

Structuring Failure and Success: Understanding the Variability in Latino School Engagement

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Why do some low-income immigrant and native-born Latino students do well in school while others do not? Why are low-income Latino students less successful in school than their White peers? What are the effects of institutional mechanisms on low-income Latino school engagement? For the past two decades, the most persuasive answers to these questions have been advanced by the cultural-ecologists, who suggest that differences in academic achievement by race result from minority groups' perceptions of the limited opportunity structure. However, variations within the Latino student population remain — some Latino students succeed and some fail. In this article, Gilberto Conchas describes the results of a study that examined how school programs construct school failure and success among low-income immigrants and U.S.-born Latino students. The results of Conchas's study show that, from students' perspectives, institutional mechanisms have an impact on Latino school engagement, and he links cultural-ecological explanations and institutional explanations. The findings from this study extend our understanding of the fluidity and nuance of within-group variations in Latino student success in an urban school context.

Children of immigrants now account for nearly one in five of all U.S. schoolchildren. There is increasing public debate about how best to educate these newest Americans. Most of the parents of these children arrived in the United States from Latin America and Asia. Although these newcomers have settled in all parts of the United States, the majority of immigrants are concentrated in California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). California alone houses more than two-fifths of today's

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immigrant youth (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Of these immigrant youth, Latinos¹ will represent 50 percent of the total school-age enrollment in California by the year 2005 (del Pinal & Singer, 1997). Within this growing population of Latino school-age children, low academic achievement and a high dropout rate persist (Trueba, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Thus, Latino students' school achievement should be among the top priorities of educational policymakers.

Some scholars attribute the low academic achievement among Latinos to segregation and neglect in a racially stratified society (Orfield, 1998). Research indicates that low-income minority students often encounter aesthetically unpleasant and ill-equipped learning environments, inadequate instructional materials, ineffective teachers, and defiant peer subcultures, such as youth gangs (Anyon, 1997; Orfield, 1998; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Trueba, 1998; Vigil, 1988, 1997). These studies specifically point to school factors, such as teachers' low expectations and lack of cultural awareness, a curriculum that does not reflect the life experiences of minority youth, and the lack of institutional support systems, as contributing to low academic performance (Conchas, 1999; Gándara, 1999; Goyette & Conchas, in press; McQuillan, 1998; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). Other research links family background to lower levels of educational performance (Diaz Salcedo, 1996; Trueba, 1998). However, despite the overall poor performance of low-income Latino students, many of them are defying the odds and succeeding at school (Conchas, 1999; Conchas & Clark, in press; Gándara, 1995, 1999; Gibson, 1997; Mehan et al., 1996).

While schools by themselves are hard pressed to circumvent structural inequality at the larger social and economic level, they can have a powerful effect on students' experience of social conditions. In this article, I describe the results of a study that examined how school programs construct school failure and success among low-income immigrants and U.S.-born Latino students. The findings from this study extend our understanding of the fluidity and nuance of Latino students' within-group variations in an urban school context. They specifically reveal that institutional mechanisms have an impact on Latino school engagement. By capturing the voices of both low-achieving and high-achieving low-income Latino students, this research shows promising ways that schools may begin to shape social and academic success.

Assessing Latinos' School Engagement

Many questions have been posed about the education of Latino youth. Why do some low-income immigrant and U.S.-born Latino students do well in

¹ The term *Latino*, for the purposes of this study, refers to Chicana/o and/or Mexican American, Central American, and South American.

school while others do not? Why are low-income Latino students generally not as successful in school as their White peers? What are the effects of institutional mechanisms on low-income Latinos' school engagement? For the past two decades, the most persuasive explanations for these questions have been advanced by the cultural ecologists, who suggest that academic achievement differences by race result from minority groups' perceptions of the opportunity structure — that is, social and economic institutions, including the work force, education, and other areas that influence social mobility (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1974, 1978, 1987, 1989, 1991; Weis, 1990).

The cultural ecological model suggested by Ogbu and his associates distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary minorities (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1974, 1991; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Voluntary minorities (such as Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, Cuban Americans, Filipino Americans, and West Indians) are immigrant groups who have historically moved to the United States of their own free will, usually for economic, social, or political reasons. Although voluntary minorities may face subordination and exploitation, they perceive and react to schooling positively because they regard their current situation in the United States more favorably than their situation in their country of origin. Their specific experiences in the United States relative to their native countries contribute to high levels of immigrant optimism that often results in higher levels of school achievement.

Involuntary minorities (African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans), on the other hand, are groups who have historically been more or less involuntarily and permanently incorporated into U.S. society through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Ogbu refers to these groups as "caste-like" because their incorporation often resulted in social and economic subordination. For instance, African Americans were enslaved through force and Mexican Americans were incorporated through conquest. Involuntary minorities, as the paradigm suggests, are unlikely to work hard in school because they do not wish to assimilate, and because they recognize that, relative to Whites, they have a limited chance of benefiting from education. These unique historical and social experiences relate to high levels of pessimism toward the opportunity structure and toward schooling in particular. Thus, involuntary minorities perceive a limited opportunity to attain school success. Ogbu (1987) concludes that "membership in a caste-like minority group is permanent and often arrives at birth" (p. 91). In general, involuntary minorities are believed to develop oppositional subcultures and identities resistant to the assimilation process prevalent in schooling.

The minority group categories depicted by the cultural ecologists, however, do not explain the variations in school experience that exist between and within racial minority groups. While many voluntary minority students attain school success, others do not; and while many involuntary minorities are academically "at risk," some do well (Gibson, 1997). For instance, Mehan

et al. (1994) found academically successful involuntary minorities such as Mexican American and African American students in large urban high schools. Foley (1990, 1991) shows that middle-class Mexican American youth respond to schooling like voluntary minorities; that is, they do not resist the schooling process. Conversely, Lee (1996) depicts low-achieving behavior among some voluntary immigrant Asian students.

Research documenting generational influences on school engagement make the voluntary/involuntary immigrant dichotomy even more problematic. Specifically, Ogbu's typology does not take into consideration the variability in school performance from one generation to another. Several studies suggest that Latino school performance may decline with each successive generation (Gibson, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Vigil, 1997). In their comprehensive study of Latino immigration and school achievement, for instance, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) report that newly arrived Mexican immigrants have a strong desire to learn English, acculturate, and partake in U.S. society, while subsequent generations of U.S.-born Mexican Americans develop an oppositional identity against "making it" in school. The researchers state that "many second-generation Latino youth reject . . . schools . . . that violently reject them, and they seek refuge with their peers" (p. 67), sometimes through youth gangs. The Suárez-Orozcos explain the achievement paradox between immigrant and U.S.-born Mexican Americans as a function of racial stratification in society. Mexican American youth become more ambivalent toward schooling as they become more acculturated and as they face greater levels of racial discrimination.

The aforementioned studies overlook the role of school processes and their influence on Latino students' varying academic trajectories. While many Latino youth perform poorly in school, many others attain success in urban schools with support from specific institutional processes. The Latino student population reflects not a monolithic entity in which all Latinos perform poorly, but a heterogeneous one in which some perform well and others do not (Conchas, 1999; Gándara, 1995; Gibson, 1997; Goyette & Conchas, in press; Mehan et al., 1996; Vigil, 1997). Although research studies accurately present variability, the majority do not show how group differences in school engagement may be related to institutional factors within the school context.

Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001; see also Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) begins to explore that relationship by studying the micro-process of information networks within the school as a source of social and cultural capital and eventual academic success. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) argue "that supportive ties with institutional agents represent a necessary condition for engagement and advancement in the educational system and, ultimately, for success in the occupational structure" (p. 117). According to

Stanton-Salazar, successful low-income youth of Mexican origin find supportive ties within schools. The development of a successful support network rests upon the youths' developing social consciousness in response to their assessment of the opportunity structure. In other words, once youth consciously recognize what it takes to be successful in school and in society in general, they will, on their own, seek the necessary avenues to attain social mobility. Those who are most successful seek out institutional agents who can help them. Consequently, it is up to Mexican American youth to forge the necessary relationships with key agents in the school.

While Stanton-Salazar's research advances our understanding of how some Mexican American youth become academically successful, we are still uncertain why some of them seek out institutional agents and form supportive relationships while others do not, and why some institutional agents are available while others are generally unreachable. A few studies have identified the key role of institutional support networks in promoting student engagement and achievement. Mehan et al. (1996), for instance, examined African American and Latino youth in an untracked college-bound program for low-income urban youth, called Advancement Via Individual Determination, better known by its acronym, AVID. The study investigated the features of AVID that make schools work for these youth, such as the curriculum, teachers, mentors, networking, and other social factors (Hubbard, 1995; Mehan et al., 1996).

Mehan et al. (1996) employ the term *social scaffolding* to describe the institutional support systems that AVID creates to increase school success for low-achieving students. They define these supports as "the practice of combining heterogeneous grouping with a uniform, academically rigorous curriculum enhanced with strong supports" (p. 78). Concentrating on the organizational arrangements provided through AVID, Mehan et al. demonstrate how social scaffolding can contribute to positive academic motivation and engagement. It is through social scaffolding that low-achieving youth can attain the socialization required for academic success. More specifically, the AVID program "explicitly teach[es] aspects of the implicit culture of the classroom and the hidden curriculum of the school" (p. 81). AVID provides low-achieving Mexican American and African American youth with the foundations essential for navigating the opportunity structure and achieving social mobility.

Mehan et al. (1996) argue that this organizational support must begin early in the high school experience and then be slowly removed as the students internalize "the help their guides provided" (p. 79). Once aware of these organizational supports, students are more capable of navigating the school system on their own. Mehan et al. demonstrate that the social scaffolding process fosters student identities and peer cultures oriented toward academic success. This study effectively shows how the school context con-

tributes to academic engagement among involuntary U.S.-born Mexican Americans.

The cultural-ecological model provides a simplistic framework for understanding school engagement. According to the model, voluntary minorities are likely to succeed, while involuntary minorities are doomed to fail. However, the work of Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, Stanton-Salazar, and Mehan et al. suggests that variations among minority school achievement do exist. In fact, some members of involuntary minorities, such as Mexican Americans and African Americans, can and do attain school success. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) also show that differences in academic achievement exist between immigrant and U.S.-born Mexican Americans. Moreover, Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001; see also Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) and Mehan et al. (1996) indicate the importance of institutional factors in understanding the educational plight of minority youth. Still, two issues remain unclear: the impact of institutional factors on both immigrant and U.S.-born low-achieving and high-achieving Latinos, and the relationship between cultural ecological explanations and institutional explanations.

This article explores these issues through a qualitative case study of low-income immigrant and U.S.-born Latino students attending an urban high school. Some of these were low-achieving students, most of whom were enrolled in the general school program, while most of the high-achieving Latino students were enrolled in career academies and/or the Advanced Placement (AP) program.² The aim is to show how institutional mechanisms mediate school engagement. In the case of a specific urban high school, this study shows how school structures and practices can contribute to optimism and pessimism among immigrant and U.S.-born Latino students. Various institutional mechanisms create opportunity structures within a school that students navigate and interpret optimistically and pessimistically. These mechanisms also divide the students into different peer groups that have different subcultures and support networks. This study argues that particular units within the school may be reinforcing the patterns of student engagement laid out by the cultural ecological model, while others may be disrupting these patterns and accounting for some of the variation in Latino student engagement.

² In California, career academies grew out of the need to retain potential dropouts and prepare students for postsecondary education (Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 1992). Career academies are schools-within-schools that offer a career-related academic curriculum to students in the tenth through twelfth grades. Sometimes ninth graders are included. The number of career academies has increased dramatically in recent years. Stern, Dayton, and Raby (1998) suggest two reasons: 1) academies improve student achievement and 2) research shows the design of career academies is "strongly congruent with the widely accepted principles of high school reform" (p. 2). While Stern et al. write that it is not possible to suggest a definitive career academy model because of the many variations among them, they do outline several key features fundamental to all academies: small learning communities, college-preparatory curriculum with a career theme, and partnerships with employers and community.

TABLE 1
Baldwin High School Profile: 1997–1998

<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>	<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>	<i>Limited English Proficiency</i>	<i>College Prospects</i>
65% African American	More than 30% receive AFDC benefits	18% limited English proficiency	11% College attendance rate
20% Asian American			
10% Latino	More than 50% are eligible for free or reduced lunch	More than a dozen different languages are taught at Baldwin	The majority of college-bound students are enrolled in one of several school-within-school college preparatory programs
4% White			
1% Filipino, Native American, and Pacific Islander			

The Setting

Baldwin High School is located in a large, predominantly racial-minority city in the western United States.³ According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census report (1996), the city's racial and ethnic composition is 42.9 percent African American, 28.3 percent White, 14.3 percent Asian, 13.8 percent Latino, 0.5 percent Native American, and 0.3 percent Other. The city's household income ranges from \$27,095 to \$61,171. Baldwin High School is one of several comprehensive high schools serving a low-income and racially diverse student body that is reflective of the larger community. Baldwin High was built at the turn of the century, and is a large, three-story structure, now accompanied by portable classrooms.

At the time of this study, the Baldwin High School community of 1,817 students was richly diverse. Table 1 presents the high school's racial profile. Some of the Latino students at Baldwin High were immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central and South America, while the majority were second- and third-generation Mexican Americans.

Baldwin High offered a full curriculum ranging from general classes to Advanced Placement. During the period of this study, the high school housed a Medical Academy for students who were interested in pursuing health-related occupations and a Graphics Academy, a magnet program specializing in computer-assisted graphics technology. The administration and teachers were also interested in establishing a Computer Academy and a Teacher Academy. Their goal was to restructure the high school into smaller,

³ Baldwin High School and student and teacher names are all pseudonyms.

more intimate learning environments, each of which focused on a particular career theme. The school also housed an English as a Second Language (ESL) program and a highly reputable AP program that included five subject areas. It is important to note that the AP program had a strong relationship with the Graphics Academy, and that the majority of AP students were also in the Graphics Academy. This study concentrates on the experiences of students in the Medical Academy, Graphics Academy, and AP program, comparing them to the experiences of those in the general academic program. Table 2 profiles each program.

