I’m Latino…Why Do I Need a Class on Culture?

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Abstract

As the demographics of schools become more diverse, it is imperative for schools to recruit and hire more educators of color as role models but as the results from this study indicate, these actions may be far from adequate. The Latino graduate students enrolled in a cultural foundations course in the Educational Leadership program at a traditionally Hispanic Serving Institution expressed many of the same deficit beliefs as those documented on White educators in the field. Schools and institutions of higher education therefore cannot assume Latino educators come with the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills to effectively work with students and families of the same ethnicity but must provide them with the necessary preparation. This study discusses the instructional process used in this cultural foundations course to develop Latino students’ cultural knowledge and skills and challenge and reframe their deficit thinking. Students not only reported a change in their beliefs and practice but the impact of this transformation appeared to extend beyond their own classrooms.

Introduction

I’m Latino and live in south Texas where the population is 99% Hispanic, why do I need a class on culture? Although not shared with me until the end of the course, this was the question foremost on the minds of my graduate students on the first day of class. I was teaching a course on cultural foundations in the education leadership program at a traditionally Hispanic serving institution in the Rio Grande Valley. Students soon realized however that they like many White educators across this country were in desperate need of cultural awareness, knowledge and skills to better serve culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students and parents in their schools.

I have been doing diversity training for educators across the country since 1998 and am the first to say that diversity training is not just for White educators. In many of the workshops I have taught I have discovered that many educators of color who attend these sessions have similar deficit views as many of their White counterparts (Nelson, & Guerra, 2008; Betsinger, García & Guerra, 2000). Nonetheless, I did not expect the pervasiveness of these attitudes in a region where the population is almost all Latino and in a poverty zone. Plus because half of the 19 Mexican American students enrolled in the course had moved to this country as young children, had worked in the fields and had lived in poverty for much of their adolescent years, experiencing the impact of deficit thinking first-hand, I assumed they would make every effort to stop this cycle not only for their own children but for the students they teach who are growing up much like they did.

To my dismay I discovered many of the same deficit beliefs among this group of prospective school leaders as I hear voiced by White educators in the field (Kruger, & Love, 2005). These deficit views however surfaced almost immediately and were expressed with less reservation because they were being taught by “one of their own”. Rather than seeing the assets students brought, students/parents were judged for the mainstream cultural capital they lacked (Valencia, 1997; Hinchey, 1998). Captured in the statements below, these deficit beliefs often centered on
students’ inability to learn because of their home lives and parents’ failure to care due to their lack of involvement in school and with homework. Pseudonyms are here and throughout the paper to mask students’ identities.

Raquel: *The groups of students that make up my classes consist of 14-17 year olds. They come with different baggage: single parent homes, hard working parents, physical and emotional violence, helping parents by working, head of household responsibilities, as well as low self esteem…*

Gloria: *They never care, no wonder the students act the way they act if parents themselves do not care, they cannot make time for their children’s education…*

María: *The students [that] are struggling and working below grade level often return their homework and weekly test grade folder unsigned by their parents. The teacher then needs to go the extra mile by communicating with the parent through another form such as a phone call or home visit to at least make the parents aware of their child’s progress.*

**Examine Issues through Multiple Lenses**

To increase cultural understanding and challenge and reframe students’ deficit thinking a four-prong approach was used over the course of the semester. First, to develop a broad knowledge of issues related to serving CLED students and understanding of how deficit thinking begins and is reinforced among educators, including those of color, students read a variety of literature centering on school reform from both a mono-cultural (i.e., mainstream) and pluralistic lens and analyzed and compared perspectives. Interestingly enough, during class discussions and in written reflections students reported they were well aware of mainstream explanations for CLED’s underachievement (i.e., “lack of student motivation”, “lack of experiences” and lack of parent involvement) because they were exposed to similar readings in their undergraduate preparation programs. And even though they were hurt by this literature’s negative portrayal of their cultural group, and understood it included themselves and their families, as reflected in the sentiments below, they appeared to accept these deficit beliefs as truth and in turn viewed students and families they served through this same deficit lens.

