

Cultural Challenges faced by Mexican Immigrant Students

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Introduction and Methodology

It was the start of another school day, the sun was shining, the air was cool, and the student filled the air with the early morning laughter and excitement typical of the small elementary school where I had taught for the past six years. I found myself listening to a conversation between three girls. I could not understand since they were speaking Spanish, but I could tell by the tone and the smiles on their faces that they were enjoying each others' company. It is not uncommon for students to speak Spanish at this school, since over a third are English Language Learners (ELL's), with most from families who had either moved here from Mexico or living in a home with family from Mexico. As I was watching the conversation move by me the three girls were passed by a group of White students, also in morning conversation. The White students, upon noticing the Spanish language being spoken by the girls, stopped and gave the girls a "look" and began laughing. The girls smiles were immediately erased and their conversation stopped. The reaction by the White students was obviously in response to the Spanish being spoken by the three girls. The faces of the three girls showed emotions of both anger and embarrassment.

Hispanics are currently one of the fastest growing minority populations in the United States (Mayer, 2004). Therefore the school in which I teach is by no means unique in its diversity in relation to Mexican immigrant students. It was during this early morning experience that I began to think of how something as simple as a morning conversation in their native language had started these three girls' day with a negative consequence. I thought of how many other challenges Mexican immigrant students face throughout the day as a result of their native culture. The opportunity to research and write a paper on this topic for my university course on

multicultural concerns could not be passed up. In addition to the language challenges of these students (Honigsfeld & Gioroukakis, 2011), I was certain there were many more.

The purpose of this investigation is to explore the cultural challenges faced by Mexican immigrant students through the study of the literature. Thus, the following question for this literature study is: What are the cultural challenges faced by Mexican immigrant students in the United States? Though by no means exhaustive and often addressing the challenges faced by non-Mexican immigrant students, review of the current literature has brought to light numerous challenges for these students. My own experience as an ESL teacher within a diverse academic elementary school setting has driven me to investigate these challenges specific to Mexican immigrant students so that the knowledge gained may help improve the learning environment for the students and create a more positive learning experience, resulting in higher achievement and success. This paper will describe various aspects of cultural challenges and suggest ideas for addressing these challenges from a teacher perspective.

Methods used to collect data for this paper were limited to published, peer reviewed articles found using an online search. Articles chosen pertained to the question presented above. Though not all of the articles were directly related to Mexican immigrant students, they all discuss challenges faced by immigrant students that relate directly to them.

The articles were read in detail, with main ideas and concepts that related to the subject being highlighted. Margin notes and outlines were created for each article highlighting the key points. Notes were then used to develop general themes to which the ideas within the articles could be combined. The four themes that emerged from the review of this literature are: dominant pedagogy, educational skills, deficit model, and student identities. Within these themes are many additional challenges faced by students, each described within the theme section in the

“findings” section of the paper. The “conclusion/recommendations” section of the paper includes suggestions for classroom teachers in order to address the challenges faced by Mexican immigrant students with the goal of improving the educational experience of the students coupled with improved academic achievement and success. It is in this section that I also include my own ideas as developed in combination with my teaching experience and knowledge gained through this project.

Findings

Dominant Pedagogy

Souto-Manning (2006) describe the dominant pedagogy in teaching approaches. These dominant teaching practices, based on dominant discourse (Gee, 1996) make school success for students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups very difficult. Pedagogy in the classroom refers to both the teaching practices as well as the teacher/school created physical surroundings (Bruna & Chamberlin, 2008) in terms of architecture, signage, decorations, and themes that are represented throughout the school. Immigrant students and their families are challenged with the conflict of wanting to maintain and be proud of their heritage languages and cultures and trying to fit in and even join the majority group. By doing so these students begin to erase “their heritage language and culture to adopt the powerful one” (Souto-Manning, 2006, p. 294). The term *powerful* clearly states the challenge faced by Mexican immigrant students as seeing their own cultural norms as inferior (Borjian & Padilla, 2010), adding to the pressure to abandon to them in order to adapt. Unfortunate is how “students remain marginalized no matter how much they adapt” (Garza & Garza, 2010, p. 204).

