

# **Five Concepts for Counselors to Incorporate in their Work with Latina/o Youth and Parents**

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## **Abstract**

This article is practitioner based and focuses on how high school counselors can facilitate the development of Latina/o youth and parents who on a daily basis face psychological and social issues that confront their lives. My work with Latina/o troubled youth and parents, over a 33 year period, has led me to propose five concepts that can serve counselors to effectively work with low-income Latina/o youth and parents in particular. The five concepts are: (1) connectedness, (2) selfaffirmation, (3) brokering support and trust, (4) internal cognitive restructuring, and (5) investing in resiliency. Through the examination of these five concepts, counselors and educators who are cognizant and culturally sensitive to Latina/o youth and parents will be able to better access education for low-income youth and their parents. The concepts were derived from my reflections of my work, discussions with other high school counselors, involvement with school related committees dealing with troubled youth and their parents, as a MEChA advisor, conducting group counseling sessions, and through specific sessions with parents as they sought assistance in working with their daughter or son.

Over a period of thirty-three years working in an ethnically and linguistically diverse low-income community, as a Chicana/Latina counselor, one is challenged to address all aspects of the aspiring human condition that impact the development of youth and their parents. One is also privy to the amazing experiences that educators and sociologists label funds of knowledge (Moll, 1994) and networks of social capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Among the funds of knowledge and skills students acquire from their parents are biliteracy, bicultural social skills, ability to navigate the social and multicultural dimensions of the dominant and ethnic communities with minimal hesitation or fear, and the ability to support family and friends as they negotiate social, medical, psychological and economic issues of daily hardships (Ruiz, 1997). These social experiences and knowledge are learned and lived by low-income Latina/o youth and parents. Yet, over time these learned experiences and acquired skills by ethnically and linguistically diverse youth and

parents go unrecognized by the educational and broader community as Latina/o youth and parents journey through adolescent mazes of development (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006).

This article is written for practitioners and focuses on how high school counselors can facilitate and support Latina/o youth and Latino parents who daily face social and educational obstacles that confront their lives and often their survival. In my professional experience in working in one of the poorest communities in the Southwest, I learned that we need to connect with youth and parents, reaffirm their sense of self, intervene to broker their school success, facilitate their awareness of how they perceive themselves and others, and support their resiliency in tackling the conditions that challenge their lives.

Specifically, reflecting on my work in a low-income community, I will examine five concepts that can contribute to school personnel recognizing the funds of knowledge

and skills of Latina/o high school youth and parent, namely: (1) connectedness, (2) self affirmation, (3) brokering support and trust, (4) internal cognitive restructuring, and (5) investing in resiliency. Why are the five concepts important to low income Latina/o youth and their parents? Because through the application of these five concepts counselors and educators who are cognizant and culturally sensitive can empower Latina/o youth and parents to better access education and navigate the educational system.

### **Background on the Educational Condition of Latina/o Youth and Low-income Parents**

A brief rationale of the need to empower Latina/o youth and parents can be found in the community environments that are characterized by high levels of victimization, high unemployment rates, family incomes below the poverty rate, low home ownership rates, and a limited community economic infrastructure (Reyes, 2001)). Because of these conditions, schools often have low academic expectations that are driven by a compensatory curriculum, and have teachers who are recently credentialed (Nieto, 1999; Valdez, 2000; Weiss & Stephen, 2009). Furthermore, schools attended by low-income Latina/o youth and parents consistently face losses of human resources as educational institutions struggle to connect with youth and parents. Among the greatest concern are the high dropout rate of low-income Latina/o youth and the unfamiliarity of parents on how to intervene on behalf of their daughter/son. Nationally, Orfield (2004) reports that the dropout rate is a long-standing indicator of youth and parents' inability to connect with their local schools. Orfield also report that not only do young adolescents face an array of disadvantages, but also they are paid significantly less in the labor market, their employment opportunities are scarce, their literacy skills are low, and their opportunity to enter postsecondary education limited. Nevertheless, within the context of lowincome conditions, youth and parents demonstrate resilient conditions that enable families to confront social, economic and educational

issues that disempower their lives. Moll (1994) documents how family's networks work together to pull resources and information and rarely function in isolation because the social relationships they established facilitate an exchange of goods and services. In these social networks families collaborate with one another, use their knowledge and social and intellectual assets to address social problems. Culturally competent school counselors can tap into these community networks and funds of knowledge as they work with families and "at risk" Latina/o students (Bagley & Ackerley, 2006). As school personnel connect with families' funds of knowledge and begin to transform their relationship with families and students they can avoid the deficit trap of assuming that these families are somehow devoid of abilities, skills or caring.

