From Me to You: Lessons from Teaching in Segundo Barrio

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I am not a researcher. Nor am I a university professor or journalist or scientist or data collector. I am a public school teacher. I work with recent immigrants in a high school just across the Rio Grande River from Juárez, México and I teach algebra, yes, in English. I am writing this collection of ideas and theories about teaching not because I learned them in an in-service or workshop or college course, but because I've tried them over the years and found them to work well, especially for the type of student I teach. My students are low-income, non-English speaking immigrants who are entering the United States school system for the first time as high school freshmen or sophomores. There is not a more at-risk population than these kids. They have to adapt to a new school, new home, new language, new culture, new neighborhood, new friends, new rules and regulations, new curriculum, and a new country. They even learn that football, not soccer, rules on Friday nights.

Bowie High School is located in the Segundo Barrio of El Paso, Texas, about 100 yards from Mexico and within a quarter-mile of the Córdova International Bridge. Segundo Barrio is a low-income, but culture-rich, area just southeast of downtown El Paso. Educationally speaking, it is estimated by the El Paso Empowerment Zone that 54% of the people living in Segundo Barrio do not have a 9th grade education. Bowie High School has nearly 1,300 students in grades 9-12. The TEA Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) demographic data from 2005-2006 are: 99.4% Hispanic, 93.1% low income, 80% at-risk, 38.2% limited English speakers, and 21.6% enrolled in the ESL program. Although there is no data kept on the number of students who speak Spanish, a reasonable guess would be around 99%. Every year there are between 60 to 70 new students from Mexico who enroll at Bowie High School. These are my algebra students, the recent immigrants who speak little or no English at all.

Because I, myself as a student, was not enamored with math, I have tried to find different ways to explain how things worked, and in such a way that non-English speakers would both understand the concept and learn the English vocabulary. I have a variety of methods that I use in teaching that support my beliefs in student learning and that are backed by research in the field. I also use methods outside the classroom that help these new immigrants feel welcome and encouraged to stay in school, methods that require little or no preparation, cost, or training.

Some examples of best practices in the classroom that I use are analogies, visuals, patterns, references and word play. I rely heavily on patience, high expectations, and reward and praise. Pure mathematicians might be aghast at my technical explanations, but I prefer comprehension over precision in this fragile learning environment. I say fragile because all of my students are at risk, come from impoverished conditions, and have many strikes against them for educational success.

Strategies in the Classroom

In addition to the regular second language learning approaches of slower speech, multiple examples, hand and body movements, and repetition of words and phrases, I incorporate the following strategies:
Analogies

Algebra is complex and abstract. I’ve found that many concepts can be explained by using a simple everyday experience, or a non-mathematical analogy. When introducing or reviewing the correct order of operations, English speaking students are generally taught the sentence “Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally” to remember the order of parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction. For non-English speakers, however, it is meaningless. Instead, I use a Mayan pyramid divided into three layers, with the peones (peons, i.e. addition and subtraction) having access only to the bottom. The middle layer is for the middle class merchants (multiplication and division), and the top is reserved for the high priest and/or king, the complicated exponents and parentheses. When two operations are of the same class, they’re performed from left to right because we read from left to right. The pyramid is easy to draw and students can put their fingers on the operational signs to determine which operation is performed first. I ask students if they’ve seen any of the ancient pyramids in Mexico, and to tell the class what they experienced if they have. It gives them a connection to their homeland and heritage while reinforcing a basic mathematical concept. Social distinctions, modern or ancient, are understood very well by high schools students.

Another favorite analogy is for solving equations. Many students have a hard time understanding that in order to keep the sides of an equation balanced, the same operation with the same number and/or variable must be performed on both sides of the equal sign. I set up this scenario: a mother with two small children is in a grocery store. She buys a “paleta” (lollipop) for one child; what had she better do for the other one? Everyone agrees that the second child must have a “paleta” also, or he will cry because it’s not fair. When solving equations, we say “paleta, paleta” when performing an operation in order to make sure both sides are treated equally. Along similar lines is the sorting of laundry to simplify an equation. Almost all of my students help out with laundry chores, and they all know that the first thing one must do is separate the whites from the colors. To simplify an equation, one must manipulate the equation so that all the numbers are on one side and all the variables on the other: 10x – 5 + 2x = 8 + 3x – 6 must become 9x = 7. We actually label the terms in order to “sort the laundry” and simplify. It turns an abstract concept into an everyday experience with which the students are familiar.

