



Teacher Perspectives on Supporting Students to Feel Welcome and Safe in Politically and Socially Challenging Times

Equity Spotlight Vodcast Series



Dr. Edmund “Ted” Hamann, MAP Center Equity Fellow – Nebraska

TRANSCRIPTION

Ted H.: Hello everyone, and welcome to the third Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center vodcast that our team—four current and former Nebraska-based secondary educators—plus me, the Equity Fellow from Nebraska, have made in collaboration with the Great Lakes Equity Center, since 2017. Our team, presented alphabetically, includes Dr. Chandra Diaz, a former middle school mathematics teacher and high school counselor who is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska-Kearney; Dr. Janet Eckerson, currently a teacher of Spanish as a Heritage Language and World Language at Lincoln High School, chair of their World Languages Department, and a Practice Fellow at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Dr. Tricia Gray, a former high school teacher of Spanish and Social Studies in Kansas City, Missouri, Leech Lake Minnesota, and Fremont Nebraska, and newly named Professor of Practice at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Cara Morgenson, a teacher of English as a Second Language at the high school-level for Lincoln Nebraska Public Schools, currently on leave to pursue her doctoral degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I’m Ted Hamann, a professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning & Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, as well as the aforementioned Equity Fellow from Nebraska for the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center.

Ted H.: This vodcast, like the two that preceded it, is intended to function ‘educator to educator’. We intend these to be substantive enough that they can be used to initiate or continue a professional development conversation related to pressing contemporary themes of equity and inclusion. At roughly 20 minutes each, we intend them to be short enough that teachers won’t feel overwhelmed (from a time-devoted standpoint) if they’re asked to watch them ahead of a critical friends group meeting, a professional learning community convening, or some other professional development event. Each is intended to stand alone, although we think they could

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also support conversations and planning for a sequence of meetings over a number of months. All three can be found on the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center website.

Ted H.: The first one was called, [*Teacher Perspectives on Equitable Education for Immigrant Students*](#). The second one was called, [*Teacher Perspectives and Teacher Participation in School Reform for Educational Equity*](#). And now this one is called *Teacher Perspectives on Supporting Students to Feel Welcome and Safe in Politically and Socially Challenging Times*.

Ted H.: The impetus for this third vodcast is our sense that more kids, more students than ever before, seem scared, seem uncertain, seem uncomfortable. And we’re the ones who see them everyday. So we’re the ones they often turn to for help. And actually, sometimes we’re the ones they don’t turn to. Rather we see them struggling or remote and distrustful, so we turn to them. Not because we’re psychologists or therapists, but because we’re adults who are in their lives and want to help them persevere.

Ted H.: With racism, gender discrimination, and xenophobia all heightened in our present politically-polarized times, students often feel unsafe and vulnerable. Those sensibilities, however understandable, nonetheless can interfere with an individual student's learning and larger classroom and school dynamics. So, our panel offer their perspectives and strategies for helping students feel welcome, and safe, and able to learn. We’ll turn to Trish next, then after her, Chandra.

Tricia G.: Ok, thanks, Ted. One of the first things to understand about immigrant and migrant students—and particularly those who have migrated involuntarily, or to flee violence or oppression in their home countries—is that the experience of migration

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causes its own forms of trauma and stress. Trauma, violence, and poverty leave lasting impressions on young immigrants. Immigrant youth suffer a number of stresses, and taken together are unique to the experience of immigration. “Migration stress” occurs as a result of leaving a familiar environment; “acculturative stress” describes the tensions of adapting to new contexts without opportunities to escape the newness; and “traumatic stress” occurs as a result of political, economic, and social burdens.

Tricia G.: The cumulative stress that comes just with the experience of immigration amounts to a considerable challenge in facing school for newcomers. Unaccompanied minors—youth who have made their way into the United States without an adult caretaker—have an added stress of assuming adult responsibilities as they navigate life in a new country. Hostility (in receiving communities and especially in the current sociopolitical context), acculturation challenges, absences (often to attend immigration hearings or to help family members), and familial separation are also results of unaccompanied and/or unauthorized immigration. Once newcomers arrive in schools—often with wide gaps or complete absences in their formal schooling—they’re faced with an unfamiliar school routine and overwhelming amounts of work” and the stress of testing and English-language learning. Further, their construction of a citizen identity is influenced by the vitriolic, anti-immigrant right rhetoric, and policies currently pervading our civic and social spaces.

Tricia G.: Taken together, the unique experiences of immigrant and migrant students imply a need for community agencies to work alongside, and in schools, in order to support their social, emotional, and physical health. There are also specific things individual educators can do to create a welcoming environment and to cultivate a sense of belonging for immigrant and migrant students. For example, become

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familiar with trauma-informed practices, such as structured classroom routines and relational pedagogies, and others that Chandra will describe later.