Methods

This case study is part of a larger comparative racial and ethnic research project of urban high school students' educational experiences.⁴ Baldwin High School was chosen as a research site for a number of reasons. First, it represents a typical urban high school in California, with a majority of low-income minority students, both low and high achieving. Second, it houses unique schools-within-schools that attempt to shape school success. The aim was not to research career academies per se, but to understand the experiences of low- and high-achieving youth that happened to be enrolled in career academies. The focus here is on students' perspectives about the institutional processes that related to their motivation and academic engagement. This study, however, concentrates specifically on the variations among Latino students' experiences.

The data collection for this study consisted of two years of participant observation. Data consist of field notes on day-to-day student-student and student-teacher interactions, interviews with students and teachers, maps of seating arrangements, and site documents such as report cards, student work, teacher evaluations, and announcement flyers. Social and academic events were closely observed before school, during lunch, and after school. Close attention was paid to the overall social organization of the school, but specific attention was given to one school-within-a-school's attempt to create a meaningful learning community within a racially polarized school setting.

This article focuses on the data collected in interviews, focus groups, and observations of twenty-six Latino students in the tenth through twelfth grades. Semi-structured protocols were used for the interviews and focus

⁴ The descriptions of the programs and students at Baldwin are based on data gathered during the 1996–1997 and 1997–1998 school years. As part of the larger study, I interviewed eighty high school students to assess their responses to the various school cultures at Baldwin. I interviewed an equal number of boys and girls, including twenty-six Latinos, twenty-seven African Americans, and twenty-seven Asian American students. In addition, I conducted focus groups and interviews with a total of forty-five teachers, administrators, and staff. While my focus was on the Medical Academy teachers (n=7), I sought interviews with teachers who reflected the staff composition at Baldwin High (n=38). I interviewed the director of each academic program, as well as various teachers throughout the school setting.

TABLE 2

Medical Academy, Graphics Academy, and Advanced Placement Program Profiles: 1997–1998 School Year

<i>Medical Academy</i>	<i>Graphics Academy</i>	<i>Advanced Placement Program</i>
School-within-school: 10th–12th grade (some start in the 9th grade)	School-within-school: 10th–12th grade	Blocked scheduling: 11th–12th grade
Voluntary enrollment: teachers place a high em- phasis on recruiting at-risk youth, in particular African American and Latino males	Voluntary enrollment: teacher recruitment within AP pathway and outside of school, concentrating on high-achieving math students	Voluntary enrollment: counselor/teacher/ parent recommendation
267 students: 55% African American 32% Asian American 10% Latino 3% White	127 students: 25% African American 56% Asian American 9% Latino 10% White	64 students: 16% African American 66% Asian American 4% Latino 14% White
93% graduation rate	100% graduation rate	100% graduation rate
98% college enrollment: 77% four-year colleges 19% two-year colleges 2% transferred out of college	100% college enrollment: 98% four-year colleges 2% two-year colleges	100% four-year colleges

groups, which lasted one to two hours and were taped and transcribed verbatim. Eighteen of these students were enrolled in the three college preparatory programs (11 in the Medical Academy, 3 in the Graphics Academy, and 4 in the AP program), and eight were not part of any high-track grouping, but were instead enrolled in the general academic program. Fifteen of the students were female and eleven were male. Thirteen of the students were U.S.-born Mexican Americans, six were Mexican immigrants, and seven were immigrants from Central America. The students self-identified their race and ethnicity and also reflected upon their generational status. The Latino students in the sample were from low-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds that included intact families as well as single-female-headed households and foster families.

This sample is not entirely representative, for it does not include Limited English Proficient (LEP) Latino students. It reflects, nonetheless, the larger English-speaking and bilingual Latino population at the school. At the beginning of the study, Latinos were recruited to participate and all who volunteered were interviewed. The majority of these were followed for two years.

Ultimately, this study endeavored to explore the origins of low-income Latino students' school failure and success in relationship to the school context.

School Opportunity Structure and Racial Perceptions

Like, you got an all-Black class, or something, and if you are in there, [Black teachers] try to misplace you. . . . They take care of their own. . . . We are invisible.

David, third-generation Mexican American sophomore

According to my observations, structural and cultural processes at Baldwin High School divided students by race and distributed opportunities among students in a way that reproduced social inequities. These racial hierarchies reinforced immigrant pessimism among involuntary minorities, such as U.S.-born Mexican American students. The high school, for instance, was segmented into various academic groupings, the structures of which contributed to an academically competitive school culture⁵ and, at times, hostile racial and ethnic relations. Selection and instructional processes divided students and distributed opportunities along racial and ethnic lines. Latino students were among those who experienced, observed, and questioned these inconsistent racial and ethnic divisions. In turn, the majority of Latino students separated themselves within classrooms, during lunch, and after school. Distinct Latino subcultures existed that either perpetuated these racial and ethnic divisions or attempted to circumvent them.

The racial and ethnic divisions associated with the various subcultures are important to understand, for each reflects how immigrant and non-immigrant students engage in school. For instance, Stanton-Salazar (1997) suggests how different peer groups and support networks affect student optimism and pessimism. Those students who perceive stronger and healthier racial and ethnic relations are more motivated and more engaged in school, whereas those who feel more intimidated by the racial and ethnic climate suffer. Latino students' academic success is also associated with close relationships with other high-achieving peers outside of their own race and ethnic group. Those Latino students who forge relationships with non-Latino students build a stronger high-achieving peer network. This peer network in turn helps mediate immigrant and native-born differences as Latino students help each other engage and succeed in school.

Latino students at Baldwin were aware that most low-track classes were composed of Black and Latino students, whereas high-track classes were

⁵ Following Peterson and Deal (1999), this study defines school culture as "the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools" (p. 28).

composed of primarily Asian and White students. Although the school's racial and ethnic demographic profile showed a majority of African American students, African Americans as well as Latinos were underrepresented in the AP program (see Table 2). The racial composition of the Graphics Academy, on the other hand, while not yet representative of the overall school population, was significantly improving because the director and staff were making a strong effort to recruit more non-White and non-Asian students. Nevertheless, these two programs enrolled a majority of Baldwin High's Asian students and a significant number of the White students.⁶ Asians and Whites made up approximately 25 percent of the student population, yet represented 69 percent of the total enrollment in the Graphics Academy and the Advanced Placement program. Bill, a third-generation Mexican American AP student, commented that "there are mostly all Asians in the Advanced Placement program . . . and almost all Whites in school have Advanced Placement. Actually, a lot of students in the Advanced Placement are also in the [Graphics Academy]."

This structural racial and ethnic separation within the school was reflected in the ways students socialized and with whom they socialized at school. Ana, an immigrant from Mexico who was enrolled in the Medical Academy, explained that "students segregate themselves based on how they are treated. Like you go out for lunch . . . and you see . . . a group of Asian people right there in the classes with some Whites, and then you see a group of Blacks in the front, and then you see a group of Latinos by the gym." The same was true at school functions, where students were given a limited choice as to where and with whom they would sit; for example, during school assemblies students sat and spoke with students of their same racial and ethnic group. A common sight was that of Asians sitting on one side of the school auditorium, Blacks toward the front, and Latinos clustered together according to what academic program they belonged to. This pattern extended into the classroom, where students formed strong relationships with others of their own racial groups and sat together. It was not uncommon to observe a classroom with Blacks sitting on one side, Asians on another, and the few Latinos sitting together.

