

Experiencing Nashville's Immigrant Community
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Unlike the majority of the United States, the Southern United States' recent increase in immigrants is relatively new phenomenon. In the 1980's, immigration laws changed and caused an enormous increase in the number of immigrants in the South. Tennessee was one state that was particularly affected by this increase in immigrants having the immigrant population grow by 400% since 1990 (Kromm, 2014). Today Nashville's unique population has created a culturally diverse community of people from various backgrounds living in harmony. Nashville is currently "the home of the nation's largest Kurdish population, as well as sizable numbers from other countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Eretria and Bhutan"(Hull, 2015). With this diversified population comes a unique challenge for Nashville's public schools. According to Hull (2015), 30% of the students in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools speak another language than English as their first language. Along with the wide varieties of languages represented are a number of cultures with their own unique traditions and customs.

One community in particular that has thrived in Nashville for many years is the Spanish-speaking community. Many people from South and Central America have moved their families to the Nashville area because of the abundance of opportunities for them here. Many of these people have used their enduring entrepreneurial spirit to begin their own businesses and have created their own communities across Nashville. In the south corridor of Nashville along Nolensville Road, the Spanish-speaking community has found their home among many other cultural groups. Here you can find several shops and restaurants all developed by their community. One community resource available to this group is Casa Azafran. (Appendix A and B) Casa Azafran is a community resource made up of a health clinic, legal services, a kitchen work space, an art gallery for local artists, and many other valuable amenities. The organization

has created a safe place for people of the Spanish-speaking community as well as other cultural groups to come to to build a new life here in Nashville. It provides support for people who are struggling economically to make the most of the skills that they have. For example, one sub-organization of Casa Azafran is the Mesa Komal. The Mesa Komal is an industrial kitchen that is available for members of the community to rent out and use to prepare food that they can sell on their own to begin and support their food businesses. (Appendix C)

Through the resources provided by Casa Azafran and other organizations like it the people of the Spanish-speaking community have been able to use the talents and other strengths they brought with them to Nashville in a way that benefits their new lives. As a teacher of English Language Learners including students from the Spanish-speaking community, it is my job to discover these skills that my students have and use them to help teach them. According to Luis Moll's article, "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching" (1992), students come to school with an abundance of knowledge and skills that can be used as leverage to teach students school content. During my visit to Casa Azafran I was able to discover several skills of students that could be used in the classroom. One that I was particularly amazed by was the unique way of telling stories. The administrators of Casa Azafran had used tapestries that students had created as a traditional way of some indigenous tribes' story telling. (Appendix D) Each color and ring around the long strands that hung from a wooden rod told a different detail of a story. It was a way for them to pass down folk tales. When I discovered the meaning behind these works of art, I began thinking of ways I could use them in my classroom. This unique community literacy could be used to teach sequencing, story grammar, visualization, and many other things when

applied correctly. Connecting cultural practices like these to course content is a great way of accessing the skills that students already bring into the classroom.

Although bringing students' culture and already developed skills into the classroom to help them while I teach is important, it is also use these things to connect with families and other community members. To build upon this idea we can look at Allen's (2007) article, "Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home school partnerships with diverse families." In his work Allen (2007) says that there are many ways that we can bring families of culturally diverse students in to our schools to create a more positive learning environment. I discovered one tool during my visit to Casa Azafran that I believe would help bring families from various cultures in. While walking through the space Casa Azafran designed I noticed the unique touches of artwork and design that were representative of various cultures. Having artwork as well as photographs of people from the community around the school would create a more accepting environment for our students and their families.

My time here in Nashville has taught me many things about diverse populations and students that come from them. With such a dense immigrant population, I have been able to truly see how impressive the various communities the different cultural groups have built. Seeing these things has allowed me to think differently about what things my students may be bringing into my classroom. Moving forward, I will be able to use what I have seen and experienced here in Nashville in other communities I plan on working in.

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Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D

