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AUTHOR Abi-Nader, Jeannette
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ABSTRACT

A teacher's interaction with Hispanic high school students enrolled in Program for Learning in Accordance with Needs (PLAN), a college preparation program designed to develop the basic skills--reading, writing, and public speaking--needed to succeed in college, was observed. The following implicit instructional goals of PLAN were revealed: (1) creating a vision of the future; (2) redefining the participants' self-image; and (3) building a supportive community. These goals were supported through a network of teacher behaviors, particularly sociolinguistic strategies imbedded in the teacher's speech, which wove the cultural characteristics of Hispanic students with academic content in an environment that encouraged learning. PLAN's success may be partially attributable to the strategic use of language in motivating students. The instructional goals and the strategies used to implement them are illustrated on an accompanying handout. A brief bibliography is included. (BJV)

# TALKING TO LEARN: INTEGRATING CLASROOM TALK WITH ACADEMIC CONTENT FOR MOTIVATING HISPANIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by Jeannette Abi-Nader
Learning Research and Development Center
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara St. Pittsburgh, PA 15260

## Purpose and Design of the Study

The escalating number of Hispanics in the schools and the rising dropout rate among them force researchers, teacher educators, policy makers, and practitioners to address their situation. In spite of the dropout rate from high school, which for Hispanics reaches 70% in some areas, the majority of studies and intervention programs focus on pre-elementary or elementary school children. In adolescence, however, problems related to identity and self-worth become critical and require a different approach than that which works for children (Gay, 1978). Moreover, researchers and policy makers, with some notable exceptions, focus on deficits and failures and so reinforce a climate of hopelessness and frustration. The amount of research about successful academic programs or instructional strategies for minority teenagers is in inverse relationship to the magnitude of the dropout problem for this age group. Finally, most pedagogical approaches aim exclusively at improving language production (Cummins, 1986; Heath, 1986) without addressing underlying social concerns which may interfere with successful learning: (a) no vision of the future, and no skills in planning or goal setting; (b) low self-esteem especially in learning and communication situations, and (c) feelings of alienation and lack of identity in the dominant culture (Carter, 1971).

My study was different in three ways: first of all, it focused on Hispanic high school, not elementary school students, and was about a successful college preparatory program, and not about student failures. In the course of this study, I discovered that language production was not construed as an isolated skill, but as a means of addressing the social concerns of Hispanic high school students by helping them to (a) create a vision of the future, (b) redefine their image of self, and (c) build a supportive community. Going beyond a preoccupation with "learning to talk," teacher/student interaction in this college prep program integrates cultural needs and academic content through "talking to learn." Instruction is contextualized in the life experience of the students and in the cultural information embedded in the speech events of everyday classroom talk.

## Design of the Study

The way I went about this investigation involved ethnographic methods of inquiry. This meant that I had to find a real place where Hispanic high school students were experiencing academic success; and that I had to become as much a part of that place as I could in order not to interfere with naturally occurring events nor influence natural behaviors and attitudes. Through a personal contact, I located a

college preparatory program for Hispanics in a large urban high school, called Heritage High, in a city in northeastern U.S.A. and spent about a year there as a participant observer. The students were enrolled in PLAN, a college prep program designed to develop basic skills needed to succeed in college: reading, writing, and public speaking. The courses were offered in a three-year sequence as electives for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The students, some of whom speak very little English, represent a range of academic achievement from below to above average and do not bring a record of school success to their experience of PLAN. What they have in common is a desire to go to college, or at least be with their friends who do. Data consist of fieldnotes, audio- and videotaped classes; and interviews with faculty, students, graduates, parents, and administrators; and with reviews of school records and parents' meetings. The purpose of on-going and subsequent analysis was to identify, categorize, and relate patterns of events in classroom interaction and in other data; then to interpret these patterns in order to understand and explain PLAN's success. The validity of the interpretations was checked through recursive data gathering, extensive interviews with a range of informants, and by corrective lapses of time between focused observations. The profile of PLAN that emerges from this analysis is stable and consistent over time and warrants confidence that there is congruence between interpretations of the data and the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

## Results of the Study

The data reveal that the implicit goals of instruction in PLAN are to help students (a) create a vision of the future, (b) redefine their image of self, and (c) build a supportive community. These goals are supported by a network of strategies, or focused teacher behaviors, which weave cultural characteristics of Hispanic students with academic content in an environment which encourages learning. The figures included in your handout show the goals of instruction and the strategies used to implement them. I will discuss these from the point of view of teacher-talk and the sociolinguistic strategies which promote these goals.

