

What Teacher Education Programs Can Learn From Successful Mexican-Descent Students

Craig A. Hughes
Central Washington University

Abstract

This study explored the high school experiences of 32 Mexican-descent students who had successfully graduated and were enrolled in institutions of higher learning. By conducting extended interviews with these students, the author sought to identify teachers' actions that the students found helpful or harmful to their learning experiences. These observations can be used to make recommendations for better preparing preservice teachers for the changing classroom demographics that are resulting from the rapidly rising percentage of Mexican-descent students in public schools. Better-prepared teachers may make a difference in increasing the low high-school completion rate for these students. One recommendation is that preservice teachers be aware of cultural differences and include these different cultures in the curriculum. It is also important that they avoid stereotypes. Preservice teachers need to realize that all students are capable of academic success. In addition, preservice teachers must be prepared to include and challenge Mexican-descent students in all aspects of their educational experience. Teacher education programs can assist by providing training specifically targeting these areas of need.

Introduction

Teacher education programs often face the question, "Are we preparing future teachers for what they will experience in the classroom?" When their future classrooms include students of Mexican descent, the answer is often "No!" This article presents thoughts, from the perspective of successful Mexican-descent students, on how teacher education programs could better prepare preservice teachers to serve their population.

The Hispanic student population has grown at a much more rapid rate than other ethnic groups (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2000). The non-Hispanic White population made up 75.6% of the public school population in 1978. Black students were listed at 15.9%, while the Hispanic population was reported at 6.4%. Almost 30 years later, these statistics have changed. The percentage of non-Hispanic White students has dropped to 62.7% of the total public school population, with the Black student population showing a slight increase to 17.1%. On the other hand, the Hispanic population has more than doubled in size to 15.1% of the total population (NCES, 2000). This growth is even more visible in the West, where the non-Hispanic White population fell from being nearly 75% of the population to slightly more than 50%, and Hispanics moved from 15% to 30%. This is of particular importance when you consider that the vast majority of Hispanic students in the West are of Mexican descent (NCES, 2000).

Mexican-descent students are often lost in the larger ethnic groupings of “Hispanic” or “Latino.” While these larger groupings do share many commonalities, such as language and basic religious orientations, strong differences exist among groups in areas such as educational and economic attainment. Mexican-descent students, those who can link their heritage directly to what is now or was Mexico, tend to achieve at lower levels than other Hispanic groups, such as Cubans and South Americans (Valdivieso, 1990). Nonetheless, more Mexican-descent students remain in school than leave (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; NCES, 1995; Rumberger, 1991).

Teacher Education and Linguistic Diversity

Research on teacher education programs has documented the need for training in diversity. Goodwin (1997) noted that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) required institutions applying for accreditation to show evidence of multicultural education in their curriculum as early as 1979. Yet, Gollnick (1992) found that only 56% of institutions sufficiently addressed diversity issues in their curriculum.

NCATE made revisions in the accreditation standards in 1993. One of the modifications made was the need to address multicultural and diversity issues across all of its standards (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). Among other issues, Melnick and Zeichner noted that through the curriculum design, teacher candidates encounter “courses and experiences in professional studies [that] incorporate multicultural and global perspectives” (p. 24). Such experiences enable candidates to develop meaningful learning experiences for students within the context of students’ “cultures, language backgrounds, socioeconomic status, communities, and families” (p. 24).

Much recent work has focused on the need for teacher education programs to address multicultural needs and issues (King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997; Sikula, Buttery, & Guyton 1996). This research provides little regarding the

needs of linguistically diverse students. One example of this can be found in the second edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (Sikula et al., 1996). Issues dealing specifically with “language minority students” appeared in only one chapter, which focused strictly on the preparation of “specialist” teachers (García, 1996). The chapter did not address what teacher education programs could do to prepare all teachers for linguistically diverse students. This article provides feedback from successful Mexican-descent students on how teachers could be better prepared to address their specific needs.

