

Case Study

Latino Experiences in a Rural Elementary School in North Carolina

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore whether teachers in a rural North Carolina public school had developed any culturally responsive teaching strategies to respond to a new and growing Latino student population. Using observational data, interviews, and a reflexive ethnographic perspective, the case study examines the lack of culturally responsive teaching strategies and attention to “funds of knowledge” when working with Latino children.



Introduction

On a cold, overcast morning, we drive along a rural stretch of highway in Wamble County (a pseudonym). On our way to our last visit to Johnson Elementary School (a pseudonym), we recollect that our visits have been painted with both moments of joy and moments of sadness and dismay. During our visits, we have begun to learn about one enclave of the new Latino community in North Carolina. The Latinos who have moved to Wamble County have arrived in search of work, economic stability, and educational opportunities for their children. The school that has received them is both unfamiliar with how to teach this new community of students and unaware of the unique and rich cultural backgrounds that the Latino children carry with them each morning as they ride the bus from their homes to the school. In our observations at Johnson, we have seen that there is still a chance to avoid the mistakes of the past concerning the education of immigrant students and at the same time, the prospect remains that this unfortunate past may be repeated if more aggressive strategies are not pursued.

Vignettes from the Field

Boredom

It was Friday morning, which meant it was a pretty good bet that Mrs. K was going to be working on assessment tests for the end-of-grade reading comprehension section. Mrs. K, a retired teacher who had returned for one year to fill a teaching shortage at Johnson, was arguably the best teacher that the students encountered in the fifth grade. That being said, the atmosphere of silence and the feeling of agony among



the students as they sat waiting for the daily test preparation to begin were our most notable observations in Mrs. K's classroom. While Mrs. K did appear to make adjustments for her Spanish dominant learners (slowing down her speaking, offering several explanations of vocabulary words, etc.), she did not infuse her teaching methods with elements of the students' lives so that they might be able to make a connection to what they learned.

When we entered the class on that particular Friday morning, the kids were in their usual seating arrangement (an L shape in order to fit all the desks into the trailer). The students were sitting in silence, filling in bubble sheets, or reading silently—something they were “allowed” to do if they finished their assessment earlier than their peers. This is the official *modus operandi* of Mrs. K's classroom.

On this particular morning, Janet sat next to Luis, who had opted out of his regular desk seat for a round table near the door. Ms. K had told us that she let the children sit wherever they pleased as long as they behaved. As she often did on Friday mornings, Janet began to watch the clock and hope that today would be the day the kids were allowed to do something other than take a practice test. Mrs. K apologized for the lack of variation but reminded her that as a result of accountability testing, the Friday test drills were mandatory, and the schedule would remain regimented throughout the majority of the school year.

She leaned over and asked Luis if they ever did anything fun when the adults who visited from Chapel Hill weren't around. He looked at her with a sly smile and answered in the negative, “Nope and this is the first day I've even been able to stay awake. I

actually thought you was Mrs. B (the principal) when you walked in so I tried to wake up!” Janet nodded understandingly, saying that it is indeed hard to stay awake when you have to take tests all day. Luis added in a whisper, “And when she [Mrs. K] starts to read, that’s the worst!” Janet smiled at Luis’ honesty, and asked him if they ever wrote stories in this English class. Luis looked surprised and said, “That would be kind of nice, but I think the last time I wrote a story was in the fourth grade.” Janet suggested that maybe he would be able to write a story after the end-of-grade test occurred. Luis nodded, but it was clear that he didn’t really believe it would happen.

Boredom is the air that students breathe in the fifth grade classrooms that were observed at Johnson. Attempts to connect Latino students to the curriculum — such as those outlined in Karen Grady’s (2002) article on “Lowrider Art and Latino Students in the Rural Midwest” or to connect any of the “low level” students to meaningful activities — were eclipsed by test preparation during Friday observations of the fifth grade. The disservice that is being done to all students and especially to Latino students, who already struggle with the unfamiliar environment of school, only further alienates Latino students from the classroom. Monotony and boredom pervaded the Friday classrooms because the emphasis was on testing rather than learning.

Lack of Training and Support

On the first day we walked into Mrs. S’s room to begin our observations of her class, she told us, “Any advice you have for teaching ESL students is welcome. I have a class full of them, but I haven’t had any real training about how to best teach them.” Her class of 14 consisted of six Latino boys, four Latino girls, two White boys, one White

girl, and one Black girl. All the Latino students were labeled as English language learners and qualified for ESL services, and all the non-Latino students were receiving special education services for learning disabilities. It did not take us long to gather that this was the low track class (although many of the Latino students were bilingual, biliterate, and very bright). Mrs. S did not have an assistant and while the school has a number of ESL teachers, she didn't have any ESL support in her classroom because all her students were conversationally fluent in English, more or less.

