

DIVERSIFYING THE TEACHING PROFESSION: WHAT LED HISPANIC TEACHERS TO BECOME TEACHERS?

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Abstract

More than 80% of teachers in the United States are White, while less than 50% of students are White (Rotherham & Gold, 2021). Hispanics are the most significantly underrepresented group in the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Hispanic teachers in Texas that informed their decision to become an educator. Nine Hispanic teachers who teach in a rural Texas school district participated in this study. Three primary themes emerged: teacher as role model, teacher as encourager, and teacher as cultural representative of career success.

Keywords: Diversifying the teaching profession; Hispanic teachers; Teacher recruitment

Classrooms in the United States are experiencing a demographic shift. One major component is the number of Hispanic students in public schools, which has increased from six million in 1995 to more than 13 million in 2017 (Wang & Dinkes, 2020). The Texas Education Agency reports the demographic data of teachers who apply for their initial teaching certification (Smith, 2021). In 2018, White applicants comprised 54.9% of all the applications. African American applicants comprised 11.8%, and Hispanic applicants comprised 28.3%. The residual demographics included the remaining 5% (Ramsay, 2019). According to the Office of the State Demographer of Texas, there will be a sharp increase in the growth of the Hispanic population in the State (Potter & Hoque, 2014). The Hispanic population will likely grow to 21,516,362 by the year 2050. The Hispanic population will surpass the non-Hispanic White population by more than 10 million people. If the current trend holds, the gap between teachers' demographic makeup and their students' demographics will widen even further.

Understanding each of the various factors that influence an individual's desire to teach and to enter the profession is critical to counteract the teacher shortages that have plagued the educational system in the United States for years. Further, understanding the specific factors that influence a Hispanic individual's decision to enter the teaching profession may be beneficial in helping to increase the overall percentage of Hispanic teachers in the Texas workforce. Currently, a gap exists in the research that identifies the experiences of Hispanic teachers that have

influenced their decision to become professional educators. The purpose of this research was to fill this gap in the literature.

Literature Review

Teachers make up approximately 4% of the entire civilian workforce (Ingersoll, 2001). Becoming a teacher used to be one of the most sought-after career goals in the United States. In 1975, 22% of all college-going individuals entered teacher preparation paths, but by 2015, that percentage dropped to only 10% (Carothers et al., 2019). This trend of declining interest has continued to plague the industry, as has the retention of teachers in the profession.

The Effect of the Teacher Shortage on Students

The teacher shortage is a complex issue. It is not a matter of a certain number of vacancies being filled by candidates. The schools with the fewest resources and least desirable working conditions often experience the most vacancies (Aragon, 2016; Carothers et al., 2019; Howard, 2003; Sutchter et al., 2016). More often than not, the students who need help the most are the ones least likely to get it. Teachers who work at schools with disadvantaged students experience more turnover than those with more affluent students. Schools with high numbers of economically disadvantaged students experience teacher attrition nearly 50% more than schools with more students of wealth (Carothers et al., 2019).

Student demographics also play a significant role in teacher attrition. The single greatest source of educational inequality is the disproportionate exposure of poor and minority students to less trained and inexperienced teachers (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). High minority schools' turnover is 64% greater than schools with the fewest students of color (Sutcher et al., 2016). This chronic instability places students who have been historically underserved at an even more significant disadvantage. Strong relationships between teachers and students can predict student achievement. Still, high teacher turnover makes it extremely difficult to establish the environments necessary for trust to build and positive academic achievement to be realized.

Demographic Considerations

The persistent lack of well-prepared teachers in schools and classrooms across the country remains despite a decades-long, concerted effort to address the need to recruit and retain high-quality certified teachers. This issue has been tackled at the federal, state, and local levels with varying degrees of success. The work that has been done to try to address the teacher shortage is admirable. Still, more work is needed to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce. Fewer than 50% of all public-school students in the nation are White, but more than 80% of all teachers are White (Rotherham & Gold, 2021). Evaluation of the current teacher pipelines indicated that this trend is not rapidly changing (Yuan, 2018). The lack of diversity among the teaching force is cause for concern for many political leaders. Since the 1990s, multiple states have adopted policies designed to help recruit more people of color to the teaching profession (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). There is some evidence that these initiatives are beneficial. Smith (2021) stated that in 1990, only about 10% of the teaching force was composed of minorities. By 2003, the percentage of teachers of color had increased to 16%.

