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ABSTRACT

This study examined how successful Hispanic American high school students have managed their upward mobility, specifically the decision to work hard and get to college. The sample consisted of 115 participants at the annual Hispanic Youth Conference in Sacramento (California). Why the students decided on college, how they planned to get there, and the strategies they pursued to deal with peers and school to achieve success were studied. Following modifications of the typology of Ogbu (1978) and the concept of eth-class of Gordon (1964), students were divided into caste, immigrant, and autonomous groups. Caste students need teacher help and are willing to fight the bureaucracy to take needed classes. Immigrant students benefit from school programs and some parental help and try to mentor others. Autonomous students choose to segregate their peer relationships by activity and receive mostly parental mentoring. From the experiences of these students, a list of suggested student strategies was prepared. Strategies include peer management, commitment to a hard work model, and never giving up on oneself. Specific strategies are suggested for teachers in the areas of: (1) finding common errors, (2) forming homework groups, (3) mentoring students, and (4) increasing opportunities for upward movement in school. Some suggestions are made for the entire school as well. (Contains 3 references.) (SLD)

The Mobility Strategies of Succcessful Hispanic High School Students

by

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This preliminary report sampled all participants in a recent meeting of the annual Hispanic Youth Conference in Sacramento, California.[1] There were 115 participants studied in various ways. The sample were all high school students, primarily sophomores, who were oriented toward college. All 115 were surveyed, while approximately 40 took part in videotaped group interviews, with 5-8 participants in each group. Last, 15 extensive, individual interviews were conducted to assess hypotheses developed from the survey and group interviews.

The study examined how successful Hispanic youngsters managed their upward mobility, i.e., their decision to work hard in school and get to college. We sought to determine why the sample decided to go to college, how it decided to get there, and what strategies were pursued to deal with peers and school to achieve success. The plan of the paper is to introduce the sample and theoretical base, review the findings broadly, give an example of each type of student and his or her story, and to review, in a practical way, the various strategies helped students achieve upward mobility, i.e., an orientation toward making it to college.

The Hispanic Youth Conference draws youngsters from across the State of California, on the recommendation of high school counselors. The emphasis is on representation, so the conference limits the number of participants from each school in order to draw from the a large number of schools. Theoretically, the sample was divided by a combination of Ogbu's (1978) minority typology and Gordon's (1964) concept of eth-class. This resulted in a modification of Ogbu's general three-part typology, Caste, Immigrant, and Autonomous, with each category divided generally by parental place of birth, family income level, and orientation toward one's culture.

The Caste group (n =4) had U.S.-born parents, family income below $20,000, and, as expressed by the sample, ambivalence toward the dominant culture. The ambivalence included a sense that dealing with the dominant culture was necessary for mobility, and also that discrimination set forth barriers to mobility. The Immigrant group (n=86), had non-U.S. born parents, income levels from $10,000 to $60,000

[1]The data used in this report and all quotes are taken from Maria Chairez, *The Mobility Strategies of Successful Hispanic High School Students*, unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, School of Education, University of the Pacific, 1990.

per family, and a cultural orientation which was based on language usage. That is, the cultural identification of the immigrant sample was based primarily on Spanish-speaking peers rather than any sense of the dominant culture. The Autonomous group (n=24) had parents who were both U.S. and non-U.S. born and whose income ranged from $20,000 to beyond $60,000 per year. Cultural identification in this group was basically symbolic, when it was present. This group tended to live in upper-middle class neighborhoods of mixed ethnicity, rather than neighborhoods characterized by a high incidence of Spanish-speakers or low income people.

The focus of the study examined how high achieving Hispanic adolescents made their way through high school. What kinds of personal strategies do they use to make their way through high school? A secondary question involved what teachers and schools do to increase the chances of improving achievement and helping youngsters reach upward mobility. The sample all expressed a set of common, middle class values, including a belief in the future, that education was related to upward mobility, and that there was opportunity in society. While this was predictable in a sample of upwardly mobile students, we probed the source of these values through the questionnaire.

Mentoring and the Decision to Do Well in School

Students were asked to identify when they first decided that school was important. Only one third of the sample always viewed education as important. The remaining two-thirds made their decision while they were in school. Thus, some event or series of events positively shaped the majority of this sample's desire to do well in school and to view school as important to their lives.

