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School's Impact on Immigrant Students' Self-Identity

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School's Impact on Immigrant Students' Self-Identity

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requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

School's Impact on Immigrant Student's Self-Identity

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Chris Caduff

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

Students today have a lot on their plates. Besides a full schedule of classes, many students also have duties at home, part-time jobs, and a variety of extra-curricular activities. Immigrant students have the added responsibilities of balancing learning about a new country and culture and keeping parts of their native culture alive. They may also be learning a new language and/or translating for their parents. Simultaneously, they are often trying to figure out how they fit in this new place and in their new school. Culturally Responsive Teaching, where value is placed on the student's culture, language, and experiences, and incorporated into their education is one way to help them adjust and fit in. Helping them to develop and share their personal stories, and listen to other people's stories, is another way to help them adjust.

Keywords: immigrant students, personal stories

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Introduction

Immigrant students have unique needs in the school setting. This paper will look at the current role that schools fill in regard to immigrant students and families. As teachers and schools continue to fill some of the caregiving roles that were once done at home, the significance of their impact on how children view themselves increases (Korn, 1998). This paper is organized into four different sections. It begins with a section on interactions between immigrant parents and their children's schools. Next, it will review some issues that immigrants of color face both in and outside of school. Following that, it includes a section on immigrant students' cultural identities as they try to make their way through the education system in the United States. The final section includes information about Culturally Responsive Teaching and some strategies to help build cultural identity in immigrant students.

Review of Literature

Immigrant Parents and Their Child's School

A positive home-school connection provides a strong base for the education of a child. In a world where parents are busy, varied modes of communication can be invaluable in helping to build this strong connection. Unfortunately, due to language barriers and insufficient knowledge about the U.S. education system, immigrant families too often face institutional barriers to establishing a family-school partnership. One result of this is immigrant families often feeling unwelcome or undervalued by educators (Soutullo et al., 2016). Language barriers may result in children being used as translators for parent-teacher conferences, meetings, and other communication from schools. Miscommunication, feelings of powerlessness of the parents, or superiority for the children can occur when they are used in this way (Isik-Ercan, Demir-Dagdas, Cakmakci, Cava-Tadik, & Intepe-Tingir, 2017; Soutullo et al. 2016).

Besides the barriers mentioned above, undocumented parents also cite other barriers to establishing family-school collaboration. Schools often have policies around volunteering to prevent people with criminal records from working with students. To be eligible to volunteer, perspective candidates may be asked to register and complete a background check. A possible unintended consequence of these requirements is that undocumented parents may be afraid to volunteer. Many states also have laws requiring that every school visitor must show photo identification. This too may discourage undocumented parents from visiting their child's school to volunteer or attend meetings or special events (Soutullo et al., 2016).

Other barriers to building a home-school connection may be subtler. School staff may have personal beliefs and assumptions about individuals, families, and communities of immigrants. Their beliefs may come across in their interactions with the students and families. They may not seek out or provide time or opportunities for input from immigrant parents (Pushor, 2011). Schools may translate only some materials which may not always be correct. Assumptions may be made about available materials at home that are needed to complete homework, or even what constitutes the idea of parent-involvement in schools in the United States versus in other cultures (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017).

Immigrants of Color

Fruja-Amthor and Roxas (2016) and Hadaway and Young (2009) state that the majority of today's youth immigrants are people of color. Because of this, they may face other obstacles both in and out of school. The desire to be accepted and belong is a fundamental human need often magnified in youth. However, they may experience discrimination, racial profiling, economic disadvantages, negative perceptions, and isolation because of not being invited to join mainstream society. Spears-Brown and Lee (2015) conducted a study that looked at the beliefs

about immigration of children between the ages of 7-11. When asked “Why do you think American people might not like it when other people move to America from other countries?” nonimmigrant children’s second highest response was because they “looked different”. The average response was 2.36 (on a four-point scale), placing it somewhere between two, “medium amount true”, and three, “very true”. The authors noted that “older children were less likely than younger children to endorse ethnic/cultural discrimination as the reason for anti-immigration attitudes” (p. 173).