Although there is an increase in the number of teachers of color entering the workforce, it is not enough to keep pace with the growth in the minority student population. In 2016, 34 states reported a demographic divide of at least 20 percentage points among the teaching staff, and this gap appears to be widening (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). This discrepancy between the proportion of teachers of color in the workplace compared to the proportion of students of color has been widely documented (Brady & Esmail, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Sutcher et al., 2016). From 1987 to 2012, the number of teachers of color in the workplace

increased by only 18%; however, in the same period, the number of students of color increased by 75% (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Sutcher et al., 2016). Some researchers believe the underrepresentation of teachers of color will likely persist or even grow in the coming decades (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Hansen & Quintero, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019). Hispanic teachers are expected to be the most significantly underrepresented demographic group in the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Hansen & Quintero, 2019). This belief is strongly supported by current demographic trends, especially in the State of Texas. In 2020, 53.8% of the students enrolled in Texas public schools were Hispanic, while only 28.01% of the teaching force was Hispanic (Smith, 2021). The Office of the State Demographer of Texas projects that the Hispanic population will likely grow to 21,516,362 by the year 2050, which surpasses the White population by more than 10 million people (Potter & Hoque, 2014).

Why Diversity Matters

Ensuring every student has access to a great teacher must be done by design. Ensuring every student has equal access to exceptional resources and teachers is the responsibility of every school administrator and political leader. There is growing evidence that ensuring a demographically diverse teacher population is essential (Banerjee, 2018; Goe & Roth, 2019; Torres et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Weisberg, 2018). Evidence suggests that increasing diversity within the teaching profession can substantially impact the educational experiences of both the students and the teachers and enhance educational outcomes. This evidence articulates the vital role teachers of color play in the U.S. education system. Teachers often serve as role models and mentors to students of color. Research indicates that teachers of color hold students of color accountable for higher academic achievement levels than White teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2017). Students of color who have teachers of color demonstrate higher academic achievement and social-emotional development due to this teacher-student relationship (Carver-Thomas, 2017). Setting higher expectations and supporting students in achieving those expectations improves the students' self-perception and enhances student academic achievement, leading to higher grades, motivation, and interest (Cherng & Halpin, 2016).

Teachers of color play a vital role in the makeup of the teacher workforce. They are more likely to seek out difficult-to-staff teaching positions in low-income communities, high minority populations, and urban school districts (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Sutchter et al., 2016). Increasing the number of teachers of color who enter the workforce can help school districts staff the schools most often plagued by teacher turnover and lower academic performance.

The impact that teachers of color can have on developing the minds of the students they serve is far more than academic. By serving in these critical roles during the critical formative years of the student's development, they can help to break down the negative stereotypes and better prepare students to live in a multi-racial society (Carver-Thomas, 2017).

Additionally, there has been growing evidence that students of color benefit significantly from teachers who share their cultural identity. One review of the Tennessee Star data found that Black and White students placed in classes with same-race teachers scored better in math and reading than their peers who were not placed with a same-race teacher (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). There is mounting evidence suggesting all students accrue academic benefits when teachers of the same race teach them and when they are exposed to a teaching force that is racially and ethnically representative of the student population (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In fact, Hispanic teachers in large urban high school systems with high enrollment of Hispanic students reduced dropout rates and increased the college-going rates of Hispanic students (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The researchers suggest the positive perception of minority teachers may be due to the minority teacher translating their experiences and identities to form a rapport with students who share the same race.

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Hispanic teachers in the State of Texas to determine the factors that informed their decision to become a teacher. This researcher sought to identify critical needs and motivators that influence Hispanic individuals' decision to enter the teaching profession. The research question that guided this study was:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Hispanic teachers employed in Texas schools that informed their decision to become teachers?

Participants

Once Institutional Review Board approval was received, participants were recruited from a rural school district located in Texas Hill Country. Recruitment was conducted by emailing all teachers within the targeted district. The email contained information about the purpose of the study and the criteria required for participation. Interested participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey document where demographic data was collected, and an electronic signature for informed consent was provided. The researcher selected participants from all interested candidates who met the criteria, including identification as Hispanic and certified teachers in the rural school district chosen for this study.