Visuals

My mantra has been “show, don’t tell” for two decades at least. My room is filled with posters and word walls that feature math examples with the English words: numbers, operations, names of polygons and triangles, rules for exponents, and formulas for areas and volumes. It is extremely difficult for non-English speakers to distinguish between “fifteen” and “fifty,” and it helps to see the word that corresponds to the number. Spanish/English dictionaries are widely available for students to use also. Students often make posters of their work, explaining how to solve a problem or what concept they discovered in a calculator lab, giving them a reason to write in English.

Patterns

Mathematics has been defined as the science of patterns. Students with a limited vocabulary in English can comprehend complex mathematical concepts presented in a pattern. Simple sentence structures explain the idea of the distributive property and factoring. Exponents are mathematical abbreviations. Rulers and markers in hand show the collection of like terms or adding or subtracting of fractions and why unlike terms cannot be combined. Visual and physical demonstrations abound.
It is important to stress that these students do come with a knowledge of mathematics, but the complexities of English often disguise that knowledge until a visual perception or pattern is used. Some students are scared that they don’t know anything, thinking that somehow algebra in English is different from algebra in Spanish. Once they realize that \( \pi r^2 \) still equals the area of a circle, even in English, they relax and decide that it isn’t so foreign after all.

References and Word Play

I try to relate words in Spanish to their English counterparts whenever appropriate. For example, when exploring the qualities of a quadratic expression, I have the students relate quadratic to "cuadro," Spanish for square, because a quadratic has a variable squared in it. I call attention to every opportunity to emphasize the value of being bilingual. The names of huge numbers are Latin based, and a quick lesson on the names of periods (thousand, million, billion, trillion, etc.) shows students how their knowledge of Spanish enables them to predict quite correctly the period names up to \( 10^{63} \) without any other prior knowledge.

I’ve learned to explain differences in language from the students' point of view. “Carro rojo” is reversed to “red car.” I tell them English (not Spanish) does it backwards, but that the meaning is still the same. As an English speaker, the Spanish word order seems backward, but to the native Spanish speaker, it’s the English speaker who reverses his words. This seems like an insignificant point, but it conveys a comforting attitude that is critical to these students. This little detail also serves to explain mathematical rules such as the Commutative Property of Addition. Technically stated, \( a + b = b + a \). Simply stated, \( 2+3 = 3+2 \). El carro rojo equals the red car.

I also try to emphasize the similarities between Spanish and English. For example, in border Spanish the phrase “No entiendo ni papas” (literally “I don’t understand potatoes”) is frequently heard, indicating the speaker is confused. I tell my students that in English we use beans instead of potatoes, as in “I don’t know beans.” Why one language features beans and another uses potatoes, I don’t know, but it’s interesting that they both use common foods. My students then delight in telling me they don’t know beans about what we are doing, or they shorten it to “no beans” or “no potatoes” as a way to get additional explanations. This may sound corny or unsophisticated, but in reality it builds camaraderie and trust within the classroom. Students feel they can approach me and ask most anything without fear of being ridiculed or castigated.

Because I know the Spanish language, I can use cognate words to indicate the desired meaning and then introduce the more commonly used English counterpart. The first week of school I ask students if they have terminated their work, writing the word “terminate” on the board, and then equating it to the more popular term “finish.” They learn to associate the word “finish” with the Spanish verb “terminar” without waiting for a translation or using a dictionary. I interchange the two for a few days before shifting exclusively to “finish.” There are countless common English words that have cognate synonyms. By using them, students learn language more naturally and comfortably.