## Creating a Vision of the Future

During the first week I spent observing the classes in PLAN, the seniors gave three-minute speeches about their most important dreams or wishes. It was a follow-up assignment to their reading of "The Monkey's Paw." The assignment did not reflect the Faustian theme of a man selling his soul to the devil in exchange for having all his wishes come true. It did reflect a basic need the students in this class experience, the need to imagine a secure and successful future and to express their dreams and wishes. Assignments like this are part of the network of strategies which helps students create a vision of the future.

This network includes three major strategies (see Figure 1) which are: (a) **The Mentor Program**, (b) **an Oral Tradition** about PLAN, and c) **Future-oriented Classroom Talk.** Hispanic students in PLAN, like most minority students, lack models for pursuing a college education or preparing for professional careers. In The Mentor Program Hispanic

college students and professionals, many of them graduates of PLAN, talk to the students about college, jobs, and careers. "If they can do it, I can," is a refrain frequently repeated by PLAN students when reflecting on The Mentor Program.

Secondly, many PLAN students are the first in their families to finish high school or even think of college, and so they lack a tradition on which to base expectations or motivation for future success. By recounting stories about the academic and social achievements of PLAN graduates, the teacher developes an oral tradition and invites his students to become part of this history of leadership, service, and success. In interviews and informal settings, the students, in turn, repeat the stories and cite them as instances of motivation for going to college and for assuming significant roles in their communities.

Third, the struggles and failures students experience with a new language and culture result in an inability to imagine a future which includes success and acceptance by the dominant society. In PLAN, classroom talk counteracts these negative self-appraisals and promotes the imaging of a successful future. Teacher talk, in particular, is infused with references to the students' concerns about their future, their identity, and feelings of alienation. These references shape the content, structure, and function of teacher talk.

## The Content of Teacher Talk

Teacher talk encompasses frequent references to the future which take the form of preparations, descriptions, rationale, and anecdotes. Out of a total of 20 senior classes which I transcribed and analyzed for references to the future, seven entire classes were devoted to planning or preparation for the future. This **preparation** took the form of writing the personal essay required for college applications, learning how to fill out financial aid forms, or listening to PLAN graduates talk about college life. In the 13 remaining senior classes in the set, there were 57 references to the future in the form of descriptions, rationale, or anecdotes.

**Descriptions** were of situations in college such as using a syllabus, taking notes in a college class, or going to the college counsellor for help. **Anecdotes**, designed to focus attention on the future, were stories about PLAN graduates who got A's on their first college term paper, who called the teacher to say how useful a handout they had received in PLAN was in college, or graduates who were turning around a failing college careers by following advice heard in PLAN. The **rationale** for skill-building exercises was stated in terms of success for the future, for instance, "You might not need this now, but it will be important in college."

## The Structure of Teacher Talk

The structure of teacher talk also supports the goal of creating a vision of the future. Statements about the future are most often expressed in the indicative rather than in the conditional mode. When referring to the future, for instance, the teacher says "when you go to college" rather than "if you go to college." Other examples are: [After note-taking practice, students shake their wrists as though they had writer's cramp] "Okay, that's what it's going to be like"

(Jan.16.Sr). "Not easy, but this is what you're gonna have to do. It's gonna be longer than this in college" (Jan.16.Sr). "I just want you to learn how to do it [term paper]. I don't want any surprises when you go to school next year. You're going to know how to do it" (Jan.27.Sr). "I'm gonna give you all the practice you need so by the time you go to college or you go into the business world, you're making good notes" (Dec.6.So).

Students are aware of the power of declarative structures and detect teacher deviations from this pattern. On one occasion when the teacher was assigning role-playing parts, he said, "Luis can be the policeman because he might be a policeman someday." Luis looked indignant and said, "Might? Will!" Such declarative statements consistently characterize the structure of teacher talk and help reinforce the positive image of self as well as create a vision of the future.

