Perspectives of Teaching Mexican American Students as Reflected in Multicultural Literature

Susana Garza
Liliana Portilla
&
Keri Shannon
Texas A&M International University

Abstract
Minority population is on the rise and projected to continue growing. This article reviews the plight of the Mexican American student and how the history reflects a path of struggle towards academic equity. Areas explored include cultural deprivation, cultural differences, and funds of knowledge that students bring with them to the academic arena. A historical review provides us with the strategies utilized by Mexican American students, the challenges that they have faced and continue to face and how impactful teaching of Mexican American students is vital to their success. Three varied personal experiences will provide insight into how Mexican American students have been perceived and educationally assisted throughout a span of twenty plus years. Educational recommendations are provided for educators working to provide an equitable education for Mexican American students.

Introduction
It is well understood and documented that certain groups of students from minority backgrounds will face challenges throughout their educational careers in elementary and secondary public education. Research states that the educational outcomes for African Americans, Native Americans, certain Asian groups, and Hispanics will not be as high as the educational attainment of White Americans. However, most of the listed groups can be further divided into subgroups. For example, Native American students are often generalized as one population, though each individual tribal group brings varied experiential knowledge to the school setting (Snipp, 2004). Likewise, Hispanic and Asian groups can be subdivided by the group most closely related to their country of origin. When studying the academic outcomes of students from Hispanic backgrounds, the one group that performs lowest among the Hispanic group are the Mexican American students.

Garcia (2004) cites case study research that recognizes how schools can focus on certain attributes that will enhance the success for all students. In his report, schools will achieve that success by ensuring that the following areas of the school system are working effectively and as prescribed: a positive school climate; strong leadership characteristics of the administration; a customized learning environment; intradistrict efficacy that focuses on articulation and coordination between schools; native language instruction to build fluency; cultural respect for all groups; a balanced curriculum that offers basic skills while developing higher order thinking; explicit instruction from caring, knowledgeable staff; student directed learning facilitated by responsive teachers; research based instructional strategies; real life opportunities for students to practice content learned; varied assessments that match curricular skills; staff development opportunities that are directed for individual teacher needs; and parent to school involvement.
In concept, Garcia provides all the tools necessary to fix the ills of today’s educational institutions, especially those serving large populations of students from minority backgrounds. However, the reality is that many schools with the populations of students who are most challenged do not have the most qualified administration or staff needed in order to fulfill the mission of meeting the students’ needs (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002). It would take focused reform and strong leadership to accomplish the goals that Garcia mentioned. As the demographics of our public schools continue to shift, educators must look at ways to achieve such reform, especially as it relates to students from minority backgrounds. The largest growing minority group consists of Mexican American students, included in the Hispanic group. It was projected that the Hispanic population would be 31 million in 2010 and 47 million in 2040. Keeping in mind that 60% of the Hispanic population is Mexican American; therefore by 2040 28.2 million individuals will be Mexican American (Spencer, 1986). Therefore, it is imperative that educators work on understanding and addressing the needs of this specific group.

Current research exists that addresses the educational needs of Mexican American students. According to the research, educators should address and have a basic understanding of multicultural education, especially when it deals with Mexican American students. Likewise, successful schools with a majority of Mexican American students exist throughout the nation. Developing an awareness of proven educational theory, there is hope that schools can provide a stronger educational foundation to Mexican American students by applying theory to practice.

**Review of Literature**

**Equity Pedagogy**

According to Banks (2004), there are five precepts that, when faithfully executed, will create a strong multicultural education. These precepts, or dimensions, will increase school and student outcomes with deliberate, focused leadership and consistent coherence at all levels in the school. In order to produce a multicultural climate of education in the school, stakeholders must address the areas of building knowledge of how students of color construct and process knowledge, prejudice reduction, content integration, an empowering school culture and structure, and equity pedagogy.

Equity pedagogy is the deliberate focus on understanding and using the diverse cultures brought by the students when they enroll in American schools. Like other paradigms, there have been shifts over time as to the exact application of equity pedagogy. As the times change, so have the philosophies that drive instruction. However, an efficacious educator will use the beneficial parts of each concept to implement a pedagogy that guides students to successful outcomes.