Immigrant Student’s Cultural Identity

Somewhere between the ages of three to four, children become conscious about their own ethnic identity and ethnic, cultural, and language differences. Between the ages of four and eight, in an attempt to seek an integrated identity, they establish an ethnic orientation, choose social groups and try to understand similarities and differences between their group and other groups (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). Immigrant children often feel the push-pull forces of fulfilling their home culture’s expectations while also trying to gain acceptance into the new dominant culture (Fruja-Amthor & Roxas 2016; Hadaway & Young, 2009).

Peterson, Gunn, Brice, and Alley (2015) report that students from immigrant families face many challenges as they navigate across new cultural boundaries while still trying to retain their own cultural and ethnic identity. They may face many challenges around their mother tongue. Though bilingualism has shown to produce cognitive benefits including attentional control, working memory, and abstract and symbolic representation skills, immigrant youth may face linguistic elitism, where English is held superior to other languages (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017; Hadaway & Young, 2009). They may find that their ability to speak and understand another language is not valued or used as a way to help them in learning English. Indeed, they may find

that communicating in their first language is not only not valued, but also not allowed in schools. Both teachers and classmates may struggle with pronouncing immigrant student names. Mispronunciation or attempts to shorten or change their given name, can negatively influence students of immigrant families. They may lose some of their self-worth or their sense of identity may be affected when this happens (Peterson et al., 2015).

According to Hadaway and Young (2009), 'transcultural identity' is when individuals are able to keep and value their mother tongue and culture, while at the same time learn English and adopt American culture. This can be accomplished when learning environments are positive. Immigrant students' home languages and cultures are affirmed and recognized as positive assets for them. When a person attains transcultural identity, it has shown to be advantageous to a person's sense of self and adaptability. They are able to draw on their native experiences and social networks, instead of discarding them, to aid them in functioning effectively in their new culture.

Racial differences, life experiences (some that may not be positive), socio-economic status, and social struggles are a few barriers that may prohibit students from feeling welcome and that they are part of a school's culture. By encouraging students to share their stories, teachers are not only aiding in the development of student's communication skills, but also in helping them to develop an understanding of who they are as individuals. In turn this helps them to begin to understand their place as social beings who interact with others in our world (Korn, 1998).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Students learn best when they are comfortable and can thrive. If teaching skills and content are within the student's personal frame of reference and learned experience, education is at its best. This is what is called culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching can

also be described as recognizing the balance between knowing what to teach students and learning from them so that we might teach them better (Kesler, 2015). It is a way of recognizing that students and families have a wealth of knowledge and experiences and drawing on those to make learning more personal and inclusive. Going beyond just the recognition that all students and families exhibit cultural assets, culturally relevant teaching includes understanding how these assets contribute to community connectedness and should be part of collective classroom learning (Borrero, Ziauddin, & Ahn, 2018).

One example of culturally responsive teaching may include a study of student's names. It is recognizing the importance on many different levels – personally, culturally, gender, religious, familial, etc. of each person's specific name. Learning about and sharing the meaning, history, and importance of names can provide a sense of connectedness in a classroom or school. It can also serve as a jumping off point to using multicultural literature or to explore how personal lived experiences may be related to a name (Peterson et al., 2015; Hadaway & Young, 2009). While children's literature can provide a place for immigrant learners to see themselves reflected in stories, we must also be aware of the limitations. Some books may foster unreal expectations of a timeline of adjusting to a new culture or learning a new language. Also, multicultural books rarely show bilingual children or characters who share their personal wealth of knowledge (Hadaway & Young, 2009). Children's literature can also exaggerate and/or perpetuate stereotypes of cultural groups.