About 41% (n=47)of the Immigrant students always viewed school as important. The other 59% (n=68) decided to do well in school at varying grade levels. Some were greatly influenced by experiences in upper elementary; even more decided to excel while in junior high. Those Immigrant students who decided later in their schooling to do well reported that this occurred because "they were encouraged to achieve."

The Decision to Do Well in School
(N=115)

Decision to do well in school	*Caste*	*Immigra*	*Autonomous*
always	3 of 5 (60%)	37 of 87 (42.5%)	7 of 22 (32%)

upper elementary or higher	2 of 5 (40%)	50 of 87 (57.5%)	15 of 22 (68%)

The mentors who influenced the sample to do well in school varied by group. In the Caste group, all mentors were found within school. The Caste mentors were teachers and counselors. There were no other sources of encouragement or support.

Teachers were the major source of mentoring in the Immigrant group, followed by parents and peers. One phenomenon unique to the Immigrant group was that Spanish-speaking youngsters would actively work to recruit their peers to commit to school as a way of doing well.

The most significant form of mentoring in the Autonomous group was parents. They mentored their children closely, with support from teachers. Teachers were not nearly as significant as parents for orienting students toward college. In addition, there were significant peer pressues and neighborhood pressures for achievement reported by the Autonomous sample.

Aside from teachers, there were few concrete role models for Caste students. Teachers, parents, and peers provided concrete role models for Immigrant youngsters, while Autonomous adolescents reported that nearly everyone was a role model. Essentially, Caste students decided to believe a teacher or counselor, because there were few, if any role models, while Immigrant students did have some role models. Autonomous students were inundated with strong role models.

Making It Through High School: Peers, Parents, School Programs, & Study Strategies to Deal with Teachers

The interviews brought to light a set of strategies employed by the sample to asssess the impact of peers in relation to their impact on one's upward mobility, i.e on the chances of making it in school. The strategies employed by the sample varied by group. The small Caste group and the Immigrant group tended to use the same strategies for dealing with peers, while the Autonomous group tended toward a different set of strategies.

The Caste and Immigrant groups each had youngsters who were able to balance the social demands of adolescence with their orientation toward getting to college. A number of the sample, however, made a determination to isolate themselves from peers. Typically, this group saw peers as a drag on their opportunity and mobility. Issues such as delingquency, teen pregnancy, and simply 'hanging out' were perceived as unnecessary restrictions on mobility. Their basic response was to

isolate themselves from peers and live their lives without peers. As one adolescent put it on videotape, "I don't have friends; I have a career."

Autonomous youngsters practiced what can only be termed peer group segregation in pursuing their paths toward college. Essentially, Autonomous youngsters had different peer groups for different functions. There would be a group with which one studied and other groups for partying, sports, etc. In this way, an academic focus could be maintained in one peer group, while other interests might be pursued in less significant peer groups. These youngsters consciously managed their time and choice of activities.

A second management issue involved parents. Caste students often sought and received mentoring for their parents. Caste parents needed to be convinced that there was opportunity and that it was worth pursuing. School programs and counselors were significant in this regard. Similarly, school persons and programs were helpful in supporting Immigrant parents. Autonomous parents were the primary mentors of their children. This attitude was reflected in the Autonomous sample, which was clear that parents were most significnat in managing their school careers.

School programs were most significant for Immigrant students. The range of special programs, such as bilingual education, provided strong support for Spanish speakers. This included help in gaining higher track placement and using bilingual teachers for guidance in a new culture. Autonomous students made use of school programs, but they were supplements to other sources of support, not the primary way they got oriented or supported to achieve in high school.

School programs were not significant for the small Caste sample. Essentially, there were no programs for these youngsters, so school support came only from teachers and counselors. One point which was clear in the interviews is that Jesse Jackson's statement, "You can **be** somebody," was very effectively used by teachers to motivate caste students to achieve. The caste students reported that hearing this line repeated over time motivated them, i.e., gave them cause to believe that they could, indeed, 'be somebody.'

