

Sociocultural Perspectives on Interpersonal Relationships in Schools

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This incident happened in my junior year: I got into a confrontation with another girl and ended up getting suspended during the process. While I was still at school, I was taken into a counselor's office and was introduced to Ms. Costello. We started talking and found out that we had a lot in common. Our moms died about the same year, and I remember her saying "Oh, now I'll never forget you!" And she took a post note, wrote my name on it and stuck it on her computer. A lot of things were happening in my life at that time so, yes, it made me put a smile on my face.

Anyways, time went on and I came back [to] school . . . and me and her kind of walked by each other and me thinking that she was going to stop and say "hi!" She passed right by me and didn't even notice me. But what was weird was I know she saw me because she glanced at me. . . As soon as this happened I thought to myself "what the hell!" It was so [awkward]. When this [happened], I kept thinking to myself maybe she has too many students, and she's not good with faces. Then I realize[d] that . . . maybe it was all just fake, the way she acted that day. Maybe she didn't really care, she was just doing her "job" and she will get paid anyways so why would she care if I was remembered? Even to this day, when I see her, she has never said hi once. (Cristina's field notes)

Cristina is a high school student who exemplifies the importance of interpersonal relationships for success in school. She is committed to graduating and entering a professional program to become a medical assistant. She is motivated in her classes, making sure that all of her assignments have been received and recorded for mid-semester grades. But she also reports feeling nervous and uncomfortable in nearly all of her classes.

Cristina's description of her experience with Ms. Costello epitomizes missed opportunities to foster stronger interpersonal relationships in schools, thus investing in student success. Genuine interpersonal relationships are marked by respect for students' ethnicity and race. Missed opportunities do not necessarily happen simply because any particular people in schools—administrators, staff, or, teachers—do not care about their students, but rather because institutional and administrative practices and structures too often inhibit relationships of authentic care, as Angela Valenzuela (1999) describes, among students, adults, and peers in public schools. It requires intentional work to develop meaningful relationships in spite of these dynamics. At the same time, contemporary political issues of charters, privatization, school choice, and high levels of teacher turnover mitigate against developing meaningful relationships in school and these cannot be discounted in explaining why students and teachers are often unable to establish such relationships.

Research tells us that Latino/a students (as well as students from other marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds) succeed in educational environments that support strong social relationships (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Cristina's story illustrates the potential for positive relationships within school, and the negative effect when students lack support and care. Cristina describes how the connection between an adult in school, Ms. Costello, and her was significant, even citing how all the other difficult things in her life made that positive experience more important to her. But perhaps even more significant than the initial positive bond between Ms. Costello and Cristina was how easily it turned sour, and how severely it pained this student. The resulting betrayal further alienated Cristina from school, fueling a lack of trust that school staff truly cared for her. This alienation is consistent in

her descriptions of nearly all her classes, because “to talk in any other class is just nerve wracking,” making her “nervous” that the teacher will say she has given the wrong answer, and causing her to feel “tense.” This tension makes it less likely that Cristina will attend school regularly, endangering her achievement.

This section explores the importance of interpersonal relationships for facilitating Latino/a students’ academic success, focusing on the way that dynamic notions of culture enhance our understanding of these crucial relationships. We discuss two types of relationships that support student success: relationships with adults in schools, and relationships with peers, family, and community members. Supportive social relationships among friends, adults, and families both in and out of school provide young Latinos/as with the grounding, knowledge and impetus to navigate the difficult waters of a highly competitive and often intolerant American society. Social scientists commonly categorize such helpful relationships as social capital (see Portes, 1998). We argue, however, that “culture”—when understood as the meaningful practices people engage in every day—lays the foundation for the development of constructive relationships and thus for the formation of social capital useful for educational achievement. Authentic interpersonal relationships recognize the role that race and ethnicity, among other identities, play in students’ everyday lives. As a consequence, respect for multiple facets of students’ identities help sustain students’ cultural practices.

