the scope of this conceptual article – to argue that the struggles of ELs and the systemic exclusion of what they bring to the educational experience, leads them to live a life that parallels other adolescents who are at risk of contemplating or completing suicide, or engaging in other risky behaviors.

We draw on Howard's (2006) work of minimal group theory, which describes how people "tend to draw distinctions between themselves as individuals and groups, even if the distinctions are essentially meaningless in a larger context" (p. 32). Members of a group decide who is part of them, thus creating "in-groups and out-groups" (ibid.). These discriminatory actions determine, at least to the group members, who is "superior" and who is not. Then to add biases based on "visible markers" (ibid.) such as a person's skin color, how they talk, or other identifying characteristics (i.e., eyes, hair, dress, etc.), relationships between groups experience a greater divide and resistance to change. Moreover, as Howard points out, differences in "race, gender, social class, religion, ability and sexual orientation," add more depth to the separateness of groups based on one's discriminating against what they consider "the other."

In the case of ELs, this separateness extends beyond the visible markers to include how they speak English (i.e., "different" from their peers), as well as cultural differences that become evident as the school day unfolds (i.e., the ELs unfamiliarity with schooling in the new location). These distinctions give those of the dominant culture even greater reason for othering ELs and keeping them in the "out-group." ELs find that, in many cases, as they experience "out-group" dynamics, they lack what is referred to as "dominant cultural capital" (Apple, 1995; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bourdieu, 1986; Giroux, 1983), which denotes the knowledge, skills, values, or attitudes of the dominant group. Capital of this sort allows or disallows acceptance into the mainstream. A student's background and social class determines the degree of their cultural capital, where the "legitimizing of certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, and ways of relating to the world," (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 76) are found. Lower-class, working class, and other forms of cultural minorities may be judged harshly because they neither speak, act, walk, nor respond in the same manner as those of the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986). Consequently, "poor, minority, English language learners must fight multiple uphill battles, allowing only those with extreme self-determination and resiliency the chance to get out of the social pyramid's lower levels" (McDaniel, Rios, Necochea, Stowell, & Kritzer, 2001, p. 31). This hegemonic framework results in learners being ostracized within the school environment. They may feel alienated, struggle with academic expectations, experience a loss of self-esteem, and may find the curriculum to exclude their lives and experiences, all of which mirrors the same characteristics and signs of those found in suicidal adolescents.

### **Suicide as a Reality**

While our focus is on ELs in this exploration, suicide is common across genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, socioeconomic classes, and intelligence levels (SAVE, 2015). That said, it also does not exclude the propensity for certain populations to become more susceptible to suicide (AFSP, 2016; WHO, 2014). For those aged 10-24 in the US, during 2013 the Centers for Disease Control ([CDC], 2015) reported 4,600 suicides—or about 14 suicide deaths per day—doubling the rate from 1970-1990 (AFSP, 2016). Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-to-24-year-olds and the second leading cause of death among college students (American Association of Suicidology [AAS], 2013; CDC, 2015). In the United States each year, “approximately 157,000 youth between the ages of 10 and 24 receive medical care for self-inflicted injuries” (CDC, 2015, para. 2). Self-inflicted injuries that are not reported or cases where no medical care was sought would increase this number. Equally, if not more, troubling, the suicide rate for children ages 5-14 years continues to rise after tripling between 1970 and 1990 (Granello & Granello, 2007). Currently, each year approximately 12,000 young people between the ages of 5 and 14 “are admitted to psychiatric hospitals for suicidal behavior” (ibid., p. 33).

#### ***Suicide and the EL’s Reality***

Considering all of the variables that intersect in the EL’s life at home, school, and in the community, suicidal activity or risky behaviors are of concern for this population. Because this is a new area of research and in the exploratory phase, locating data to substantiate claims specifically about EL students is difficult. Due to the system of reporting suicide data, no statistics are available as to how many suicides are attempted or completed among EL students or young adults because death certificates and information gathered on deaths do not include the designation of EL status; this information may not be accessible for many years. There are, however, studies that are able to help us understand the connection—and thus the susceptibility towards—ELs and suicidal behavior. For example, Aseltine and DeMartino (2004) found that ELs had less knowledge about mental health (e.g., depression, suicide, self-harm), and also self-reported a higher number of suicide attempts than their peers. Interestingly, despite their lack of knowledge and higher number of suicide attempts, ELs in this study were more likely to seek help when facing mental health issues. Unfortunately, the authors did not elaborate on why there were such contradictory findings.