The refusal to be deterred by failure was the only common study strategy shared by all three types of students. This is the single approach to school shared by high-achieving students from the range of social class and cultural backgrounds in this study. It suggests that teaching students how to deal with failure might be a way to improve school success and college going. At least, this is a testable hypothesis for further study.

While students might pursue this strategy in slightly different ways and for different purposes, all students sought to learn from

failure and improve as a routine way of approaching school. In the case of one Caste youth, the refusal to be deterred by failure took the form of a challenge. He requested that he be placed in calculus and would happily leave as soon as he failed a test. He made an A in the class. Both Caste and Immigrant students used this approach to achieve higher track placement. In less dramatic examples, all types of students pressed teachers for explanations of why they had failed a test or an assignment and sought opportunities to redress the failure in some way.

Examples of Each Student Type: A Brief Synthesis and Three Biographies

This section summarizes briefly the three types of student and humanizes the sample with the lives of three students, John, Elizabeth, and Peter.

A caste student is a youngster who needs help from a teacher and is willing to fight his way through the bureaucracy to take the classes he needs. The good teachers go out of their way to make sure a worthwhile kid gets to college or somewhere productive. Without a teacher, these kids are loners who may have to hide their skills and ambitions from parents and siblings, as well as fighting the school on their own. They either become loners or are socially skilled enough to 'win permission' from their peer group to achieve and leave.

An immigrant student is a youngster who not only benefits from school programs and some parental interest, but tries to mentor other newcomer peers to get involved in school instead of dropping out. This youngster finds shelter in the form of mentoring and continued support in bilingual programs. The bilingual teacher works to introduce the immigrant student to American culture. This youngster either isolates him/herself from peers or finds a way to balance aspirations and peer group.

An autonomous kid has a choice of peer groups segregated by function, academic, athletic, etc. Parents mentor this youngster, whose achievement orientation comes from his/her total environment: the neighborhood, family, and peer group. This youngster is pushed to do well in school and listens more to family than teacher or friends. School programs are viewed as things that help gain college admission, rather than things which provide support and guidance.

John, A Caste Student

John is in eleventh grade attending an urban high school in the San Jose area. Born in San Jose, John's parents did not push him to excel in school, because as he put it, they only understood working as a means of economic survival. Both parents had only completed the third grade and worked in manual labor occupations. His parents placed

more emphasis on working for a living, than on working for good grades in school.

John reported that his values about school were reshaped by positive school experiences. He described his dramatic turnaround when he went from being anti-schoolwork to pro-schoolwork, and eventually embraced school as a place to be. He changed his outlook toward education directly because of his experiences in school:

> "Yea, I used to laugh at people who carried back-packs, you're a big nerd, you know, you're this and you're that. I was trying to be the cool Mexican. Be the coolest I can. And then I had the opportunity to find out about MESA , well they had a summer program at San Jose State. I enjoy math and they [meaning MESA] contributed to my motivation because my parents don't really push, because they came from a background that you know you work, you work, and you work. Study was not a top priority (#51)."

The opportunity to participate in this special program fulfilled John's secret desire to take calculus. He said he had always dreamed of taking calculus, but that he was discouraged by peers and family.

To overcome these barriers, John had to mentor his parents and expose them to the benefits of the summer MESA program. He did this by telling his mother:

> "Mom, I really wanta do this, and my mom she, well I love her so much, she goes 'O.K., John, if you have so much faith in this, I believe in you and we will do it.' Then I go that there's this orientation that you have to go to, and she says 'Well I don't know if I have time,' and I go, 'Mom please, you know you have to go to this... (#51).'"

Essentially, John won his mother over by persuasion. As a result of his mother attending the special orientation to parents on how to help students succeed in school, his mother became more supportive of letting John do homework at home instead of working part-time for extra money. As a result of not being pressured to work after school, as he had to in his freshman and sophomore years, John's grades improved, and this in turn made him feel good about school.

Successful experiences in school did not happen all the time and John did find that low expectations from teachers were additional barriers that had to be overcome. After the summer program, John tried to enroll in courses such as advanced placement Spanish, biology, trigonometry, geometry, but not without battles with certain teachers. He knew that he could achieve more than his teacher expected:

> "And even when I got an A the first semester in her class, she still didn't want me up to the next honors class. And so I talked to my mom and the principal and they said she thinks I can't handle it, and she's totally against me going into the class. If I feel I can handle it, that should be my judgment (#51)."

