Multiple Marginality and Urban Education: Community and School Socialization Among Low-Income Mexican-Descent Youth

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This article conceptualizes the crucial social and developmental features impacting Mexican-descent youth and adolescents in low-income communities in southern California. All youth in these neighborhoods must confront and come to grips with the many environmental, socioeconomic, racial, and cultural forces they confront. However, it is the poorest of the poor and most culturally conflicted individuals and groups that must command people’s attention. It is these street-socialized youth who are most prone to being subjected to disconnection and becoming gang members. To date, the various school-based strategies that have been formulated, and are constantly being reformulated, often miss the street-socialized segment. Based on extensive anthropological and sociological research, this article pushes researchers to critically examine the education of low-income youth through a multiple marginality framework. It suggests a holistic understanding of street socialization that impacts all youth, from those that are completely disengaged and in gangs to those who are succeeding despite the odds. This approach will significantly inform educational policy and practice to bring marginalized youth back on track toward a productive adulthood.

The growth and development of low-income Mexican-descent youth are affected by many situations and conditions. Early on, family life determines their health and learning readiness, and by the time they reach adolescence, the schools help make or break them. By this time, ethnic identity formation is well underway, especially in the context of the psychosocial moratorium (Erikson, 1968), when gender and age clarification enter the equation. The vast majority of youth work their way through these problems to evolve into mature and productive young adults. Especially stark options and rigid barriers are encountered, however, when racial prejudices and ethnic isolation, along with poverty, undermine the maturation process (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Vigil, 2002a).

This article conceptualizes the crucial socio-developmental features involved when Mexican-descent youth and adolescents in low-income communities in Southern California...
have difficulty growing up due to the social ecology of poverty. Although we heavily concentrate on the most disconnected youth, our focus in this paper extends to low-income youth who are not as disengaged; namely, those low-income youth who (a) are not disconnected, but have disengaged and are not doing well, (b) are struggling with school, and (c) are doing well/succeeding. Although all of these youth are street-socialized, many succeed despite the odds. It is our contention that even those low-income youth and young adults who are doing well are not immune from the social ecology of racism and poverty.

All youth and young adults in these neighborhoods must confront and come to grips with the many environmental, socioeconomic, racial, and cultural forces that exist there. However, the poorest of the poor and most culturally conflicted individuals and groups must command attention. These socialized youth are most prone to becoming disconnected and eventual gang members. We argue that educational initiatives and reform efforts ought to address the street socialization that impacts all low-income Mexican-descent youth and young adults. We employ a multiple marginality framework to guide our understanding of socio-developmental issues that relate and intersect with the educational failure and success of young adults who are socialized in low-income racially segregated environments.

COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY AND SCHOOL-BASED RESEARCH

For many low-income youth, various aspects of human development have taken different and often destructive turns. Examining the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical processes of their lives shows when and where choices were made—or more correctly, conditions compelled them to follow a street socialization rhythm and the selection of an unconventional path. In these neighborhoods, the street gang has become a competitor with other sources of identity formation, often replacing family, school, and other conventional influences. Street gangs are made up primarily of groups of male adolescents and youths who have grown up together as children, usually as cohorts in a low-income neighborhood of a city. Yet only about 10% of youth in most low-income neighborhoods join gangs (Esbensen & Winfree, 2001; Short, 1996; Vigil, 1988a). Those who do so participate together in both conventional and antisocial behaviors (Thornberry, 2001). The antisocial behavior, of course, attracts the attention of authorities as well as the general public (Bursik & Grasmick, 1995; Curry, Richard, & Fox, 1994; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

For all youth, making the passage from childhood to adulthood involves a marginal status crisis termed the *psychosocial moratorium* in which ambiguity and confusion characterizes the self-identification processes (Erikson, 1968; Vigil, 1988a, 1988b, 2002b). Ego formation, group affiliation, and adoption of role behavior dominate during this time. For about a tenth of the youth in poorer neighborhoods, because of attenuated, stressful family situations and uncaring schools that fragment and make their egos fragile at a preadolescent phase, the further shaping of the ego becomes problematic during adolescence. It is no accident that these misshapen egos find solace in groups, where together with other similarly fragile egos, like pieces of a puzzle, they find a wholeness and completeness that they have never experienced before. What else to do but accept the role characteristics that the group has fashioned over the years for similarly disaffected and unaffiliated youth? In short, to
understand the developmental processes of gang and nongang affiliation and identification, one must intertwine ego, group, and role psychologies in ways that show connections and interactions.