Tricia G.: Second, take extra care to protect their personal information. For example, don’t ask about immigration status or that of their family members. You are not required by law to divulge that information to law enforcement agencies. Third, be proactive about ensuring that these students have access to information that goes out to families and students, especially in response to crisis situations, but even in the delivery of the mundane, everyday announcements that are part of school life. Fourth, foster caring relationships with your students. Be an ally and let them know that you are an ally. No matter where you stand on immigration policy issues, school needs to be considered a safe space. And Janet will talk about several immigrant ally organizations that are useful sources of information and solidarity. And then finally, and perhaps most importantly, make school a transformative and empowering experience.

Tricia G.: Teach content, and teach it well, using translanguaging strategies and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies. Make sure that activism on their behalf doesn’t take over teaching actual content. Purposefully include them in curriculum and when you talk about citizens—people who share a space. The language you use can send a loud message about immigrant belonging in the United States. I take care to only use a descriptor like “undocumented” when it’s necessary to communicate meaning, and even then I use phrases like “undocumented Americans” or “undocumented citizens.” This terminology goes a long way to foster a sense of belonging, and to communicate your inclusion of all people in the capital “P” Public.

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- Ted H.:** Thank you Trish. I realize you just gave us five points that I’m about to summarize with just three. But hearing it, be an ally; make your classroom a safe and welcoming space; and remember you’re a teacher. So it’s not just make it safe and welcoming, but help them grow, help them learn. Now, turning to Chandra, yet an additional perspective.
- Chandra D.:** Hi, I’m Dr. Chandra Diaz from the University of Nebraska at Kearney. I would like to share some ideas about how mental health is an area that impacts our immigrant and undocumented students, as well as address what we have control over as educators.
- Chandra D.:** A vulnerability that immigrant and undocumented students may face, and is an important topic to discuss is how their experiences impact their mental health. I would like to believe that most educators have empathy for our students and their experiences, but even for those who consider themselves culturally responsive and further along on the continuum of responsiveness, may not consider the daily mental heaviness that undocumented status has on our youth. The range of impact on our students is wide and can include post-traumatic stress disorders as well as absenteeism.
- Chandra D.:** The constant wondering of or experiences of: racial profiling; microaggressions; immigration raids, or even talk of ICE near their communities; family members being stopped while driving; being separated from their families; returning home to find out that their families have been taken away; deportation; plus other areas. Many of us cannot even imagine what this constant weight does to our mental health and well-being. But let’s try take a little glimpse: Imagine you are shopping, and you have your very expensive phone with you, and you lay it down while trying

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on some items. You find what you need, you pay, you drive home. When you get home, you realize that you left your phone at the store.

Chandra D.: The entire way you are wondering, “How many people have walked by my phone? Maybe nobody noticed my phone.” Your heart races every time you are stopped at a traffic light. Now, many of us have experienced misplacing our phones for a short time, and know the feelings all too well leading up to actually finding our phone. Imagine if that feeling never goes away. The feeling of worrying and anxiety, never goes away for our students. Compound that feeling with all the expectations that we put on students in our schools.

Chandra D.: As we all continue to grow in our understanding of youth who are undocumented, or are from mixed-status families, there can be mental fatigue that we see in our classrooms. Knowing our school and community resources for mental health for our students and families is critical. As an educator or school leader, it’s important to know what local non-profits are helping our immigrant families so that we can connect them to those resources.

Chandra D.: Lastly, I want to address an area that we have control over that can make a positive impact. While knowing resources is important, your classroom instructional strategies are what we control; and what we control is the classroom experience. Using trauma-informed strategies can be helpful. Some ideas would include: creating a structured environment in your classroom to decrease stress that students are already experiencing; bring in social and emotional strategies that could include mindfulness activities when students arrive to your classroom, or you can use them as a brain break in the middle of class; move from punitive discipline practices to more restorative practices, which allows the student to

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rebuild broken relationships. And in closing, know the resources in your communities and keep strengthening your trauma-informed classroom practices.

Ted H.: Thank you, Chandra. I appreciate your wisdom, your concern, etc. I just want to highlight, to emphasize a couple of the points you made. One is, and perhaps most powerfully declared: empathy’s not enough. Obviously, we want teachers to feel empathy, to try to identify with some of what students might be negotiating. But caring and understanding is important—but incomplete. I like that you brought up, what I think is an increasingly popular field or domain: trauma-informed instruction. It is true that our teaching task is complicated by what some kids are negotiating. And giving some thought as to how we reach past their challenges, and successfully engage them in classwork, academic advancement, and a better sense of self. All of that matters.

