

Cultural Awareness Project

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November 11, 2020

### **Current Knowledge of the Mexican Community**

Cultural awareness in the classroom is very important in today's educational climate. Multicultural education and research are influenced by many factors which I will discuss here. Prior to this exploration of learning in the Master's Degree in Teaching program, I would not have known about culturally relevant pedagogy. As it comes to middle school students, they are at the age where they are searching for an identity. Even the most innocent comments that are made by a teacher or a peer can emotionally affect a middle school student negatively. This makes the importance of understanding the cultures of my classroom even more important. In my classroom I will demonstrate the commitment to principles of fairness, embracing student diversity, and including the principles of equity throughout all facets of my teaching.

In my classroom, I have the opportunity to serve students at a school who are predominantly African American at 81%, Hispanic at 10%, and white Americans are 4%. The student population that I choose to research are the Hispanic students and they are now preferring to themselves as Latinx. This is a gender-neutral term that replaces the use of Latina or Latino. The term Latinx was new to me and I wonder how students feel about the changes. Normally I would try to refer to a person from where they are from like for instance Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Dominican. With my current knowledge of the culture I recognize that each Latinx group varies in dialect, traditions, and norms. I think that everyone has the right to be treated as an individual, not by the stereotypes of being a part of a large group.

My current knowledge of Latinx students is varied when it comes to the culture, their interests, the unique ways of learning, feelings toward education, and scientific worldview. The skill of being bilingual and many other aspects of Latinx students in America is an evolving study. Many subcultures in America that have similar concerns regarding integration and adaptation in North American schools. My initial thoughts on language are that the students would have difficulty reading English and other difficulties understanding the context and science content. My students may struggle to communicate in classrooms that are predominantly non-Hispanic or in an English only speaking environment. I am not an expert in Spanish, but I am confident that communicating with their parents will be difficult because of the language barrier. Many Hispanic parents do not speak English. This is evidenced by the translation of the website of the school district. I assume that the Hispanic students will have trouble in their studies and consequently not score well on standardized tests because they are not offered in languages other than English. I am also concerned that education may not be as important because the Hispanic student graduation rate is lower than that of their African American counterparts.

There are more skilled, blue-collared workers Hispanic than have white-collared jobs. Hispanics have a great work and are predominant in service-oriented jobs. Many of those workers in hotels for example do not speak English but are focused and hard workers. Language is not an indicator of intelligence as much as it can be as a barrier to access to better opportunities. I assume that Hispanic families are low income and maybe renters instead of property owners as a result do not have a stake in their community. Because of the lower income, you see many families living together with multiple generations in a home. They seem to have a very close-knit family unit but do not allow others into their circle easily. Each familial group seems to network within the group of people they can relate to. I have rarely seen a Latinx with a person from another race as a friend.

Even the children seem to follow this behavior of only speaking in Spanish when they are around English-speaking people. The Spanish-English language dynamic is more than likely unconscious to the student as they operate in a duo language environment between school and home. I realize I must utilize unique tools to engage the learner in a virtual learning environment. This makes me question how I will connect with the students over a virtual learning environment as I am a native English language speaker.

Nonetheless, I do not know much about their motivational influences and their thoughts on the systems of math, science or medicine. I also am interested to understand the views on health insurance or if they have access to the same services as their American counterparts. I would like to know if they do not go to the doctor or even want to participate in the American system of politics or education. I also would like to better understand the experience as a Latinx in American education system.

### **Case Study of the Mexican Community**

Interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams. The participants were a Mother Nikki T. age 42, student, Maria age 12, and Educator, Lorena Polanco all of Mexican heritage. Nikki T. did not finish high school, has 3 children and lives with her sister who has 2 children, mother and uncle. Maria is in middle school and said she wants to be a Veterinarian when she grows up. Maria lives with her Mother, stepfather, aunt and 2 cousins. Mrs. Polanco, a recent college graduate and first generation Mexican American. She is in her 3rd year of teaching in a school district with a low Hispanic population.

### **Interview Outcomes**

Each participant was engaged in an interview with questions specific to the 1st generation Mexican experience. Nikki is a housekeeper at a hotel where most of the other workers are of Mexican descent. She stated her household norms are to assist with homework but because of the language barrier, she is often left confused and ashamed. Nikki said she does not understand what is required of her child. Nikki acknowledges she uses tools such as google translate but it still leaves her feeling left out to ask questions from the school about the lesson plans for her student.

Maria is a 6th grader who is anxious to learn about science but because of her lack of English language mastery, she is very quiet and withdrawn from the online learning environment. Spanish is her first language and only has 2 years of experience learning English in a formal school setting. She is afraid students will make fun of her accent and acknowledges she does not say anything in class. At home, her mother has other children and works long hours as a housekeeper. Maria feels her mother is not paying attention to her concerns. Maria stated she has a bird that is her best friend and that is why she is inspired to be a Veterinarian.

Mrs. Polance is a Mexican American bi-lingual educator. Mrs. Polance says many of her peer teachers do not engage with Spanish speaking students and parents to her because they do not understand Spanish. In a live classroom, there are many other factors to consider including lesson time constraints. Mrs. Polanco stated she uses her native tongue to make her classroom learning more fun and enriching for her learners. Mrs. Polanco feels her Spanish-English language mastery is a detriment when dealing with her co-workers but helpful to Spanish-speaking students and their parents.