To discover and examine these developmental dynamics, we initiated a series of studies that utilized a community orientation to street ethnography. A major position advocated in this analysis is that important contributions to community research have yet to be comprehensively explored. This is the case not only because certain issues—such as persistently high dropout rates, poverty-related health problems, and overrepresentation and high rates of recidivism among low-income populations in the prison system—are in need of attention, but also because of the pull of applied work that generates new approaches to transform public policy. From this perspective, striving to serve the community through research requires authentic interaction with community folk to determine pressing social issues.

Researchers themselves can advance the integration of multiple perspectives into the research paradigm, including academically trained insiders. This process can also be stewarded through the involvement of members of the communities who have experienced or are experiencing the social problems under consideration. With either approach, benefits accrue to the community under study. However, the contributions and perspectives of the outsider should not be unilaterally abandoned in favor of a strictly insider view. Rather, we see the potentiality of a blended research framework as offering the most promising results for studies conducted in low-income communities. Data collection methods that afford the researcher multiple devices and perspectives through which to compile and interpret data provide a broader and deeper picture of reality.

We continue the legacy of a community orientation to street ethnography but with a different thrust. With lessons learned from early exploratory years, in combination with the mission of Ethnic Studies and research, our self-reflexivity integrates a community perspective and advocates for policy formulations and changes. Thus, among numerous projects developed in the past, the one focusing on street gangs has been particularly fruitful. This research quest by Vigil, the second author, actually began in the roles of street worker, counselor, and high school teacher in the 1960s during the War on Poverty. Reconnecting with barrio youth perked a keen interest in literature that addressed a range of social and economic problems. Through an extensive literature review and discussions with literally dozens of people, it became apparent that there was not much information available on the problem of street gangs in any ethnic group, much less Chicanos. Similarly, Conchas, the first author and the son of Mexican immigrant farm workers, has established a strong record conducting school and community case studies (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008) that aim to shed light on what works for the social mobility of low-income populations. Instead of asking why low-income young adults fail in school, for instance, Conchas asks why many succeed, and how policy and practice can learn from the institutional structures that mediate engagement and achievement. This approach suggests that the ecology of educational opportunity may lead to success amidst inequality. Conchas and Vigil’s combined work aims to shed light on street socialization and the factors and influences that construct failure and success of Mexican-descent youth. The aim, of course, is to suggest policy and practice recommendations to help break the insidious cycle of poverty in American neighborhoods.
Researchers for over half a century have grappled with the effect of acculturation on education. Great strides have been made in coming close to a comprehensive interpretation that, at the very least, better documents the problem sources of minority student performance (Conchas, 2006; Macias & Garcia Ramos, 1995; Neisser, 1986). Simply stated, researchers have focused on either structural or cultural foundations as the causes for poor student performance (Feliciano, 2006). According to the structural theorists, America’s long history of economic dislocation and oppression creates a “caste” educational system that works to exclude ethnic minority children. According to these same theorists, this exclusion has created a countercultural reaction, an “oppositional” culture (Ogbu, 1987; Willis, 1977) of distrust and suspicion of dominant institutions and authorities—a sort of turning off to a social system that has traditionally and historically oppressed them. Other theorists argue that cultural barriers or acculturation strains, either language difficulties or a conflict in values, serve as the primary problem source. The cultural difference viewpoint takes a bottom-up (micro) perspective, whereas the societal viewpoint prefers a top-down (macro) assessment (Vigil, 2002b).

