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Mexican-American preservice teachers and the intransigency of the elementary school curriculum¹

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Abstract

Perhaps the intense focus on the lack of minority teachers in the US has obstructed the study of those students of color who do enter teacher education programs. In particular, few research studies examine Mexican-American preservice teachers and their negotiation of the learning-to-teach process. This study addresses how Mexican-American student teachers “use” their ethnicity during student teaching. For instance, do Mexican-American teachers express their cultural knowledge in lesson planning and implementation? Semi-structured interviews with four Mexican-American student teachers revealed little ethnic expression, even when teaching Mexican-American children. Implications for teacher education programs are also discussed. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Preservice teachers; Mexican–American teachers; Cultural knowledge

Ranherita a tu puerta ven y mira
(Ranherita, come look through your door)
Con ojitos de mis sueños
(With those eyes of my dreams)
Ay te va mi corazón
(To you I send my heart)

–Tish Hinajosa

1. Introduction

Most contemporary teacher educators, especially those who work in urban and ethnically diverse settings, feel compelled to increase the number of people of color who seek teacher licensure. This goal remains woefully unmet. Teacher educators

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continue to teach classes of European-American, middle-class students who lack the cultural background of the students many of them will teach. The literature to date documents many attempts to increase the number of minority students in teacher education programs. However, few studies examine the experiences of minority teachers during their teacher education. My own ethnic heritage (Mexican-American) and several years of teaching experience in diverse K-12 classrooms convinced me that understanding the culture of my students made a difference. Now, as a teacher educator, having the benefit of observing many teachers and students, I am even more convinced of the role of culture.

Admittedly, encouraging additional people of color to teach is an important goal; however, the present study is not about increasing the number of African-American or Latino students who choose teaching as a career. It is about Mexican-American women who have already chosen to be teachers. It is about a group of young people who have made it to the final phase of teacher licensure. It is about Mexican-American preservice teachers teaching Mexican-American children. It is, at its end, about culture.

The very idea of culture percolates in modern US society, and the education of children and youth who are not of the dominant culture certainly has not been ignored. In fact, the most riveting and often distressing implications of cultural differences have been played out on the stage of the public school. This paper, examining as it does the boundaries of several cultural spheres, must also address the issue of culture. However, before discussing the important cultural features of the study, it is necessary to examine the purpose of studying preservice teachers of color in the first place. For instance, why do policy makers, university teacher educators, and school district administrators generally agree that US schools need more minority teachers? What precisely is the benefit of more minority teachers? Many other “noble” professions, such as social work, would benefit from the diversity of experiences that people of color would bring to the job. What evidence does the educational community have which suggests that teachers of color are differentially effective in

certain settings? It is this question that must be addressed before opening a discussion on how student teachers of color may experience teacher education as a consequence of their ethnicity. Given the interest and energy devoted to increasing the number of teachers of color, we might suspect that there is a sound research or theoretical base for such an emphasis. But no such foundation exists. There are, however, several potential reasons why educators, policymakers, and politicians feel compelled to recruit teachers of color. The two following sections each examine the possible purposes for increasing the number of teachers of color. These sections are followed by a summary of general studies of teacher education students of color.

2. Differential population growth

Motivation for increasing teachers of color may be based on what might be called the “population projection” view. This perspective suggests that recruitment and supply of teachers should mirror the percentage each ethnic group holds as part of the total US population, or at least the percentage each ethnic group comprises as a total of the school-aged population. Many papers in teacher education policy point out the dramatic differential population growth among ethnic groups in the US and conclude that more teachers of color are needed. However, such papers begin with the assumption that more teachers of color will serve to improve the educational quality of students of color (e.g., Henninger, 1989). From such work it is not clear precisely why the teacher/student population should be as ethnically balanced as possible, but the attention given to census data is indeed interesting, and I will summarize a few of the more important trends relative to this paper.

Naturally, the representation of culture by examining racial/ethnic categories in the US Census data is a shorthand for deeper issues. Yet, these are the figures that are often used to awake us to cultural trajectories. Such data typically shocks policymakers by the extraordinary growth among

“Hispanics”². While it is clear that all those who are represented by the category Hispanic do not hold a similar cultural viewpoint, being Hispanic or, more precisely, Mexican-American, does circumscribe a set of attitudes and beliefs. The same, of course, is true for European-Americans or African-Americans, yet ethnic categories in the modern US remain important markers. And these figures provide data to reinforce the view that the examination of demographic data is not trivial.

So what do we know about differential ethnic growth among teachers and students? Using the latest data from the US Census and elsewhere, Lewis (1996) points out that “white” youth make up 68% of the US public student population while white teachers comprise 86% of all public school teachers. Hispanics comprise 12% of the student population, yet only 3.1% of all teachers are Hispanic. Other ethnic categories are also underrepresented with regard to the number of teachers in the schools, yet Hispanics have the greatest student/teacher percentage differential.

These data are more dramatic when specific regions of the country are considered. For instance, in Texas, data from the Texas Education Agency shows that in 1995, white students comprised 47% of the total state public school population; white teachers made up 76.6% of all teachers. The percentage ratio of Hispanic students to Hispanic teachers was over 2 to 1 (approximately 36 to 14%). Add to these figures the data suggesting that the US Hispanic population is growing at a much faster rate than other ethnic groups and the desire to recruit additional Mexican-American teachers is amplified.