Adding to this challenge of the dominant pedagogy in education are laws in place that even further limit the ability to consider and value Mexican immigrant students’ language and

culture. Currently there are 24 states with English only laws (Gann & Garza, 2010). These laws prevent teachers knowledgeable about teaching in a multicultural setting from doing so. Teachers who know and understand how to engage ELL's in these states not only run the risk of personal consequences for teaching out of the norm, but also of breaking the law. This pressure on teachers to not value students' language is also the reason why many students do not view teachers as caring or schools as supportive (Borjian & Padilla, 2010). To them school is not a place where they belong.

Educational Skills

Many of the Mexican immigrant students come from what is considered third world environments (Bruna & Chamberlin, 2008), with this move even being described as "trauma" (p. 131). These students may lack the educational background often present in American students. Because of this, Hispanic students may enter Kindergarten with much lower skills in math, as described by Reardon & Galindo (2007) as well as the obvious language skills. Mexican immigrant students entering school in higher grades experience even a greater gap in these skills. This lack of skills greatly adds to the challenge for both the students and the teachers for these students to catch up to grade level proficiency. This gap between native born non-Hispanic and White students does not go away even by the fifth grade. Adding to the skills deficit is the issue of socioeconomic status which accounts in the fifth grade for most of the gap.

Though Hispanic students are a poorer population than other minority populations, as described by Reardon & Galindo (2007), the gap they experience is not as large, showing there are other factors that the Hispanic culture brings that when built upon may allow for increased educational achievement. This lack in educational skills also accounts for the fact that many illegal Mexican students are considered vital to industry (Bruna & Chamberlin, 2008) from a

physical labor perspective. They are not valued for language and math skills simply because they begin education not lacking the cognitive ability to learn these skills, but the educational background that was needed to build a foundation of these skills. This lack of educational acceptance and respect also accounts for the large dropout rate of Hispanic students in the United States (Mayer, 2004).

Deficit Model

Mexican immigrant students' lack of educational skills when entering school in the United States adds greatly to the challenges they face in a culture where the deficit thinking model is highly pervasive (Garza & Garza, 2010). In this model, students are assessed and labeled for the skills they are lacking instead of the skills they have. In a culture where students are expected to learn English and assimilate as fast as possible they are often tested in their ability to learn and speak the English language. Their scores are often interpreted as how much they do not know instead of how much they are learning. This grade-level proficiency approach that overlooks the students' strengths (Cuero, 2009) often creates an atmosphere of blame, with teachers often blaming parents, families, the community, and the students themselves for their underachievement (Garza & Garza, 2010).

Student Identities

The cultural challenges described above; the dominant pedagogy, education skills, and the deficit model, all play a crucial role in student identity. Mexican immigrant students are forming identities like all other students are (Cuero, 2009). They have the incredible challenge of forming these identities in an atmosphere that is dominated by a culture where bilingualism is considered inferior to the mainstream and where Mexican immigrant students are often not given or allowed privileges that the mainstream students are. Their valuable identity is built on a sense

of not belonging, without a clear foundation as to who they are. They are expected to abandon their native culture and language and expected to accept and become part of the new. Therefore students have a much greater challenge in identifying who they are and where they belong.

Without an identity that is truly accepted and valued students often find it difficult to find the motivation and desire necessary to succeed in the school system, also contributing to the large dropout rate for Mexican immigrant students. Mayer (2004) discusses how this dropout rate is different for communities with different Hispanic populations. Mayer found that the dropout rate for Hispanics from communities with greater than 50% Hispanic population to be less than the dropout rate from communities with a Hispanic population less than 50%. The accepting and valued attitude of the community for Hispanic students clearly plays a large role in the students' identity. Communities with a large Hispanic population give students the needed sense of acceptance and belonging, as seen by the direct affect on dropout rates. This effect may also be seen within school populations where minority students tend to make up the majority population.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Classroom Solutions

This paper describes challenges faced by Mexican immigrant students in the United States. It is through the understanding of these challenges that we as teachers are able to change the educational environment in the hopes of increased achievement and success for all of our students. The authors in this paper and many others who describe these challenges faced by Mexican immigrant students also suggest solutions for the classroom. The overall themes of these suggestions focus on cultural and language respect and acceptance for immigrant students. Borjian & Padilla (2010) describe the need for educators to create an environment where students feel accepted and welcome. This is done through the multicultural understanding that

teachers can achieve through learning about each student and how cultural heritage plays a role in who they are. This includes, as Borjian & Padilla (2010) describe, knowledge of languages and how much language is a part of both culture and identity. Teachers must understand theories, concepts, and strategies around second language learning to further understand the academic challenges students face. This can only be done through highly dedicated and capable teachers who truly want their students to succeed.

