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Where Education and Assimilation Collide

By [GINGER THOMPSON](#)

WOODBIDGE, Va. — Walking the halls of Cecil D. Hylton High School outside Washington, it is hard to detect any trace of the divisions that once seemed fixtures in American society.

Two girls, a Muslim in a headscarf and a strawberry blonde in tight jeans, stroll arm in arm. A Hispanic boy wearing a Barack Obama T-shirt gives a high-five to a black student with glasses and an Afro. The lanky homecoming queen, part Filipino and part Honduran, runs past on her way to band practice. The student body president, a son of Laotian refugees, hangs fliers about a bake sale.

But as old divisions vanish, waves of immigration have fueled new ones between those who speak English and those who are learning how.

Walk with immigrant students, and the rest of Hylton feels a world apart. By design, they attend classes almost exclusively with one another. They take separate field trips. And they organize separate clubs.

“I am thankful to my teachers because the little bit of English I am able to speak, I speak because of them,” Amalia Raymundo, from Guatemala, said during a break between classes. But, she added, “I feel they hold me back by isolating me.”

Her best friend, Jhosselin Guevara, also from Guatemala, joined in. “Maybe the teachers are trying to protect us,” she said. “There are people who do not want us here at all.”

In the last decade, record numbers of immigrants, both legal and illegal, have fueled the greatest growth in public schools since the baby boom. The influx has strained many districts’ budgets and resources and put classrooms on the front lines of America’s battles over whether and how to assimilate the newcomers and their children.

Inside schools, which are required to enroll students regardless of their immigration status and are prohibited from even asking about it, the debate has turned to how best to educate them.

Hylton High, where a reporter for The New York Times spent much of the past year, is a vivid laboratory. Like thousands of other schools across the country, it has responded to the surge of immigrants by channeling them into a school within a school. It is, in effect, a contemporary form of segregation that provides students learning English intensive support to meet rising academic standards — and it also helps keep the peace.

In a nation where most students learning English lag behind other groups by almost every measure, Hylton's program stands out for its students' high test scores and graduation rates. However, at this ordinary American high school, in an ordinary American suburb at a time of extraordinary upheaval, those achievements come with considerable costs.

The calm in the hallways belies resentments simmering among students who barely know one another. They readily label one another “stupid” or “racist.” The tensions have at times erupted into walkouts and cafeteria fights, including one in which immigrant students tore an American flag off the wall and black students responded by shouting, “Go back to your own country!”

Hylton's faculty has been torn over how to educate its immigrant population. Some say the students are unfairly coddled and should be forced more quickly into the mainstream. And even those who support segregating students admit to soul-searching over whether the program serves the school's needs at the expense of immigrant students, who are relentlessly drilled and tutored on material that appears on state tests but get rare exposure to the kinds of courses, demands or experiences that might better prepare them to move up in American society.

“This is hard for us,” said Carolyn Custard, Hylton's principal. “I'm not completely convinced we're right. I don't want them to be separated, but at the same time, I want them to succeed.”

Education officials classify some 5.1 million students in the United States — 1 in 10 of all those enrolled in public schools — as English language learners, a 60 percent increase from 1995 to 2005.

Researchers give many causes for the gaps between them and other groups. Perhaps most paradoxical, they say, is that a nation that prides itself on being a melting pot has yet to reach agreement on the best way to teach immigrant students.

In recent years, students learning English have flooded into small towns and suburban school districts that have little experience with international diversity. Meanwhile, teachers and administrators have come under increasing pressure to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which links every school's financing and its teachers' jobs to student performance on standardized tests.

The challenges have only intensified with a souring economy and deepening anger over illegal immigration, provoking many Americans to question whether those living here unlawfully should be educated at all.

Political Responses

Across the country, politics is never far from the schoolhouse door. Arizona, California and Massachusetts adopted English-only education policies that limited bilingual services. By contrast, school districts in Georgia and Utah have recruited teachers from Mexico to work with their swelling Latin American populations.

Near Washington, officials in Frederick County, Md., floated the idea of challenging federal law by requiring students to disclose whether they are in the country legally, an idea also proposed by the authorities in Culpeper County, Va.

