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The University of Colorado Puebla Experience: A Study in Changing Attitudes and Teaching Strategies

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Students participated in a 2-week intensive program in the city of Puebla, Mexico. The experience included university course work, cultural field trips, and teaching and observing in Mexican elementary schools. It also included many opportunities to interact and participate in daily life in Puebla. The study examined changes in attitudes about Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as changes in teachers' stated beliefs about effective teaching methods. While pre/postattitude surveys did not show a shift, there were significant changes in participant perceptions of teaching strategies for Mexican American students. The results suggest that intensive short-term programs such as this one may not demonstrate improved attitudes; however, they may impact classroom strategy use, and this in turn may have a positive impact on English language learners. This multifaceted experience resulted in rather complex outcomes.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING TEACHER BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS: A COMPLEX ISSUE

U.S. schools have become increasingly diverse. By the middle of the century, it is estimated that the trends in urban school settings will result in no clear majority population (Woolfolk, 2007). In some urban areas this has already occurred. Recognition of this change in classroom demographics has been accompanied by an increasingly heavier focus on textbook topics relevant to diversity. For example, current educational psychology texts now devote much more space to minority students and how to effectively teach them (Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). This study deals with the evaluation of a program, one of many, designed to provide teachers with an increased awareness of language and cultural issues to be considered in teaching Mexican American students.

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Such programs have as a primary focus the need to learn to be more effective teachers of Mexican-heritage students in the U.S.

Definition of Diversity

A critical issue in this area is the definition of diversity.

from a professional family, and professional families stress educational goals. The teacher does not change her stereotype, however, because she also believes that not many Mexican American students come from professional families? Actually, the teacher may have no knowledge of the family circumstances. In any case, stereotypes remains unchallenged as the teacher concludes that this student is an exception because in her view few Mexican Americans come from families where a career in medicine is encouraged. This allows the teacher to deal with this student as an obvious exception. The next Mexican American with a similar set of academic credentials would not, at least initially, encounter a previously modified belief system.

One purpose of the Study in Mexico program discussed herein is to challenge teacher stereotypes about Mexican and Mexican American students and their families. Moreover, beyond challenging existing stereotypes, a bigger challenge is how to change actual behaviors.

Attitudes and Behavior

Even if a program such as the Study in Mexico challenges particip

Factors Underlying Complexity

Two variables that contribute to the complexity of the linkage between behavior and the related

THE PUEBLA EXPERIENCE

Attitudes

The items selected for evaluation reflected both beliefs dealing directly with classroom instruction, as well as general expectations. The assumption was that both could contribute to teacher expectations regarding Mexican American students. Two Mexican American scholars, whose suggested revisions were incorporated, reviewed each of these items. The problem in this study is that students in any diversity training or similar experience may have already learned or quickly learn socially desired responses. Rejecting any generalization such as “Mexican American students are lazy” is an obvious response. But if the same attitude could be presented using a more neutral tone, such as “Mexican workers need closer supervision,” it was hoped that a socially desired response might not be initially evoked. We recognize that the survey instrument is still in its formative stage.

The participants responded to 14 attitudinal items, which supposedly impacted teaching strategies. This made the responses situation specific (i.e., the classroom). The scale used was as follows: 5—very significant, 4—significant, 3—uncertain, 2—insignificant, and 1—very insignificant.

The specific attitude items were as follows:

1. The high dropout rate suggests that schooling may not be a high priority matter in Mexican families.
2. Mexican students tend to use their native la

analyzed primarily to see what references were

were not that difficult to codify. While language might differ, the underlying strategy was rather easily determined. Some teaching strategies, both most and least effective, seemed to cut across both the pre-Puebla as well as post-Puebla surveys.

variety of formats to meet the multiple needs of diverse students (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). This might include, for example, the use of small cooperative groups (Kagan, 1994);

2. Classroom climate. Fostering a positive, caring, comfortable, and respectful environment was seen to reduce student anxiety and defensiveness (Krashen, 1997);
3. Interactive strategies. These were determined to be effective. A good example can be found in the area of reading. Teachers read to the students and then discuss the material (Pinnell & Fountas, 2002).
4. Direct and explicit instruction. Teachers emphasized the contributions of direct, explicit instruction (Genesee & Riches, 2005);
5. Strategic use of Spanish. Participants recognized that when teaching English as a second language, there are times when there is confusion about a concept, and elaboration in English is not adequate. Teachers should employ the nativ

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