²The term “Hispanic” is used as a general term for those of Latin American origin. However, the term carries negative connotations for some, who argue that “Hispanic” refers to either the country of Spain or the Spanish language. Few persons of Latin American origin have any connection with Spain and many who share this ethnic heritage do not speak Spanish. Therefore, this paper will use the term *Latino/a* when referring to those whose geographic heritage is Latin America. When speaking directly about those students whose heritage is Mexican, I refer to them as Mexican-American. When speaking of census data, I will use the term “Hispanic” to maintain consistency with such nomenclature.

Teachers of color are, not surprisingly, severely under-represented in specialized teaching roles. For instance, Ford, Grantham, Tarek, and Harris (1997) point out the nearly insignificant number of African-American teachers of gifted children.

These data clearly suggest that those who argue for equal student/teacher ethnic representation have a point. Yet, in spite of the disparity in these data, the population projection argument is rather weak. For instance, what educational improvements can be expected when teacher and student ethnic populations are balanced? While it may be important to achieve ethnic balance among students and teachers, the practical and theoretical basis for this view is weak.

Perhaps implied in the effort to bring more teachers of color to classrooms is the notion that they will be more successful than European-American teachers. But this implication has dramatic consequences not often explored. To say that teacher ethnicity must match student ethnicity suggests that “white” teachers cannot or should not be teaching children of color. But can a “white” teacher learn a second culture and learn to recognize and translate that knowledge into classroom practice? With respect to the function and form of language use in the classroom, many studies have found that the discourse patterns of white teachers often prevent them from recognizing language use among African-American children. Michaels and Collins (1984) write that “this kind of disharmonious interaction results in a pattern of differential treatment and negative evaluations that, in their turn, diminish the student’s access to the kind of instruction and practice necessary for the acquisition of literacy” (p. 243). But nowhere do the authors suggest that teachers cannot learn new dialects.

Papers focussed on minority teacher recruitment perhaps assume that the kinds of cultural and linguistic discontinuities Michaels and Collins describe will fade if more teachers of color teach youth of color. But such an assumption may be wrong. It is also incorrect to assume that white teachers cannot learn the linguistic features of African-American youth and engage in literacy instruction consistent with their students’ use of language. Therefore, beyond the general but worthy goal of increasing the number of minority teachers for the sake of equity in the teaching profession, the value

of the census-driven recruitment of teachers of color is indeterminate at best.

3. Teacher/student cultural unity

Examining census data ignores what ethnic and cultural categories mean in lived experiences. What, in fact, does it mean to share ethnicity? And what role does ethnicity play in culture itself? Is it more important than gender in determining school success or failure? Does religiosity play a greater role? Of course, these questions cannot be answered in this paper and may be utterly untenable. However, for the purposes of this discussion, it is assumed that children's ethnic culture (e.g., Mexican-American, European-American) does play a role in their experiences as learners in US schools. The exact role is quite beyond this paper. Readers can consult a number of strong sources for further investigation (e.g., Darder, Torres & Gutiérrez, 1997).

Thus far in this paper, the term culture has not been sufficiently defined. And, of course, there is not one agreed-upon definition. However two meanings seem to fit the nature of this work. First, the brilliant educational anthropologist Ruth Landes explained that, "culture limits and stylizes the raw, pulsating materials of mankind [sic] like a mold or pattern" (p. 190). Louis Wirth argues that culture is all we know that we do not know we know, or that which we take for granted.³

In the context of this research, culture has indeed "stylized" those who choose to become teachers. In its own way, the culture itself has shaped the goals and dreams of young people to become teachers, teachers who will no doubt impart a culture to children and youth. Children, of course, have their own set of cultural biases based on the very fact that they are children. But they also have an ethnic culture, one that has also shaped them in ways sublime.

If culture, as Landes and others suggest, shapes the raw materials of our humanity, then it stands to reason that teachers must understand deeply the culture of students. The paradox of cultural knowledge, however, is that we fail to recognize our own culture even when it is the very thing that makes us who we are. Given the nearly limitless cultural interchanges in the process of schooling, we might expect that when teachers and students share culture, schooling will be more successful.

However, evidence that Mexican-American teachers, for example, are more effective with Mexican-American children has little research support. In spite of the lack of research evidence, the rationale runs clear: teachers must understand what students already know (knowledge that is deeply grounded in culture), so that they may build on the knowledge students have. This crucial idea in the formation of any educational experience has been repeated in one form or another since the formal study of education began. Plato, in his "Meno's Paradox", made the problem of prior knowledge the centerpiece of his epistemology. Dewey (1938), in *Experience and Education*, noted "that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experiences learners already have" (p. 74). Contemporary cognitive psychologists point out the centrality of prior knowledge when they use terms such as schema. And each time educators talk of constructivism, they are admitting to the importance of prior knowledge. Given this central theme in the philosophical and research literature, it seems reasonable to expect that ample evidence exists to verify the cultural unity hypothesis. In fact, few studies make this issue a primary focus.

In a seminal paper, Au and Jordon (1981) found that Hawaiian teachers were able to negotiate a more appropriate reading instructional strategy for elementary school native Hawaiian children. Specifically, they found that atomized reading instruction (e.g., phonics practice, word lists) was not interpreted by native Hawaiian children as an instructional moment. In Hawaiian homes, linguistic events such as storytelling and talk story served as markers to children that an adult was going to teach something and the child's attention was needed. When reading lessons began as phonics instruction, the children reckoned that their attention

³These definitions of culture are not meant to imply that culture is a static construct. Anthropologists note that culture adapts to changing circumstances. In particular, immigrant cultures, in response to new pressures, modify and adapt beliefs to new environments. Of course, all cultures, independent of their conditions, grow, change, or die, just as the people who create them.

was unnecessary, as if the teacher was doing something for herself. In revising the curriculum and encouraging the native Hawaiian teachers to use more culturally relevant instruction, Au and Jordon found that when reading instruction began with a story common to the children's experience, reading scores on a standardized test improved. This type of cultural knowledge, most easily understood by teachers who share an ethnic tradition with the students, is considered part of the invisible culture, that portion which is not manifested in dress, customs, or other observable behavior.