In order to give weight to our concerns and our theoretical position, and in comparing the struggles of ELs and the characteristics of adolescent suicidal behavior, we looked at suicide rates in the states (USA) where most EL students live and attend school. Although we are certainly not suggesting cause-and-effect relationship, the potential for a correlation appears to be very real, which would require rigorous studies to confirm. According to the CDC Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report (Tejada-Vera, 2014) the following ten states, all in the western part of the U.S., had the highest suicide rates for the entire population in 2014: Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Oklahoma, respectively (p. 1041). Of these ten states, we discovered that five also have the largest percentage of ELs enrolled in their schools: Nevada (19%), New Mexico (16.1%), Alaska (11.1%), Colorado (12%) and Oregon (11.3%) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). High EL concentrated states that are not among the top suicide states—California (23.2%), with the highest EL concentration and Texas (14.9%), the 4th highest—will be discussed subsequently.

Since the highest suicide rates were prevalent in half of the states where most ELs reside and attend school, it would seem imperative that we look at the relationship between the two. Accessing suicide data from World Life Expectancy (2015), we explored the top four causes of death for those aged 15-25 in the states with the highest percentage of ELs (Table 1). Table 1 indicates that suicide is indeed a serious problem for not only the overall population in the states where ELs live and attend school, but specifically among their age group as well. It is clear that road traffic accidents and suicide are the leading causes of death for most young people in these states. Moreover, with poisoning as the third cause of death, one would have to also consider it in the “accidents” category of possible suicides. Overall, one can see that young people are dying by risky and/or self-intentional behaviors.

Turning our attention to California—with the highest EL population—and Texas with the 4th highest (NCES, 2015), neither are included with the highest overall population of suicide rate states; in fact, they are among the eleven states with the lowest suicide rates (Texas, 11th lowest; California, 9th lowest). However, as shown in Table 1, young people in California die by the same leading causes of death (road traffic accidents and suicide) as young people in states that have high suicide rates. During 2013, in California, a total of 1,735 teens and young adults died in road traffic accidents (684), suicide (595) and poisoning (456)—a combination which is suspect to suicidal activity (World Life Expectancy, 2015). While California as a whole is not considered a high suicide rate



state, the distinct population of young people die by suicide-related (road traffic accidents) and suicide at a high rate.

In Texas, a similar pattern occurs—a high EL population, yet not a top suicide state for the overall population, that also has a propensity towards youth suicide. The two leading causes of death for those aged 15-25 include road traffic accidents (774) and suicide (423) or 1,197 deaths. Texas is the only state where the 3rd leading cause of death is homicide (312) instead of death by poisoning (226), with a total of 1,423 deaths in 2013 due to risky behaviors (traffic accidents, poisoning, and suicide).

Given that California and Texas have the same two leading causes of death in young people as those states that have the highest percentage of suicides and/or self-destructive behavior, we believe further exploration and consideration of the mental health of ELs across the U.S. is imperative in order to understand the emotional needs of this population of learners. Overall, of the ten states ranked highest for suicides, seven states have suicide as the leading or second cause of death for young

**Table 1**  
**2013 Causes of Death for Ages 15-24**  
**in States with Largest EL Populations**

<i>States/EL populations (%)</i>	<i>Cause of Death #1</i>	<i>Cause of Death #2</i>	<i>Cause of Death #3</i>	<i>Cause of Death #4</i>
California (23.2)	Road traffic accidents	Suicide	Poisoning	Homicide
Nevada (19)	Road traffic accidents	Suicide	Poisoning	Homicide
New Mexico (16.1)	Road traffic accidents	Suicide	Poisoning	Homicide
Texas (14.9)	Road traffic accidents	Suicide	Homicide	Poisoning
Colorado (12)	Suicide	Road traffic accidents	Poisoning	Homicide
Alaska (11.1)	Suicide	Poisoning	Road traffic accidents	Other injuries

people. Traffic accidents account for the leading cause of death in four of the states, which serves to position these deaths as suspect to suicidal activity as denoted by suicide researchers and reporting agencies (AFSP, 2015a). These seven states are also where the largest populations of EL students live and attend school.

### **Adolescence, ELs, and Suicide Potential**

Adolescence brings changes for many young people due to puberty, including erratic emotional fluctuations and rapidly changing growth patterns. Teens begin to question their beliefs, values, opinions, and attitudes towards themselves, their parents, schooling, and life (American Psychological Association, 2002; Steinberg, 2007; Tomé, de Matos, Simões, Camacho, & Diniz, 2012). As with any adolescent, ELs' feelings, perceptions of self, and degree of importance are critically influenced by how they are viewed by others, which can make them feel valued, needed, and appreciated. Fitting in becomes vital as the influence of the peer group may take priority over that of the family, thus shifting more attention to what peers think (Reitz, Zimmermann, Hutterman, Specht, & Neyer, 2014). Since school serves as a primary mechanism of social relationship-building, teens who are excluded (e.g., ELs) may find it difficult to make friends or secure peer groups and eventually suffer alienation and isolation instead.

