What Latino Students Want from School

Jason G. Irizarry

Latino high school students examined learning opportunities for Latinos in their school. Here's what they found.

If you asked Latino students how to improve schools for young people like themselves, what would they say? What recommendations would they have for educators committed to improving their education?

Certainly, we need to do more to improve the education experiences and outcomes for the largest minority group of students in the United States. Approximately 13 percent of all U.S. Latinos between the ages of 16 and 24 don't have a high school diploma or the equivalent. That rate is four times higher than it is for whites and almost twice that of blacks (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Some scholars have called this a crisis (Gándara, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Most districts with significant concentrations of Latino students are engaged in some type of school or districtwide improvement initiative. But who typically gets invited into those conversations? Who gets to share their expertise? Who gets to shape education policy and practice?

Most often, school reform is initiated by politicians and business leaders, the overwhelming majority of whom have never been teachers nor taken any coursework in education (Apple, 2004; Hess, 2011; Lipman, 2004). In some cases, district and school administrators and teachers get to drive the agenda, developing interventions aimed at improving student performance. Those most directly affected by the problem of underperforming schools, those whose futures hang directly in the balance—namely, the students themselves—are rarely included as partners in this process.

Committed to including students' oft-silenced perspectives in the conversation around improving education, I invited seven Latino high school students to join me in a multigenerational research collaborative dubbed Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators conducting Research to Transform Education)—also, fuerte means strong in Spanish). Our goal was to examine schooling experiences and learning opportunities for Latino students and develop recommendations for educators, researchers, and policymakers. As part of the project, I offered a course on action research at the students' high school
twice a week for two years, spanning their junior and senior years. We also met after school and during free periods, weekends, and school vacations to advance the work. While the students were engaged in the participatory action research project, which involved interviewing fellow students and surveying educators at their school, I conducted a multiyear ethnographic study of their experiences. The data I collected—which included interviews, student work products, field notes, and video recordings of presentations the students delivered at professional conferences—reflect vital perspectives from Latino youth that schools need to consider if they're to do a better job of educating these young people.

What Schools Need to Do

Three distinct themes cut across the students’ experiences and frame their recommendations: the need to counter deficit perspectives, broaden one's concept of identity, and acknowledge how power and opportunity are manifested in urban schools.

Counter Deficit Perspectives

Deficit perspectives suggest that cultural traits of students and their communities are the primary cause for academic underachievement (Flores-González, 2002; Nieto, 2000). Such perspectives abound in society and permeate the discourse around the education of Latino students. Latinos have played a central role in the struggle for equal education in the United States and were pioneers in the school desegregation movement (Cockcroft, 1995; Darder & Torres, 2013; Irizarry, 2011; MacDonald, 2004). However, there remains a pervasive belief among many educators and policymakers that Latinos are apathetic about education and that Latino cultural values are incompatible with the beliefs and behaviors that lead to school success.

As Alberto, one of the student researchers, noted, "My family cares about it … about education. That's all they tell me. 'Do good in school, mio.' They really want that for me." Without exception, all the students in the research collaborative and all the Latino students they spoke with as part of their data collection efforts expressed a commitment to advancing their education and felt supported in this by their parents. Comments aired over popular media often stand in contrast to students' perceptions and findings. Take, for example, the remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. When asked about Latinos and preschool education at an event to support increasing federal investment in early childhood education, Duncan posited that "cultural hesitation" makes it difficult for Latino families to send their children to formal preschool programs, suggesting that Latino parents prefer to have their children cared for by family members or friends (Johnson, 2014; Starr, 2013). Although his remarks may have been well-intentioned, they reinforce stereotypes of Latino families and frame their reluctance to send their children to school.
before kindergarten as a cultural trait that leads to problematic education outcomes. Left out of the discussion are any references to how education institutions meet (or don't meet) the needs and concerns of Latino families.

