

Nuestros Niños: Preparing Pre-service Teachers to Educate Latino Migrant Children and Youth through Service-Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present important insights to teacher preparation programs concerning service-learning for pre-service teachers who work with Latino migrant families. These insights are critical when considering best practices to meet the educational and developmental needs of the children in these families through service-learning. These ecological factors include understanding the transient nature of Latino migrant families, family cultural values and beliefs, the economic reality of migrant families and the role of migration and immigration. Finally, the authors present insight into how reflection is important to the service-learning experience with Latino migrant youth.

Introduction

They arrived one day in a shiny silver car. We gathered around as two strange adults spread out a plethora of brand new RIF books on an empty flat bed hay wagon. 'Take two', they said. 'They're yours to keep.' I never really liked reading much until the summer I owned my very first books. These memories of my childhood and youth serve as a reminder of the struggles that my family faced as we migrated from state to state. Moreover, they illustrate the struggle migrant children and youth have in obtaining an education, and serve as a window to the strength and resiliency of migrant Latino families and how schools and communities can collaborate to ensure the success of migrant children and youth. - Reflections from one of the authors.

In 2006, the Latino population in the United States increased to approximately 44 million (U.S. Census, 2006). Within this population, 2 out of 5 Latinos are immigrants (Ramirez and De La Cruz, 2003). More specifically, according to the Migrant Education Report (2006), there were a total of 872,732 migrant children reported to the U.S. Department of Education in 2002. The vast majority (89%) were Latino. Despite efforts to offset educational barriers, a gap persists between Latino migrant students and mainstream students in their access to quality education (Gibson and Bejinez, 2002).

Although teacher preparation programs have long sought to integrate cultural diversity in their curricula, learning environments for pre-service teachers designed to develop cultural competence and proficiency with Latino migrant children and youth are rarely offered. Service-learning can be an excellent option for teaching valuable skills for working with Latino migrant children and youth.

The purpose of this paper is to present ecologically-based insights to teacher preparation programs concerning best practices for meeting the educational and developmental needs of Latino migrant children and youth through service-learning. The ecological factors addressed in the article include the transient nature of Latino migrant families, family cultural values and beliefs, the economic reality of Latino migrant families, and the role of migration and immigration. In the final section of the article, the authors present insight into how reflection through different qualitative methods can enhance the benefits for pre-service teachers of participating in service-learning with Latino migrant youth.

The Transient Nature of Migratory Families

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2003), a migratory child is one under the age of 22 who has not graduated from high school and who has made an interstate or intrastate move with parents in search of agricultural work within the last 36 months. In 1964, as part of the War on Poverty, the first migrant education programs were initiated (Seligmann, 1998). Through these programs, states could obtain funding for summer school classes in which migrant children could recoup what they lost through frequent school interruptions. Despite such programs, the transient nature of migrant existence continues to present several daunting educational hurdles for children and youth. Children are often enrolled in their new schools at odd points in the school year and are expected to acclimate to unfamiliar environments. They are faced with the challenge of making new friends, getting used to their textbooks, and catching up academically with their peers. Just as these students are finally adapting to their new learning environment, they are often abruptly withdrawn from school and forced to adjust to a new setting as their family migrates to the next job. In addition to understanding these challenges posed by a transient existence, however, it is also important for pre-service teachers to understand the resiliency migrant children have through their family in this difficult context. With this ecological perspective in mind, teacher preparation programs can better develop service-learning programs.

Latino Migrant Family Context

Central to the education of migrant children and youth are their families. Family values and beliefs serve as resiliency mechanisms or “cultural capital” for families while on the road, and for the children as they enter different schools. In general, the collective nature of migrant Latino families is grounded in a set of values and beliefs, linguistic pride, religiosity, and spirituality. At the center of many migrant families’ beliefs is a value known as familism, a belief in the precedence of the family over the individual (Viramontez Anguiano, Johnson and Davis, 2004). Familism finds expression in everyday life as a flexible support network comprised of nuclear and extended family members, fictive kin, the migrant community and the larger community. For migrant families, this network serves as an insulating foundation for their children and youth. A second value is personalism, which stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships. Personalism manifests itself in the network of familial relationships that is central to migrant life and centers on a warm, individualized, and respectful interaction with others (Levine and Padilla, 1980). In essence it serves as a socialization mechanism in Latino families.