Humanizing Aspects of Teaching Mexican Immigrants

Patience

New immigrants often go through a period where they shut down and do not perform academically or socially. This period can last a few days or months. At first this baffled me, but I’ve learned over the years that this is common and cannot be rushed. Once I had a student who had been expelled from another school for fighting. He was angry and defiant from the first day. I
welcomed him to the class, gave him the materials he needed, and he sat. Every day he sat and did nothing. I always asked for his homework, I assigned him a group to work with, and I tried to engage him in conversation. No response. I just let him be, figuring that eventually he would come around. After several weeks of doing nothing in all his classes, I watched in amazement one day as he impatiently grabbed a paper from his too-slow partners and told them he’d show them how to do it right. He apparently worked through his anger and was tired of doing nothing. He was actually very bright and well-educated. He was a troubled child and did not need to be prodded or provoked by a nagging educator. Once he started to work in my class, he performed well in his other classes and finished the year without incidence. I didn’t really do anything extraordinary. I just allowed him to be in the room without any punishment or embarrassment or pestering.

High Expectations

Students will rise to the level of a teacher’s expectations, provided that those expectations are attainable and realistic. One year while teaching in a similar low-income ELL environment in an El Paso middle school, our team of teachers was introduced to Diego, who was in a wheelchair. He was placed in sixth grade because of his age; he had no formal schooling. Diego sat slouched in his chair, drooling and rolling his head around. It would have been easy to place him in a corner of a room and give him toys to play with, but the team had much higher expectations. We insisted that he learn to sit up straight, hold a pencil, and wheel himself around. We required that he listen and participate in oral discussions. We would not baby him. He had to learn to write the letters and numbers. He had to count manipulatives and learn his addition and subtraction facts. His parents had no expectations and were convinced that the boy couldn’t do anything on his own. Within a few months, Diego was rolling himself down hallways, writing stories with assistance, and solving math problems. His socialization skills increased to where he attended dances and danced in his wheelchair, and he was very clever at making plays on words in English. The following year, we worked with a physical therapist. She had studied Diego’s condition and determined that he was capable of learning to walk. Every day, his English and Social Studies teachers – not a therapist or nurse – worked with him during a homeroom period. Diego used a walker and each day he had to walk a little further. His parents still refused to believe their child could do any of these things, and we had to invite them to come see for themselves at school. We had obtained a walker for him to use at home, but his overprotective parents didn’t believe him when he said he could use it to walk.

Respect, Reward and Praise

Aside from content area teaching strategies, it is critical to encourage the ELL in secondary school. I am constantly telling my students that they can learn math in English, that they are the best, that they will succeed. They prove me correct on school-wide and district-wide benchmark tests. My students take the exact same test as their English-speaking counterparts, and consistently meet or exceed the performance level of the other students. I check class scores and let my students know just where they performed in comparison to the rest of the algebra classes. It delights me to see their interest in learning and experiencing success in their new environment.

In addition to the daily verbal praise and encouragement I impart on my students, on Fridays we listen to Mexican cumbias while working in class as a reward for working hard during the week. Students at first are amazed that this middle-aged Anglo woman actually enjoys “their” music. If a class does particularly well on a school-wide assessment or does an exceptional job on a project, I
treat them to cookies or donuts. I spend money on my students. It shows them that I care and that they are important to me.

One project I do for my students is creating a class yearbook because none of my students can afford the cost of the regular annual. Because these students are in many of the same ESOL classes throughout the day, they develop strong bonds and friendships. About three weeks before the end of the school year, I take everyone’s picture. I use a simple software program to design and print each student’s name with his or her photo, six photos per page. I add a cover page and a page for me with a paragraph explaining how proud I am to have been their teacher. The pages are bound together to form a book, and each student receives a free copy. They spend time writing dedications and recuerdos to each other, plus it provides me with a visual class roster to remember each school year.

**Ideas Beyond the Classroom**

Many high school teachers never realize their influence on their students outside of the classroom. When working with at-risk, low-income English language learners, what is said and done before or after class can be as important as the content within a class period. Some of what I have learned to do is explained in the following paragraphs.

