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Bridging the Cultural Gap

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Multicultural education teaches people as they seek to understand cultural differences. Banks and Banks, (2016) stated “Teachers need to understand their students’ community and home life” (p. 278). It is the responsibility of teachers to ensure that every student that enters the classroom leaves with a sense of worth and knows that each of them matters regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, or gender.

For the purpose of this article, I chose a student named Becca, who shares my culture and ethnicity. As generations evolve and people change, so the way we are raised changes. For example, my youngest sister, who is 27 years younger, was not raised the same way I was. My sister was disciplined differently, was not expected to be in the kitchen, and was allowed greater participation in school activities. When I was born, my mother was 16 years of age, but she was over 40 when she gave birth to my youngest sister.

I utilized Becca’s life to analyze how time has adjusted not only our attitudes, but how we view the world through a cultural lens. Throughout this article, I critically analyze the commonalities and conflicting norms within our own cultural and ethnic group through a series of semi-structured interviews. The central research question for this article is: What are some of the factors that shape and affect student performance at school and at home when a generational shift occurs in the Hispanic community?

Contextual Description

My subject Becca, a Hispanic female, attended a high school in Collin County in Texas. I met Becca when she was a cadet in the Marine Corps Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program. She was in the program for two years and after graduating from high school, she joined the United States Marine Corps. Becca was born in 2001 in Torrance, California. Her parents married young. Her mother got pregnant at the age of 18 when she was a senior in high school. Becca’s mother did not finish high school and never received her diploma. Becca’s father earned a high school diploma, which he completed in 1996. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996):

A lower percentage [compared to other ethnic groups] of Hispanic young adults complete high school programs—about 62 percent of all Hispanic 18- through 24-year-olds in the United States in 1996 had completed a high school program. Although there have been some year-to-year fluctuations over the last 25 years, the pattern for Hispanics is relatively unchanged.

These numbers paint a picture of the academic norms in 1996 with the focus on Hispanics.

When Becca was a student in 2016, the demographic breakdown of the high school she attended was: 50 percent White, 30 percent Hispanic, and 20 percent African American. Over 35 percent of the student population at the school she attended were economically disadvantaged students. With a moderate representation of Hispanic students at the high school, Becca stated that

she felt comfortable being at school because of the inviting atmosphere that the school strived to provide so that all students would be accepted by their peers regardless of their cultural differences.

Methodology

I collected data using various methods. I began with three semi-structured interviews. Upon reviewing that data, I had additional questions that were followed-up with via email. I also provided Becca a questionnaire about her family and religion for further insight. I conducted four unplanned in-person observations at school; Becca was aware that observations would occur at any time. I observed how she not only interacted with her teachers at school, but also with her father and stepmother. I also interviewed two of Becca's teachers for their analysis so that I could make connections to the data collected.

Results

Often in Hispanic culture, family and religion are the most prominent of categories that play an important role amongst this ethnic group (Smith, 2000). During the data collection process, the reoccurring themes of family, school, language, and religion were the focus. Family was of the utmost importance to Becca, followed by school and the importance of obtaining a high school diploma. However, Becca struggled with her heritage, in particular learning how to speak Spanish proficiently because she just was not raised speaking the language. Becca was raised to be Catholic until she went to live with her father, who is Protestant, and therefore felt torn between two religions.

Family

Families come in all shapes and sizes and are derived from a long lineage of people that make up their identities which are deeply rooted in culture (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2020). Family is the genesis from which everything derives and amongst the Hispanic culture considered an "important social unit" (Clutter & Nieto, 2009, p.1). In this culture, family takes care of each other. "The Hispanic culture places a strong value on family, and in most instances, families are large, with many of them live together in the same house or in very close vicinity of each other" (Inter-Exchange, 2020, p.1). The Hispanic culture believes that family is a bond, a tight-knit community, and that the father is the head of the family (Clutter & Nieto, 2009).

Prior to Becca's father remarrying, they did not spend a lot of time as a family. Her father worked a lot to make ends meet. That was the expectation because he was the man of the house and had to provide for the family. Her mother stayed home to care for the children at that time. Her mother was the disciplinarian in the home and used physical methods while her father's means of reprimand came in the form of lectures. Becca was more afraid of those lectures because of the disappointment she felt from her father's remarks.

Becca was seven years old when her parents divorced. As she put it, "My parents were rarely seen together," her parents' divorce was no surprise and a mere formality. Becca's father remarried sometime later, and at the age of 16 Becca had to decide whether to stay in California with her mother or move to Texas with her father. Her mother encouraged her to move

with her father because her brother really wanted to go, and she did not want her children to be apart.

With the new family came some things that Becca was not used to doing, such as eating dinner together and engaging in conversations about their day, they did everything as a family. If one wanted to go to the movies, then they all would go. Becca stated that her “father utilizes every moment he has to ensure they are always together as a family doing something fun” to build on their family bond. At times, though, this could be a bit much for Becca because they spent so much time together. She found school liberating as she explored her individuality but was quite grateful to share her explorations at the dinner table.