## The Function of Teacher Talk

Teacher talk functions in three ways: it **forecasts** the future; it **exhorts** the students to meet high expectations; it **simulates** likely future events and situations.

Forecasters. Forecasters are teacher-comments which help students imagine themselves in college or in professions: "Hey! You could find yourself working for a magazine. You could own your own magazine." (Oct.11.Sr) "Okay, what kind of person do you want working for you? You want the task-oriented person who meets deadlines." (Jan.27.Sr) "You could be working for the FTC someday. You could be working in California or DC or Africa and it's important to know this" (Nov.12.Sr). Let's say your boss, let's make it a woman, she wants something done by Monday (Jan.27.Sr). What is significant about these comments is that the image of the future projected for the students is not their typical experience. The teacher addresses them as potential employers, managers, entrepeneurs.

Exhortations. The purpose of these "mini-sermons" and bits of advice by the teacher is to set high standards and remind the students that success requires hard work. "If you can do it here [succeed in PLAN] you can do it in college. There's no question about it. My only question is do you want it? How badly do you want it? Do you have the motivation to do it?" (Jan.17.Sr) "You've been developing communication skills for about three years now and it's time to lead. It's time to show the sophomores, the freshmen and the juniors what Heritage High is all about" (Sept.10.Sr). "And I like the way you concluded that money wasn't everything. It isn't everything; we know that; we see that; loving one another as brothers and sisters of the one creator we have, is everything" (Sept.20.Sr). These exhortations often recur in student talk about their own goals and aspirations.

Simulations. Role-playing and communication games simulate scenarios which the students may encounter in the future. For instance, a role-playing activity in the public speaking class began with this rationale: "You're at a parents' meeting. You want a good education for your children. You are the only one to speak up. That's why it is so important for you to learn public speaking skills." And practice in note taking is introduced in this way:

"Okay, what college are we going to be today?" [Students call out names of schools] "Princeton!" "Georgetown!" "UCLA!" "Harvard!" "Okay, today we are at Princeton." [He reads a passage from the workbook in "lecture" style, and the students take notes]. (Dec.10.Sr.Jr.)

Future-oriented classroom talk, which increases and intensifies from sophomore to senior year, distinguishes PLAN from other classes at Heritage in which college and a future in the professions are rarely mentioned. The power of these strategies are demonstrated in how students adapt ideas from these speech events to express their own ideas and vision of the future (See Table 1.).

| Teacher | Students/Graduates |
|---|---|
| They [parents] want you to have a better life than they did. (Sept.23.So) | They [parents] want us to go to college to have a better life than they have. (Fri.Int.10.8) |
| You take what the mentors tell you and evaluate that and make your decision. (Jan.17.Sr) | I'm going to evaluate and I'm going to put it together and that's going to be my decision. (Fri.Int.10.8) |
| I want you to learn how to express yourself. (Nov.4.Sr) | I learn how to express myself. (Sar.Int.10.8) |
| If they can do it, you can do it. (Nov.27.Sr) | If she can do it, I can do it. (Ani.Int.1.30) |
| Take your time. Wait. The boys will be there when you're ready. (Sept.10.So) | You can wait, you know. Tell the guy wait and everything. (Ani.Int.1.30) |
| I want you to be independent. (Sept.10.Sr) | We want to be independent. (Tape.2.Speech) |
| You are the future leaders that will go back and help your people. (Sept.9.So) | I'm going. . .to go back and help my people. (Sur.Sr.5) |

Table 1. Adapted from A House for My Mother: An Ethnography of Motivational Strategies in a Successful College Preparatory Program for Hispanic High School Students.

## Redefining the Image of Self

A second set of strategies addresses areas of major concern for students as immigrants and minorities. Some stereotypes they encounter from "white" teachers are of the Hispanic "sense of time," "dependence on welfare," "lack of providing for the future," and "apathy toward civic involvement." In addition, difficulties with the language make them "feel ashamed" of their identity as Hispanics and of their limited ability to speak English; they do not like to read aloud in class, and they have no confidence that they, as Latins, can learn.