Students made strong links between the racial composition of the different academic programs and the racial stigma associated with each. Latino students clearly articulated how the racial and ethnic divisions within each

⁶ The different approaches to recruitment in the two career academies in this study reflect two very different educational philosophies. From its inception, the Medical Academy was committed to the belief that all students can achieve to high standards and made a special effort to include those students who were not already succeeding in a traditional education setting. The Graphics Academy began as an honors AP program and continued to target those students who were already high-achieving, especially those students with demonstrated success in mathematics. While the Medical Academy did accept high-achieving students, its primary target population included "high-potential" students (students who have not yet demonstrated their excellence.)

program reflected the racial hierarchy present in the larger society. Consider, for example, a Salvadoran immigrant student's astute response when asked about the relationship between racial stereotypes and a program's academic image:

GC: Is there a connection between race and ethnic perceptions and what programs are perceived to be the best?

Rocío: Oh gosh! Yes, like AP. You walk in and you see order, you see hard-nose people working . . . and you see mostly Asian. That makes a difference! (Laughing) You know, if you walk into a regular class and see the majority African Americans and Mexicans, you know you would think it's bad. The messages we are told about African Americans and Mexicans are bad and we would think that was the case. Gosh! Our opinions about how good the programs are here are based on race. They are pretty heavily based on race.

GC: Can you explain that for me?

Rocío: Well, if society says that . . . you are Latino and lazy, that [if] you are Asian, you are smart, if you are White, Oh God, the best, and if you are Black, you are bad, horrific. If you walk into a class full of Asians and White students . . . you think that this is a really good class, because they are Asian and White. It must be a good class. If you walk into a class that is majority African American and Latino, you know it's bad, because they are lazy and dumb. . . . It is like a pyramid, you know, the supreme of the supreme on top and the rest down the way. The classes are set and they are there, who embodies them is different. That makes the difference.

Diego, a third-generation Chicano Medical Academy junior, and Ricardo, an immigrant Mexican sophomore in the Graphics Academy and AP program, commented on how the school programs reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes:

Ricardo: (Translated from Spanish) For instance, my teacher, and I'm in Graphics, he goes up to [an] Asian student, looks at his work and says, "You could do better." With me, however, he simply says . . . "It's all right." But he never says I can do better, right? He is like telling me, for me [as a Mexican], it is all right. Like if I cannot do better than that, that is the best I can do. And I do not like that.

While Ricardo thought racial stereotypes were an explicit part of school interaction, Diego saw it as more subtle:

Diego: I don't think any of this is done directly, all this racial segregation in the school. I don't think there is any one person or group of people that are out to do this at this school, but I think just the ways things have shaped up, things that happen . . . are the way they are because [of] the stereotypes that people hold and they get turned into who gets the best and most challenging things here. Teachers have also been influenced by this. . . . I think that over the years they have seen it over and over and over again, and after a while they help in making stereotypes come true.

Diego poignantly speaks to the institutionalized nature of racial and ethnic divisions. He explains how teachers are both passive and active agents in perpetuating these forms of inequality. Teachers are passive in that they adhere to common perceptions about race and ethnic groups, yet they also actively reinforce these forms of racial and ethnic divisions by following these traditions. In general, he locates teacher agency within a larger structural process that feeds into the school setting. Unfortunately, these actions affect student relations and, in turn, their academic engagement.⁷

Latino students' experiences and perceptions of schooling differed according to the programs in which they were enrolled, and the subsequent sociocultural processes to which they were exposed. The following section addresses how the distinct school programs mediated students' interactions with one another and with their teachers, and their overall school engagement.

Latino Responses to the Distinct School Programs

Latino students fell into distinct academic niches that corresponded to the school's stratification system. A continuum of academic programs reflected distinct processes and student actions. On one side of the continuum the general academic program served mostly U.S.-born Mexican American students. This academic niche corresponded to the lowest academic status on campus and mediated marginalization, pessimism, low achievement, and racial divisions.⁸ On the other side of the continuum, academic programs like the Graphics Academy and AP catered to high-achieving immigrant and first-generation youth and provided rigorous academic training. The Latino students in these programs had a higher sense of anxiety and alienation from the general school body. Thus, they benefited from strong social scaffolding processes, but were at odds with themselves and with others around them. Nevertheless, these Latinos managed to succeed and were eager to conform to school processes.

Interspersed along this continuum were other high-achieving Latino youth, both immigrant and U.S.-born, who were both critical of the opportunity structure and academically successful. Their ideologies reflected direct knowledge of the institutional mechanisms at play, and their behavior closely resembled the "accommodation without assimilation" strategy suggested in previous studies on successful involuntary minorities (Gibson,

⁷ This finding is similar to one that Lee (1996) found in her study of race and ethnic relations in her ethnography of Asian American students in an urban high school.

⁸ Fine (1991) also observed similar findings among the dropouts in her ethnography. Fine argued that the dropouts in her study developed an in-depth critique of class, gender, and race, in contrast to the high school graduates, who accepted notions of hard work and meritocracy. The low-achieving Latinos in this study exhibited some of the dropout traits suggested by Fine (1991), such as non-engagement, truancy, and low achievement, but related their sense of alienation and failure almost exclusively to the lack of institutional support systems.

1988; Mehan et al., 1994, 1996). Accommodation without assimilation refers to minority students navigating between distinct cultural worlds, such as the home, community, and schools, but consciously assuming their native cultural point of reference. Baldwin's Medical Academy, in particular, attempted to enhance cultural awareness, promote racial diversity, create community, construct school success, and, in general, circumvent institutionalized inequality.

General School Program

Mexicans at this school have like a 5 percent chance of graduating, man — no higher, and I'm not part of that 5 percent.

Miguel, third-generation Mexican American sophomore

Baldwin High School strove to educate all students equally. The school envisioned a united community of educators that would enhance the motivation and expectations of urban youth. The Baldwin High vision statement in 1996 read:

All members of the [Baldwin] community will work cooperatively, communicate respectfully in a peaceful, safe, and clean environment.

All [Baldwin] students will strive to achieve high expectations, meet solid academic standards, and have equal access to an enriching curriculum that will enable them to reach their highest potential.

All [Baldwin] students will graduate with transferable skills in academic, vocational, and social development for quality jobs, college, or career education.

Regrettably, the school fell short of its vision, especially in creating a larger sense of community and in equally educating all students.

Students in the general academic program did not benefit from these strong social and academic institutional mechanisms that promote school success (Mehan et al., 1996). Among these students were the majority of self-identified Chicanos at Baldwin High School. They were not enrolled in any alternative academic structure at school, nor did they express confident ideologies about school success. Instead, these students were enrolled in the lower-level track where they received little support from teachers and peers. These students were mostly third-generation Mexican Americans who hung out with their "homeboys" and "homegirls," smoking by the gym during lunch and after school. Several students in both the general track and in other academic programs reported that many of these Latinos may also have been involved in youth gangs. Interviews and observations suggest that these students found school boring and disengaging, and they cut classes because, as Blanca, a third-generation Chicana in the general track, explained, "there ain't nothing else to do." Most of them attributed their lack of academic mo-

tivation and achievement to their marginalized status and lack of guidance from adults and other students.