Tara: *I found the article very interesting, but at the same time very upsetting. Because when they are referring to Mexican Americans like me, it really hurts for people to think that education is not valued…*

Susanna: *I felt hopelessness at the beginning when I read what I’ve heard over and over. Mexican Americans don’t care about education. It’s almost like throwing darts at a used dartboard. Those darts (negative comments) hurt every time they hit yet it seems that the dartboard (Mexican Americans), must take them anyway.*

Viewing themselves as an “exception” (i.e. “you’re not like them”), prior to this class they attributed their educational success to their own individual efforts, hard work and desire to succeed.
Regardless of the fact that many of their parents had come to this country to seek better opportunities for their families and worked at manual labor jobs and/or in the fields to do so.

When reading about the same issues from a pluralistic lens, students were surprised to discover that an alternative perspective in the literature existed and this perspective acknowledged diverse students’ interactions and behaviors as culturally different and not dysfunctional. Even more surprising was this literature valued students’ cultural differences or funds of knowledge and promoted its use in schools as a way to improve learning and achievement (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). During these class discussions, students for the first time seemed to realize they are a “normal” member of their cultural group and not an “exception”, which appeared to result in a sense of relief. As Linda remarked:

It’s about time someone said something positive about Latinos!! Latinos/Hispanics do have academic strengths... I am glad that Rolón decided to acknowledge that Latinos have the same potential to learn as any other students if we are given the appropriate teaching tools. So do not give us stats that Latinos have the highest drop out rate, but acknowledge that we are individuals who can meet high expectations!

Similarly, Susanna explained:

My feelings of pride rose when I read about how the myths [that Mexican Americans don’t value education] were being exposed. We definitely need more studies and scholarly literature to prove that we, Mexican Americans, are not lackadaisical in reference to education.

Acknowledging their differences as cultural and valuing these differences not only appeared to begin an emotional healing process for students but also created enough cognitive dissonance for continued exploration of their deficit beliefs.

**Develop Understanding of the Dimensions of Culture**

To develop students’ awareness of their own cultural identity and its influence on teaching and leading, their students’ and families’ identities and their influence on learning and interacting, and the implicit culture taught and reinforced in school, students were then taught the dimensions of culture. Individualism–Collectivism, Low–High Context Communication, Low–High Uncertainty Avoidance and Low–High Power Distance (Hofstede, 2003) were explored to help students understand culture is the lens through which people understand the world (Garcia & Dominguez, 1997) and that cultures vary from one another in important ways, including identity development, communication style, power distribution, and role expectations (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2003). Students also participated in cultural simulations, games, and activities that magnified these invisible aspects of culture so they could be examined, analyzed and discussed. Through the debriefing of these activities students soon discovered the differences between themselves and their students and families could not be attributed to lack of hard work, motivation, or value of education but to different worldviews. With this broadened cultural lens students were able to see their own assets as well as those of the students and families they served. As Linda pointed out:
Before this class, I would think that I was just too nice or that there was something wrong with me because I worry about everyone’s feelings. Now I realize that it is part of who I am, my culture. I just wished I would have known about high and low context communication before so I wouldn’t have been too harsh in judging my parents, my colleagues, or myself.

In reflecting about his interactions with his students’ parents, Antonio stated:

_I remember that when I used to have parent conferences dealing with student misbehavior, and parents would tell me they did their part by sending them to school and for me to take care of the issue at hand, I thought they did not care. In reality the parents were caring…_

During discussions, students came to understand that although they lived in a Latino community, they were products of two cultures and not one. The Mexican culture acquired from their family and community and the mainstream one taught and reinforced in school. And more importantly, the mono-cultural perspective gained from the educational system was the lens through which they viewed students and parents in schools.

**Surface, Deconstruct, and Reframe Deficit Thinking**

Next, classroom and school scenarios illustrating the dimensions of culture were used throughout the semester to surface, deconstruct and reframe students’ deficit thinking. Students read scenarios addressing the functions of schooling, which included: instruction, curriculum, behavior management, assessment, parent involvement, data inquiry, and leadership. And, then were asked to respond to the question, “What is happening in the scenario?” In each scenario, students were quick to identify the interactions between students/parents and teacher as a “problem” resulting from students/parents’ lack of experiences or qualities such as motivation to learn, or care. Rather than consider cultural differences as an alternate explanation. During these discussions it was critical to provide a safe environment in which students’ beliefs could be expressed and explored, facilitate their understanding of the invisible aspects of culture clashing in each scenario, and challenge deficit beliefs that surfaced without judgment or repercussions. Questioning underlying assumptions and asking for evidence that supported these assumptions were important steps in deconstructing and reframing their deficit thinking. To understand the negative consequences of deficit thinking on students and parents, students then read and discussed literature on disproportionality in special education, over-referral of CLED students in discipline, under-representation in advanced placement classes and in college bound programs, and other related issues. Additionally, students were asked to examine and disaggregate school data to determine if these same patterns of inequity could be found in their schools.

