Research Idea

Exploring Engagement of English as a Second Language Latino Youth in Agricultural Education

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Introduction

Until recently, Latino students have not been widely studied within career and technical education programs. Even so, a subgroup of students, English as a Second Language Learners (ESL), have hardly been considered in vocational education. In the United States, the Hispanic population has risen dramatically since the 1970s (Ennis, Rios-Vargas & Albert, 2011). With that growth has come a drastic increase in the number of students- the vast majority of them Hispanic (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006)- with limited English proficiency, who are often referred in disproportionate numbers to special education (Gunn, Smolkowski, Biglan, Black, & Blair, 2005). One study notes that over 85% of ESL students that do spend time in mainstream classrooms are without support for language development (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000) and less than 30% of mainstream teachers are prepared to serve those students in their classes (Short, 2013; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Due to the barriers of academic success, most ESL students underperform in subject areas where "these results are not unexpected because ESL students must take subject tests before they are proficient in English" (Short, Fidelman, & Louguit, 2012, p. 335). Although Latinos are regularly classified as the highest growing subpopulation in the United States, limited research exists regarding Latino experiences in agricultural education. The purpose of this study was to explore the educational needs for secondary, Latino ESL students in agricultural education.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit) served as the theoretical underpinning for this study. The overarching goal of CRT is to understand the oppressive aspects of society and work to alter them on an individual as well as societal basis. Scholars and policy-makers began its application to education in the 1990s to examine curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment methods equitable for all students (Haskins & Singh, 2015).

Latino critical theory was created as an extension to critical race theory; encompassing issues experienced by Latino students that are more specific than CRT provides. LatCrit is used to reveal the ways Latino students experience education according to their race, class, and sex with the additional lens of their immigration status, native language, ethnicity, and culture (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Elliot & Lambert, 2018). Researchers must challenge the current educational practices that marginalize Latino students and recognize the patterns of racial inequality that exist in our classrooms. This intersection of CRT with LatCrit helps provide the context for our Latino students in agricultural education. By identifying the relationship between race, racism and power, we can begin to change the experiences of Latino students, and other students of color, towards one of empowerment.

Methodology

In this ethnographic study, qualitative methods were used to gain insight on Latino ESL students' experiences in agricultural education. Ethnographies study the relationship between a subpopulation of people and their current environment. In this case, Latino ESL students were interviewed about their agricultural classes and the environment of their ag department. Students were interviewed by the principal investigator in a focus-group setting. Single individuals to groups of two students were asked questions, from a previously developed interview protocol, about their classes, behaviors of teachers, and relationships with their classmates. Interviews

were recorded and completed in one typical 50-minute class period. In the context of this study, four different high schools, that were ranked in the top ten of most populated counties for Latino population, agreed to participate. Interviews were analyzed to identify common themes and reoccurring experiences for these individuals.

Results

The study began as an investigation of Latino ESL youth and agricultural educators' interactions in the classroom. Initial findings indicated agricultural educators have positive relationships with their ESL students and provided extra resources to assist ESL students with their English development. Although these interactions were positive, ESL students faced different circumstances with their classmates in the agricultural education classes. Through the lens of LatCrit, students experienced marginalization not from their educators but from their White peers. Although teachers set an example of how to serve the needs of Latino ESL students, results indicated a pattern of racial exclusion from their peers. When asked why they did not encourage their Latino friends to enroll in agricultural education courses, two students said, "Because they know it's a class for the 'bubbies'. . . the white rednecks." Students agreed that their agricultural teachers "made them feel safe" but were divided on whether or not educators would "come to their defense" if they experienced discrimination.

Conclusions

For agricultural education to improve their techniques with Latino students and ESL engagement, educators and the culture they create must fully incorporate Latino ESL youth in the classroom. Educators should ask themselves why the growing Latino ESL population isn't enrolling in their classes; and more importantly if they are enrolled, why similar students aren't joining them. When looking at meeting the needs of this student population, these needs include a positive experience in the mainstream classroom that aids in English language development in addition to content learning of the students. Students' experiences with negative interactions or bias from their classmates can prove harmful to this development. Research is still ongoing about Latino ESL students' experiences within the classroom, which could lead to further results and themes that have yet to be discovered.

Impact on Profession

The results of this study indicated agricultural educators built positive relationships with their ESL students by providing extra vocabulary words, extended office hours, and one-on-one tutoring. However, when it comes to creating an environment in the classroom where these same students feel supported by their peers, there is still work to be done. If educators confidently cheer on Latino ESL youth, this same message could be replicated with their classmates. Outwardly coming to students' defense when bias is seen, pairing Latino ESL youth with English-speaking partners, obtaining training in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model, and creating an inclusive environment could increase enrollment of a diverse group of students who have yet to find a place in agricultural education. Prioritizing the needs of our Latino ESL students could be a method of engaging this population and creating a community that truly accepts all students regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or languages spoken.

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