Eleven Hispanic teachers were interested in participating in this study. One was excluded because she had transitioned from a teacher to a counselor. A second participant ultimately decided not to join the study because she did not want to be recorded. The recording was a necessary component of the research protocol. Ultimately, nine Hispanic teachers participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Nine Hispanic teachers employed in a rural Texas school district were interviewed for this study. Multiple sources of information were used in this study, including interviews and audiovisual information, to thoroughly understand the participant's perspectives related to the study. All interviews were conducted in person at a time and location selected by the interview participant. Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured protocol that allowed the questions to serve as a guide. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to remain flexible in exploring individual participants' interpretations of their life experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviewer used follow-up and probing questions to seek clarity or extend participants' answers. Interviews lasted from 18 to 49 minutes and were conducted in a location selected by the participant. All of the interviews were recorded.

Upon completion of the interviews, recordings of the interviews were sent to a transcription service to be converted from audio files to text data (Creswell, 2019). In addition, each participant validated the transcripts to verify they were accurate and conveyed their intended meaning. Each interview transcription was uploaded to the qualitative analysis software NVivo for coding (QSR

International, 2021). The NVivo software streamlined the coding process to allow the researcher to code individual words, sentences, and paragraphs. In some instances, statements fell under more than one code. The codes were examined for overlap and redundancy and collapsed into broad themes (Creswell, 2019). Finally, the researcher used member checking by having the study participants review the themes identified by the researcher to validate that they are accurate and represent the participant's intended perspective (Creswell, 2016).

Findings

Five female and four male teachers participated in this study and are representative samples from each of the three primary levels of education. Three currently teach at the elementary level, two teach at the middle school level, and four currently teach at the high school level. One of these participants had taught at the middle school level during the prior school year. Study participants represented various degrees of experience in the profession. Two participants reported having less than five years of experience. Three participants have between six and ten years of experience, and four participants reported having 11 or more years of teaching experience. See Table 1 for a demographic overview.

Profiles of Participants

Teacher 1 (T1)

T1 spent all her time in South Texas before moving to her current city. She reports that her community's demographics are predominantly Hispanic due to its proximity to Mexico. Neither of her parents obtained a college degree but supported her desire to receive an education. However, they were not as excited about her decision to leave South Texas. Along with her teachers, friends, and community, they painted non-Hispanic communities as inhospitable and unsupportive. She reports that she experienced fear and anxiety as she transitioned to her new city to begin a life with her new husband. Speaking about her transition to her current school, T1 stated, "I was afraid. I wasn't just intimidated; I was scared."

T1 did not want to be a teacher. She wanted to be a coach. Once she was deep into her degree, she discovered that you also had to teach to be a coach in a public school setting. She has taught at the middle school level and is currently teaching and coaching at the high school level.

Teacher 2 (T2)

T2 reports that he enjoyed school far more than anyone else in his peer group. He was a curious person and always wanted to know why things were the way they were. It was late in his senior year of high school when he began seriously considering a teaching degree. After meeting with his school counselor, though, he began to doubt his decision. He shared his desire to be a teacher and coach with his high school guidance counselor. However, he was encouraged that perhaps working in construction, as a police officer, or going into the military might be a better fit for him. However, with the support of his teachers, friends, and parents, he decided to ignore the advice and follow his path. Although neither of his parents went to college, T2 pursued his college degree following his older brother's footsteps. Currently, T2 teaches middle school English and coaches soccer.

Teacher 3 (T3)

T3, a first-generation college graduate, reports that he first became interested in the teaching profession when he was in elementary school. He shared a story of looking at all of the pictures that one of his elementary teachers would post of her vacations and travels during school breaks. This experience caused him to think that he would make enough money to do those things if he taught. Later in life, as he discovered he excelled in sports, he deduced that teaching would provide him the means to be involved in sports and enjoy the lifestyle demonstrated by his elementary teacher.

T3 has taught and coached at the high school level for 26 years. He spent much of his career working in the same large urban school district. This year he transitioned to a much smaller rural school district where he teaches special education and coaches football and basketball.

Table 1*Demographics of Participants*

Participants	Years in Public Education	Current Grade Level	Certification Route	Gender
T1	6-10 years	9-12	Alternative Certificatic	Female
T2	Less than five years	6-8	Traditional College	Male
T3	11 years or more	9-12	Traditional College	Male
T4	6-10 years	9-12	Alternative Certification	Male
T5	6-10 years	6-8	TechTeach	Female
T6	Less than five years	PK-5	TechTeach	Female
T7	11 years or more	PK-5	Traditional College	Female
T8	11 years or more	PK-5	Traditional College	Female
T9	11 years or more	9-12	Traditional College	Male

Teacher 4 (T4)

Growing up in a small South Texas town provided few career options for T4, at least from his perspective. The only immediate options available were joining the Navy or working as a ranch hand. Neither of these options was appealing to this participant. He knew that obtaining a college degree was the key to avoiding either of these two options, so he settled his mind on pursuing a degree in engineering.