**Encourage Reflection and Application to Practice**

Finally, to assess students’ individual understanding of the course content and their beliefs and determine whether deficit thinking had begun to change, throughout the course students were asked to reflect on their reading by responding to a set of questions, which included, “What are your reactions to the content, findings, and/or conclusions and why?” and “What are implications for principals (i.e., leadership, school reform).” Similar to the process employed in class discussions,
deficit beliefs surfacing in written reflections were challenged and reframed through a written exchange of questions and comments to help individual students consider alternate explanations. In addition, specific prompts like the ones listed below were also used to encourage application to instructional and leadership practice.

1) Think about your students and classroom: How does your classroom reflect the individualism–collectivism continuum? For example, how is your orientation (either individualism or collectivism) reflected in the ways you teach and interact with students? (Guerra and García, 2000)

2) As a future principal, how will you and your hiring committee attempt to avoid hiring teachers who only have deficit beliefs about students of color and/or from poverty?

**A Change in Beliefs and Practice**

Although resistance from students in this course was noticeably less than usually encountered with White educators, perhaps because students personally related to many of the issues discussed in class and in the literature, it still took time for students’ deficit beliefs to shift. It wasn’t until mid-semester when an epiphany occurred that resulted in a dramatic change in students’ beliefs and behavior. During this week, students read articles on parent involvement and participated in a student-designed, class activity that asked them to categorize the involvement of their own parents in their education while growing up, involvement with their own children’s education or anticipated involvement (for those who did not yet have children), and the current involvement of their students’ parents. To display and interpret the results, students’ ratings were posted in front of the class for everyone to see. Out of the 19 Latino students in the course, 18 evaluated their own parents’ involvement identical to that of their students’ parents in spite of the fact that 9 of these 18 were raised in middle-class families and 2 of the 9 reported their mothers were teachers.

Students in this course were the first in their family to graduate from college, educators with middle class incomes, and pursuing a master’s degree yet they did not believe their parents were in part responsible for their success. Similar to the deficit thinking of many White educators, students believed their parents were not involved in their education because they did not display behaviors similar to those of White middle class parents (i.e., sit on committees, volunteer at school, help with homework). Socialized by the educational system from Pre-K through 16 they were indoctrinated with mainstream values of what parent involvement should look like, regardless of the fact they lived in Latino community located forty miles from the border of Mexico. But even more surprising was a number of students expressed disappointment and anger over their parents’ lack of involvement in their education, and like many other White educators, had equated this lack of involvement to a lack of care.

Students were not surprised to learn their parents were labeled as uninvolved in their education because after all, growing up they had not helped with homework, failed to attend parent-teacher conferences on a regular basis, and had not volunteered at school. What caused anguish though, was to see their parents placed in the same category as their students’ parents. Faced with this realization, students were visibly upset and questioned how this could have happened. Their parents truly loved them, did their best to ensure their happiness, and made sacrifices so they could have a better life than their parents did. On the other hand, they believed their students’ parents did not care about their children nor value education, but now seeing the two groups side-by-side in front of them, struggling to reconcile disparate perceptions, they wondered if they had misjudged their students’ and their own parents all along.
To internalize this “aha” moment, students then read and discussed literature on parent involvement in Latino communities and compared it to mainstream expectations. Once exposed to these culturally different forms of involvement, they not only discovered their own parents had done many of the same behaviors described in the literature but so were the parents of their students. In reflecting about her own parents’ involvement Tara stated:

My parents were very supportive and always preached that getting an education would get us out of poverty. I could not help it to get sad, because I was guilty of always saying that my parents did not care about school because they would not attend meetings, etc. But after reading this article I realized the many efforts they made for me and my brothers to like and attend school everyday.