**Know the Students**

I make it a point to go out of my way to talk to students and former students as often as possible, usually on my way to the office or to my room, or in the hallway between classes. Most of the time it’s a simple “Hi, how are you doing this year? Everything going alright for you? Are you still passing?” Sometimes it’s more than that. I ask seniors about their plans for the next year. I ask students how their mothers are, or sometimes I have to ask how their babies are. I ask them to bring me a picture. I ask last year’s students who their math teacher is this year, and remind them that if they need help to come see me. I ask athletes when the next game is and who the opposition is. I ask young men to remove their caps in the hallway because it’s good manners and I want to see if they are handsome. I ask the girls where they bought those cute shoes or that purse, or if they fix their own hair or have someone else do it. I smile. I cajole. I am 100% sincere. I have students I don’t even know come by my room to ask questions, because the word is out that Ms. Svedman will take the time to talk and will not berate, insult, or criticize. She may not tell you what you want to hear, or she may deny your request, but she does it with a smile and an explanation. This is time spent on building rapport, and it pays a multitude of dividends for me. I truly believe the students come first, and if I don’t finish grading papers or if I don’t have time to make that personal phone call for a hair appointment, I’ll just have to do it later.

**Conversations**

A few years back, a new student enrolled in January. Edgar was 16 years old and not well schooled in manners or education. After being in my class for about a week, I saw this young man outside at lunch by himself. I asked him what his story was, and he replied with disbelief, “You want to know my story?” I said yes, and invited him to join me for lunch so we could talk. Edgar had come from Honduras with several brothers and cousins, hoping to better their lives. Right after getting into the States, they were rounded up by the Border Patrol, but Edgar managed to escape. All were sent back, and he was living in a shelter here in the U.S. His family told him not to come back because there was nothing for him. He had a fourth grade education. He had nobody.
At the shelter, he won over the hearts of some individuals who could help him get legal status. All I was required to do was teach him math and English. I realized that this boy needed additional attention, so once I learned about his situation, I talked with him every day after class about his progress, his family, his future here. He hugged me when no other students were watching, and he cried once because spring vacation was coming and he wouldn’t see me for a week. All I did was show genuine interest in his plight. I gave Edgar encouragement and understanding by letting him know he was smart and could catch up in school, little by little. He needed hope more than algebra. He needed a hug more than homework. He survived and flourished, and is now living in the Midwest with a family that adopted him.

Compassion

Last year I had a student who was sweet and well-mannered, but had not one iota of interest in math. I tried to sit down with Yesenia regularly and work with her to get her more motivated to learn. She would comply, but not willingly. One day I just wasn’t in the mood for prodding her, and she sat and did nothing. I finally went over to her and asked if she understood what she was supposed to be working on. She said yes, but that she felt sick. She started to cry. I pulled her out into the hallway and asked what was wrong. More tears. Between sobs, she told me what had happened: her father had unexpectedly died the day before. I couldn’t believe she was at school! Yesenia said someone had told her family that they could not be absent from school, so both she and her little brother had gone to school. Her mother had reported to work. I gathered her up and walked with her to the office, leaving my class to work alone. (Here’s one of those dividends – I can leave my class in an emergency and know that nothing will happen, and that students will stay on task out of respect for me.) The mother was released from work, the brother was sent home from school, and Yesenia joined them. By alerting the proper personnel immediately, the needs of this family were met. I could have easily let her continue to sit and do nothing without intervening, as had happened in her previous class periods.

I had another student, Lidia, who was a teenage mother. I’d had her as a 10th grader after she sat out a year to have her baby, and as an 11th grader in a regular geometry class. I knew from conversations with her that she and her mother had a rocky relationship, mostly about how she cared for her baby and about her boyfriend. One day she showed up about 15 minutes late to class with a tear-streaked face. I got the class going on an activity and invited Lidia to step out in the hall. Sobbing, she said her mother had kicked her out of the house for good that morning and she had nowhere to go after school and she didn’t know what to do She had been beaten by her boyfriend. Geometry proofs were not important at that moment, and I was afraid she would drop out of school. My conference period was the next hour, so I asked her to wait and go with me to the counselor. Of course, Lidia was capable of finding the counselor herself, and I didn’t have anything to do with the services provided her. I only take credit for showing this teen mother that the school cared about her enough to do something immediately, and I followed up with questions and conversations at various times the rest of the semester. A person who shows care and compassion can lift up a vulnerable teen and possibly prevent an unpleasant outcome. Lidia graduated the next year. Again, all it took was a little time and talk on my part.