The debate for too long has been cast into an either/or framework between the culturalists and the structuralists (Conchas, 2006; Feliciano, 2006; Foley, 1990; Vigil, 2002c). A more holistic model—one that integrates both the culturalist and structuralist viewpoints—is needed to explain the complex relationship between ethnicity and academic performance. Previous studies have too often neglected the tremendous variability found among Mexican Americans in the largest urban settings in the nation, regions undergoing rapid cultural changes even at this moment. Previous researchers have conducted investigations in intermediate-sized towns or small villages, sometimes rendering their findings incompatible with larger, more diverse populations such as those found in Los Angeles (Vigil, 2002a). Individual character is also an important factor, and limiting the debate to either cultural or structural explanations ignores the significance of an individual’s persona and motivation.

Social scientists have long ago noted that minority groups, natives and immigrants alike, often fashioned strategies of acculturation that entailed retaining the original culture while learning the new one (Chavez, 2008; Conchas, 2001; Spindler, 1970; Vigil, 2002a). Researchers have also noted that school success could result with individuals or groups who took that path of biculturalism (Long & Padilla, 1971). Even with the debate between the structuralists and the culturalists sometimes taking center stage, the overwhelming evidence compiled supports the idea that an expansionary, rather than a contracting, acculturation pathway results in successful school performance. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) referred to these concepts as additive and subtractive acculturation. The case for an expansionary mode of acculturation can be found in the academic success of many immigrants, such as Mexicans (Conchas, 2006) and Cubans (Portes & Bach, 1985), and Punjabi (Gibson, 1988). However, although there may be general agreement on the value of expansionary acculturation, the clash between structuralists and culturalists continues to drive much of the literature.

In our contemporary discussions of this issue (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Feliciano, 2006; Vigil, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1987; Vigil & Long, 1981), we argue that both perspectives must be integrated into a broader approach to assess the question of minority student school achievement and performance. Excluding either the structuralist or the culturalist viewpoint would be foolish.
The Mexican American population, in particular, should be examined contextually both as natives and immigrants. We offer a multiple marginality framework that captures the complexity and nuance of the Mexican American community and schooling experience.

MULTIPLE MARGINALITY AND THE EDUCATION OF LOW-INCOME YOUTH

Based on the aforementioned theoretical discussion, we have utilized an analytic model that Vigil termed multiple marginality (Vigil, 2002a; Vigil & Yun, 2002) to understand the failure and success of low-income Mexican-descent youth and low-income youth in general. The phrase reflects the complexities and persistence of many forces. As a theory-building framework, multiple marginality addresses ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological factors that underlie street gangs and youth’s participation in them (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1992; Vigil, 1988a, 1988b, 2002a). Macrohistorical and macrostructural forces—those that occur at the broader levels of society—lead to economic insecurity and lack of opportunity and fragmented institutions of social control, poverty, and psychological and emotional barriers among large segments of the ethnic minority communities in Los Angeles. These are communities whose members face inadequate living conditions, stressful personal and family changes, and racism and cultural repression in schools (Valenzuela, 1999).

As discussed earlier, the debate for too long has been cast into an either/or framework between the culturalists and the structuralists (Foley, 1990; Vigil, 2002b). The multiple marginality framework, conversely, shows the actions and reactions among various forces that generate and sustain an extremely tenuous and uneven educational experience for Mexican Americans. It is a holistic model, one that integrates both the culturalist and structuralist viewpoints, to explain the complexity of academic performance in a place like Los Angeles. Previous studies have too often neglected the tremendous variability found among Mexican Americans in the largest urban setting in the nation that is continually undergoing rapid cultural changes. Individual character is also an important factor, and limiting the debate specifically to cultural or structural explanation ignores the significance of an individual’s persona and motivation.

Within a broad assessment and generational sweep of Mexican students, each case contributes a piece of the cultural mosaic required for understanding how multiple factors affect schooling and learning. Students can sometimes be poorly rooted in both the Mexican and Anglo cultural traditions. In contrast, intermediate marginal individuals tend to gravitate toward more contracultural behavior, a lifestyle that includes gang involvement, moderate drug usage, and school absenteeism. Thus, cultural marginality and street socialization have taken their toll in this regard. Because of these forces, gang membership and gang-related violence have sharply increased over the decades in southern California (Vigil, 1993a, 2002a, 2007). To exacerbate matters, schools sometimes have hardened their policy by kicking out or pushing out students before they drop out.