The Study

The impact that teachers can have on the academic success of Mexican-descent students can be seen through the responses of the 32 participants who took part in an extended interview procedure that focused on their high school experiences. This study was based on two research questions:

1. Did academically successful Mexican-descent students perceive themselves as marginalized during their secondary school career, and in what ways?
2. What assisted these students in overcoming the perception of marginalization?

Consequently, the development of teacher education programs was not the primary focus of the study. Still, the findings from the study can inform such programs as they attempt to better prepare future teachers.

Narrative analysis

This research project used narrative as the base for the study. Narrative is seen as one means to understand human experience or “to conceptualize the self” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 135). Narratives allow the stories of participants to be seen in relation to the development of their lives through the process of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1991). Emplotment takes single events and places them together in a configuration that leads towards a conclusion (Polkinghorne, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984; Freeman, 1998). Through this process, researchers can bring together the stories of the participants to understand what participants perceive as having led to their current situation. Narrative analysis relies upon perception of events. Often, what a person believes has occurred is not what actually happened according to an “outsider’s” perspective. Yet, perception is what actually enters into the understanding of individuals and has a strong impact on how they see themselves in relation to others and events (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1991).

One area of weakness in the research dealing with teacher preparation is a lack of student voice and perspective. Narrative analysis allows for the presentation of students’ perceptions in a format that informs such development.

Participants

The participants in the study were 32 Mexican-descent college students who had graduated from high school in the United States. The study defined Mexican descent as the ability to trace ancestry back to what is or was the country of Mexico. For comparison purposes, the study divided participants by length of residency in what is now known as the United States. From the participants' perspectives, a distinction emerged between two dominant cultural groups based on length of residency. The first group had more recently emigrated from Mexico. Members often referred to themselves as *Mejicanos* and distinguished themselves from the other group by their use of Spanish and having a "true understanding" of Mexican culture. The second group was the Chicanos. This group tended to come from families who had lived in the United States for several generations and had lost most of their use of Spanish, but considered their culture to be more "developed." The percentage of Mexican-descent students attending a particular school affected the relationship between the two groups; a higher percentage of Mexican-descent students at a school tended to allow the two groups to remain distinct, separated, and sometimes hostile.

The participants in this study were students at several colleges and universities. They had attended high school at different locations throughout the western portion of the United States. The majority of the participants' high school teachers were non-Hispanic White. The experiences presented are strictly those of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

This study accomplished data collection through participant interviews, organized around what Denzin (1989) defined as the Nonschedule Standardized Interview protocol. This type of protocol has a predetermined list of required information, but the interview allows for the dynamics of the interaction to determine when and how each question will be addressed. Each interview took place at a location determined by the participant.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. After transcription, the data were analyzed using a system similar to the process proposed by Spradley (1979). This began with coding data into sets of categories, some predetermined and others appearing through the transcription and coding processes. Next, the coded data were organized into meaningful hierarchal units. The final portion of the analysis involved organizing the coded units into a structure that demonstrated the appearance of certain traits within and between the different subgroups.

Key Findings

The findings from this study offer key points observed and experienced by the participants. It should be noted that the participants used examples of

teachers who had developed effective teaching traits as well as teachers who lacked them. Consequently, this article presents both positive and negative examples of teachers.

Cultural Understanding

Negative actions of teachers

One of the major findings was that teachers need to recognize the diversity of Mexican-descent groups. As noted earlier, not all persons labeled “Hispanic” come from the same historical and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this diversity can be seen even among those who trace their ties directly to Mexico, as documented by the participants in this study.

Most of the participants in the study felt that the teachers did not have an understanding of their cultures. One factor was the lack of Mexican or Chicano histories or cultures in regular classroom settings. Students believed most teachers were hesitant to include these cultures, even in areas where such inclusion might be expected. The first participant in Dialogue Box 1 noted that items directly related to Mexican history were not included in his history classes. He also found that important Mexicans and Chicanos were excluded, or as he later mentioned, portrayed in a distorted manner to justify the anti-Mexican feelings held by many Americans.