Then there is Hylton High School's home county, Prince William. What was once a mostly white, middle-class suburb 35 miles southwest of the nation's capital has been transformed by a construction boom into a traffic-choked sprawl of townhouses and strip malls where Latinos are the fastest-growing group.

Neighborhood disputes led the county to enact laws intended to drive illegal immigrants away. White and black families with the means to buy their way out of the turmoil escaped to more affluent areas. Hispanic families, feeling threatened or just plain unwelcome, were torn between those who had legal status and those who did not. Many fled.

By last March, educators reported that at least 759 immigrant students had dropped out of county schools. Hylton, whose 2,200 student population is almost equal parts white, black and Latino and comes from working-class apartment complexes and upscale housing developments, was one of the hardest hit.

The school's program for English learners — a predominantly Latino group that includes students from 32 countries who speak 25 languages — is directed by Ginette Cain, 61, who says she was inspired to teach immigrant students because she was once one herself.

Petite with a shock of red hair, the daughter of a lumberjack and a cook, Ms. Cain was the first in her French-Canadian family to master English when they arrived in Vermont in the 1950s. She served as a bridge between her parents and their new homeland, helping them in meetings with landlords, teachers, doctors and bill collectors.

The hostilities that today's immigrants face, Ms. Cain said, have shaken her faith in bridges.

"I used to tell my students that they had to stay in school," Ms. Cain said, "because eventually the laws would change, they would become citizens of this country, and they needed their diplomas so they could make something of themselves as Americans."

"I don't tell them that anymore," she continued. "Now I tell them they need to get their diplomas because an education will help them no matter what side of the border they're on."

A Crash Program

It was crunch time at Hylton High: 10 minutes until the bell, two weeks before state standardized tests, and a classroom full of blank stares

suggesting that Ms. Cain still had a lot of history to cover to get her students ready.

The question hanging in the air: “What is the name for a time of paranoia in the United States that was sparked by the Bolshevik Revolution?”

“What’s that?” Delmy Gomez, a junior from El Salvador, said with a grimace that caused his classmates to burst into laughter.

The question might have stumped plenty of high school students. But for Ms. Cain’s pupils, it might as well have been nuclear physics.

Freda Conteh had missed long stretches of school in war-torn Sierra Leone. Noemi Caballero, from Mexico, filled notebooks with short stories and poetry in Spanish, but struggled to compose simple sentences in English.

Nuwan Gamage, from Sri Lanka, was distracted by working two jobs to support himself because he found it difficult to live with his mother and her American husband after spending most of his life apart from her. And Edvin Estrada, a Guatemalan, worried about a brother in the [Marines](#), headed off for duty in some undisclosed hot spot.

Few of these students had heard of the Pilgrims, much less the history of Thanksgiving. Idioms like “easy as pie” and “melting pot” were lost on them. They knew little of the American Revolution, much less the Bolshevik.

“American students come to school with a lot of cultural knowledge that other teachers assume they don’t have to explain because their kids get it from growing up in this country, watching television or surfing the Internet,” Ms. Cain said. “I can’t assume any of that.”

Education experts estimate that it takes the average learner of English at least two years of study to hold conversations, and five to seven years to write essays, understand a novel or explain scientific processes at the level of their English-speaking peers.

High schools, the last stop between adolescence and adulthood, do not have that kind of time. Getting students to graduation often means catching them up to a field that has a 15-year head start.

In recent decades, some degree of segregation has often been involved in teaching immigrants. Through the 1980s, schools generally pulled them out of the mainstream for at least an hour or two each day for “English as a Second Language” courses that were largely focused on basic English and vocational training.

As national education standards were adopted in 1989, some school districts established dual-language programs that allowed students learning English to study core subjects in their native languages until they were able to move into mainstream classes. Other districts, hit by the largest waves of immigrants, established so-called newcomer schools, where immigrants were clustered to help them adapt to their new surroundings and develop their English skills before moving on to regular schools.

When significant numbers of immigrants began arriving in Prince William County, the school district, like others across the country, essentially created newcomer schools-within-schools, where students learning English are placed for all but a few electives like art, R.O.T.C. or auto mechanics. The goal, educators say, is to give them intensive attention until they are ready to join mainstream classes.