Schools have historically been opposed, and at times hostile, to helping students who speak languages other than English develop and maintain fluency in their native language while also acquiring English. The literacy-rich environments created by caretakers who may be family or friends—spaces in which Latino youth are often affirmed and can develop language skills in context—are, by default, pathologized, whereas formal education institutions are uncritically exalted.

Noted Natasha, another member of the research collaborative, "Why are schools like this? Why don't we hear one word of Spanish on the announcements, not even buenos días? Why can't schools make us feel wanted?" Her questions underscore the work that schools need to do to make Latino students feel welcomed.

**Broaden the Conception of Culture**

Latino youth bring a variety of cultural and linguistic strengths to school, but schools don't always value or affirm those strengths. Students in the research collaborative spoke to the importance of approaches that teach to and through students' cultural identities (see Paris, 2012).

The students see culture in more fluid and multidimensional ways than educators or researchers might. Carmen clarified the point during a discussion about what Latino students wish teachers knew about them:

I'm Latina, Afro-Latina, but that's not all of it. I spend time with African Americans and other people, and we, like, share culture. I don't know how to put it. It's not just Spanish or English but a mix with Ebonics and other stuff. I'm Latina, but I'm mixed culturally, not because my parents aren't both Latino but because of who I am around. I check Latino or Puerto Rican on the forms, but I don't really fit in a box in real life. That's just on paper. Don't get me wrong, I'm a proud Latina, but Latina means a lot of different things for me.

Approaches that focus on students' cultural identities and frames of reference often narrowly define culture solely in terms of race or ethnicity. Although students' racial and ethnic identities are important to them, Latino students in the research collaborative reject the notion of a checklist of attributes that make someone "Latino." Instead, they highlight the importance of cultivating hybrid identities that draw from, build on, and extend racial and ethnic identities, and they want schools to understand and affirm those identities.

Drawing from their own experiences, student interviews, and a teacher survey, the students concluded that their teachers typically are more focused on teaching content than on teaching kids. This may be the
result, in large part, of the constraints under which educators work. Accountability pressures may prompt a myopic focus on quick-fix methods of delivering content to promote academic achievement, measured largely by student performance on standardized tests, as well as the need to move through material as quickly as possible. This limits the time and space for connecting with students and for collaborating with fellow teachers to help students not only meet academic benchmarks, but also learn to navigate and influence the world around them.

Close Opportunity Gaps

Latino students aren't asking for less work or a reduction in academic rigor. On the contrary, our research project suggests that students yearn for more meaningful education experiences and are willing to invest more deeply in schooling if they're convinced that what they're learning will positively affect their lives. Latino students want challenging and interesting learning opportunities. However, most students consulted as part of the project feel that the curriculum at their school is dumbed down because educators don't believe they're capable of handling more. In fact, the students' investigation revealed a rigid tracking system at their high school, with Latino students significantly overrepresented in the lowest, least academically rigorous tracks. Although some educators believe that grouping students by perceived ability levels is an effective way to organize instruction, most of the students consulted believe that tracking is a vehicle to reinforce their marginalization and limit opportunities.

Drawing from both their research and personal experience, the students also call attention to the racialized aspects of academic tracking. In response to a question from an audience member at a presentation of the project's findings, Ramón offered the following insightful analysis of tracking and its impact on Latino and other students of color:

Latinos are in the lowest [level] classes. That's just the way it is, how it's been. That's what our research shows. At first I was like, we must be dumb, we are not smart like the other kids. Latinos are different. So I started to act dumb and not do my work and stuff like that. What does it matter, right? Like, if you are not smart, [you are] not going nowhere. Then I start this research and start to think about it. Many Latinos are smart but still in the low classes. And are you saying that white [students] are smart because they are in the high classes, not fundamentals? It hurt me real bad at first. … thinking that Latinos and myself are dumb or less than them. It still kind of hurts. But I see that is the way school is set up. That needs to change. We are smart. We want better.

