Developing Trust between Teachers and Recent Immigrant Students
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Submitted June 2002

Abstract
The intent of this study was to explore ways in which teachers can participate in and contribute to the acculturation process of immigrant students. To do this, I worked with 5 Hispanic immigrant students outside of school hours in order to gain a fuller understanding of their lives. Initially, my intent was to implement formal training to help with the acculturation process. However, as I got to know each of the students better, it became apparent that it was important for me to talk with them individually about their experiences and get to know them in a deeper way so as to develop trust. Throughout the year, the students used our relationship as a sounding board for acculturation issues they were encountering, such as stereotypes, academic struggles, and language acquisition concerns. Overall, I found that fostering a relationship with these students outside of the classroom environment served to engage the students in their own acculturation process in a meaningful way, as well as to serve as a “safe place” for these students to ask questions and make observations about American culture.

Introduction
The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of minority language students’ lives in order to more effectively meet their academic needs. As a Spanish teacher, I have been somewhat concerned that our guidance seems to place many Hispanic students in Spanish classes without regard to their language level (English or Spanish). In addition, the students participating in my study were fairly new immigrants to this country (within the past 5 years), and I was interested in finding out more about how they adjusted to an academic setting during their own cultural adjustments. An important aspect that I was looking for throughout my interactions with them was ways to help them effectively adjust to their new surroundings.

The study consisted of 5 high-school aged Hispanic students who are all enrolled in my Spanish 3 classes. Gloria, from El Salvador, is an 18-year-old female who has been in the US for four and a half years. Jose, from Panama, is a 17-year-old male who has been in the US for one year. Julia, from Bolivia, is a 14-year-old female who has been in the US for 3 years. Miguel, also from Bolivia, is a 17-year-old male who has been in the US for 2 years. Victoria, from Peru, is a 15-year-old female who has been in the US for one year. All students volunteered participation outside of school hours. Parent consent for their participation was also received.

1 Names have been changed.
Literature Review

Literature indicates that new immigrant groups have specific academic and emotional needs. Holman (1997) highlights challenges faced by immigrant families: intimidation, language barriers, lack of formal education, and economic hardship. In response to these challenges, she suggests that teachers work to provide supports such as validation of the culture and family, language support, and easily accessible information in Spanish. She advocates that the school work to welcome parents and facilitate their adjustment to not only a new culture, but a new academic system as well.

Bemak and Chung (2003) suggest that the guidance counselor also plays an important role in immigrant student success. The need to understand the immigrant student experience is shown by the high number of young people in the immigrant population. Nearly 20 percent of new immigrants in 1998 were under 15, with another 32 percent being between 15 and 29. The authors explain a model of the need for immigrant students to gain cultural mastery through a switch from reliance upon previously established knowledge to adjust to the new culture to a new set of paradigms with which the student can integrate their previous experience with their present situation. Another facet of immigrant culture is the faster rate at which children adapt to a culture. While adults tend to learn a language and adjust more slowly, family dynamics can be severely affected because the child quickly learns to take on certain attributes of the new culture that may be inappropriate or offensive to the home culture. Additionally, language can pose problems if the child must serve as a translator for parents because it juxtaposes roles between parents and children. Finally, the authors suggest that school (especially counselors) can have a great impact on immigrant students because they may be able to help bridge some of these gaps.

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (1999) published an article that outlines ways to understand conflict and power in classrooms, to create safe places for discussion, and to inspire advocacy and activism among students themselves. Some suggestions include that teachers should not fear cultural conflict, and should seek ways to learn from, rather than avoid it. It examines different concepts of culture that effect the way in which we view our surroundings. For example, it describes how different cultures may be less tightly bounded, highly variable, and constantly changing. It explains how culture can consist of both implicit and internal knowledge as well as everyday, outward habits and practices. It also suggests that to learn about culture and develop self-awareness, teachers should be quick to observe and to place themselves in situations where they gain a personal understanding of cultural awareness. Finally, it makes applications for parents and community involvement, as well as ways to adapt curriculum to teach through cultural perspectives.

At the beginning of the study, I felt the students were inappropriately placed in Spanish 3, and that other courses would be more beneficial to their
language and cultural acquisition process because they already spoke Spanish. Given the situation, I was interested in finding ways to train immigrant students in cross-cultural adaptation. However, I met much frustration as I look for materials specifically geared to high school aged immigrant students. Most of the materials I found were for corporate or American students. After further review of the above literature, my expectations grew to a deeper desire to understand my students’ experience, rather than to teach them about it. Additionally, I suspected that, if these students developed a strong relationship with a trusted American who spoke their language, it would provide a “safe place” in which to ask questions or share concerns regarding both their personal and academic lives.

Methods

I met with each student approximately 5 times after school. In addition, I interacted with them two to three times a week in class. During individual meetings, I gathered information through written surveys and oral interviews. Some interviews were individual, others were discussions as a group. My intent was to create an environment where the students felt comfortable sharing with me, as well as asking questions of me. I would usually bring a topic of discussion to the meeting and ask students about their opinions and experiences.

Results

Meeting with these students, themes of their experiences began to appear. The pervading themes were personal struggle, language insecurities, and confronting stereotypes. While the students come from very different homes and backgrounds, these themes took on various forms in each of their lives.