Ted H.: You also remind us, I think powerfully again, that a number of kids, sadly for foreseeable reasons, negotiate a constant state of worry. Being anxious, being worried, is a very hard circumstance to be in—and then try to learn. To clarify, this weight doesn’t only come from kids wondering if something might happen to them because of their own documentation status or lack thereof. Oftentimes kids have documentation status; they’re born in the U.S., they’re U.S. citizens. But it may well be that they live in a mixed-status family, and there are people that they’re close to, people they care about, who they worry about, “what’s gonna happen to my aunt? What’s gonna happen to my dad,” those kinds of concerns. And that’s very real.

Ted H.: There’s actually some intriguing work I’m familiar with that talks about how in schools with a concentration of worry of this type, you can have kids who aren’t directly worried about anybody in particular in a sense, anybody in the classroom,

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whose instruction nonetheless is affected and indeed impeded by the weight being borne by some of their classmates. It’s a direct concern for students, sometimes it’s a concern for students about others, and sometimes it’s just part of the larger climate.

Ted H.: I think it’s also important, as you suggest, that we’re not expecting teachers to be the “be all, end all,” provider of all services, or attender to all needs that kids bring to the classroom. But it is the case that we’re often the first contact, and as such, we can sometimes start processes of support, start aligning resources, finding resources that would happen later, or perhaps even not at all if we weren’t part of the chain of connecting. So there are other resources in communities, there’s other resources within school buildings, counselors and such. And it’s useful to remember once we’re aware of some of the challenges kids might face, we don’t have to take that awareness alone and go forward with it without including others, often with important professional training. Anyway, again thank you. And now we turn to Janet.

Janet E.: Hi, I’m Janet Eckerson, teacher at Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. My school serves a large immigrant and refugee population, so my work puts me in regular contact with those vulnerable student populations. I’m speaking from that experience. Our school students are directly influenced by the present political climate, including the heated immigration debate and the proliferation of nationalistic, xenophobic ideologies. The uncertainty surrounding immigration policies and practices, ranging from proposals to change TPS or DACA, the executive immigration ban or the border wall “emergency,” all of these issues make their way to school and exert pressure on our students. Oftentimes, fear, rather than facts, prevail.

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Janet E.: Making vulnerable students safe at schools can start with educators becoming more knowledgeable about the very issues that make our students vulnerable. For example, it's likely that most of us know far less about immigration status and policy than we think. Learning more can help us to check our assumptions about which of our students might be impacted by these issues, and sensitize us to the experience of all students. For example, we might be concerned about the 6% of U.S. school students who are themselves undocumented, while a much larger group of U.S. born students live with undocumented family members. The Migration Policy Institute in 2018 estimated that more than 5 million U.S. citizen children are living with at least one undocumented parent—and there are 18,000 of such students in my home state of Nebraska. We might believe that our Latino students are the only ones impacted, while 1 in 4 undocumented residents of the U.S. are not Hispanic or Latino. Moving away from these kinds of assumptions, to facts, is a critical step.

Janet E.: Partnering with outside organizations to provide in-service training and informative presentations to both staff and students about immigration issues, in order to dispell myths with accurate information about immigration law and policy, is one successful way my school has helped to create a safer school climate. In partnership with the Office for Academic Success and Intercultural Services at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we were able to host a Dreamer Ally in-service training for interested staff, that addressed misconceptions about immigration, how to create climates of trust, what to do when students disclose immigration status, and how to respond to prejudice in the classroom. Participants received a Dreamer Ally sticker to display in their classrooms, much as the SafeSpace rainbow triangle sticker has long signified support and welcoming for LGTBQ students. These stickers may seem unimportant, but they make safe spaces explicit on an institutional level, and can powerfully signal to students that their

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concerns are not invisible. It's likely that a college or University in your state can help you find a Dreamer Ally training in your area.

Janet E.: Some national organizations that you can turn to for these types of resources include: Define American; United We Dream; The Dream.Us; Families for Freedom. Similarly, several student-led organizations at my school have hosted presentations for students themselves with similar aims—real facts about immigration law and policy—ranging from Know Your Rights style presentations by a local legal aid society, to strategies for confronting misinformation and racism, presented by a university student advocacy organization. These types of educational efforts help to create an environment of empathy where the responsibility to protect vulnerable students lies with the whole school community, not just with a few school officials.

Ted H.: Thank you, Janet. That was fantastic. Although you're probably surprised that I'm paying attention to your use of the plural, but you actually used the word “efforts” plural, and I think that gets right to the crux of it. It's more than one effort, more than one time; this is an ongoing sort of stance and posture. I also liked the double meaning of “check our assumptions.” Check in the sense of hold them to ourselves—but check as in double check, like “what is it that we understand? Is it right? Or are we going off of misleading information?” So again, many thanks. Cara, you're up to bring us home.