Similarly, McCollum (1989) found that "turn-taking" patterns among Puerto Rican children and teachers differed from "Anglo-American" teachers and students, noting that these differences may have serious implications for Puerto Rican children taught by Anglo-American teachers.

The motivation for increasing the number of minorities in teaching is in part based on the view that teachers of color can imbue the school setting with features of their cultural heritage. For instance, we might expect African-American teachers, in the effort to make the schooling experience more connected to the lives of their African-American students, to develop in-depth lessons using the work of Eloise Greenfield, the African-American writer for children. African-American teachers, using their cultural vantage point, could examine, for instance, both well-known figures in African-American history such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others who are less famous, to develop not only basic literacy skills but cultural knowledge and even pride in the African-American heritage.

Foster's (1995) well-known work suggests that "when students and teachers share a common cultural background and are able to engage in productive interactions, it is possible that they might develop attachments to education that they otherwise might not" (p. 575). For instance, Foster argues that African-American teachers are able to capitalize on the cultural patterns of collectivity and shared interests rather than rely on traditional school patterns of competition to motivate students. This view recalls Hollins' (1995) suggestion that teachers should utilize "culturally mediated cognition" when working with children of color.

In addition, we might expect African-American teachers to understand and perhaps share the dialect and discourse patterns of the students, thereby developing literacy activities more culturally appropriate for their students. As a consequence of the cultural unity hypothesis, for which we have found limited but critical evidence, perhaps student teachers of color should be given great opportunity to engage their cultural knowledge during their student teaching, the space in which the learning-to-teach process is most intense and directed. Indeed, what good is it if we recruit more Mexican-American teachers who ostensibly know the culture of the children if the curriculum has no place for the injection of their cultural knowledge?

4. General studies of teacher education students of color

Whereas studies testing the ethnic unity hypothesis are rare, some studies have examined preservice teachers of color in an effort to examine their experiences. For instance, a 1992 issue of *the Journal of Teacher Education*, titled *Cultural Diversity in Education*, held six articles. Of the six, one did not mention the ethnicity or race of the emerging teachers who were undergoing training in diversity, and three studied White teachers only. One article focused on minority teachers, but in that paper, 26 teachers out of 29 were white. The final study examined diverse students' success or failure in schools linking them to high, medium or low impact teachers. The article made no mention of teacher ethnicity.

Even the few studies that examine the reasons why students of color enter teaching are limited in scope. For example, Osler (1994) studied 22 British black student teachers, hoping to uncover their reasons for choosing teaching as a career. Her findings, not surprisingly, reveal two sets of purposes: one related to race, the other set related to general prospective teacher motivation. Those students who expressed that race was a motivating factor had always wanted to teach because they felt that black youth need the perspective of a black teacher. At least two student teachers were motivated by their own miseducation at the hands of a school

system they felt was overly racist. One student even reported that his desire to become a teacher was the result of watching US TV shows, which he believed, demonstrated that teaching had more “equal opportunities than many other professions”. Other reasons given by the sample were related to family traditions (e.g., “I have two cousins who started teaching last year”), a desire to help children, and a general sentiment of social responsibility. These students also were positive about course content dealing with racial and ethnic issues in schools. However, they felt subtle and overt hostility coming from white students who felt that the course spent too much time and energy discussing racial issues.

Guyton, Saxton, and Wesche (1996) interviewed seven preservice teachers, all seeking initial certificates in a Masters/Certification program. Although the focus of the article is the experiences of “diverse” students in teacher education, the authors include six students of color in their study, along with one gay male student. Their general findings reveal that each student was given to understand by practicing teachers and other student teachers that they were somehow different. Not surprisingly, the African-American student teachers were more comfortable in the urban school student teaching setting. However, one of the students complained that the multicultural curriculum at even the urban schools began and ended with Martin Luther King, Jr. This was the only time the school curriculum was mentioned in a paper that, by its own admission, ranged over many issues without much direct attention to any particular point. The research conducted by Gonzalez (1997) uncovered similar beliefs among student teachers of color.

Galindo (1996) has studied experienced Chicana⁴ teachers and invited them to share their role identi-

ties as teachers. Two themes emerge from these studies: the advocacy for the education of minority students and the establishment of constructive and often highly personal relationships with students’ parents. In spite of variation among the participants in the study, each had cultivated an occupational role identity as teacher that centered on “giving something back” to their student communities. In addition, they each saw themselves as part of the community of parents and believed that parent participation and communication with the school was central to school success. Such relationships, Galindo concludes, might be difficult if the teacher did not share an ethnic identity with the parents. This finding is corroborated by a recent ethnographic study of two bilingual first-grade classrooms (Enslie, 1996).

Shaw (1996) studied two African-American doctoral students in education. What is surprising about this study is that it examines two minority students who chose not to teach high school (their intended major) at all. One of the interviewees, in fact, did not even participate in the school field experience. The other student interviewed decided that high school teaching was not the place for someone who “wanted to write a book”. The student continued “If I’m going to be a high school teacher, I probably couldn’t write a book” (p. 339). It appears from the article that both students were pursuing doctorates in higher education. This research draws conclusions about race and class issues in teaching by examining the beliefs of two students who have chosen not to be teachers.

