Improving ways United States educators teach immigrant and migrant youth will be the focus of a Fulbright-sponsored project one University of Arizona associate professor in the College of Education is initiating.

Already a nationally recognized scholar for her research on Hispanic students, Toni Griego-Jones, a faculty member in the department of teaching and teacher education, received the prestigious Fulbright/Garcia Robles Scholarship, which is named after Alfonso Garcia Robles, late Nobel Peace Prize winning Mexican diplomat who participated in the formation of the United Nations.

The award and Griego-Jones’ project, “Arizona-Sonora Transnational Teacher Education: Curriculum Development & Research on Classroom Practice,” will take her to Ciudad Obregon in Mexico where she will be hosted by the Instituto Tecnologico de Sonora.

Leaving in August for one year, Griego-Jones will take a look at public school classrooms in Sonora, Mexico – mostly in Ciudad Obregon, but also in rural areas of Sonora – while also teaching a seminar at the Mexico institute about the public school system in the United States.

During her research, Griego-Jones will attempt to understand what beliefs teachers in Sonora have about teaching and will look at the type of materials and strategies typically used to teach classes. She also will study ways Mexican educators teach students a second language topics and issues that have not been extensively studied in the United States.

“Terms like immigrant, immigration and immigrant education were almost completely absent from the mainstream journals in teacher education,” Griego-Jones said.

“There is considerable research in the U.S. about immigration in the fields of anthropology, sociology, labor, health, public policy and environmental concerns, but little research on the impact of immigration on classroom teachers and on teacher education,” she added.

Griego-Jones pointed out that the challenges immigrants face, such as living in poverty and their attempts to learn English, have been the subject of numerous studies. But “we need a deeper look into the professional knowledge that would be helpful to classroom teachers in teaching immigrant students, in this case, Mexican immigrant students,” she said.

Over the last 30 years, teacher education programs have incorporated teachings about student diversity, but such programs must incorporate teachings about the histories and backgrounds of immigrant populations in order to understand the distinctions between the educational backgrounds of Mexican immigrant and native-born Mexican-Americans, Griego-Jones said.

Those who teach immigrant children must have a solid understanding of the children’s backgrounds, particularly in Arizona, which has an ever-increasing immigrant population.

In her project proposals, Griego-Jones wrote: “No public institution in the United States has been more impacted by the increased immigration from Mexico than our public schools. Given that schools are the recipients of Mexican students and, given that teachers are key to effective instruction for all students, teachers need to know more about the prior educational experiences of immigrant students.”

Griego-Jones hopes to eventually publish her research findings from the project in national journals, and she intends to present her work across the country and internationally. She also intends to incorporate her work into the UA’s teacher education programs.

“I anticipate that my research will lead to a better, more practical understanding of the classroom experience that Mexican immigrant and migrant children bring with them when they enter American public schools,” Griego-Jones said. “I hope that the findings about expectations in Mexican schools, about how teachers and students interact with each other there, about the curriculum used in Mexico and about the socio-cultural framework of schooling there will help teachers here.”

Griego-Jones has coordinated a research initiative out of the College of Education made of up faculty and graduate students who study issues relevant to Mexican-American students.

The group, which has been meeting regularly since 2003 to share their research, intends to influence best teaching practices for those who are working with Mexican-Americans and immigrant populations. Several of the group’s members have also published articles on various topics related to teacher education.
“Studying the Mexican public school context is a logical extension of our research on teacher preparation for Mexican-American students given that a significant percentage of Mexican origin students and their parents have their education grounded in that system,” Griego-Jones said.

It’s the type of work, she said, that will not only help education professionals in Arizona, but across the United States.

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