Crucial to our discussion of culture and its application in schools and beyond is that formal and informal social practices can promote or inhibit constructive social relationships. Institutional practices in particular can inhibit the development of authentic relationships and undermine students’ chances to benefit from social support of their academic success. In contrast, an educational environment that promotes the cultural practices of Latino/a students engenders the interpersonal relationships among students, school staff, and parents that can lead to higher achievement. In what follows, we describe how social capital facilitates educational achievement, focusing on relationships as a form of social capital. We then describe how a comprehensive understanding of “culture” is critical for understanding how Latino/a students develop and access social resources.

Social Capital and Its Cultural Contents

When Coleman (1988) described Asian mothers buying extra textbooks for themselves to learn school lessons before they helped their children, the term *social capital* jumped to the forefront of the social sciences as well as the national imagination. A great deal of research has examined the role of social capital in school achievement (Anyon, 1997; Delpit, 1988; Fine, 1993; Lareau, 1987; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). However, Portes (1998) argues that widespread use of the term has caused inconsistency in its definition and application. He calls for a grounding of the term social capital with a definition forwarded by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), probably the first to apply the term in contemporary sociology. Bourdieu (1986) describes social capital as “durable networks” that are formed through “institutionalized relationships” which distribute resources—whether information, ideas, or opportunities—to those with access to these networks. The power to leverage social resources is a result of a web of social capital: social networks, educational qualifications, institutional connections, and economic resources. These resources allow individuals to access public institutions in economic, educational, political, and employment realms. Bourdieu’s (1986) conception of social capital focuses on its instrumentality for economic and social advancement, including education.

Bourdieu (1986) also emphasizes the cultural processes involved in the formation of social capital, which many contemporary scholars neglect in their treatments of the term. Culture entails the production and maintenance of practices, actions, and relationships that mark and sustain common aspects of identity, group membership and participation in social networks. Through shared cultural meanings and practices, members recognize other members of the same social group and hence those oriented to accessing its network. The distribution of resources among members of a social group occurs primarily through relationships formed in and through cultural practices. The institutionalization of culture and concomitant relations ensures that the network and patterns of participation in it persist over time.

This dynamic understanding of culture is in contrast with the simplified and essentialized version we so often hear about as set values, habits, and characteristics that children inherit and carry around with them like a schoolbag. In this framework of cultural determinism (González, 2008), culture is understood to dictate

peoples' actions so much so that it is used as both predictor and explanation of social outcomes. A discouragingly common example of this is the typical explanation for why Latino/a students do not score as high as White students on standardized tests: "Their families don't value education; it is just a cultural difference." This crude notion of culture too often leads to racial and ethnic generalizations, and concomitant identification of patterns of deficiency—educational, social, intellectual, or moral.

Culture is not a set of fixed behaviors, values, or habits that people of different traditions pass down to their children. Although ethnic, geographic, spiritual, and linguistic traditions are certainly important to how people construct their identities, these are neither fixed nor dictated by their "culture"; instead, we are concerned with peoples' ongoing and co-constructed social practices. This processual conception of culture in turn allows us to see social capital as adaptive and created through enduring and shifting processes of social agency. As a result, social capital can be understood as prospective, bearing the potential for on-going construction of relationships and knowledge building that support peoples' increasing ability to benefit from social institutions. Our conception of social capital is marked by adaptability, resilience, and dynamic social relationships that are mutually constructed in continuous negotiation across sociocultural contexts.

Sociocultural Capital in Latino/a Education

Constructive interpersonal relationships are crucial for success in school. When students experience support and respect from adults in their school, it increases their connection to their school, fostering higher achievement. In addition to support from adults, peer relationships can facilitate academic achievement and serve as key assets for many students. When young people are surrounded by friends who are academically oriented it increases their ability to attain success. In both cases, however, positive interpersonal relationships acknowledge and respect students' race and ethnicity.

