

## **Obstacles to Overcome: Mexican American Pre-Service Teachers Share Their Insights**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This article reports the results of a descriptive study based on qualitative methodology based mainly on semi-structured, audio-taped interviews of Mexican American pre-service teachers. The research study was focused on identifying the factors that created severe obstacles and those that provided helpful support for Mexican American students who hoped to become elementary teachers in their careers. Results revealed that obstacles to successfully becoming a teacher included educational deficits in middle school and high school, financial difficulties, and intimidation and alienation. Factors that provided helpful support included single individuals from school personnel, educational assistance programs, church and religion, and self-reliance. University professors, school administrators, counselors and teachers should be forming partnerships that can address and respond to these factors in properly preparing Mexican Americans to enter the teaching profession as it is urgently needed.**

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### Introduction

**T**he data collected by the 2000 United States Census Bureau revealed a marked increase in Hispanics in the U.S. since 1990. Of those, Mexican Americans comprised 58.5 percent of that category (United States Census

Bureau, 2000). This trend is reflected in the demographics of school populations in many states, with the largest numbers residing in Texas, California, New York, Illinois, and Arizona. Yet, statistics indicate that the needs of these children are not adequately being met. Both the high Hispanic drop out rates in the U.S. during 2002, reported at 5.3 percent, compared to Blacks at 4.4 percent, and Whites at 2.4 percent, as well as the achievement gap between Whites and Hispanics serve as evidence that more attention is needed to serving Hispanics in schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Researchers suggest the high percentage of middle class white teachers and corresponding low percentage of teachers of color may be one problematic factor. Haberman (1988) reports depressing evidence of the failure of schools and colleges of education to prepare minority teachers. For example, he reports that only 7% of Hispanics graduate from college, and only 10% of the new bachelor degrees earned by minority students in all disciplines are earned in teacher education. Researchers suggest a need for cultural compatibility between public school students and at least some of the teachers in the schools (Delpit, 1996; Haberman, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Valenzuela, 2001).

The urgent need for minority teachers, at all levels of the education hierarchy, especially Mexican American teachers, continues to underscore the importance of discovering the reasons for the paucity of successful minority teacher candidates and certified applicants for teaching positions. The Texas Education Agency (2004), for example, reports that in Texas, of the 80,000 new students received annually in public schools, 57.6% are Hispanic, and of those, 75% demonstrate limited English proficiency. At the same time, only 12.9% of the teachers in the state are Hispanic. There are thousands of bilingual/bicultural teacher vacancies in Texas public schools (K-12), yet only 1.7% of Texas undergraduate education majors (139 students) declare bilingual education as a major (The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2001).

The Holmes Group (1986) has highlighted similar problems at the university level. Guerra (1994) investigated the factors that supported the success of Hispanics in graduate study primarily through formal interviews with participants at the University of Texas. Her results showed that most successful Hispanic graduate students came from middle class families where parents held advanced degrees themselves. In addition, results revealed that special opportunities available to minorities through the University had not been disseminated widely enough for students to take advantage of them. Comfortable social interactions between students and professors also appeared to be problematic because of cultural definitions of appropriate behaviors.

Researchers have begun to investigate and describe the experiences and challenges that high school graduates of color who wish to become public school teachers face in following through with their career ambitions (Delpit, 1996; Gordon, 1993; King, 1993; Ladsen-Billings, 1997; Waldschmidt, 2002). Factors identified by these researchers included the lack of adequate preparation by elementary and secondary schools (King, 1993; Waldschmidt, 2002), language loss, and cultural identity conflicts (Waldschmidt, 2002), and limited access to technology (Resta, 2004), among others.

Recognizing the desirability of increasing the numbers of teachers of color in public school settings (Futrell, 1999; Haberman, 1988; Mora 2000), and the high percentage of Mexican American children in Texas public schools, we were interested in

investigating further the factors that are negatively impacting the successful entry of Mexican pre-service teachers into the teaching profession, and those which have provided positive influences in supporting success. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of Mexican American undergraduates pursuing teacher certification in elementary education of the factors contributing to their access to and success in a teacher preparation program, and the obstacles that threaten that success.

