Kerry Shelton

T.E. 891

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**Case study of Hispanics in the United States**

In this case study I have decided to take an in depth look at the Hispanic ethnic group. Within my school district there is not a significant immigrant population. This is not to say that we do not have any immigrants in our district, but there does not seem to be one dominant group of immigrants. I decided on the Hispanic population because there are a few Hispanic children within the district and this is the fastest growing minority group. Although, I have not had a Hispanic child in my classroom, I did have the opportunity to assist in an after school program where a Hispanic child attended on an occasional basis.

It is my goal to share information and to answer key questions I have about the Hispanic ethnic group. This case study will help educators to become more informed, while reducing some of the many stereotypes that exist in relation to this expanding minority group. I will first define the term “Hispanic,” what it means and who is included in this term. Next, I will share some important demographic information, including information specific to Michigan. I will then share some instructional strategies that are useful and that I plan to implement in my own classroom. Last, I will talk about parent involvement its importance and strategies for increasing participation.

As I began my research on this topic the first thing I asked myself was: How should I refer to this particular group of people? Do I call them Hispanic or Latino? Are these names used interchangeably or are they two different names for two different groups of people? Actually most Hispanic/Latino people actually prefer to be called by their immediate ethnic group (e.g. Mexican American). Since this paper is not focused on a specific group I needed to decide on a broad term that would include the larger population that I am choosing to study. Therefore, the question still remained Hispanic or Latino? Hispanic is a term often used by the government. When schools refer to this group they use the term Hispanic. Hispanic also generally means Spanish speaking. Latino is not a term that the government uses (Vazquez, 2004). It is often used by grassroots organizations and liberal politicians. Latino is a very general term. This creates justification for some and problems for others. A 1995 survey by the Census Bureau found that 58% of people of Hispanic/Latino background preferred the term “Hispanic.” While only 12% preferred to be called “Latino.” After doing this research I have decided to use the term “Hispanic,” for the remainder of this case study, unless I am citing a piece that refers to this ethnic group as Latino.

My purpose in this case study is not to decide which term is better. As an educator I have always been self –conscious about how to refer to this ethnic group. What I have learned from this research is that it is important to get to know each student and their family on an individual basis. From getting to know each family personally, it is then that you will most likely be able to tell what ethnic group they prefer to identify with. If it is unclear what ethnic group they identify with then Richard Vazqquez (2004), states that it is all right to ask what label they prefer and why they prefer this label if you are trying to learn more about this ethnicity group. He also states that if you are uncomfortable about asking why they prefer a specific label, then it is fine to offer an apology in advance for not knowing.

In my opinion, as teachers the labels should not be of utmost importance. I feel that openly labeling these children is just another way of segregating them from the other children in the classroom. We certainly do not assign labels to each of the native English speaking children in the classroom, who at one time or another; their families would have been considered immigrants. In other words, rather than homogenously grouping these children within the schools it is more important to get to know them on an individual basis. This idea of getting to know each student individually will be revisited toward the end of this case study when I offer some helpful instructional strategies.

As I began to look at the demographic projections relating to Hispanics, I realized that there is some important information to be considered about this ethnic group that may cause the numbers for these projections to not be as accurate as they may be for other ethnic groups. Hispanics are an ethnic group, like African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans. Unlike these groups, however, Hispanics are not a race. In fact, Hispanics, although mainly Caucasian, also include people of color, including Native Americans, Asians and Blacks. Thus, Hispanics are multiracial and depending on the area of interest, one race may be represented more than another (Shorris, 1992). Also, as noted by Geoffrey Fox, Hispanics do not have a common biological descent. Hispanics the Census Bureau reminds us, can be of any religious and any citizenship status, from undocumented, to United States citizen by birth. They do not even all share the same language (1996, p.3).

According to the most recent statistics from the U.S. census bureau in 2000, Michigan had 261,000 Hispanics. This is number is projected to rise to 431,000 by 2025. Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population increased by 50.3% in Michigan (Kayitsinga, Post & Villarruel, 2007). In 2000 a majority of the Midwest’s Hispanic population lived in Illinois (49%) followed by Michigan (10.4%). More specifically, I teach in Washtenaw County which accounts for 2-3% of the Hispanic population within Michigan (Kayitsinga et al., 2007). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2050 Hispanics may consist of 22.24% of the total population (May, 2008). Thus, within two generations non-Hispanic Whites will no longer be the majority in America and Hispanics will take on a more critical role.