This group of Latino students was relegated to a position of invisibility within the larger high school setting. Most of these students felt that teachers and counselors only cared for the academic concerns of Black and Asian students. Marisa, a third-generation Mexican American student, stated that Latinos were treated differently from the rest of the students because teachers “think we’re all the same, they think we don’t exist.” Jorge, an immigrant Mexican American student, shared this sentiment and explained that the school counselors did not care for his concerns:

I don’t think they care because I have been filling out slips to go see my counselor. I sent like four from September and they still have not called me. Every time I go there, he’s at lunch or is with other students and during class he has no time for me.

They also reported that other Latino students in the college preparatory programs on campus ignored their presence. “We see other Latinos around,” said Bella, a third-generation Mexican American, “but they don’t talk to us. Even the *recién llegados* [recent immigrants] stay away.” Bella suggested that the recent Mexican immigrants were motivated to succeed in the United States and that these students viewed the Mexican Americans in the general program as unmotivated and undesirable peers.

The Mexican American students in the general program did have career goals and expectations, but they did not experience the social scaffolding available in the other school programs. For instance, data reveal that these students did not experience the unique peer group effect, the advising, a high-achieving setting, a homeroom system, more positive racial and ethnic relations, administrative support, and curricular focus available in the more demanding programs. These students were given little guidance and support from what Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001; see also Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) calls key “institutional agents,” such as peers and adult staff members. During interviews and informal conversations, some expressed interest in becoming computer technicians, nurses, doctors, astronauts, and small-business owners, but they did not know how to achieve these goals. Miguel, for example, wanted to eventually marry, have children, and run a small business. “I have lots of goals,” Miguel explains. “I want to be a lot of people and do lots of things. . . . I want to have my own shop, like a high-performance shop dealing with engines. I know a lot about that.” However, he articulated his awareness of the limitations schooling and society impose upon Latinos, believing that these obstacles would likely impede him from achieving his goals. “I have no support, man, no way of doing it.”

These students had few positive role models to whom they could turn for help. They understood the importance of positive peer relationships and caring teachers in the schooling process but had little experience of either.

Jorge, for example, stated that if he had had the positive influence of friends to push him, perhaps he would have done well. Miguel agreed with Jorge's opinion and explained that "good teachers and good school programs could help." Although there were plenty of good programs and teachers at Baldwin, these Latino students did not feel they had access to them. Their sense of alienation and invisibility translated into a lack of motivation, failure to plan for college, and pessimism about lifelong career goals (Conchas, 1999).

Graphics Academy and Advanced Placement Program

The Graphics Academy was a school-within-a-school magnet program specializing in computer-assisted graphics technology. This program had a reputation for catering to students with strong math and science backgrounds. Its aim was to prepare students to succeed in college and to pursue careers in computer technology. During their three years in the Graphics Academy, students took a variety of classes in physics, calculus, and chemistry, and in the summer following their junior year they participated in paid internships linked to their studies.

The Graphics Academy enrollment was about 127 during the two years of this study. Not surprisingly, enrollment was nearly two-thirds male (63%), reflecting a broader pattern in the United States of female under-enrollment in math and science. Although the academy's ethnic profile did not reflect the Baldwin student population, it did so more closely than the Advanced Placement program. During the 1996–1997 school year, enrollment in the Graphics Academy was 56 percent Asian, 26 percent Black, 10 percent Latino, and 8 percent White. Occasionally, program recruitment took place at other schools in the district, but at the time of this study, most students were recruits from Baldwin's ninth-grade AP track. The director hoped to keep enrollment as low as 150 to better serve the students in the future.

Graphics Academy students' experienced high levels of success. School records indicate that the Graphics Academy had a 100 percent graduation rate during the 1996–1997 school year, and nearly all graduates enrolled in top four-year universities. A majority of students in this academy also participated in the AP program.

Also geared toward high-achieving youth, the AP program began in the mid-1980s. The goal was to bring the instructional quality available in privileged private schools into an urban public school setting. The courses set rigorous reading, writing, and discussion standards. The Socratic method was the major pedagogical strategy, for the lead teachers felt this method prepared students better for college through class participation and discussion. AP classes were offered to tenth through twelfth graders in the humanities and social sciences, including world cultures; American, English, and world literature; political theory and U.S. government. A ninth-grade feeder course linked with the AP track, California history/literature, was also

added. All of the courses in both the ninth-grade block and the AP program were classified as AP and/or Honors. There were also Advanced College Prep (ACP), junior history, and English classes for students who had been dropped from AP. The ACP tag carried no college credit significance, but guaranteed that these students would not be in class with the general school population.

The AP program also did not reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the high school. During the 1997–1998 school year, sixty-four students were enrolled in the AP program. Of them, 66 percent were Asian, 14 percent were White, 16 percent were African American, and 4 percent were Latino. Interestingly, most of the White and middle-class African American students at Baldwin were enrolled in this program.

AP students were required to take advanced placement examinations in history, government, and English. According to district data, AP students at Baldwin consistently scored above the national average on these exams and three times as many students scored a three or higher out of a five-point rating system than at the more affluent high schools in the district. In addition, many of the students enrolled in top four-year universities with twenty advanced placement units — that is, the equivalent of twenty college course units. School records show that the majority of the AP students enrolled in four-year public universities as well as elite private colleges.

AP Program and Graphics Academy Student Responses

Latinos in the AP program and in the Graphics Academy were part of a very small and exclusive peer group of high achievers. In the eleventh and twelfth grades combined, there were three Latinos in the AP track and thirteen in the Graphics Academy, mostly immigrants, during the 1996–1997 academic year. The three Latino students enrolled in the AP classes were also in the Graphics Academy.

Teachers, administrators, and students perceived the two programs as the most rigorous and intellectually challenging structures in the school. School data revealed that both maintained a 100 percent graduation and college acceptance rate. Students from these programs were accepted at Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard, and Yale.

These thirteen Latinos were caught in an interesting paradox. While they were placed at a high academic level in school and were projected to enroll in top colleges, they marginalized themselves not only from the rest of the school but also from other youth in their program. These students were highly stressed as they strove to achieve academic excellence. Data from this study revealed high levels of Latino student alienation and depression within these two programs.

Unfortunately, the social bonds among the Latino students were fragmented. These Latino students made little effort to form relationships with other Latino students in other academic communities, in part because they

felt that others did not share similar values. They exclusively befriended other high achievers who were predominantly Asian and White. Bill, an AP Chicano, for example, had no intention of congregating with other Latinos. He explained that his friends were “mostly Asian students because they are more [his] type, . . . unlike . . . the guys that hang out by the gym, . . . never go to class, have low grades, and tend to be different.” Latinos in this setting simply had little desire to associate with students at the bottom of the academic track whether they were Latino or not. An AP student, a female immigrant from Peru, said, “I don’t associate with those other Latinos because . . . they belong to this gang or that gang and they don’t even go to class. I mean, they bring their mess to our school, they bring their mess to our learning environment.”