#### Methodology

Participants in this study (identified by self-selected fictitious names) were two male and four female Mexican American pre-service teachers participating in a field-based teacher preparation program in central Texas in which we served as course professors. This program places pre-service teachers as interns in local elementary schools in a multilingual/multicultural community where they gradually become involved in ongoing instruction in actual classrooms under our supervision for one semester prior to their student teaching. Simultaneously, coursework and technology training are provided on-site and integrated with their field experiences.

This study employed qualitative research methodology, primarily audio taped interviews of participants and document analysis (Bogden & Bicklen, 1982). We conducted the audio taped interviews (adapted from Guerra, 1994) encouraging each participant to discuss: a) past educational experiences, b) community background, c) sources of the opportunities that fostered their progress, d) obstacles encountered and/or overcome, and e) recommendations for friends with comparable career goals. (See Appendix A for complete interview questionnaire) These interviews, lasting an average of 45 minutes, were transcribed, and served as the primary source of data analyzed according to the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To support, corroborate, or disconfirm any significant patterns found as a result of this analysis, three other sources of data were collected for analysis. All three additional documents were assignments required as part of the integrated Reading and Curriculum planning coursework for which we served as instructors. First, students engaged in reflective thinking through Weekly Reflections that offered students opportunity to participate in interactive writing based on their experiences in actual classrooms (Bolin, 1988; Zeichner 1980). Second, students wrote Literacy Autobiographies recounting their personal experiences learning to read and write, and how they became the readers and writers they are today (Lortie, 1975). Lortie emphasizes the importance of teachers' prior schooling experiences as a key element in teacher socialization. Third, Personal Writings allowed students to explore and improve their own writing through self-selected topics and participation in a writer's workshop experience. All documents were inspected and re-inspected to discover patterns or categories of significance among the students relevant to obstacles or supports in pursuing a teaching career.

## Results

### **Experiential Background of Participants**

Interview data immediately revealed that the six Mexican American participants in this study represented a diverse range of experiential backgrounds within the Mexican American communities in central Texas. Participants came from rural and urban settings, Hispanic, as well as European American communities, and attended public, as well as private schools (See Table 1). Descriptions of the educational background of family members revealed that only one of the six participants had parents who attended college, while educational levels achieved by the remainder of the parents ranged from those who could not read or write, to those who dropped out of school at the eighth grade level.

Second, the remainder of responses to interview questions were tabulated and categorized according to “Perceived Obstacles” and “Perceived Supports” in accomplishing the goal of earning teacher certification. “Perceived Obstacles” that emerged as patterns across participants included: a) educational deficits resulting from inadequate schooling, b) feelings of intimidation and alienation, and c) the precarious economic survival of the family. “Perceived supports” that facilitated their progress through college and teacher certification courses included: a) individual school personnel (i.e., a teacher, counselor, or coach), b) the Catholic Church, c) educational assistance programs, d) family support, and e) self-reliance (See Table 2). Representative excerpts from the interview transcripts, personal writings, and reflective writings are used to provide illustrative examples of the categories that emerged in the data. In addition, they serve to authentically portray the ethnic nature of the data.

### **Perceived Obstacles**

#### **Educational deficits**

With the exception of one student that attended a private Catholic school from elementary school through senior high school, all the interviewees concurred that their educational experiences prior to the college level were inadequate. Descriptions of these deficits in their educational background seemed to focus on the lack of high expectations of teachers, counselors and principals for these students, and limited exposure to beneficial learning experiences, especially in reading and writing.

For example, although Soledad was placed in a college-bound English class in her senior year in High School, she never read an entire book prior to enrolling in college. In fact, the first book she ever read all the way through was *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Ed Moody, for a college level history class.

Eloisa's painful memories surfaced in her Weekly Reflections as she compared her own experiences with the teaching she was observing in the classroom where she was assigned as an intern:

I know how those children feel having English as their second language. I am so happy that they have an opportunity to learn English, but still hold on to their first language. I was reprimanded for speaking Spanish in school. I learned nothing. In high school, I was placed in remedial courses. I was told I wasn't smart enough for the Honors track. The teacher was teaching elementary stuff, asking us to repeat after her. There was no outside reading, no reports to write. In my senior year, though, I read four books on my own, the Bible, and some other Christian books.