While Mrs. S was one of the most caring teachers (spending many early morning and after-school hours with her students and desiring to serve her students as best as possible) we encountered at the school and had very strong relationships with her students, she did not have the training required to effectively support her students' development of academic English and she knew very little about the *funds of knowledge* of her students. The diversity workshops she had attended did not leave her feeling well equipped to meet the challenges and needs of her students. She knew some of the basics about language acquisition and seemed to understand the importance of developing literacy in the first language, but assumed that none of her Spanish-speaking students or their families could read or write in Spanish. While some of her students and their families were not literate in Spanish, many were well educated in their first language.

Mrs. S expressed a desire to learn Spanish in order to communicate better verbally with the parents of her students and hoped to go to Mexico one day to learn about their origins, but she did not seem to understand that she could learn a great deal about her students by getting to know the Latino community living right in her own backyard.

While it is easy to criticize her for being uninformed about her students, it would be unfair considering her lack of preparation and training. In addition, it should be noted that she was far ahead of many of her colleagues. Many of the other teachers we encountered knew nothing at all about language acquisition theory and in some cases were unaware that some of their Latino students were still acquiring English. At least Mrs. S recognized her lack of training and wanted the support and knowledge that would enable her to be a better teacher. Her students, and all the students attending Johnson, deserve teachers with adequate training and support.

Missed Opportunities

Our journeys into Johnson Elementary School often left us troubled by the many missed opportunities to provide instruction that built upon the students' *funds of knowledge*. This situation stemmed in part from the lack of teacher training and in part from the school's extreme focus on test preparation. Even within such an environment, however, there were occasional opportunities when teachers could have pursued a more culturally responsive pedagogy. One striking and easily remedied such opportunity was the selection of books. While more than 50 percent of the school's population was Latino, we encountered only one book in the library about a famous Latino person and there was only one story about Latino family life in the fourth grade reader. Every time we saw Latino students reading, they were reading books selected by their teachers that had nothing to do with their lives or interests. The Latino students could have been reading books such as *Pablo Remembers* by George Ancona, *Family Pictures* and *In My Family* by Carmen Lomas Garza, and *Gathering the Sun: An Alphabet in Spanish and*



English by Alma Flor Ada and Simon Silva and *Taking Sides* and *Baseball in April and Other Stories* by Gary Soto.

On our second visit to Mrs. S's classroom, we were introduced to Hector, a 10-inch iguana that a Latino boy had brought to school in a cardboard box. The teacher had found an aquarium to house the new class pet. She said that the students had been very excited about the iguana and that she had looked for a book on iguanas in the library to read to them, but was unable to find one. Courtney asked the students what they knew about iguanas and a couple of them said they used to see iguanas in Mexico. One student said that his uncle had an iguana that was more than two feet long. Another student reported that iguanas grow to whatever size their cage permits.

While the teacher was happy to see her students so enthusiastic about something, she did not go any deeper to build upon her student's enthusiasm. The students were not asked to write a story about Hector, the teacher did not invite the parent whose child bought the iguana to come and talk with the class, and the teacher was unable to find a book about an iguana for her students to read. Unfortunately, she failed to recognize the potential impact Hector could have had on her students' learning experience. Mrs. S saw the iguana as an interesting addition to the classroom that her students could think about between worksheets and practice tests, but she did not recognize the opportunity to engage her students in meaningful learning. For example Mrs. S. might have explored developing lesson plans regarding what iguana eats, what types of habitat they live in, and where populations of iguana live around the world. She might have also developed an art lesson around the paintings of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and why iguanas



sometimes appeared in her paintings. Although her outward display of enthusiasm for the iguana reflected an aesthetic form of care, this missed opportunity demonstrates the need for teachers to extend their caring theory toward a more authentic manifestation that would build upon students' experience and knowledge (Valenzuela, 1999).

Questions for Group Discussion

- How did well-intentioned teachers “miss the boat” when trying to work with Latino immigrant students?
- What does it mean to “authentically care” about a child?
- What role does testing and the mandates of NCLB play in the environment and experiences of immigrant students?
- What could the teachers in these vignettes have done differently?
- What could administrators have done to help these teachers succeed?
- As a teacher/administrator what resources/support do you need to walk away with from this class to support your ability to work with immigrant students?

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