Some students explained their isolation in terms of a structural phenomenon. Ricardo, a Mexican immigrant, for instance, asserted that he had no choice with regard to peer relationships because “mostly all are Asians” in his academic program. The choice to form relationships with other Latinos was unavailable because this student community was separated from the rest of the Latino and general school culture through ability grouping within a distinct academic enclave. They also were physically located on another section of the campus and had minimal contact with the general high school environment.

While these two programs facilitated peer bonding through small class size, curricular focus, and strong teacher relationships, the demands placed on students resulted in social divisions. The AP program and Graphics Academy provided high academic standards for young intellectuals, but success came at a price. Students and teachers explained that the competitive spirit among the students resulted in extreme isolation and unhealthy relationships among Latino students. Some students resorted to creative strategies, such as cheating, to elevate their academic standing and simply pass. Several students divulged during interviews that some of their peers cheated to survive in a course. Rocio had this to say on this issue:

Rocio: The Advanced Placement is kinda intimidating, pretty intimidating. I noticed that a lot of my friends . . . cheat and they still make good grades. It is so hard and stressful that a lot had to cheat. You know, . . . they got better grades while cheating . . . and [they were] praised for it.

GC: Do students work together?

Rocio: No, not really. . . . Students there did not because they had to prove that they are the most brilliant and don’t need help. Yeah, it was really competitive. . . . In Advanced Placement you are striving to be the best for the teacher’s attention. . . . If you are not putting your neck out there . . . you will not get noticed, you will just get passed by.

While Asian students at times assisted other Asian students who needed extra help, the few Blacks and Latinos fended for themselves. Other student

interviews and observations confirmed that Asian students worked more closely with one another than with other racial groups. Flor, an AP third-generation Mexican American, had no problem with this arrangement and explained that it did no good to be in a top program if you were not going to be aggressive: "If you're not aggressive about doing good, then, oh well, you are not going to be the best." Thus, Flor felt that the most aggressive students did the best, irrespective of race and ethnic divisions.

The Latino students in these two programs conformed to the school processes and demonstrated competitive values that they believed led to academic success. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that minority students believe that social mobility is possible with the adaptation of majority cultural traits that result in the burden of acting White. This requires successful minority students to resist developing a critical consciousness of the opportunity structure in favor of adaptation. The high-achieving Latino students in both the Graphics Academy and AP program acknowledged the need to repress their perceptions of inequality in favor of conformity and school success. "Oh my God," Rocio expresses, "me be in regular English? Forget that. That does not look good. What would that look like? I want to be tagged the best. The other programs are seen . . . as easy, that's why I'm in Advanced Placement." Despite feelings of isolation, competition, and racial and ethnic divisions, these Latino students adapted to these school processes in order to succeed.

These Latino students put themselves through this ordeal because they wanted to show everyone that they could "make it" in the most difficult of academic settings. These students felt a sense of academic pride in being in these two programs, but at a major social cost: stress and isolation. Ramon, a second-generation Chicano, affirmed that by being in the AP program he felt "damn proud, like [he was] actually someone in the school." However, he was quick to point out that the whole situation was unhealthy because "you're always trying . . . to catch up . . . and always comparing yourself to others. I always feel depressed."

Medical Academy

That's the sort of magic that goes on inside the [Medical] Academy, the flagship of the . . . School District's eight high schools within a high school. Teachers ramble off personal incidents about their students' lives, students tell of working harder than they ever have and getting support from their teachers. ("Disenchanted' Students," 1992)

Baldwin High School's Medical Academy, the first in the city, began in 1985 as an experimental program bridging classroom lessons with real-life experience. Since its inception, its focus has been to serve the district's many students who are likely to drop out of high school. One Baldwin English teacher

designed and implemented the program, spending countless hours responding to the critical need to increase the number of inner-city students pursuing careers in the fields of health, medicine, life sciences, and biotechnology. According to a Medical Academy pamphlet,

The goal of the Academy has been to capture the interest of students in health and bioscience careers and to provide students with the breadth and depth of educational experiences needed to be well prepared for high quality health/bioscience careers, for post secondary education, and for active (and healthy) citizenship.

The Medical Academy enrolled 267 students during the 1996–1997 academic year. Student composition more closely reflected the racial makeup of the overall Baldwin student community than did the Graphics Academy and AP program: 54 percent of the enrollees were African American, 32 percent were Asian, 10 percent were Latino, 2.5 percent were White, and 1.5 percent were Filipino. According to Medical Academy staff and research report evaluations, the academy's student body has historically been over 60 percent female.

Medical Academy students took interrelated academic and lab classes during 80 percent of their school day for three or four years. They typically joined the program in the ninth or tenth grade. The Medical Academy relied heavily on team teaching to link the curriculum along interdisciplinary lines. As the pamphlet explains, academy students participated in related “work-site learning, which includes volunteer experience, career explorations, clinical rotations, summer and senior year internships, career portfolios, senior projects, demonstrations of mastery, etc.”

Although not the first to combine education with work, the Baldwin Medical Academy earned recognition as a national model (Stern et al., 1992). In 1995, a local newspaper wrote that “the [Medical] Academy was a leader in an apprenticeship movement long before then Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently declared it ‘a success story we would like to replicate across the nation’” (“[Baldwin] Leads the Way,” 1995). Capturing the sense of community that developed from the Medical Academy is at the heart of what school reformers seek to emulate.

Medical Academy teachers nurtured their students in many facets of school life, not only in the linkage between school and work. Every teacher knew each student by name. Teachers met regularly to devise better ways of improving individual student success. The program provided career mentors and postsecondary student coaches. Frequent contact was made between school and home, and there were tutors and workshop support services available. Further, a Student Peer Educator program helped link the academy students with other students, faculty, community members, and parents. Throughout the school year, special social and award activities highlighted the program's success and promoted the sense of community. Unlike large,

comprehensive high schools in which students may feel like mere numbers, the academy sought to treat each student as an important and valuable individual. A very close sense of community seemed to result from being in the academy. Many academy students and teachers described the academy as a “family.”

The graduating class of 1998 was remarkably successful, considering that many of the students enrolled as “at risk”: 93 percent graduated, and the remaining 7 percent left the school district or enrolled in another high school. Of the graduates, 91 percent enrolled in college — 72 percent in four-year universities and 19 percent in two-year community colleges. Two students chose not to attend college: an Asian male decided to pursue a military career and a Latina decided to work to help her family financially.

Medical Academy Student Responses

Medical Academy students participated in a thriving school-within-a-school program where supportive institutional processes existed throughout.⁹ These students felt close bonds with one another and their teachers, and they also formed relationships with non-Latino youth. As Diego passionately explained, “We are like a family. We know each other well and get along.” The Medical Academy functioned differently from the Graphics Academy and AP program in eliciting student engagement. While the other two programs engendered competition, the Medical Academy built a sense of community among its students.

The Medical Academy also provided common visions and goals for the Latino youth. Latino students in the Medical Academy supported one another as they strove to succeed academically. Ana, a second-generation Chicana, reported that “the Medical Academy is like a community of a group of people that are working together . . . and if one is not doing good, the other helps . . . to make it better, to make everything better.” Marisol, a Mexican immigrant, expressed similar feelings of affinity and emphasized that students united to meet common goals as future medical professionals: “We are like a community, because in the Medical Academy, they are always telling us to work together and more things are going on for us to unite. We help each other to fulfill our goals in school and go into health [professions].”