As in creating a vision of the future, the use of language plays a critical part in helping students to redefine their self-image as Hispanics, as learners, and as communicators (See Figure 2). The strategies which the teacher uses in PLAN support the students in reversing these concepts of self and the stereotypes they harbor by (a) frequent positive references to cultural values familiar to the students, such as closeness among family members, and the importance of religious customs; (b) stories about the teacher's experience in the Peace Corps and how it helped him appreciate Hispanic culture, (c) identification with students as his brothers and sisters, and (d) stories about Latins who have achieved success. Because the teacher had to adapt to a new language and culture in the Peace Corps, he can effectively appeal to his students to abandon dysfunctional cultural traits and to adopt functional behaviors such as daily attendance, completing assignments, being independent, and pursuing opportunities for service and leadership in school as practice for civic involvement.

Positive language is used to correct mistakes as well as for praise. For instance, when students make mistakes related to the content of a lesson, he says, "That is a great mistake to make because now we can see better what it's supposed to be." When a student stumbled through an oral presentation for which he had not prepared, the teacher said, "We can learn from Luis. He is our model of what can happen when you have to speak in public and you're not ready. Even professionals have to prepare." In commenting on this strategy for correcting mistakes the students demonstrate an awareness of the power of the linguistic structures used in positive language. They specify this approach as helpful and non-threatening, and say, "He love mistakes!"

Role-playing and dramatization of scripts are ways the students practice reading and speaking skills, but they also function as opportunities for the students to try alternative images of themselves. They create and dramatize TV commercials which are videotaped and replayed year after year. Playback of videotaped activities helps the students to view themselves as learners, as decision makers, as problem solvers, and as persons who can speak with authority, and to see these images evolve over the three-year period of PLAN.

Lastly, teacher strategies of modelling language production and guiding student performance help the students overcome a lack of

confidence in speaking in public. The teacher does not interrupt students to correct syntax or pronunciation when they are engaged in class discussion or in conversation. Instead, when they read scripts or stories aloud, he assumes the role of a "stage director," models language production, and insists on careful imitation of his pronunciation and intonation.

For their part, students develop a strategy of "echo-speech" to increase their language repertoire, not only by imitating the teacher's pronunciation, but also by storing away chunks of his speech which reappear in their own talk. For example, when encouraging girls to think about college, the teacher emphasizes the need to be prepared for a future in which the roles of women will be different from those commonly accepted by their mothers. In interviews, some of the female students use his words and expressions to describe their roles in the future (See Table 1, above).

## Building a Supportive Community

In many ways, building a supportive community is the context for creating a vision of the future and for redefining the image of self. Affective language characterizes strategies utilized to build a sense of family in PLAN, a particularly appropriate move given the value of the family in Hispanic culture. Three traits which characterize family structure also describe PLAN: acceptance, mutual support, and self-preservation (See Figure 3). The teacher models acceptance by never allowing the students to laugh at each other's mistakes, and by creating an atmosphere of belonging in the class. He talks to the students as if they were his children, "I have a daughter your age. What I want for her, I want for you." "We're family in here. We look out for each other." This modeling is accompanied by coaching them in developing the same kinds of relationships among themselves. They are to demonstrate mutual support and encouragement by (a) relating to one another as members of an extended family, (b) helping younger members as counsellors and tutors, and (c) by cooperation not competition in efforts to succeed. A third quality of families, the instinct for self-preservation and regeneration, enjoins responsibilities on the students to help recruit members for PLAN and to return after graduation to share experiences of college life. Finally, enjoying friendship in PLAN is meant to develop a sense of duty for building and extending community through leadership and service. The dearth of Hispanic leadership in Heritage City is cited as the cause for their limited political, economic, and social clout and as a reason for learning language skills, especially public speaking. When the students' interest in PLAN wanes, the teacher points to posters of Nicaraguan orphans and challenges the students to learn language skills in order to speak for all Latin Americans, especially the orphans who have no one to speak for them.