**Cultural Deprivation**

As the demographics of American public school started shifting and becoming more culturally diverse, educators encountered challenges in creating successful student outcomes. Instead of becoming introspective and recognizing the lack of multicultural knowledge that existed in the schools, educators developed the first paradigm in multicultural education, which was the philosophy of cultural deprivation.

Cultural deprivation was the belief that students of color bring a culture of poverty to school, usually related to a lower socioeconomic status and cultural norms that are different from the White majority culture (Banks, 2004). Since the educators view students of color as culturally deprived, this original paradigm was routinely reflected in the schools by deficit thinking in the system. The
belief was that students of color were just as capable of learning as other students. However, they could not perform or learn well in the typical educational setting because the amounts of poverty at home deprived them from being able to attain the knowledge and skills necessary for academic success.

Banks found that education practitioners that worked under the paradigm of cultural deprivation assumed that the best reform would be to offer students of color and students from poverty needed academic experiences. By enhancing early experiences in the school setting, such as at Head Start programs, then students considered culturally deprived would be able to overcome the deficits they had upon entering the school systems. If they were not afforded the early childhood opportunities, educators could still help them overcome the lack of cultural knowledge by focusing on improving socialization for students of color.

The paradigm of cultural deprivation did not prove to help students of color succeed in school. Reforms did not enhance outcomes. Instead, it was found to create institutional racism. The lack of student outcomes led to a new paradigm in multicultural education.

Cultural Difference

Years of addressing the cultural deprivation paradigm regarding students of color did not show improvements in academic outcomes. The shifting paradigm that followed focused on cultural difference, which was a philosophy in which students of color struggle academically because of a cultural conflict between students’ knowledge of the world and the mainstream culture of educational systems (Banks, 2004).

The cultural differences are most frequently caused between the students of color and the teacher understanding of the students’ culture. The issue is not solely due to ethnic culture, but also is connected to the culture of poverty that frequently accompanies the ethnic differences. However, there are basic assumptions that teachers develop based on ethnic generalizations. In addition to teachers’ generalizations regarding ethnicity, there is a lack of true ethnic knowledge about the affective needs of different ethnicities.

As per Banks, to improve education for students of color under the cultural difference paradigm, it is important that educators focus on cultural differences. This shift was very prevalent in the implementation of multicultural education. Though slight academic improvements prevailed under the paradigm of cultural difference, achievement gaps existed between the white majority and minority students of color.

Funds of Knowledge

Moll and Gonzalez (2004) developed an approach to address the diversity in multicultural education that is still widely followed today. The approach is based on educators recognizing the funds of knowledge that students of color bring to school. Moll and Gonzalez found that, even though teachers recognize the cultural difference paradigm, they do not understand how to use the differences to improve the students’ academic outcomes. Garcia (2004) found that not only is there a lack of understanding, but that many educators are not able to dismiss the deficit thinking they have for the students of color.

Therefore, educators must be able draw upon the funds of knowledge that students of color have from their school. Students of color have a depth of rich, lived experiences that they take to school. Although these lived experiences may be different from the majority of teachers, it can be utilized to improve academic outcomes for all students. For instance, many diverse popula-
tions have stronger social and community networks that can be advantageous for all stakeholders if the school will work within the network. Likewise, the students bring strong knowledge from their homes which provide rich pedagogical possibilities even though they may not be based on academic knowledge. An example would be a student who has helped his father in construction since he could walk and has worked with mathematical skills without having formal mathematical knowledge.

By having educators recognize the funds of knowledge and build upon them in schools, students of color will be more likely to succeed academically. There are riches that every student has in the poverty in which they live, such as support, love, resilience, values, and morals. In order to provide a strong multicultural education, educators must respect the funds of knowledge for all students and build upon those strengths (Moll and Gonzalez, 2004).

