

## Strengthening Student Identity in School Programs

Patricia Gándara

Ignoring students' race is often perceived as being antiracist by teachers, counselors, and administrators who have little sense of the fundamental importance and far-reaching consequences of racial-group experiences for people of color, as well as for Anglos. Official policy in recent years has promoted this "colorblind" attitude in education. On the heels of the passage of Proposition 209, the anti-affirmative action ballot initiative in California, schools were told that they could not consider race for selection or programming purposes in college access programs. Since then, many schools have been reluctant to group students by race or ethnicity for any purpose.

I contend that to help students of color who feel especially vulnerable as visible minorities in school settings to succeed in school and to go on to college, it may, instead, be antiracist to cluster students occasionally and temporarily by racial-ethnic background for academic, social, and counseling purposes. Sometimes it also makes sense to match them with adult mentors who share the same background. These practices counter students' marginalization in the majority environment and their vulnerability when asked to share their views and experiences, which have been shaped in environments very different from their Anglo classmates'.

I call this occasional and temporary separation from the majority group into a cluster of same-ethnicity peers "cocooning," because the strategy provides some protection for the young person to form her identity in a healthy and supportive environment and to develop the strength and skills necessary to confront marginalizing experiences. The well-meaning teacher who remarks when looking at his classroom, "I don't see color, I see children," is missing some critically important information about his students' needs, such as how membership in a racial group shapes experience, access to social and cultural capital, and perspectives.

For more than a decade, my students and I have been investigating how low-income students of color can successfully navigate the tortuous path through high school and into higher education. The data show that most do not succeed in reaching this goal, but we have surveyed, interviewed, and

observed both those who do and those who do not. We have studied programs that purport to provide students with the assistance they need to succeed in high school, which are variously known as "early intervention programs," "college access programs," and "outreach programs." All attempt to support low-income students, usually students of color, who would be the first in the family to make it into college.

We have learned a great deal about what makes these programs effective, as well as the kinds of limitations that are inherent in them. One successful strategy is assigning a full-time person to monitor individual students across classes and grade levels, who gets to know them on a personal level. Since close and careful monitoring of students is labor intensive, it is expensive to operate programs this way, and budgetary constraints mean that most programs severely limit the numbers of students they serve.

While studying these programs, we have heard a deafening silence on one vital question: is it sometimes advisable to subdivide students by racial-ethnic group to increase their chances of success? Conversely, do programs that serve all racial-ethnic groups together in a "colorblind" manner have equal success with all groups? Most people we interview lack a vocabulary to talk about this issue of racial-group programming. Many find the topic uncomfortable, or even anathema to the perspectives on race they share with their funders. We often act as though even thinking about the implications of a student's race and ethnicity for how she or he navigates the difficult path to higher education is "racist" in itself. I have become convinced that our discomfort about engaging race and ethnicity is undermining some of our best efforts to expand academic opportunity.

As an antiracist move, I suggest providing students with "cocooning" group-<sup>ing</sup> them by racial-ethnic identity in order to enable them to analyze their situations in a protected environment and, if possible, with mentors who belong to their racial-ethnic group. When "cocooning" students, educators can provide these protected learning environments for students for part of the day or part of the year, occasionally or routinely, and at various moments in students' development. Educators must decide who will be placed in these "cocooned" environments, what the curriculum of these environments will entail, and who will run them. Here I briefly describe just one effective program to illustrate the types of cocooning experiences that can be provided for students.

The High School Puente program in California focuses on Latino students, meets for one hour of each school day, and emphasizes rigorous instruction in writing and Chicano literature, mentoring provided by an academically successful Chicano/Latino member of the community, and intensive college preparatory counseling, sometimes provided by a Chicano/Latino counselor.<sup>1</sup> Through field trips, the Puente program encourages participants to spend time outside the classroom together, supporting one another's identities and academic goals. Curriculum in the Puente English classroom includes

community-based folklore and assignments that incorporate parents and other family members in research. One typical classroom activity focuses on *dichos* (proverbs). In Latino culture, *dichos* serve as guidelines for appropriate behavior and demonstrate life lessons. They can also be used to motivate and guide students toward success in school, and they provide the opportunity for students to analyze both language and culture. Many Latino parents are familiar with *dichos* and most enjoy contributing their favorites to the class. For example, one popular *dicho* is "Dime con quien andas, y te diré quien eres" ("Tell me who you hang out with and I will tell you who you are.") An examination of this *dicho* brings complex issues to light, such as how students choose their friends and are chosen by them; how their parents feel about these friends; what constitutes a good friend or friendship (e.g., friendship with a high-achieving student or with a loyal friend who is failing in school); and what consequences these choices entail.

In the aftermath of the passage of Proposition 209, the Puente program was threatened with a lawsuit if it continued to recruit only Latino students. In response, the program opened its doors to all students, but remained firmly committed to its focus on Chicano culture and on curricular and counseling strategies that had proved effective for Latino students. Counseling strategies included guiding students in critical analysis of the factors that impede Latino students from going to college and holding Spanish-language information sessions for their parents.

A guiding principle of the Puente program is that it is crucial for young Latinos to analyze their own educational situation as Latinos. Without a critical perspective, students run the risk of internalizing and acting out the racist stereotypes they see all around them about Latinos who are failing in school, holding only low-level jobs, and are prone to criminal (male) or seductive (female) behavior. Another key principle is that adults must deeply understand and, to the extent possible, have experienced the same racially and ethnically specific circumstances as their students. The program matches highly qualified adults with students from the same community, though not all program staff members are Latino.

