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## Designing Learning Spaces for Hispanic and Latino/a Knowledge to Emerge in Doctor of Education Programs

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### Keywords

Hispanic and Latinos, Doctor of Education programs, scholar-practitioner



## **Designing Learning Spaces for Hispanic and Latino/a Knowledge to Emerge in Doctor of Education Programs**

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### **Abstract**

Shifts in demographic and cultural change in American society, particularly the growth of the Hispanic and Latino/a population, have shed light on inequalities in education and revealed institutional barriers to Hispanic learning in doctoral education programs. This best practice paper contextualizes Hispanic and Latino/a Learners (HLL) within scholar-practitioner programs, specifically in Doctor of Education programs. It historically addresses potential factors that may impact this population within that context based on the scholarly literature, history, and practice. Most importantly, it sets the tone for designing positive inclusive spaces and improving conditions for HLL knowledge to emerge in Doctor of Education programs.

Keywords: Hispanic and Latinos, Doctor of Education programs, scholar-practitioner

### **Education Programs**

Reimers (2017) pointed out that changes in many areas have dramatically impacted education at large. The author suggested that “demographic change” is one area that has affected educational systems (Reimers, 2017, p. 1). Thus, demographic trends warrant meaningful consideration in any dialogue about designing inclusive learning spaces and learning conditions in academia. The Hispanic and Latino/a population increased from 16% to 18.5% between 2010 and 2019. This population is considered a fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in the United States. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that Hispanics and Latino/a populations will continue to grow and will nearly double by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). For the purposes of this study, Hispanic and Latino/a is defined as, “A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (McFarland, Hussar, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Rathbun, Barmer, Forrest, Cataldi, Bullock Mann, 2017, p. 02).

Projections also suggest that the number of Hispanics and Latino/as enrolled in higher education is on the rise (Snyder & Dillow, 2016). A report on the conditions of Latino/as earning doctoral degrees indicated that “Latinos increased the number of doctoral degrees they earned in the past ten years. From 2003-2012, the number of doctoral degrees earned by Latinos increased 67%, compared to African Americans (56%), Asians (49%) and Whites (32%)” (Snyder & Dillow, 2016, p. 10). However, even though HLL is on the rise, this population still earns advanced degrees at much lower levels than other racial groups (Snyder & Dillow, 2016). According to Schak and Nichols through 2016, in the US, 13.4% of whites earned graduate degrees in comparison to 5% of HLL’s (2017).

While Hispanic and Latino/a enrollment in doctoral programs is on the rise (Snyder & Dillow, 2016), greater diversity is needed, and gaps of knowledge exist in studies that address the need to educate those involved in academia to embrace HLL’s knowledge (Nora & Crisp, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2012). Hispanic and Latino/a learners (HLL) can bring a range of rich practitioner knowledge to doctoral classrooms (Ramirez, 2017). This practitioner knowledge is often non-traditional, yet, not less important than the knowledge originating in traditional channels. It is important to ponder that Doctor of Education programs continue to evolve from being focused on cultivating the future research of professors towards more interdisciplinary programs with emphasis on acquiring knowledge and skills that prepare students for a variety of career choices in and out of academia. Hence, it is critical to create all-inclusive learning environments for Hispanic and Latino/a students.

In sum, even though the demographics of Doctor of Education programs have dramatically changed in the past decade, not much has been accomplished to decolonize curriculum, address the social-economic disparities, inequality, and racial disconnects in Doctor of Education programs. Thus, there is a big challenge for doctoral program planners to design programs that meet the needs of HLL while maintaining academic quality and cultural accuracy that reflects the changing needs of society and students. The authors of this best practices paper, therefore, propose that designing spaces and improving learning conditions for Hispanic and Latino/as knowledge to emerge in Doctor of education programs is important and a morally principled decision that leaders should embrace.

## **Scholar-practitioners and Doctor of Education Programs**

A scholar-practitioner is a doctoral scholar who combines knowledge based on educational practice and experience with theoretical concepts to create meaningful change in education. The scholar-practitioner improves practice by combining multiple experiences with theory and design (Wilson, 2007). Wasserman and Kram (2009) suggested “The term scholar-practitioner is showing up more and more at academic and practitioner conferences as well as in the literature” (p. 13). Wasserman and Kram (2009) noted the importance of a continuum for scholar practitioners is to provide reasonable discourse on research-related topics and consideration of the social nature within the communication of ideas and application. Learning communities within Doctor of Education scholar-practitioner programs should then be mindful of accepting diverse scholar and practitioner viewpoints of underrepresented populations rather than taking oppositional roles.