**Educating Students of Mexican American Descent**

**Historical Strategies in Education Mexican American Students**

Mexican American students make up the largest population of Hispanic students in the United States at 64% of all Hispanic groups (Garcia, 2004). The historic philosophy of education was to Americanize different cultural groups while subtracting the students’ home culture. Much more than other Hispanic groups, Mexican Americans have overwhelming worked in rural and agricultural jobs, which has created a “lower caste” system of Hispanics, where the Mexican American immigrant laborers stay low-skilled without the ability to become economically independent. Living in rural/agricultural areas also creates challenges for schools in their goal of assimilating Mexican Americans.

Due to the different work and living environments that Mexican Americans have in the United States compared to other Hispanic groups, the education system, along with the economic system, has created disparate conditions that maintain a certain subordination of Mexican Americans. The plight of the Mexican American in the United States is one that has proved unfavorable for Mexican American students as well. For approximately fifty years, the issues of providing equal education to all students have benefited Mexican American Students. Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned academic discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. Additionally, the May 25 memorandum added that discrimination due to native language was likewise discriminatory (Garcia, 2004). For example, Diana v. California Board of Education was an important case that found discrepancies in testing in special education placement. The case was based on the placement of a special education student with a mild mental retardation (MMR) label. The precept of the case was that Spanish speaking students were tested with English assessment instruments, identifying them as special education based on bias language procedures. (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004) In order to bridge low achieving student groups to high achieving groups, compensatory education issues addressed education that would help groups, such as historically low achieving Mexican American students (Garcia, 2004).

Finally, educational systems began making changes in curriculum that focused on multicultural education. Most of the reform focused on the contributions of various cultural groups to the United States that was added to textbooks and special cultural celebrations. Additionally, innovative instructional programs such as two-way immersion and various bilingual programs offered opportunities to enhance cultural and diversity understanding among and between whites, Mexican American, and other ethnic groups (Garcia, 2004).
Challenges for Mexican American Students

According to Moll and Gonzalez (2004), schools are working with communities where students present diverse language and social backgrounds that are in contrast with the majority of educators. The interethnic groups that now make up many school systems are facing the same historic ideals regarding education that negate student differences, call for cultural subtraction, and promote Americanization (Garcia, 2004; Moll and Gonzalez, 2004). Many schools continue to focus on these same goals, which has been detrimental to students of color. Mexican American students are one of the lowest performing student groups to which this educational philosophy has been applied. In actuality, these historical goals have been extremely detrimental to Mexican American students, with the outcomes being generational failure and an academic and economic caste system with the placement of Mexican Americans being at the bottom layer. Because of the way that Mexican Americans have been forced into this unspoken caste system, Garcia found that Mexican American student groups are actually more segregated today than they were three decades ago.

The economic system that has created this echelon for Mexican Americans has been exacerbated by the education system in many states. The institutionalized push for standardized testing was initiated to ensure that students of color were receiving and equitable education. However, standardized testing is actually widening the gap between minority and linguistically diverse students (Garcia, 2004). Much of this collapse in the education of Mexican American students and other students of color is based on the policies that require schools to have a certain percentage of all student groups pass the standardized tests. Instead of the policies promoting stronger, more explicit teaching of students of color, they have promoted more test preparation and rote instruction, which further weakens the academic and economic futures of the Mexican American students (Moll and Gonzalez, 2004).

Statistics regarding the academic outcomes and educational attainment of Mexican American students are bleak. Research by Garcia (2004) addresses the statistical data and illuminates the need for educators to become aware of the statistics and find ways to overcome the challenges faced by Mexican American students. Mexican American students have the largest percentage of students that do not complete either high school or college. The statistics are worse for Mexican immigrant students, of which only 38% complete high school. The educational data for Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants are dire. Fifty percent of them will leave school prior to graduation, and another fifty percent are over-aged by the 12th grade. However, the dismal data begins as soon as Mexican American students start school. A large percentage of Mexican American students were low performing in elementary school, with almost 2/3 of the Mexican American student population performing below basic skills on the NAEP math and reading assessments in fourth grade, with the majority performing significantly lower than national norms. 38% of Mexican American students will be retained at least once. Mexican American students are six times more likely to be placed in special education than white students. Of all drop-outs, Mexican American students are significantly more likely to leave school before the eighth grade, with 19% of the population acquiring less than an eighth grade education. All other groups combined average a 1% acquiring less than an eighth grade education. Male students have the highest drop-out rates of all groups.