Personal Struggle. While some struggle appeared quite blatantly in students such as Gloria, who is six months pregnant and abandoned by her mother, other students faced a more passive struggle. Victoria, innocent and naïve, often expressed frustration in trying to understand how to fit herself into the American teenage social life. She expressed that she liked boys and would readily flirt with them, but was also appalled by the overtly sexual behavior and appearance of certain girls at school. At times, it appeared as though her struggle to understand where she fit placed her in situations where she could easily be taken advantage of.

José exuded a stronger sense of internal confidence, although he readily admitted that the move to America had been difficult. He expressed sadness and preoccupation about the changes in his life and stated often how much he missed his family and friends. Julia has known personal struggle for most of her life, as she was raised in Bolivia by her grandmother for ten years while her parents were working to make a life in the States. Her mother was so concerned for her emotional well being that she hired a psychologist for Julia and her sisters to meet with regularly. In spite of the cultural stigma that people who see psychologists are “locos”, Julia grew up processing her difficult emotions about being separated from her parents. While the adjustment to living with them was
difficult, her emotional maturity is quite evident as she has been committed not only to making herself learn how to adapt to her new family and country, but also to helping her sisters do the same.

Miguel, a “teddy bear” in both body and heart, expressed the least personal struggle aloud. He said he was excited to come to this country and seems genuinely comfortable about living here, despite his low level of English. Although his internal contentment level appears stable, Miguel’s grades suggest otherwise. He has no grades higher than a D and failed his ESOL class.

**Language Insecurities.** While the students expressed a distinct sense of insecurity about their language acquisition process, their paths along this road were remarkably distinct and different. José and Victoria both expressed much more emotional insecurity and struggle about their language skills than the other students who have been in the country for a longer period of time. Victoria even stated that she wished she had never come to this country because she feels like her language leaves her behind in her academic subjects. She explained that all of her friends in Peru are advancing academically and she doesn’t feel like she’s learning anything. A quiet and reflective person, José expressed preoccupation and sadness about the process of having to learn a new language. While he seems socially adept and mature, I have watched him struggle to make friends because he is more mature than his Spanish-speaking peers and yet doesn’t speak English well enough to make good English-speaking friends.

While Gloria, Julia, and Miguel have lived in the States for a longer period of time and have more language experience, each of their language acquisition processes took a unique path. While Gloria and Julia have the same experience of having grown up in their own country apart from their parents, their attitude toward learning English is of great perseverance. Julia arrived to the States to discover that her parents were pregnant with twins, and that they now spoke English most of the time at home. When Gloria arrived, she was more or less abandoned by her parents and left to figure things out alone. While she expresses extreme emotional duress and loneliness of this lack of guidance, she has continued to work hard, maintain a positive attitude and do well in school. She will graduate this spring, and have a baby later in the summer. Miguel is a bit paradoxical, because while he claims that he feels confident to speak English, he speaks mostly Spanish with me and answered all surveys in Spanish as well (even those written in English). While the other students expressed worry, dismay, and struggle with their language acquisition process, Miguel’s attitude appears to be much more relaxed. He seems confident in himself and is not bothered by his apparent “differences” or “limitations”. This confidence seems to help his social interaction with other students as well.

**Stereotypes.** Faced with assumptions about Hispanics, my students encountered a new challenge of understanding both the experience of being a minority as well as confronting these unexpected stereotypes. While the students’ emotional responses to being stereotyped varied from anger to acceptance, they were all dismayed at being put in the elusive box labeled “Hispanic”. A unifying factor among these students was their desire to be a part of activities that did not have a large number of Hispanics. Victoria tried out for
both the dance and cheerleading teams, though she expressed concern that friends had told her she wouldn’t make it because she was Hispanic. Miguel (the “teddy bear”) played American football and was one of a few Hispanics on the team. José is working hard to apply to MIT or Virginia Tech. Julia expresses a strong desire to be a pilot or part of the military. While Glenda’s home and personal situations are more unstable, she works hard to attend school regularly, getting up at 5 am every morning to get a ride to school from her boyfriend before he goes to work. While many may stereotype a teenage mother as irresponsible and careless, Glenda is far from these characteristics, as she continues to work diligently to be responsible in her schoolwork.

Discussion
I was quite surprised by how much I learned about my students by simply spending some time with them outside of school hours and making conversation. As we spent more time “talking,” I began to notice that these students in particular started to ask me more personal questions about American dating, race relations, and career choices. The questions were all “in the course of a normal day” - not dramatic, life-changing conversations, but they were steady and consistent. I also began to notice that these students and their friends tended to behave better as the year progressed. In addition, I watched their confidence grow from the beginning to the end of the year as they grew more accustomed to their environment and the language. They also seemed to feel a sense of ownership and pride in Spanish class as they freely participate and share their experience with both the class and myself. José, Miguel, Julia, and Victoria will all take Spanish 4 with me again next year and I look forward to gaining and even deeper understanding of their experience.

Conclusion
Unfortunately, it is much too easy as a teacher to form stereotypes about certain kinds of students. What I discovered in this research was the highly individual and personal nature of each students and their own experience. While my students did have some common themes, their experiences within those themes were strikingly different. Throughout this research, I have been reminded to slow down and see my students as people, particularly those students sharing the same linguistic background. Learning about their dreams, desires, and experiences has helped me to see beyond their current trappings of adolescent bodies to work to inspire them to pursue their highest potential. In the future, this knowledge will remind me to be more aware of the individuality of my students and push me to find ways to learn about each of them personally.
References