A high level of respect for students' families, communities, and culture is one of the most effective means to tighten personal bonds among students, teachers, and parents (Cammarota, 2008; Delgado-Gaitán, 1991; McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998; Nieto, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). But these relationships cannot function to encourage resilience if they challenge or denigrate the person's cultural practices or the value of their role in them. They must be consistent with and supportive of students' cultural practices and identity. The "funds of knowledge" framework (Moll et al., 2005) in which educators build on the cultures and experiences of students and their families is unfortunately another example of a missed opportunity because too often educators fail to validate and expand on the languages and knowledge that students bring to school.

Valenzuela (1999) describes well how institutional practices and structures can undermine students' existing capital, and inhibit the genuine relationships that support students' achievement. The administration in Valenzuela's (1999) study fosters an anti-Mexican environment, inhibiting substantive relationships with adults in the school, as well as the flow of intergenerational social networks.

The development of positive social relationships, and thus the acquisition of social capital, occurs through what Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes as "network orientation," or how people perceive both the value and purpose of that network and its corresponding capital. In describing network orientation, Stanton-Salazar (1997) advances our understanding of interpersonal relationships beyond common conceptions of social capital. This type of network orientation exemplifies how students may overcome constraining circumstances while positing culture as the key to equipping them to successfully negotiate mainstream institutions. But Stanton-Salazar's (1997; 2001) conceptualization excludes the myriad forms of cultural agencies and practices in which people engage as they transform their subjectivities and aspects of their orientations. This omission places at risk the crucial recognition that network orientations are mutually constructed social practices, and can be the locus of agency and cultural production.

We argue that a "network orientation" is linked to an individual's perception of their role within the cultural group, and how they see themselves as bearing potential to benefit from and, in the case of education and future economic benefits, eventually contribute to the capital available to members of the group. A fuller understanding of individual agency and cultural production are necessary to appreciate how a network orientation

is continually constructed among individuals and within groups, thus enhancing the formation of social capital.

Peer Groups, Family, and Community as Social Capital

Valenzuela (1999) argues that a nuanced cultural understanding of social capital is especially appropriate for “highlighting the effects of breakdowns or enhancements in the flow of school-related information and support” that students and their parents have access to in schools (p. 27). Yet the school administration in Valenzuela’s study fostered “a powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification, or de-Mexicanization” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 161). Because of the curriculum, teacher attitudes, and administrative and language-limiting policies in the school, being or acting Mexican, including speaking Spanish, was fraught with tension; as a result, many students ultimately attempted to minimize their association with Mexican people and social characteristics. These decisions may inhibit later generations from interacting with first-generation immigrants, whose networks function as academic social capital.

Valenzuela (1999) found that a “pro-school ethos” is critical to student achievement, and is facilitated by affiliation with academically oriented peers and access to exchanges such as homework sharing, computers, and study groups. She observed that “academic competence thus functions as a human capital variable that, when marshaled in the context of the peer groups, becomes a social capital variable” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 28).

Peer groups can serve as a major form of social capital for students seeking academic attainment. An example from our research illustrates our discussion. We identified a group of eight first-generation Latina students from a Tucson high school which we refer to as the A.N.A., for “accommodate not assimilate” (a term first used by Margaret Gibson, 1988); this is in reference to the fact that these students are accommodating the behaviors that school requires for academic success, but also identifying themselves firmly as Mexican, without assimilating to mainstream cultural or language practices (Gibson, 1988; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2008). These students sat in the front of the class, were rarely absent, remained focused on class discussion and activities, and excelled in their research assignments. They were all academically-oriented immigrant females who were preparing themselves not only to graduate but also to enroll in college.

Several characteristics of this group mark it as a site for the development of social capital among members. They supported each other not only as friends, often discussing matters pertaining to family and personal relationships, but they also helped each other with school assignments. It was not uncommon, when one of these students questioned the teacher or indicated that they did not understand, that one or two others would lean over and explain in Spanish. They shared information about homework, college recruitment and preparation, teachers, and which classes to take. The A.N.A.’s enacted their cultural identity by always speaking Spanish, and by seeking out and including in their circle recent immigrants who might otherwise struggle to “learn the ropes” at their new school.

