Conclusion and Recommendations

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As we have seen throughout this paper, the education of Latino/a students is in crisis. At the same time, based on our review of promising practices and creative projects, we also believe that this is a time of great opportunity. There are a number of areas that are especially crucial in improving the education of Latinos/as. Based on our critical synthesis of the literature, in what follows, we briefly address what we see as positive future directions in four broad areas: teacher preparation for diversity, services for ELL and immigrant students, family outreach and community engagement, and school, state, and federal policies and practices.

Teacher Preparation For Diversity

Because of the important role that teachers play in creating culturally responsive environments and learning experiences for students, it is imperative that teacher education and in-service professional development programs develop a vision for improving the preparation of all teachers, and especially those working with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including Latinos/as. The lack of knowledge and readiness to work with such students is at the heart of the problem. For example, a survey of more than 5,000 teachers concerning their preparedness to teach found that fewer than 34 percent had participated in professional development programs focused on teaching students of diverse cultural backgrounds. Even worse, only 26 percent had any training at all in working with students who are learning English (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001). Clearly, teachers who do not know their students or the issues they are facing will find it more difficult to connect with them, and to teach them well.

Successful programs at schools and universities ensure that issues of cultural and linguistic diversity are central to teacher learning. Creating appropriate programs entails overhauling the curriculum and field placements in teacher preparation and the nature of in-service education. For example, rather than passive professional development where teachers simply listen to outside experts, it makes more sense to create a climate in which teachers are active co-constructors of their learning. Also, programs in which school districts partner with universities to offer graduate degrees, and where courses are offered onsite at schools, are another model that has been successful. As we have seen in this paper, culturally responsive pedagogy, an anti-racist climate in schools, research in "funds of knowledge" literature and approaches, and both PAR and YPAR have proven to be helpful in familiarizing teachers with appropriate strategies in teaching Latino/a students and in helping to change institutional structures in schools.

Another way in which teacher preparation programs can improve is by focusing on teaching as a vocation based on relationships. Relationships among students and teachers are central to students' feelings of acceptance and competence. Yet in too many cases, students feel unwelcome and alienated in their schools even to the point that they are reluctant to ask for help from the people who are there to help them. For example, in a recent study, the authors quote a student, Sophia, who said "I wouldn't ask for help because I didn't know anyone in the class…and I thought the teacher wouldn't help me so I just didn't ask" (Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien, 2005, p. 112). If students do not even dare ask for help, how can teachers help them learn? Sophia's words demonstrate

dramatically the need for teacher preparation to focus on promoting relationships as a key element of teaching.

Schools of education and in-service professional development also need to approach teaching as an intellectual endeavor in which teachers view their role in multidimensional ways: as curriculum developers, as researchers of their own practice, and as learners of their students' lives. In this way, teachers also learn to advocate for their students. All of these issues can be included in a quality teacher education program where teachers develop identities as intellectuals and leaders rather than as technicians and test-givers.

Support for English Learner and Immigrant Students

Given the growing number of immigrant and English learners in U. S. schools – the vast majority of whom are Latinos/as – it is imperative that schools offer appropriate support for these students. Unfortunately, in too many cases, newly arrived immigrants and English learners are simply warehoused in special programs ("newcomer" programs or immersion English classes) until they learn sufficient English to be placed in mainstream or general education classes. In the meantime, they lose valuable learning time in other content. In other cases, they are allowed to "sink or swim" by placing them in regular classrooms in hopes that they will soon catch up with their peers. Neither of these is a viable option.

Appropriate programs for immigrant and English learners include English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual programs, intensive counseling, and in-school and after-school support services. Bilingual education, as we have seen earlier in this paper, has been successful in both teaching English and content in the native language. The controversies surrounding bilingual education, however, have meant that many bilingual programs have been curtailed, with at least three states (California, Arizona, and Massachusetts) having eliminated them entirely. Yet, according to Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009),

> Many of the problems of cultural mismatch, lack of understanding of students' social and educational circumstances, and inability to communicate with students and parents who do not have a good command of English could be ameliorated if the schools had more well-trained bilingual and bicultural teachers. (p. 107)

A case in point is Massachusetts, where bilingual education was eliminated in 2002 as the result of Question 2, a voter initiative. The following year, students who had previously been in bilingual classrooms were placed in structured English immersion (SEI) classrooms, the thinking being that they would learn sufficient English to be removed to general education classes within a year. A recent comprehensive study of the effect of Question 2 in Boston, however, found mostly negative results of the change. For example, in the years following this policy change, grade retention among English learner high school students in Massachusetts increased from 17.2 to 26.4 percent yearly; in fact, students of limited English proficiency went from being the group with the lowest dropout rate to that with the highest dropout rate in the city. The study also found that achievement gains were "equivocal at best" (Tung et al., 2009, p. 11). That is, although there were some gains, English learners did not improve in their pass scores in the MCAS, the state's mandated high-stakes test, compared with the steady score increases among English proficient students.