Dialogue Box 1

First participant: I really don't remember a class being a bad experience, talking bad about the Mexican people. But sitting in a class on world history or U.S. history and it's not even mentioned. Like, 200 years from the 1800s 'till the year 2000, pretty much. You know, nothing at all. Or some kind of conquest. The year Christopher Columbus, to me, that's not Mexican history. That's the start of the new world, you can even call it. I mean, that's about the most that you ever hear of any kind of Mexican history at all was that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue, you know, that kind of thing. It was those kind of things that people said that, you know, you're wondering, "What happened with Benito Juarez?" Who you didn't know what his name was until, I was like a junior in high school. Or maybe even a senior in high school. (Chicano male)

Second participant: It [the school] just concentrated on the American. Not the American situation. But it's only concentrated on the United States. And it doesn't really go on to other cultures. It's just trying to teach the students that to be an American is okay. (*Mejicano* male)

Related to this was the ideal presented by many teachers that the most important thing was for students to become American. Because many teachers did not incorporate other cultures into the educational system, many students

felt teachers did not believe these cultures were important. The second participant in Dialogue Box 1 best summarized this. Ultimately, many of the participants felt school faculty members still believed in the “melting pot” ideology, that Mexican-descent students would receive acceptance when their native cultures were eliminated.

Positive actions of teachers

Some teachers did make an effort to include Mexican and Chicano histories and cultures. Often, this involved merely asking questions about the experiences of Mexican-descent students. Dialogue Box 2 documents how the teachers of one participant accomplished this.

Dialogue Box 2

Researcher: Did any of the teachers ever treat you like they expected you to be less Mexican?

Participant: No. They were always curious. Asking me questions. “Oh, what do you do in Mexico?” Like the *Cinco de Mayo* thing. They’re really into it. But I don’t know why because it’s not that big a deal in Mexico. They were asking questions and they wanted to learn from me and I wanted to learn from them. (*Mejicana* female)

The two participants in Dialogue Box 3 had teachers who expanded the concept of cultural understanding. The teachers were not of Mexican descent, yet they strove to bring Mexican and Chicano cultures into the classroom. The first participant had a teacher who expected all students to participate. As stated, due to the inclusionary support from this teacher, she felt she had an equal say with her non-Hispanic White peers.

Dialogue Box 3

First participant: She really gave a chance, in her class, to have equal say with the White kids. . . . Actually that was the class where I gave my opinion to kids. And then she would side with me, you know. I mean, she was White and everything. I think she gave me a big boost. (*Mejicana* female)

Second participant: Yeah. I think I had some pretty good experiences in my classes. Especially my junior and senior years. My AP [advanced placement] English teacher was excellent. We got along great, and I excelled in that class. Mostly because I loved literature, and she made a real attempt to diversify the reading list, working within what the college board wanted them to do. We read Toni Morrison. We read Rudolfo Anaya, as well as some of the classics like Faulkner. (*Mejicano* male)

The second participant spoke of how one of his teachers used the curriculum to expose all of her students to the different cultures. This student had the opportunity to explore cultures to which he had never been exposed, as well as present part of his culture to others.

Summary

Students' perceptions of teachers' abilities to incorporate the culture and history of the students in the classroom varied. Some students felt that their teachers failed to recognize that Mexican-descent students come from cultural groups that played a significant role in the development of the United States, while other teachers included these cultures as an "extra," a piece of trivia not really needed. However, some teachers did bring the cultures of the students into the curriculum and encouraged students to express their points of view, as well as share their cultures with others in the class. Other teachers incorporated the history and literature of Mexican and Chicano cultures in a meaningful manner in place of the expressions of cultural superiority or ignorance that often appeared in classrooms.

Use of Stereotypes

Related to the lack of cultural understanding was the use of stereotypes. All of the participants, at one point or another, felt that some of their teachers made assumptions and judgments based on stereotypes. On the other hand, these same students had teachers who refused to accept the stereotypes, expecting the students to advance to higher levels of academic development and achievement.

