

International University Teaching Conference

Innsbruck, Austria

Paper to be presented

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June 26, 2012

Models for Success Initiative: Evidence Based Learning in a Latino Community

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the use of evidence-based learning to adapt and modify teaching practices to best serve the needs of pre-service teachers during the induction period. Research has shown that the attrition and retention rates of teachers during the first four years are at odds. The data collection consists of archived self-reflections by the participants along with university personnel, public school officials, mentor teachers and professors.

Models for Success Initiative: Evidence Based Learning in a Latino Community

Forbes listed, “The Best and Worst Cities for Jobs Right Now,” and highlighted that, “the metropolitan area with the most optimistic forecast of all for hiring this fall is San Antonio, Texas” (Smith, 2011, para.1). For the last 10 years, Texas has been an economic anomaly marked by the oil and gas boom and the rise of the Latino population, who has shifted from being a minority to a growing majority presence in south Texas. According to the latest reports from the United States Census Bureau (2010), the “U.S. Hispanic population surged 43%, rising to 50.5 million in 2010 from 35.3 million in 2000. Hispanics now constitute 16% of the nation's total population of 308.7 million”(Reddy, para.1). The unprecedented existence and establishment of the two largest higher educational institutions, the University of Texas and Texas A&M systems, make the historical city of San Antonio a natural selection for educational opportunities for the Latino community. “Latinos now account for about one in four people under age 18” (Reddy, 2010, para.3). Deep in the southernmost part of the city lies what is well-known as the remote, south side and where the newest A&M System campus houses the Models for Success Initiative (MSI), a pilot pre-service teacher program, birthed in an effort to serve those communities which traditionally have remained on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, literally.

Through elements of the MSI pre-service teacher program, the creation of a new dynamic in the induction period of novice teachers has accelerated the learning curve for inductees into the teaching profession. The move by Texas A&M San Antonio (TAMUSA) furthers the student teaching experience from 14 weeks to 52 weeks and insists on the commitment to the model of local public school superintendents, a cohort of professors, seasoned veteran teachers and

energetic and over-enthusiastic university students (Pyramid for Teacher and Learning Success, n.d.). Dr. Velma Villegas (personal communication, March 2012), a university, independent education consultant and former superintendent to Southwest Independent School District (SWISD), refers to MSI as a metaphorical umbrella, which pivots the entire future of all programs under the School of Education (SOE) at TAMUSA. As Villegas states, no one person or one program is MSI, everyone is MSI. The underlying premise is that MSI will be the norm and expectation for all of the future education majors enrolled at TAMU-SA. Among the multiple factors giving rise to MSI, part of the impetus came as a result of attrition and retention statistics across the nation and in Texas. Kaiser (2011, p.3) reports in the most recent national and longitudinal study of retention and attrition during the induction period that, “Of the teachers who began teaching in public schools in 2007 or 2008, about 10 percent were not teaching in 2008–09, and 12 percent were not teaching in 2009–10”. The study of 2000 teachers over a period of 5 years also reveals the role of mentoring in the life of a brand new teacher,

Among beginning public school teachers who were assigned a mentor in 2007–08, about 8 percent were not teaching in 2008–09 and 10 percent were not teaching in 2009–10. In contrast, among the beginning public school teachers who were not assigned a mentor in 2007–08, about 16 percent were not teaching in 2008–09 and 23 percent were not teaching in 2009–10 (Kaiser, 2011, p.3)

A key component for the MSI model includes eleven participating school districts and the promise to not only provide quality mentors, but also a vow from the corresponding superintendents to place MSI program graduates at the top of the applicant pool for teaching vacancies (Performance Fact, 2011). Surrounding school districts are convinced that teachers

have a large impact on student performance (Lloyd, 2011). In a review of literature by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2005), several studies suggest the following:

Students at lower-performing, lower-income, higher- minority schools are more likely to have inconsistent staffing from year to year and to be taught by a greater number of inexperienced teachers than their counterparts are at higher-achieving, more affluent, and predominantly white schools (p.9).

In order to effectively serve the evolving Latino student population adequately, the use of Evidence-Based Learning approaches are necessary and relevant. Harris (2009) points out, “One of the important characteristics of EBP [Evidence-Based Practices] is the inclusion of professionals’ knowledge about the unique attributes and circumstances of all individuals/groups involved in any situation” (p.3). The current pilot program consists of 51 candidates. The majority of the candidates are women, Latinas, and working mothers. Evidence-Based Practices provide an excellent opportunity to take a snapshot of teaching practices in the Latino community. According to Latino Voices (2011),

While there’s little definitive research linking student performance to teacher ethnicity, the sense that shared cultural backgrounds is a bellwether for classroom motivation is making the U.S. government and influential education organizations seriously examine the disparity between the exploding number of Latino students in classrooms and the small number of Latino teachers leading them (para. 10).

The pilot program is still in its initial implementation stages with nearly a 100% retention rate of all participating candidates. The existing model also follows a cohort system, which has a documented successful use in multiple higher education settings (Guidry, 2012). The participants in this research study keep their placements with the same mentor teacher for a total

of three semesters, or 52 weeks during the equivalent of one and a half academic school year.

The collection of narratives, self-reflections and ad hoc profiles of participants will give universities an opening to adapt the program as needed to meet the needs of the community.

This data collection will be significant given the present outlook of educational attainment among the Latino community, and in particular, among Latinas. Ayala (2012) explains the following about Latina women, “They're anomalies. While the nation has almost 50 million Latinos, according to 2011 census data, it can boast only 174,000 who have Ph.D.s, less than 1 percent of all Latinos of all races” (p.4).

Higher education entities are engaged in the job of educating with a purpose and ultimately meeting the needs of those individuals universities serve. Valenzuela’s (1999) research on the failure of Mexican Americans to connect with their respective school environments and their teachers only highlights the need to constantly reassess the success of pre-service teacher programs. The demand for teachers has grown and given rise to alternative academic programs, such as Teach for America (2012). However, the production of teachers in under-served communities poses problems as well. As noted in Education Week by blogger, Skoolboy (2008),

But TFA’s [Teach for America] practices create an interesting tradeoff: the recruitment process may select novice teachers who are predisposed to engage in the kind of caring teaching practice that Angela Valenzuela champions, while simultaneously parachuting these teachers into settings where they have little understanding of the cultural practices and values of the local community”(para.3).

This research intends to take participant responses and apply the information as a collective voice to address the needs of the Latino community. The undertaking of this study

consists of lofty goals, however, the potential to gather key findings will provide an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the MSI model and to ultimately adjust the program based on the needs of the students, the community and the education needs of the institution.

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