A summary theoretical trajectory of multiple marginality would begin with how immigrants adapted to the United States after beginning their stay here and working in low-status jobs and occupations in spatially separate (i.e., barrios) and visually distinct (i.e., dilapidated housing stock and neglected environments) places. Common problems associated with poverty affect the food, clothing, and health care of youth; the repercussions of poverty are felt in how families manage and whether schooling is essential to them. The ripple effects of poverty, combined with
the public school system of tracking, tests, segregation, and so on, leads to predictable end results. Such converging factors are proof that structural and cultural explanations need to be addressed in combination (Vigil, 2002b, 2007).

Multiple Marginality is Also an Eclectic Strategy That Allows for Time, Place, and People

The facets of time, place, and people are important features that can aid future researchers and investigations of the question of acculturation and education. The time period reflects the economic, social, and political habits that shape people and events, whereas place—such as the neighborhood or school—reflects changing realities. People change over time and in places, and new and/or different forces, such as immigration or economic restructuring, can significantly alter an individual’s feelings, thoughts, and actions. As the Spindlers noted (Spindler & Spindler, 1990), such shifts can tax and strain enduring (past), situated (present), and endangered (stress between first two) notions of self.

Families, schooling, and law enforcement are thus particularly important in examining how people learn to adjust and conform in the context of the broader and deeper forces of a modern, urban society. By focusing on these socialization experiences, we can gather facts, describe transformations, and offer interpretations of how and where family life and its structures unravel, how schools fail, why law enforcement remains disconnected from low-income communities, and when a multiple-aged peer group and street socialization begin to dominate the life of a youth.

Based on what we have witnessed and researched, we have concluded that disengagement is an outcome of marginalization; that is, it is the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness. This process occurs on multiple levels as a product of pressures and forces in play over a long period of time. Some of the disconnected members whom we have known have come from such stressed and unstable circumstances that one wonders how they have survived; however, many of these youth from the same communities and families manage to thrive and succeed (Conchas, 2006; Vigil, 2002a). The phrase multiple marginality reflects these complexities and their persistence over time and allows us to examine (a) the failure and success of low-income young adults in the educational setting and (b) the variations that exist among all youth and young adults. Therein lies the strength and utility of the framework.

A CLOSER LOOK AT VARIABILITY AMONG LOW-INCOME YOUNG ADULTS

A comparison of the specific environments of the most disconnected young adults who are active gang members with those in the same neighborhoods who are not in gangs (and even some who are fringe gang members) shows a wide difference in their backgrounds (Huff, 2002; Vigil, 1988b, 1993a, 1993b, 2007). Gang members are usually reared in poorer homes, mother-centered family situations with more siblings, and marginal, unstable economic conditions (unemployment and welfare; Vigil, 1988a). In a study exploring differences between gang and nongang families in a public housing development, Vigil (2007) reported notable contrasts between them. These differences considered together strongly suggest that gang families,
even in a community sometimes stigmatized as a haven for welfare recipients, criminals, and drug users, are more at risk to fall prey to local problems than most of their neighbors. Gang households, for example, were poorer, much larger, and more likely to be headed by single females. There are also indications of greater economic stress in the gang families, including a significantly smaller proportion of those households having access to a car. Ironically, absent parenting and absent policing, along with voids in schooling, have cumulatively added up to leave children free to seek and find their own street-controlling influences, especially among boys.

Violence against others in the form of rampant gang fighting and slayings, and against the self through the careless use and abuse of drugs and other chemical substances, represent the destructive, debilitating habits that separate gangs from other adolescent peer networks. Put another way, gangs foster both public and private destructive acts, meaning the locura (i.e., quasi-crazy) orientation common in the gang can take both external and internal paths. The violence brought about by these acts is by no means insignificant.

Nevertheless, even these activities can be understood as an altered type of sturm und drang response during adolescence when daring, excitement, courage, and adventure are valued by peers. Indeed, it is doing these gang-related things that earn one respect and recognition as a dependable gang member with huevos (balls). Notwithstanding their attempts to conform to such expectations, however, most youths remain conscious of, and concerned with, the detrimental effects of this behavior. It should be underscored that oftentimes the negative results of this type of behavior accelerates the “maturing out” process, hastening one’s exit from the gang (Vigil, 1988a, 1996).

