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Puerto Rican students? Five Success  
Factors of High Achieving Puerto  
Rican High School Students**

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# Where are the academically successful Puerto Rican Students?

## *Five Success Factors of High Achieving Puerto Rican High School Students*

### Background

High achieving Puerto Rican high school students are largely missing not only from urban high schools, but also from the educational research. The purpose of this article, then, is to describe the five success factors that ten low-income urban high school students from this ethnic group attributed to their high academic achievement. These success factors are 1) the acquisition of social capital and academic motivation through religiosity and participation in school and community-based extracurricular activities; 2) student affirmation of Puerto Rican identity; 3) the influence of mothers; 4) the potential for caring teachers to influence high academic achievement; and 5) membership in multicultural/multilingual peer networks. Additionally, these success factors and their implications for Latina/o education are discussed.

Over the last three decades, numerous scholars have written about the connection between the academic underachievement of Puerto Rican students and the socioeconomic/academic struggles they frequently confront. These struggles include such things as internal and direct colonialism, households headed by teenage mothers, poverty, culturally irrelevant curricula, and non-academic tracking (Nieto, 1998; Pérez, 1973; Spring, 1994). Although this scholarship is theoretically rich, it places overdue emphasis on the deficit/dropout model in explaining the schooling experiences of these students.

In response to this overemphasis on low achieving Puerto Rican students within traditional urban public high school settings, several scholars have recently produced research that serves to deconstruct, reconstruct, and transcend this scholarship by looking at several conditions that work to foster the high academic achievement of these students. These conditions are 1) the importance of these students' families, especially the role of the mother and/or grandmother, as support

systems (Hidalgo, 2000; Hine, 1992; Rolón, 2000); 2) the connection between curriculum and Latina/o students' funds of knowledge [e.g. the application of Latino home/community-based cultural knowledge in schools] (Moll et. al., 1992); 3) these students' acquisition of social capital through their participation in social institutions and their networks of institutional agents [e.g. knowledge, life experiences, and mentorship/information garnered through connections with community members/leaders and/or school staff] (Flores-González, 1999, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and; 4) the importance of caring teachers and culturally relevant curricula within schools (Antrop-González, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Muller, 2001; Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

Finally, recent research has discussed religiosity/religion-based identity as a source of social capital and how it is linked to the high academic achievement and resiliency of Latina/o urban high school students and other youth of color (Cook, 2000; Flores-González, 1999, 2002; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003). Religiosity, through active participation in church-related activities, can be an important source of social capital for two reasons. First, church membership instills positive attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote school success and serve as protective measures against oppositional youth behaviors like gang membership, drug use, and truancy. Second, participation in church activities like retreats and conventions encourages *intergenerational closure*, which has also been found to facilitate the high academic achievement of high school students (Coleman, 1987; Carbonaro, 1998; Muller & Ellison, 2001). Intergenerational closure describes the relationships and social networks held between students, their friends, and their friends' parents. These relationships are valuable because it is within these networks that mentorship, counseling, and access to other school and community resources are shared and provided.

## Methods

This study was driven by the following primary research question:

*According to the experiences of Puerto Rican 11th and 12th grade students who are enrolled in a Midwestern United States urban high school, what factors are linked to their high academic achievement?*

To address this question, three sets of data were collected for this mixed methods study. The bulk of the data was qualitative and consisted of tape-recorded one-on-one interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. A majority of the interview questions focused on the students' familial educational backgrounds and experiences as well as their own. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in order to identify themes. Each student was interviewed once and each interview lasted between one to one and a half hours. The second set of data that we collected and analyzed was an acculturation/linguistic scale (Marín, 1987) that was used to determine which language (English vs. Spanish) and types of social network/s (Anglo, African-American, and/or Latina/o) each student preferred within and outside school. Each student filled out this scale and the individual items from the ten completed scales were summed to develop the scale values. Finally, our participant observations with the students helped us learn more about their everyday schooling experiences, as we were able to spend time with them in the hallways, lunchroom, and some classes.

We conducted this study during the fall and spring semesters of the 2001-2002 academic year at Brew City High School (a pseudonym), which is a large comprehensive high school located in the Midwestern United States. This high school has a student population of 1,500 students enrolled in grades 9-12. Of these students, 55% fall below the federal poverty line and qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Moreover, approximately

70% of the high school's students are of color with 15% of these being Latina/o. Brew City High School is regarded as one of two of the city's best high schools because its curriculum offers many advanced placement and honors level courses and because 70% of its graduates go on to pursue some sort of postsecondary education.