I am always amazed at the number of teachers who express no desire or interest in getting to know their students. They don’t want to know about the problems of students; their only interest is the content area they teach. What they miss out on is an understanding of why their students haven’t completed homework or studied for a test. They are clueless as to the home environment
of children of poverty and the reasons for their behavior and priorities being different from middle-class teachers. Even when provided with research in an easy-to-read format such as Ruby Payne’s book, “A Framework for Understanding Poverty”, some teachers choose to remain ignorant and uncaring because it’s easier.

Home Visits

Some shudder at the thought of taking time to drive to an undesirable part of town and trekking through a maze of tenement apartments to find a parent. It’s not an easy task. It is humbling, though, to see how students live outside of the classroom. I have visited crowded, stifling 2-room apartments, listened to drunken tirades of neighbors, and been suspiciously scrutinized by the local gang members, but I have never been threatened or harmed. I have never been refused entry or been denied a conversation. Quite the contrary – I am invited in, offered something to eat or drink, and asked if I had any difficulty finding their home. The adults are pleasantly surprised to hear me speak Spanish, as if a blue-eyed, slightly graying middle-aged white woman wasn’t supposed to. I am always reminded of the conditions poverty-stricken children live in when visiting a family, and it helps me understand why students aren’t prepared for school or why homework was not completed. Poverty is not an excuse, but it does provide an appreciation for student effort in those conditions.

I have often made home visits to parents who don’t have a home phone and whose child needs a little assistance in either behavior or academics. I always tell the student that I will be going to his or her home, and the reaction is always the same: a look that says, “Yeah, right, when pigs fly.” When I actually show up, the student is shocked and parents express polite disbelief. I tell the parents my concerns and always emphasize that I know they have taught their child manners (even if I know they haven’t) and that they surely want the best for their child. I tell them what their child’s responsibilities are and that the child needs to do his or her part. I do not accuse the parents of being inadequate or make demands. I offer to help by tutoring the student during lunch if he or she can’t come before or after school. I invite the parents to come to school and I tell them about the special programs we have to help immigrant students. I never stay more than 30 minutes. The next day I generally have 5 or 6 students ask if it’s true that I went to so-and-so’s house yesterday, and upon positive confirmation, they behave exceptionally well. Thereafter, a simple whisper in the ear of the visited student suggesting I return for another visit will redirect the student to do what I expect in the event that a reprimand is in order.

Ideally I would do this for all my students and not wait for a negative need to visit. But time is a premium and I have to reserve it for special needs.

Support

One aspect of high school life is extra-curricular activities and sports. New immigrants can benefit greatly from team sports such as baseball, soccer, or basketball, or individualized ones such as tennis. Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC), theater, music, drama, and specialty clubs provide another socialization outlet and competitive opportunity. It allows students to participate in more mainstream groups and gets them out of the cycle of poverty at least temporarily, sometimes permanently. Students who are encouraged to participate find new friends and develop new talents, and extra-curriculars give them a reason for continuing their education and a purpose for learning more English. Whenever I find out that my new immigrants are on a sports team or other extra-curricular activity, I try to make it a point to watch them perform. I don’t have the time to attend
performances, games and competitions; I make the choice to create the time because it is important to my students. More often than not, their parents are unable to attend an event because of their work schedule or lack of transportation. I make sure the student is aware of my presence at each function, otherwise it doesn’t count. Anyone can say he or she went to the game last night, but if the teacher is seen, it’s validated. The smile on the athlete’s face makes it worthwhile every time.