Another specific, yet still open-ended example of culturally responsive teaching is a "Where I'm From" (WIF) poem. Fitts and Gross (2010), describe the project as having the potential of developing students' language and communication skills as well as exploring the meaning of culture, diversity, and identity. Students write a poem of where they are from and also share

some artifact, or photograph, about them with the class. In this way students have the opportunity to be creative, and personal, in their sharing about themselves and also learn about each other through their presentations.

Immigrant students and families coming to the U.S. face many obstacles in and around schools. Many of these obstacles revolve around the idea of their identity. It can be a struggle to try to maintain a cultural identity while also making a way in a new place with a different culture. Immigrants of color may face even more obstacles. They may face discrimination and not be accepted easily into the dominant culture. Students from immigrant families are a fast-growing segment of the U.S. population. Schools must be prepared for these students and provide an education that values them as individuals as well as their culture and lived experiences. Culturally responsive teaching is one way that schools may use to meet the needs of the immigrant students.

Developing Personal Stories

Recognizing, accepting, and celebrating similarities and differences in students can aid in the “further the development of empathic understanding by helping children distinguish between their own perspectives and those of others” (Korn, 1998 p. 225). However, based on barriers mentioned above, students may not be comfortable sharing, or even recalling and examining, their stories. Nelson, McClintock, Perez-Ferguson, Shawver, & Thompson (2008) suggest a group story where participants develop a story about a fictional character. In this activity, participants develop a character and create a story where the character faces challenges, received help from others, and returned to the story changed in some way. Done this way, it can provide a safe way for participants to feel safer about giving information that may be personal. This can all be done with assistance from a teacher, counselor, or other adult.

Discussion

Whether it is a travel ban, family separations, deportations, or an impending caravan of people walking North through Mexico for about the past year and a half, immigration has been a topic often leading newscasts and headlining newspaper articles. Too often what gets lost in these reports is the human aspect. The fact that each individual in the reports has their own story is forgotten (or ignored) as the focus becomes lost jobs, economic issues, and referring to immigrants as criminals, drug dealers, or rapists.

Crawford and Valle (2016) note that students often seek out (counselors and teachers) to get information and access to resources. As a result, a team-taught personal storytelling project between counselors and teachers can provide a win-win-win situation for all involved.

Developing, sharing, and listening to others' stories can create connections between students where they begin to recognize the inherent value of each person as an individual. Benefits from this sharing and listening can occur in a variety of areas including academic, self-concept, and social skills.

Counselors often face student ratios that are too high and students with unmet basic needs and mental health concerns. Teachers often face growing class sizes and increased responsibilities with technology and curriculum. In addition to those, both often face increased workloads, responsibilities related to standardized testing, and caregiver-type duties that historically were often provided at home. In order to not make this just another thing to put on either of their plates, this project provides a school counselor an opportunity to build relationships with many students on a personal level and covers state standards for the teacher. Parents and family members provide an authentic audience for some form of these stories to be shared outside of the classroom. A storytelling night at school or local community center allows the students to share

their work and potentially could be a place where new connections are made between families. School staff members could help to organize and facilitate this event.

Language barriers, shyness, and/or negative past experiences are some possible limitations for students. Some possible limitations for school counselors and teachers were mentioned above. Figuring out the best grade level for this may also be a limitation as it is rolled out and also something to be determined. Modifying the lessons for each specific school and classroom may help with some of these.

Future-related considerations may include recruiting former students to share their stories and assist younger students who are developing their stories. If this is widely used in a district, tracking data of student interactions with each other could be compared with years prior to the storytelling project being implemented.

Author's Note

As a fifth-grade teacher, I have been excited to use some of these lessons with my students this year. I whole-heartedly believe that connections that we make with each other have beneficial results in a variety of areas of our lives. Starting this with youth, I believe, will have benefits for society as well.

Listening, openly and actively, to others as they share their stories is the first step in making connections and building relationships with others. Too often, I think that we listen to others to respond, but not to really hear or understand them. Knowing who we are is the second step in making connections with others. When we know who we are, we can appreciate and build upon similarities and differences that we have with others. Besides learning about others, we also learn about other cultures and hear different perspectives.