Negative actions of teachers

Many participants felt that the teachers at their schools stereotyped them as either "gangsters" or *Rancheros*. Many Chicanos tended to divide themselves through dress and mannerisms, taking on the appearance and speech habits of "gangsters." Dialogue Box 4 documents how this allowed them to create an identity that moved them away from mainstream schools and communities. In this particular case, the first participant discusses an advanced placement class.

Dialogue Box 4

First participant: Actually, I would go in late and I would go in acting cool. Acting like, "Who are you guys?" Just acting bad. Arriving late. I would sometimes talk back to the teacher. I had an attitude in there. . . . I think I had that attitude because I had to. I had to have it because everybody else thought they were better. So it wasn't only the work I did that I had to prove myself, I had to put up this face, this front. . . . I knew I could get away with it because I was from a population of students that was the majority in the

Dialogue Box 4 (con't)

school. So, if I'm not cool in here with you guys, hey, I'm cool in the school. I don't know how to explain it. It's because I was kind of representing the rest of the kids in the school in that class. In that class that didn't have that representation. So I knew I could get away with it. (Chicana female)

Second participant: I walked in and I've got the baggy pants. I've got the baggy shirt. . . . And you know they're like, "OK, you sit over here. And this half, I'll teach them." . . . So, I would do good in class. As I said, they would be very surprised I'd do good on tests, because they didn't think I was paying attention to anything. They didn't think I was studying. They didn't realize I was turning in my homework. . . . And then I'd go ace the test and they'd be like, "How'd you do that?" They'd be like, "Oh good job!" . . . I'll raise my hand in class. I wouldn't hardly ever sit towards the front. I mean I would hardly be in the back but I'd be there [motions towards a middle area]. But these few teachers, I be like, raise my hand and they'd just [looks over the top of hands]. (Chicano male)

Students perceived that many teachers assumed anyone dressing or behaving in such a manner would make little effort to succeed in school. Consequently, teachers appeared to make little effort to involve these students. As the second participant noted in Dialogue Box 4, even capable and successful students felt they were being ignored.

Recent immigrants from Mexico, *Mejicanos*, often felt they were stereotyped in a different, but equally damaging, way. They believed they were viewed as *Rancheros*, those who work in low-paying agricultural labor positions. Furthermore, some students said they felt the school personnel assumed that *Rancharo* children had lower levels of formal education and, due to school displacement through parents' search for employment, lagged behind in social integration. While several participants did come from such backgrounds and had difficulty achieving in school, many teachers generalized these characteristics to anyone who spoke more Spanish than English.

Dialogue Box 5

Participant: It never surprised me when the new immigrants were pushed out. I don't think I could have withstood the kind of terrible stereotypes of them. There was a time when if you were in ESL [English as a Second Language], it was taken that you were also stupid. Not that there was a language barrier, it's just that you don't know anything. And that your education is inferior. (*Mejicano* male)

Another major stereotype that emerged was the belief that Mexican-descent students were destined to academic failure. Participants felt that teachers often demonstrated low expectations towards their Mexican-descent

students by excluding them from challenging activities based on stereotypical assumptions. Furthermore, many participants felt that some teachers assumed they could not understand what was happening in class because of deficiencies in language or background knowledge, thus exaggerating teachers' low expectations even more.

The first participant in Dialogue Box 6 outlined three important concepts when examining the reaction of some teachers to having Mexican-descent students in their classes: (a) These teachers have developed stereotypes based on past experiences, (b) they spend less effort on helping these "lost" students, and (c) the teachers believe this treatment is justified. Consequently, Mexican-descent students felt they were treated as inferior.