Cara M: Hello, all. I am Cara Morgenson, a doctoral student in Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, as Ted introduced me. But I'm also a teacher of multilingual high school students. And as a teacher working with those students who are enrolled my building's English Language Learners (ELL) Program, I realized early on that perhaps my greatest challenge in the classroom would be creating an

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inclusive and welcoming classroom space for students who were already quite acutely aware of the ways in which they were separate from their “mainstream” peers on the basis of their level of proficiency in the English language. So, too, did students find themselves in richly diverse co-educational classrooms, ones in which they alternately found their differences embraced, or as cause for exclusion.

Cara M: As teachers, we often assume a number of roles that aren’t so much secondary duties, but rather pieces of the complex identity of an effective educator. In any given moment during the school day, a teacher may be called upon to act as a creator and implementer of curriculum content; a leader or administrator; a role model; an academic advisor; a crisis counselor in times of trouble—be that a break-up or a personal loss; or as an advocate, and the list goes on. A significant part of navigating and performing these roles effectively and authentically relies on our abilities to know not only our students and their families, but also the policies and realities in which their experiences are regulated and situated—be they within the school building, in local communities, nationally, or globally.

Cara M.: My colleagues, who’ve already spoken, have expertly described a number of stressors to be aware of, as well as suggestions of pedagogical practices, welcoming and inclusive practices, and trauma-informed strategies to support vulnerable students. I believe it’s also critical to recognize the role and influence of power of dynamics, positionality, and privilege in the classroom, between both student and teacher, but also between the students as a whole. We must acknowledge the role that schools play as sites of assimilation and acculturation and that, while teaching students the skills they “need” to know or have to “successfully” have in order to assimilate into American culture, we are also responsible for providing marginalized students with the opportunity to acquire the academic and civic literacies, social capital, social networks, and self-efficacy

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needed to know the ‘agenda,’ and empower students to impact that agenda and discourse of power.

Cara M: Now, while it is essential for teachers to adapt critical stances, pedagogies centered around translanguaging and cultural responsiveness, and educate themselves on the cultures, religions, and languages of their students, along with maintaining awareness of global events and discourses that so significantly impact the lives of marginalized students and their families, so too must students attend to the ways in which we are participants in an educational system that doesn’t inherently afford students the opportunity to assimilate while still nurturing and growing their own self-efficacy, so that they may begin to engage socially and civically in ways that empower themselves and their communities. I don’t presume to have all of the answers, if only, but I have found that the following strategies and behaviors are ones that work to acknowledge that there are imbalances of power and privilege in the classrooms, no matter how hard we work to overcome those, and to rebalance and re-norm. Through this dialogue with students, I offer some strategies, ways to provide opportunities for all students to speak and learn across difference.

Cara M: First of all, allow students to question, to wonder, to voice their perspectives—even as you’re teaching that curriculum, and that content, and teaching it well. Be prepared to respond with empathy and questions yourself, even if this means offering a counter-perspective or allowing another student to offer their counter-perspective, and recognizing the ways in which power and privilege lend themselves to the formation of our identities and beliefs. Also, don’t be afraid to admit that you don’t have an answer. Welcome this as an opportunity to research and engage together to find an answer or explore different perspectives. Attend and respond to microaggressions that surface in the classroom, the building, and

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local communities. They may manifest in class or through alternate avenues, such as social media. Use these as catalysts to conversations that spark discussion and broadened perspective.

Cara M.: Connect students with local policy makers, agencies, and organizations from whom they can both learn and teach. Provide students with authentic audiences with whom to share their writing, projects, and ideas. Empower students to engage with difficult topics and issues that they care about. Support them as they research, and dialogue, and create. You are an ally in these moments. Finally, listen to your students. Deeply listen to their thoughts, their ideas, concerns, frustrations, fears, joys, anger. You won’t always have solutions or advice to offer, but you are there to hear it, and through hearing it you’re contributing to the ways in which they are building that self-efficacy, and that awareness of the ways through which they can have their own voices heard. Thank you.

Ted H.: Thank you, Cara. Again, very germane and helpful advice. It seems so big and overwhelming to think about, “how do we have kids feel safe? How do we have them feel welcome? How do we help them feel needed?” It’s perhaps more acute now than it’s ever been—or at least in my lifetime it’s been. But the work is out there, and the four of you are seeing it, I’m seeing it, and I suspect anyone who watches this vodcast is gonna be turning to it because they’re seeing it, too. There’s a lot of work ahead of us, but we’re teachers; that’s what we signed on for.

[End of Audio]