## Theorizing About PLAN

What evidence is there that the strategic uses of language in PLAN affect students' motivation? PLAN's success is demonstrated in the college acceptances and scholarships recorded over the years. Typically 60% to 65% of PLAN students attend college compared to 40%

of Heritage High School seniors who declare an intention of going to college. These data describe but do not explain PLAN.

| | Record of PLAN Graduates | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CLASS OF | 1986 | 1985 | 1984 | 1983 | 1982 | 1981 |
| PRIVATE COLLEGE | 8 | 6 | 10 | 7 | 3 | 5 |
| PUBLIC 4 YEARS | 2 | 5 | 2 | 13 | 8 | 8 |
| JUNIOR/TECHNICAL | 4 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| SCHOLARSHIPS | 13 | 10 | 12 | 24 | 13 | 19 |

Table 2. Adapted from A House for My Mother: An Ethnography of Motivational Strategies in a Successful College Preparatory Program for Hispanic High School Students.

Interviews with and observations of students and graduates in PLAN establish that the strategies form a model, a structured, interactional approach, in which classroom talk is integrated with the cultural realities of the students' lives to create an environment which supports academic success. Students internalize propositions about their future, their own image, and their place in society and imitate linguistic structures and social attitudes enacted in PLAN such as, "We never laugh at anyone's mistakes;" or "College is important. . .especially for girls, minorities" (Fri.Int.10.8). They imitate "expert" language production through their own strategy of "echo-speech."

Students demonstrate cognitive and affective growth which they attribute to their experiences in PLAN. They move from imitating behavior or language production to acting independently and communicating confidence in their own ability as learners and communicators. This knowledge empowers them to control and direct their lives, to develop their own strategies or metacognitive skills. "Mr. Bogan [the teacher] has helped me a great deal. . . .I don't think I would have been able to do so many things, nor to plan my future so good. This class helps you be independent and more mature towards life" (Sur.Sr.10). The graduates share experiences about successful college interviews, about effective note-taking and outlining skills, about achievements such as establishing Hispanic programs on campus radio stations, or being chosen to represent their colleges at public programs. They ascribe these successes to the opportunities they had in PLAN to explore, develop, and test their use of language in an encouraging and supportive environment.

## Research on Classroom Talk

Many studies deal with classroom talk and its precedents. Ethnographers like Heath (1983), and researchers at the Kamehameha Project (Jordan & Tharpe, 1979) have identified cultural differences which characterize learning to talk in various socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups.

Discoveries about socialization through language were made by Heath (1983) in her study of communities around textile mills in the Carolinas. By extensive observations over a period of years, Heath was able to identify the ways in which the various communities taught their children to use language. Heath taught teachers to become ethnographers of their own and their students' culturally rooted uses of language which led to improved communication and instruction.

Another study of the impact of culture on language production is the case study of the Kamehameha Early Education Program called K.E.E.P. (Jordan & Tharpe, 1979). This special laboratory school run by researchers integrates ongoing research about community patterns of interaction with the design of instruction. Notable increases have been achieved in reading levels of the Hawaiian children in the school by incorporating a native pattern of story telling in the reading groups. By describing discontinuities caused by cultural differences in learning to talk, these studies have resulted in the development of successful intervention programs that integrate home ways with school ways of speaking.

For innercity minority high school students, the problem is not just the need for socialization from home ways to school ways as in "learning to talk." There is also the need to integrate the social concerns experienced by Hispanic adolescents into the content, structure, and function of classroom interaction. Strategies which emerge from an awareness of these social concerns make "talking to learn" the focus of instructional goals. Language production, then, becomes not only the end of instruction, but the means as well. When rooted in the skillful integration of the students' background with academmic skills and content, such strategies effectively motivate Hispanic students to create a new vision of the future, to redefine their image of self, and to contribute toward building a supportive community.

## Final Word: A House for My Mother

Through the motivational stategies of PLAN, the teacher and his students cooperate to resist stereotypes of failure and "to reach for our dreams even if they seem impossible" (Sur.Jr.13). Because "family" is an important cultural characteristic of the students in PLAN, it functions as an appropriate key metaphor and dominant motif in the sociolinguistic strategies aimed at creating a vision of the future, redefining the image of self, and building a supportive community. Success for many students in PLAN is bound to a desire to "buy a house" for their mother. Frequent expressions of this wish in interviews and speeches were tied to goals and aspirations for acceptance and success in the future. The mother becomes something beyond a family member whose needs motivate her children to succeed. She symbolizes the "mother land," the "mother tongue," the search for identity and a "place" in a new culture. Classroom talk, which integrates these cultural values with cognitive tasks of mastering skills and academic content, becomes a vehicle for rehearsing future events, for internalizing new images of self, and for developing a language community which empowers and motivates students to succeed.

