Cultural Identity of Latino Students and Academic Success

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Abstract

While Latino children and youth may initially possess the intrinsic motivation for academic achievement, their future success and the development of their cultural identities is greatly influenced by their communities, schools, teachers, parents and self-view. Through the review of literature, the complexity of and correlation between these influences is explored. While highlighting the negative and positive perspectives of each, the emphasis is on valuing the cultural assets of Latino youth and their families.

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When I reflect on my personal experiences of growing up in predominantly white communities and schools and the factors that drove me to pursue academic success, I recall having a passion for learning. Also present was the desire to attend college and prepare for a career where I could make a difference. As a parent of a 10 year old son, I ponder about what will drive *him* to succeed and how I can most effectively support his preparation for the future. By reflecting on my parents' example and what they provided for me and my younger brother, transferable themes emerge through their response to situations that were beyond their control. Both parents were born into large families who experienced poverty and migrant work, spoke Spanish as their first language and did not progress beyond middle school due to family obligations. They were determined however, to work towards creating a different life by consistently promoting the value of an education and nurturing the potential inside of us. My parents, like many Latino parents, believed we could have hope for the future and maintain a strong awareness of and appreciation for our Mexican heritage. They also recognized that the students and individuals we would become would be influenced by several additional factors. While Latino children and youth may initially possess the intrinsic motivation for academic achievement, their future success and the development of their cultural identities is greatly influenced by their communities, schools, teachers, parents and self-view.

In my current work with Latino adolescents who participate in a TRiO Upward Bound Program, I am challenged daily to further explore these factors. Upward Bound is structurally an academic program but when the students' lives are influenced by much more than homework, persuading them of the value of tutoring, college exploration and career preparation can be

difficult. Thus, reexamining how their family histories and experiences in our community affect their desire and ability to understand, participate in and be successful in school is paramount.

Issue Identification

Violand-Sanchez & Hainer Voland (2006) describe Latinos as a varied ethnic group representing 20 countries, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States. The diversity among the group also reflects a mix of those born in the United States and those who have immigrated (legally and illegally). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001), as referenced by Martinez, DeGarmo & Eddy (2004), Latinos are also the largest and most rapidly growing ethnic subgroup in the United States, growing at a rate of about 4.5 times the rate for the rest of the population between 1990 and 2000. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2000) states that Latino children and youth currently comprise 15% of K-12 public school students in the United States but that by 2025, this could rise to 25% (as cited by Zambrana, Zoppi & De Anda, 2005). While their presence is noticed in rural and urban areas alike, Latino youth and their cultural assets are often overlooked or neglected, particularly in school systems. This can lead to a total disengagement from the educational experience and result in dropping out. According to the 2001 U.S. Census Bureau as cited by Zambrana et al. (2002), Latino youth drop out of school almost four times the rate of White students. Fashola & Slavin (1997) indicate that individual and group factors that contribute to this phenomenon can include low achievement, dissatisfaction with school, a need to begin work early, early pregnancy, high poverty, language issues, and recent immigration status (as referenced by Martinez et al., 2004). Additional factors can include family

responsibilities, lack of participation in pre-school, attendance at poor quality schools, placement into lower-track classes, poor self-image and limited neighborhood resources (Zambrana, 2002).

As a former middle school teacher and in my current work with Upward Bound students, 70 % of whom are Latino, I have witnessed the struggles many have faced and the obstacles they have attempted to overcome in an effort to achieve academically. The perceived or real lack of support for their well-being and futures has also influenced how they define success and how they see themselves. These experiences, combined with the research presented here, provide the opportunity to consider the influences on the development of Latino cultural identity from five perspectives: communities, schools, teachers, parents and students. While the perspectives are distinct, there remains an intricate connection among them and to the academic success of Latino youth. Martinez, DeGarmo and Eddy (2004) suggest that school success is among the most important correlates of overall physical, mental and social well-being. Martinez also asserts that, "School failure is not a random act. Rather it is the consequence of a host of interacting influences that can set children on a trajectory toward a lifetime of difficulties" (Martinez et al., 2004). As educators, we are responsible for examining these influences that prevent students from achieving; however, the additional challenge lies in acting from a social justice perspective in order to bring about systemic change.

Analysis and Summary

Communities

In researching the topic of cultural identity and minority education, several articles reference the work of John Ogbu, professor of Anthropology at the University of California,

Berkeley. In his 1992 article, “Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success”, Ogbu provides a framework for understanding the role of community forces on academic success and how these forces create options and choices regarding school. While these forces differ by minority group, Ogbu describes four factors that are instrumental in understanding school adjustment and academic performance of minority students. He also states these factors are, “…dependent in part on the group’s history, its present situation, and its future expectations” (p. 289). These factors include (a) cultural models, (b) cultural and language frame of reference, (c) the degree of trust minorities have for White Americans and (d) educational strategies that result from these elements (p. 289).