I love to watch football and basketball, and those games are easy for me to attend. However, soccer is the sport of choice for my immigrant students. I was asked once by a soccer player – Edgar, actually – why I would go to football and basketball, but not go see him play soccer. I confessed that soccer was not my favorite sport and that I didn’t really understand the rules and strategies involved. Dejected, Edgar commented that I was missing out on a good thing. He had handed me a one-way ticket for a guilt trip. I found the soccer schedule and showed up for the second half of the next game at school. I was the only teacher in the crowd, and only a handful of spectators were there. My dejected student was one of the best players, I found out. I waited until after the game, and then went to greet him as they came off the soccer field. Edgar’s eyes were wide with disbelief. Dirty and sweaty, he grabbed me and hugged me. He said he couldn’t believe I was actually there.

Of course, the word got out and the next day several students asked if it was true that I went to the soccer game. One of the players who was not my student stopped me in the hall and asked if I was going to go to the next game. I told him I would try. At the next game, this unknown student also hugged me and thanked me for coming. Now I try to go to the games my students are participating in because I realize how much it means to them to have a teacher watching them play. I can’t say I’m surprised that other teachers don’t attend because I realize how difficult it is to juggle family, free time, and other commitments. But if they could go to just one or two games and tell the students how well they played or how hard they tried, it might make a student’s day. It’s very important to teens to be noticed and recognized for effort, and for these at-risk students it is incalculable.

Future Planning

I have students that stay in school and graduate who are perfectly capable of attending a college or university. They have the desire to continue, but they are sorely lacking in one area: guidance through the maze of applications, scholarships, and standardized tests required to attend college. It is often enough to deter even the most determined and intelligent student. The parents of my students have little formal education and no higher education, and are more lost in the educational system than are their children. Counselors do their job of handing out applications for scholarships and admittance to universities, and they help students with ACT and SAT registrations. However, it is not enough for the immigrant student. The questionnaire for the ACT has over 200 questions to answer, and many ELLs do not understand the rating system for answering, or they simply do not understand the questions being asked. Sometimes it’s a matter of vocabulary. Sometimes it’s a cultural issue. Sometimes it’s lack of information and exposure to the world of middle-class America.

Whenever I have former students who are interested in attending college, I tell the students to come to my room at lunch and I’ll help them get started. We begin with a folder that all papers go into. Testing registrations and college applications go on one side, and scholarship applications ordered by due dates go on the other. I will read the questions on applications out loud and make sure the students understand what is stated in order for them to decide on the answer to mark.
I explain why the questions are asked and indicate whether the questions are requesting factual information or opinions. I make sure the students obtain a copy of their high school transcript, make copies of their parents’ tax return, and have a secure place to write down important numbers and passwords. I work one-on-one, usually during the lunch hour, with any student who is willing to do the leg work to get information. They can use my computer to access web sites for online applications or to seek information about a particular school. I have them complete the applications while I watch carefully to make sure they complete each section and save the information. I have them make a list of items they need to continue an application, and hound them to bring it back. We work together to write essays for scholarship applications, adding and editing to conform to the required word count and emphasis.

If students are interested in attending the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), I take them to the campus and show them the Academic Services Building because that is where they need to go for scholarship information, tuition payment, IDs, and a host of other campus requirements. I stand in line with them, but let them do the talking. I only interfere if there’s a problem and the student becomes frustrated or scared. I show them the bus stations and have them pick up a schedule to start planning how to get there. (Students opt to live at home because it’s less expensive.) I talk with parents to let them know what is going on and what they need to watch for in the mail, and give them my phone number to call in case they have questions. I enjoy showing them the next step into fulfilling their dreams and helping them get started on this journey.

One of my best and brightest students was determined to attend UTEP and become an engineer. Marco’s mother was a domestic housekeeper and his father was “a useless drunk” (his words) in Mexico. He was eager to go to college, and I had helped him with his ACT registration, scholarships, and college application. He was accepted and had received two scholarships, for which I had him write thank-you notes that he delivered personally. I reminded him to sign up for orientation in June, and to call me if there were any problems. I didn’t hear from him until August. He had received a paper that said something about federal financial aid and listed names and amounts, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do. After checking with him, I discovered that he hadn’t signed up for orientation, nor had he taken any placement tests and he didn’t have a schedule of classes for the fall semester. He thought he just had to show up the first day of class like he did for high school.

