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Paola Mendizabal
William & Mary

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Paola Mendizabal[a]

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Abstract

Although the Latino ethnic group is the most significant minority and the fastest-growing subgroup in the United States, they are one of the most underserved groups in public schools. This is due to many systemic issues; however, this paper focuses on student engagement. Increasing student engagement decreases student dropout rates. If we foster high levels of engagement with Latinx students in K-12, they are more likely to graduate high school, possibly with aspirations to further their education. This conceptual paper aims to answer the following questions: What factors inhibit and/or contribute to Latinx students' engagement? How do we engage Latinx students in K-12 to encourage them to further their education? Several factors negatively impact Latinx students' engagement in K-12 schools, including cultural disconnection, issues with the curriculum, and inequitable practices. Nevertheless, many Latinx students become successful learners. There are many strategies teachers can leverage to support students' success and increase their engagement. They can build relationships, offer a relevant curriculum, and employ equitable practices. Considering the factors that hinder and contribute to Latinx students' engagement in K-12, and drawing from several motivation and engagement theories, I advance a conceptual model that promotes Latinx students' engagement and possibly lifelong learning aspirations.

Keywords: *Latinx students, engagement*

Although the Latino ethnic group is the largest minority and the fastest-growing subgroup in the United States, they are one of the most underserved groups in public schools (Rubin, 2014; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Despite a decrease in the dropout rate and an increase in college enrollment (Gramlich, 2017), Latinx students still lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in various academic measurements. At Grade 8, Hispanic students scored approximately 20 points lower on average than White students in the NAEP 2020 reading and math tests (NCES, 2022). According to 2020 data, the Hispanic dropout rate (7.4%) remains higher than that of Blacks (4.2%), Whites (4.8%), and Asians (2.4%). Moreover, Latinx students who are also English learners (ELs) face more difficulties in graduat-

[a]*William & Mary*

ing as the median state-level high school graduation rate for ELs is only 68.4% (McFarland et al., 2019). Furthermore, only 15% of Latinx students obtain a four-year degree when compared to about 41% of Whites, 22% of Blacks and 63% of Asians) (Krogstad, 2016). Latinx students are more likely to enroll in community colleges than in four-year colleges. They are also less likely to attend selective colleges and enroll full-time (Krogstad, 2016).

While the Latinx education crisis stems from many systemic issues, such as low socioeconomic status, underfunded schools, immigration restrictions, and discrimination (Gándara & Contreras, 2009), this paper focuses on student engagement. Increasing student engagement decreases student dropout rates (Rubin, 2014; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Therefore, if we can foster high levels of engagement with Latinx students in K-12, they are more likely to graduate high school possibly with aspirations to further their education.

The idea for this paper came from my experience as a doctoral student. My journey thus far has been both engaging and alienating. Engaging because some professors' pedagogies are culturally responsive and some topics are relevant to my learner and educator identities. It has also been alienating, however, because when I look around the room in my classes and in my university hallways, I mostly see whiteness. Thus, as a brown person sometimes I lack a sense of belonging which impacts my self-worth and academic experience. I would like to see more graduate students and professors who look like me and share my culture. As a Latinx doctoral student and educator, I wonder: What factors inhibit and/or contribute to Latinx students' engagement? How do we engage Latinx students in K-12 to encourage them to further their education? The following sections will address these questions.

Factors that Inhibit Latinx Students' Engagement

Unfortunately, there are several factors that negatively impact Latinx students' engagement in K-12 schools. I have grouped them into three categories: cultural disconnection, issues with the curriculum, and inequitable practices. Each category is further explained next.

Cultural Disconnection

Most teachers in the U.S. are White females and because of their background, teaching takes a White, Eurocentric perspective (Rubin, 2014). This disconnection between cultures contributes to teachers believing that minority students perform low academically. There is also a cultural discrepancy in the meaning of care. Teachers expect students to care about school by following certain rules and expectations, whereas many Latinx students expect authentic care that stresses teacher-student relationships (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Gándara and Contreras (2009) explained the consequences of failed relationships:

Secondary teachers who have little time – usually a fifty-minute period – to develop authentic personal relationships with their students are at serious disadvantage in breaking through the tough exterior that many Latino youth have developed after years of feeling inadequate in school (p.107).