Andrew's response focused on his Advanced Placement English class. Like Soledad, he couldn't remember reading anything:

The teacher would write on the board for students to copy, or just lecture. There was a lack of preparation for college study. I didn't learn that much. When I was a freshman in college, I found out my essays didn't have a body to them. They were just ramble, no structure. I didn't know what a thesis sentence was.

### **Feelings of intimidation/alienation**

With the exception of one student, all the interviewees mentioned feelings of intimidation and alienation. These feelings were related to ethnic, gender, and class issues, or to separation from the close-knit family that resulted from the college experience. Participants describe hassling from white college students who spit on the ground by them, and ask what they are doing on this campus. In addition, the absence of other Mexican Americans in a sea of white people felt intimidating—there was no one person with whom to connect or assume similarities and understanding. Carina described the feelings of alienation this way:

I felt very alone. Mostly the Anglos would act like I was just not there. We didn't associate much with each other. Maybe because we needed clothes. I don't know.

While experiencing this alienation at the university, the participants also felt alienated from the close-knit family structure they were accustomed to before leaving home to attend college. They reported not having as much time to

spend with their families, and the inability to discuss this new experience at home:

You can't really talk about it. You're changed by the knowledge you are acquiring in your being and your thoughts. Your parents are not really that much interested.

Male participants reported concerns dealing with the challenge of being male in a profession dominated by females which added to their feelings of alienation.

### **Family survival**

Sometimes, life circumstances threatened the family survival and, therefore, students' ability to continue their educations. Loss of jobs, accidents, serious illness, and death among family members, particularly parents, could force a student to experience difficulties in school, or even drop out. All but one of the students that were interviewed had received financial support from educational assistance programs. Even so, minimum paying jobs held by their parents, such as farm work, don't allow for building long-term family security such that can absorb a financial threat to the family survival like in Carina's example:

After my first year in college, my parents had an accident and they were both in the hospital. And my little brother was too. I didn't think I was going to go back to school. They were involved in a real bad tornado in Michigan. It was in the news...the tornado just exploded their house, and my Mom was thrown up in the air. At the time, I was going to summer school and I just left. I missed a semester because they were in bed for several months. My brothers would go to work, and I would babysit my little brother and take care of my parents. And I was thinking, what if my parents can't work anymore? I'm going to help them. So I wasn't coming back.

### **Perceptions of Support**

On the other hand, participants in the study were able to identify the ways in which each had received support and encouragement to reach their goals for teacher certification. They were grateful for the individuals,

programs, and opportunities from which they drew strength, financial support, and expertise.

### **School personnel**

When asked to talk about the people they felt made a difference in achieving their goals, these Mexican American pre-service teachers named individual teachers, counselors, and even a coach, who seemed to take a special interest and go beyond normal expectations to extend assistance and support. They were teachers who took extra time to work one-on-one after school in tutoring, translating, and encouraging their students. Carina recalled the extraordinary efforts of a counselor in Michigan who was instrumental in establishing a connection with our university in central Texas, assisted in preparing application documents, and even personally paid the late fee.

### **Educational and Financial Assistance Programs**

Each of the participants mentioned programs that had in some way either influenced them in a positive way to become a teacher, or, more often, made it financially feasible. Among those programs mentioned were:

1. **CAMP:** a scholarship assistance program for migrant students to attend a university.
2. **Upward Bound:** a program that paid high school students a stipend to attend Saturday classes at a University that were taught by University professors.
3. **Host Mentoring Program:** This program did not offer financial assistance, but involved high school students in tutoring others who are experiencing difficulties in school. It provided an introduction to teaching experience.
4. **Scholarships:** Financial assistance specifically for minority students who want to become teachers.

### **Family encouragement and support**

All the parents were emotionally supportive and encouraged their children to strive to higher goals. The amount and type of support varied rather significantly among the six participants. It seemed to depend on the

parents' perceptions of their own personal ability to make a difference. Participants reported, for example, that sometimes parents were unable to provide guidance with schoolwork, and relied on the children to push themselves at school. Soledad wrote in her Literacy Autobiography:

You asked about our reading or writing experiences, and some people in class said, "Well, Mom and Dad read to me." I can't do that because I didn't have that background. It has to be up to me, it has to be within me, that I want it. I never thought I'd come to be this person, as far as education, and literature, and the appreciation. The college experience has done that for me. Now I want to teach my parents how to read.