If we follow a human developmental model, examining the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects of growth and maturation, it is fairly obvious that the social dimension of the gang for gang and nongang youth alike is, perhaps, its most important feature. In particular, the desire to be well-liked is common across most adolescent groups, but this human aspiration takes different turns and twists among gang members. For one thing, the gang is situated in a street-based arena that dictates how one becomes well-liked, by whom, and how, among other motivations.

Group psychology is a key aspect of low-income life and plays an important overall role for street children bereft of home and school moorings (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Gang members often hold a poor view of themselves. Because of their low self-esteem and fragile and fragmented egos, the street group or gang becomes important and helps make members feel complete. Self-identification and ego development for them has been a radically different process, one of ups and downs accompanied by hits and misses. When a critical mass of similarly unevenly developed youth undergoes street socialization, the outcome is a street identity that is strongly group-based. “Birds of a feather flock together” is a classic phrase that depicts this phenomenon.

On the emotional plane, the crisis passage of puberty is accompanied and strongly affected by bodily changes and hormonal adjustments and imbalances. Becoming more self-conscious of these developments in the context of street life, where the pressures and demands are sometimes overwhelming, leads to a tremendous amount of ambiguity and confusion during this time. This is especially the case because of the developmental tension that exists between early household socialization, often dominated by women, and street socialization under the aegis of a male, multiple-aged peer group. Obviously, this makes one even more peer dependent; members must
maintain the emotional stability necessary to keep up the gang front, which is part of the role psychology of the gang (Vigil, 1988b).

Street children generally come from households that are severely strained—for example, those with incomes lower than their neighbors’ even in an already low income area; single, mother-centered (or grandmother-centered) households; and/or households with limited extended family or social networks (Conchas, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). As a result of these strains, children from such homes attend school with physical and emotional habits and handicaps that negatively affect their learning and behavior. To compound matters, they also bring with them an inner rage imbued with a heightened antiauthority edge, an attitude that the streets help forge and bolster.

Seeking friends to like oneself and relying on them almost exclusively for guidance and direction can also play havoc on the cognitive level of a gang member. There are many physical and mental inconsistencies exhibited by low-income young adults that reflect this tendency. Some gang members often maintain gang and nongang associations; many adopt a Jekyll and Hyde character. In fact, although more common among Asian American gang members, the shifting nature of being schoolboys by day and streetboys by night is a balancing act that shows the precarious involvement and flexible identity that youngsters have for gang life. For some, it is not uncommon to hide their school books in their lockers or make sure they are never seen carrying books home; such behavior would show fellow gang members that they are not serious about belonging to the gang.

What is learned in the streets is thus often augmented by the bonding that takes place in the classroom. As a strategy of survival, street identification is nurtured when youth learn that they need protection, friendship, and support from one another (Vigil, 1988b). In the classroom, this identification is intensified with new dimensions added. Protection and friendship, among other gang attributes, can also mean that you stand up for your friends if the teacher is picking on them, regardless of whether the treatment is deserved or not. When these individuals are singled out because of some particular deed or trait, group bonding increases exponentially. Such phenomena as inappropriate behavior, poor study habits, dislike for reading, lack of academic preparation, cultural differences (Garcia, 1992; Valdivieso & Nicolau, 1994), a need for remediation, and so on, generally characterize street children when they arrive in school. Sharing certain backgrounds and personal and home problems, these children are placed in a behavioral and learning category in which teachers strive to give them special help. The teacher, in making sometimes heavy-handed attempts to do so, faces the additional problem of being seen as a usurper of parental authority (which, in any case, the child has by now begun to defy). In the minds of gang members, bonding to defy an unsanctioned authority contributes to the group and gang, adding another objective to the already well-honed gang repertoire.