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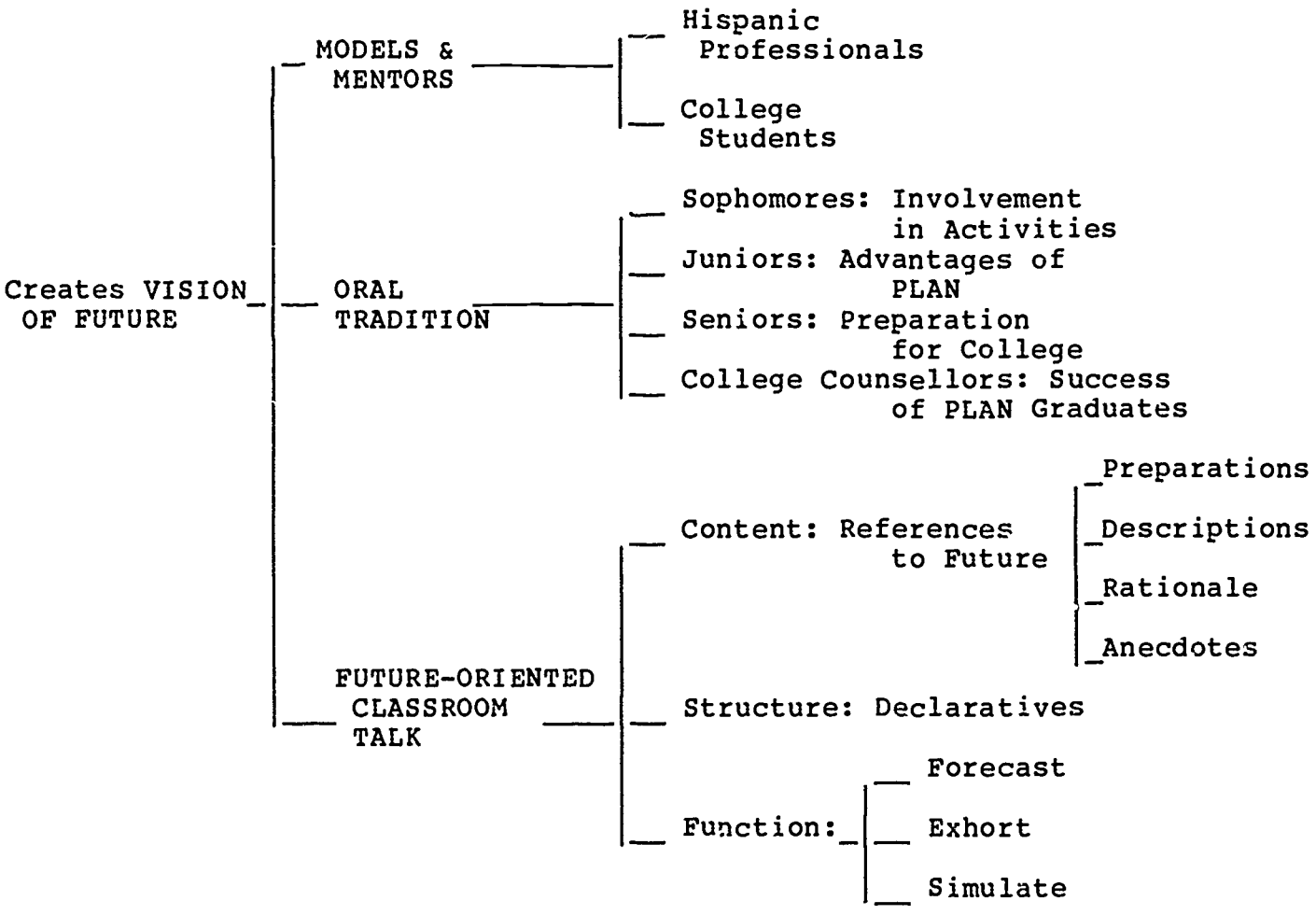
## MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES USED IN PLAN