Discussing the involvement of her own parents and their friends, Susanna shared:

Although my parents did have a formal education in Mexico, the traditional beliefs mentioned in this article can be seen in my family. For example my parents never wanted me to work because I needed to concentrate on my studies. They constantly reminded me of taking advantage of educational opportunities I was presented with. They trusted me in making the right decisions and supported me in whatever decision I made…Growing up, many of my…friends’ parents fit the description of the removed [uninvolved] parents. Yet, it was not because they were indifferent or did not value education, but because they felt it was not their place to interfere with the educational setting. Actually the school staff had all the authority over the children with the support of the parents. The first thing you would hear from the parents’ mouth was, “Hazle caso a la maestra.” (Pay attention to the teacher). They definitely had high expectations of us, reminding us everyday to appreciate what they never had.

When thinking about culture clashes over parental involvement that were constantly occurring between teachers and parents at her school, Susanna went on to explain:

When a child is struggling, the teacher always says she/he is doing her best to teach but cannot do it alone. We need the parents to sit with them everyday; help them with their homework and read for at least twenty minutes. When that doesn’t happen, we automatically say, “Those parents just don’t care!” It becomes a vicious cycle of blame. The teachers say they are here to teach not to raise children. The parents say it is the teacher’s job to teach the children, that’s what they come to school for. So who wins? Nobody. Who loses? The child. After reading this article, I am more conscious of what I think and say. I try to put myself in those parents’ shoes.

Students now understood Latino parents do value education and support their children but differences exist in the ways they demonstrate this value and support due to different cultural orientations. For example, because Individualists tend to view education as a partnership, teachers and parents both are expected to work on children’s academic learning (Trumbull, Rothstein,
Quiroz, & Greenfield, 2001). While teachers instruct, parents are expected to teach and/or reinforce learning through the purchase of educational toys and books, reading bedtime stories, helping with homework, and volunteering in school (Epstein, 1995). In contrast, Collectivists see distinct boundaries between teachers and parents; teachers are expected to teach cognitive skills while parents socialize children (Trumbull, et al., 2001). Parents’ involvement centers on shaping children’s behavior to become obedient, well mannered, and respectful students who will listen and learn. In discussing these collectivistic expectations, Roberto noted:

> Although not evident in school, the parental support (consejos/advice) is what drives these kids to be respectful to the teacher, to do what the teacher asks them to do, and to be quiet when someone is talking. Interestingly enough, this is the parental support that many of us didn’t see.

In reflecting on Roberto’s example, María identified additional behaviors she had observed:

> …A mother that walks her child to school is supportive in that way. A parent that simply asks the child if her homework is in her backpack is supportive as well. The parent that simply encourages the child to listen to the teacher is supportive. Just because parents do not make themselves visible in school does not mean they are not supportive.

Finally, students were asked to share stories of their own parents’ involvement while attending school so they would leave with a deep understanding of collectivistic expectations and forms of involvement in contrast to individualistic expectations of the school and to dispel any remaining doubts about their parents’ involvement. In addition to the previously cited examples, other parental behaviors students cited included: disciplining children for misbehavior in school, asking children if they brought their books home, providing consejos or advice to reinforce the value of school and providing experiences that teach children to stay in school, many of which are discussed in the following stories.