The limited attention to minority teacher education students themselves results from one of two situations. First, teacher educators have been largely unsuccessful in recruiting significant numbers into their programs and therefore do not face the dilemma of developing teachers of color within a dominant white program, or the students of color participating in teacher education programs may represent middle-class values and beliefs. Perhaps the reason that teacher educators have not been successful in recruiting additional persons of color into the teaching profession is that we have failed to understand their predicament in the very programs we intend for them to join. The second alternative is

⁴The term Chicana has a more specific meaning than Mexican-American. Born of the civil rights movement, Chicana generally implies one whose heritage is Mexican-American and whose political orientation is radical left. Consequently, Mexican-Americans who identify with the civil rights movement are much more likely to call themselves Chicano or Chicana. Partly because of their age, the student teachers in this study all preferred the term Mexican-American to Chicana. Perhaps because Galindo’s work focuses on experienced teachers who are older, his participants choose Chicana.

that teacher educators are given to understand that students of color experience the learning-to-teach process in the same way as dominant culture students. Either case does not bode well for future students/teachers of color.

The research and policy studies reviewed suggest that (a) a clear rationale for the recruitment of underrepresented teachers is lacking, (b) little evidence exists for the cultural unity hypothesis, and (c) those studies examining student teachers of color range from being deeply interested in teachers and their engagement with children of color to a lack of direction with respect to people of color or the context of multicultural classrooms.

This study sought to learn more about Mexican-American student teachers, their purposes in teaching and their experiences within their teacher education program. Specifically, the focus was placed on their interactions with Mexican-American children and their ability to use their ethnic knowledge in ways that supported learning.

5. Method

It became obvious early on that no survey or other quantitative method would suit the research agenda; therefore, conducting extensive interviews with four Mexican-American teachers, chosen randomly from a population of 25 Mexican-American teachers, was the most appropriate research strategy. This largely qualitative study relied upon semi-structured interviews with four Mexican-American students undergoing a yearlong teacher preparation program in three urban professional development schools. Interviews were

conducted individually at the university. All interviews were conducted in English except when Spanish words were needed for clarification. Each interviewee provided over 6 hours of taped dialogue, which was later transcribed. The data were analyzed using the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), particularly the use of pattern coding.

Like all studies, this study must address the issue of researcher effects. In particular, this research relied upon data gathered by a professor from undergraduate students. To control for interviewee acquiescence, the researcher chose only students who had not been under his direct supervision. With respect to data interpretation, each interviewee was given an opportunity to review their interview text and the interpretations derived from their words. In general, the “member checks” resulted in no significant changes.

6. Participants

Each interviewee was in her final semester of coursework and in the midst of student teaching. Table 1 shows each participant’s demographic information and their level of ethnicity as measured by the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans (ARSMA). The ARSMA asks respondents to report how long their families have lived in the US, their desire to use Spanish, the frequency of their visits to Mexico, and their connection to the customs of their older relatives, among other social variables. All names are pseudonyms. Table 1 summarizes this data. The schools at which the students taught are described in the next section.

Table 1

Name	Gender	Age	School	ARSMA Score
Claudia	Female	24	Barnett	Level IV: Strongly Anglo-oriented
Delia	Female	25	Barnett	Level III: Slightly Anglo-oriented, bicultural
Noelia	Female	25	Calhoun	Level II: Mexican-oriented to approximately balanced bicultural
Maria	Female	25	North	Level II: Mexican-oriented to approximately balanced bicultural

The first point to notice regarding the participants is that all are women, a fact not surprising because the vast majority of elementary teacher education students are female. Age among the participants was very similar. Their ARSMA scores represent a wide range, from Claudia, who rates her ethnicity as nearly “Anglo” to Noelia and Maria who are more oriented to their Mexican heritage. The interview data also revealed Claudia as clearly the most ambivalent toward her Mexican-American heritage. As one measure of her Anglo orientation, Claudia simply refused to learn Spanish. Her parents speak Spanish (although they made English her first language). One comment she made was emblematic of her views: “I am Mexican-American and proud of it. I don’t know Spanish and don’t care to learn it. If you don’t like that, then you have a problem”.

Maria and Noelia are much more oriented to Mexican culture. Noelia was born in Mexico City, while Maria was born in Brownsville, Texas, a city that in many ways is more a part of Mexico than the US. They reported that their parents consistently encouraged schooling and hoped to develop bilingual children, highly skilled in Spanish and English speaking, reading, and writing. Their parents, all recent immigrants, spoke Spanish exclusively in the home, but endorsed the learning of English in school. Perhaps as a result of their bilingualism, each was seeking the bilingual teaching certificate.

Delia, whose cultural orientation was most balanced among the respondents, reported that her family had in some ways rejected much of their ethnic orientation in order to take advantage of jobs and educational opportunities. She reported that it was not until she took a course in the history of Mexican-Americans in Houston that she understood features of her family’s rituals, place connections, and friends. Mexican-Americans who engage in the process of deliberate ethnic shift are often referred to as “pochos”, a derogatory term used to describe those who abandon families and friends in the effort to appear more white. Delia understood why her parents failed to connect her more fully with her ethnic roots, but she did admit that her cousins who were equally intelligent had done much less well in school because their parents failed

to shield them from the traditions of Mexican culture. Delia admitted that being “too Mexican” hurts in school, a sentiment shared by each participant, although in varying degrees.

All had family connections in Mexico although each varied in the number of times they visited relatives. Consistent with many Mexican-American young women, three of the four lived at home with their parents, waiting to finish school or get married.

All the interviewees’ parents were born in Mexico or a Mexican-American area of Houston or South Texas. All reported being the first generation of college degree earners in their families. When asked why they wanted to be teachers, they provided most of the common explanations for becoming a teacher (e.g., “love working with kids”) and a few that were particular to their class and ethnic orientation (e.g., “give something back to the community”). All were volunteer participants in the study, understanding that their responses would remain confidential.

