

## Instructional Practices and Approaches

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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)

As documented in the demographic data presented earlier in this review and as demonstrated through Noemi's words above, large numbers of Latinos/as have not experienced academic success as measured by traditional indicators such as high school and college completion. In addition to addressing structural barriers impeding academic success, reversing this deleterious trend involves providing Latino/a students with genuine access to rigorous and culturally responsive curricula that respond to the material conditions of their lives. Unfortunately, too many Latino/a students languish in classrooms and schools where this is not the case.

In this section, we examine some of the historical instructional approaches that have been used with Latino/a students, and we analyze the impact these have had on their educational experiences and outcomes. We also highlight some participatory action research projects and culturally responsive pedagogy as promising instructional practices that have the potential to transform students' personal and professional trajectories as well as empower them with the skills to meaningfully participate in and transform society so that it is more inclusive and just. Drawing on these approaches provides a stunningly different vision for Latino/a education than is currently the case, one that can serve as a vehicle for both personal transformation and community empowerment.

### A Brief Historical Overview of Instructional Strategies Used With Latino/a Students

The educational experiences of Latino/as have been characterized, among other realities, by segregated classrooms and schools, limited access to qualified teachers, corporal punishment, and "sink or swim" approaches to language learning. Historically, for example, Mexican Americans in the southwest were prevented from attending "Anglo" schools with better facilities and curricular materials. Parents and community members organized to combat the segregation of Mexican American students, winning important legal battles in Lemon Grove, California in 1931 and throughout the southwest, marking the first victories against school segregation policies and establishing legal precedent for the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (MacDonald & Monkman, 2005).

In Puerto Rico, during some periods of the U.S. colonization of the island beginning at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, schools were forced to operate in English, a language spoken by few of the students or teachers. The schools were renamed after famous figures in U.S. history, and the school curriculum was changed to introduce Puerto Ricans to the espoused benefits of American culture (Negrón de Montilla, 1975). In fact, English was imposed as the major language of instruction until 1949, more than five decades after the U.S. acquisition of the island. The education of Puerto Ricans on the mainland United States through the mid-twentieth century was equally problematic, characterized by instructional practices based on deficit perspectives (Flores, 2005),

corporal punishment for speaking Spanish in school (Cockcroft, 1995; Nieto, 2007), and discipline practices that have limited students' access to appropriate instruction (Drakeford, 2004).

Basing their perceptions of Latino/a students on standardized test scores as well as stereotypical, racist notions of Latino/a academic capabilities, teaching practices in these classrooms were often reflective of perceived low-levels of intelligence. While students in the upper tracks were being prepared for higher education or White-collar positions in the workforce, the education of most Latino/a students prepared them for menial jobs in the service industry that provided few, if any, opportunities for upward mobility. For example, according to Cockcroft (1995), in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the *California Guide for Teaching Non-English Speaking Children* encouraged teachers to comb their students' hair, clean their faces, and present them to the class with the words ‘Look at José. He is clean’” (p. 29).

While past approaches to teaching Latino/a students may seem deplorable, there is evidence to suggest that despite efforts to change the situation, the current climate for Latino/a students is also oppressive. For example, as a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 – the federal legislation that purports to improve the performance of all students through the use of standardized tests – many teachers in schools labeled as “underperforming” have narrowed their curricula to focus solely on the content that will appear on the state tests. This “test prep pedagogy” (Rodriguez in Liou, 2008) approach to teaching and learning has resulted in the elimination of “specials,” that is, classes such as music, art, and physical education, among others. In some schools, even science and social studies (subjects not yet included in the tests) are sacrificed. In addition, many school districts have purchased curricular materials based on “skill and drill” approaches that simulate the skills students need to pass the test while they ignoring the critical thinking and other skills that students need if they are to become active participants in a democratic society. Schooling for many Latino/a students has thus become a barrage of test preparation rather than meaningful learning. Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress, or *ayp* (determined in part by scores on standardized tests which are fraught with problems including cultural bias; see, for example, Abedi & Gándara, 2006), are often penalized. Consequently, structural inequalities are exacerbated, making it more difficult, if not impossible, to provide students with the same facilities and resources as their more privileged peers.

The stated goal of NCLB – to close gaps in achievement between White students and “minority” students – is a positive one. Yet, because of its focus on testing and Standard English literacy, NCLB has been particularly harmful for recent Latino/a immigrants for whom English is not a primary language (Rodriguez, 2007). Although NCLB is a relatively new law, it has had a devastating impact on instructional practices, and has resulted in metaphoric leaks along what some scholars have referred to as the “educational pipeline” (De Jesús & Vázquez, 2005; Yosso, 2006), further exacerbating the dropout crisis and low achievement levels described earlier.