The reality, experts acknowledge, is that only a few high school students ever make that jump.

“I would love nothing better than to have my kids in classes all over the building,” Ms. Cain said. “But you know what would happen to them? They’d move to the back of the class, then they’d fail, and then they’d drop out.”

She began building her program — known formally as English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL — in 2001, when she enlisted a colleague to teach a separate world history class for those learning English.

Ms. Cain sat in to learn the information, then taught a review class so her students understood the material well enough to pass state tests.

The following years, she set up similar pairs of classes in earth science, biology and American history. A Peruvian teacher, who made fun of his own thick accent so the students would be less self-conscious about theirs, began teaching algebra and geometry. And the head of the English department agreed to teach a class that would help students complete a required research paper.

The curriculum for those learning English covers most of the same material taught in mainstream classes, except that teachers move more slowly and rely more on visual aids. Students in Ms. Cain's program generally outperform other English learners in the state on standardized tests, and do as well or better than Hylton's mainstream students. Last year, for example, all of the English learners passed Virginia's writing exam; by comparison, 97 percent of the general population passed. In math, 91 percent of Hylton's ESOL students passed the exam, the same percentage as other students. And 89 percent of the English learners passed the history exam, compared with 91 percent of the others.

Teaching to Tests

The consistently good scores turned out by Hylton's English learners gave rise to suspicions of cheating a few years ago, which a state audit concluded were unfounded. But watching the program up close reveals that certain tricks and shortcuts are built in.

Sample tests are published on the Internet, for example. Ms. Cain studies them and uses them as guides. "It used to be that we were told not to teach to the test," she said. "Now, that's what everyone tells us, from state administrators on down."

"Teachers know what's going to be on the test," she added. "And if you only have a limited amount of time, that's what you're going to teach."

Compared with mainstream students, the average English learner at Hylton spends twice the time with twice the number of teachers on core subjects needed to graduate. Their classes are light on lectures and heavy on drills, games and worksheets intended to help them memorize

facts about topics as varied as European monarchies, rock formation and the workings of the human heart.

At Hylton, freshmen finish Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in a month, while immigrants pore over it for an entire semester. Most mainstream students take tests with essay questions on the phases of the water cycle; the English learners have the option to draw posters, like one by a Bolivian-born boy who depicted himself as a water molecule rising from an ice cube, drifting into a cloud and raining over his homeland.

The immigrant students are given less homework and rarely get failing grades if they demonstrate good-faith efforts. They are given more credit for showing what they know in class participation than on written assignments. And on state standardized tests, they are offered accommodations unavailable to other students.

Teachers, for example, are allowed to read test questions to them. In some cases, the students are permitted to respond orally while teachers record their answers.

In Ms. Cain's 90-minute history review classes, which can touch on topics from the reign of Marie Antoinette to the Iraq war, getting ready for tests often seems the sole objective. Ms. Cain routinely interrupts discussions to emphasize potential questions.

"Write this down," she told a class one day. "There's always a question about Huguenots."

Significant historical episodes are often reduced to little more than sound bites. "You don't really need to know anything more about the Battle of Britain, except that it was an air strike," Ms. Cain told one class. "If you see a question about the Battle of Britain on the test, look for an answer that refers to air strikes."

Often, she manages to combine her test tips with comparisons to historical struggles and the ones her students face today. That is how she taught them about the aftershocks of the Bolshevik Revolution. The period of paranoia that gripped the United States, she told students, was known as the Red Scare.

“If you see a question about Bolsheviks on the test,” Ms. Cain said, “the answer is probably Red Scare.”

Unsatisfied, Delmy asked whether Americans were right to have been afraid of a Communist invasion.

“This kind of fear has happened a few times in our history,” Ms. Cain said. “You know, where we blame foreigners for our problems, for wrecking the economy, for stealing our jobs. You see where I’m going?”

Melting Pot/Pressure Cooker

Like so many other suburban communities transformed by immigration, Prince William County was overwhelmed as much by the pace of the change as by its scale.