During his first year of high school, his mother married his stepfather, an educator. Later, his mother, who was already working as a nurse, obtained a degree in education. Observing his parents' work gave him a glimpse into another career option he had not previously considered. Then, through a series of interactions with influential coaches, he began exploring teaching as a viable career option. T4 has taught middle school math and is currently teaching science and coaching at the high school level.

Teacher 5 (T5)

The desire to become a teacher began in first grade for T5. Already knowing how to read upon entering school may have been a contributing aspect. She found school to be fun and engaging. She developed a strong admiration for her teachers from early in elementary school.

Growing up in a migrant family presented some challenges. She traveled from crop to crop, ensuring the family was not in the same place for a long time. As one of the youngest of 10 children, T5 was fortunate enough not to have to work the crops. She described her father as an abusive alcoholic and stated that school was a safe place for her. She is one of only three in her family to graduate from high school and the only one to obtain a college degree. However, she did not pursue this degree until she was in her 40s.

She began her career in education as a teaching assistant in a public education elementary school. Working through the TechTeach program of Texas Tech University and the partnership with her school district, she was finally able to obtain her teaching credentials. Today, T5 is a bilingual education teacher working with students in elementary school.

Teacher 6 (T6)

Teaching was not the first career pursuit for T6. Having been raised in a very strict household, T6 was determined to make her way in life and not follow the traditional route of her peers. She decided not to get married in her 20s and have children. She thought, "Why do you need to bring kids to the world to be miserable?"

Upon graduating from high school, T6 went to college and landed a job with what she describes as "one of the best companies in the world." She worked for this company for 11 years.

She married when she was 30 years old and began having children of her own. Her third child demonstrated some difficulty in school, and she knew, as a mom, she needed to be able to dedicate the time necessary to help her son. She applied for multiple positions at the school her son attended. She could not ever seem to get a job. Then, she took her son to a pool party for the boy scouts one day. In attendance at this party was also the son of the assistant principal of her son's school. Not understanding why she could not get a job, she approached the assistant principal to inquire why she could not get a job. She said, "I told her, Why did I not get hired? I never have a problem getting hired...I apply immediately, and they hire me." The boldness of her inquisition led to her being offered a paraprofessional position the following week. Then, after learning of the partnership between the school district and Texas Tech University, she joined the TechTeach program and obtained her teaching certification. T6 is currently in her third year of teaching elementary bilingual education.

Teacher 7 (T7)

T7 seemed to have a natural inclination toward teaching. She began teaching English classes at a non-profit organization for non-English speakers when she was 16. After completing high school, she enrolled in college but found it challenging. She performed so poorly that she began doubting herself and did not think she was "college material," so she dropped out. She continued teaching various classes at the non-profit, including prenatal care, childcare, and computer classes. The non-profit organization needed a secretary, so she decided to attend the community college to earn certification as a secretary. Her success seemed to boost her confidence, so she decided to go back to college to earn her teaching degree after marrying and moving to Houston. T7 is an elementary teacher with more than 11 years of experience.

Teacher 8 (T8)

When T8 was six years old, her family moved her to the United States from Mexico. Her parents had difficulty finding a job because they were not in the United States legally. After a brief time in San Antonio, the family settled in a small German community located in Texas. Growing up in a community with very few Hispanic people

created an environment ripe for discrimination. T8 recalls being called "cockroaches" by other students, teachers, and school personnel. She stated that connecting to teachers was difficult because they would often say, "you're just going to be another statistic." Some would even say, "you're just going to end up pregnant and drop out of school, or you are going to end up in jail."

As an English language learner, she struggled in school. She was placed in Special Education classes. She found herself in trouble often because of discipline. One such time landed her in a series of Saturday school detentions overseen by a teacher who would ultimately positively impact her life. The teacher would help her with her vocabulary and homework during each weekly encounter. He would encourage her and tell her that she could accomplish anything she set her mind to do. It was not long before she was dismissed from Special Education and enrolled in PreAdvanced Placement and Advanced Placement courses. With lots of hard work and encouragement from her new favorite teacher, she applied and was accepted to The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, where she obtained her teaching degree. Today, she is an elementary bilingual education teacher.