While the situation is dire, there have been rays of light within an otherwise dismal picture. An emerging body of literature highlights the journeys of Latino/a students who have been able to successfully navigate the system (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2005; Conchas, 2006; Gándara, 1982; Gándara, 1995; Irizarry & Antrop-González, 2007). This literature challenges deficit perspectives regarding Latino/a students and families, making important contributions to our understanding of underachievement by examining factors that might instead foster high academic achievement. These factors include some of the social and cultural support networks described in other sections of this paper. Understanding the factors that contribute to student success can help researchers and practitioners create learning experiences that promote achievement among Latino/a students. In what follows, we discuss several promising practices and innovative approaches to Latino/a education.

## **Promising and Innovative Approaches to Latino/a Education**

Numerous research projects have documented the adverse impact of schooling on Latino/a students (Conchas, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Quiroz, 2001; Trueba, 1998; Valdés, 2001). Several studies point to specific aspects of schooling – including culturally insensitive teachers and administrators, curriculum that is disconnected from the histories and lived experiences of Latinos/as, and poor learning environments – as root causes for Latino/a underachievement (McQuillan, 1998; Nieto, 2007; Noguera, 2007). As a result of these conditions, Latino/a students are often disengaged, alienated, and disconnected from school. At the same time,

throughout their history in the U.S., Latinos/as have challenged institutional forms of oppression in the schooling of their children, resulting in research-based, promising approaches. More recently, scholars in the fields of participatory action research and culturally responsive pedagogy have documented the findings of their work, offering new possibilities for Latino/a education. Although not widespread or systematically implemented, there is empirical evidence to suggest that these approaches have positively influenced the educational experiences and academic outcomes of Latino/a students.

## Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Latino/a Students

A promising practice gaining traction within schools serving Latino/a students is culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Also referred to as *culturally relevant* (Ladson-Billings, 1994), *culturally congruent* (Au & Kawakami, 1994), and *culturally sensitive pedagogy* (Jacob & Jordan, 1987), this kind of pedagogy refers to the effective instructional implementation of multicultural education, building on students' cultures to promote their academic achievement. The work of Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas (2002) offers a vision of culturally responsive teaching by describing the characteristics they believe teachers should embody. According to their research, culturally responsive teachers: 1) *are socio-culturally conscious*, meaning that teachers understand that peoples ways of being and thinking are influenced by a variety of factors including race, class, gender and language; 2) *have positive views regarding students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*; 3) *act as agents of change*, embodying a sense of commitment and skills to using teaching as a platform for engaging students in social change; 4) *have constructivist views of learning* where students are encouraged to make meaning of their experiences and academic content; 5) *know their students well* and affirm the “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997) that are present in their students' communities; and 6) *are able to incorporate the knowledge of the students, families and communities* they serve into their teaching. Villegas's and Lucas's (2002) comprehensive overview provides a clear goal for teachers and teacher educators and offers strategies to lessen the cultural conflict that can emerge between teachers and students in diverse classrooms.

Certainly, CRP has the potential to positively influence the education of students, particularly for those whose cultural identities and histories have been maligned or completely disregarded by schools (Nieto, 1998). However, it is imperative that conceptualizations of culture as it relates to CRP remain fluid and multidimensional and avoid essentialization. Notions of fluidity and cultural hybridity have characterized the literature regarding culturally responsive pedagogy for Latino/a students. For example, *centering pedagogy*, a framework introduced by Carmen Rolón (Nieto & Rolón, 1997), “consists of instructional and curricular approaches that begin where students are at—experientially, cognitively, psychologically, and socio-politically—in order to move them beyond their own particular experiences” (Nieto, 2003, p. 54).

To address the fluid nature of culture, Kris Gutierrez and Barbara Rogoff (2003) use a cultural-historic approach to help “researchers and practitioners characterize the commonalities of experience of people who share a similar cultural background, without ‘locating’ the commonalities within the individual” (p. 21). This perspective deliberately describes culture not as a set of fixed traits or immutable characteristics but instead focuses on *cultural practices*. Essentializing culture and further marginalizing members of cultural groups that have been oppressed, they argue, can be avoided by understanding how group members' participation in fluid cultural practices of various communities and their distinct histories and experiences help *shape* – although they do not *determine* – their identities.

Recent research by Jason Irizarry (2007) describes practices that Latino/a students have identified as culturally responsive. Drawing from data collected through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with a group of Latino/a high school students and their African American teacher, Jason Irizarry (2007) posits that culturally responsive pedagogy must be more broadly conceptualized to address the cultural identities of students who have complex identities because of their experiences with peers of many varied identities, those whose urban roots have resulted in hybrid identities, and those who are multiethnic/multiracial.

Although much of the research literature regarding culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on single-group studies (i.e. Mexican-Americans or African Americans), Irizarry (2007) suggests a framework for culturally responsive pedagogy that is rooted in a view of culture as fluid and multidimensional, that is, one that acknowledges

the diversity within and across cultural groups and accounts for the development of hybrid identities. This view of culturally responsive pedagogy calls for teachers to move beyond treating cultural groups as monolithic entities and develop approaches to teaching that acknowledge, affirm and respond to the various sources from which individuals draw to create their identities.