He pushed the issue by recruiting his mom to meet with the principal to lobby on his behalf.

In terms of peer relations on campus, John had to distance himself from his friends from junior high who had no intention of doing well in school. His friends during his sophomore year were involved with drugs and he described the pressure he was under:

> "There was a lot of peer pressure, but I always got good grades, besides that, I never saw my friends anyway, because they were in the low classes and I was in the high classes. So I get my report card and it would be a 3.5 and they go well "what did you get John?' and I go 'a 2.5' because all my friends were barely getting 2.0 (#51)."

After his positive summer experience with MESA he returned in the fall motivated to really do well in school and he started making new friends who were in his advanced placement classes. He also grew more confident about doing things he had wanted to do, like getting involved in student government. He overcame this barrier by making friends with students involved in student government from his advanced placement Spanish class. He describes this breakthrough:

> "She goes 'John, you're really a motivated guy, you know, I can tell, cause you're outgoing and stuff. How would you like to attend our leadership conference?' And I went great, this is my chance to meet all these people on the leadership position so I can be, you know, be involved (#51)."

In essence, his peers created opportunities for him to receive further mentoring and coaching at a time when he was making a critical transition from being non-involved in school activities to becoming a leader on campus.

Elizabeth, an Immigrant Student

The second student, born in South America, told how she became academically successful in school despite family problems, language barriers, and cultural adjustment problems. Both parents immigrated to the United States because of economic hardship. Elizabeth currently lives with her older sister while attending a high school in San Diego.

She credits her current success in school to her sister who she claims had the greatest influence on her. Her parents, overly strict, continually argued with Elizabeth about how she should act, dress, talk and this caused tremendous stress for her which eventually affected her grades in school. She describes her rebellious period while living with her parents:

> "They [refering to her parents] were more strict on me because I rebelled back. I was very rebellious, but I don't think they were. They were just trying to help, but I wouldn't listen. I was really hard headed until after I came to live with my sister and everything hit me them. I could be learning more things instead of goofing off(#9)."

In addition to Elizabeth's sister being her mentor, she had mentors in school. She performed poorly in school until after she moved away from home. She told of her math teacher who believed in her and this had an impact:

> "I had one math teacher, Mr. Gomez, he's the one who mentioned this leadership conference. He'd seen the qualities [meaning qualifications] and he said I had the qualities in me and that I should use them. I never thought about it, until then, when he mentioned it (#9)."

Despite her own family problems, Elizabeth spent time mentoring others:

> "I found out that there was this girl in my class, she's Hispanic and so I don't want her to get involved into gangs and things like that. I went over and introduced myself and asked her where she was from and how she was doing. And she was having some problems staying in school. And I would motivate her telling her about a tutor and that it's not hard, it's really easy. And I basically just give her positive reinforcement, letting her know that it's not hard, so that you don't think it's hard (#17)."

Now Elizabeth is at the top of her class. She mentors others in her school, particularly other girls from troubled homes or ones who need extra tutoring to keep up in difficult class She has meshed her values with those of the school. She views school as a place where she can ask for help and get it when she needs it.

Peers for Elizabeth were mainly drawn from school. She described her friends as "those who always turned to her for advice". She also acknowledged that she lost her relationship with friends from junior high, because they were going through rough times and they got caught up with boyfriends and they lost interest in school.

Elizabeth uses school as a place to study and to get advice from teachers on personal matters. She says she likes school, and that if she has any problems, she goes to her teachers who give her extra help. In addition, part time work has not stopped her from getting good grades in school, partly because of her perspective of the importance of school. She works at a fast food restaurant after school, and because she was reliable and dependable, her manager started to depend on her to fill in for others who missed worked. She says:

> "I never wanted them to depend on me because I knew that if I showed how much effort t I put into my work and I like to do good work that they were going to depend on me. They would want me to work more hours and on weekends (#9)."