### **Mexican culture integration into the North American School System.**

According to Patron et al. (2002), Hispanic students as a group have the lowest levels of education and the highest dropout rate of any student group. Conditions of poverty and health, as well as other social problems, have made it difficult for some Hispanics living in the U.S. to improve their educational status. Cultural and historical practices have also placed numbers of Hispanic children at risk for educational failure. The fact is American and Mexican school systems are very similar although disparities do exist. According to Helgesen & Hindson (2009) and de Souza (2017) when it comes to an academic path, purpose, and core classes offered; this knowledge will help break the stereotype that Mexican immigrant students are probably illiterate and come from poor, one-room schoolhouses.

Furthermore, today in America it is all too common for educators and policymakers to make judgment calls on Latino immigrant students despite a severe lack of knowledge about their past educational experiences; these teachers and administrators are guilty of formulating “educational decisions in student assessment, curricular planning, and instructional behavior” without this important information (Macias, 1990, p. 292). Moreover, the fact is there is a significant difference within the Mexican Culture as much as there is with differences between other cultural and racial groups.

### **Action Plan**

Mexican students who speak in their Spanish language need to have instruction designed to meet the unique needs of the learner in an English language environment. In an online environment tools such as Google Translate can be an effective tool for non-English language learners. The Mexican Consulate offers classes to parents and has great resources for educators. (<https://consulmex.sre.gob.mx/atlanta/index.php/comunidades-v20/educacion>). I plan to engage in the resources available. I have downloaded the free application Duolingo and will be using this as a fun way to learn Spanish to better engage with my students. In our school district, we have collaborative teachers who float throughout the schools to teach creative ways to increase Hispanic student engagement. There are voluntary classes that I plan to attend related to international students and creative ways to engage students in an online environment.

#### ***Normative routines in an inclusive diverse online environment.***

There is a balance of understanding a students' learning style and communication style all while ensuring learning continuity. Although the language is an important and essential component, the educator needs to be aware of other communication mediums to engage the non-English learner to keep the student engaged. (Ball, 2011).

#### ***Collaborative learning instructional design.***

Technology is a collaborative tool used to actively engage students. Technology learning opportunities from games to online manipulatives provide all learners access to tools such as translation applications that can increase student's communication and classroom engagement. In a person-to person-environment, a translation application would otherwise be used to a lesser degree if at all as there are time constraints.

### **Final Reflection**

Students of Mexican descent and speakers of other languages require an educator to be creative and patient to understand the needs of the learner. No two students are the same, but they deserve the same level of respect and attention to ensure they have the highest and best educational experience. As an educator, I must teach all children regardless of language.

### **Outcome 1**

Rituals and routines are a great way for learners to engage in regular activities such as the pledge of allegiance or reading aloud as a group in my science classroom. Students can volunteer to read and practice speaking in front of other students to build confidence in their speaking abilities. As an educator, it is my responsibility to collaborate and assist the non-native English learners with pronunciation exercises and provide alternative homework assignments.

### **Outcome 2**

Inclusion of all students and families. I have learned each child has a unique way of communicating. I have constructed a binder for each student similar to a file a doctor has for each patient. I have coded my non-English learners in red, to remind me to pause and remember there are special instructions when communicating. I also can collaborate with our translation department at the school board to translate all my lesson plans into Spanish for the parents at home.



### **Outcome 3**

Allowing additional testing time. As part of the English as a second language program, ESOL students are given extra time to complete Unit Assessments and Common Formative Assessments. Pre-Assessments for study skills courses are available in Spanish. Students can choose this for themselves. I will include in verbal instructions the option to have directions given in Spanish. Extra time is allowed during an additional period called content support which meets daily.

### **Outcome 4**

I also plan to communicate twice a semester to each parent via our parent portal called REMIND and or telephone call with a translator on the line to ensure we are communicating effectively. In an online classroom, I can send private messages to students and engage in questions by using Google Translate as well. Building a connection with students is important as is comfortability. This can increase student engagement and excitement about learning.

### **Outcome 5**

During Hispanic Heritage month, I will utilize the lesson plan to introduce students to culturally relevant pedagogy to include examples of their culture. The 5E Model of instruction uses the engage technique to connect the students to the lesson with examples of scientists to see themselves in the real world (Abell & Volkmann, 2006). I can also use real world examples to connect students to other lesson plans. I will encourage students to share information about their family life and celebrations with the class. This will build upon our classroom communities of learners so that Latinx and non-Latinx students will connect with each other in the future.

Due to COVID-19, we are prohibited from all excursions but, in the future, I would like for our students to experience the diversity our city has to offer with the Mexican Independence Day Celebration at Plaza Fiesta. This is a free celebration of Mexican Heritage and Independence. Recognizing important holidays that are typically celebrated by Latinx families will provide other historically relevant references for students to identify with. I will share the information for the event with the school principal and request it to be included in the school newsletter or in the weekly announcements.

In conclusion, I am pointed in a new direction (triangle) with the research that states that understanding the learning style and communication style of diverse students will improve student outcomes. The knowledge will serve to enhance my listening and communication skills with all students. I look forward to exploring more ways to assist the diverse learner in my classroom by keeping them excited and engaged in the virtual classroom learning environment.

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