School

Becca lived in California with her mother until the age of 16. Then she was given the option to live with her father. She made the decision go live with her father, but that also meant that she would be leaving California for the state of Texas. The move was due in part to her father’s job relocation for Toyota. Becca knew that the relocation to Texas meant she would have to make new friends at her new school, but that did not deter her from wanting to go and live with her father.

Parents play a critical role in shaping their children’s worldviews, including how they feel about school. Banks and Banks (2016) stated,

Parental involvement is important because it acknowledges the importance of parents in the lives of their children, recognizes the diversity of value and perspectives

within the community, provides a vehicle for building a collaborative problem-solving structure, and increases the opportunity for all students to learn in school (p. 277).

School, depending on which parent Becca was living with at the time, was either imperative or nonessential. When Becca lived with her mother, homework was not a priority. Becca mentioned that her mother would call for her and when she replied that she was working on homework Becca’s mother then responded that she could do that later because she wanted to spend time with her.

However, when Becca went to live with her father, homework and school became the priority. Becca described in her interview her father’s intelligence by sharing a story her father told about his biology class one day. His teacher asked a question and had called on Bernie, Becca’s father, who had fallen asleep during the class that day. He had awoken to answer the question and, much to the teacher’s amazement, he had answered correctly. Becca stated that her father was very smart and learning came with relative ease to him. Becca knew her father’s stance on the importance of a good education. Becca had excelled in school to the point that she positioned herself to qualify and apply for a Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) scholarship to a reputable university. Homework came first in Becca’s household and extracurricular activities came second.

Becca had a great support system that was constantly engrained in her personal and academic success. Becca participated in the competition teams in the JROTC program, which required passing

grades in all classes for competition. Becca devoted a lot of time to practicing for these teams with the support of her father and stepmother. Becca's parents cheered her on at the competitions, helping Becca to stay motivated and engaged in her academics and extra-curricular activities.

When I spoke to a few of Becca's teachers, they had nothing but great praise for her, from her work ethic in the classroom, to her impeccable academic record, to her personal character and expectations. On the other hand, her art teacher did share a time in which Becca became very aggressive in nature towards her because she had made changes to a drawing that Becca had been working on for a while. Becca was bothered because she did not agree with the suggestions or changes; it was her drawing. Her art teacher shared that she found Becca to be disrespectful because of the disagreement. She had never seen Becca get upset and only had positive reviews of Becca up until that point. She shared a deep passion for art but was not open to any suggestions from her art teacher. I later asked Becca about the incident and stated that she believed strongly in her art and was not going to let anyone else tell her otherwise. Although she showed confidence and her strong-willed personality, Becca later realized that there was a different way to handle the situation.

Language

Becca strove for perfection in everything she did, however Becca wished she was fluent in her heritage language. Instead, Becca had her own formulated version of Spanish that she spoke with her parents and in particular with her brother. Shortly after moving to Texas, Becca

experienced racial and language discrimination while riding the bus home from school. She and her brother were sitting together and were speaking their version of Spanish, when a white kid sitting in front of them asked if they were speaking Spanish. Surprised by the question, Becca simply looked at her brother to determine whether or not to answer. Another white student who sat in the seat across the aisle pointed out to them that "We are in America; we only speak English." Instead of being bothered by the comment, Becca and her brother found the comment comical because they were not even speaking formal Spanish, rather their own made-up version. Gabaldon (2014) discussed the value of bilingualism but also mentions how many Spanish-speaking parents want their children to learn English as much as they want them to learn their native language. He further compared the Spanish language to power and beauty and goes on to state that "the growing use of Spanish in our communities will somehow threaten English" (Gabaldon, 2014, p. 146). However, high school students are expected to study a language for two years in the state of Texas in order to graduate. One of those languages is Spanish.

Becca does recognize the limitation of not being able to speak her heritage language and describes how she feels like she does not fit into her cultural group. During the interviews she focused quite a bit on the misconception that all Hispanic people know how to speak Spanish. She was apprehensive about speaking Spanish, knowing that she was not fluent compared to those who were fluent. She was afraid she would be made fun of by those who were fluent. According to Clutter and Nieto (2009), "Spanish speakers are usually loud, fast, and adorned with animated gestures

and body language to better convey points” (p. 1). Communication is not only words but face and hand gestures that emphasize words as a voice of expression.