Teacher 9 (T9)

T9 never intended to be a teacher. He simply wanted to leave his small town. He is the first in his family to graduate from high school and the first to go to college. Although he was accepted to Harvard University, fear kept him from accepting the invitation and moving that far away. He chose to attend Stephen F. Austin University and majored in English and Spanish. While in college, he worked as a tutor and found he enjoyed working with other people, especially when they had "ah-ha moments." After teaching for 19 years, he completed his master's degree in educational leadership and served as a campus administrator. He missed his work as a teacher, so he returned to the classroom after serving as a campus administrator for eight years. T9 is currently a high school Spanish teacher and language other than English department chair.

Themes

Three themes emerged as factors that contributed to the individual's desire to become a teacher: (a) teacher influence, (b) altruistic nature of education, and (c) family support.

Teacher Influence

For the participants in this study, teachers influenced their decision to pursue careers in education in three primary ways: (a) role model, (b) encourager, and (c) cultural representative of career success. In some instances, the influence of teachers took on all three roles.

Teacher as Role Model

Participants often reflected on teachers' role in shaping and influencing their own lives. These teachers did not need to build a special bond with their students. They simply needed to execute their job responsibilities in ways that garnered admiration from their students. Participants discussed such encounters during their interviews.

T5 explicitly stated, "As a young person, you're looking at the teacher, they are your role model. They are leading the class. They must be somebody important, and they must know what they are talking about." T4 referred to his high school coach as his role model and a significant contributor to his interest in becoming a teacher. He stated that when referring to his coach,

You constantly have a positive role model, and I had a high school coach who was extremely positive. I still talk to him, text, and keep in touch. It's people like that who left an impact and made me want to be what I am.

Some participants appreciate the sacrifice of hard-working educators. T2 stated, "I like that we had these educators who were sacrificing more time than students to really understand and to make sure that we are gaining something positive from a learning environment."

When asked when she decided she wanted to become a teacher, T7 stated,

I think it all started as like a little kid. My kindergarten teacher, Ms. Garza, and my first-grade teacher, Ms. Carranza. I wanted to be like them when I grew up. I liked their personality and the way they taught.

She also referenced a teacher she had in high school who was also from Mexico. He told her that if he could come from Mexico and become a teacher, she could as well.

T7 was not the only participant who remembers an elementary educator's impact on her life. When his mother passed, T3 specifically remembers the teacher who looked out for him during that difficult time. This encounter left a lasting impression that he remembers many years later.

Additionally, T7 recalls two Hispanic teachers she had in the first and fourth grades. She said she knew she wanted to be a teacher when she became an adult, just like them. She loved their personalities and how they taught their students.

When a teacher enjoys their job, it can inspire the students. T8 told the story of his high school journalism teacher, "She herself showed such an enjoyment out of the topic that it was contagious." For T8, though, this impact remained true even if the personality of the teacher was not as pleasant:

I had another teacher who was my eighth-grade English teacher. She was not the most pleasant person, but you could tell that she really enjoyed the subject. It was like night and day when you got her on a topic that she enjoyed as compared to her as a regular person. That always amazed me, and it thrilled me in a way.

For T6, she did not have any teachers she admired when she was a child. She never had a single teacher make any profound impact on her life as a student. However, once she became a paraprofessional, that changed. "I just admire her. I [admire] the way she teaches and her dedication. Her classroom was just so perfect, and she was very into helping the students." T6 also credits a very influential college professor for helping her develop her passion for the classroom. She beamed with excitement when provided the opportunity to say, "Oh my gosh, she is the best in the world. She has so much energy, and from the moment she interviewed me for my master's program, we connected because she loves her job." What seemed to have the most significant impact on T6, though, was the fact that this professor remembered her after more than a year of no contact. "She remembered me," T6 reflected, "I mean, we only talked one time, and she still remembered me. She literally changed my life because of her motivation, her energy, and her love for what she is doing."

Teacher as Encourager

The teacher's impact in forming the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions was evident for the participants in this study. Even when faced with a discouraging counselor, T2 emphasized his teachers were very supportive and encouraged him that if teaching was what he wanted to do, then he could and should pursue it. T2 stated, "They made it seem that it wouldn't be a problem [to become a teacher], and it wasn't, my experience going to college was great."