As counselors working with bicultural students and low-income Latino parents, recognition of their cultural, academic, and psychological dimensions need to be incorporated into their educational development. This requires an understanding of cultural capital. The concept of cultural capital, popularized by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), has to do with the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to another. It includes ways of talking, modes of interacting and acting, socializing, forms of knowledge, values, and language practices. McLaren (2000) points to how schools often value and reward those who exhibit the dominant cultural capital, frequently exhibited by school personnel, and devalue the cultural capital of students who occupy subordinate class positions. Bernard (2004) argues that academic performance often represents not individual competence or lack of ability on the part of parents or students, but the schools depreciation of their cultural capital. The result is that the school's academic credentials are linked to an unjust system of trading in cultural capital, which is then transformed into economic capital as working-class students become lesslikely to get high-paying jobs.

In the case of Latina/o low-income youth and parents, Trueba (2002) argues that unique skills and flexibility are required to manage multiple identities. Whereas Latinas/os have often been seen as lacking the necessary cultural capital to succeed in the mainstream population, Trueba argues that those individuals who can best manage multiple identities and thus function in an increasingly diverse society in fact possess more cultural capital. The ability to master different languages, to cross racial and ethnic boundaries, and general resiliency to endure hardships can be recognized as a new form of cultural capital rather than a handicap. For school counselors to shift their perspective on how they view bicultural youth and Latino parents, one needs opportunities to engage in what Freire (1998) calls a reflective process that explores, names, and questions their work with low-income parents and “at risk” Latina/o troubled youth. If novice and experienced counselors do not reflect on their beliefs they often judge low-income students and parents based on their personal views of language, culture and privilege. Using the Freire’s (1998) concept of *social consciousness*, through reflection, dialogue and action, negative educational views can be changed. This requires school counselors to find spaces within their workload to be cultural brokers within the larger educational and cultural structures of their school communities rather than dispensers of information. Discussion of Five Concepts to Empower Latina/o Youth and Parents My work with Latina/o troubled youth and parents, over a 33 year period, has led me to propose five concepts that can serve counselors to effectively work with low-income Latina/o youth and parents in particular. The concepts were derived from my reflections of my work, discussions with other high school counselors, involvement with school related committees dealing with troubled youth and their parents, as a MEChA advisor, conducting group counseling sessions, and specific engagement with parents as they sought assistance in working with daughter or son.

Often my group counseling sessions used a reflective process that required participants to think through all aspects of concerns about their schooling—both their connectedness and disconnectedness. Furthermore, I kept a notebook with my reflections. Every quarter, I reviewed my reflections that were subjected to both thematic and critical analysis in order to better understand my sessions with youth and parents. Using ethnographic techniques my notes and reflections were coded for patterns of issues—this led to the formulation of the five constructs that I propose need to be part of the counselors awareness in working with “at risk” youth.

These five enabling concepts are: (1) connectedness; (2) self-affirmation; (3) brokering support and trust; (4) internal cognitive restructuring, and (5) investing in resiliency. The five concepts interrelate and are interdependent of one another. I will discuss each of the concepts and highlight their respective value to Latina/o youth and their parents.

### **Connectedness**

The first concept is connectedness and is the idea of having a person, activity, or organization that facilitates a student’s sense of self, personal power, and sense of belongingness. There are students who have not found a comforting niche in their lives, therefore, do not do well in school and often in life. Connectedness has been a significant concern over the past ten years as schools have been forced to deal with students who use violence as a form of seeking attention.