Two-way immersion programs in which Latino/a immigrant and ELL students learn in both English and Spanish alongside their English-speaking peers have proven to be a popular alternative supported by both Latino/a families and English-speaking families. In addition, these programs have resulted in high levels of achievement for both English speakers and Spanish speakers. For example, in a longitudinal study by Elizabeth Howard, Donna Christian, and Fred Genesee on two-way immersion Spanish/English programs (2004), the researchers found impressive levels of performance in reading, writing, and oral language in both English and Spanish. Both native English speakers and native Spanish speakers had very high levels of English fluency, and while native English speakers scored lower on reading Spanish than native Spanish speakers, their oral Spanish proficiency was quite high.

In cases where bilingual education is not an option, ELL and immigrant students should be offered ESL instruction by qualified teachers who have received specialized training in the field. What is clear is that English

learners and immigrant students can no longer be ignored or denied the quality education they deserve.

Family Outreach and Community Engagement

Since the NLERAP project began, a central principle underlying our work has been that community engagement and family outreach are necessary for the improvement of the education of Latinos/as. In fact, as we have seen throughout this paper, when families and communities are significantly involved in the education of the youth, great strides can be made. This has certainly been the case where PAR and YPAR approaches are used, but even in more traditional programs, family and community engagement are key factors in improving the education of students. Finding ways to foster communication between the school and Latino/a families is not only an important step in promoting involvement, but is also a proven strategy in raising student achievement.

Traditional family outreach strategies that work with middle-class families will not always work for families living in poverty, families where English is not the primary language, families that feel uncomfortable in the school setting, or families where the parents have not had the privilege of a higher education. Expecting families to help children with homework, while a laudable goal, may not be possible in families where the parents themselves have not had access to a quality education. Another popular approach, "parent education" workshops, can be condescending because they fail to take into account the expertise and experiences that families already have. Having meetings at times when families cannot attend, or in venues that may be difficult to get to, are also not good approaches.

Teachers and administrators need to think more critically and creatively about what it means to involve families in the education of their children. This means taking into account the talents and skills that families possess, and finding more respectful ways to encourage them to become active in their children's schooling. It also means welcoming other community members and resources into the school, whether individuals, or community organizations. These approaches tend to be much more helpful and successful than assuming that families are not interested in, or committed to, the education of their children.

School, State, and Federal Policies and Practices

Policies and practices at the school, state, and federal levels also need to be addressed if the education of Latino/a students is to be improved. Although limited space does not permit us to address adequately all the policies and practices at each of these levels, in what follows, we focus on several crucial areas.

At the school level, the nature of the curriculum, the pedagogy used by teachers, and the counseling services offered to students have a tremendous impact on the experiences and life chances of Latino/a students. Throughout this paper, we have seen that the curriculum offered in many schools has little to do with the realities of Latino/a students' lives and experiences. Yet time and again, when the curriculum does include these concerns, students have been both more engaged and more academically successful in school. We are not suggesting that the curriculum should focus *only* on students' experiences but rather that it must begin with and honor these experiences. At the same time that they build on the knowledge and experiences in their lives and communities, Latino/a students should also be exposed to a wide-ranging curriculum that is expansive and inclusive of the nation and world.

Another vexing and continuing problem is that the traditional curriculum to which Latino/a students are exposed does little to prepare them for postsecondary education. Too often, students reach their final years of high school without having taken some of the courses required to apply to college. By then, it is too late for some. The implications for counseling services are clear. In fact, in all the successful programs we have reviewed, comprehensive counseling services were a key element in developing a sense of belonging in students, as well as in raising their achievement and preparing them for postsecondary education.

Policies at the state and federal levels also need to be reviewed critically. We have certainly seen the results of the contentious debate over bilingual education in several states where it has been eliminated, but even in cases where bilingual education is available, the quality of the programs leaves much to be desired. Simply offering bilingual programs is not enough; also needed are teachers who have been appropriately prepared in

content and pedagogy, adequate resources to run programs well, and administrative and community support to keep them viable.

Testing policies also need revising. Since the early 1980s, the nation has been gripped in the throes of a standardization movement that has done little to improve the education of students but much to improve the bottom line for test publishing companies. In the process, Latino/a student dropout rates have continued to grow, while their college-going rate lags far behind that of other groups. State and federal laws that mandate rigid testing policies need to be overhauled to take into account the unique needs of Latino/a students, and especially students with limited English proficiency. In addition, because the pedagogy in many schools has been severely restricted as a result of rigid testing policies – particularly in schools in poverty-stricken communities – Latino/a students have been especially hard-hit by these policies. The elimination of the arts, physical education and recess, and in some cases even social studies and science, have left Latino/a students with an even more inferior education than before the obsession with standardized testing began.

Final Thoughts

Given the plight faced by Latinos/as not only in our public schools but also in housing, employment, health care, foster care, and other institutions, it is fair to say that schools alone cannot tackle such massive problems because poverty is often at the center of these problems. It is clear, then, that education cannot be separated from the consequences of poverty, and although this paper focuses on education, some caveats are in order.