### Creating a Vision of the Future

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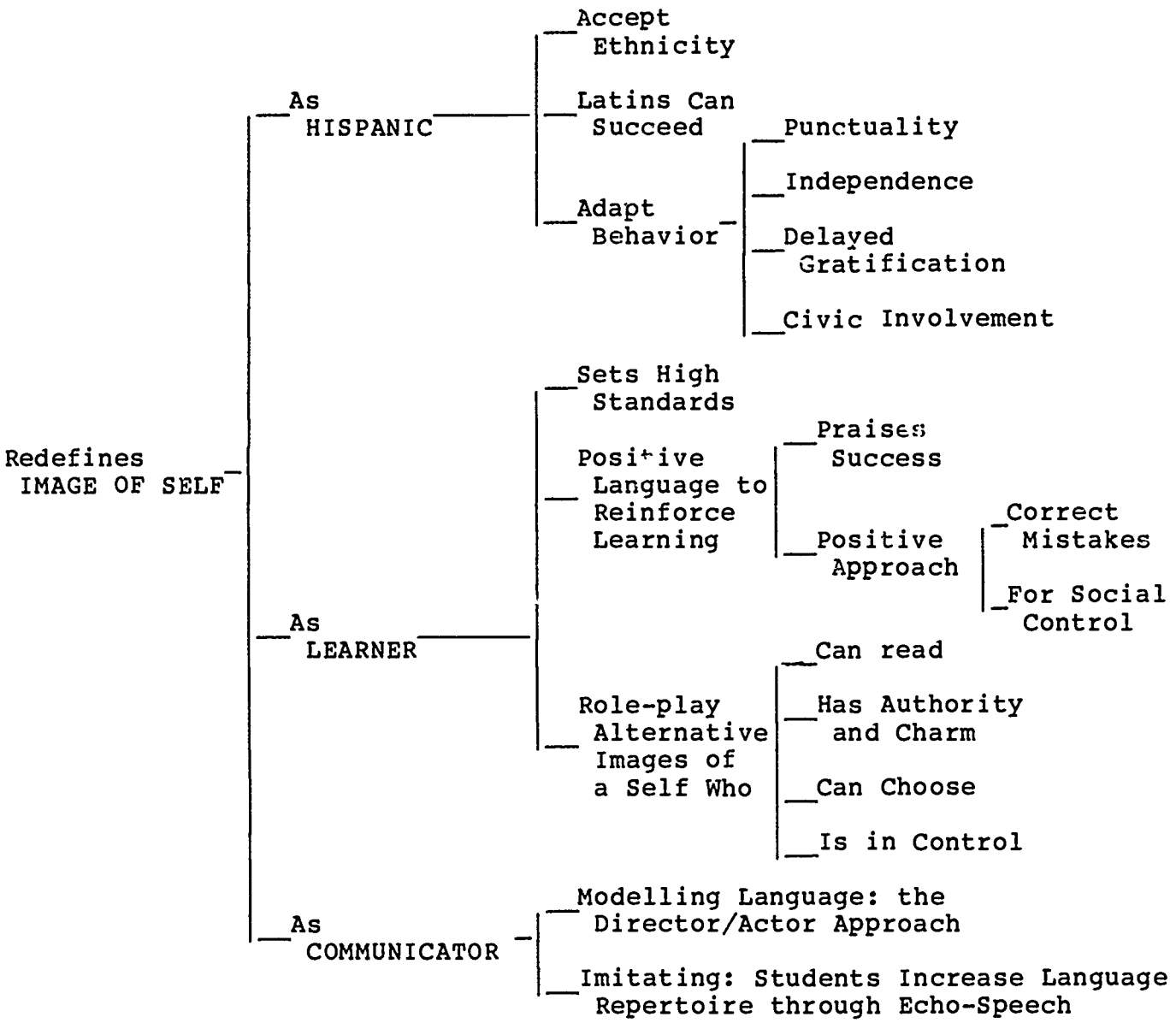
## MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES USED IN PLAN