Ogbu defines cultural model as the way in which people understand their world and how this influences their interpretations of events and their personal actions (p. 289). Cultural and language frames of reference can include the differences that existed either before or after a group became a minority (p. 290). The experiences that a minority group has had in its relationships with White Americans can determine the degree to which minorities trust them and the institutions they control (p. 290). Lastly, educational strategies reflect the “the attitudes, plans, and actions minorities use or do not use in their pursuit of formal education” (p. 290). He further summarizes the impact these factors have on schooling by stating the following:

> These differing elements of the community forces…work in combination with societal factors to ultimately produce educational strategies that either enhance or discourage school success. This process occurs in a step-wise fashion as follows: Initially a minority group’s understanding of its place in United States society is partially determined by its initial terms of incorporation (voluntary or involuntary) and subsequent

> subordination; these understandings, in turn, determine the group's cultural model of schooling. Its cultural model also determines the group members' coping responses to the U.S. society as a whole, as well as in a given locality. These coping responses, expressed in the forms of folk theories about making it, and alternative or survival strategies, tend to require and promote adaptational attitudes, skills and role models that may or may not be compatible with the pursuit of academic success. The initial terms of incorporation and subsequent treatment also determine the degree of trust minorities have for the schools and Whites (or their minority representatives) who control the schools. (p. 292)

Ogbu indicates that while it is important to consider the weight of school, classroom and home situations on academic success, it is equally important to consider the role of historical and structural contexts (p. 292). This is true for Latinos, especially when such contexts could include racist ideologies based on the assumption that they are intellectually inferior and/or when there is an emphasis on individualism (Cammarota, 2006). As argued by Cammarota, the culture of individualism explains social and racial inequalities as "…consequences of individual failure instead of emerging from social structures (i.e. ideologies, economic systems, and institutional discrimination)" (2006). This mindset can be detrimental because even if Latino students achieve a certain degree of academic success, they do not experience the same rewards that others, particularly Whites, experience (2006). Steele (1992) acknowledges that this reality is equal to requesting they adhere to a system that has essentially made them invisible (as cited by Cammarota, 2006).

Schools

School systems and school culture undoubtedly play a role in either hindering or promoting Latino students' academic success or sense of belonging. When their success is hindered, it appears to be due to the deficit perspective, or lens, through which they are viewed. Souto-Manning (2007), in referring to her previous work (2006), indicates that this perspective is limited and incorrect because it only draws attention to the skills or background knowledge they may be missing. She also asserts that students are, in essence, seen as culturally deprived because they are deficient in ways that connect them to the mainstream culture (Souto-Manning). Similar to the deficit perspective is the concept of the subtractive schooling process, which Valenzuela (1999) defines as the process that "…divests these youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure" (Gonzalez, 2005). Carter (2006) further explores the related premise of assimilationist ideology and the dangers this entails when it is present in a school environment. Rist (1977) and Sager and Schofield (1984), as referenced by Carter, describe this ideology as one that,

> …presupposes that the proper ends in education will have been achieved when minority groups can no longer be differentiated from the white majority in terms of education, economic status, or access to social institutions and their benefits and when nonwhite students act, speak, and behave as much as possible like the white middle class."

When any combination of the deficit lens perspective, the subtractive schooling process or assisimilationist ideology are embedded within the school environment, it becomes apparent why Latino students would question their cultural identity and their belief in their personal success.

While cultural identity questions and low academic achievement may be more evident in schools where Latinos are the minority in numbers, it is interesting to consider what occurs when the school is an urban, predominantly Latino high school. Flores-Gonzalez (2005) argues that the identity students adopt or form is rather based on the structure of academic and social opportunities offered by the school. The results of her ethnographic study of Hernandez High School in Chicago highlight the institutional practices that either encourage or discourage achievement. These practices include having high and low achievers occupy different spaces, limiting their group to group interactions, tracking students according to their school or street culture, and the extra-curricular opportunities that are offered or lacking, depending on the group of students (Flores-Gonzalez). The implications of her study suggest, therefore, that achievement is not restricted by ethnicity as other research has implied (Flores-Gonzalez).