To deal with this pressure Elizabeth focuses or her future goals by telling herself that she didn't want to work in a fast food restaurant all her life and she had goals to work at a higher level in her community, doing what she enjoys the most, helping others.

Peter, An Autonomous Student

Peter had a clear goal to do well in school, but this goal came primarily from family pressure instead of special programs in school. Peter lives with his parents in a suburban area of Northern California, and he attends a predominantly Anglo school with high academic standing.

His parents played a major role in shaping his career aspirations. In contrast to both immigrant and caste students, autonomous students like Peter received mentoring, guidance and direction to achieve in school from the home:

"My parents were more important than school. My parents are both educators and they exposed me to more than what school ever did (#2)."

His parents, both college educated are upper middle class. Peter acknowledged that he knew very little of the Hispanic students on his campus, and that his interest in attending the youth conference was to learn more about his culture and to get in touch with his cultural past.

In school, Peter took advanced classes, had many peers based on the social networks of campus life including academic clubs, athletics, and student government activities. He was very astute in distinguishing the different sets of friends he has on campus:

> "I have two sets of friends, those in school and out of school. The guys who I play football with are not the academic types. The ones

in school give me competition. Both are friends, but different (#2)."

This peer network is broad, not isolated. In this example he associated with non-academic students who shared his interest in sports. In school, his friends were a source of academic challenge. Both, as he pointed out, were friends, but in different ways. In fact, sports is competitive as well, so this student was being competitive in a social atmosphere as well as an academic one.

In sum, Peter expressed very few major barriers in moving about the day to day task of being a student. He did not get pressure from family or peers to not do well in school, on the contrary, he felt pressure to succeed and to be competitive in getting good grades.

Summary of Practical Strategies to Achieve in High School

This set of practical strategies were culled from the interviews, questionnaires, and the experiences of the sample. They are offered as a practical guide to setting up programs or class rooms to maximize the chances that students will orient themselves toward college.

Student Strategies

1. Peer management strategies are necessary to balance off school and social lives. The strategies may include:

- isolation from peers perceived to be drags on mobility;
- balancing friendship and mobility: getting permission to achieve and still remain a friend in the peer group;
- segregation with one college-bound group, including subordination of fun social or athletic groups with the study group focusing on college admission.

2. Commitment to a hard worker model: anything can be learned with hard work, including math.

3. Never give up on yourself

- keep faith in yourself, i.e., that you can be somebody;
- always find out what went wrong when you failed and try to make up for it.

Teacher Strategies

Teach class to learn from failure--use negative experiences to gain new insights and teach students how to deal with failure. For example, use the following principles for each assignment:

- Analyze failures, as in the most common error
- Set reasonable standards for improvement
- Offer opportunities for improvement: revision, redoing assignments, etc.

A routine way to build in the capacity to deal with failure in the class room is to consider the following questions and implement ways to answer them in class room practice:

What was the most common type of error?

How can it be remedied?

How much improvement can I make in a week?

What should I expect for the next attempt?

How close did I come to reaching my goal?

English: revise assignments by picking out and eliminating most common error in paper.

Math: find most common error; restudy; add a new section to a student's test next week, but count the new section grade as part of last week's test. That is, replace the point count for the weak section with that from the hopefully stronger section.

Homework groups

Form heterogeneous homework groups, with able kids checking on and teaching homework problems.

Teach organizational skills

- always use assignment sheets
- develop calendar keeping skills
- develop some homework planning skills

Mentor students: equip them to make their way in school

- have their best interests in your attitude
- define the next step in their school careers
- explain the next step in terms of an advantage understood in the here and now

Increase opportunities for upward track movement in high school

- allow or help motivated students to move up a track

School Programs

1. Form achievement study groups in school. Organize a college club or an achievement group and provide time and space for homework in a cooperative setting. Treat it like a club and get an advisor who can contact faculty about specialized help or helpers.

2. Make vocational information made available in the middle grades, when decisions about college and work start gettng made by bright students. There is a range of useful vocational computer programs for the exploration of one's future.

3. Establish a program for mentoring for parents of bright, poor students. School counselors and teachers can explain, in terms useful in mentoring, the reasons for supporting academic efforts by their children.

Source List

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