Latino students actively engaged in their schooling and worked toward careers in the medical profession. Juan, an immigrant from El Salvador, declared, “*Claro* [of course], we all help each other. *Todos queremos hacer bien* [We all want to do good]. We want to be in health.” These students linked

⁹ It is important to point out that Medical Academy students self-select into the program. Stern et al. (1992) argue that if academy students self-select into an academy, one does not have a true assessment of engagement and achievement. They therefore suggest a more systematic study that controls for self-selectivity bias. The Medical Academy director argues against this as an indicator of success because she makes tremendous strides, along with the other teachers, to recruit the most needy at-risk youth. While some students self-select, the director suggests that many others were “seduced” through intense recruitment efforts on behalf of the academy staff and other students.

TABLE 3
The Medical Academy and Institutional and Cultural Processes

<i>Small Learning Community</i>	<i>College-Prep, Career-Related Curriculum</i>	<i>Partnerships with Employers, Community, and Higher Ed.</i>
Academy-only classes for 2-4 years	College-entrance academic classes	Steering committee to govern academy
Team of teacher-managers	Broadly defined career class	Parental involvement, support
Limited, voluntary enrollment	Contextual, applied, integrated curriculum	Business and community speakers, role models
Family-like atmosphere	Common teacher planning time	Field trips, job shadowing
Administrator and counselor support	Project-based learning	Mentor program
Other courses and activities outside the academy	College and career planning, articulation	Workplace internships, community service
School-within-school	Multicultural pedagogy	Articulation with post-secondary education

their career goals with what they saw around them on a daily basis; that is, they often witnessed and experienced poverty in their neighborhoods and acknowledged the great need for health care for their immediate families and those around them. Consider these statements by Latino students in the program:

GC: Why did you choose the medical career?

Diego: I want to help other people. It's because what I see around me. I've seen how in many cases Latinos don't have as much access to health care. That's one of my priorities. Not just becoming a doctor and forgetting about it, but thinking about my community. I have also spent a lot of time in the hospital so I understand what people go through. I think I can relate to people in need.

* * *

GC: Ana, what plans do you have for the future?

Ana: I plan to be a pediatrician too, because I like to work with little kids. I have a lot of cousins and I've seen many people that are really in need of health care. Many children are sick . . . and the parents say, "Oh, we can't do that, we can't do that, we have no money." I see this all around me. I want to help, not because of money for me, but for helping kids out. To me money does not matter, it will matter to survive, but not to be happy.

The cultural and institutional mechanisms in the Medical Academy supported students' positive vision to do well in school and further enhanced Latino youths' desire to become health professionals. Table 3, modified from Stern et al. (1998), summarizes the key institutional practices that the Medical Academy students reacted and responded to.

Latino students were exposed to various careers in health through field trips, internships, and having mentors in the medical field. Ana, for example, explains that they "get to experience the different careers in health, have mentors, and have more real goals because we see it and they bring it to us." Monica, a second-generation Mexican American, similarly linked her desire to become a doctor with her personal and academic experiences:

This past summer I interned with Children's Hospital . . . and I had the opportunity to see many things and learn about what went on around the hospital. It is sad how so many children need the help of others and how few people there are to help them. I thought so many times of a way that I could be of service to the children.

The same was true for Marisol, who shared that her summer internship experience led her to firm up her goal to become a medical doctor:

During the summer of 1997, I had the honor of being a health intern in a well-known . . . medical hospital. I worked side by side with real doctors. This has forever inspired and encouraged me to pursue my lifelong career choice. . . . I observed the many doctors' professional expertise as they had to make vital life-saving decisions. Regrettably, I even witnessed a death while I was an intern in the emergency room. I have a strong academic background in science, and most importantly, I have hands-on experience in the world of health.

Marisol explained that the Medical Academy's science curriculum coupled with her internship experience in an emergency room gave her a solid foundation to pursue her career goal. In sum, the Medical Academy structured the opportunity for Latinos to experience real-life health professions while they were in high school by incorporating paid internships into the formal curriculum. These institutional mechanisms greatly affected Latino students' perceptions about the opportunity structure, which led to more optimism. Medical Academy Latino students did not only aspire to become professionals, they also expected to realize their college and career goals.

Additionally, the Medical Academy community instilled principles of inclusion and teamwork within students as a way for them to form relationships. Competition was experienced as "healthy." "We are always happy for other students who do well and we help one another out," stated Diego, "but, there is some healthy competition." Diego defined "healthy competition" as a form of competition that

pushes you to work harder. It is not the kind of competition that makes you say, "Oh well, I'm the worst student and so and so always has the answer." And teach-

ers encourage us to work in teams. . . . Like, I'm not worried about getting the best grades. I'm worried about getting good grades.

Latino students in the Medical Academy were encouraged to work in teams and help each other in times of need. This form of peer relationships often resulted in higher levels of academic success.

Veronica, a Chicana sophomore, also shared the view that she belonged to a community of learners who supported rather than competed with each other for the best grades. She said that "sometimes . . . students will be clapping for you, making big ol' sounds when you do good in class. . . . They're like, 'Oh good.'" Latino students reported a strong and supportive academic program and participated in a high-achieving peer group.

Most significantly, Latino students explained that the Medical Academy's racial and ethnic composition differed from the school's other special academic programs in that it was the only one that reflected the composition of the school as a whole. Juan stated that "in the Medical Academy everybody is in there. The largest group was African Americans, then Asian, then Latino, then a few White. The school looked like that. The Medical Academy looks like the school." While the numbers did not match exactly, the Medical Academy more or less paralleled the larger high school's race and ethnic composition.

Latino students in the Medical Academy reported that the racial and ethnic diversity of the program encouraged intergroup contact. Latino students became friends, colleagues, and, in many cases, the boyfriends or girlfriends of individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the Latinos in the program credited the academy's diversity with debunking preconceived notions about other racial and ethnic groups. The Medical Academy took the initial step in forging racial and ethnic integration and breaking down segregation within the school. In addition, the curriculum and pedagogy reflected the various social and historical experiences of the student body. The following student comments on the issue of racial integration showed this clearly. We begin with Laura, a second-generation Mexican American:

Laura: I guess I feel more comfortable talking to *Morenos* [African Americans]. Like, if you have regular classes . . . it's not easy to meet people, and then you can't have a friendship with them. At the academy, you have the same people in all your classes, so you get to talk to them more and become friends.

Marisol: You know, also stereotypes we might have had are not true because we get to know people better. I don't look at Black people the same way. We have common goals.

Ana: We change our thoughts and get to know people better.

GC: Is this positive for students to get to know people who are different from them?

Diego: Little by little people begin to change. Stereotypes begin to change.

Juan: That's their strategy, *la meta* [the goal] — *trabajar con los demás, y no solo con tu propia raza* [to work with others and not just your own race].