7. The elementary school contexts

Both Delia and Claudia were placed in a school near downtown Houston, located in the traditionally Mexican-American southeast section of town. Both Delia and Claudia had grown up near the school, Barnett Elementary. Claudia actually attended Barnett as an elementary school student, but recalled that there were fewer Mexican-American children at the school when she attended. The school district of which Barnett is a part has experienced a similar shift. Once considered a “black” district, this large, urban district has experienced rapid growth of the Latino population, which has recently reached 60%. Claudia’s family had lived on a street with Mexican-American families for “as long as” she could remember. Delia’s family was once the only Mexican-American family on the block, but now, she reports, every family is Mexican-American. She attended an elementary school nearby that is now almost entirely Mexican-American.

The school in which they worked is today a large elementary school (over 800 students), built for less

than 400. With such bursting enrollment, the school ran several lunch sessions and portable classrooms dotted the campus, filling in the playground and parking lots. At the time of the study, over 90% of all the students were economically disadvantaged. All but 40 students were Hispanic; 60% were classified as Limited English Proficient. Nearly half of the school's 50 teachers were Hispanic, many of whom staffed over 23 bilingual or English as a Second Language classrooms; white teachers represented 36% of the faculty, blacks 14%.

The two other schools, where Maria and Noelia were placed, are located in mid-urban school districts. However, the lack of proximity to the inner city did not affect either the density of ethnic minorities or the socioeconomic status of the families. Of the 535 students at Maria's school, over 75% of the students were economically disadvantaged. The ethnicity of the students, however, reflected greater diversity: 38% "Hispanic", 35% White, 14% Asian-Pacific Islander (primarily Vietnamese), 12% Black. Thirty-four percent of all students were categorized as Limited English Proficient. The ethnicity of the teachers, however, was much less diverse than in the large urban district: over 75% of the 30 teachers were white, 15% were Hispanic, and 10.6% were black.

Noelia's school had an enrollment of 922, of whom over 50% were economically disadvantaged. Forty-six percent of the students were Black. "Hispanics" comprised 21%, while Whites and Asian-Pacific Islanders each comprised about 16%. Twenty-one percent of the students were categorized as Limited English Proficient. The teachers were overwhelmingly white (86%). Less than 2% of teachers were Hispanic. Blacks comprised the remainder at 12%.

8. The university context

In 1994, the University of Houston initiated an elementary teacher certificate program for full-time students based on the Professional Development School (PDS) Model (Goodlad, 1994). Borrowing the structure and purpose of the teaching hospital,

PDSs are typically located in schools where many expert teachers conduct their work. Consequently, pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to apprentice for an entire year with skilled teachers. The University of Houston's PDSs are not located on the university campus (in contrast to a laboratory school), but are rather situated in "regular" schools, governed, funded, and directed by local school districts, not the university. In fact, the University of Houston chooses PDSs consistent with the theme and name of the program—PUMA, an acronym for Pedagogy for Urban and Multicultural Action. A majority of the children in the elementary school PDSs represent students of color; over 50% of the children at each school are economically disadvantaged; all PDS sites are located in urban or mid-urban Houston.

The development of the PDS concept at the University of Houston has its own history, complete with successes and remaining challenges. However, the most obvious features are the urban and mid-urban focus; the methods courses, which are taught in the field where university educators often interact with children; a university coordinator who oversees all the student teachers at one or two sites; and a year-long program that places student teachers at the same school for their entire program.

With respect to the curriculum of the teacher education program, it is important to note that each coordinator devoted a portion of class time to a discussion of student diversity and the implementation of multicultural education and its potential value in schools. Each of the participants' primary instructors said that they had spent at least two class sessions discussing culturally relevant curriculum and provided some examples of how multicultural curriculum may be implemented in schools. In addition, each of the methods courses devoted a portion of the curriculum to specific multicultural strategies. For instance, the reading methods courses examined children's literature by minority writers. Of course, such a brief treatment could not be expected to create multicultural experts out of the student teachers, but it was a fact that multicultural education was given two weeks of direct attention in a very truncated teacher education

program.⁵ Two of the cluster leaders were of color, one Mexican-American and one African-American who was a former bilingual teacher.

9. Results

As might be expected, the data gathered provided only partial and, at times, ambiguous findings. Auspiciously, this emerging study posted no formal hypothesis and thus required no rejection of claims. However, the data analysis revealed several interesting findings—some of which may help to understand better the experiences of Mexican-American students and one that may lead to policy changes in teacher education. Finally, the paper ends with questions about the use of ethnicity by teachers of color.

First, the participants in this study revealed themselves to be committed teachers and spoke about “giving something back to their community”. But they certainly did not use the missionary-like terms that we have grown to expect from studies with teachers of color teaching children of color (e.g., Foster, 1997). Their interest in teaching centered around the issue of teaching itself. They did not speak about choosing to teach in a particularly Mexican-American school. After all, the largest district in the area is over 60% Hispanic. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find a school that *does not* have a significant number of Mexican-American children. Rather, they spoke of their interest in children but did note that they might, *only*

might, be more effective with Mexican-American children. And all claims to being disproportionately effective with Mexican-American children were followed quickly by a commitment to all children when they “had my own classroom”.