Poverty is not simply an individual problem. Instead, poverty is created within a particular sociopolitical context characterized by complex structural problems and inequalities. As a result, confronting poverty is a *community and national responsibility*. While schools have historically been expected to bear full responsibility for educating children who live in poverty, this expectation is both unrealistic and myopic. Schools can, of course, do a great deal, but they cannot do it all. In a recent and comprehensive analysis of factors related to poverty that must be addressed if schools are to provide students living in poverty with a quality education, David Berliner (2009) described six out-of-school factors that greatly affect health and learning opportunities of children: (1) low birth weight; (2) inadequate health care; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics. Until we take seriously the responsibility to improve these conditions, schooling in and of itself cannot solve achievement problems and inequities.

Larger institutional issues shape children's educational experience, and although solving particular crises in the lives of individual children is an important step in improving educational outcomes for those children, it is not enough to turn the situation around for the vast majority. For example, preschool education is not universally accessible to all families. As a result, young Latinos/as as a group attend preschool at much lower rates than any other group of children in the nation, thus placing them behind their peers even before they begin formal schooling. According to the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA 2008), Latino/a children are less likely than their African American and White peers to participate in early childhood education programs. In 2005, 59% of White children participated in center-based preschool education programs, while only 43% of Hispanic children participated. Clearly, universal preschool is one concrete action that cities, states, and the federal government can take to help level the playing field.

Another concrete issue affecting many Latino/a families is homelessness. The stigma associated with foster care, migratory lifestyles, and homelessness influences student disengagement, alienation and non-participation (Keogh, Halpenny, & Gilligan, 2006). One young woman, formerly in foster care, recounted her experiences with homelessness as she attempted college. She described her inability to complete assignments or take an exam and the embarrassment she felt in having to explain her situation to the professor. She stated "…school was so connected to housing, it wasn't funny… I went to the University not looking for sympathy but for them to understand." She further explained, "…okay, now you're going to fail me because now you dropped me a whole letter grade because I didn't turn in one assignment or I didn't take one test… understanding that there's circumstances beyond our control, and I wasn't looking for sympathy but at the same time, I didn't want to tell all my personal business… I'm embarrassed by this" (Perez & Romo, 2009b).

While it is true that larger structural problems such as lack of access to preschool and the growing

problem of homelessness greatly influence student learning, it is also true that schools – and the policymakers, administrators, and teachers who determine what happens in schools – can do a great deal to become places where Latino/a students want to go, where they feel included, and where they can learn successfully. Thus, in spite of the massive structural problems in our society, if we were to address in a consistent and meaningful way such issues as teacher preparation, bilingual and other services for students learning English, and other school, state, and federal policies and practices such as an enriched and multicultural curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, consistent counseling, fair and flexible testing policies, and respectful family outreach and involvement, schools would inevitably become spaces of hope and learning.

Although we have focused on students in this essay, our concern here is also the communities from which they come, for this is the crucible of human development that will ultimately sustain the progressive social change we desire. The socioeconomic and cultural development of our communities in our view is ultimately the road to achieving sustainable and ever greater individual academic achievement. School transformation is a critical component of community development. With community development as the long-term goal, reciprocal support between schools and communities is a beneficial result. Although we have emphasized the community-to school direction in this essay because our focus has been an educational one, we also need to explore the interconnectedness of the school and community for mutual support.

In addition, if neighborhoods, communities, and ethnic/racial groups are understood as sociocultural products of history, they should not be ignored but rather engaged by schools. Approaches to educational improvement that espouse market-based reforms ignore this reality because a one-dimensional conceptualization of education results in marginalizing a potentially – and in our view, in the long run, an essentially powerful – alliance. As Latinos/as we also aspire and claim the rights to the benefits and joys of sociocultural continuity and our identities as life-sustaining and enriching. The right to self-determination is not just enhanced, but is based upon, a community's ownership of history and consequently the future, something that democratic societies should encourage and protect. It is clear that if we do not heed the imperative to connect schools and communities in their mutual improvement, we risk failure even with the most well-meaning of intentions and actions.

The education of Latino/a students is at a crucial juncture, not only for Latino/a students for also for our nation as a whole. As we have seen in this paper, the Latino/a community is growing at an unprecedented rate; at the same time, the academic progress of Latinos/as is either at a standstill or regressing. This is bad news not only for Latinos/as but also for the future of our society as a whole. In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate that there are major institutional and structural barriers that present obstacles beyond the control of students and their families. There are also glimmers of hope and these are evident through the creative programs and approaches we have reviewed, through school environments that nurture students both academically and emotionally, and through the committed and caring educators who make a difference in their students' lives. These glimmers of hope reinforce our conviction that teachers and administrators, Latino/a and other researchers and policymakers, as well as the general public must work collectively to create policies, practices, programs, and school structures that will remove barriers and build upon foundations that promote educational success. Along with policies and practices – and equally crucial – are the personal and collective values and sensibilities among educators and others that insist on educational justice for all students, including Latinos/as.

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