Although cooperative learning has proven successful for some students, tactics based on cooperative learning often fail with gang youth. The dense personal and social bonds that mark the group psychology of the gangs are built on positive, as well as negative, attributes. However, in the context of schools and teachers, it is mostly the negative, antisocial aspects that quickly surface. Gang members, if anything, are more peer dependent than other adolescents. Recent research, however, shows the impact of peers on educational engagement and achievement among all students (Conchas, 2006). This mutual dependence develops, in part, from the early educational experiences of ability grouping and bonding. Such school-based bonding has buttressed the multiple-aged peer group nature of the gang, in which much older gang members
serve as models and tutors. Thus, street social ties transcend the relatively safe school environment. This situation is further aggravated by the mismatch and cultural disjunction between primarily White teachers and ethnic minority students in inner city schools, a problem that has been broadly researched and discussed (Foley, 1991; Trueba, 1991; Valencia, 1991).

Finally, much of what was said about the emotional state of mind during puberty applies to a final human development feature, physical changes. Although the interior of a person is undergoing mostly hidden changes, it is much more obvious when physical appearances make a tell-tale statement about ambiguity and uncertainty. Voice changes, height increases, and other bodily alterations remake the person, and especially the sense of confidence associated with control and management of these physical developments. All of these physical changes send a message to onlookers that a nearly intact person is there or a work in progress is in the making. Added to this is the need to show mastery by achieving or shining in some capacity. For men, sports become a very important avenue and outlet for such status recognition; women gain attention by wearing makeup and dressing in more adult styles. However, in contrast to dominant-society teenagers, who are socialized in conventional areas of accomplishment, such as academics, sports, and so on, the streets have dictated a different arena for many barrio youth. Showing toughness is a particularly important characteristic for street children, and a few are actually very tough, even overly combative. Such individuals are usually the ones who have experienced early childhood traumas.

Certain developmental phases unfold on their own, such as hormonal and physical transformations. Other phases, by contrast, depend on the ecocultural system that a person lives in—such as home, school, or the streets—and the role models found therein. For example, how the ego is shaped and grows determines whether there is an overreliance on the group for it to develop further, in which case a person becomes peer dependent and surrenders to the group. To complicate matters, aside from developmental issues, it is fairly obvious that most adolescents and youth have specific needs and indulge in many normal activities. These outlets can be striving for friendship, the selection of social gatherings, participation in the daily gossip of their cohort, and even drinking alcoholic beverages and taking drugs. In short, developmental phases and normal adolescent patterns pertain to almost all youth. However, the streets have presented different obstacles and dictated various options to twist and skew such phases and normal activities. We must understand these to promote the successful socialization of all youth, both in and out of schools.

**PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND SUPPRESSION STRATEGIES**

Survival in the streets becomes an overriding force that all low-income youth must contend with, especially those who are primarily street socialized. Being and acting tough becomes a *modus vivendi* that bodes well for protection, cultivating friendships, and instilling social routines and rhythms that fit the culture of the streets. As a coping strategy for youth who lack conventional paths for development and normal behavior, the street values and norms that dominate their thinking and behavior make perfectly good sense.

Street socialization dictates that survival requires affiliation with a gang for protection, security, friendship, emotional support and affection, and, of course, guidance on how to think and behave. Multiple marginalization has taken such a toll on the lives of gang members that
learning and behavioral difficulties surface quite early and set them on a weakened, and often shortened, educational path. By the time they reach their early teen years and join a gang, their educational careers have worsened. Never able to catch up with their early shortcomings, these youth find sanctuary in the gang and adopt a group orientation that helps legitimize anti-authority behavior in school and elsewhere.

Prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies provide a logical, flexible balance for addressing the needs and problems of children from marginal, gang backgrounds. At present, however, schools reflect the visceral sentiments of a society at large that supports suppression as the sole solution to a complicated problem. Early strategies that consider social, emotional, cognitive, and physical facets of human development must be at the fore of antigang efforts. Thus, prevention and intervention approaches that could be effectively implemented in elementary schools are largely untied, and the limited programs at the middle school and high school levels tend to reinforce, rather than alleviate, gang deviance. In both cases, there is little educational remediation. The irony of this approach is that the principal suppression forces (the police) do not have a large role in generating the problem because the roots of the problem go back earlier and deeper. Stressed families under poverty and discriminatory circumstances are the first phase of the unraveling. Schools, however, have exacerbated the problem; in fact, the overall school record in addressing the needs of low-income youth is dismal (Noguera, 2001). Nevertheless, schools present the best opportunity for nurturing cooperation and coordination among families, educators, and law enforcement in addressing the problems of gang and nongang low-income youth (Conchas, 2006; Noguera, 2003).