Attempting to explain the low levels of achievement among Chicano students, Enrique Trueba (1991) found that there is a relationship between the support of students' language and culture and their school adjustment. He conducted research in two underperforming school districts in southern California and focused on developing culturally appropriate methodologies for teaching English. In his research, Trueba (1991) found that the teachers in the study, the majority of whom were White monolingual English speakers, had negative views about the potential of their students and did not believe the students could be successful. Nevertheless, when the classrooms were reorganized into smaller communities within the larger class context and built on issues that were important to the students in their writing assignments, students acquired essential literacy skills and made positive changes in their schools and communities.

In addition to documenting the academic benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy, Menchaca (2001) found other positive impacts of a culturally relevant curriculum. Illustrating culturally congruent lessons for Mexican American students, Menchaca (2001) integrated content related to the Mexican American experience in language arts, health, science, and social studies. This included, for instance, using familiar foods in a health lesson about food groups and drawing on students' familiarity with Mexican flora and fauna in teaching science. Like all of the scholars in this review, Menchaca (2001) asserts that learning is most meaningful when it is connected to, and reflective of, the experiences of the learner.

In sum, culturally responsive pedagogies that account for the fluid and multidimensional aspects of culture have the potential to improve the academic achievement, sense of efficacy, and feeling of belonging of Latino/a students. The studies mentioned here, as well as others (Moll, 1992; Wortham & Contreras, 2002), focus on foregrounding the cultural knowledge in Latino/a communities to foster the academic and personal success of students. While still an emerging body of research, CRP suggests that as teachers search for strategies to improve student achievement, it is imperative that their approaches build on students' cultural identities and the strengths students bring with them to the classroom.

## **Examples of PAR as an Instructional Strategy**

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is emerging as a potentially transformative pedagogical approach with Latino/a students. Notably, the work of the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), located at a high school in the Tucson Unified School District (Romero, Cammarota, Dominguez, Valdéz, Ramírez, & Hernández, 2008) enrolls students across three different high schools in a series of credit-earning social science courses aimed at addressing the educational, personal and professional needs of Latino/a students. Using a critical pedagogical framework (Freire, 1970), the project engages Latino/a students in the study of structural issues that impede their access to quality education and obstruct their full participation in civic life. Through participation in SJEP, students conduct research and present their recommendations for addressing issues of social injustice at various community engagements as well as academic conferences and professional meetings. The sites for research include neighborhoods, schools, peer groups, and workplaces so that the students' social contexts are key milieus for study and analysis.

The knowledge gathered in their analyses is not limited to cultural aspects, but also emerges from understanding how social relationships may impede or enhance their life chances (Cammarota, 2007; Cammarota, 2008; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). SJEP's social justice orientation fosters the formation of academically orientated social networks that build on students' cultures to advance school achievement. Contrary to conventional compensatory programs that seek to increase academic achievement by focusing on institutional literacy, the success of this program comes from its explicit embrace of students' home cultures and their intellectual capacities to bring social change to schools and communities.

Another YPAR project engaging Latino/a youth is illustrated in research by Jason Irizarry (2009). Dubbed Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators conducting Research to transform Teacher Education), participants

in this research collaborative critically examine the quality of education in urban schools and develop research-based recommendations aimed at improving the educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for students who have been traditionally underserved by schools. A significant feature of the project is to encourage students of color to consider teaching as a profession. Project FUERTE, therefore, not only aims to transform the preparation of teachers but also to diversify the teaching force by “home-growing” teachers of color for urban schools. Student researchers participating in the project are enrolled in a social science elective course entitled Action Research and Social Change, where they learn skills in conducting research that will simultaneously enhance their academic skills and address issues related to the material conditions and socio-emotional aspects of their lives. Class sessions and assignments focus on generating research questions and learning the skills necessary to answer them. Students are encouraged to draw from a variety of “funds of knowledge” including, but not limited to, existing research in their areas of interest, various electronic databases, and community resources. A primary goal of the course is to familiarize students with the conventions of ethnographic research as a means of exploring the ways in which power and opportunity manifest themselves in urban schools and to consider the implications of their findings for teacher education.

The findings from both of these studies identify and challenge those policies and practices that serve to limit opportunities for personal and academic success among Latinos/as. The work of Romero et al. (2008) and Irizarry (2009) also document positive outcomes for student participants, including increases in academic achievement and the development of critical consciousness. Instead of being positioned as “problems” within school reform efforts, Latino/a student participants in the aforementioned YPAR projects are assets, asserting themselves in decision-making processes that directly impact – yet typically exclude – youth. Moreover, because they are grounded in schools, these projects offer potentially liberatory spaces within institutions that have, by and large, underserved Latino/a students and families.