Racially and ethnically homogeneous peer groupings are important because students from the same background share specific experiences and family practices that allow them to empathize with one another and to discuss sensitive issues surrounding their challenges in school. Early in our evaluation of the program,<sup>2</sup> we noted the deep sense of safety that Latino students felt in the Puente classroom, as they revealed to each other the difficult circumstances of their migration to the United States, the problems of living here without legal documentation, the challenges inherent in growing up in a family in which parents had only a few years of formal education, or of dealing with the trauma of siblings involved in gangs—many things that would be embarrassing to admit in front of others who did not share such experiences.

These issues impinged on their ability to succeed in high school and entertain the thought of going to college. Adolescents, who value, above all, being accepted by their peers, are generally very protective about what they reveal to others.

These safe places were created in classrooms by talented and sensitive Anglo teachers as well as skilled teachers of color. It is likely that these students would never have divulged such personal information in a classroom of more heterogeneous peers, however. It may be possible to achieve the same sense of safety in a heterogeneous classroom, or one that incorporates students from similar circumstances who belong to different racial-ethnic groups. But my own experience is that few adults have the talent and skills required to achieve this goal. By reducing its variability, the complexity of the task is reduced.

How do these programs reconcile racial and ethnic grouping with the equally important need for students to learn to move with ease and confidence in the broader society and among peers and adults of different racial-ethnic backgrounds? Does the structure of the program actually impede this learning? In order to gauge students' comfort in interacting with adults and students across racial and ethnic lines, we surveyed and interviewed them about their thoughts concerning appropriate mentors and asked students about the ethnic backgrounds of their best friends to see whether they preferred interacting with peers from the same racial-ethnic group.

On the first point, surprisingly, a slight majority felt that racial or ethnic background made no difference in an adult's ability to connect with and support them. However, they felt it was important that the teachers, counselors, and mentors who interacted with their parents be able to speak the same language and understand their parents' circumstances and attitudes. As we reviewed the features of college access programs that were particularly successful,<sup>3</sup> we observed that programs with mostly African American staff often had better outcomes for African American students, and those with mostly Latino staff seemed to have an advantage in working with Latino students. Some programs with strong male staff also appeared to be more successful in attracting and retaining males. Students may have been more likely to take seriously the advice and counseling they received from these same-ethnicity, same-sex adults.

Students had similarly complex reactions regarding the importance of interacting with Latino peers. While the safety net and support structure of the program was predicated on involving peers from the same background, students also expressed a desire to interact with others who were not from the same background. Some students even refused to answer the question about the ethnicity of their best friend, saying "it's nobody's business." In focus groups, students often stated that race and ethnicity "didn't matter" in their choice of friends, though survey results showed that the overwhelming

majority of students of all racial-ethnic groups tended to choose best friends from the same background. Like adults in the society in which they live, high school students are deeply ambivalent about discussing or even acknowledging racial differences. The students' survey responses suggested that race was an important factor in their social and educational lives and they valued interacting with peers and adults from the same racial-ethnic background, but they were not comfortable discussing this question.

Powerful evidence demonstrates that students need to have safe places to address many of the issues that have held them back educationally: lack of support from family and friends, racist actions by their teachers and counselors, and ugly stereotypes that caused them to question their own abilities. To succeed academically and interact with people across racial and ethnic boundaries, students need to develop strong identities as members of a racial-ethnic group that is often marginalized or vilified in the dominant society. An effective way to support the development of a healthy identity is through contact with adult members of their community who have successfully addressed that challenge. At the same time, low-income students and students of color who are most successful educationally are comfortable moving back and forth between their home culture and mainstream culture and between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups (see also P. Carter, Chapter 21).<sup>4</sup> Educators should simultaneously offer students opportunities for the strengthening provided by cocooning and the broadening offered by boundary crossing. Because students are often tracked into racially segregated classes and engage in different social activities according to race, many heterogeneous schools do not provide real opportunities for border crossing. Just as with cocooning, programs designed to promote border crossing must be skillfully structured.

Sometimes the most effective antiracist strategy for helping students of color to navigate high school and move on to college is to give them opportunities to be "cocooned" for some period of time in contexts that allow them to analyze in a safe environment what it means to be a racial-ethnic group member in and out of school and to draw inspiration and support from those who have traveled the same road before them. The opportunity for safe exploration is appropriate to the key developmental years of early to mid-adolescence, when young people are "trying on" possible identities.<sup>5</sup> This strategy allows students to enter the mainstream culture with the self-confidence required to succeed, while feeling pride and comfort in their own racial-ethnic background.

## RESOURCES

Martha Montero-Sieburth and Francisco Villarruel. 2000. *Making Invisible Latino Adolescents Visible*. New York: Falmer. This book includes a number of chapters on various aspects of the culture of Latino youth.

Tom Musica and Ramon Menendez. 1988. *Stand and Deliver* [Motion Picture]. Warner Brothers. Looks at Latino students in a math classroom and the personal and cultural challenges they face together.  
The Puente program: [www.ucop.edu/puente/](http://www.ucop.edu/puente/).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** When does placing students in racially and ethnically homogeneous environments assist them, and when does it harm them? Have you seen successful and unsuccessful examples of this strategy?
2. **Strategy:** In racially and ethnically homogeneous groupings, what types of activities or curricular material might prompt students to analyze their shared experiences?
3. **Try tomorrow:** What specific professional development or learning experiences might you need if you were leading a cocoon for students who did not belong to your own racial-ethnic group? How might you prepare if you did belong to the same group?

*Patricia Gándara is professor of education at UCLA, Co-Director of the Civil Rights Project/El Proyecto de CRP, and associate director of the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Professor Gándara's research explores the education of English Learners and issues of access and equity in education.*