Personalism ultimately leads to educación, another value that the majority of migrant families hold dear. In most Latino families, education is highly valued; children are expected to be “buen educados” (well educated) (Galindo 1996). However, a good education includes not only academics, but also social morality. As Zuniga (1998) stated, Latino families expect their children to respond sensitively to the feelings of others, demonstrate politeness and respectfulness to elders and others in the community and exhibit loyalty to family and friends. Educación manifests itself through consejos, or nurturing advice, passed down from adult to child as moral lessons to influence certain behaviors that are consistent with Latino values and interactions (Fránquiz & del Carmen Salazar, 2004; Valdez, 1996). Consejos are a cultural education mechanism means through which knowledge is produced, passed on, and negotiated (Villenas & Moreno, 2001). This cultural foundation serves as a vehicle to understand how to better serve migrant children, youth and their families through service-learning.

Service-Learning

Jacoby (1996) defined service-learning as a form of experiential education in which students participate in experiences that promote the well being of humans, community and societal needs and provide a curriculum designed to promote student’s learning and growth. Factors that distinguish service-learning from community service include an emphasis on knowledge acquisition and reflection and students in the role of active

and intentional learners (Sterling, 2007). Billig (2000) further argues that service-learning differs from community service because of its reciprocal benefits to the students and receiver of the service and the careful attention paid to the service provided and to learning outcomes.

Marullo (1998) argued that service-learning can help pre-service teachers learn about cultural, ethnic and racial relations, an important outcome as American classrooms continue to become more diverse (Bollin, 2007). However, Sperling (2007) stated that when teacher preparation programs utilize multicultural service-learning (MSL) with minority children, appropriate steps should be taken to ensure an ethical and professional learning experience for both Education students and children. Teacher education programs should help candidates learn about and appreciate the strengths of diverse children and their families and resist deficit thinking. Programs should prod pre-service teachers to move beyond the mentality that minority children and their families are at risk and do not bring any strengths to the service exchange.

The next section of this article provides ideas for designing service-learning experiences for pre-service teachers that reflect ecological features of life for many migrant children and their families.

Ecological Factors to Consider with Service-Learning and Migrant Families

As discussed previously, the most important ecological factor to consider when working with Latino migrant families is the transient nature of migrant life. The reality of “here today and gone tomorrow” should be taken into consideration when teacher preparation programs plan pre-service teachers’ service-learning experiences. For example, tutoring programs provide an excellent opportunity to work with Latino migrant children, youth and their families; however, teacher educators and candidates need to be aware of the seasonal crop production calendar needs in order to know how long children and youth will be available.

Programs should also be flexible enough to respect the unique work schedule that some migrant workers keep called *la tardiada*, a mid-day break. Sometimes families will begin working at dawn and will go home around noon for an extended break. They will return to work only hours later when the day begins to cool avoiding the dangerously hot afternoon sun and often work late taking advantage of the cooler evening temperatures. Planning service-learning experiences during *tardiadas* demonstrates respect of the migrant families’ work.

Finally, pre-service teachers should be expected to demonstrate cultural proficiency by designing tutoring as a collective sociocentric experience which incorporates the cultural values of familism, personalism, educación and consejos. They could do this by inviting multiple children to participate and allowing them to learn in an interactive manner, while still allowing enough time to meet individual children's needs. Pre-service teachers could also plan activities to involve parents, such as a shared family reading time (Olivos, 2004; Quezada, Díaz & Sánchez, 2003; Ramirez, 2003).

Because building a strong collaboration between parents and teachers results in stronger academic outcomes for children (Cranston-Gingras & Anderson, 1990). pre-service teachers could develop other parent involvement activities as part of their service-learning experience, such as sessions for parents on how to help children with homework, improve literacy skills, and prepare for state-mandated examinations. Practical factors to take into consideration when planning such sessions are childcare for young children who are not targeted for services and providing quality referral information for services outside the program's scope. Although it would be an overgeneralization to assume that all Latino migrant parents only speak Spanish with limited English or no English, having an interpreter and advertising that all sessions will be bilingual will make families feel welcomed.