I called the University and arranged for him to take placement tests that afternoon. I called and got him the last slot for the last orientation session for freshmen engineers. I went to his house, picked him up, and took him to the testing site. He took his tests and was disappointed in his results, but I told him not to worry yet. The next day I again picked him up and we took all his paperwork to the scholarship office. The official we talked with was kind, and said it would be very easy to set up payments via electronic transfer; all Marco had to do was to complete a form. Prior to doing that, though, he had to have a bank account, which of course he didn’t have. Neither did his mother or anyone in his family. We went to the nearest bank and he opened an account, receiving a check book and debit card. We went back to the University, filed the paperwork, verified everything, got his scholarship and financial aid in order, and located the meeting place for the 5-day orientation which started the following week.

I could see the transformation of this young man in the course of a few hours. He thanked me profusely and said how he never could have done all that by himself. In three hours he moved from relying on his mother’s cash-only week-by-week subsistence to having his own bank account with checks and debit cards and electronic monitoring and money for an entire year to budget. He was well on his way to college life. He is still in college, working on his dream.
Broadening Horizons

When a new hire in bilingual education came to UTEP, I made my usual pitch for him to come to Bowie for a real education and suggested collaboration between the two schools. To my great surprise, Dr. Reynaldo Reyes III accepted the challenge. Our joint efforts resulted in a new program designed to share learning experiences between high school students and UTEP education majors. I bring small groups of ELLs from Bowie High School to Dr. Reyes’ University multicultural and bilingual education classes. We hold a discussion panel and my students talk frankly and honestly about their experiences in coming to the US and having to learn English while in high school. The education majors have a great opportunity to interact with the students and find out what they as new teachers need to know about language learners, what to do and what not to do. Every panel has unknowingly reinforced the concepts taught earlier in the courses. The emphasis is usually on the same themes: peer pressure, uncaring educators, the students’ true desire to learn versus the reality of many obstacles, respect for their family, pressure of high-stakes testing in English after only a one-year exemption, and boring and meaningless classes.

After the discussion, the high school students tour the campus and get a brief glimpse of University life, giving them some insight as to what is available to them after graduating from Bowie High School. Because most of them have never seen the University or been on the campus, they are impressed and excited. UTEP becomes a real place, not just a name heard or read on a poster.

Dr. Reyes suggested that we take the program to a larger audience: the National Association of Bilingual Educators (NABE) 2007 National Convention in San Jose, California. What an opportunity it would be for the barrio students of Bowie High School! I submitted a proposal that was accepted, and we started to plan. I selected three boys and three girls to go, based on their willingness to speak English, their grades and behavior, and leadership qualities. I had a senior, two juniors, two sophomores, and a freshman. Two students were first year immigrants, two were second year, one was in his third year, and the senior had been there for four years. It was an eclectic group. Of these six students, four had never traveled on a plane before, and none had stayed in a hotel before.

I met personally with each student’s parents in order to explain what was happening and why their child was selected to go. I also wanted to answer any questions or concerns they might have. They were all so proud of their children! I provided information in Spanish about the trip, the itinerary, airline restrictions, the phone number of the hotel, and my cell number. The students and I had lunch meetings to plan and practice expressing viewpoints.

We flew from El Paso to Los Angeles, changed planes, and flew to San Jose. By 11:45 AM, these kids were changed. They marveled at the view from the plane, listened to different languages being spoken in Los Angeles, took pictures and chatted among themselves because they really didn’t know each other very well. We took the light rail train (another first) to the hotel and checked in. The students were in awe of the elegant surroundings, and I knew I would not have to worry about them causing any problems.