Dialogue Box 6

First participant: Teachers see students taking their classes; they stereotype them. By saying, "OK, he's probably not going to graduate. He's probably not going to make it." Because that is what they have experience at. But they do stereotype people. Basically it's, "He's not going to be able to make it." They're not really willing to help the students. Because of this belief that he will not make it. And I even had teachers who think it's right to make him feel that way. (*Mejicano male*)

Second participant: And my first day in it was an accelerated chemistry class. I was the first one to class. It was the first class of the day. The teacher walks in, looks at me, and walks out of the room and looks at the room number. Comes back in and asks me if I was aware that that was Chemistry 1X, rather than Chemistry 1. And I told him yes, I was aware that this was Chemistry 1X. This is where I belong. And he kind of looked at me in disbelief and just shrugged and went into his office. (*Mejicano male*)

Students often perceived teachers as communicating the assumption that Mexican-descent students were not capable of succeeding in difficult classes. The second participant in Dialogue Box 6 told of his first encounter with his advanced chemistry teacher. The teacher saw the student sitting there and assumed, based only on physical appearance, that he was in the wrong class. Surely the student belonged in basic chemistry, not an advanced class.

Positive actions of teachers

On the other hand, when teachers did not lower their expectations, this led to positive results. The first participant in Dialogue Box 7 speaks of how a certain teacher challenged her to focus on what she wanted to express to others in the class and then challenged her to speak out, even when other students might disagree with her.

Dialogue Box 7

First participant: She is a history teacher. And I was in her American history class. She really educated me, you know. Basically told me not to speak until you know your facts. Yes, she really gave a chance, in her class, to have equal say with the White kids. . . . We were talking in American history about, we learned about the Great Depression, you know. A lot of immigrants came in. Not Mexican immigrants, but they were Irish immigrants or your Europeans coming out. And that's when the kids came out saying, "Well, they come here and they take our jobs." Or, "They take our land." Then I spoke up and I said, "Well, I don't think so. They came and they take the jobs that you people don't want. You know, the Americans don't want. The dirty jobs. The hard jobs." And she came out and she, she told them, "I think that's your parents speaking through you. I think that these people do come and work." Yes. That was the time that she did side with me. When she actually told the kids to be quiet. (*Mejicana* female)

Second participant: My math teacher, I worked with her four years. I went in that grade hardly knowing English. And it was a different program. It's called MP. Interactive math. And it's a different way of learning math. It's, like, word problems. And you find different ways to find an answer. And so, we were divided, like, in four persons per group. And we would interact finding an answer. And you know that math for me during middle school . . . it was easy because it was numbers. And the teacher explained it, and I could see the process. And so it wasn't really the language that was having a big play on that. But when I got into school and seeing actually the board problems. And so I needed to work like twice to understand the problem. And how to present it too. So we needed to go in front of the group and present it. And so I think that that helped me to develop more security communicating with my other classmates. (*Mejicana* female)

The second participant in Dialogue Box 7 had a teacher who challenged her in the content area, math, even though her language skills were still limited. The curriculum's organization gave the participant the opportunity to learn through observation, yet challenged her to develop both the content knowledge and the language needed to express her learning to the class. Due to the teacher's encouragement and high expectations, this participant could understand what was occurring in the class, as well as develop a stronger sense of pride in her academic abilities. It gave her the self-confidence needed to communicate with others and express her abilities.

Mejicano participants often found their English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers to be the ones who recognized their potential, pushing them in their ESL and mainstream classes. Unlike some teachers who kept *Mejicano* students in ESL classes longer than necessary, these supportive teachers

would not let students remain in classes that were too easy. Dialogue Box 8 provides an example of a student who had such a teacher.

Dialogue Box 8

Researcher: And what else did she do to really help you? And encouraged you? She had you in class at least your first couple of years.

Participant: I was with her, like, in middle school. Then when I got to high school, I only did one semester and that was it. For me for ESL. She's like, "You don't need it anymore." She's like, "You're not taking it." And I'm, "OK." [Laugh] And then she like pushed me, "You're not going to take any more ESL classes. You start taking the regular classes. With no help." And I'm like, [laughs] "Fine!" (*Mejicana* female)

Through efforts such as these, teachers displayed their confidence in the abilities of Mexican-descent students. They refused to let these students remain hidden in the classroom with little or no intellectual challenge. Instead, these teachers provided learning opportunities for Mexican-descent students, then allowed them to display their abilities to others.