T1 discussed a coach who had a tremendous influence on her life:

I was in eighth grade, seventh grade, and I had a female basketball coach, and she was somebody who believed in me so much that she would tell my dad, this girl can go play college ball. Anything she wants to do, she's capable of doing it. And I just grew fond of her, and I mimicked her, and I think she was one of the reasons why I became an educator because coaching goes back to the same thing to teaching kids and making them grow as an individual and as a person. She was the reason why [I became an educator].

For T8, an encounter with a teacher in Saturday school changed her life forever:

He was just awesome. He believed in me, and by the third Saturday, because I think I [was assigned 12] he would bring me an apple and our economics book. He would say, "Come over here and let's go over all of your homework. What is it that you didn't get? What is it that you need help with? He would chunk the text. He would help me with vocabulary. The following year I actually started putting an effort into school. Then I suddenly came out of Special Education, and they started pushing me into Pre-AP and AP classes. He just took the time. I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher to make a difference like him.

For T4, the role that his Hispanic coaches played still encourages him today:

There are things you don't talk about, but you show up to practice. You show up to school one day, and your coach says, "You don't need to tell me what happened. I don't need to know. But if there is something you need to tell me, tell me. I am here for you. Let's make it a good day." That meant a lot. I want to be like them because they had such an impact on my life.

Teachers not only encourage their students, but they also serve by encouraging their colleagues. Working as a paraprofessional, T6 demonstrated a passion for helping students. She did not, though, possess the credentials necessary for teaching a class of her own. The teachers on her campus recognized her passion and gift. They encouraged her to return to school to get certified. T6 recalled, "Teachers would say, why don't you get the certification. You are good at this." This call to become certified would occur repeatedly until she finally relented.

Teacher as Cultural Representative of Career Success

Participants in this study identified Hispanic teachers' role in forming their career desire. The presence, or in one case, absence, of Hispanic teacher role models played a significant role in the individual's desire to pursue teaching credentials.

T8 knew she wanted to teach at the elementary level simply because she wanted to have the opportunity to be a cultural role model for her students. Reflecting on her own experience as a student, T8 stated,

We definitely didn't have Hispanic role models. The only Hispanics I remember seeing at school were custodians. I wish I would have seen someone that was Hispanic because then that would've made me think, "Oh, maybe I can do it, too."

T8 is so passionate about the role that she sees herself playing as a cultural representative of career success that she often reminds other Hispanic individuals of the need to serve this role:

I tell them, "our students need more [Hispanic] role models. They need to know that even though we have gone through the struggles, we have come from third-world countries, that even we might be first or second generation of students going to school, I always try to tell them, we need more educators. We need people who are bilingual.

Speaking of a Hispanic student teacher he had in high school, T2 stated,

The fact that there was somebody there while I was pondering this decision to become an educator that was Hispanic was comforting. It was comforting to know that there are Hispanic teachers out there and that they can make their way.

Having grown up with Hispanic teachers allowed T4 to believe that he could attain his goal. Remembering a specific teacher, T4 said, "He would tell me that there is nothing special about me. You can read. You can write. You can do the same thing I did. You just have to not be scared and do it."

From as early as elementary school, T8 knew there was something special about the two teachers who made the most significant impact on her life at the time. She stated, "They were Hispanic, and so I was looking forward to one day being in their shoes, being able to teach other

children." She also recounts a teacher she had in high school who frequently reminded the Hispanic students in his class, "I am a teacher, and I come from Mexico. If I can do it, you can do it, just set your mind and set your goals, and you can also succeed in whatever you decide to do."

Altruistic Nature of Education

For each participant, the challenges they endured while earning their degree were fueled by the passion for improving the students' lives they serve. T1 does not focus on only impacting students in the present; she wants to have a lasting impact on their future. She states, "I like the aspect of helping people more so on the mental aspect and helping guide them through different psychological paths as far as I can help them be better." T1 attempts to capitalize on her Hispanic heritage and use it to encourage her students to pursue greatness:

I can try to push some of these kids because we can connect better. I feel like I can connect better because we are of the same ethnicity. I am not afraid to do that and try to push them and say, hey, you can do better.

These individuals derive joy from observing students grow. T4 states, "I get to watch kids change. I get to watch them develop new controversial ideas. I'm not [just] educating. I am being educated as time goes on." This perspective also holds true for T8. She specifically wanted to teach elementary school because she wanted to be able to have an early impact on the students she serves:

I did not want to go back to teaching high school. I wanted to start in elementary school as a teacher because I wanted them to not hate school the way that or have such a bad experience in school the way that I did.