### Redefining the Image of Self

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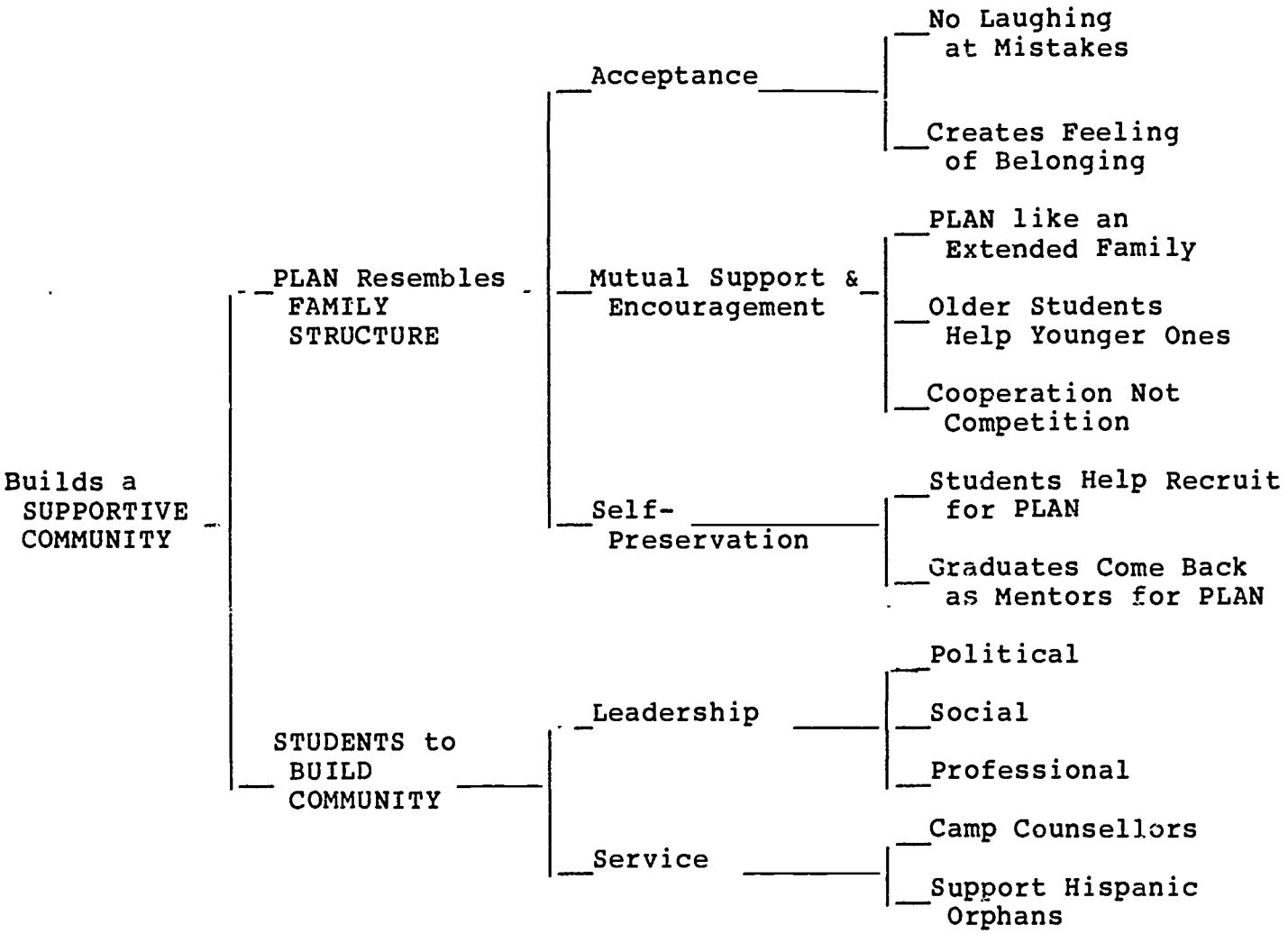
## MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES USED IN PLAN

### Building a Supportive Community

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