In a blink of history’s eye, this commuter community became one of the 12 fastest-growing counties in the country, with a Hispanic population that surged to 19 percent from 2 percent, far outpacing growth by any other group since 1980. The enrollment of children with limited proficiency in English grew 219 percent. The county, the scene of some of the first skirmishes of the Civil War, became a battleground again.

Corey A. Stewart, chairman of the all-white, predominantly Republican Board of Supervisors, led the cause of those who argued that illegal immigrants — an estimated 30 percent of all those moving into the county — were an undue burden on taxpayers. It cost Prince William \$40.2 million, about 5 percent of the school budget, to provide additional services to students with limited English last year, for example.

Mr. Stewart ordered his staff to identify services the county could deny to illegal immigrants. And he was a co-author of an ordinance that would have allowed the county police to check the immigration status of anyone they stopped whom they also suspected of living in the country illegally. (The authorities later backed off, limiting the police to checking the status of anyone arrested.)

“We didn’t set out to pass a law addressing immigration,” Mr. Stewart said in an interview. “We wanted to address issues involving problems

in housing, in hospitals, in schools and with crime. And we found that when we looked at all those areas, illegal immigration was driving a lot of the problems.”

In neighborhoods, however, many people did not make distinctions between legal and illegal immigrants. Some residents complained of a “foreign invasion.” Constructive dialogue was often drowned out by hate-filled blogs, headlines and protests. And school boundaries were bitterly contested, with some families moving their children into schools with lower populations of immigrants, and others flexing their political influence to try to keep the immigrants out.

Many parents worried that the Latino influx strained schools’ resources, eroding the quality of their children’s education.

“I have no problem with immigrants,” said Lori Bauckman-Moore, a mother of five who said her mother came through Ellis Island. “But so many of these kids don’t speak English. I’m talking fourth, fifth and sixth grades, where half of the kids don’t understand what their teachers are telling them. How can my child learn when teachers have to spend most of their time focused on the kids who cannot keep up with the curriculum?”

At Hylton, Ms. Cain’s school-within-a-school began to feel like a bunker. Two brothers from El Salvador vented in class about always having to look over their shoulders, and then stopped coming to school. A boy from Mexico disappeared, calling a month later to ask Ms. Cain to send his transcripts to Houston.

Eventually the tumult threatened the teacher’s pet: Jorge Rosales, a shy, strapping Mexican who wore gel in his hair and a medallion of the Virgin of Guadalupe around his neck.

When Jorge arrived at Hylton his sophomore year, he was reading at a sixth-grade level and failing most classes. Two years later, he was playing on the soccer team and on his way to graduating with honors.

But early last year, six months from getting his diploma, Jorge told Ms. Cain his father had lost his construction job, his parents had fallen behind in their mortgage payments, and, since no one in the Rosales

family was in the country legally, his mother lived in fear that a minor traffic infraction could lead to deportation.

Ms. Cain called each member of the County Board of Supervisors and told them the crackdown was infringing on immigrant students' rights to an education. "They told me I was the only person calling to complain," she said. "All their other calls were from people who supported what they were doing."

Before long, the polarization outside Hylton reinforced the divide between the two groups of students inside the school.

Teachers set the tone. In their classrooms, some tiptoed around the immigration debate or avoided it altogether. Advisers to student groups created to examine pressing issues — including the school newspaper, the Model United Nations and the World of Difference Club — similarly ignored the matter. And the teachers for those learning English made little effort to organize activities that would bring them and mainstream students together.

"To create a positive environment for my kids," Ms. Cain said, "I've had to control who they're exposed to."

The silence and separation fueled an us-versus-them dynamic. The president of Hylton's parent-teacher-student organization recalled her daughter complaining about an immigrant student wearing a T-shirt that said, "They Can't Deport Us All." A Peruvian mother remembered her son coming home and asking, "Are we legal?"

When asked why they did not have any friends among the immigrant students, some mainstream students responded by mentioning a worker who did not finish a job their parents had paid for, or a line of pregnant women at the clinic where their mother works, or a gang member who stole a friend's books.