Bruna & Chamberlin (2008) describe the need to recognize the gaps between pedagogies of Mexican and U.S. schools in order to better address the needs of Mexican immigrant students. Teachers must also acknowledge the affects these gaps have on the students, with educational achievement being just one of them. Teachers, according to Bruna & Chamberlin (2008) must take action and make provisions for these differences. By educating teachers about the migration experience students will be better able to cope with the trauma they have been through and continue to experience. Bruna & Chamberlin (2008) also suggest orientation sessions for newly arrived Mexican immigrant students to help them with the transition from their native country to the much different schools here in the United States.

This paper does not mean to suggest that learning of the English language is a bad thing. It is only the challenges described that must be addressed in this learning. Research shows that an increase in English acquisition leads to increased opportunities to learn in schools where English language is the language of instruction (Reardon & Galindo, 2007). For this reason teachers must rely on strategies that are effective for learning English while also respecting students' native language and culture. Gann, Dean, & Marquez (2005) suggest the strategy of rote learning for building vocabulary. Though considered a monotonous strategy, this does help

ELL students learn the English vocabulary. These students already know much of the vocabulary and simply lack the word in English.

Souto-Manning (2006) suggests four “structural essentials of schooling that influence the degree to which ‘minority students’ are empowered or destitute” (p. 301-301). They are (a) including the minority students’ culture and language, (b) involving minority communities in the education of their children, (c) address classroom pedagogical assumptions and practices, and (d) address the evaluation of minority students. By including the minority students’ culture and language teachers are creating an atmosphere of acceptance and value for the students. The students are then much more able to become a part of the educational process instead of feeling like an outsider. This feeling of belonging is directly related to student achievement and success. Students are then also able to value their native culture in the process of building their identity in a new country.

Involving minority communities in the education of their children is also beneficial in creating a community-wide atmosphere of value and acceptance for these students. Parental involvement, often being blamed for lack of academic achievement, can be seen as a powerful tool for improved achievement. From involving the parents and the greater community, teachers are more able to respond to the individual strengths of each child by getting to know the students (Moore & Ritter, 2008). As Moore & Ritter explain, teachers must respond to students’ individual identities and not base their educational approach on cultural curiosities. Respecting culture is deeper than studying artifacts and holidays (Rowan (2001) which can lead to additional stereotyping. Teachers must understand that they are defining their social and personal identities and must be given the tools in order to create a valued and appreciated identity. Moore & Ritter (2008) describe an activity with preservice teachers in which they used letter writing with

minority students to move past writing conventions and onto the “voices, questions, and assumptions of the children” (p. 508). It was through this literacy project that the teachers were able to view the children at “literate individuals, each with their own backpack of history, knowledge and interests-their own unique funds of knowledge (p. 512). It is through the building of relationships that the personal respect and understanding for children from all backgrounds can be developed. From a classroom perspective teachers have an even much greater opportunity to get to know each student, and through involving the family and community teachers are also able to reach out to the families and community.

Through the understanding of challenges that Mexican immigrant students face teachers are able to take a role in social justice as it relates to equity and excellence for all students (Garza & Garza, 2010). The literature clearly shows the need to provide success school experiences to low socioeconomic status Mexican immigrant students despite cultural differences. Teachers must be truly concerned about their students and genuinely care about their success as students and individuals. Teachers must show traits of commitment, dedication, persistence, hard work, and resourcefulness. As Garza & Garza state, “we must find ways to honor, dignify, and incorporate the knowledge of Mexican American children, families, and communities in our classrooms” (p. 205). By doing so we can create an educational system dedicated to the success of all students.

My own experience as an ESL teacher has great influence on how I view and teach my students. I have come to understand that my students’ individual backgrounds, culture, experiences, etc., are not *who* they are, but are all a part of the identity that makes them who they are. Students, for example are not *Mexican*, but valuable and precious individuals who are also Mexican. I cannot agree more with the conclusions and recommendations discussed by the

authors referenced in this paper. It is through the understanding, value, appreciation, and gratitude for all students that teachers are motivated to create a positive learning environment using caring and thoughtful approaches to teaching that benefit all students.

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