The number of Hispanic students enrolled in public schools has increased in recent decades. As America’s fastest growing ethnic group, Hispanics lag behind all others in education. This group of students has the lowest levels of education and the highest dropout rates of any group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau News, (June 29, 2004) the graduation for Hispanics graduating from high school in 2003 was 57%, while 11% had obtained a bachelor’s degree. Whereas, 85% of Non-Hispanics had graduated from high school and 27% had obtained a bachelor’s degree from college. This is a gap that simply cannot be ignored.

There are a number of factors that contribute to Hispanic children being put at risk for academic failure. These include poverty, health, cultural and historical practices. Also, in the Hispanic culture family togetherness tends to be more important than individualism, which the United States emphasizes. As a result when it comes to individual achievement the Hispanic student may not see this as important as working to benefit his entire family.

Regardless of the factors that may be putting Hispanic children at risk for academic failure, it is our job as educators to implement effective teaching strategies that will help decrease the educational crisis that these children face. A key factor in improving education for Hispanic students, as I mentioned earlier, is to understand they are from different groups of people, with different needs. Therefore, if I found out that I was going to have a Hispanic student in my classroom, I would wait until I got to know him/her before I planned to put specific strategies in place. Knowing the child is Hispanic does not mean that I should take a “one size fits all” approach. However, some of the strategies that I may already be using could benefit this student. Padron, Waxman & Rivera (August, 2002), recommend using a variety of methods to insures that all student’s learning styles are being met. Some examples include, using visuals, group work, building upon prior knowledge and connecting lessons with examples from the real world. Since a kindergarten is a very social, hands-on environment. These are strategies that are already included in my daily instruction.

It is important to build a supportive classroom atmosphere where all differences are not ignored, but are explored, discussed and celebrated (Padron et al., August, 2002). I mentioned earlier that I had the opportunity to assist in an afterschool program where a Hispanic child was in attendance. The teacher did a nice job of allowing this child to celebrate his differences. On his first day the teacher introduced him to the class. She then told the class that there was something special about Juan. He could speak two languages, Spanish and English (his English was borderline proficient). Since our school has such a low diversity rate, many of the children were not sure what Spanish was. However, when the teacher asked the children if they had ever watched the television show *Dora the Explorer*, many of them then realized what Spanish was. After the teacher was done talking with the children as a group, they had free choice time. During this free choice time the children immediately gravitated toward Juan. Many of them wanted to know how to say various things in Spanish. Some of the children would carry objects, such as an apple over to him and say, “How do you say this in Spanish?” Juan would smile and tell them. This was a great early school experience for Juan. The teacher allowed him to celebrate his differences right from the beginning. This in turn encouraged the children to interact with Juan and make him feel comfortable in the classroom environment.

Although I could certainly provide a situation like the one mentioned above if an immigrant child arrived in my classroom, I would like to do more so that when the child walked through the door they would feel like they belong in my classroom. This environment would be a place where the student and his/her family could immediately see that cultural differences are explored and celebrated. I would begin to create this environment by having dolls of various ethnicities in the pretend play area and the posters on the wall would represent people of varying backgrounds. I am also going to be more culturally sensitive about the books that I am reading to the children. Making sure that various ethnicities are represented no t just white people. In order to truly create this type of environment I will need to purchase the materials mentioned above, including books. My school has a foundation that awards grant money to teachers each fall as a way to improve content and quality of education within our school district. Therefore, I plan to write a grant request to this program in the fall.

Including multicultural materials in my classroom is not only important for those children who might be in my classroom someday, but it is extremely important for the children who are already in the classroom. After doing this research and reflecting on my own teaching experiences, I am realizing that although our immigrant population is minimal along with the diversity within our school, I am doing the rest of the children who attend our school a disservice by not educating and exposing them to various cultures. In the NWREL article “Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Students,” that we read for class, it talks about the importance of helping all students develop multicultural values so that the youth and community will be better able to meet the social and communication needs of a culturally diverse society (2001). I now realize how important it is to provide my current students with a multicultural perspective. Although, they are not faced with cultural differences at this point in their life, someday they will be a part of society as a whole, where they will most likely come in contact with various cultures on a daily basis.