The four student teachers found themselves challenged by teacher education and offered responses teacher educators have come to expect from their students (e.g., “I just can’t believe how hard this is!”). Their experiences as Mexican-Americans within the program were tempered by the fact that they were each one of several Mexican-Americans working at their PDS. The literature’s image of the lone student of color facing a sea of dominant culture classmates simply did not fit this situation. In spite of being one of several Mexican-American teachers, or perhaps as a result of this fact, each participant recalled several issues that arose out of being ethnically different, for, at times the white students represented one view and the Mexican-American teachers another. But the challenge of learning to teach often overwrote these stories as all the student teachers negotiated a rigorous teacher education in schools that often lacked the resources teachers need to be successful.

The importance of these issues notwithstanding, the focus of this paper was whether or not these Mexican-American students were allowed to use their ethnicity, in whatever form, during student teaching. We might expect that the Mexican-American student teachers would be welcomed to invent curricular themes that focused on the cultural knowledge they shared with the children. But in each case, the student teachers in this study were merely invited to reproduce the typical and expected “canon”. Dreary basal readers, social studies textbooks that might best be described as outdated, and a very plain general education dominated the schools’ materials and activities. However, each of the participants found, in her own way, some measure of success connecting to Mexican-American children. Yet these connections were not made through the general curriculum but by making what amounted to a curricular “end-run”.

In presenting the results of the interviews, they have been sequenced in order of the student teachers’ ARSMA scores, from most “Anglo” to most “Mexican”.

⁵The Texas Legislature is now well-known for their landmark 1987 ruling that limited education courses for those seeking certification to 4 courses in education and one semester of student teaching. In response to growing concerns about the quality of teachers being prepared, the state initiated a series of funding opportunities for those universities who implemented PDSs. However, the number of courses allowed in public universities, such as the University of Houston, grew to approximately 7 courses in education. When courses such as mathematics methods were expanded to a full course, there was little room left for others. In response, the coordinator instructor addressed the concept of multicultural education in a wide-ranging course that addressed learning theories and other general education issues. Of course, many of the specific methods teachers dealt with cultural issues, but not as a distinct subject.

9.1. Claudia

Claudia's interview revealed several interesting paradoxes in her beliefs about culture and curriculum. First, Claudia refused to learn Spanish and thus had no interest in teaching bilingual education. In addition, Claudia was clear that she often felt shame for some of the cultural values that prevented many of her Mexican-American friends, especially women friends, from "succeeding", a construct that Claudia defined in European-American terms. She said that defining one's life in terms of what many Mexican-American women value was wrongheaded and would limit success in the modern US. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to teach Mexican-American youth. Claudia believed that Mexican-American students needed to understand what was "wrong" with their cultural upbringing and was especially concerned with the way girls and women were treated in some Mexican-American homes. Too many young girls in her family and neighborhood, she argued, "just went along with what everyone else was doing, even if it stopped them from doing well in school". Many girls she knew were too likely to submerge their own academic and life goals for what she believed were the more culturally relevant objectives: marry and have children.

Her concern with the traditional Mexican-American culture did not, however, encourage a belief that students should not know about their culture or have pride in it. On the contrary, Claudia had been introduced to Mexican-American (Chicano) history at the university and believed that such knowledge was important for her success. But like the other student teachers, she was not provided an opportunity to help her fourth graders gain such knowledge, in spite of the fact that her cooperating teacher was Mexican-American. At a loss to explain why the curriculum of her cooperating teacher had no culturally relevant orientation, she reported that maybe "there was too much other stuff to teach". But she also recognized a distinct bias in the textbooks:

Interviewer: What about culture [in the books]?

Claudia: Oh, there's nothing that touches on culture.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Claudia: Because, I don't know. Whoever designed the books doesn't want to touch that. Maybe it's taboo to them. Most of America wants it to go away. They don't want to recognize the influence of the other cultures in our society.

Claudia reported finding very few ways to engage her cultural knowledge in the classroom. However, she regarded her attempts to inject her cultural knowledge as very important, reporting that Mexican-American students should not have to get to the university before they learn about the lives of their families and ancestors. During the time in which she had complete responsibility for the class, Claudia decided to forget the books and develop her own lessons. She said, "In order to help the students understand their culture and learn the subjects, I have to make everything, but they like it much better".

9.2. Delia

Delia connected to her 5th graders in ways that did not affect the curriculum directly, but in ways that she believed influenced her students nonetheless. When talking with her Mexican-American students, she reported:

I just felt good. Like I could serve them well because I knew where they were coming from. Things I could relate to. Like my cooperating teacher [an African American] would talk to the kids about eating breakfast. "Did you have eggs for breakfast?", she asked them. "No we [the students] ate tacos for breakfast".

In another point in her interview data, Delia reported another important cultural connection.

I could connect with the girls; going to quincineras⁶ ... About the girls and their moms

⁶The quincinera is a traditional celebration marking a girl's transition to womanhood. For many Mexican families, a quincinera is as important as wedding and may receive equal attention and resources.

are real strict and they can't wear makeup. Those were things I could relate to. You know, I couldn't wear makeup until I was 17.

She also pointed out that her understanding of the girls and their pre-adolescent challenges allowed her to build on this knowledge in lessons. For instance, the idea of parental control could be used, she found, when discussing the way laws in society operate to control all citizens. Her cultural identification seemed to cross gender lines as well in a particularly interesting example of cultural unity:

The boys were really into the Old English letters. Although I have never been into that, I know about it. I don't look at it and gasp at it or anything, I know. Some of the White teachers thought that they were making gang writing, but they weren't. They were just writing their name in the old English letters. There's a difference [between kids just writing their name and kids being in gangs].