In 1997, after the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, the state of California passed Assembly Bill 1113, which examines the need for securing safe schools. Included in this bill was the concept of students’ connectedness to school, community, and persons that can make a difference in the direction of their lives. I had the unique opportunity to participate in the formation of AB1113 and worked with other professionals in designing possible strategies for student connectedness to school. It is my

belief, based on my experience as a counselor, that if Latina/o adolescents and their parents are offered an honest support base, they will flourish and surpass their own expectations. Yet, Latina/o youth and their parents who are not connected to a positive force in their lives will wander with little or no direction, no clues of how to succeed in school, no knowledge of resources available to them, and no successful alternatives to personal development. My experience working with Latina/o troubled youth and parents has led me to believe that it is imperative for the school counselor to constantly work with parents to connect youth to be positive role models and a positive force on a school campus. How can a school or institution facilitate a student's connectedness? By connecting Latina/o youth and parents to positive experiences, people and opportunities that provide belongingness in the school community. The process takes time, but over a year or two youth become connected to their peers, their parents, the purpose of schooling, and both youth and parents realize that one can engineer one's life and aspirations, complete all high school course credits, and graduate from high school.

### **Self-Affirmation**

The second concept is *self-affirmation* and is the idea of believing in oneself, believing in one's ability to make positive change in oneself, believing in one's power to work towards change in one's environment. Developing a positive sense of self is crucial to one's self-affirmation. When Latina/o adolescents and their parents experience a number of negative situations in a school setting and in the school community over a period of time, it will be a very slow process in building their self-esteem. There are often doubts as to one's intelligence and learning abilities when one has a pattern of perceived failures. A counselor must slowly and constantly build a trust base with Latina/o youth and their parents in order to rebuild their faith in themselves and to help create new successes in their lives. How can this be done? It is a process of engagement, building trust and relationships, and small

successes through experiencing incremental and positive accomplishments. The task of building trust to begin working on self-affirmation is an ongoing process of getting youth and their parents to believe in their development. At one point in time they begin to make decisions, to improve their sense of self-affirmation, academic potential, and develop a sense of self reliance.

### **Brokering Support and Trust**

The third concept centers on brokering support and trust. Many Latina/o adolescents and parents do not see high school as a trusting agency and do not trust the intentions of teachers and school personnel. Brokering support and trust consists of supporting and advocating on behalf of youth and parents, providing information and opportunities, encouraging, and enabling them to understand the personal dilemmas that we all confront, and how the process of schooling works. Brokering and trust building is also a very slow and time-consuming process. It is the process of showing authentic and honest availability, finding time to engage with youth and parents, and showing respect for their concerns and well-being. Consistency, honesty, finding spaces in the school day, and often, the use of humor are key elements to brokering support and trust. If one is to establish trust, a counselor must be willing to put in time to build an honest trust level with the adolescent and their parents. When they have had nothing but negative experiences with school officials, whether it has been with teachers, administrators, or support staff, they have built a level of cynicism with school personnel and see the school context as an unwelcoming place. It can be a slow process in convincing Latina/o at risk adolescents and their parents that one is honestly concerned about their development, their personal growth and their academic achievement. As a counselor and educator, one must be willing to be patient over a period of a year or two in building the trust level so that behavior and attitudinal change can take place. As part of brokering for Latina/o youth and parents, a counselor must be consistently and constantly "there" for them. They will test your real commitment and will

need your intervention any time during their day and week. A counselor must have the commitment to stop what they are doing and deal with concerns such as their—fears, conflicting interpersonal interactions, and/or troublesome family relationships. They must see in practice that you will be available for them and will help them to become empowered individuals. How can a counselor find time to broker and build trust in working with troubled youth and parents? By making every effort to find the available spaces of time to broker support when they need one's involvement. As an example, initially a student may be a bitter young person entering high school and expresses that s/he is failing classes to spite their mother or father. Brokering and establishing trust between the student and counselor can begin through a group counseling session or a parent session focusing on how the school system works—an approach that can establish a safe place to share and slowly begin to create dialogue and trust. To be authentic as a person with youth and their parents, a counselor is often challenged to take risks and share their life experiences.