Educational outcomes are often exacerbated by poverty and poor schools (Garcia, 2004). The challenges Mexican American students face are challenges for all educators. The Mexican American population has grown at exponential rates over the past decades, and growing demographic group is expected to be a majority minority group in schools in many states within the next few years (Garcia, 2004). It is imperative that educators recognize research proven methods that
afford Mexican American students an equitable and quality education to improve academic outcomes.

**Teaching Mexican American Students**

It is often difficult for educators to understand the needs of Mexican American students. To achieve an equitable education, teachers must change their thinking and their behaviors in order to improve the academic outcomes for Mexican American students. It is required that teachers learn through professional development about the best ways to work with Mexican American students (Moll and Gonzalez, 2004; Garcia, 2004). Additionally, teachers must set high expectations for Mexican American students, which include teaching for high levels of success instead of teaching for proficiency on standardized tests. Other ways teachers can improve the academic outcomes is by being involved in all aspects the students' lives, including forming strong familial relationships and respecting students' funds of knowledge (Moll and Gonzalez).

Teachers that promote a general respect for diversity among all students create successful classroom communities that recognize and respect diversity. By teaching and acting responsively to diversity, there is an enhanced equity and pluralism for human relations, which leads to higher self esteem and higher achievement (Garcia, 2004). Attending to the distinct contributions of the collective culture of Mexican Americans, and any student of color, creates a stronger sense of belonging, which increases student involvement and success. Researchers found that Mexican American students thrive in an environment where the teacher recognizes the assets that students bring to school and the benefits of speaking a different language, especially when those differences are capitalized on in curriculum and pedagogy (Garcia, 2004; Moll and Gonzalez, 2004).

Besides focusing on teachers' beliefs regarding Mexican American students and creating a safe classroom climate, research suggests that certain pedagogical methods will improve the academic outcomes of Mexican American students. Garcia (2004) found that focused purposeful instruction needs to begin in preschool and primary grades. The intensity of education at the beginning has shown to increase the outcomes for Mexican American students, especially when there is a concentration on reading development based on phonics and comprehension. Additionally, instructional methodology in a bilingual and bicultural setting affords students greater success (Garcia). In classrooms that are socio-culturally and linguistically diverse, students are better able to understand the context and develop meaning from text more easily. Teachers need to ensure that the classroom offers opportunities for students to find the relevance in lessons and learning based on constructivist theory. With the ability to build knowledge that students see as important, stronger learning takes place. Moll and Gonzalez (2004) recommend that teachers at all levels aim to develop themed unit lessons so that Mexican American students, as well as other students of color, find the connections in learning that may not exist in the students experiential knowledge.

Challenges of teaching in schools with high populations of Mexican American students are often cited in research, as well as suggestions or theories of how effective instruction may increase student outcomes. Often, schools are filled with teachers who are less qualified or effective working with challenged populations (Garcia, 2004). However, there are teachers daily that put the theories and research into practice at schools with large Mexican American populations. Their accounts regarding the experiences and successes in working with Mexican American students will further contribute to the body of knowledge in educating Mexican American students.
Personal Experiences of Working with Mexican American Students

Educator #1

As a student of the 1980s, my education courses were replete with theories and practices of multicultural education. When I began work, I understood the cultural differences between myself and my future students. I was eager to take those differences and work with them. I actually loved learning about the Mexican American culture of my students, and wanted to gain as much knowledge from them about their lives as share that of the academic world. In the first few years of teaching, I think my main focus was on embracing the culture of the students and working on making a respectful, caring learning environment. I loved my students and the stories of their lives. I had embraced the Mexican American culture and loved working with the Mexican American students. Unlike many White American teachers, I thought I really made a cultural connection to my students, even though I had grown up in a White, rural area of Texas. When I was assigned to a rural school of Mexican American student, I was thrilled, as I believed I would have a true understanding of my students’ rural life.