The students who were recruited for this study had to meet the following four criteria. First, they had to be enrolled in grades 11 or 12 because the majority of Puerto Rican students drop out of school by the tenth grade (Nieto, 1998). Second, the students must have had a cumulative G.P.A. of a 3.0 or higher because we determined this G.P.A. to be indicative of a high achieving student. Third, the students must never have dropped out of school because we wanted this study to focus on non-dropouts. Finally, participants had to identify themselves as Puerto Rican (students who were self identified as half Puerto Rican were also included in the participant recruitment and selection process).

A Puerto Rican guidance counselor at the school volunteered to facilitate the recruitment and selection process of the participants because she knew a majority of the school's Latina/o students. As a result, ten students met the four criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Each student selected her/his own pseudonym and their interviews and acculturation/linguistic surveys were conducted and completed individually in an empty classroom during school hours.

## Findings

### *The Acquisition of Social Capital and Academic Motivation through Religiosity and School and Community-Based Extracurricular Activities*

Many of the students we spoke with credited their high academic achievement to their involvement with a Catholic or Pentecostal-based religious institution and/or other kinds of extracurricular activities. The main benefit of participating in these activities consisted of targeted recreational activities for youth. These activities also

contributed to the further establishment of community/social networks that facilitated their access to resources like homework help and mentorship. Daniel, a junior (3.8 G.P.A.), said:

*Growing up my mom always took me and my sister to church and she always had us involved in youth groups as far as you know, Sunday school and we went on trips with our church groups and that always helped me keep on a straight path.*

In addition to his church involvement, Daniel's participation on athletic teams also played a major role in his high school career and helped him gain much access to positive help-seeking, middle class resources like information regarding college, mentorship from his teammates' parents, and his access to computers at his friends' houses. This intergenerational closure (Carbonaro, 1998; Muller & Ellison, 2001), marked by social and informational networks comprised of Daniel's friends and their parents, was valuable for Daniel because he felt this information was necessary to be successful in college, get a job after graduation, and obtain a middle class lifestyle. He remarked:

*A lot of my friends who I play with on the teams are a lot better off than me. Like, David's parents live out in the suburbs and both his parents are college psychology professors and make a lot of money. They both have been a great influence on me because they've talked to me about what I need to get into college and be successful in college. They helped me make the decision on which university to apply to. I like their advice because I see that they have become successful. I want to follow their examples and also have a big house and nice cars like them one day.*

Cecilia, a junior (3.2 G.P.A.), also commented on her church involvement, her church-based multicultural social networks, and the impact these had on her academic achievement:

*Ever since I was in the ninth grade, I have been going to church regularly. I also sing in the church choir. The people at church have always been friendly and supportive of me. I feel like I really belong. I have also met a lot of people at church. I have a lot of friends from different backgrounds. I have Hispanic, White, Asian, and Black friends. We all treat each other as friends and we keep each other in line. I think all of these things help me do well in school.*

Jasmine, a senior (3.2 G.P.A.), credited God for her high academic achievement.

*God has helped me become a good student. He has helped me keep focused. I know he helps me do the best I can in school.*

Limari, also a senior (3.6 G.P.A.), felt that God impacted her school achievement:

*God had helped me become a good student because He has been with me through all my struggles.*

Estrella, a senior (3.4 G.P.A.), also echoed her peers' feelings regarding her involvement in church and credited this involvement as being a factor in her high academic achievement:

*I'm involved in church very much. I have lots of friends of church in church. We do lots of things together. We do retreats and we invite other youths to come. We also evangelize together. We want other youths to know God and Jesus. There are also lots of camps in the summer and conventions in the Midwest. There are lots of Latinos that get together for these conventions and we have lots of fun.*

Participation in school and community-based extracurricular activities also had a role to play in our participants' academic success. Erica, a junior (3.1 G.P.A.), remarked:



*I participate in a lot of sports activities and they help me become a good student. I was always getting asked by my teachers to do favors for them and I took part in lots of competitions around the state.*

Likewise, Alexia, also a junior (3.4 G.P.A.), talked about her involvement with community-based agencies and how it greatly influenced her academic performance.

*I do all kinds of work with people in the community. I work with the Private Industry Council and help people get jobs. I also work with the Historical Society. These jobs keep me busy and help me meet lots of interesting people.*

Our participants' experiences were similar to those of other high achieving Latina/o urban high schoolers and other youth of color (Cook, 2000; Flores-González, 1999, 2002; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003) because their involvement in religious organizations and/or community-based extracurricular activities had a positive impact on their academic achievement. Hence, their experiences suggested that this kind of involvement served a dual function.