### **Rapport with children**

All participants concurred that by far the easiest part of becoming a teacher was their love of children and their intuitive ability to build a positive rapport with them. In fact, each one expressed the desire to work with children like themselves as the primary source of motivation to become a teacher.

### **The role of the church**

All participants mentioned the role of the church in an important capacity for providing encouragement and support in a variety of ways. While Javier felt the church helped him sustain his faith during difficult times (the murder of his father), Soledad felt that teaching religious education and going to mass helped preserve family connections threatened by the time demands of her career decision. Rebecca credited the private Catholic school she attended for providing her with good life skills such as hard work, discipline, organizational skills and responsibility. And Andrew identified the opportunity to take on religious teaching responsibilities with first graders as leading him to a teaching career. Finally, Eloisa found authentic purposes for meaningful reading (e.g., the Bible) when she became a Christian.



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## Self-reliance

Participants reported a growing awareness of the necessity to take responsibility for one self. One participant was faced with the necessity to work two part time jobs to support herself during the college years. Another participant found that through her work in the College of Education, she acquired critical knowledge about the “system,” (about courses, financial aid, deadlines, or advising) and learned to ask for information. When I asked her to elaborate she said:

I think it’s more of yourself. You’re put into the University; you know you have to be your own leader. You have to be the one seeking the information. Go ask questions. You can’t just sit there and let it come to you. You have to do it yourself.

In summary, the results of this investigation of the obstacles and supports that impact Mexican American pre-service teachers’ ability to pursue teacher certification, revealed the following patterns:

- Were likely to be the first one in the family to go to college.
- Perceived their own educational experiences as inadequate for the demands of a college education
- Were motivated by the desire to help children like themselves.
- Enjoyed and related well with children.
- Were supported by an individual schoolteacher, counselor, coach, or religious leader rather than the school system in general, that took a special interest in promoting their careers.
- Benefited from the support of educational assistance programs that offer financial aid.
- Reported some level of intimidation and alienation in school settings due to ethnic differences.

## Conclusions

The urgent need for qualified and well-trained minority teachers in schools around the country speaks to the significance of this exploratory investigation. The findings of this investigation are consistent with research results into the obstacles faced by other minority populations in pursuing a teaching career. The participants of this study were students who managed to overcome significant obstacles and challenges to pursue teacher certification education. It was important to discover that financial considerations may not

be the most critical obstacles that Mexican American teacher hopeful's encounter. Rather, most troubling is the report of inadequate preparation by elementary, middle, and high schools for a college education. This finding is most disturbing considering the continuing and unsolved difficulties of minority school children in this present year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Participants recognized that they themselves were victims of the subtractive schooling described by Valenzuela (1999). Interview data revealed that significant changes, specifically in middle school and high school reading and writing instruction in schools populated by Mexican American students, are critical if we hope to increase their numbers in teacher preparation programs. Low expectations for these students held by their schools and their teachers, coupled with the lack of exposure to meaningful reading and writing instruction provide disturbing evidence to support Delpit's call (1995) to "not teach less to poor urban children, but understand their brilliance and teach more!" Results of this investigation should awaken teachers, administrators, and university educators to their urgent responsibilities in breaking this disturbing pattern.

The sense of alienation reported by these pre-service teachers is also a disturbing finding. The potential for finding connections at the university and the myriad role models available to Caucasian students is only sparsely available to Hispanic students and will not be alleviated until universities diversify their faculties and their student population demographics.

Finally, the importance of professors in higher education, administrators, as well as teachers and counselors assuming the role of mentor and guide for Hispanic students with potential to become the first college-bound person in the family should not be overlooked. Instead, careful attention starting in middle school, should be given to the class assignments for Mexican American students to receive a high quality education from excellent teachers. And teachers must hold high expectations for the Hispanic students in their classes. Partnerships established by higher education professors with school district administrators should focus on recruitment, mentoring, improvement of instruction, and significant research possibilities.