When migrant students enroll in a new school and are assessed to measure their English language fluency, school officials often discover that they have limited English proficiency. Legal precedent has established that school districts are obligated to provide adequate instruction to students with language barriers during the regular school year (Castaneda v. Pickard, 1981; Lau v. Nichols, 1974). In reality, many school districts find themselves strapped for funds and struggle to provide sufficient academic support services and resources to their limited English proficient (LEP) population. To address this disconnect between government mandate and educational reality, there are other effective strategies that pre-service teachers can acquire. For example, Bollin (2007) encourages future teachers to develop a sense of empathy in an effort to appreciate and understand the immigrant family culture and to look at situations from multiple perspectives. She argues that empathy toward various cultures will inspire personal responsibility among pre-service teachers for the children they teach. A great deal of research has also focused on the importance of getting parents involved in their children's education. Quesada, Diaz and Sanchez (2003) suggest that educators find what works in their community is to bring Latino parents into the classroom and be an active participant in the educational process.

Teacher educators also need to help pre-service teachers plan service-learning experiences that are sensitive to the needs of families with children 12 years and older.

The majority of the migrant population lives in extreme poverty, earning between 10,000 and 12,000 dollars a year (Donato, 2003). Because the legal minimum age at which children are allowed to work in agriculture-related labor is 12 years, the contributions of older children are especially critical to their families' survival. Most children 12 and older keep the same hours in the field as parents. Pre-service teachers need to accommodate the work schedules of these children, for example, by using *tardiadas* for educational activities.

The final ecological factor that may affect pre-service teachers' service-learning experiences with migrant children centers around the complexities of immigration. Problems may occur in attempting to involve migrant parents in their children's learning if they are undocumented. Migrant parents may fear attending school events for fear of being deported; and as a result, may not be able to develop strong relationships with pre-service teachers during their service-learning experiences. A possible option is to integrate home visits into service-learning activities. Although parents' involvement in these activities may be limited, home visits would demonstrate pre-service teachers' willingness to accommodate parents' needs. Bollin (2007) also argues that when working with immigrant Latino children and their families, future teachers should take into consideration the social inequalities Latinos face. Her point should definitely be taken into consideration during the service-learning experience and also as part of the reflection period of service learning which will be discussed in the next section.

Reflection through Qualitative Evaluation

Scholars agree that the reflection process is a key element of service-learning. Reflection serves as a mechanism for students to examine the larger social issues that their service-learning experience is impacting (Billig, 2002; Eisman, 2000; Jacoby, 1996). One approach to stimulating reflection is a qualitative interview by teacher preparation faculty which taps into pre-service teachers' experiences with migrant children and their families. A second is the process of journaling. A third qualitative approach, focus groups, could serve as a forum for pre-service teachers to share their experiences and challenges, but could also be utilized with the Latino migrant families. Specifically, bilingual focus groups could be held with Latino migrant parents and adult extended family members to gain the community perspective on what they believed the strengths, benefits and challenges of the service-learning programs.

Conclusion

Celebrated writer Tomas Rivera once described the migrant experience in his book, *Y no se lo trago la tierra* (and the earth did not devour him):

I wanted to document the spiritual strength, the concept of justice so important for the American continents. Within those migrants I saw that strength. They may be economically deprived, politically deprived, socially deprived, but they kept moving never staying in one place to suffer or be subdued, but always searching for work; that's why they were "migrant" workers (Tomas Rivera, 1992).

These words exemplify the unique reality that Latino migrant families and their children have in the United States. America's schools continue to experience an increase of Latino children and youth in the classroom, including a greater presence of Latino migrant children and youth. To ensure that these young people succeed in education and life, migrant families, schools and communities will need to develop stronger partnerships. Service-learning initiatives could serve as critical components in these partnerships, and pre-service teachers would be an excellent addition in educating this historically underrepresented group.

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