Gabaldon (2014) describes ideological battles around language and makes a very profound statement that speaks to the ignorance of the shallow thinking that exists in American hegemony, saying, “Those who interpret Spanish as a threat rather than a marvelous resource are poorer for it” (p. 146). Hispanic culture has evolved most notably in the passing of the language from generation to generation. Many assume that if you are Hispanic, then you must know how to speak Spanish proficiently. However, as generations pass, the urge to learn to speak English as their first language overrides the need to learn Spanish for the purpose of attending public school in America. When English becomes their first language, it leaves children of Hispanic culture without the ability to speak their native language. Unlike language, religion is highly valued and is expected to be practiced in the Spanish community.

Religion

The Hispanic culture is deeply rooted in religion and is the center of daily activity as it is the most influential part of family and life (Clutter & Nieto, 2009). However, this is not always the norm in Hispanic families. “Family members also can collaborate with educators to plan and implement strategies to teach students about their faith” (Whitaker et al., 2009, p. 317). Becca was torn between two religions which caused her to be confused by which religion to incorporate in her own life. Becca’s father’s side of the family were Protestants and her mother’s side of the family were

Catholics. Becca’s father went to church every Sunday; however, Becca’s mother only went when she felt like going which led Becca being confused about what religion she wanted to follow.

Becca shared an interesting story about her brother during one of her interviews. She mentioned that one day she was visiting with her dad. Her grandmother was also visiting that day. Becca’s mother was conversing with Becca’s father when her mother made the comment that her oldest son was gay. When the grandmother overheard this, she immediately responded with, “A man should only be with a woman.” It was not until sometime later in life that her brother actually announced to the family that he was gay. At first when her brother’s boyfriend would attend family functions, he was told that he would have to introduce him as a friend and not be allowed to show any displays of affection. One day they were giving each other a hug at a family function and the grandmother saw it and told them they needed to stop. However, when Becca’s brother was with their mother and her family, they were more accepting of her brother’s sexuality. He was allowed to be himself and not hide his relationship from anyone. Due to the differences in how engaged they were in religion; the mother was more accepting of her son’s relationship than Becca’s fathers’ side of the family.

Discussion

According to the NCES (2020), the graduation rate for Hispanics was at 83%, with only 33% of those high school graduates enrolling into a four-year university. The first implication is that regardless of how her parents were raised, the saying “we want our kids to be better

than us” was the expectation that Becca’s parents had for her. Her parents wanted nothing but the best for her. Becca’s father ensured that she would stay focused on academics and supported her academic career by showing up for competitions. Further, when Becca qualified for the NROTC scholarship, her parents were ecstatic about her eligibility for such a prestigious scholarship. For a Hispanic young lady to be eligible academically for a NROTC scholarship was a massive accomplishment. Becca shifted her familial and generational academic achievement. Moving forward, the expectation in her family would be to not only graduate from high school, but to attend college.

Most students are eager to learn, but educators must understand that all students are unique. Banks (2016) states “A nation as culturally diverse as the United States consists of a common overarching culture as well as a series of microcultures. (p. 8). In short, we live in a diversified world made up of many cultures that educators may not always understand. We all have and share an equal contribution to the world in which we live. As educators it is our job to depict the value of all cultures’ importance in everything we do in the classroom.

The second implication is to never be embarrassed by your ethnicity, culture, or religion, but to embrace it. Becca shared how proud she was of her Hispanic culture and eager to learn her heritage language. Although Becca was not obligated to learn how to speak Spanish, she did have the desire to want to learn it so she could speak Spanish proficiently. It was important for Becca to learn about her heritage and fully engrain herself in it.

The final implication is that Becca may have been confused as to which religion she wanted to follow, but she realized the importance of religion within her culture. Further, Becca understood that she would always feel supported no matter what religion she chose to observe without judgement. Becca stated that when she was with either parent, there was no expectation to attend church, but when she was with her father, they prayed every day at each meal they shared together. Becca’s dad tried to instill certain ideals that he felt were important in order to be a well-rounded individual. Becca’s father accepted that his son was gay. Her father’s main concern was the well-being of his children, not their sexual orientation. Although Becca felt that religion was important, our well-being is as equally important was the key takeaway for Becca.

Personal Reflection

One of the things I felt important to do is with my students is to share about myself the way I was brought up, my experiences, and some of the struggles that I have endured to get to where I am today in the classroom. I feel that is important because I am a minority teacher. Primarily, most students encounter Hispanic teachers when they choose Spanish as their foreign language or if they are an EL student. The opportunity to share my own personal experiences as a Hispanic woman is like a door opening to educate those with the predisposition that Hispanics will not amount to much in life. According to Banks (2016), “Teachers are a key ingredient in parent and family involvement” (p. 285). Building relationships is how this happens, not just with the students but with the parents. Making the parents feel a part of the

process through constant communication is key.

During the interviews I was able to relate to Becca in many ways personally. However, professionally, I recognized that as a teacher I can help other students that come from the Hispanic community. Further, it is important for me to help fight the stereotypes associated with the Hispanic culture that education is not important. Whatever level of support one may have at home, there are teachers who love to see all students achieving their goals and setting their expectations high.

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