### ***Internal Cognitive and Restructuring***

The fourth concept is internal cognitive restructuring and is the process in which a person is able to deconstruct and reconstruct a world of chaos into one of order for their own personal growth. The concept calls for examining and controlling one's personal situations rather than having chaos control their direction. Restructuring is a very slow process in which a counselor must allow Latina/o adolescents and their parents to take risks, see the consequences of the risks, and move forward with a new goal each time. Oftentimes it is three steps forward and two steps back as it is in life. Many Latina/o adolescents and low-income parents have not had moments in their lives to "stop the world" so that they can reflect and establish goals for themselves, design a plan to meet those goals and internalize the personal power that can result from meeting their goals. It is critical for the

counselor to develop successful experiences for Latina/o adolescents and their parents so they can see short-term positive changes in their lives. They need to see for themselves that they have the power to control the direction of their lives. They must be able to applaud their goal attainment and be ready for the next goal-setting challenge. It is through a goal setting process, for both personal, academic, short term and long term goals that Latina/o adolescents and their parents can begin to internalize their power in restructuring their cognitive development into a forceful, planned life. How can one begin to change a student's and their parent's internal cognition? Given that there are many personal demands and little structure in the lives of youth and parents in low-income communities, one can begin by inviting Latina/o professionals to discuss their road to success, the difficulties they encountered in life and to share how they overcame their hardships. This is an empowering experience. Activities that support parent engagement and student organizations can play a vital role in their lives by being able to help them decipher their internal cognition and begin to restructure their conflicting world into one seeking order and personal growth. In such a process, the counselor must be willing to find time, space and help design short-term and long-term goals, monitor the progress of said goals, provide feedback on the conditions contributing to the success or failure of the goals, and provide on-going personal support of their goals.

### ***Investing in Resiliency***

The fifth concept is investing in resiliency and is the ability to recover quickly from setbacks. Resiliency is also defined as the process of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, overcoming obstacles or adversity, bouncing back from setbacks, and thriving under extreme and on-going pressures without acting in harmful ways (Siebert, 2005). In the case of Latina/o adolescents and their parents one finds that they have struggles in their personal lives that must be addressed in order to transform their social and academic growth possibilities. Yet, as many Latina/o adolescents and their parents deal with their

daily struggles one finds that they have the ability to be resilient in continuing their personal development, regardless of the problems and barriers that they have had to face in their lives. Many have built for themselves the challenge to continue to value school, to continue to find positive experiences in their lives, and to continue to believe in a better life for themselves. Latina/o youth and their parents are stronger than they think they are. They have a sense of resiliency that they do not even think they own. As educators we need to invest time with Latina/o youth and their parents in learning how to nurture their resiliency.

How can we invest in their resiliency? As educators and counselors we must recognize the personal strengths and skills of our bicultural students and parents and apply them to their personal growth. Furthermore, by using the Latina/o youth and their parents' life experiences educators can affirm the resiliency skills that they can transfer into their academic world. It is the counselor who must acknowledge this very special resiliency quality in each Latina/o adolescent and their parent and facilitate successful experiences as they encounter and negotiate their social and academic world.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Over the years, working with Latina/o youth and their parents has been both challenging and humbling. I learned from their struggles, their resiliency, honesty, and willingness to confront their personal issues. Over the years, I have worked with Latina/o youth and their parents, as an advisor to the MEChA high school organization, as a counselor responsible for over 400 students per year, and as an advocate for the development of youth and parents in our school communities. The five concepts derived from my personal reflections over the years and the experience of ongoing counseling sessions with Latina/o troubled youth and their parents have helped me to focus on not losing sight of my work as a counselor, educator, and parent and advocate who can make a difference in the lives of youth and parents. The five concepts presented are

inter-connected. Working on only one concept at a time will not bring the results that working on all five throughout the year will bring. A counselor working with low-income youth and parents must be active in brokering support and trust and work with the whole person, not just the academic part of a person. As educators and counselors we need to be committed to our student and parent school communities. We need to have the vision that our collective work can impact the lives of our youth and parents. Through my work as a high school counselor and educator, I recognized that I could impact the self affirmation of youth and parents. This requires that we remain connected with their lives in the schoolcommunity and in support of their cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Latina/o youth and parents that have problems at school often have problems in their personal lives. This coupling condition must be constantly addressed if internal cognitive transformation of the whole person is to take place. There is no magic solution. Every adolescent and parent has unique personal problems, a unique view of the world, specific concerns and unique strengths. It is the role of the educator and counselor to know their students and their parents work with each on an individual basis, work with them in group settings so that they capitalize on the strength of the group process for support and validation, and be consistently and constantly accessible to them. It is an overwhelming commitment for the counselor, who must believe, honestly and wholeheartedly, in their client's ability to become selfempowered individuals who can design their own destiny.

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