T6's passion for connection extends beyond the classroom, "I am a hardcore advocate for our community. I truly believe that the biggest impact is having a good relationship with our parents, with our community, and identifying culturally with them."

T5 works with students new to the United States as a bilingual education teacher. She beamed with excitement as she explained, "I just love helping people learn, and now it is even better because I basically teach people how to read and speak English. It is transformational in their lives."

Family Support

Most of the study participants credit their parents and family to some degree for helping them remain focused and committed to earning their teaching credentials. For T2, watching his mother and stepfather continue their education was enough to keep him motivated. "Just seeing my mom do it and stepdad do it," T2 explained, "was a positive influence."

For T1, her parents played the crucial role of not letting her succumb to her fears or exhaustion:

They told me, "You have to see this through." I did it more for them. At the time, I was wondering what am I doing here? They would give me a phone call. They knew the right things to say. I was like, okay, I'll stick it out and finish it.

For T8 and T9, the fact that their parents were unable to get an education themselves was a significant factor in their commitment and their parents' support. T8 said, "My dad always would tell me that I needed to go to college because he did not get to go to college." She added, "In Mexico, you don't have to finish school." She explained that when her parents moved their families to the United States, her dad pushed her mother to learn English and then supported her to earn a certification as a Licensed Vocational Nurse. She continued her education and is now a Registered Nurse. T8 explained that she often reminded herself, "If your mom learned English when she was older, and she had to work, and she had to go to college, and she did all of this, then there is no excuse for you."

T9 explained that his parents did not care what he chose to study; they just wanted him to get something they never could:

They simply wanted me to become educated. It didn't matter. Whatever I chose, they would support me 150%. They simply said, "You need an education. We didn't have a chance to get one, and you're going to have one, and whatever we need to do, then that's what we're going to do." If I needed something and they didn't have the money for it, they'd go out and find someone to borrow it from or whatever they needed to do to get what I needed.

While her parents had some impact, for T5, her husband and siblings had the most significant influence. However, her daughters were sometimes a little bit resentful because of the time her studies took from them. They wanted her to succeed but really missed their time

with their mom. For T6, her experience with her children was the opposite. T6 explains, "I have the best kids ever. They support me. They say, "Mom, whatever you need." She told stories of how her daughter would cook meals, her son would help with laundry and trash. Her children would eat cereal on evenings when she was too busy or too exhausted to cook.

Sometimes support can feel like pressure. That was the case for T7. "Because I was the oldest of five," T7 recalls, "my dad would say, "She's going to college. She will be the first person that goes beyond high school and being a role model for her siblings as well." She added, "It was a big pressure because at the same time, being the oldest, thinking about my parents not having a higher education was like, maybe she can help financially with the family."

Discussion

Recruiting high-quality, qualified teachers is a challenge faced by school administrators all across Texas. The challenge of ensuring that the demographics of the teachers in the classroom closely match the demographics of the students these teachers serve is nearly impossible to conquer. The need to recruit Hispanic individuals to the teaching profession has never been greater.

Teacher Influence

For the participants in this study, teachers played a significant role in their decision to become an educator in three distinct ways: (a) teacher as a role model, (b) teacher as an encourager, and (c) teacher as a cultural representative of career success.

Teacher as Role Model

Teachers can positively influence students by serving as role models (Carver-Thomas et al., 2017). Some in this study reflected on their experiences and often referred to early elementary teachers who served them as a child. They referenced the teacher's kindness, dedication, and persistence. They discussed how the teacher helped them overcome learning challenges or simply how they created a learning environment that made them feel safe and important.

Teachers are not always aware of their influence over their students in their capacity as role models. None of the participants ever told their teacher of their admiration. However, each of the individuals who participated in this

study identified at least one who played a substantial role in helping them form their career interests.

Teacher as Encourager

Verbal persuasion involves the role that a person plays in influencing another person's belief about their ability to succeed at a task by simply telling the individual that they are capable of performing the action (Bandura, 1997). The degree of influence is determined by how the influencer is regarded by the person being influenced. Participants in this study regarded teachers who took the time to build positive relationships, set high expectations, and provided support and encouragement very highly. Cherg and Halpin (2016) stated setting high expectations and supporting students in achieving these expectations improves student self-perception. This concept proved true for these study participants. These teachers had a direct and substantial influence on the individual's self-efficacy. They served, in many cases, as a catalyst for overcoming challenges faced along the road to teacher certification.