This critique shows how tracking can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy that causes students to internalize negative appraisals of their academic capabilities. In turn, many students start to withdraw from school and put less effort into their work because they believe their fates are predetermined. The overrepresentation of Latino students in the lowest tracks and their limited presence in the most
academically rigorous levels of the school create an apartheid-like system (see Akom, 2003), structuring educational opportunities on the basis of students' race, ethnicity, home language, or other personal characteristics that have nothing to do with their academic ability.

Closing gaps in achievement is at the heart of school improvement initiatives. The student researchers suggest that discrepancies in achievement stem from gaps in opportunity, not from a pathology among students or their communities. Focusing on student outcomes without a critical analysis of inputs—what students learn and how they're taught it—is shortsighted and problematic.

Fixing Schools, Not Kids

Before we can work in solidarity with Latino students and families to improve their education experiences and outcomes, we need a more robust understanding of how they're experiencing school, particularly within the context of ongoing school improvement efforts.

The students who participated in this project were not perceived to be invested in school. They often cut class, failed to complete assignments, and rarely contributed to classroom conversations. Viewing them as apathetic, uncaring, or uninterested would be an accurate, although surface-level, appraisal.

This same group of students engaged in a two-year research project, working diligently in the class associated with the project, meeting after school, on weekends, and during school vacations to advance our work. They worked as hard as any students I've ever encountered, and they produced high-quality work that reflected an ability and commitment to learning that far exceeded the limits placed on them through their positioning in the school.

The difference in their investment, according to the students, was due at least in part to how they felt about themselves within the context of the research collaborative. Instead of being positioned as a problem to be fixed, they were invited to participate as researchers with invaluable perspectives that might inform the work of educators who teach Latino students. This shift from deficit perspectives to asset-based approaches should be at the heart of any school improvement effort.

Students also ask that educators view them as cultural beings and view teaching and learning as a culturally mediated process. Latino students are often positioned as "culturally different," which suggests that the dominant culture is "normal" and that students who come from different cultural communities are deviating from the norm.

Take, for example, the notion of Spanish as a "foreign" language. The United States has one of the largest Spanish-speaking populations in the world, yet the language is still described as alien or foreign, thus privileging one way of knowing over another. We all have culture, and these cultural identities inform all our interactions. Because schools and communities are highly segregated—more segregated now than they were in 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court ended legalized segregation—there are fewer opportunities to learn across lines of cultural difference. We also tend to define culture narrowly, thinking
solely in terms of race, ethnicity, or language. Students want us to acknowledge and value the complexity of their identities and build on their prior knowledge and cultural frames of reference. Finally, shifting the gaze from students to the institutions that educate them reveals an inequitable opportunity structure that, somewhat predictably, leads to uneven education outcomes. The focus of school improvement efforts should not be on fixing kids but rather on fixing institutions that do more to reinforce race and class-based stratification than they do to create quality learning opportunities for all students.

Young people are embedded in systems they have little power to change. Similarly, many educators feel powerless to challenge policies that negatively affect their work. Students and educators can be natural allies and collectively create and implement a vision for schooling that reflects the best of our collective wisdom—one that supports the academic and personal growth of all students. The futures of Latino youth and others that schools have underserved depend on it.

What We Want from Educators

"If you don't live here, spend time in our neighborhood. How are you going to really know us if you only see us in one place—school?"

—Jasmine

"Learn another language, like Spanish. This way you will know what we go through. Plus, you can talk to our families."

—Natasha

"Support undocumented students. If you want the best for us, support the Dream Act to give us a chance, a real chance, to go to college and have a career."

—Alberto

"I want teachers to teach me like they want me to go to the best college, how they would want teachers to teach their kids."

—Taína
"Most of my teachers think Latinos are like the stereotype. I want teachers to really see me, see us. We will surprise you with what we can do. We just need a good education, a real education that teaches us how to rise above and change the world."

—Carmen

"Speaking languages other than English should be valued in school."

—Kristina

References


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Endnote

1 For a more detailed documentation of the project and its findings, see *The Latinization of U.S. Schools: Successful Teaching and Learning in Shifting Cultural Contexts* (Paradigm Publishing, 2011).