First, these activities served as protective measures for our participants because they encouraged them to develop their positive self-concept and discourage participation in oppositional youth cultures like gang life, as they have the potential to greatly impinge on scholastic endeavors (Flores-González, 2002). Second, their involvement in these types of activities contributed to the high degrees of intergenerational closure present between these students' friends and their friends' parents. This high degree of intergenerational closure (Carbonaro, 1998) was valuable because it facilitated these students' access to important resources like adult and peer mentorship and other positive help-seeking behaviors (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and encouraged them to pursue a school kid identity (Flores-González, 2002) that valued high academic achievement.

## **Student Affirmation of Puerto Rican Identity**

All the high achieving students we spoke with strongly affirmed their Puerto Rican identity by expressing they were proud to be "Boricua" or "Puertorriqueña/o" and that their peers also viewed them as being Puerto Rican. This ethnic affirmation challenges the belief held by some researchers who contend that being a good student from an involuntary migrant group is ultimately perceived by other students of color as "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Like the participants in our study, Flores-González (1995) also documented that the high achieving students she interacted with did not hide their Puerto Rican ethnicity regardless of race. Héctor, a senior (3.8 G.P.A.), reinforced this ethnic affirmation when he remarked:

*I'm proud to be Puerto Rican and bilingual. But, you know, White people stereotype Puerto Ricans and think that we're not serious about our education. I want to prove them wrong.*

Héctor also went on to describe that he felt Puerto Ricans were often negatively represented in the city. In turn, several students we interviewed felt their high academic achievement could have the potential of dispelling the negative stereotypical images that others held towards them. Jasmine also commented on the negative stereotypes that White students in her advanced placement held towards her by virtue of being the only minority student in the class. In turn, she also used her high academic performance as a way to prove others wrong about Puerto Ricans.

*Sometimes in my AP [advanced placement] classes, like AP English and AP History, some of the White students make you feel really small because you're the only Latino student in the class. I remember one time when a boy asked me what I was doing in the class. He said that he didn't think that people like us could be in these kinds of classes. I told him that he shouldn't be so stereotypical and that we can be smart, too.*

These students used their ethnicity as a tool to prove to their teachers and peers that they had the potential to be good students. This finding compels us to believe that these students' sense of school-based marginalization, rather than cause them to resist the idea of schooling, actually worked to motivate them to academically perform well. If this "marginalization as motivation" concept were to appear in future studies, it would certainly continue to challenge the belief that involuntary migrant group status is a strong and reliable indicator of low academic achievement (Ogbu, 1978). Moreover, our participants' affirmation of their Puerto Rican identity and its impact on their academic achievement also reinforces the concept of "accommodation and acculturation without assimilation" (Conchas, 2001; Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2001). This concept is reflected in that although they were willing to accommodate themselves in mainstream curricular classes at the expense of facing ethnically and culturally hostile conditions, they did so without feeling compelled to reject their ethnic identity.

### **The Influence of Mothers**

Although the majority (9 of 10) of the students we interacted with came from traditional two-parent households, they indicated that their mothers played stronger roles in their school and home lives. These mothers often took it upon themselves to help their child with schoolwork. When some of the mothers felt they could not directly help with schoolwork, they actively sought out the necessary resources that would facilitate their child's learning process. Moreover, several students indicated that they felt strongly obligated to make their mothers proud of them by getting good grades.

Several references were also made by students regarding how mothers were also friends and mentors in times of need or personal crisis. When asked to elaborate on her mother's role in her education, Lisa stated:

*Ever since I was in middle school, my mom has been sending me to pre-college programs and doing things like getting me stuff on the ACT and the kinds of questions they ask on that test. I also go to my mom for personal problems that come up. My mom is always coming down hard on me to do well in school. So if she can't help me with my school stuff she finds somebody who can.*

Lisa's mother went the extra mile to counsel her child and seek informational resources that would aid her in the college application process and general learning process. Again, these kinds of profound statements support the work of several scholars and their discussions concerning the influence of Puerto Rican mothers in the academic lives of their children (Hidalgo, 2000; Hine, 1992; Reis & Díaz, 1999; Rolón, 2000). Also important was the fact that our participants' mothers also held their children to high academic expectations and actively sought additional human resources to help their children with things like homework.