Additionally, Latino stereotypes often result in self-fulfilling prophecies. Since Latinx students are often held to lower standards, many do not make an effort in school because

they are afraid of failing, which then confirms the stereotype. Therefore, some Latinx students might pretend that they do not care about school and become disengaged (Steele, 1997, as cited in Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Furthermore, Latinx students are frequently forced into assimilation, often by suppressing their primary language. The language that is publicly spoken and preferred has to do with power and a sense of belonging. Since language and culture are interconnected, silencing students' primary language hurts their self-identity (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Issues with the Curriculum

Standardization was intended to foster academic achievement; however, it has become one of the entrenched barriers to engagement. Standardization is often accompanied by mandated textbooks and scripted lessons that result in content that is often not interesting or related to students' cultures (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). Similarly, state standardized testing puts pressure on schools, especially those deemed as failing, creating a narrow curriculum characterized by test preparation (Bach, 2020). Additionally, Latinx students often miss out on other curriculum opportunities, such as extracurricular activities. These activities are valuable for both building a path to college and fostering a sense of belonging. However, Latinx do not usually participate in extracurricular activities because of feelings of alienation (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Moreover, language has been one of the reasons for making unfair judgments of Latinx students as there is a perception that learning English will fix all their academic problems. Approximately 30% of elementary school students are English language learners (NCES, 2023). Therefore, they require some type of intervention to help them acquire English. However, many schools fixate on English instruction. The goal becomes for students to learn English as quickly as possible, so any other learning stops, including academic English, which is needed for comprehension and literacy (Gándara, 2017). Some teachers have even reported that they stop teaching science and social studies from December to April in order to prepare students for standardized testing, including English proficiency tests (Henderson & Palmer, 2015). It is also noteworthy that language learning, like any other type of learning, has a social aspect that can influence language acquisition. If students don't feel comfortable or have a safe learning environment, they will be afraid or embarrassed to use English (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Inequitable Practices

According to Giroux (2010) public schools are characterized by "a regime of teaching to the test coupled with an often harsh system of disciplinary control, both of which mutually reinforce each other" (p.715). Giroux also commented that schools unfairly punish minority students because they are blamed for schools not meeting proficiency levels at standardized tests. Similarly, schools often exercise a pedagogy of compliance, instead of focusing on engagement and learning, students are expected to be silent, orderly, and complete work without questioning obedience (Hammond, 2021; Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). However, such compliance behaviors are not indicative of understanding or learning.

Likewise, due to cultural biases, minority students from low socio-economic status are less likely to be identified as gifted and talented or to have access to advanced placement or honors classes, which are critical paths for college preparation. Moreover, tracking practices start in the primary grades when Latinx students are usually assigned to low-achievement groups so they can receive remediation. Tracking sets up Latinx students on an unequal path in high school and hurts their self-worth. Similarly, consistently low grades for Latinx students result in fewer opportunities for entering college or other higher education institutions (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). When students experience failure repeatedly, they will likely become disillusioned and alienated (Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Furthermore, English hegemony is a major problem. Learning English is important to be successful in school and future endeavors, but why are emergent bilinguals expected to lose their primary language in the process? Although bilingual education has proven to be successful in furthering the academic achievement of both emergent bilinguals and English native speakers (Thomas & Collier, 2012), a limited number of such programs exist. When language education involves eliminating a students' primary language and transforming their identities, we cannot expect positive results (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

As a result of cultural disconnection, issues with the curriculum, and inequitable practices, Latinx students may develop feelings of disenchantment, disconnection, and disempowerment. Shirley and Hargreaves (2021) described these three as enemies of engagement. The authors describe disenchantment as students becoming disillusioned from school, and losing interest. Additionally, disconnection is a sense of detachment, which can stem from the lack of relationships in the classroom and a lack of connection to the curriculum or the school culture. Finally, disempowerment is the loss of students' voice in their own education. Feelings of disenchantment, disconnection, and disempowerment will likely affect Latinx students' academic achievement.