Summary

Mexican-descent students perceived that many of their teachers relied upon stereotypes when it came to classroom structures and interaction. The students felt that many were teaching to the stereotypes, often using previous experiences to justify their actions. The use of negative stereotypes allowed for limited expectations and follow-through. On the other hand, the teachers who seemed to reject the stereotypes encouraged more direct participation of the Mexican-descent students. Such teachers also maintained high expectations and assisted the students in meeting these expectations.

Assumed Lack of Understanding

Negative actions of teachers

Many participants felt that some teachers assumed that Mexican-descent students could not understand what was happening in class and, thus, they held low expectations of them. This was particularly true for *Mejicano* students who felt that many teachers assumed they lacked both the language and background knowledge needed for success. Participants felt that some teachers made little or no effort to include students who struggled with English. In Dialogue Box 9, a math teacher would not even give assignments to recent immigrant students. Instead, they sat in the back of the classroom with nothing to do, wondering why they bothered to attend.

Dialogue Box 9

Participant: Like, this teacher, he was my math teacher, and never gave us any papers or anything to do. Like, it was math, and we can kind of figure out what's going on. And so we started sitting on the back, and he just kind of ignored us. . . . We're like, "What are we doing here? If you're not even paying attention to us." (*Mejicana* female)

The teacher saw the lack of English proficiency as an indicator of inability to accomplish what was expected in the class. He did not recognize Mexican-descent students as bringing knowledge to the classroom; instead, it was easier to ignore them. Another *Mejicana* female, when asked how her teachers treated her, replied, "They ignored me." Mexican-descent students, Chicanos along with *Mejicanos*, often felt they would not be called on to answer questions.

Several participants noted that due to their limited English capabilities, they needed more than one explanation to understand certain concepts. However, certain teachers chose not to repeat their instructions or present the information in a different contextual format, which meant that the students could not accomplish their assignments. The participants felt that the teachers projected an assumption that any possible knowledge the students brought with them was inferior and had not academically prepared them for school. Rather than explore alternatives, the teachers ignored the students.

The results of such behavior made students angry and bitter. As noted by the participant in Dialogue Box 10, the students could not understand why teachers ignored their potential. Mexican-descent students reacted to this type of treatment in several ways, including leaving school, becoming aggressive, and ignoring the teacher. The students would likely exit the system without being fully prepared for college or meaningful future employment because they did not receive the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Dialogue Box 10

Participant: Like, some people, they won't understand. Or like want to get repeated again. Like repeat the question and some teachers said, "No. It's done, it's done." And they're like, they're stuck. They're like, "Nah. Why won't she at least repeat it again for me to understand it?" (*Mejicana* female)

Positive actions of teachers

Most participants had teachers they felt were willing to assist them in overcoming the lack of linguistic or cultural understanding. The help the teachers provided varied from simply restating content material in more understandable language to spending their free time working one on one with the students. The first participant in Dialogue Box 11 explained how her teachers helped by modifying the language. Like many other *Mejicanos*, she found the English used in class too advanced for her. Instead of ignoring her, as many teachers did, her teachers allowed her to come forward after class and seek clarification.

Dialogue Box 11

First participant: After class, we would go and ask her, “Can you explain this again?” Cause that’s the thing that I had. If I don’t understand something, I will go after class. “I didn’t get this part. Can you explain it?” And if they explained it in a complicated language, I would say, “Can you talk more simpler?” Like with words that I would understand. And they were very good about it. (*Mejicana* female)

Second participant: Not that they . . . gave any breaks on any tests or anything. But when we weren’t doing so well, they said, you know, “Hang back. Stay after class so we can work on this.” Or, “Can you come in the morning? We need to work on this.” Or, “If you need some help studying for this test, these are what you really need to look for.” Or, “This is what you need to improve on.” Stuff like that. And that, and that’s what helped. That special concern that other teachers weren’t showing really made a difference. (*Mejicana* female)

The second participant in Dialogue Box 11 noted that the Mexican-descent students did not receive advantages, such as being excused from tests. Rather, her teachers wanted to help however and whenever possible. The teachers would make explicit what they expected and what the students needed to study. Students were informed of weak areas and provided the means for improving such areas. All this allowed the Mexican-descent students to feel prepared for class.

