

Recommendations for Special Educators Collaborating with Newly Arrived Students
from Mexico

Tim Hobbs, PhD
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Troy University

Vanessa Silla, EdD
University of Scranton

Gloria Beltran
Universidad Del Valle De Atemajac

*Presentation at The 15th International Conference on Learning
June 5, 2008
Chicago, Illinois*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges faced by special educators throughout North America in meeting the needs of Mexican-American students. Recommendations will also be provided for collaborating with families from Mexico along the following dimensions: population and demographic factors, urbanization and the decline of rural communities, emigration to the United States, language and ethnicity, religious factors, interpersonal factors and family relations, schools and education and special education in Mexico. The following information and recommendations were gathered from interviews conducted in schools, clinics, communities and homes in multiple states and cities in Mexico. Informants were parents, teachers, administrators, university faculty, children and others.

Challenges Faced by Special Educators

Special educators throughout North America are challenged by the educational needs of an expanding population of Mexican-American students with special needs. Teachers are required to move forward with highly specialized educational services; lead education team meetings; develop meaningful individual education plans; conduct assessments; and facilitate informed judgments regarding educational placement for children with disabilities from Mexico. North American teachers frequently conduct these activities with little previous experience, minimal Spanish language skills and limited knowledge regarding cultural issues that affect their relationships with Mexican-American parents. They typically do so with great good will and sincere professional commitment regarding their students of Mexican origin. However, their efforts are hampered by a profound lack of information. This presentation is an overview of observations and interviews conducted in schools, clinics, communities and homes in multiple states and cities in Mexico.

Recommendations for Collaborating with Families from Mexico

Informants were parents, teachers, administrators, university faculty, children and others. They were invited to answer open-ended questions regarding schools and educational services for children with disabilities in Mexico and to share information they considered important for their Norte Americano peers teach emigrant children residing in the United States. Answers and comments were facilitated by a translator and summited with the assistance of various collaborators in Mexico; and supplemented by reviews of recent articles and information from public documents. The resulting information is summited as a brief introduction to cultural factors affecting collaboration between North

American teachers and immigrant families from Mexico; and recommendations for special educators regarding their new immigrant students.

Population and Demographic Factors

Mexico has experienced substantial shifts in population throughout its history. North American teachers can anticipate that parents from Mexico will be slightly younger and their families slightly larger than their North American counterparts. Their children with disabilities will probably have been assessed prior to emigration. Children emigrating from urban locations are more likely to have previously received special education than those from rural regions. Prior school experience for all children may have been limited to primary grades. Special education records and outcomes of previous assessment may remain on file, in Mexican schools and social service agencies and access to official copies may be difficult to obtain.

Urbanization and the Decline of Rural Communities

Many immigrant families have moved several times prior to arriving in North America. They are participants in an ongoing migration from the countryside to urban centers throughout Mexico. Teachers can assume that newly arrived students from Mexico, and their families, have engaged in a complex emigrant experience prior to leaving Mexico. This may have involved multiple family moves and transitory school experiences. Older children, including those with disabilities, may have considerable work experience. Special efforts may be necessary to inform families regarding benefits and obligations of school attendance for older children. Special efforts should be made to educate families regarding transition planning and services for children and young adults with disabilities.

Emigration to the United States

Many immigrants now remain in the United States as permanent or semi-permanent residents. They are employed in most industries and enter the local workforce at many levels. They are members of expanding Mexican-American communities where they join local churches and enroll their children in local schools. North American teachers in communities should anticipate the challenges presented by newly arrived students from Mexico in towns and regions throughout the United States. Special educators will experience particular difficulties as they attempt to apply the best practices of their profession in challenging cross-cultural environments. In doing so, they become cultural arbiters of basic tenets of North American special education, such as inclusion, least restrictive environment, and parent participation.

Language and Ethnicity

Family members of children with disabilities from Mexico are likely to identify themselves as one of two ethnic groups; Indian or Mestizos. Today it is common for persons from all historic groups who have adopted Spanish as a primary language to refer to themselves as Mestizo. Those who retain their indigenous language, village connections and Native American world view commonly identify themselves as Indian. Many families are in transition between these groups and may identify themselves as either Indian or Mestizo, based on their current social context. Both groups may share communities but maintain observably different lifestyles.

Teachers should make a special effort to determine the ethnicity and State of origin of families of children with disabilities from Mexico. They should not assume cultural or linguistic homogeneity. Families from southern Mexico, and those with strong Indian

cultural connections may have experienced severe economic and educational challenges prior to emigration. They may not be aware of the range and content of educational services available for children with disabilities in North American schools. Special efforts may be needed to inform some parents regarding opportunities for educational inclusion, education in the least restrictive environment, and the role of parent participation in educational decision making.

Religious Factors

Most immigrants from Mexico are practicing Catholics; and substantial subgroups are members of Protestant, Evangelical and / or Charismatic church organizations. Mexican Catholicism is theologically varied and may involve considerable content derived from indigenous religious beliefs. In modern Mexico, liberation theology, charismatic renewal groups, and lay organizations abound.

Teachers should assume that religious comments and questions may become part of any educational meeting. These should be welcomed and not avoided. They should be aware that parents and teachers of children with disabilities in Mexico are often motivated by profound religious conviction and express this conviction as educational advocates for persons with disabilities. Teachers should become informed regarding local religious and social organizations with substantial Mexican membership. These can be substantial cultural resources and natural support systems for children with disabilities and their families.

Interpersonal Factors and Family Relations

An extended family (familismo) consists of two or more generations and may include cousins, aunts and grandparents. Members share their affection openly and

provide mutual emotional and material support. Relationships within a familismo may be expanded and strengthened through a system of god-parenting (compadrazgo). Persons outside the family enter a ritual relationship as co-father (compadres) and mother (comadres) for a child.

North American teachers should be aware that basic decision making, such as approval for testing or identifying annual goals for Individual Education Plans may involve extensive family communications (sometimes with influential elder familismo members in Mexico). Immigrant parents may also invite their child's comadres or compadres, to a confidential school meeting. Teachers can expect mothers to be the primary contact point regarding educational issues for children with disabilities from Mexico. Involvement of fathers may be limited to older children or to situations of increased need or perceived crisis.

Schools and Education

Schools in rural areas frequently lack trained teachers and, in some cases, do not offer all six primary grades. Many teachers are concerned that children in Mexico, particularly those with disabilities, are being adequately prepared to compete in a global economy. Many students in southern Mexico do not complete their mandated nine-years of education. School attendance and graduation is highest in urban and affluent communities and lowest in rural and impoverished communities. Students in particularly impoverished regions often fail to enter primary school or leave school prematurely.

Teachers can assume that issues of educational access and funding are important to parents and students from Mexico. Access to education may have been an ongoing struggle prior to emigration and perceived educational opportunities may have been an

important factor in their decision to leave Mexico. Teachers can assume that parents from Mexico have a strong commitment to effective communication with North American teachers and educational access for their children with disabilities.

Special Education in Mexico

North American teachers can assume that newly arrived students with disabilities from Mexico have had some access to education services provided by a trained special educator. Some parents from Mexico may be uninformed regarding special education processes. Teachers should make extra efforts to inform parents regarding both the intent and content of IEP documents. Teachers can provide extra time for family orientation and decision making. It is important that teachers offer explanations and assurances regarding confidentiality and mandated guarantees of parent participation in all key educational decisions such as assessment, goal setting and placement. Educators should consider extended meeting times or second meetings as needed.