"I identify with the people I hang around with," said an editor of the student newspaper, who is not named because she spoke without her parents' permission. "My friends' parents are not cashiers or people who wash dishes."

When Ms. Cain's students are asked why they have not made friends outside their group, they often tell stories about a customer who cursed at them while they were working at McDonald's, or an employer who cheated their father of his wages, or a student who told them to stop speaking Spanish on the school bus.

Romina Benitez Agüero said that a neighbor greeted her cheerfully on the street, but that the woman's daughters — both Hylton students — snubbed her.

And Francisco Espinal, from Honduras, said a teacher once shouted at him for running in the halls. "This is not your country," he recalled the teacher saying. "You are in America now."

Costs Versus Benefits

The more Amalia Raymundo goes to school, the more she feels her options narrowing. She was a rising star in her remote village in Guatemala, the region's beauty queen and a candidate for college scholarships. But she came to this country two years ago to get to know a mother she had not seen since she was a baby, with the belief that an American education would help her fulfill her dreams of "becoming someone."

She works hard to make all A's. But this year, she started to wonder whether the work was worth it, and she nearly dropped out.

Amalia's classes are all in English. Still, Amalia, 19, worries that because she spends most of her school day speaking Spanish with other students, and then with her parents at home, it could be years before she is able to speak, read and write English fluently enough to compete for college.

It means she has had little access to peers and networks that might help her learn to better navigate her new country, apply for scholarships, make her own MySpace page or drive a car. She lives an hour's drive from Washington, but has visited only once, on a field trip with other immigrant students.

"If I am going to end up cleaning houses with my mother," Amalia said to explain why she almost quit Hylton, "why go to high school?"

Hylton's program has become a source of pride for helping immigrant students succeed in school, but also a target of criticism that segregated classes have handicapped students by isolating them and "dumbing down" the curriculum.

"High schools have to make a pragmatic choice when it comes to these kids," said Peter B. Bedford, a history teacher who supports the program. "Are you going to focus on educating them, or socially integrating them?"

"This school has made the choice to focus on education," he added. "The best tools we can give them to function in this society are their diplomas."

But Amy Weiler, an assistant principal, worried whether the program had turned high school into more of an end than a beginning. "If you ask whether our program is successful at getting our students to pass tests, the data would indicate that it is," Ms. Weiler said. "But if you ask whether we are helping our students to assimilate, there's no data to answer that question."

"My fear," she added, "is that if we take a look at where our ESOL students are 10 years from now, we're going to be disappointed."

Studies suggest that English learners in separate, so-called sheltered classrooms perform better in school than do the majority of their peers who are immersed in the mainstream with little or no language support. There has been no systematic tracking, however, of English learners beyond graduation to determine whether schools are leveling playing fields or perpetuating the inequalities of a stratified society.

Some students, of course, successfully climb into the middle class and beyond, as generations of immigrants before them have. But Hispanic college graduation rates — 16 percent of 25- to 29-year-old Hispanics born in the United States hold a college degree, compared with 34 percent of whites and 62 percent of Asian-Americans — suggest that many recent immigrants and their children are not going to college.

Ms. Cain's anecdotal evidence bears that out. A handful of her students go on to four-year colleges, while others enroll in community colleges or

join the armed services. The majority, however, eventually move into the same low-skilled jobs as their parents.

“I love hearing from my students,” Ms. Cain said. “But then again, I don’t, because I usually don’t hear what I had hoped.”

Those hopes, for example, had propelled Ms. Cain’s star student, Jorge, to graduation. After his family moved to Alexandria, she adjusted his schedule so his mother could drive him the hour to school.

He loved Hylton, he recalled in an interview. “It is the only place where everybody has the same chance,” he said. But now, without enough money for college — and English skills still so weak that completing community college seems a much more daunting prospect — he installs drywall with his father.

He still remembers the architectural design class he took at Hylton and the ambitions to become a foreman it inspired. “Sometimes when I see the floor plans,” he said wistfully, “I think about high school.”

Amalia, who once thought about becoming a doctor, has also learned to adjust her sights.

“When I came to this country, I had my bags packed with dreams,” she said. “Now I see my dreams are limited.”