Factors that Contribute to Latinx Students' Engagement

In spite of engagement-inhibiting factors, many Latinx students become successful learners. There are many strategies teachers can leverage to support students' success through increased engagement, educators can build relationships, offer a relevant curriculum, and employ equitable practices. These are further described next.

Build Relationships

Teacher-student and student-student relationships are key to building a community learning environment that fosters students' success through engagement and motivation (Hinojosa, 2021; Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). Teachers can foster relationships by demonstrating authentic care, or what the Latinx community refers to as cariño. Teaching con cariño involves teaching the whole child (Hinojosa, 2021). Fostering personal relationships with students means showing cariño, and being personable, enthusiastic, and flexible while holding students to high standards (Gay, 2018). Latinx students often put more effort into learning, not because of the subject matter, but because they don't want to disappoint their teacher (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Likewise, when culturally diverse students feel that

their teachers care for them and respect them and their culture, they are more likely to perform better academically and less likely to drop out (Rubin, 2014). Educators need to invest time to learn about their students, their families, and their culture to build relationships and provide a relevant curriculum.

Furthermore, peer relationships are also vital and Latinx students need to feel a sense of belonging to the school. Teachers can foster positive student-student relationships by creating a safe, engaging, and collaborative learning environment. Gándara (2017) argued that immigrant students who make at least one friend are able to adjust to school better and learn English sooner. Additionally, among different interventions, extracurricular activities have been proven effective in connecting Latinx youth to peers and school. Many friendships originate in extracurricular activities. Such activities also expand Latinx students' network and might open a path to furthering their education (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Design Relevant Curriculum

In a study of outstanding educators of Latinx students, Moll (1988) found that teachers had high expectations for students and that they made efforts to incorporate students' funds of knowledge in the curriculum. Moll and colleagues (1992) defined funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p.133). Gregg and colleagues (2012) suggested using creative ways such as family-generated portfolios or family photographs to discover the resources and insights a family has to offer that could be integrated in the curriculum.

Educators in Moll's study (1988) employed different strategies to capitalize on Latinx students' funds of knowledge. The teacher participants viewed literacy as understanding and communicating meaning. Therefore, their teaching approach did not involve instruction in which reading and writing were taught in a series of unrelated skills. Instead, comprehension and expression were built collaboratively between teachers and students through meaningful and functional language use. Similarly, Gay (2018) stated that a culturally diverse curriculum has significant value and draws on intrinsic motivation because it bridges school with home and the community. Gay also suggested that culturally responsive materials can be used to teach the different content areas, thus making abstract concepts more concrete for culturally diverse students. Continuous efforts are needed to offer Latinx students a curriculum that is relevant to their personal lives, their interests, their culture, and their identities. Students need to find a meaningful purpose to what they are learning and why they are learning it (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021).

Engage in Equitable Practices

The best instructional approaches for Latinx students are those that take into account students' funds of knowledge, and their languages (Fernandez, 2016). Teachers should acknowledge the value of students' home language by encouraging students to use their primary language with their peers during class activities. If we are to foster positive identities for Latinx students and increase a sense of belonging, we must honor their heritage

language. One way of doing so is by offering bilingual programs. When Latinx students are placed in effective bilingual and dual language programs, they perform better academically when compared to peers receiving English-only instruction (Thomas & Collier, 2012). Some structured English immersion programs also help students access the curriculum; however, they might lack rigor. Ultimately, the best programs are those that accelerate English proficiency by building on students' native language (Gándara, 2017).

Moreover, Moll (1988) suggested that teachers switch their role to that of a facilitator. Teachers in Moll's study provided guidance and support, whereas students chose the purposes and uses of oral and written communication during literacy instruction. Additionally, Latinx students need to be held to high standards. Teaching to the test or watering down the curriculum are not equitable practices and set students on a low achieving path. Students should be offered a challenging and innovative curriculum that pushes them toward the zone of proximal development (Hammond, 2021; Moll, 1988). Moreover, students should not be grouped by ability level, as an alternative, they could be grouped by interest (Moll, 1988).