STRENGTHENING THE K–20 PIPELINE AS THE WAY FORWARD

Although schools, by themselves, are hard pressed to circumvent structural inequality at the larger social and economic level, they can have a powerful effect on low-income Mexican-descent youths’ experience of social conditions. Specific school programs construct school failure and success among low-income populations. The findings from our years of combined research extend our understanding of the fluidity and nuance of low-income students’ within- and between-group variations in urban school contexts. Our collective work has revealed that institutional mechanisms have an impact on school engagement and achievement among a diverse low-income student population.

Recent studies provide important empirical evidence that low-income Mexican-descent youth are not monolithic, but instead complex and diverse (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Noguera, 2001; Vigil, 2007). Vigil (2002b), for instance, assessed the variations in acculturation and schooling achievement of two generations of Chicano students in the greater Los Angeles area. He classified youth along an acculturation spectrum that includes Mexican-oriented, intermediate, and Anglo-oriented. Within the acculturation spectrum, he identified four major profiles of Chicano youth in Los Angeles. The first profile includes low-income first-generation Mexicans with high goals but limited resources. The second profile comprises the children of the small segment of the petty bourgeoisie that were neither Mexican- nor Anglo-oriented. The third profile represents most of the at-risk Chicano youth who “fashioned a street Cholo style . . . with the local gang” (p. xii). Last, a large number of Chicano youth includes the more Anglo- and surfer-identified students known as the “Chic-Anglos.” Vigil depicted not a generic Chicano youth population,
but a diverse and complex one. A stable ethnic and cultural identity signaled positive school outcomes for many of these urban youth. Importantly, however, students who were in the middle culturally—the cultural marginals—were more prone to join and identify with the cholo population or another youth subculture.

Despite variability, research indicates that the school context has a tremendous impact on poor school performance among low-income students (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002). Studies usually point the finger of blame at the aesthetically unpleasant and ill-equipped surroundings, inadequate instructional materials, unmotivated teachers, and defiant peer subcultures, such as youth gangs, that low-income urban students face (Vigil, 1988b). Others specifically implicate school factors—such as teacher expectations, lack of cultural awareness, and a curriculum that does not reflect the lived experiences of minority youth—as contributors to low academic performance (Gándara, 1995; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Yet in spite of the all-too familiar problems of unequal schools in poor neighborhoods and overall dismal performance, many low-income youth can and are defying the odds (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Gándara, 1995; Mehan et al., 1996).

Mehan et al. (1996) employed the concept of social scaffolding as institutional support systems that the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program created to increase school success for low-achieving students. The term refers to “the practice of combining heterogeneous grouping with a uniform, academically rigorous curriculum enhanced with strong supports” (p. 78). Concentrating on the organizational arrangement provided through the AVID program, Mehan et al. demonstrated how social scaffolding mediates student agency and positive academic outcomes. It is through social scaffolding that low-achieving youth attain the socialization required for academic success.

More specifically, educators implementing the AVID program “explicitly teach aspects of the implicit culture of the classroom and the hidden curriculum of the school” (Mehan et al., 1996, p. 81). AVID provides low-achieving Latino and African American youth with both the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and the social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Goyette & Conchas, 2002; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) essential for social mobility. Mehan et al. (1996) argued that such organizational supports must be introduced early in youths’ high school experience and then slowly removed as these students internalize “the help their guides provided” (p. 79). Once socialized, students are capable of performing on their own. Similarly, Conchas (2001) found that social scaffolds within career academies foster student identities and peer cultures responsible for academic success.