We had several people donate funds for the students to make sure they could take advantage of the sights and attractions that the school funding would not cover. Because of the generosity of these great folks, the students went to the Technology Museum, which is a wonderful hands-on treasure of ideas and activities. Among other activities, the kids designed roller coasters, felt a simulated earthquake, experimented with energy sources, maneuvered a simulated jet pack used in outer space, and watched for the first time an IMAX movie. We stayed until closing.
The next morning we hurried to get to the convention center for the panel discussion. We had a two-hour slot. The students had each prepared a statement to read about themselves, and I had prepared a PowerPoint presentation for the audience to show photos and demographic information of the school as well as photos of the students with biographical information. The audience was receptive. There were many good comments and ideas shared, and the students carried on the discussion for the entire two hours. To reward them for their performance, I took them for another first – a shopping mall. Actually three had been to a mall in El Paso, but nothing like this one. The students decided to build a teddy bear for our principal, Mr. Lionel Rubio, to thank him for helping fund the trip and for supporting them. (The school mascot is a bear.)

The next day we were returning to El Paso, but not leaving until late afternoon. In the morning I rented an SUV and we drove to San Francisco. Another first for them, to see the ocean, and another dream realized: they had lunch at the Hard Rock Café. They saw Alcatraz, watched sea lions at Pier 39, and roamed the little shopping complex in search of inexpensive souvenirs. We drove back to San Jose, caught the plane home, and were greeted and hugged by parents. Each student was responsible for writing a thank-you note to a person responsible for making their trip possible. Through all the commotion and stress of the trip and the presentation, no one ever complained or misbehaved. The students knew this was a golden opportunity for them to see another part of the world, another community, another possibility in their future.

In 2004-2006, the UTEP basketball team had some players from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Columbia, and Brazil, players who had come to the United States to attend school and play basketball. I thought it would be inspirational for my recent immigrants to meet these players and listen to them tell about their own experiences in coming to the US and doing battle to learn English. I sent an e-mail to the coach in charge, and explained who I was, who my students were, and why I’d like their players to come visit us at Bowie High School. The coaches at UTEP, as well as the players, thought it was a good idea and agreed to come.

I arranged to have my students excused for one period for a special program. I didn’t tell them what it was about. At first they were unimpressed, thinking that it was going to be another incomprehensible presentation about something they didn’t understand. I issued each student an invitation to come, which was really their pass to get out of class. The UTEP basketball players arrived and were seated on the stage of the auditorium. I began by explaining to the students that this program was for them and would be in Spanish, which delighted them. I introduced the players, telling a little about each one. The students listened with rapt attention. The players each spoke about their experiences in coming to the United States, and told funny stories about mistakes they’d made because of not knowing the language. They also talked about what they missed about their homeland and what they liked about El Paso. (The Brazilian had learned enough Spanish to converse with them, plus he entertained the audience with a little Portuguese.) Then the floor was opened up for questions. They graciously answered all questions: personal, academic, or athletic for the entire period.

After that, students were scrambling for anything they could write on to ask for autographs, which the players gave. I think the college kids had as much fun being stars as my students did being the audience. It was a great opportunity for the high school students to see that they were not alone in their feelings or problems, and that with hard work and perseverance they could accomplish whatever they wanted, just as these athletes had. Afterward, my students wrote thank-you notes to the players for taking the time to talk with them. It was a win-win situation for everyone, and didn’t cost more than a couple hours of time and a short 5-mile drive from one school to the
other. The benefits were far-reaching, I believe, and I had them come back the second year for a repeat performance.

The whole point of telling these stories is that ELL students of poverty need opportunities and exposure to the rest of the world. They need to experience the lifestyle lived with a higher education so they can believe it’s real and not the make-believe they see on television. They need to hear English being spoken in order to appreciate the need to learn it and learn it well. They need to be put into situations unfamiliar, yet safe, for them to learn how to successfully work out problems in given situations. They need exposure to new and different music, cuisine, architecture, and activities so they can make choices and decisions. But they need hope and encouragement along the way. They need teachers who care enough to have high expectations. They need nurturing, not sympathy. They need responsibility, not handouts. They need understanding and patience, not rote memorization of meaningless facts. They need a smile, a handshake, a hug, and sometimes a pencil. They need someone to trust as they enter a strange new world called the United States. This new world is referred to as the land of opportunity, and they should be shown, not told, how to get there.