Furthermore, involving Latinx students in social justice issues is another effective way to increase their engagement and empower them to be critical of the issues they face daily (e.g., poverty and marginalization) (Guldin, 2021; Rubin, 2014). Rubin (2014) provided some examples of how teachers can embed social justice in language arts instruction. For instance, reading current event issues that directly impact the Latinx community or analyzing Latinx stereotypes broadcasted in the media. Students turned their reflections into action, such as letters to the editor and emails to city councils. Moreover, social studies teachers can implement a journalistic approach in which Latinx students research, conduct interviews, write, and publish on the internet about social justice issues such as racism, immigration, and discrimination (Guldin, 2021). These instructional approaches in language arts and social studies are examples of how issues of social justice along with students' funds of knowledge can foster engagement, critical reflection, and agency in Latinx students.

The Path to Lifelong Learning

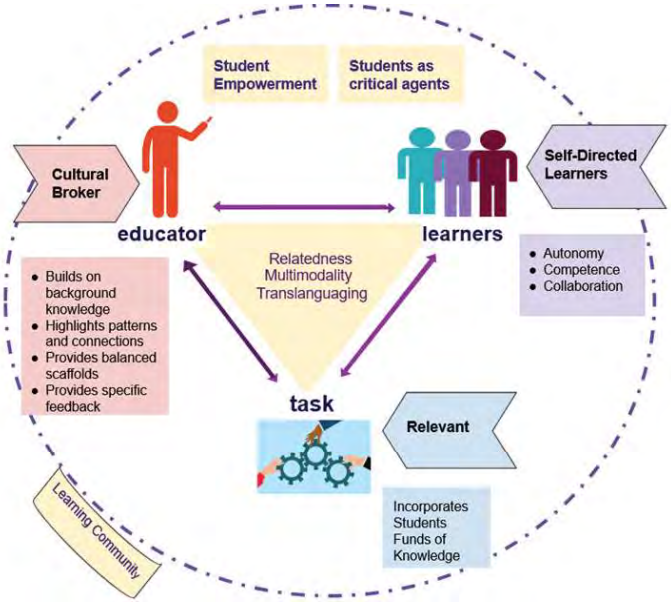
Considering the factors that hinder and contribute to Latinx students' engagement in K-12, I draw from several motivation and engagement theories to advance a conceptual model that promotes Latinx students' engagement and possibly lifelong learning aspirations (Figure 1). The theories included are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, mastery learning (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021), universal design for learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018), student voice (FSG Impact, 2014), and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2021).

The model has three main components: the teacher, the learners, and the task (e.g., activity, learning experience). Elements related to educators are colored red, while those related to the learners are purple, and the task-related ones are blue. Elements in peach color refer to the intersection of the three components. The model proposes that educators take on a cultural broker role, engage students through relevant tasks, and encourage students to

become self-directed learners. Each of these main components is explained further below along with examples of strategies that teachers could implement.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model for Latinx Students' Engagement



Educator as Cultural Broker

According to Gentemann and Whitehead (1983, as cited in Gay, 2018), teachers should be cultural brokers, i.e., they should be aware of how culture works in their classroom; create learning environments that celebrate and appreciate cultural and ethnic diversity; have high expectations for all students; engage students in critical discussions about culture differences; and make teaching compatible to students' sociocultural contexts. In order to become intentional cultural brokers, educators need to learn about their students first. Herrera (2016) provided a sample student biography card that could be filled out after interactions with the student, parents, and other teachers. Herrera suggested collecting information on students' sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, academic experiences, and learning styles. Teachers will then need to become knowledgeable about the students' culture avoiding stereotype traps.

The box below the cultural broker in the model lists four suggested strategies for teachers. For instance, CAST (2018) recommended that teachers build on students' background knowledge. This can easily be done by showing the cover of a book or an image and asking students what they see, and continuing to probe students to elicit more discussion. Usually, students are eager to tell us what they know about a topic or share a family story that relates to it. CAST (2018) also proposed explicitly highlighting connections among concepts, as well as between concepts and students' daily lives. Additionally, educators should provide scaffolds as needed, but be careful not to offer too many too soon (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021; Hammond, 2021). Students should view a healthy struggle as part of learning.

