A School-University Collaboration to Educate Preservice Teachers on the Needs of Chicano Students in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT: Compared to other minorities in America, the Hispanic, specifically Chicano, population has experienced an educational crisis, manifested in high drop-out rates, low postsecondary enrollment, subpar testing results, and low literacy rates. To address this issue a project was created to lead faculty through a learning experience to broaden their understanding of the needs of Hispanic, specifically Chicano, children by meeting with education administrators, teachers, parents, and students in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. By being immersed in the culture, the faculty learned many important lessons, including the importance of family/communities, language/identity and curricular differences. In turn, faculty will help university students understand the unique needs of the Chicano population by understanding cultural differences that impact schooling for Hispanic children in the U.S. Through educating our preservice teachers, administrators, counselors, and higher education personnel, we will create a cycle of dispelling myths and stereotypes surrounding the Hispanic population and K-12 schooling.

NAPDS Essentials addressed (prior to 2021 release of the Second edition): *1. A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community; 8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings.*

This project speaks directly to, and was developed in the spirit of, several of the Nine Essentials developed by National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS). The first leading Essential as noted in #8 is, "Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings." This project began with an awarded grant secured in the hopes of educating preservice teachers by immersing university faculty in the P-12 systems of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. The work started with a formal collaboration between the author's university, the Director General of Educational Development and Regional Management in the Yucatan Peninsula, and the Director of an International Education Agency in Merida Mexico. By establishing this connection, access to numerous P-12 partners were facilitated that allowed direct access to numerous P-12 resources.

By developing this relationship with influential partners in the world of P-12 education in Mexico, the first Essential stated by NAPDS was accomplished by creating "A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community." The collaboration established by these entities allows for ongoing education of the preservice teachers who will be directly working with a large population of Chicano students in the mid-west region of the United States. This relationship allowed faculty members to engage with multiple groups of educators in Mexico: school leaders, policy makers, schools, teachers, and students.

Background of Project

Within the context of a university funded grant, three university professors were able to engage with these various stakeholders for one week in Merida Mexico. Within that time period much was learned about the Chicano culture. This learning came from scheduled meetings with groups of administrators including such individuals as the Minister of Education for the State of Yucatan, as well as other officials from the area. All graciously gave their time to share their experiences and suggestions on how to best serve the Chicano population immigrating to the United States. Knowledge of the Mexican school structure and how to successfully blend the basic beliefs with those in the U.S. were explored. Additionally, groups of teachers shared their insights into how to best serve Chicano students who have migrated to the U.S.

This experience was combined with numerous visits to schools within the region to witness first-hand the education of the native population. Visits were made to public schools, private schools supported by parental contributions, school for students with special needs, and conafe schools supported by local communities. Canafes are rural primary schools supported by the National Council for Educational Development (CONAFE), a government agency providing educational services to small rural areas with local citizens acting as teachers. Also included in the school visits was an observation of a service-learning project designed to engage students and assist with learning in rural areas. Conversations with teachers, students, and parents added to the knowledge being collected to share with preservice teachers in the U.S.

Hispanic/Latino/Chicano

There are approximately 11.3 million Mexican immigrants currently living in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2018).

Current literature often speaks to the issues surrounding this population, particularly of Hispanic school-aged children, but little is available to speak to the vast differences of the multiple cultural norms housed under the term "Hispanic." As identified by Forbes (1992) the term Hispanic is used by the United State Census Bureau to identify those from one of 20 Spanish-speaking nations including Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central America, South America, and Spain. And within this vast list of countries are vast differences in cultural norms and educational needs. Yet, the literature and teacher training models currently used groups all Hispanic, or Spanish speaking individuals, into one category when presenting strategies for teaching.

The term *Hispanic* is a generic term used to identify those whose first language is Spanish. The term originated in the 1970 census and was intended to categorize any individual identifying with a Spanish cultural heritage. As simplistic as this may sound there are numerous, and often offensive, connotations when using this term to group ALL Spanish-speaking individuals. As noted by Strouf (2020) "these words homogenize and erase linguistic and cultural diversity" (p. 1). Whether an individual identifies as Latino(a) or Latinx, an individual with a Latin American heritage; Chicano, an individual with a Mexican heritage; or Spanish, an individual with a European Spanish heritage, they all have a rich and individual set of cultural norms that influences their identity, especially in the U.S. K-12 school system.