> Roberto: When I think of my elementary years, I often think of my dad, mom and grandfather walking me to school. In my eyes, this was a form of parental involvement. How do you assure that your son/daughter will get to school on time? You walk them to school. During those years, I remember the “consejos” that my parents would give me: respect your elders, listen to your teacher, and the infamous, “portate bien” (behave). By the way my mother stills says that to me…During my elementary years, I always remember my mom ironing everyone’s clothes. The absence of money was not going to justify attending school with dirty clothes. I often remember my mom preparing a meal and would remind me to eat healthy at all times…Parental involvement continued to be present during my high school years as well. Not knowing how to drive, I remember my dad buying a car. He never told that the car was for me. My dad realized that the school bus was picking me up too early and figured I was not getting enough rest…Upon reaching graduation, I remember my dad telling me that I did not have to financially contribute to the household as long as I was enrolled in any post-secondary program. In my opinion, this is the best support a parent a can give their son.
Tara: Throughout my elementary years my parents would make sure that we would go to school everyday rain or shine. I remember my mother bringing us hot chocolate to bed so it would warm us up since the house was so cold. We were so poor, we did not have hot water and my mother would heat up water on the stove so we could take a bath. My parents always provided us with everything that was needed for school. Now that I think about it they showed support in so many different ways. Although I grew up poor, I did not see it like that when I was young. I had so much love and support from my parents that everything was great even when we would go work in the fields. …My parents would always say that we needed to get an education so we did not have to work so hard. They would encourage us to go to school by asking us “Is this the way you would like to live for the rest of your life?”… After class I started thinking back to everything they would do so we could attend school and feel comfortable. My parents rarely visited the school unless I was going to get an award, or be in a program. I can recall back when I was in elementary school around third grade that both of my parents started to shy away from visiting the school. My mother once told me that some of the teachers would stare at them, so she felt uncomfortable…I am very proud of my parents for always being so supportive.

Susanna: In third grade I qualified for the G/T [gifted and talented] program, but the school that offered it was across town and we lived ten miles outside the city limits. I, again, was scared to go but again they convinced me it was for the best. We had to wake up at 5 a.m. to get on the bus by 5:45 a.m. for the two-hour trip. On cold mornings, my dad would wake up earlier to turn on the gas stove while my mom heated our clothes. My dad built a little shed for me to wait for the bus. Either he or my mom would wait outside with me everyday. My mom always had a delicious home-cooked meal ready. Although my parents never attended the PTA meetings and were [not] physically involved in school, the support they gave me meant the world to me. …Throughout junior high school and high school, my parents’ love and support continued strong. As my classes got harder, they were not able to help me as much but they always were there for me. I remember the sacrifice it was to buy me an encyclopedia set because I needed it for my research papers.

María: At age 15, my parents taught me one of my most valuable lessons. It had been about 9 years since my parents had stopped migrating up north. It was a Saturday in May that I will never forget…. My parents were taking me to Colorado to experience this hard work they spoke so much about. As a young 15 year old, I could not comprehend the need for this trip. We lived in a comfortable brick home and my sisters and I were not lacking any necessities. My father would say, “It’s the experience mijita, you need to know what hard work is.” Those summer days were long and the work was HARD! Aside from the hard work the day went from cold, to very hot, to lots of rain and windy evenings all in one day. It was like experiencing every season all in one day. It was at the end of the day that my father would say, “This is why you need to go to school and study hard. You don’t
want to work like this so take advantage of your opportunities at school.” Now, 20 years later, I am about to receive my master’s in Educational Leadership and my father could not be any prouder. It is through their support and encouragement that I have accomplished not only my dream but their dream as well.

Jesus: I remember that my dad was very supportive of my education in other subtle ways. For instance, my brother Roy and I received subscriptions to nature and wildlife cards. By this I mean that every couple of weeks we would receive a shipment of animal fact cards. On one side was a picture of the animal and on the reverse side was information about the diet, habitat and interesting facts about this animal. At the time I didn’t realize why my dad did this, but now I know that he was trying to be an active participant in us getting smarter. I remember that my dad would take us to work on Saturday mornings to the fields in Starr County where we helped him take counts for parasites in the cotton and watermelon fields. We would take samples of carrots and vegetables and weight them with a field scale and record the results. My dad was doing concrete hands on math activities with me and I didn’t even know it… I remember showing my report cards to my mom who said, “Al rato se lo ensenas at tu Papa.”(Show it to your father later after he’s rested.) My dad would always be watching television on his bed when I would take him my report card. He’d sign it and just give it back to me. It didn’t dawn on me that he didn’t say, “Good job son,” or stuff like that. But it didn’t matter. I always knew school was important because of the emphasis they put on never letting us be absent, and making sure we were always prepared and there on time.

Claudia: The day I graduated from high school I could see how proud my parents were but even though my dad is understanding and laid back he made a comment that day that I would never forget. He said, “That diploma means nothing. Once you have your college degree then that’s the one I will place on the mantle.” This comment is what has made me persistent with my education and I feel that I am who I am because of them.