The research often mentions how Mexican American students have generational poverty and often have no family members with formal education. When I started teaching in the rural setting, I struggled to understand the differences of my rural background to that of my Mexican American students. My students lived in a poverty I had not imagined existed. Family members were employed, usually in agricultural or laborer positions, but poverty was ubiquitous. They lived in homes with dirt floors; often, families had no running water or electricity. School breakfasts and lunches were free to the students, yet their dinners often consisted of beans and tortillas. Where I grew up eating steak most nights from the cattle we butchered, my students had no meat to eat except on very special occasions. I struggled to understand how students of such poverty could be happy students, and how I could teach them.

Though I would hate to say that I adopted the philosophy of deficit thinking, I wondered why the students would care to learn when they had to struggle to meet their basic needs every day. Luckily, I had a strong administrator who taught me, as well as many other teachers, that these students and their families valued education and the American dream more than most. We were expected to visit families, as suggested by Moll and Gonzalez. We learned how to turn the students’ experiential knowledge into assets in the classroom. That administrator had her doctorate degree in education, and used the theory and research to coach the teachers in ways to ensure a strong education for the students.

The bilingual education principals were enforced, with strong foundational knowledge in native language provided through the primary grades. Curriculum committees at the school created themed units for each primary grade. Many opportunities for strong parent-school involvement were initiated. Any teacher that did not believe in the potential for student success was offered a transfer to a different school. These initiatives, which are found in the literature by Banks, Garcia, Moll, and Gonzalez (2004), proved to be contributing factors to the success of the majority of Mexican American students at the school. The subsequent success of the students led to a change in teacher’s attitudes, including my own.

Educator #2

The majority of my educational experience has been working with Mexican American students, with the exception of two years working in Louisiana. My entire educational journey has been a journey void of deficit thinking. My professional goal has always been to set high expectations for all students regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language ability.
As a Mexican American student in the 1980’s I felt that I was limited with my ability to excel in the post-secondary world. The educational mentality was just beginning to change during this time. The change was very slow in coming. I can remember my high school counselor and her deficit thinking: as I entered the educational field I vowed that the goal would be to support and assist as many students with post-secondary options. The focus would be to incorporate and educate the parental component. A majority of the parents do not have the funds of knowledge available to make the correct contacts, choices, and decisions. I assume that parental responsibility to a large degree.

In relation to the increase of minority students, mainly a large percentage being Mexican American, my experience was not as pronounced. I worked in an area of 98% Mexican American students attending school, so the minority was the majority. I was not exposed the great growth in this area.

In educating Mexican American students, I have high expectations, much like any other teacher in suburbia would have for their students. I have seen students from exceptional poverty achieve unprecedented success. Equitable and excellent education is the key to that success. My philosophy of multicultural education, therefore, is to see Mexican American students, and all students of color, as having all the funds available to be as successful as any White majority student. It is the educator who needs to find ways to enhance the opportunities for the students by implementing what research says works, coupled with high expectations and strong cultural respect. My experience is not limited to regular education students; I extend my expectations to students with special needs. I afford them the same opportunities and prepare them for post-secondary options.

Artiles, Trent, & Palmer (2004) The current literature points to very depressing projections. Special education populations are lagging dismally behind with only one-third of Learning Disabled and Emotional Disturbed/Behavior Disorder students graduating high school. New research should focus on documenting best practices that can help poor multicultural students succeed in school.

**Educator #3**

I started teaching first grade at low income elementary school in the south side of a south Texas district. I have to admit that at that time I had very little knowledge about the theories and practices of multicultural education, but I had strong knowledge on acculturation, culturally responsiveness and the different immigration phases that individuals go thru when they decide to reside in a different country. I believe that this prior knowledge on culture and immigration helped me survive my first year of teaching and urged me to find learning approaches in multicultural education in the years to come. This is probably because public education was not my major but international business instead.