The population of Hispanics in the United States continues to increase, including the Hispanic population of students in our K-12 system, which is growing rapidly. According to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, in 2016 25% of all K-12 students were Hispanic (Revilla-Garcia, 2018). More than two-thirds (69%) of Hispanic public school students are of Mexican origin. Nearly three-quarters of first- and second-generation Hispanic students (72% and 74%, respectively) are of Mexican origin (Fry & Gonzales, 2003). In order to effectively educate this growing population of students, teachers must be trained to be culturally competent and sensitive to the unique needs, cultural norms, and differences of the Chicano student.

Diversity in public elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. has increased 73% over the past decades with Hispanic students, making up 23% of that number (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Therefore, as Cardona-Moltó and colleagues (2018) explained "the demand for educational institutions to improve teachers' awareness, attitudes, and competence in teaching students who differ becomes increasingly pressing" (p. 19). Curriculum that identifies the differences in cultures and cultural norms between Spanish speaking students needs to be shared with preservice teachers, administrators, counselors and higher education instructors' students along with strategies for effectively and respectfully addressing these cultural differences in their schools. However, "pre-service and new teachers are often unprepared to teach in a school where the students' life experiences are essentially different from their own" (Lambeth & Smith, 2016, p. 46). As institutions of teacher preparation, we must prepare our future educators to respect and serve all populations: "If teachers are not of the same ethnic background as these students, there are steps educators can take to still inspire and empower them" (Irizarry & Williams, 2013, p. 183).

Data Collection

Data were collected through the gathering of field notes and informal interviewing. Each of the three researchers created notes and observations during the meetings with administrators, teachers, parents and students. These notes were processed each day by a meeting of the researchers to analyze the day's learning. This method of processing resulted in common themes being observed throughout all interactions. The three commonly noted themes were: the importance of family/communities, language/identity and curricular differences.

Lessons Learned – Common Themes

Importance of Family/Communities. The strongest of the emerging themes presented itself by way of the importance of families and communities in the education of Chicano children. This was reiterated throughout all interactions including administrators, teachers, parents, and students. The topic of children being close to parents and the communities in which they live was evidenced numerous times. In particular, observations were made at all school visits of interactions with parents, community, and the schools. In many of the rural areas, the school was viewed as the center for the community with parents being active participants in numerous ways. Many of the schools visited had parents as school caretakers, classroom helpers, food providers, etc. without any monetary exchange. Visits by the research team were treated with much fanfare including special meals sponsored by parents to show appreciation for showing interest in understanding their culture and children. The dedication of the parents and community members was obvious.

Many times, teachers, especially newer teachers, express frustration at the lack of engagement with Hispanic/Chicano parents. This type of deficit thinking often surrounds the poor and minority families of the migrant population. In her work on Latino family engagement, Valdés (1996) identified misunderstandings between families and schools caused by "expectations that teachers had about what families should be, how they should view education, and how they should behave" (p. 148). According to Lowenhaupt (2014) this perspective "leads educators, administrators, and policy-makers to focus on families' shortcomings rather than examine the efficacy of their own policies and practices" (p. 526). Teachers, in turn, often view these differences in basic views of education as a lack of caring.

It is a misperception that parents' lack of communication with U.S. teachers is a lack of care for their child's well-being. According to Auberbach (2011) "parents DO care; they just need an invitation" (p. 18). Auberbach explained that Latino parents

have high aspirations for their children, but the pathway to success is not always the same as U.S. teacher expectations. The concept of education is more than just the formal education typically assumed in the U.S. When interviewing parents and teachers, they explained the concept of education as being a more wholistic approach to educating their children including teaching manners, respect, etc. Therefore, when teachers in the U.S. focus primarily on academic conversations with Chicano parents, it is a mismatch of the basic definition of education. Culturally, Chicano parents are concerned with more than just academics when discussing their children.

Language/Identity

The issue of language and its barrier for students whose first language is not English is a topic gaining much attention in the education world today. Historically, beginning in the early 1900s, the U.S. has subscribed to an English-only curriculum in many of the larger, urban areas. (Mondale & Patton, 2001). This gave little consideration for the first language of students and their inability to succeed in the classroom. It has only been since the passing of an amendment under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that public schools were required to serve the interest of students whose first language was not English. But this provision was not without controversy. At the same time the federal government awarded recognition and funding to the education of bilingual students, others were attempting to put into law "English only" legislature (Kim et al., 2015).