The perspectives and practices described thus far provide insight as to the ways in which school environments can hinder success. Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand (2006) offer several strategies, however, for promoting Latino student success. They state it is critical to acknowledge and capitalize on the cultural and linguistic strengths of Latino youth in order to begin addressing their needs and that this can occur by viewing bilingualism and biculturalism as assets. They also emphasize the importance of empowering Latinos through leadership roles and by encouraging student voice orally and in writing (Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand). When schools can provide a genuine sense of belonging, as created through such experiences, opportunities for success and self-efficacy will follow and their cultural identities will be affirmed (Souto-Manning, 2006).

Teachers

In continuing the transition from the macro perspective of communities and schools to a more micro perspective, it is vitally important to examine the negative and positive influences of teachers on Latino student success. According to Jacob and Jordan (1993), as cited by Souto-Manning (2006), "the cultural mismatches between teachers and students may end up creating difficulties in the classroom in terms of communication and interaction." Much of the research reviewed for this topic verifies this and highlights the consequences caused by teachers' disinterest in the intellectual growth of their students (Cammarota, 2006). This disinterest, which often stems from the deficit perspective previously described, can directly affect the amount of effort students choose to put towards their school work as researched by Newman et al., 2000 and Wenzel, 1997 and referenced by Alfaro, Umana-Taylor and Bamaca (2006). Cammarota agrees and states that, "The most disastrous consequence for students experiencing an apathetic education was that they started to abandon hope and not care about school." As reported by Stanton-Salazar (2001) and referenced by Martinez, DeGarmo and Eddy (2004), the lack of *confianza* (trust) that results from such a scenario can cause students to exhibit more self-reliant behaviors instead of help-seeking behaviors which in turn hinders their success.

In contrast to the aforementioned negative influences, teachers who express interest in a student's personal life in addition to his or her academic work can be role models and mentors (Ceballo, 2004), even if they are from a different cultural background. If they can specifically connect learning with genuine care, they are then demonstrating compassion, an appealing attribute to many Latino youth (Cammarota, 2006). "Compassionate educators who demonstrated empathy for their students had an understanding of the multitude of factors

affecting their students' success and a belief in their potential and worth as learners and as people….Consequently, these teachers' demonstrations of care encouraged students to learn and excel" (Cammarota). In exploring strategies to improve Latino student achievement, demonstrating compassion appears to be a non-traditional yet effective way for teachers to build relationships with their students. Souto-Manning encourages further development of this practice by offering educators this salient piece of advice:

> I hope this [article] will inspire you to continue challenging your assumptions, embracing the humanity of each and every student, seeing all children as resources in the classroom, valuing diverse social and cultural capitals, and promoting culturally, and linguistically appropriate environments for all children! (2007)

Parents

With or without a college degree, parents are teachers who model choices and behaviors that influence the development of their children's cultural identity. The interactions that occur within a family's home provide a framework for what transpires in school and other environments. Souto-Manning offers the following description for how this occurs:

> Part of one's identity is his or her culture. Culture is learned through the interactions of members of a group. Culture is shared, as thinking and acting are shared by members of the group. Culture adapts to specific political and economic conditions and is frequently changing. Like schools and classrooms, families can be understood as cultures in which participants (family members) create ways of acting, believing, and valuing the relations among family members (2006).

The “ways of acting” that emerge from the above dynamics can be negative, positive or fluid depending on a family’s previous experiences with the dominant culture. One such example Souto-Manning (2007) describes is the (re)naming practice that is becoming more common, particularly among Latino immigrant families. In this practice, parents choose to change their child’s first name to an American name but keep the Spanish surname (for school records only). Their purpose is to mask their child’s cultural identity in hopes that he or she will have a better chance to be successful academically (Souto-Manning). A direct correlate to this practice is the pressure that parents may feel to not force their children to learn or speak Spanish, even though they value bilingualism. The motivating factor in each of these scenarios is the protection of their children and the reduction of any potential prejudice or rejection at school (Souto-Manning).

This same motivation also drives many Latino parents to employ alternative strategies. Ceballo (2004) suggests three in particular that have proven to be effective: parental emphasis on the importance of education, encouragement of a child’s autonomy, and nonverbal support for educational goals and tasks. An American education is often considered the best and only route to escape poverty even though parents may not always understand the educational process or related details (Ceballo, 2004). I often replay the words my father spoke as I went through school, “Mija (my daughter), your education is something no one can ever take away.” Latino children whose parents emphasize education so fervently also tend to earn their parents’ trust to manage all aspects of their academic careers. This autonomy, which may derive from parents’ language barriers and limited schooling, also allows students to budget their time and develop responsibility, a core value within a Latino family (Ceballo, 2004).

