Latin American Children and the School System in the USA: An Educational Journey

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Recommended Citation
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“Seventeen years ago, my husband and I decided to accept an invitation to relocate to the United States of America. It was a time when major corporations sought talented, highly skilled employees to work in the computer engineering industry. We viewed this invitation as an opportunity to live in a culture we wanted to explore and also share our values and our way of life with. And that is how we decided to embark on this journey.

“We firmly believed that our move to the US would only bring benefits to our family. Access to a highly regarded education for our two young children, a healthy environment where they could thrive physically and intellectually, and the advantages of acquiring a second language made our decision an easy one. Unfortunately, soon after settling in our new environment, we realized that, in order for our children to succeed, they would have to go through significant changes.”
Summary

The story of the majority of kids with Latin American origin is all too common in the United States. Studies assert that Hispanic children drop out from school in greater numbers than any other minority group. They are forced to give up their culture, their language, and the expectation of teachers - and society alike - is that, at best, they will be mediocre students. As the Hispanic community is projected to “comprise nearly a quarter of the nation’s population by 2050” (Masci, 1998, p. 11), it is of significance to try to gain greater understanding into some of the issues that hinder the academic advancement of children with Latin American origin. I would like to delve into the literature, while at the same time, look at my own experience as a parent whose children have gone through the American public educational system and discuss the impact that acculturation/assimilation into American culture and bilingual education—or lack of it—have on these students. I also want to look at the effect that teachers’ expectations have on these students’ performance in school.

Becoming American

Culture, communication, and identity are closely intertwined (Smith, 2002). Culture “shields people from the unknown by offering them a blueprint for all of life’s activities” (Samovar & Porter, 2001, p. 33), and language serves individuals to maintain and express their social identity (Samovar & Porter, 2001). Latin American families that emigrate to the United States find themselves with the daunting task of trying to preserve their culture, while at the same time having to adjust to their new adoptive land. In this quest, the acquisition of the English language becomes a primary goal, and as Delgado-Romero (2005) discusses in his article, for fear of prejudice and discrimination, parents seek that their children learn to speak English without any trace of an accent. Accomplishing this task, which undoubtedly has its benefits, sometimes comes at a price.

We were also the kind of parents who wanted our children to speak English like any other American child. To accomplish this, our decision was to use only English at home until the kids could speak it perfectly. In a relatively short period of time, the kids had full command of the new language; unfortunately, they also learned to view English as the prime mode of communication. Our bedtime stories, the songs we sang, and even the jokes we told each other were American cultural expressions. Unknowingly, while I was trying to help my offspring learn English, I was also passing on a culture that was not our own. “The stories each culture tells its people, whether in the form of folktales, legends, or myths, are all intended to transmit the culture from person to person and from generation to generation” (Samovar & Porter, 2001, p. 38). Our family hardly used Spanish at home anymore, and despite the initial decision to revert to using our language once the kids had full command of English, we found this difficult to achieve. The pressure to act and behave like the dominant group proved to be too great for our young family; the children did not want to speak English with an accent, and as Martínez (2002) asserts in her article, by becoming “anglicized” immigrant children are able to counteract negative stereotypes; thus, learning the American way turns into a matter of survival.

Furthermore, the expectation of the dominant culture is that everyone, newcomers included, will act homogeneously; this idea even applies to the names people use. Everyone in America has a short name, or uses a short version of it. Ana Paola and Jose Ricardo, the names we gave our children when they were born, proved to be too long and difficult to pronounce for Americans. Our children’s light complexion helped them blend in with their White counterparts, but their names remained the factor that singled them out. After experiencing the educational system for a period of time, Paola and Jose asked if they could become Paula and Joe instead. They had grown tired of teachers and administrators constantly mispronouncing and forgetting their names, and of peers teasing them for being different. In a persistent manner, my Latin American children were being stripped of everything that brought them comfort, and everything that connected them to their own culture.

Teachers Expectations

The literature supports the view that teachers’ expectations impact how students perform in school (Hughes, Gleason & Zhang, 2005). Furthermore, teachers’ perceptions of students’ achievement have an effect on students’ grades and scores on standardized achievement tests (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Clearly, and as supported by the literature, teachers play a major role on students’ performance in school; the literature also supports the notion that teachers are influenced by how society views different ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, American society has a negative view of Latin American immigrants or Hispanics, which is the ethnicity that has been created for this varied group of people. The stereotypes have filtered through schools’ boundaries, and when “expectations are based, in part, on children’s background variables such as ethnicity…they contribute to the widening disparities in educational attainment between majority and minority students…” (Hughes, Gleason & Zhang, 2005, p. 4). In other words, since teachers and society expect poor results from these students, then the learning environment for them is one in which motivating, challenging, and responsive instruction is absent.

Moreover, and as Griffin (1992) asserts in his article, Hispanic students are encouraged to seek jobs of a vocational nature. This seems to be especially the case when these students are lagging behind when compared to their peers; thus, the dream to reach higher peaks and to do better remains elusive for these students. The notion of ever attaining a college education is denied to them at a tender age.

Teachers’ supportive attitude is crucial for kids during their school-age years. Fortunately, Paola and Jose had teachers who understood their situation, and did all they could to help them. Paola’s second grade teacher even tried to create a small list of vocabulary words for her, and she was a great source of motivation for our daughter. It would be worthy to mention that we did get one or two phone calls from teachers, who were bewildered at the fact that our family was not sports oriented. Some diversity training would have helped these teachers understand that people of different cultures pursue different interests; and that variety is what makes societies interesting and rich.

Conclusion

The number of students with ties to Latin America will continue to grow in the United States. For these students to be successful in the American school system it is necessary to promote an all-encompassing and gradual assimilation into US culture. The creation of efficient bilingual programs in which Hispanic students are taught about their own history, literature, and the arts would give these students a sense of who they are and where they come from. It is only when individuals have a sense of their own history, when they can develop an ideological foundation and a sense of purpose.

In addition, parents and teachers alike should encourage the retention of important elements, such as language and other cultural expressions, which would provide this group of students with a heightened sense of identity and self worth. Otherwise, educators and society must recognize that ‘for people of color (or other marginalized groups), ‘being like everybody else’ is a double bind: Regardless of how we attempt to be like the dominant group, our very presence would almost automatically label us as the ‘other’” (Yep, 2002, p. 61). Language and culture, coupled with a strong sense of identity, could
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become the shield that immigrant children have with them as they struggle to become part of a culture they do not entirely identify themselves with, and a culture that, regretfully, is not fully accepting of them.

Lastly, teachers must understand that “their degree of receptivity and helpfulness toward immigrant children can either help the children feel at home or leave them to sink or swim in their adoptive homeland” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 237). Furthermore, school administrators should promote diversity in their curriculum, and educate staff and students about the impact that negative stereotypes have on minority students. The literature fails to mention what kind of programs, if any, are in place now in schools that are directed to teach children to be accepting of each other, regardless of their origin. Also, the literature focuses on the study of low-income minority groups and the performance of these students only. It would be insightful to look at middle-class immigrant students and their adjustment in the American school system.

References