During the time spent in Mexico with educators and parents, the issue of language was mentioned numerous times. Parents shared their reluctance to participate in school activities based on the language barriers. As Auerbach (2011) noted, parents do not want to have interpreters or stand out as different from other parents in the group. The parents interviewed noted an enthusiasm to participate in their child's education not often seen in the U.S. schools. When questioned, parents shared there is often a feeling of exclusion due to the language barrier. Teachers in the U.S. are viewed as not caring enough to try and learn basic words and communication methods. Parents also communicated their concerns over the difference between formal and informal language when putting their students in U.S. schools. The perception was there exists a marked difference between the English being taught in ESL programs to the language begin used by teachers and students in the classrooms. The Mexican teachers explained many of their students seem to have a defeatist attitude when trying to excel in academics in the U.S. Since many of the students are part of migrant families, they know they will return to Mexico. Therefore, they find little value in performing well in the U.S. schools. The teachers also expressed concern that many of their students do not continue their education once they return to Mexico. Their belief is that the mindset of defeat and fear of being too far behind their peers prevents these students from re-entering the Mexican system.

School Differences. Added to the personal cultural differences Chicano students face, there are also educational culture differences. Teachers and administrators described the difference in how Chicano students and U.S. students view the education system. The issue of family, both immediate and extended, was the first topic discussed. Teachers explained how Chicano students are accustomed to families and community members being an integral part of the school community. Festivals and celebrations are intertwined with community, family, and school. The traditions and values of Chicano families are part of their schooling and it becomes problematic when students and families try to adjust to the more independent and self-focus of the U.S. schools. McLaughlin (2002) speaks to the struggles of Chicano students when adjusting to the less socially active integration of students when immersed in the U.S. schools.

The Mexican teachers shared how they often see struggles with their students in adjusting to the more student-focused method of teaching in the U.S. Much of the education system in Mexico is less independent and more traditional in teaching methods. Being immersed in a project-based or self-paced environment often seen in U.S. schools is difficult for many Chicano students. They are more accustomed to traditional, whole class instruction and often struggle with the independent motivation needed to succeed in project-based or self-paced learning.

According to McLaughlin (2002) Chicano students are not used to "the more rule-driven culture of most U.S. schools" (p.2). Comparatively, Mexican schools are more flexible with things such as time, discipline and mandated learning outcomes. An example of the adjustment to the U.S. method of schooling lies in the difference in the time structure of the school day. The teachers noted that may students, especially young students, were not accustomed to the long hours of U.S. schools. Since most schools in Mexico practice a "siesta time" in the middle of the day where students usually return home, many students have trouble adjusting to the fast-paced extended time in school. Students in Mexico are often in school later in the day after returning from an extended lunch/social time. This change to expectations can lead to some students feeling stressed or deprived of a normally social time in the middle of the school day.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This collaboration between public school and university stakeholders proved to offer much by way of creating a knowledge base designed to be used with the training of future educators. By embracing the opportunity to personally interact with Chicano administrators, teachers, parents, and students, faculty were able to listen to and understand the specific needs of Chicano students placed in U.S. schools. This opportunity resulted in a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice designed to benefits students; both the Chicano

students placed in the U.S. and the university students studying to be teachers.

This collaboration highlighted the need for teacher preservice programs to recognize the necessity of preparing teachers to understand the unique needs of the Chicano students and embrace the cultural differences while recognizing all Hispanic students are not the same. Speaking a common language (Spanish) does not equate to a unified set of cultural norms for all students. Understanding the cultural importance of family and community will help teachers be more inclusive with parents and students. Knowing Chicano culture perceives educating a child as more than just academics with a child's character being equally important as their academic achievement will help teachers create a meaningful curriculum for students. Also being mindful parents do care about the education of their children and a lack of presence in the school is likely a result of factors other than disinterest from the Chicano parents.

Also, being sensitive to the struggles posed in language acquisition is important in effectively serving the Chicano student. Being mindful of the need to communicate with parents in a format they can understand will help their children succeed. Remembering parents want to be involved, they just might not understand the norms and expectations of teachers and schools in the U.S. It is also important for teachers to recognize the pride of culture often found within the Chicano culture. As suggested by a group of teachers and parents, ask a student to share his heritage and culture. Have them share their beliefs and customs with their peers to promote understanding of and appreciation for their experiences and background.

Finally, it is important to consider the logistical differences between U.S. schools and Mexican schools. Take into account the adjustments some students might be making in the way school is structured in the U.S. How to "do school" is not a universal concept. Each culture has its own set of expectations and norms that are not inherently obvious to those outside the culture. Chicano students need guidance and structure. They have come from an environment that is more traditional in its methods and they will need to learn how to adapt to U.S. instructional methods. All students, especially those transitioning to a new environment, need the patience and understanding of educators who take the time to learn how to best serve their needs. Above all else this should be the lesson taught to preservice teachers. SUP

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