Teachers can serve this vital role as a colleague as well. Two participants serving as teaching assistants spoke favorably of the role that teacher-colleagues played in helping them believe in themselves enough to pursue teaching credentials. Having the support and encouragement from someone serving in a capacity that these individuals aspired to obtain was very influential.

Teacher as Cultural Representative of Career Success

According to Carver-Thomas (2017), being exposed to teachers of color during the critical formative years of school can help break down the negative stereotypes. It also helps to formulate career roles that individuals play.

Each of the participants in this study shared multiple things in common. Aside from sharing a cultural identity, they each expressed varying degrees of challenges that arose from being Hispanic. For some, it was growing up in a migrant family. For others, it was having to acquire a new language in a foreign land. For six of the participants, having a Hispanic teacher or simply knowing of a Hispanic teacher gave them enough reason to believe that they, too, could become a teacher.

Altruistic Nature of Education

Teaching is a highly altruistic profession. Teachers are often motivated to make the students' lives that they serve better and contribute positively to their students' life

outcomes. For the individuals in this study, this held. Each participant spoke about their desire to build positive relationships with their students and promote a positive outcome for each student they encountered.

In some cases, the altruism was reinforced by their own experiences in school. For some, they had a very positive experience and wanted to duplicate that in the students' lives that they serve. In other cases, though, the opposite was true. For some, their school experience was fraught with difficulties and negative emotions. They were deeply motivated by the desire to ensure the students' experiences that they serve will be much better than their own. They communicated a willingness to care more, work harder, try better strategies, and ensure students felt safe and encouraged. The participants who experienced negative associations with their teachers in school demonstrated an awareness of how their interactions with their students affect the student's ability to learn and self-belief. They use their own experience as a child as a motivation to ensure they are a better teacher to their students than their teachers were to them.

Family Support

Participants in this study took various paths to pursue their teaching credentials. Five of the participants took the traditional route by attending a 4-year college. Two participants participated in an alternative certification program after earning a 4-year degree and working in a different career field. Two participants worked in a unique program provided by a Texas university that fast-tracked the teacher certification and degree earning program. Regardless of whether the individual entered the certification program immediately upon graduating from high school or their pursuit of the teaching credentials occurred later in life, all participants credit family support as a critical component in their successful completion of the certification program.

All experienced a high degree of encouragement from their family. A sense of pride and accomplishment often supported encouragement. In other cases, support was taking on additional responsibilities for the household. For example, children may take on additional household chores such as cleaning, laundry, and cooking. A spouse might work extra jobs or overtime to help offset the loss of income while the participant attended classes. The families committed to doing whatever it took to ensure the

participant could complete their teacher certification program.

Recommendations

The three themes that emerged from this study did not reveal the magic formula to solve the teacher shortage crisis or recruit more Hispanic teachers to the profession. However, the findings did reinforce what has been widely documented through decades of study. The single most important factor that influences the quality of a child's education in the classroom is the teacher (Hanushek, 2011; Holme et al., 2017; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017; Rowe, 2003). What impacted the participants' lives in this study had little to do with what their teachers knew. How their teachers demonstrated that they care for their students made the difference. Taking the time to demonstrate care, support, and personal regard for their students profoundly impacted the study participants. For the participants in this study, the relational impact of one or more teachers was the more significant contributing factor in helping to define their career choice.

Students in Texas spend approximately 17,017 hours with teachers between kindergarten and graduation. Equipping teachers with the tools and resources necessary to strengthen the human component, ensure teachers can meet students' social and emotional needs will go a long way to fostering the type of learning environments that help students develop the self-efficacy necessary to pursue lofty goals. While there is certainly no guarantee that this will result in every student choosing a career in education, it can increase the likelihood that some students may generate an interest in teaching who might not have otherwise.

Recommendations for helping to reinforce the influential role that teachers play in the lives of their students based upon the findings of this study include

- developing and requiring courses during the teacher certification program that explore the role teachers play in influencing the lives of their students that reaches beyond their content and is deeply rooted in relationships,
- schools should provide ongoing professional development to all teachers that strengthen their ability to build relationships with students as both skill-builders and reminders of the significant role they play in the lives of their students,

- foster more opportunities during grades kindergarten through graduation that allow students to explore a career in education and be mentored by a teacher, and

The single most effective recruiting tool that exists to fill the teacher pipeline may very well be the teachers currently working in the profession. Training and equipping them with the tools and resources to maximize their positive influence on the students' lives that they teach may be the answer to solving a decades-long problem.

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