Almost immediately I felt a strong responsibility and commitment in addressing the needs of my Mexican American students, and remembered that just ten years prior to my first year of teaching I had emigrated from Mexico to the United States. I genuinely believed that all children can learn and become highly successful in schools mainly because I was a clear example that effective instruction and commitment from dedicated teachers can change a student’s life. When I started high school, ten years before, statistics were not on my side, and against all odds, being a Mexican American first generation female student I was able to graduate at the age of 23 with a master degree in business with a concentration in international trade.

I knew that believing that all children can learn is imperative in achieving student’s success but also learning from different sources such as the Internet, books and conferences is another
way that I was able to absorb different learning strategies about equity and excellence. As stated by Dr. Jim Scheurich and Dr. Linda Skrla in their book Leadership for Equity and Excellence; many teachers know from their own experience that “all children can learn” but also, another thing that will help you to believe in equity and excellence is to read about it. Articles, books, Internet, professional organizations, workshops and conference sessions are many of the ways to keep believing in equitable pedagogy.

After my first year of teaching I knew I wanted to continue in the educational field and had a broad idea of the challenges that minority students were facing in terms of bilingual education, accountability and over representation in special education. After three years of teaching bilingual students first grade, I moved to the middle school to teach bilingual special education students. With more years of teaching experience, pursuing a master degree and special education, and strong commitment in equity pedagogy I was able to see the growth on my students and the satisfaction in their faces as they were able to academically accomplish unimaginable tasks for them.

Fortunately, from the moment I stepped foot into the classroom that morning of August 1999, I felt the responsibility of trying to make a change in education. It was a privilege to had been able to teach at that small rural, low income school in the south side of the city with 22 six year old Mexican American bilingual first grade students that motivated me to continue learning as a taught them that “all children can learn”.

**Recommendations for Leaders**

Through research focusing on Mexican American students, as well as the personal experiences by others, it is evident that certain actions by instructional leaders will benefit Mexican American students. Of course, it is necessary that leaders work with teachers to all develop the same goal, which is sustained student success. It is the understanding that by aiming for the same goal and applying a plan to achieve the goal, there will be improved chances that students will achieve success.

Data drives decisions in today’s schools. Leaders must use varied data to contribute to the overall achievement goal of the schools. Assessment data, as well as progressive monitoring data, should help leaders and teachers recognize the need for improvement in instruction. Likewise, observation data will help identify where appropriate, culturally responsive instruction is taking place, and where there are areas of weakness in the school. By combining the data and utilizing different methods of observation, leaders can see where the students are being left behind the achievement gap.

Not all teachers and staff will be as effective in working with diverse populations as others. Therefore, leaders must provide professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to work with populations of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This may create the need to improve or change curriculum in order to ensure that there is a focus on the multicultural assets of the students. Focusing on how teachers work with students of color will assuredly need a concentration on the importance of setting high expectations for all stakeholders.

In order for all stakeholders to develop high expectations, there is a need to include all stakeholders. There is often a disconnect between the school and the parents. It is recommended that leaders create parental involvement opportunities in order to improve the school-home connection. An extremely effective way to achieve this is by organizing school and community visits, where teachers and staff will visit homes and parents, learning about the students’ funds of knowledge and backgrounds.
Working together with teachers and parents, leaders should try to produce a school climate where support, love, and respect resonate throughout the halls. It is in these positive environments where students of color achieve the high expectations set for them.

Conclusion

There are over twenty million Mexican American students in the United States. Like any other group of students, there is not a single, concise solution to mend the educational issues and outcomes for every student. Though there may not be an easy, one step formula for addressing the educational issues regarding Mexican American students, there are many suggestions and much research that guide educators to proven ways to increase performance and outcomes.

One suggestion is that educators remember that many factors affect student performance. Focusing solely on the basis of multicultural education will not suffice. It is imperative that leaders and educators look at the socio-cultural, linguistic, and economic factors that deter students from succeeding, and that they consistently address those challenges in a multicultural setting.

Another issue that often deters schools from becoming successful in a multicultural setting is the problem of generalization. It is important to remember that not every member of an ethnic group, a nationality, or a community is the same. In order to provide a culturally responsive education, it is essential that educators do not see the whole group and forget the most important entity – the individual child.
References