Table 1.  
Community and educational background of Mexican American pre-service teachers.

Name	Community and Schools
Andrew	At first we lived in the North side in an elite neighborhood, but then my Dad got fired from his job and we had to move to the East side of town to my great grandparents' house. There was lots of crime. Our house was broken into three times. I got picked on because of my Spanish. I had to struggle to fit in with the "pecan kids." They saw me as a "bolillo codo." My parents walked us to school and made sure we were well-dressed and clean. Other kids in the neighborhood were not so well off. I attended the public school there.
Rebecca	The neighborhood where I grew up was a busy neighborhood close to the center of the city. I lived right outside of a military base. There was a lot of traffic so playing outside in the front yard wasn't encouraged. I went to a Catholic school. I didn't live close to all the friends that I went to school with either. It wasn't a well-off neighborhood, and it was kind of dangerous. When I was in eighth grade we moved to upside of San Antonio, and it was more of a subdivision.
Eloisa	I grew up in the projects which were 100% Hispanic in Nixon, TX, a small town. There were lots of kids and relatives around. Mostly boys. I grew up being tough. I played games and sports. We were real poor. In my public school there were no bilingual or ESL classes.
Soledad	I grew up in Martindale and went to school in San Marcos. My mother cleans houses. It was a rural community. I had either ESL or bilingual classes in my public school. My parents don't know how to read or write.
Carina	My family are migrant workers. In Texas, we lived in "colonias" where everyone was Hispanic. In Michigan, my parents lived in a hut. The houses were not in good condition. Sometimes, there was no place for people to sit. Migrant workers worked from 7 in the morning to 10 at night. They plant, harvest, and prepare the land. The work is hard, tough. It's steady, but you earn minimum pay no matter how many years you work. I attended public schools in Texas and Michigan.
Javier	When my father was stabbed to death in the west side of San Antonio, that scared my Mom. She took us out of that neighborhood. She used the insurance my father left for a house in the North side in a real quiet neighborhood. I grew up in a middle class Anglo neighborhood of retirees. They didn't want us to hang around their planted yards. I don't understand why I felt so intimidated by these Anglos, and they were all around us. Everyone had an attitude because of my race. It's a feeling of distrust. I attended a parochial school taught by Irish nuns.

Table 2. Perceived obstacles and sources of supports for Mexican American pre-service teachers

Perceived Obstacles	Perceived Sources of Support
Pre-college educational deficits  Inadequate exposure to meaningful reading Lack of writing instruction and experience Low expectations of teachers Poor instructional strategies Lack of appreciation of cultural heritage	Individual school personnel  Teacher Counselor Coach
Intimidation and alienation  Facing the unknown Lack of role models or ethnic connection Alienation from family Harassment Isolation	Educational assistance programs  EDIT CAMP Upward Bound HOST
Responsibility to family survival  Accidents Poor health Financial contributions	Church/religion  Faith Family connections Teaching experiences Meaningful reading experiences
	Self reliance  Being school wise Making sensible economic decisions Taking responsibility for self Establishing priorities
	Rapport with children  Motivated by desire to work with children like themselves (i.e., Spanish speakers, children with illiterate parents, children of single parent homes) Positive experiences working with children Enjoyment of children in family

## Appendix A

### Interview Questionnaire

1. Tell me about how and why you decided to become a teacher. When did you decide?
2. Were there any specific people or programs that helped you accomplish your goal? What has been the easiest part for you in preparing for teaching?
3. Describe any difficulties you have experienced in accomplishing your goal. What has been the hardest thing you've had to do to become a teacher?
4. Talk about your educational background starting with elementary school, then going on to junior high and high school. Did you have any experiences that stand out for any particular reason?
5. Tell me about the neighborhood where you grew up. Who were your neighbors?
6. Tell me about the educational background of your family members?
7. If you had a friend or younger sibling who wanted to be a teacher, what advice would you give that person now that you are almost finished?
8. How do you feel about current efforts to maintain the Spanish language in the educational programs of Hispanic children? Would this have made a difference in your education? In what ways?
9. Have you chosen to become a bilingual teacher? Why or why not?

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