“Discovering oneself” characterizes the feelings that many adolescents incur as they wrestle with who they were as children and who they are becoming as adults. Former modes of enjoyment (i.e., sports, music, art, clubs) may lose their appeal and they may withdraw from these activities. Alternatively, adolescents who want to retain their involvement may experience not being chosen for teams and other selection-specific activities, thereby forcing them to deal with issues related to self-esteem and rejection.

Many adolescents experience poor or failing grades, difficulty socializing, irregular eating patterns, insomnia, and often sleep during school hours, especially those exhibiting suicidal intent. They may experience humiliation, anxiety, or may become sullen, irritable, angry, or rebellious. A change in behavior, especially those which are sudden or drastic, such as aggression, recklessness, isolation, withdrawal from activities, or increased use of alcohol or drugs, among others (AFSP, 2015b) are signs worth noting. Other risk factors include environmental factors—the conditions under which a student who is suicidal may be operating—such as those that create “prolonged stress” (AAS, 2013). These may include being harassed or bullied, or having relationship problems.

They may talk frequently about physical problems, which are often directly related to their emotional state (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2017). Quite the opposite can occur as well, with the adolescent becoming lethargic, bored, and apathetic. They may neglect taking care of their physical appearance or give away possessions that they cherish. Adolescents may indicate distress through verbal communication, such as “I won’t be around much longer,” while some are more direct and state suicidal intent. Students may express that they “feel trapped” in a situation, are a “burden” to others, have no reason to live, or feel hopeless or helpless. Some display no obvious warning signs.

Family, school, and personal problems can seem insurmountable, particularly if a combination of each occurs at the same time, often causing their worries to interfere with school and prohibit a focus on academic concerns. When teens encounter difficult situations, people, and feelings, they may lack the decision-making abilities needed for resolution. They often respond with emotion rather than reason, or reject seeking advice and guidance from adults, reacting instead with impatience and immediacy (Elkind, 1998). Students struggling to overcome problems find themselves in a cycle of despair from which they have little competence to escape. They retreat from situations where they need to interact with others, and prohibit themselves from “caring” about those around them. As a temporary respite from the confusion and an escape route that softens the harsh realities of life, many adolescents turn to self-destructive behaviors. Depression often emerges, an overlooked, yet serious, manifestation of suicidal intent and is “the most common condition associated with suicide” (AFSP, 2016, para. 1).

Wading through the emotional, personal, and social challenges along with their peers, some adolescents sift through their ideations about death. As it challenges their will to live, some decide that suicide is the only answer. Although suicide may seem to be the only solution to such problems, according to Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE, 2015), “Most people who attempt or commit suicide don’t really want to die—they just want their pain and suffering to end” (para. 2).

For ELs, the problems of adolescence discussed here are very real as they attempt to negotiate the balance between cross-cultural expectations. Suicide emerges as a significant concern, particularly in how the characteristics of suicidal behavior are strikingly similar to the resultant feelings from problems imposed on these students. Like most adolescents, they have a great need to fit in; EL students can be alienated from their classmates because they are not accepted and are cast as “different.” The parameters of “normal” can prohibit much of their involvement and success as they suffer alienation in the microcosm of schooling.

Due to stresses that arise in a new country, educational system, and life, adolescent ELs may be increasingly prone to act upon stress levels through self-destructive behaviors. A lack of attention to their needs, experiences, and life situations may cause withdrawal, alienation, or frustration with themselves, schooling, and life.

### **Implications for Teachers and Other School Personnel**

Although ELs face a number of challenges that may push the boundaries of their emotional wellbeing, there are a number of steps that schools and teachers can make to minimize the stress that learners may face that we have divided into three categories: environment, knowledge about ELs, and parental involvement.

#### ***Creating a Safe Environment***

One of the first steps teachers and school administrators can do to develop a positive environment is to make “connections between the classroom environment and the students’ experiences” (Price & Nelson, 2014, p. 110). Teachers can create these connections by carefully choosing instructional methods that will help ELs achieve academic success, making the curriculum relevant to the learners, as well as implementing classroom management that is culturally responsive (Au, 2007; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995) to the EL. Furthermore, school personnel should establish routines, because they help students “predict what’s expected and to follow what is happening even when they don’t understand what is said” (Gay, 2002, p. 110). Routines can rescue ELs who are new to the U.S. and American schooling. Furthermore, they “create stability, reduce anxiety, and allow ELs to be more fully involved in the classroom” (ibid.).

The learning environment is further improved when teachers and other school personnel view ELs (and others) “as active agents and authorities on their own lives” (Ginwright & Cammarotta, 2002, as cited in White & Kral, 2014, p. 131). White and Kral recommend that schools create pedagogical spaces that would allow for youth to have their own voice, such as through storytelling, photovoice, and community engagement. When “emphasis is placed on mobilizing youth strengths, maximizing inclusion, and respecting differences” we are able to engage learners in a more effective discussion on mental health and suicide prevention (p. 132).