Summary

Teachers’ perceptions of students’ lack of understanding, whether due to language or educational background, impacted the education of the participants. It is very important for teachers to recognize that students’ English language ability and academic ability are not directly related. Academic progress must continue while immigrants are acquiring English-language skills. Students felt that teachers who recognized this provided opportunities for advancement and progress, while they perceived other teachers as uncaring and closed-minded.

Exclusion from Classroom Activities

Negative actions of teachers

Mexican-descent students believed they were excluded from classroom activities in several ways. They felt several different factors, including seat location, segregated them from other students and prevented them from actively engaging in academic activities. When allowed to sit where they chose, the majority of the Mexican-descent students, including students meeting course objectives, would sit towards the rear of the class. This seating arrangement resulted in a division between those who received the attention of the teacher and those who did not. The Mexican-descent students sitting towards the rear of the classroom would be left out of the classroom interactions even when they attempted to take part.

One participant in Dialogue Box 4 presented his perspective of these exclusionary treatments. First, he was assigned to sit in an area reserved for Chicanos with “baggy pants,” due to the previously mentioned stereotypes. Second, he would succeed in the class assignments and tests but would not be called on during in-class activities. Third, talking to the teacher provided little, if any, change in these interactions. Those who did not challenge the existing social structure received more focused instruction.

Another form of exclusion experienced by *Mejicanos* was the teacher excluding them from class participation due to their inability to adequately communicate in English. One of the major frustrations experienced by many was entering a classroom where the teacher could not speak their language and the students could not speak the teacher’s language. Some teachers would make an initial effort to establish communication with limited success and then would lessen their efforts. As a result of this inability to effectively communicate, *Mejicanos* felt they were ignored in the classroom setting and did not receive needed support.

Not only did *Mejicanos*’ lack of language proficiency, Chicanos’ dress and behavior patterns, and segregated seating arrangements exclude Mexican-descent students, but teachers’ assumption that Mexican-descent students would not possess the required content knowledge further isolated them. The participant in Dialogue Box 9 felt that she and her friend could do basic math because language played less of a role. Yet, due to the teacher’s assumptions that neither she nor her friend would have the needed knowledge, they were excluded.

Positive actions of teachers

Not all teachers excluded Mexican-descent students from classroom activities. The participant in Dialogue Box 12 spoke of her experiences in psychology and speech classes. These classes were organized so that students received an opportunity to interact with other students in the class. Students shared personal experiences, including some that dealt with difficult subjects

such as death. These extended periods of interaction provided opportunities to create bonds of acceptance through mutual understanding.

Dialogue Box 12

First participant: But actually in the two that I took, well, speech and psychology, those were classes where we always spoke. There was always interaction, and so the teacher would speak some, you know the students, we'd all speak, we all got to talk, so everybody got along. Everybody got along in those classes, and we'd have fun with it. Because with speech you'd have to do things like lip syncs, and like I said we'd hear about other people's experiences. And sometimes people would go up there and talk about, like, death, you know, people who had died. And just sad things. And I felt, it just, it was a lot of closeness. And I would, those, but those two classes where all of the students got along. We all got along. And had fun together. (Chicana female)

Researcher: What did she (the teacher) do so you could interact with the Americans?

Second participant: Well, she did activities during which, because I spoke Spanish and the rest of them that came to class, no one spoke Spanish, so she put me to work with the rest of them. To help them. Later, she made me the student teacher, whatever it is. Student aide, yeah. So then I started to begin to practice more with them. With the Americans. (*Mejicano* male)

Mejicanos spoke of how interacting with English-speaking students benefited them. Increased exposure provided increased opportunity to practice their English. The second participant in Dialogue Box 12 tells how a Spanish teacher increased the student's interaction with English-speaking non-Hispanic White students by utilizing his Spanish-speaking abilities as a resource, not a handicap.