In his comparative case study, Conchas (2006) revealed how school structures and practices contribute to optimism and pessimism among low-income students. He showed how various institutional mechanisms create opportunity structures within schools that students navigate and interpret optimistically and pessimistically. These mechanisms also divide the students into different peer groups that have different subcultures and support networks. We argue that particular units within schools may reinforce the patterns of student (dis)engagement laid out by the multiple marginality model, whereas others may disrupt these patterns and account for some of the variation in street youth social and academic engagement (Conchas, 2001, 2006).

Programs and conditions in schools can unwittingly construct failure and success for many low-income young adults. Our combined research demonstrates the importance of school communities that structure learning environments that link academic rigor with strong collaborative
relationships among students and teachers. Our work reveals the necessity of establishing strong links between low-income youth and the institutional support systems necessary for academic success and positive expectations. Most important, school processes and structures play a significant force in reengaging youth in the face of limited opportunity.

As a way forward, we need to take street socialization into consideration and structure success for all youth. Our work suggests that we need to devise institutional support systems and new pedagogical methods that embrace difference and create a positive disposition toward school success. Although certain school effects begin to foster positive educational experiences, they do not equally transform students’ perceptions of the opportunity structure, especially among the most marginalized street kids. Before tangible progress occurs, we must wrestle with the weight of larger social and economic inequality and the creation of barrio street socialization. These processes have a devastating impact on the experiences and perceptions of street youth concerning social mobility.

Multiple marginality can be used as an important conceptual tool to inform educational policy and practice as educators devise strategies and interventions for success all along the educational pipeline. We must clearly understand how youth spend their time, with whom, and where—that is, we must consider time, people, and place. In addition, educational strategies ought to consider social, emotional, cognitive, and physical facets of human development among all low-income street-socialized youth. Embracing a multiple marginality framework in education takes us in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

Schools have generally failed in addressing the learning needs of low-income, ethnic minority children (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Vigil, 2002b). Nowhere are the effects of this failure more visible and intractable than in the lives of children who have undergone street socialization that has shaped a street identity (Vigil, 1988b). These children typically score poorly on tests and exhibit behavioral problems in the classroom, often compounded by street pressures that infiltrate the classroom (or at least the schoolyard). Conventional efforts at intervention through such mechanisms as parent–teacher conferences often meet with parental apathy, among other hindrances (Vigil, 2002b). As these children get older and their behavioral problems become more serious, often influenced in that direction by gang membership, the usual institutional response is to attempt to suppress the problem behavior and/or to remove the child from the school (Vigil, 1988a). This response not only often constitutes abandoning all hope in the child’s future, but also does little to prevent other children from following the same dysfunctional developmental path.

Educators have struggled to develop new strategies in the school environment to address the educational needs of children exhibiting problems at school (Conchas, 2006; Noguera, 2003). For example, they have introduced changes in curriculum design, experimented with novel teaching techniques, and trained staff for student/parent counseling (Garibaldi, 1995; Legters & McDill, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1995). The resultant innovative schooling strategies generally address the needs of “at-risk” children (Rossi, 1994; Wang et al., 1995; Waxman, Walker, Anderson, & Baptiste, 1992). However, the various school-based strategies that have been formulated and are constantly being reformulated often
miss the street-socialized segment. This stems, in part, from their focus on a more generic “at-risk” child (Vigil, 2002b).

Multiple marginality takes into account when the social environment shapes personal identities with which the individuals interact. To broaden and deepen the picture, many other factors need to be considered, such as the ecological, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopsychological, particularly in light of the immigrant experience (Conchas, 2001). Multiple marginality (Vigil, 1988a, 2002b) lends itself to a holistic strategy that examines linkages among the various factors, considers the actions and interactions between them, and notes the cumulative nature of low-income life. This complexity and the reverberations within it make conventional human development troublesome and problematic for many low-income populations. Social, emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental trajectories are undermined in such situations and conditions. However, schools have the potential to circumvent the damaging effects of out-of-school forces that lead to disengagement and failure for too many of our youth (Conchas, 2006; Conchas & Rodríguez, 2008). Schools and communities ought to push for an ecology of educational opportunity to minimize the devastating effects of inequality. School success among all youth ought to be the norm, not the exception.

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MULTIPLE MARGINALITY AND URBAN EDUCATION