In essence, the mission of Doctor of Education programs is to develop and prepare scholar-practitioners to make connections between theory and practice in their organizational context. Jenlink (2005) proposed that "...the scholar-practitioner engages in intellectual work with the purpose, in large part, to create the educative spaces wherein future generations may learn the knowledge and skills necessary to build a principled and democratic society” (p. 3). Each scholar-practitioner in Doctor of Education programs needs to deepen understanding of their role in bringing about change and creating inclusive and challenging learning environments. The scholar-practitioner is therefore an essential inspiration in motivating students and in developing a program which will take responsibility for the impact of learning spaces in the future of underrepresented minorities such as HLL. Understanding and embracing multiple perspectives and experiences in this context is paramount.

Currently, the field of education is undergoing transformational reform. Thus, there is a need to generate new knowledge that will take the place of outdated traditional practices; in this regard, the scholar-practitioners' work should reach beyond “abstract technical writing aimed at limited audiences of other scholars” (Wilson, 2007, p.148). Academia, and in particular, leaders and educators involved in Doctor of Education programs, must understand that this impact may be positive or negative, and the institution should be held accountable to provide the freedom and encourage scholar-practitioners to design culturally relevant and inclusive spaces.

Acknowledging ethnocentric bias and prioritizing social justice principles may be immediate steps that programs must take to design rigorous inclusive spaces that help HLL's flourish in their respective learning spaces.

### **Hispanic and Latino/a Learners (HLL)**

According to the US Census Bureau (2020) Hispanic and Latino/a Learners (HLL) comprise 22.7% of all students in the US, coming from many different countries, cultures, and generations; but only 1.9% of graduate students were HLL's. These numbers evidence the wide range of perspectives that the HLL population of doctoral students provides to academia. However, these perspectives may be buried or stereotyped. Ramirez (2017) who studied the educational progress and challenges of Hispanic and Latino/a doctoral students revealed "systemic inequities in the doctoral socialization process" (p.25). Such misunderstanding often turns doctoral learning spaces into segregated spaces for Hispanic and Latino/a learners (Ramirez, 2017).

According to Ramirez (2017), reasons for this occurrence may include, "institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism in the doctoral training process" (p. 36). Ramirez (2017) pointed out that HLL often face stereotyping in doctoral programs, and consequently, encountered low faculty expectations, which were informed by racist and classist prejudice toward working-class students of color; unequal access to professional development opportunities; lack of minority [particularly Chicano/Latino(a)] faculty; and lack of recognition for and validation of scholarly accomplishments, qualifications, and academic potential of doctoral students of color (p. 35).

The authors believe that improving understanding of the historical context of the challenges that Hispanics and Latino/as face may shed light on bettering culturally sensitive inclusive learning spaces and learning conditions. The purpose of this best practices article is to start a conversation about potential approaches for not only including, but also embracing HLL perspectives and knowledge in scholar-practitioner programs. Professional programs such as Doctor of Education programs should include nurturing channels for HLL knowledge to emerge and be embraced in doctoral learning communities.

In the next section the authors provide an historical perspective of Hispanic and Latino/a learning and discuss the benefits of inclusive pedagogies, which encourage cultural diversity and Hispanic and Latino/a participation in doctoral programs.

### **Hispanics and Latino/as from a Historical Perspective**

Although the first Hispanic and Latino/a settlements were developed in Florida, Texas, and New Mexico back in the 16th century, Hispanic and Latino/a historiography is a relatively new scholarly field of study. Beginning in British colonial times, Hispanic American historiography showed prejudiced attitudes towards Spanish-speaking populations (MacDonald, 2001). While Hispanophobia of American history prevailed until the first half of the 20th century, there were the two events: (1) The Mexican American War of 1846-48, and (2) The Spanish American War of 1898 that played a significant role in developing negative attitudes towards the peoples of Spain and the Spanish colonies. The results of these historic events reshaped American education which was based on the British-Colonial Education System and was under the control of English-speaking American governmental agencies which in turn resulted in forming anti-Catholic Spanish discrimination in American society. This resulted in historians relying upon biased English-language educational documents.

Beginning in the 1960s, the civil rights movements during which students demanded the opening of "Chicano Studies" and "Puerto Rican Studies" at the colleges and universities boosted the emergence of Latino/a studies and history. Increasingly by the 1980s, there were more critical analyses and in-depth studies of Latino/a history (MacDonald, 2001). While the situation slowly improved, more scholarly research addressed the problems and needs of the Hispanic and Latino/a populations. It is imperative to continue investigating the potential and existing obstacles for further Latino/a integration into American society.