At times though, it can also cause tension as traditional ethnic customs are broken and parenting skills are questioned (Ceballo, 2004). For example, my father recently told me about relatives who deemed college a waste of time and who declared it was not proper for me to leave home at that time as an unmarried young woman. I realized during that particular conversation that while my father honored tradition, he also believed in change: change that would encourage growth. The nonverbal support parents provide is also of great influence. Examples of this support may include expressions of affection, limiting household chores to afford more time for school work, offering a home environment conducive to studying, not wanting their children to work, and buying school supplies in advance (Ceballo, 2004). The blend of these alternative strategies therefore reflect the following cultural assets researchers have identified among Latino families: the esteem of children and the importance of demonstrating respect and responsibility to self, siblings and others (Trueba, 1993; Gonzalez-Ramos et al., 1998; Sotomayor, 1991; Rodriguez et al., 1999 as cited by Zambrana, Zoppi and DeAnda, 2002).

Students

The literature on the correlation between the cultural identity of Latino youth and academic success is mixed and confirms the complexity of this issue, "…not all authors agree on how to approach Latinos/as' fluid and transformable identities" (Zarate, Bhimji, and Reese, 2005). According to Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett and Sands (2006), ethnic identity results when adolescents engage in culturally specific activities, behaviors, roles, understand group membership and can develop positive feelings about themselves and the group. In an attempt to generate these positive feelings, students often select a label by which to self-identify

and may base this label on, "…nationality of adolescent, nationality of kin, language ability, race, cultural background and heritage…" (Zarate et al.). Zarate et al. explains further,

> …that it is not the adoption of a particular label that is more indicative of successful academic performance, but rather that the content of whatever label is chosen includes for the student a positive valuation of their heritage. This could be thought of as "cultural capital," in a literal use of the term culture. In other words, students who have a solid and positive valuation of home culture with which to counter homogenizing or subtractive mainstream constructions of their culture and language, have advantages that are evident in academic performance.

Anzaldua (1999) emphasizes that when a student feels positive about himself/herself, the potential for the emergence of a bicultural identity is present, an identity that requires, "…a balancing of multiple experiences and negotiating different physical and emotional borders" (as cited by Zarate et al.). Carter (2006) indicates that students with bicultural identities can also be referred to as cultural straddlers. Different from cultural mainstreamers who expect group members to be fully assimilated and non-compliant believers who favor their own cultural norms, straddlers are described as those who,

> …understand the functions of both dominant and nondominant cultural capital (Carter, 2003) and value and embrace skills to participate in multiple cultural environments, including mainstream society, their school environments, and their respective ethnoracial communities. While straddlers share cultural practices and expressions with other members of their social groups, they traverse the boundaries across groups and environments more successfully (Carter, 2006).

When Latino youth function from a bicultural perspective, they are positioned to explore leadership opportunities and use their written and oral voice to promote change (Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand, 2006). Freire's (2000) description of *conscientizacao*, a deepened awareness arising out of a state of oppression, further illustrates this point. He states that, "Once a person awakens to *conscientizacao*, he or she recognizes the systematic inequity in this world and the need to actively dismantle its mechanism to prevent its continuation" (as cited by Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand).

Recommendations and Conclusion

The literature reviewed supports the position that while Latino children and youth may possess the intrinsic motivation to achieve academically, their success and the development of their cultural identities is greatly influenced by their communities, schools, teachers, parents and self-view. The research provides further clarification as to how this can occur from either a negative or positive perspective. When communities, schools, and teachers view students from a deficit angle (Cammarota, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2006; Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand, 2006), students also begin to see themselves in this light and disengage from the school environment and learning processes. However, when students' cultural assets such as language, history and family values are esteemed, the foundation for a healthy relationship with educators and their schools can be facilitated (Souto-Manning, 2006; Zambrana, Zoppi and De Anda, 2002; Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand, 2006).

Parents also play an integral role in the development of their children's academic confidence and cultural identity (Souto-Manning, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2007; Ceballo, 2004). As stated by Violand-Sanchez and Hainer-Violand (2006), "Many Latinos are driven to succeed

when they adhere to the enabling values of love of and loyalty to family, community participation, respect for education and a strong work ethic". This directly corresponds to the manner in which students self-identify. If students feel valued and accepted, regardless of the label they choose, they can develop the skills to navigate their own and the dominant culture, thus capitalizing on the strengths of each (Carter, 2006).

Exploring the formation of cultural identity from each of these perspectives serves as a poignant reminder that the choice to succeed academically belongs to more than Latino students. It belongs to the many other faces they see in the reflection and images projected from their communities, schools, teachers and parents.

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