Lastly, I would just like to acknowledge that I have learned things about students that I do not always have the chance to know. I believe that it is an honor and privilege when someone shares their story with you. Having students develop and share their stories has allowed me to know students on a deeper level even in this age of large class sizes. I think that we have a place where students feel safe to share and have grown to love and appreciate each other on a level deeper than I see every year. (I do want to mention that I teach in a multi-age program where the majority of students have been together from first grade. Social/emotional development is also something that we value and commit to in our program.)

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Appendix A

Storytelling Overview and Lessons

This unit can be completed over many days or weeks. They should be given the time to think, write, revise, and interview family members. Students first develop and share the story of a fictional character that is created by them. This allows them the time and opportunity to practice before writing and sharing their personal stories. The school counselor can join when their schedule allows.

Lesson 1 – Students create a character and write a descriptive paragraph about their physical

Appearance (1 day)

Lesson 2 – Students develop their character's story (2-3 days)

Lesson 3 – What is active listening? (1 day)

Lesson 4 – Students present/share your character's story (3-5 days)

Lesson 5 – Students develop their personal story (3-5 days)

Lesson 6 – Students present/share their story (many days)

Lesson 1 – Students create a character and write a descriptive paragraph about their physical appearance (1 day)

Objective: Students will create and name a character and write a description about their character's appearance.

Introduction: Show student's teacher's drawing or character creation and name them.

Main Activity: Write a descriptive paragraph about teacher's character's appearance with the students.

Have students draw/create (Legos, recycled items, etc.) and name their own character. Students should keep their characters to themselves and share a photo with the teacher if possible.

Students write a descriptive paragraph about their character's appearance.

Conclusion: Teacher reads the students' paragraphs while they try to identify each other's characters from the description.

Lesson 2 – Students develop their character's story (2-3 days)

Objective: Students will develop the story of their created character.

Introduction: Share and discuss the story of the teacher's created character with the students.

With students help, develop a list of possible parts to include in the character's story.

Main Activity: Students develop and write the details of their characters story.

They may include things like – age, family, where they're from, interests, strengths, weaknesses, favorites, family traditions, fears, hobbies, what makes them proud, etc.

Conclusion: Students share a part or two of their character's story with a partner or in small Groups.

Lesson 3 – What is active listening? (1 day)

Objective: Students will demonstrate active listening skills.

Introduction: Ask students what listening means. Discuss listening and things that a good listener does. Define active listening – focus on speaker, body language shows interest, paraphrase what speaker says.

Main Activity: In pairs, students take turns speaking and demonstrating active listening.

Conclusion: Discuss what went well and what may need work. Why is active listening important?

Lesson 4 – Students present/share your character's story (3-5 days)

Objective: Students will share their character's story and actively listen to other student's stories.

Introduction: Review components of active listening.

Main Activity: In small groups, students share their character's stories – verbally, movie, PowerPoint, etc. Listeners have the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback.

Conclusion: Teacher leads discussion about similarities and differences between the characters' stories.

Lesson 5 – Students develop their personal story (3-5 days)

Objective: Students will develop and write their personal stories.

Introduction: Teacher shares part of his/her story each day that students work on their own stories.

Main Activity: Students develop and write the details of their personal story.

They may include things like – age, family, where they're from, interests, strengths, weaknesses, favorites, family traditions, fears, hobbies, what makes them proud, etc.

Students may need to interview family members for some information.

Conclusion: Teacher leads discussion about a similarity and a difference that each student thinks he/she will have from other students.

Lesson 6 – Students present/share their story (many days)

Objective: Students will share their story and actively listen to other students' stories.

Introduction: Review components of active listening.

Main Activity: Students share their stories with the rest of the class. They may use their chosen method – i.e. verbally, movie, PowerPoint, etc. Listeners have the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback.

Conclusion: Listeners share a word or two reaction on a post-it with each presenter. Presenters choose a word or two that describes them to put on a class poster of “Who We Are”.