This connection to her Mexican-American students may have important implications. In this case, Delia used her cultural knowledge in a manner that prevented action. Indeed, it appears that White educators had misunderstood Mexican-American culture. Although it is true that "Old English" calligraphy, with its extreme serifs and large size is associated with Latino youth gangs, it is not necessarily a sign of gang involvement. Early gangs developed this style of writing, in fact, because they saw it on "official documents", such as diplomas. Their use of the typeface arose as a way to symbolically seize the authority of the schools. Of course, in this case, Delia may have chosen to talk with the boys about flirting with gang life and that such writing is associated with gangs. However, she understood that simply writing old English letters does not necessarily indicate a gang affiliation but rather a subtle cultural expression. This "insider" knowledge prevented Delia from overreacting and allowed the boys in her class an overt cultural expression without admonishing what could be misunderstood as gang affiliation. This example demonstrates that ethnic unity between teacher and student may not be manifested in overt, active instructional acts.

At another point in her interviews, Delia reported that her cooperating teacher did make an effort to connect with the children, and Delia respected her efforts at the personal attention she gave each and every student. In fact, Delia spoke of her cooperating teacher using very favorable terms. However, the following quote is revealing, and in fact caused Delia herself to pause:

Interviewer: Did she (cooperating teacher) ever make an effort to connect with the kids?

Delia: Always. Always.

Interviewer: Did she teach about anything about Mexican-American history

Delia: No. But on a personal level she would (connect with the students).

Of course, such a perspective on multicultural education is not uncommon. Teachers who work with children of color are largely dedicated professionals, but many advocates of multicultural education argue that these same dedicated professionals continue to fall short of curricular goals with respect to minority histories.

Delia also had a shorter student teaching experience in a first-grade classroom, in which she also found that the curriculum provided little cultural unity with the Mexican-American children in the class. She willingly used the traditional (and monocultural) basal series the school district had adopted, but found that the early morning "calendar" and other activities were open to change.

In the mornings we play music and we dance, and they would do, like, the hokey pokey every morning. And so now I can't stand it, so I brought in Selena's⁷ songs. And they do that now and they love it. My teacher is like, "I never would have thought of bringing that in". We make up words and they love to dance to her songs.

With her modification of the morning routine, Delia found yet another way to bend the curriculum to the students' ethnic orientation.

⁷Selena's music, a blend of pop and the Mexican music known as "conjunto", is very well-known in Texas and Northern Mexico". Selena played to sell-out crowds in large venues before she was murdered by her fan club president in 1995.

9.3. Noelia

Noelia's first student teacher placement was in a 5th grade ESL (English as a Second Language) class where half the students were native Vietnamese speakers. She understood the Latino children in the classroom but found the Vietnamese children a puzzle.

And she worried about not understanding these students. She recalled that soon after the student teachers' first observations in the classrooms, the principal met with them and told them that "The school is open to all cultures". The principal made us know that multicultural education was important at this school". With that statement, one that impressed upon Noelia that diversity was an important element in the school, Noelia was worried that she would not be successful with the Vietnamese students. Her concern for not understanding the culture of the Vietnamese students stemmed partly from her own schooling experiences. When her family first arrived in Houston, they lived in an African-American neighborhood. When she was asked about her school experiences, she shared a painful memory:

When I went to [name of school] that was my first year here in the United States. So I didn't know the language and they put me in one of the classrooms, and I remember the teacher just taking me out of the classroom because I didn't know the language. That was horrible for me. So I still see that a lot [prejudice] in that district.

Naturally, Noelia was concerned that the Vietnamese students would feel as she had, and she hoped that her cooperating teacher would help her in understanding the Vietnamese language and culture. But her cooperating teacher, a European-American, seemed to be of little help in understanding what such children valued. When asked about the study of Vietnamese culture in the class, Noelia responded, "The class is real busy so we don't have much time to talk about Vietnamese culture. Maybe she did more at the beginning of the year". A curriculum oriented toward Mexican-American culture was also absent during Noelia's student teaching. Nevertheless, Noelia reported that she

was successful with one of the more challenging boys in her class: "One of the Mexican-American boys was talking about Julio Cesar Chavez, the boxer, and we could talk about him because we knew him". She said that he was very surprised to hear a teacher talking about boxing, much less a Mexican boxer. However, Noelia reported that while she was not necessarily a fan of boxing, all of the men in her family followed the sport, in which famous boxers such as Chavez and Oscar de la Hoya are revered by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Again, this connection was not part of the formal curriculum, a fact that perhaps made it more meaningful.

9.4. Maria

Maria, along with Noelia, was strongly oriented towards Mexican culture, and her interviews revealed that she felt a deep responsibility to Mexican-American children. Maria was also placed in a cluster that had only one other Mexican-American student teacher and, therefore, she felt more of an outsider than Delia. Maria also reported a severe lack of diversity in the curriculum:

Interviewer: So the curriculum doesn't really give you much opportunity to include Mexican-American activities?

Maria: Absolutely not. For example, Cinco de Mayo is coming up and there's nothing going on.

A lack of diversity in the curriculum, however, certainly did not prevent Maria from injecting her cultural knowledge. For instance, Maria was required to develop a thematic unit as part of her course requirements, and she chose to build her unit around Gary Soto's book for children, *Too Many Tamales*. Her teacher had not read the book, but agreed to allow Maria to use it. In this effort, Maria was most successful in penetrating the formal curriculum, but she found many more instances of informal cultural connections. In particular, Maria felt it was very important to create a positive relationship with the parents of the students in her class and often contacted them by phone. Because she did not speak Spanish, her cooperating teacher valued these contacts, and Maria became an important member of the

fourth-grade teaching team. She was the only Mexican-American in her cluster and placed in a school with almost no other Mexican-American teachers but many Mexican-American students. Consequently, other teachers began to look to her for insights into Mexican-American life. But some of the inquiries coming her way were pejorative and accusatory. And she grew to resent them. The following interchange in one of her interviews revealed this frustration:

Interviewer: You feel there have been times when you've been singled out?