Linda: As I think back to my childhood years, I can clearly see my parents’ humble, yet sincere look on their face as they registered me for school every year. It almost seems that they were embarrassed to step into school and, of course, after registration, they would never go back to visit my teachers. Yet on a daily basis, they would ask how I did in school. They would also make sure that I did my homework. My sibling and I were expected to work on our homework on the dinette table while my mom prepared dinner. This close proximity was my mom’s strategy to ensure that we were working on our homework…When we migrated up north, my parents were cognizant of the withdraw dates. Every year, up until I was 18 years old, my parents would wait for the last week of school before withdrawing us. Even though we were expected to arrive in North Dakota for the first week of May, my parents prolonged the withdrawal date because they wanted to ensure that we did not miss out on school. In addition, when we arrived to North Dakota, my parents would register us for summer school. So indeed I had parental support!!
Plus, my parents tried to return to the valley no later than the second week of September. If for some reason we had to stay up north later than expected date, my parents would find the means to send us to the valley so we would not miss out on school. I remember when my oldest sister was going to start college. My parents flew her to McAllen; as a matter of fact, it was the first time any of my siblings had been on a plane. My parents wanted to ensure that she arrived to the valley before the fall semester. Now that is support!!

Antonio: As a child, I remember that my parents were very concerned for our education. My mom and dad had no education at all. They were born in Mexico and come over to the states to earn a better living and to provide better educational opportunities for their children. I remember as a young child that my mom and dad would tell my brothers and sisters to go to school or to be ready to go to work so that as a whole we could provide for the family.

As the discussion transpired, students seem to release disappointment and deep-seated resentment that had been harbored toward their parents for years because of their perceived lack of involvement and support of their educational interests. In fact, a few female students even cried because they had misjudged their parents so harshly. After this particular class, a number of students sought out their parents to apologize for their lack of appreciation over the years and thanked them for the “better life” they had indeed provided. Linda lamented:

I cannot believe that I was so narrow minded and so judgmental towards my parents…I now look back to my childhood and I was such a fool to believe that my parents were not involved in my education…I have taken the time to acknowledge and appreciate my parents for their undivided support towards my education. In addition, I apologized to them for not doing it sooner.

From this point on in the semester, few if any deficit beliefs were expressed in class discussions and written reflections and students voiced a strong desire and commitment to transform practice at their respective schools as conveyed by the following two examples:

Linda: I would like to share a story that just happened a couple of days ago. We were in a district meeting discussing the final assessments for all LEP, Limited English Proficient, students. Our Bilingual Coordinator was addressing how 40% of our LEP population was Special Ed. At this point, an assistant principal, who is White, made a comment. She said, “Well of course! They are LEP.” Of course, I was bothered!! So I challenged her. “So you are saying that they are Special Ed students because they are LEP.” I felt that my heritage was devalued. She automatically knew that I was upset. I asked her again to clarify her comment! Her clarification was not making sense. But I made it very clear to everyone!! “Just because we have LEP students, that does not automatically classify them under the Special Ed umbrella.” Before this class, I would have sat there and agreed with her. Not any more!!
Antonio: This class has really opened my eyes and now I see students differently. I used to make assumptions of my students based on my past as a student myself. It isn’t always what one presumes that is actually occurring. I have learned throughout the semester to see students as a whole, and to learn how to speak and more importantly listen to them. One example that I can remember this year dealt with a young student that was having a difficult time with the other physics teacher. This young man was having conflicts with a female teacher and that teacher requested for him to be transferred to my class. The teacher warned me and told me that he was a handful and for me to be careful with him. At first, I really didn’t know if I could trust this kid, and was always on him for any slight discipline infraction. During the course of the semester, I learned in class that I must be able to understand the child and their cultural/familial exposure. As I read articles and heard the many discussions in class, I really thought about the way I was treating this student in my class. I decided one day to talk to this student on a one-to-one basis and listened more than talked. I found out that this kid had not had any mother figure/role model in his life. He opened up to me and told me that he just did not know how to really talk or much less listen to a female figure of authority. It all clicked for me from that day on… This was a real shocker for me and I discussed this issue with the other physics teacher and she was in awe once we had the conversation. I think that this class has not only benefited me, but also my fellow co-worker.