Other students also spoke about the power of their mother's influence and expressed the desire to do well in school to make their mothers proud of them. Daniel commented:

*My mom has been my inspiration to do well in school. I remember that I used to make bad grades in school and my mother would become sad. When I started to bring report cards home with As in them for the first time, I remember the happy look in my mother's eyes. When I saw that look in her eyes, I just felt that it was much more rewarding to get good grades. I also remember going to family picnics and my mother would talking about my grades. The rest of the family would then start talking about me. They were all proud of me.*



Daniel was driven to do well in school in order to make his mother happy. It was also important for him to be the pride of his family. He also mentioned that his school did not do much in the way of helping him select a college or fill out financial aid or admissions forms. Ironically, although his mother was not a high school graduate and had never been to college, she took up the role of helping him acquire and fill out the necessary forms he needed to go to college.

Erica also contrasted the roles that her parents played in her school success. While she felt her father played the role of authority figure who demanded she follow the “rules of the house,” she commented on the words of encouragement and friendship that were characteristic of her mother’s role as a nurturing supporter.

*My mother is the best. She supports me in everything I do. She is always willing to support me at whatever I do at school. She is always very excited about helping me with my work and she always talks to me more like a friend than a mom. My father is very different. He always comes across as the authority figure.*

Cecilia also relied on her mother for trust and support in times of personal need. It was evident that a high degree of *confianza* (trust) existed between them.

*When I have a personal problem, I don’t really trust my teachers or friends. I usually go to my mother who is always willing to be there for me because I know she won’t go around spilling my personal life to everyone.*

Rachel also spoke about her mother encouraging her to do her best in school so she would not be a high school dropout like her. Although Rachel’s mother did not have the experience of going to college, she knew the importance of after school programs for tutoring services and access to college information and made social connections to facilitate her daughter’s entry into these special programs.

*My mom dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. So she doesn’t want me to have the hard life that she has had. For her, it’s a top priority that I stay in school and go to college. She has gotten me in after school programs and found me jobs. She makes a lot of phone calls to people and asks about the kinds of programs that exist to get me help with school work and information I need to get into college.*

Also worth noting is that the majority of our participants’ parents had a high school education or less and were employed in factories or low-level white collar jobs. In addition, many of the students had experienced relatively stable family situations, in many cases living in the same household/neighborhood for extended periods of time. This finding reinforces the importance of reduced school mobility and is frequently associated in the literature with the process of dropping out of high school (Velez, 1989).

### **The Potential of Caring Teachers to Influence High Academic Achievement**

Finally, several of the students in our study described the potential that caring teachers could have on their academic success. The recurring theme of caring was prevalent in their descriptions of good teachers. Similar to recent studies (Antrop-González, 2003; De Jesús, 2003; Muller, 2001; Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999), the students we interviewed defined a caring teacher as one that truly knew them as a person and to whom they could talk to about their personal problems. Like the previously mentioned “mother role” (Rolón, 2000), some students in this study also mentioned that caring teachers should be relied upon for obtaining information or assistance for things like applying for college, tutoring, or successfully securing part-time employment. Erica, a high achieving junior, defined a caring teacher in the following way:

*A good teacher is one who knows you, cares about what you do, pushes students, and cares about the stuff going on in your life. A good teacher also wants you to absorb information and understand it.*

Cecilia also defined a caring teacher as one who held their students to high academic expectations.

*A good teacher is someone who cares enough not to accept low quality work. I like being pushed and told that I can do better. Some of my better teachers are like this.*

These descriptions strongly resemble Valenzuela's (1999) notion of *authentic* caring because they described the high quality interpersonal student-teacher relationships that are crucial for the education of Latina/o youth. On the other hand, *aesthetic* caring describes the emphasis that a teacher may place on things or ideas like academics. This type of caring is often reflected through technical discursive practices that tends to be impersonal, objective, and standardized. Teachers who consistently engage in aesthetic caring define their roles around a preoccupation with imparting their expert knowledge and not getting to know their students holistically (Valenzuela, 1999).

Like the students that Valenzuela (1999) interviewed in her study at Seguí High School, our participants expected their teachers to engage them in authentic caring relationships where a high degree of *confianza* between them and their teachers was present. These caring relationships also involve teachers' respect for the students' cultural and linguistic practices that are embedded in their homes and communities. According to Valenzuela (1999), Mexican students are socialized to show and receive *respeto* (respect) in their interactions with adults. Therefore, when teachers fail to reciprocate this same respect, they resist and refuse to cooperate in their teachers' efforts to school them. This rift is deepened when school officials engage in what she calls "subtractive schooling" where students are either explicitly or implicitly encouraged to abandon

their native cultural practices to acquire the cultural and linguistic practices of the "worthier" dominant culture.