#### ***Gaining Knowledge About ELs***

In addition to giving learners a voice as discussed in the previous section, school personnel must also learn about the students’ origins and the experiences they bring. Some ELs are refugees and may have had

horrific experiences before coming to the U.S. Some learners may have had inconsistent schooling, while others might have been at the top of their class. It is essential that teachers and administrators avoid making assumptions about their learners, but instead educate themselves about the learners' experiences, and then use that knowledge to help students become successful learners.

Additionally, school personnel should ensure that they understand the cultural backgrounds that ELs bring to the classroom and school. One common example is related to eye contact between student and teacher. It is expected that a student look at the educator directly in the eye when talking, which is commonly considered a sign of respect in U.S. classrooms. When students look away, the assumption often made is that the learner is uninterested or is deliberately being aloof. Another common assumption is that when an EL does not understand something in the school environment or classroom, the EL will ask questions. What school personnel must realize is that in many ELs' cultures, it is inappropriate to ask questions or suggest in any way that the teacher has not done her or his job. These examples illustrate a few of the many ways that potential miscommunication could come when making assumptions based on a lack of understanding. School personnel can enhance the learners' education by becoming familiar with these dynamics.

### ***Involving Parents in the Learning Community***

One of the biggest challenges schools face is improving ways to communicate with parents. An environment has been created in many schools that is almost hostile to parents, where interactions are commonly "unidirectional and fail to value and take advantage of the families' resources and culture" (Mathis, 2013, p. 2). Many parents of ELs work long hours and are unable to attend school functions. Furthermore, as Mathis argues, many parents of ELs and school personnel are unable to communicate with each other, and parents may be unfamiliar with how school functions in the U.S.

Teachers and parents must work together to make themselves more aware of and address the important issues and problems that ELs face; in so doing, they will create greater opportunities for dialogue and change to make the learning environment more welcoming not just for ELs, but for all learners. In taking such steps, the partnership in helping the EL student successfully adapt to the culture of the school becomes a win-win situation for all stakeholders. For example, it is important that parents and teachers encourage students to use both languages at home and at school, rather than placing the student in the position of choosing between one or the other. ELs should also be encouraged to blend their

familial and school cultures to the degree that they feel comfortable. As a priority, parents could support their child's involvement in school and community activities and clubs, which will help them adapt to their new life through social interaction outside the classroom environment (Beane & Lipka, 2000).

In spite of these measures, it still may be difficult for some ELs to acclimate to their new environment and we need to be cognizant of the potential for suicide. If one suspects a student is exhibiting signs of suicide or other self-destructive behaviors, it is imperative that the school personnel and parents work together to provide needed resources and support. Many ELs are unaccustomed to expressing their emotional feelings, and as a result may be unwilling to admit that they are unhappy or stressed (Leong & Chou, 1996). Situations such as these may become a barrier in recognizing these signs. ELs could benefit greatly from learning that it is acceptable and necessary to share with an adult when life becomes too difficult.

### **Final Thoughts**

Educators, in being considered the "front line" for handling student concerns, specifically those of suicidal intent, often find themselves incompetent, unprepared, and unable to handle the depth of student emotional, social, and personal situations that arise (Davidson, 1999). While it is understandable and certainly agreeable that educators are not usually prepared for dealing with such crises, their education and preparation in these matters is necessary. At a minimum, "One of the most important things an individual can do is to identify the warning signs and recognize an adolescent at increased risk. School professionals should know these risk factors and how to respond" (King et al., 1999, p. 69). Understandably, their lack of suicide knowledge and awareness does little to help them intervene at crucial moments in some students' lives.

Parents, too, often lack the ability to recognize the depth and seriousness of adolescent troubles (Beane & Lipka, 2000; Elkind, 1998). It is important, in the least, that parents and teachers become familiar with the warning signs and characteristics of adolescent suicide, particularly to support school suicide prevention programs that may be in place (SPTS, 2015). Adults must avoid dismissing the struggles of teens as normal problems of adolescence, recognizing teen struggles as real and taking them seriously.

ELs who navigate the rough waters of immersion into a new culture can successfully achieve the same effects, with the same results, as other adolescents. The caveat, though, is that ELs are dealing with

a double load. While coping with the issues that any adolescent incurs, ELs have the additional burden of not only figuring out the social and familial dynamics of this stage, but the cultural ones as well. They cannot face these challenges on their own; they rely on the active support of those around them, and teachers and other school personnel must do their part, starting with gaining knowledge about ELs in order to avoid making assumptions, as well as creating a safe learning environment that minimizes the challenges they are likely to face. After all, it could be a matter of life and death—literally.

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