

Connecting the Interpersonal, Instructional, and Institutional Contexts

Sonia Nieto

University of Massachusetts—Amherst

Melissa Rivera

Hunter College - City University of New York

Sandra Quiñones

University of Rochester

As discussed throughout this paper, many institutional and instructional strategies can facilitate higher achievement among Latino/a students. Many of these are effective partly because of the relationships they foster. But we also want to point out a few concrete examples of supportive constructive relationships. The common thread in these examples is how the school affirms the students' home cultures and ethnicity. When students witness the validation of their culture within the educational process, they connect their home or community identities with an academic identity. Most importantly, the cultural substance of their identities feeds and sustains an academic *persona*, which in turn promotes strong school-oriented relationships among peers, teachers, and parents. The outcome is engaged and interested students who feel their culture is not a deficit but a benefit to their academic achievement.

These examples demonstrate how student learning is not only a matter of positive interactions between some teachers and their students; institutional arrangements also help create the circumstances and the strategic support that may be available for learning. Conchas (2001, 2006) and Conchas and Rodríguez (2008), for example, have analyzed the connection between particular school programs, or academic groupings, and the variability in Latino/a student engagement and learning. As part of a detailed, comparative case study analysis of different school programs in an urban high school, Conchas (2001) showed how the social organization and routines of different programs, which he refers to as their institutional "subcultures," mediate the nature of students' school engagement, the types of support networks available to them, and their perceptions of and relations with each other, all with implications for their formation (or not), of academic identities, and the effort expended on schoolwork.

The program in which Latino/a students were most successful was less individualistic than others, and it fostered not only a common academic vision and goals, but also positive social relations with teachers and fellow students, instilling the program with a sense of community. Latino/a students in the program experienced close relations with high achieving peers both within and outside of their own ethnic group, thus establishing a peer network, who along with the supportive teachers formed a community of learners to help mediate schoolwork and success.

In contrast to the other high achieving programs, Conchas (2001) points out that this program, which had a medical theme, also helped students assess critically the status quo, reflecting upon the role of race, gender and ethnicity in their schooling and future professions, but without inhibiting their educational and personal achievement. The Latino/a students in this program, Conchas writes, "did not suppress their critical consciousness in favor of academic success"; they "affirmed that they expected to become medical professionals despite the racial, class and gender obstacles they would confront along the way" (p. 49). Hence, the program successfully enacted principles of culturally engaged schooling, acknowledging the ways that race and ethnicity bear on students' lives. It is the nature of the culture of the program as defined by its daily practices, along with academic rigor, strong social relations among students and teachers, and individual sense of agency that offers the institutional support and social capital necessary for academic engagements and success.

The Funds of Knowledge approach (González, 1995; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, González, Amanti, & Neff, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) exemplifies how institutional practices can facilitate the types of interpersonal relationships that account for and privilege students' cultures, thus increasing their

likelihood of academic success. In this approach, teachers learn ethnographic research methods and then visit their students' households to document the cultural practices or "Funds of Knowledge" that families use for everyday survival. Families might share their knowledge about informal economic systems, home-based manufacturing, agriculture, construction, or herbal remedies for illness. Once teachers observe and learn how students and their families "live culturally," they are able to initiate more meaningful relationships with their students. This engagement can facilitate the types of interpersonal relationships that allow students to compensate for discord between their school and community environments. Teachers can also integrate their observations into the curriculum and create lessons that are relevant to students, increasing their academic engagement.

Successful schools often engage students in community-based projects that encourage them to analyze their life circumstances and conditions in their communities, such as poverty, gangs, and housing conditions. They provide familial-like school environments, a safe school, and space in which students are encouraged to affirm their racial and ethnic pride (Antrop-González, 2003). For example, Antrop-González (2003) compiled a review of research on successful small, culturally centered charter schools that have become sanctuaries for students, or a "third space," in urban education. These schools provided meaningful interpersonal relations between students and teachers, community support, and a rigorous curriculum that set high standards of students' achievement (Antrop-González & De Jesús 2006).

Some have suggested alternative school options, such as charter schools or public funding for private school vouchers, as a way to right the problems that Latino/a and African American students encounter in the public school system. A number of prominent Latino/a and African American leaders have supported public funding for private school vouchers or school choice, arguing that low-income students assigned to failing inner-city schools should have the ability to choose schools that can provide successful school environments. Cumulative research suggests, however, that just as with public schools, charter and private schools have the potential to fail urban youth who live in poverty, particularly students of color (Antrop-González, in press).

While many small, community-based schools have been successful in re-engaging students, charter or voucher schools that are not associated with a school district often must charge tuition to compensate for the high cost of educating students. These schools must also be accredited by several federal, state, and local agencies and are sometimes forced to comply with the same accountability standards that create structural barriers for public schools. While alternative schools have potential to offer successful schooling environments that can counter some of the structural barriers found in traditional public schools, they also face additional barriers such as lack of capacity, inconsistency in quality across campuses, and high tuition rates.