Members of the A.N.A. peer group reflected very different academic abilities, from students receiving top grades to those barely passing. Much of this variation may be due to differences in English fluency; those students who struggled most in their classes had emigrated here more recently and were minimally able to engage in academic discussions or writing in English. The wide range of formal academic achievement means that higher achieving students were sharing their knowledge—redistributing their social capital—among struggling students. Research has long demonstrated that ability grouping reinforces failure among so-called “at risk” students (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Oakes, 1985). This group exemplifies how peer groups can overcome structural challenges to learning, generating new capital among members of the group who need it. Regardless of formal academic success, all of the A.N.A. students were supported in their efforts at school achievement through a social network that was based on—not in spite of—their cultural identities.

In addition to peer groups, networks located among family and the ethnic/cultural community may provide the emotional and cultural resources to counter the alienation and psychological distress that derive from structural antagonisms and institutional barriers. In other words, bonding culturally with others facilitates mental and emotional resilience and strengthens coping strategies; these can enable people to withstand the

structural constraints and institutional oppression that lead to adversarial stances and prevent young people from developing constructive relationships they need for institutional resources. Furthermore, communities and families can build supportive networks and provide cultural resources to break through the institutional barriers that prevent students from establishing relationships with resourceful agents. Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera (2005) have found that “for youth in communities, social capital is closely linked to connections with community-based organizations, intergenerational partnerships, and participation in broad networks of informational exchange about political issues, ideas, and events” (p. 33).

Teacher-Student Relationships

In Guererra’s class, I feel important. Like, he cares that I’m there and stuff . . . I don’t feel like he is pushing me out like the other ones. Like the other teachers are so negative. They are like, “if you miss one more day, you won’t graduate.” He’s not like that. He has **never** said that to me, ever. He’s just, “Mija, make sure that you are doing something” you know, trying to help me. . . I feel like I do better because [Mr. Guererra] cares. That’s one of the main things, why I like the class, ‘cause he’s not just there to get paid
It’s different in that class. Like, you feel way more um, important, than just a student in the class.
(Cristina, interview)

In addition to the academically oriented peer groups that exemplify the social capital Latino/a students can develop, the interpersonal relationships they have with adults in schools are central to constructing academic identities. Given that most school time is spent in classrooms with teachers, it is no surprise that teachers represent a primary source of support – or lack of support – for academic development in schools. Teachers who develop genuine relationships with their students have a significant impact on students’ academic orientation and success, as described by Cristina above.

Nieto (2005) expands the notion of a “highly qualified teacher” beyond acquiring subject matter knowledge, teaching and management skills, or a passing score on a state or national certification exam, to include the formation of relations of trust with students, especially when those students who are “vastly different from them in terms of background and experiences” (p. 7). Those types of trusting social relations may be established in a variety of ways, but generally include teachers respecting and taking an interest in the students and their particular experiences and connecting their teaching to those lived experiences, while establishing high expectations for academic learning (e.g. Rosebery & Warren, 2008).

Based on her interviews with outstanding teachers, Nieto (2005) posits several essential qualities that characterize their teaching. Among these qualities is teachers’ willingness to question mainstream knowledge, whether this knowledge is found in mandatory textbooks, or otherwise sanctioned by authorities. This implies that teachers must also be constant learners, and continue developing professionally, enhancing their knowledge. A second characteristic is a disposition to love and stand in solidarity with students. As Nieto (2005) writes:

...it seems almost maudlin to speak about [love in relation to teaching], as if it were inconsistent with professionalism and academic rigor. Yet it is well established that teachers who love their students and feel solidarity with them also develop strong and meaningful relationships with them, an essential ingredient for students’ affiliation with school. (p. 206)

A third characteristic is what Nieto (2005) calls “a passion for social justice,” that is, a motivation to engage issues such as racial discrimination, economic disparities, and other negative conditions in their schools or neighborhoods. It is the ideals of social justice and equity that help sustain teachers in the profession, even under difficult or foreboding circumstances, or in the face of resistance from peers or administrators to their emphasis on such principles. All of these characteristics also inform the instructional practices, or pedagogy, offered in schools, an issue to which we now turn.