Nurturing Self-directed Learners

Educators' "ultimate goal is to design learning so students become self-aware and self-directed as learners" (Hammond, 2021, p.7). Teachers can provide students with autonomy by allowing choice in content, process, or product. Students can select a topic to investigate; they can decide to work alone, with a partner, or in a small group; or they can choose how to present their findings (e.g., essay, presentation, video). Teachers can also build students' autonomy by setting up certain procedures in the classroom that are student-centered, for instance, learning stations, literacy circles, and writing workshops.

Opportunities for collaboration are also important (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021; CAST, 2018). There are many collaboration strategies, for example, think-pair-share, partner work, small group discussion, and group projects. Additionally, students should be supported with achieving a certain level of content mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2000; CAST, 2018). Providing specific feedback that is task-related can be a way to enhance competence. Cavanagh (2016) suggested providing both discrepancies (e.g., what needs to be corrected) and progress feedback (e.g., what has been done well). An easy way to provide both types of feedback is to assign papers or projects with multiple drafts. During instruction, teachers can also validate a student's contribution and gently correct misunderstandings.

Making Learning Relevant

A task, a learning experience such as an activity or project, should be valuable and relevant to students' interests, personal life, or future plans (CAST, 2018; Gay, 2018). Making a task-relevant involves incorporating students' funds of knowledge (FoK) in the curriculum (Hammond, 2021); including cultural family experiences or expertise (i.e., knowledge and skills) (Brown, 2017). There are multiple ways to incorporate students' FoK, for instance, students can write a biography poem in which they explore their identities, or write "all about me" books (printed or digital). Other examples include "my world" or "my community projects" in which students can incorporate and describe family and community pictures, as well as family or community members interviews. Similarly, family or community members can be invited as guest speakers or readers.

Teachers can also introduce Latinx scientists, historians, authors, and mathematicians in their lessons. Moreover, place-based learning can highlight community features and make learning more relevant. For instance, students can visit a nearby body of water to study its ecosystem by making observations and collecting data. Also, partnering with businesses in the community can help make abstract concepts more concrete, or shine light on the value for learning such concepts. Finally, as previously stated, teachers can engage students in social justice issues. Students can read, analyze, discuss, and critique issues that are important to them, their families, and their community.

Fostering a Learning Community

The triangle in the middle of the conceptual model represents the interaction of educator, learners, and task. It includes relatedness, multimodality, and translanguaging. Relatedness, being connected to others, and feeling a sense of belonging, can be accomplished by

fostering positive teacher-student, and student-student relationships. Teachers can build relationships by fostering trust, getting to know their students, and allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Educators can show vulnerability by sharing personal stories and acknowledging mistakes. Teachers can also model positive behavior by not overreacting to students' disruptions. Moreover, teachers can use multiple modes of representation (e.g., visuals, text, audio) during instruction and encourage learners to engage with a task through multimodality as well (CAST, 2018; Gay, 2018). Employing multiple modes of representation enables teachers to address students' different learning styles.

Multimodal compositions also allow students to show their learning by making intentional decisions of what modes to use to convey their message (Brown, 2020b). For instance, students can create videos where they combine interviews, images, text, music, or sound effects. Multimodality also includes the use of the different languages students command. Thus, students should be encouraged to translanguage, i.e., use their whole language repertoire (García et al., 2016). Teachers don't need to be fluent in students' primary languages to show they value multilingualism and dialects. Finally, the interactions among the educator, the learners, and the tasks should result in a learning community that fosters student empowerment and develops students as critical agents.

Conclusion

With a high percentage of Latinx students dropping out, it is imperative that we implement strategies as the ones described in the conceptual model in order to meaningfully engage students. If we are to widen the path to lifelong learning for Latinx students, we need to become cultural brokers and create a learning community that fosters a sense of belonging and collaboration. By building a learning community, educators respond to the sense of belonging that Latinx youth need, honoring them as learners and persons, and promoting positive identities (Gay, 2018). We also need to teach con cariño while holding students to high expectations. We have to provide relevant learning experiences that capitalize on students' funds of knowledge. Most of all, we need to empower Latinx students as learners and critical agents. Empowering students means supporting them to become self-directed and self-determined to pursue mastery (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2021). Empowering students has other dimensions besides academics and includes cultural, social, and civics (Gay, 2018). Ultimately, the goal is for students to gain critical awareness so that they become agentive and seek further educational opportunities.

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