Many of the students that Valenzuela interacted with also felt that the goal of acquiring an education was compatible with love of family and community. This acquiring of an education with a love for family and community is referred to as *educación* and is defined as a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility that should be well mannered and respectful. This concept is grounded in both the Mexican and Puerto Rican cultures (Valenzuela, 1999). Hence, although our student participants articulated very similar definitions of caring teachers, their accounts of their teachers' behaviors did not reflect *authentic* caring.

On the contrary, our participants' teachers manifested *aesthetic* caring because they only cared enough to challenge them to study hard and master content subject matter. Moreover, while many of the students at Seguí High School responded to their teachers' lack of authentic caring by resisting the idea of schooling altogether (Valenzuela, 1999), our participants instead chose to mitigate their teachers' emphasis on the less desirable aesthetic caring by relying on their home and community-based authentic caring to carry them through their schooling at Brew City High School.

### **Membership in Multilingual/Multicultural Peer Networks**

Our survey findings suggested that our participants valued membership in multilingual/multicultural peer networks. Only two students had "only Latina/o" friends while the rest of the sample had made non-Latina/o friends. The analysis of these surveys also indicated that, when it came to language use, there was an even balance of English dominant bilinguals and "balanced bilinguals" because when asked, "What languages do you read and speak?" half of the students responded English and Spanish equally while half replied English better than Spanish.

Their multicultural approach to peer networks was also confirmed by the results on the question asking them what kinds of friends they would prefer for their own children. Eight of the ten students chose equal numbers of Latina/o and non-Latina/o friends for their hypothetical children. These results suggest that our participants' academic success was in part due to their multicultural, rather than exclusively bicultural and/or bilingual (Darder, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), approach to building peer social networks. They had learned to be educational and social "border crossers" (Giroux, 1991) and felt comfortable with members of other racial/ethnic groups.

### **Implications for Latina/o Education**

The high achieving Puerto Rican high school students in this study suggested there are five success factors attributed to their high academic achievement. Therefore, we offer several recommendations for teachers, school policy makers, and scholars. First, it is imperative that large comprehensive high schools encourage more Puerto Rican students to participate in school-sponsored and community-based extracurricular activities. Participation in these activities helps students acquire pro-school behaviors, social capital, and intergenerational closure. These things are important because they facilitate the sharing of important college related information and mentorship between students, their friends and their friends' parents, and community members.

Second, it is crucial that students' racial/ethnic identity be nurtured, respected, and viewed as an asset and not a problem. This kind of respect and solidarity can be fostered by designing courses that address the experiences of Latina/o students. The students in our study, in spite of Brew City High School's subtractive, Eurocentric curricular practices (Valenzuela, 1999), strongly suggested that it is not necessary to "act White" or be perceived as such in order to academically succeed. Additionally, they manifested a concept we call "marginalization as motivation" because they affirmed and used their

Puerto Rican ethnicity to disarm some of their peers' and teachers' negative stereotypes and low academic expectations. Ironically, then, instead of allowing their experiences around school-based marginalization to propel them to resist school, this marginalization motivated them to excel academically and withstand the insidious nature of subtractive schooling. We argue that Latina/o students should not have to make the choice between either having to resist school or accept the idea of schooling under such negative conditions. Schools need to seriously examine and move to implement additive curricula that weave all students' sociopolitical/historical/economic realities into the fabric of traditional high schools and, hence, add to the knowledge bases that students already bring to school thanks to their families and communities.

Third, it is evident that parents, especially mothers, play a central role in the lives of their children. Our students' mothers spent time with their children, helped them with homework or found them help when they could not provide it, and offered encouragement in times of need. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that teachers understand the important role mothers play in the lives of their children. Schools need to rely more on the wisdom of these mothers and understand that parents are indeed involved in their children's lives. Fourth, these students defined caring teachers and their potential to impact their academic achievement. Caring teachers are individuals who hold their students to high academic expectations, know who they are as individual human beings, and make classes interesting and engaging. Finally, it is important to encourage students of all linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact with each other so that they can learn to appreciate multiple worldviews.

What we found most compelling about the experiences of our participants was that while they were all academically successful, they did not credit most of their success to school-based factors. On the contrary, they attributed a large part of this success to the home and community-based factors that we

described in this paper. We are led to believe, then, that large comprehensive urban high schools are still inequitably structuring opportunities for Latina/o students by not working to find ways to use the community-based resources, wisdom, and knowledge that students and their families already bring to school. We must continue to encourage schools to allow for broader partnerships with the very communities that our students come from. These school-community partnerships can provide students with the information and human resources they need to graduate from high school, enter college, and eventually obtain a career that will increase their life chances and structures of positive opportunities. Only when these positive conditions are placed within the context of school cultures will Puerto Rican high achievers no longer be scarce in our urban high schools.

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