Education can play a decisive role in this process. According to Gándara and Contreras (2009), "education is the single most effective way to integrate burgeoning population of Latinos into U.S. economy and society" (p.13). The authors suggested that investing in the education of the growing Latino/a student population would be beneficial for all Americans as a nation. The importance of English language proficiency for HLL is hard to underestimate. While American educators widely implemented English Language Learning (ELL) programs in schools and colleges nationwide to support the social inclusion of immigrant students and assimilation, the researchers argued that this is not enough to ensure the high educational performance of HLL. The American school models hardly consider the cultural diversity of immigrant students, which

complicates the entire process of their integration into society (Lash, 2018; Stromquist, 2012). Moreover, classic theories of assimilation that were built on replacing the cultural identity with Anglo-European cultural and linguistic norms cannot satisfy the needs of the immigrant populations, particularly the Latino/as, which means that schools and colleges must make changes to their teaching programs to better reach diverse student population (Lash, 2018).

One avenue for educators to meet these challenges is to consider culturally responsive pedagogy, a student-centered approach in which teachers include the students' culture in all aspects of teaching and learning decisions (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching also prepares students to live in a pluralistic society (Howard, 2007). Villegas and Lucas (2002) suggested that the learning process's foundation should be based on students' personal and cultural experiences to better facilitate learning. Culturally responsive educators should critically examine the curriculum to determine whether they replicate all demographic, social, and cultural characteristics of the diverse student groups (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and HLL in particular. Researchers asserted that using cultural knowledge to choose appropriate strategies for teaching various ethnic groups could result in better student achievement (Au & Mason, 1981; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). After an extensive review of research from a period of fifteen years, Harper and Hurtado (2007) discovered that colleges and universities that supported diversity and culturally relevant educational strategies and activities not only provided social and cognitive development of ethnic minority students on campus but also improved the communications between students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Indeed, designing positive inclusive experiences for HLL contributes to acknowledgment and acceptance of differences and leads to better student integration. To provide an example, Hernandez (2002) conducted a study with 10 HLL college students. The author outlined the four significant factors that determined the social and academic achievement of HLL: academic and social adjustment, family support, active participation opportunities, ethnic and cultural identity. Other scholars also supported these findings (e.g., Sears et al., 2003; Rivas-Drake, 2008) and emphasized that a strong sense of ethnic and cultural identity helps to improve the social status of HLL and significantly contributes to their social and academic success.

## Discussion

In this paper the authors attempted to discuss potential new directions that can help to modify the existing scholar-practitioner Doctor of Education programs in such a way that these programs can be culturally meaningful and inclusive to reach diverse and globally minded communities of Hispanic and Latino/a learners (HLL). This paper also placed a call for academia, particularly leaders within Doctor of Education programs, to embrace new scholarship and expand non-traditional knowledge within doctoral education programs. Hispanic and Latino/a learners (HLL) bring a diverse range of experiences and knowledge that comes from around the globe.

The authors provided a traditional historical picture of how HLL may be stereotyped. Its goal was not to further marginalize this population but to provide a window of understanding into the HLL's present reality and historical background. Creative directions and new perspectives towards making scholar-practitioner Doctor of Education programs accessible to broader audiences, particularly marginalized and underrepresented ones, may ultimately lead to improving practice for all and not only become mere academic jargon. This paper does not suggest abandoning traditional knowledge, instead it suggests creating conditions for multiple realities and knowledge to emerge and be embraced.

The authors of this paper seek to start a conversation about allowing diverse ideas, that go beyond traditional knowledge, and the standardized often discriminatory formats that inhibit human development and learning in Hispanic and Latino/a students in our diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. It suggested that it is about letting legacy emerge. It is about creating societal memory that is authentic and true to the knowledge creator. Designing culturally inclusive spaces may be an excellent start to foster that knowledge. Some may argue that the norm appears to be that we need to forget the old to embrace the new. The authors argue that traditional knowledge, as we know, does not need to be forgotten. We can use its fundamental principles, or not, tandem or not with new learning. It is about the legacies we will leave behind for new generations. Concerning these legacies, from an interpretative perspective, there is no best or worst, and these perspectives may be unique but should be honored, and most importantly, reflect the knowledge and ethnic composition of our culturally diverse society.

## Conclusion

To close, we have already determined that our learners and context are changing. Yet, Doctor of Education program reform policies that address inequalities are not keeping pace with social change. Implementing reforms is near impossible without the support of educators. To empower all learners to meet the demands of the 21st century and address demographic changes, it is evident that leaders in charge of Doctor of Education programs will need to facilitate dialogue about inclusive pathways to follow in the design of learning spaces and the improvement of conditions for Hispanic and Latino knowledge to emerge in Doctor of Education programs. Most importantly, these leaders will have to facilitate transformation on other levels as well. They will have to be mindful of the many challenges and barriers affecting learners. These barriers range from social-economic challenges to cultural and racial inequality. Dialogues and adaptive leadership principles may offer diverse perspectives and serve as guidelines to transform educational systems worldwide and empower all learners.

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