Unlike the high-achieving Latino students in the Graphics Academy and AP program who did not seem preoccupied with racial and ethnic integration, Medical Academy students were cognizant of the changes occurring within themselves concerning racial and ethnic stereotypes. The strong social relationships that students formed, coupled with the program's institutional mechanisms, were strong mediating forces against the larger racialization in school and in society. Perhaps in the world of work or in the university setting these Latino students would be better able to work with individuals of different cultural backgrounds as a result of being in the Medical Academy. While these students acknowledged racial and ethnic differences, they worked together as a team for a common academic goal despite the differences. These students were fully aware of the racial and ethnic hierarchy at their school and simultaneously created and benefited from their own safe space (see Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997).

Latino Medical Academy students affirmed that they expected to become medical professionals despite the racial, class, and gender obstacles they would confront all along the way. They did not suppress their critical consciousness in favor of academic success. The students in the Medical Academy continued to view a limited opportunity structure, but they remained optimistic. For example, the Latino young men acknowledged that race and class might affect their career expectations. "I'm sure I'll find racism and financial difficulty," declares Diego, "but race is no excuse though." Juan, who wanted to be a psychologist, and David, who wanted to be a doctor, also believed that race and class could impact their lives in one way or another. These students affirmed a strong determination to succeed through hard work, but they also suggested the importance of the academy structure.

These issues also relate to Latino students' expectations about attaining a professional career. Although many minority students had future aspirations, these students expected to realize them despite structural constraints. Asked about whether they would be practicing medicine in twenty years, Juan replied:

Sí [Yes]. I know and I want to do this. The only thing I can say is that I will put everything possible to do it. No obstacles for me but myself. *Porque soy latino no es obstáculo* [Being Latino is no obstacle]. *Más difícil por ser pobre y latino, pero si puedo* [It is more difficult being poor and Latino, but I can do it]. *Pero ser latino será más difícil aquí* [But being Latino here will be more difficult].

As an immigrant from Central America, Juan realized that his class status might have affected him more than his race in his home country. He predicted, however, that in the United States being Latino would be the most difficult challenge to his life aspirations. David agreed that race and class are

significant obstacles he must overcome in his journey to become a medical doctor:

I want to be a doctor too. Not sure what kind, but I do. School will help and it's the only way to do it. I really believe this and the Medical Academy is helping me. I expect to become a doctor. Nothing will stop me. Race might affect but it will not stop me. Money too, but I'll work harder.

David viewed the interaction between race and class as a difficult barrier, but he fully expected to achieve his goals. If money became an issue, he stated, then he would simply have to work harder. For these Latino youth, it was difficult to separate issues of class and race, for they were critically aware of the impact both had and would continue to have in their lives. The same was true for the Latinas, who must also wrestle with sexism in society.

The majority of the Latina students also intended to be medical doctors. They felt that the Medical Academy (and education in general) would help them get into college and into medical school. However, they were acutely aware of racism, sexism, and classism in U.S. society. They understood that as Latinas they were stigmatized by not only their race and class, but by gender as well. For instance, Ana reported that "racism, money, and being a woman . . . is a lot of pressure." Similarly, María, a Chicana junior, affirmed that "being a Latina . . . makes it . . . really hard to accomplish your goals because of stereotypes of Latinas." On the other hand, Marisol explained that "being a woman is not as much as an obstacle as . . . being Mexican. Money too will be an obstacle, but racism because of being Mexican is the hardest. I can't erase being Mexican and what people think."

These young Latinas did not separate their racial and ethnic identity from their gender identity. As poor, racialized minorities and women, they did not distinguish among these three spheres of oppression. Juana, a second-generation Mexican American, eloquently explained that she could not decipher different forms of oppression and how each related to her experiences as a Latina because she was "all three."

Although these Latina students were aware of both the structural and the ideological influences in society, they were determined to become health professionals. These were articulate, critical, ambitious, and optimistic young women. Both Latinos and Latinas in the Medical Academy foresaw many challenges in their lives, but they were determined to achieve their goals. These Latino students were by all measures successful, and they managed to be critical of, yet not deterred by, the opportunity structure.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study suggests that institutional support systems, in relationship to cultural processes, have an impact on the daily lives of low- and high-achieving poor Latino students. In particular, immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos experi-

enced distinct school structures that mediated school engagement and success. Latino students responded to institutional actions and institutional actors responded to Latino students in distinct ways. Students became active agents in the creation of school success as they interacted with school structures and cultures. This simultaneous interplay of structure, culture, and agency was the proximate source of engagement and school success.

The structure of each of Baldwin High's special academic programs provided opportunities for Latino students to attach themselves to school and develop academically oriented forms of agency. This was possible for the Latino students in the Medical Academy, Graphics Academy, and AP program, whereas the students in the general program did not interact with academy structures at all. However, it was not just the structure that determined student experiences. As explained here, the culture of each program was also important in determining how students interacted with each other and how they viewed academic success. In sum, structure and culture are both in active interplay with student agency.

Many Latino students' actions in relationship to school structures reified failure while others navigated borders and achieved school success. The Latino students in the general program, for instance, represented the majority of the "invisible" students at Baldwin High School who shared in the weakest institutional processes and experienced lack of support from peers and teachers, low expectations, and low achievement. These students represented Chicanos as involuntary minorities who were not optimistic about their future and did not perceive schooling as important, while their Mexican immigrant counterparts embraced expectations of success. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) explained the interesting paradox in motivation between recent Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born Mexican Americans as a function of racial and ethnic stratification in schooling. The general program students were predominantly second- and third-generation Mexican Americans whose experiences confirmed this finding and, in effect, produced and reproduced school failure (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1987, 1989). This academic niche did not help to dismantle the negative effects of school inequality.

On the other hand, the Latino students in the Graphics Academy and AP program were the invisible students who were by all accounts doing exceptionally well academically. They were, however, highly stressed and mentally and physically alienated from the rest of the Latino students and the larger high school in general. Moreover, they were further marginalized within their own peer group in the two programs as they attempted to outdo one another. These students accommodated to school norms as a means of attaining academic success.

In contrast, the Medical Academy structured a positive learning environment that began to bind all its students and teachers across race, gender, and class. Most students in this academy strove toward a common goal and

helped one another in the process. The cultural and institutional processes in the program were based on common visions and goals, difference, and cooperation among teachers and students. This combination of principles began to foster healthier and better integrated racial and ethnic relations, at least among students in the Medical Academy, that led to greater student optimism. This new racial formation promoted a stronger sense of social belonging and academic success for Latinos involved in the academy. This program's building of strong support mechanisms was the bridge that linked racial and ethnic minority youth with adults and other high-achieving peers, which was necessary for educational mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). These students, both immigrant and U.S.-born, were successful and remained optimistic in spite of their critical consciousness of social inequality.

In general, this case study of Latino students shows the diversity of experiences in a large comprehensive high school. It suggests that, while schools often replicate existing social and economic inequality present in the larger society and culture, they can also circumvent inequality if students and teachers work in consort toward academic success. The distinct Latino voices in this study demonstrate the importance of school communities that structure learning environments that link academic rigor with strong collaborative relationships among students and teachers. In addition, the varied experiences of the Latino students reveal the necessity of establishing strong links between racial and ethnic minority youth and the institutional support necessary for academic engagement and success. Most importantly, the study illustrates that supportive institutional and cultural processes in schools can play a significant role in the formation of high-achieving Latino students.

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