Another important teaching strategy to consider is to set realistic and manageable goals based on the student’s abilities (Stiggins, 2008). Although we have state and district standards that we are expected to meet for each child, if the goals are unobtainable for the immigrant child we are risking the chance of setting them up for failure right from the beginning. For example, in kindergarten children are expected to write their numbers 1-30 by the end of the year. If the immigrant child has limited writing capabilities, then I would start with a goal of writing his/her numbers from 1-10. Then once he/she is successful with that I would then increase the numbers.

Utilizing upper grade level students as tutors is a great teaching strategy for both the younger student and the upper grade level student (Padron et al., 2002). This would work especially well if the upper grade level student shared the same native language as the younger student. The upper grade level student could benefit by having his self-confidence about his learning boosted. The younger student could benefit by seeing the older student as a role model. I have included this strategy because I think it could have great potential. However, it would not be possible for me to implement this strategy in my school. In my building we only have preschool and kindergarten age children.

The teaching strategies listed above could be utilized for any immigrant students. They are not specific to Hispanic students. The last strategy that I am going to talk about is not only a teaching strategy, but also a strategy that is important for the whole school district to adopt. This strategy is parental (family) involvement. Although family involvement is important for all students, it is particularly important for Hispanic students. There exists great strength in Hispanic culture due to the predominance of extended families. This family resource may be essential in promoting a student’s success. Thus, parental and family involvement is critical to a student’s academic achievement. Families should be invited to become involved in activities that foster multicultural understanding, such as classroom tutors, helpers and field trip volunteers (NWREL, 2001).

Blaming parents for a perceived lack of involvement will not miraculously produce the desired involvement; urging parent involvement only to treat them with disdain discourages the kind of partnerships necessary for children’s educational success (Vopat, 1998, p.67). Vopat then provides various ideas on page 67 for making parents feel welcome, which include the following: First, it should be assumed that parents want their children to succeed in school and want to help their children succeed. Second, understand that many parents are unclear about school terminology and how they can support classroom instruction. Third, try to accommodate parents’ schedules when scheduling meeting times. Last, do not assume that parents do not care simply because they are not at school. For educators who are seriously looking to increase parent involvement I highly recommend reading Vopat’s book titled, *More Than Bake Sales: The Resource Guide for Family Involvement in Education.* This book has numerous strategies for increasing family involvement.

I think it is important to talk about the term parent involvement. When schools refer to parent involvement that often times sends the message that involvement is limited to parents only. However, the term family involvement naturally insinuates that grandparents or other extended family members are invited to become part of the school environment. This idea is extremely important when thinking about Hispanic families. Many times they have a lack of involvement because of job commitments or having to take care of younger children. However, since they often have close extended families, maybe a grandparent, aunt or uncle would be willing to become involved.

Vopat’s (1998) fourth idea for making parents’ feel welcome stated that we should not assume that parents don’t care just because they are not at school. Some immigrant parents are involved by instilling the value of education through hard work (Lopez, 2001). In Lopez’s article the Padilla family believed that they were exposing their children to three important “real-life” lessons: 1) to become acquainted with the type of work they do; 2) to recognize that this work is difficult, strenuous and without adequate compensation; 3) to realize that without an education they may end up working in a similar type of job (2001). I cannot deny that these “real- life” lessons may be an important factor for the Padilla children to see the value of education and to become successful educated adults.

This in depth study on Hispanics has allowed me to become much more knowledgeable about this ethnic group. As I did this research I was continually surprised by the stereotypes and assumptions that I had developed throughout my life. I was also shocked about how little I actually knew about this ethnic group. As you may have noticed, I refrained from referring to the Hispanics as immigrants throughout much of this paper. Some Hispanics are sensitive about the perception of being referred to as immigrants. According to Rosenbaum (1996), Latinos are too often perceived as immigrants. 64% of all Latinos in the United States were actually born here.

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