Maria: Yes. Singled out kind of because of the differences. Okay [Maria] speaks Spanish, she understands.

Interviewer: So they are always looking to you for the minority perspective?

Maria: Exactly. The teachers ask me, "Can you tell me why his mom does this and this and this. Can you tell me why his mom handles it by hitting him?" I know where I come from; I know what I am. But I don't why José's mom refuses to sign papers to get him referred ... Sure I can translate a letter for you. Sure I can tell you what they are saying. Sure I can give you my opinion. It doesn't necessarily mean that I know all about the Mexican-American kids.

The veteran teachers at Maria's school were, of course, not using Maria's cultural knowledge to develop curriculum or even to understand more deeply Mexican-American culture. Rather, they were after an ambassador who could explain why their students were failing, without examining their own instruction, curriculum, or even prejudice. Maria understood this and, she said, learned to "shut her mouth", translate the letters, or make phone calls to Spanish-speaking parents.

10. Discussion

Because the textbooks and established curriculum were perceived as impenetrable, all of the student teachers found ways to include their cultural knowledge in ways that did not affect the formal curriculum. Delia, for example, found both a clever and self-preserving way to include culture in her

early childhood classroom. Unfortunately, the student teachers interviewed for this study found a preestablished curriculum, with little room for the injection of their cultural knowledge. Such a finding does not come as a great surprise. McCarthy (1990) writes that US "educators have shown a decided lack of enthusiasm for cultural diversity. At times, they have responded with a sense of moral panic to the demands for a ventilation of the school curriculum" (p. 119).

One conclusion from the research suggests that it makes little sense to lament over the fact that we do not have enough minorities in teacher education when they are not given opportunities to engage in the very thing teacher educators have allegedly recruited them to do. Student teaching, in spite of its so-called "limited impact" is one of the primary spaces where teachers learn their craft. Perhaps student teachers should be given the opportunity to infuse the curriculum with their cultural knowledge in a developmental setting. If they do not learn to do this in student teaching, they may never do it at all. The balance between what is and what is possible inhabits the territory we call praxis, an ancient idea Freire regards highly: "I prefer a knowledge that is forged and produced in tension between practice and theory" (1996, p. 85).

Although the failure of the schools to capitalize on the student teachers' knowledge left the formal curriculum intact, perhaps the informal curriculum is where such knowledge belongs. Perhaps the formal curriculum should not act as the shelter for ethnic knowledge. Is it possible that some cultural knowledge is best shared in informal, casual and more intimate settings, when the pressure of formal teaching and, more importantly, formal testing is absent? Might the most important ethnic unity come from informal discussions on the playground?

We might imagine that, if taken to one extreme, Mexican-American students might be faced with reading passages about *Las Posadas*, *quincinas*, or the names of Mexican boxers in a way that cheapens the knowledge valued by the community. Is it possible that our deepest and most sacred cultural knowledge is too valuable to be transported to the formal school curriculum? Given the opportunity to teach specifically about

Mexican-American culture in the formal curriculum, many Mexican-American teachers may reject such a move, preferring to keep cultural knowledge at the periphery, where it can serve as a symbol of solidarity among teachers and students, perhaps in opposition to the school and its representatives. In other words, perhaps the best multicultural education is the one that is shared only by teachers and their students when the books are closed. Foster (1995) suggests that cultural unity among teachers and students can be “implicit and unspoken”. Future studies might address this idea.

Teacher educators, I believe, can only benefit from careful study devoted to the students of color in their teacher preparation programs. Indeed, efforts at recruitment must be accompanied by a clear view of why the program needs teachers of color in the first place. How will the program help student teachers of color make sense of their ethnicity during student teaching? Are faculty members prepared to endorse a curriculum of cultural unity? Are the student teaching sites prepared for student teachers who may challenge the existing curriculum?

In addition, the study of minority teachers should not be a replacement for a thorough examination of how dominant culture student teachers can be better prepared to teach students of color. Alongside recruitment efforts of minorities and a more responsive teacher education for student teachers of color must run an equal effort to help all preservice teachers commit to urban, diverse schools (e.g., Téllez & Cohen, 1995).

In conducting these interviews, I could not help but remember my own student teaching. I, too, was placed in a classroom of largely Mexican-American students. I would certainly describe my cooperating teacher as an effective and caring professional, but I cannot remember anytime when I was encouraged to teach about Mexican-American culture. In fact, my cooperating teacher helped me develop a unit on Canada, the largest of my student teaching projects. Among my early experiences I was asked to teach English to a fifth grader who had just arrived from Aguascalientes, Mexico. Even though I later moved on to teaching to the whole class and my own classrooms, I cannot forget my early experiences with the shy girl just arrived in the US. I remember struggling with the bland English-

as-a-Second-Language curriculum I was given. But I also remember talking about Mexico and life there. We also talked about the saints (*los santos*) and what we liked to do on holidays. But these moments happened on the playground, or before lunch, or right before school let out. Now, having worked in many schools and with many hundreds of Mexican-American children, I wonder about the girl from Aguascalientes and the success she has found. Did her schooling experience ever help her to understand the world she already knew best? Did her teachers, those who shared her Mexican-American culture, talk about their common lives in informal spaces? Did she even have any Mexican-American teachers? Did she gain access to the cultural world of the white, middle class? This wonderment is, at its end, about how mass schooling in the US interprets, uses, or fails to use, our differences. It is, at its end, about culture.

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