Raquel: I do not consider myself as a person who judges students, but when I talk about parents I do tend to judge them, or I did before. I thought most of these parents did not care enough about their children because they did not attend open house or returned a call when I left a message. What made me realize I was wrong about my assumptions was not only when I read the articles but when we did the activity in class about our parent’s involvement when we were in school. I am glad we read this article before we had our open house at our campus. I was actually defending parents when some of my colleagues judged parents...

Conclusion

The first day that I attended class…I did not think I would actually learn anything that I did not know. I would think about class and I would say to myself, “We are teaching at a place where 99% of our students are Hispanic, who are the teachers discriminating if the students are the same color as we?"

Gloria’s beliefs were not unusual but in fact reflected the sentiment of the entire class. Because the Latino graduate students in this education leadership course shared visible aspects of culture (i.e., skin color, language, and traditions) with their CLED students and families, they inaccurately assumed they also shared similar worldviews. Moreover, as a member of their ethnic group, many believed they came with an inherent understanding of their group’s cultural identity, and as a result, had the necessary cultural competence to effectively work with students who shared this ethnicity. Unconscious of the school’s socialization process, it was difficult for them to conceive that they might have deficit thinking and would therefore greatly benefit from learning about culture. After
all, as students who matriculated through the Pre-K to 12 system weren’t they once the target of deficit beliefs?

Contrary to their beliefs, the Latino graduate students did view CLED students and parents through a deficit lens when students and parents failed to act according to their mainstream expectations rather than consider culture as an alternate explanation. Despite the fact this community was located only 40 miles from the Texas–Mexico border, many of their students and families were recent immigrants or first generation, lived in poverty and were migrant workers, and at least half of the Latino students in the course had grown up in similar circumstances. In fact, with the exception of one individual, students even judged their own parents as “uncaring” because of their parents’ perceived lack of involvement in their education.

However, as the findings from this study reveal, students’ beliefs and practice were reportedly transformed with instruction that:

1) Examined issues through multiple lenses for the purpose of developing students’ diverse understanding of issues related to educating CLED students and school reform, and to understand how deficit thinking begins and is reinforced in school.
2) Developed knowledge of the dimensions of culture so students understood cultures vary from one another in important ways and culture is the lens through which people understand the world.
3) Surfaced, deconstructed, and reframed deficit thinking to identify and challenge student’s underlying assumptions, along with their generalizations, and stereotypes, and model a process, which could then be used with other educators in the field.
4) Encouraged students’ reflection and application to practice to facilitate transformation of deficit beliefs, internalize pluralistic ones, and apply learning to daily instructional and leadership interactions and behaviors with students/parents.

As a result of this instructional process, students not only reported a change in their beliefs and practice but the impact of this transformation appeared to extend beyond their own classrooms. Whereas before this course a number of students reported commiserating with colleagues in the teachers’ lounge over CLED students’ lack of experiences and inability to learn and parents’ lack of care, they reported at the end of the course, recognizing deficit thinking and no longer participating in these conversations. But more importantly, many indicated they now challenge their colleagues’ deficit beliefs.

As the demographics of our schools become more diverse, it is imperative for schools to recruit and hire more educators of color as role models but as the results from this study indicate, these actions are far from enough. Educators of color, like their White counterparts, will also require cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills and pluralistic beliefs if the needs of CLED students and families are to be effectively served and the achievement gap closed (Nelson & Guerra, 2008; Betsinger, García, & Guerra, 2000). But providing this cultural knowledge and skills to Latino students in teacher and leader pre-service programs may be only one of two necessary steps in their preparation as culturally responsive educators. As evidenced in this study, pre-service personnel may also need to consciously address Latino students’ feelings of hurt and inadequacy due to negative portrayal of their cultural group in mainstream literature and resolve resentment for their parents perceived lack of involvement as a result of school socialization.
The beliefs and practice of the Latinos in this study were reportedly transformed but additional research needs to be conducted to determine if this course experience resulted in sustainability of students’ beliefs and practice after several years. And if so, what does this sustainability look like in leadership practice? Additionally, research needs to be conducted on the beliefs and emotions Latinos and other educators of color experience as they journey through this transformation process and compare it to that of their White peers. Finally, more work needs to be conducted to determine whether the effect of school socialization on the ego of students in this study was an isolated case or a pattern found among other Latino educators.
References