Summary

Many Mexican-descent participants felt excluded by some of their teachers and experienced feelings of resentment and frustration in these classes. When Mexican-descent students felt teachers made strong efforts to integrate them, they believed these teachers successfully created opportunities for them to become a valued component of the school community. Besides the obvious social advantages, these interactive activities helped develop linguistic and academic proficiency.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

The findings of this study are not new. Educational researchers have known for years that teachers need to be prepared to deal with the diversity found in schools (Moll, 1988; National Association for Bilingual Education, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). What researchers often overlook is that students recognize these issues, as well. Many have developed personal survival systems that allow them to continue with their progress (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Hughes, 2000; Romo & Falbo, 1996), while others choose to leave school (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Rumberger, 1991; Valencia, 1991). It is imperative that preservice teachers receive better preparation to take the supportive roles the participants in this study have highlighted.

Experience Mexican-Descent Students in a Positive Light

By 1998, all but nine states required preservice teachers to be involved in cultural diversity during their preparation (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 1998–99). What they have traditionally received is simple coursework that does not fully introduce preservice teachers to the positive aspects of diverse populations. Research such as the “Funds of Knowledge” (González et al., 1993; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992) illustrates the value of having preservice teachers interact with Mexican-descent students in nontraditional settings in order to cast a more positive light on their abilities. Through this interaction, certain aspects of these diverse groups could be incorporated into the classroom experience.

This goal should be achieved through the development of practicum or community-service requirements in which preservice teachers assist community groups organized and developed by members of Mexican-descent communities. Spending several hours tutoring children at after-school programs, assisting with dance clubs, or helping with child care at church services would allow the preservice teachers the opportunity to view these children and their parents in their own environment. Thus, preservice teachers could learn about parents’ and children’s abilities.

Understand Language Issues

The majority of preservice teachers still tend to be non-Hispanic White, monolingual English speakers (Sleeter, 1996). While most of these preservice teachers took foreign-language courses during their school career, they have not experienced the feelings of shock associated with not understanding a language used for fundamental purposes. Providing preservice teachers with such an experience, even a brief one, would provide an increased understanding of their students’ experiences.

To provide such an experience, teacher education programs could require that teacher candidates receive 1 or 2 hours of a basic methodology instruction delivered in a foreign language. This would create a scenario for preservice teachers similar to that experienced by *Mejicanos*. This experience could be strengthened by using sheltered instruction techniques (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarria & Graves, 2003; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). This would provide preservice teachers with a better understanding of how these techniques could improve communication in their classrooms.

Challenge the Students

One result of helping preservice teachers understand cultural differences in a positive light and making them aware of language issues is that they are then better prepared to challenge students of Mexican descent in an appropriate and positive manner. Through these challenges, they prepare themselves to advance in school and society.

The use of sheltering techniques can lead to appropriately challenging experiences for *Mejicanos*. All Mexican-descent students can be challenged if their teachers are simply trained to avoid the generalizations of negative stereotypes. Once teachers realize that all students can achieve academic success, they can then translate their perceptions into positive expectations. They can increase the challenge by creating curriculum more culturally responsive to the students. As noted by Irvine (2001), teachers who reflectively challenge diverse learners, understanding that culture plays a major role in learning, “make informed choices that result in achievement for their students” (p. 11).

Conclusion

Teacher education programs have much to learn from the students being served by the teachers they have trained. Mexican-descent students have needs that must be addressed with informed instruction. Still, most teacher education programs fail to address these issues in any depth. As noted by the participants in this study, ignorance leads to situations that marginalize and stigmatize Mexican-descent students. Several simple steps, as suggested through the participants' experiences, would improve the teachers of tomorrow and increase the probability of academic success of Mexican-descent students.

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