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"Teachers Know You Can Do More"

Understanding How School Cultures of Success Affect Urban High School Students

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Urban high school reform is one of the most significant challenges facing education today. In response to this challenge, reformers have put significant energy toward restructuring the large high school primarily through creating smaller school settings. Although the research literature often draws connections between school size and student outcomes, an examination of life within these settings remains a large void. From the voices and experiences of students, this article examines how relationships are connected to school culture. The nature of student–adult relationships is disentangled by exploring how students experience personalized, respectful, and encouraging interactions with school adults. Then relationships are connected to student dispositions in schools by examining the question, relationships for the purpose of what? The author concludes that the silver bullet for high school reform is a commitment to forging deliberate "cultures of success" for low-income Black and Latina or Latino students in U.S. high schools. Implications for research, policy, and practice are explored.

Keywords: *culture; reform; urban; voice; relationships*

Urban high school reform is one of the most significant challenges facing the field of education today (Noguera, 2002). In response to this challenge, high school restructuring efforts such as small learning communities and small autonomous schools have shown promise (Cotton, 1996; Raywid, 1994). Such initiatives, mainly because of size, have been recognized for boosting academic achievement, personalizing the educational experience, and often celebrated for diminishing the effects of poverty, particularly for low-income Black and Latina or Latino students (Howley & Bickel, 2000). Specifically, the research shows significant correlations between small school

size and a number of factors including higher student achievement (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Fine, 1994; Wasley et al., 2000), higher attendance rates (Scherer, 2002; Vander Ark, 2002), lower dropout rates (Raywid, 1994; Wasley, 2002), higher levels of student participation in extracurricular activities (Cotton, 1996), lower incidences of violence (Allen, 2002), and lower incidences of student monitoring (e.g., use of security cameras and metal detectors). In a study of the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice and Central Park East High School, both small schools in New York City, 90% of the students graduated, 50% to 70% above the norm (Meier, 1995a, 1995b; Nathan & Febey, 2001).

Although such evidence is promising, creating small schools alone is no silver bullet to the challenges facing urban high schools. In fact, reform driven by consolidation and "smallness" alone can be misguided and dangerous. Although school size is correlated with some student outcomes, there is little empirical evidence explaining exactly how and why this is the case. Despite the lack of empirical research, some believe that small school reform is supported by certain political and ideological motivations (Miner, 2005) whereas others argue that although imperfect, small schools provide hope and opportunities for realizing social justice, particularly for low-income minority students (Nieto, 2000). Nonetheless, reformers recognize the shortcomings afforded by size and encourage an examination of school culture (Ayers, 2000; Fine, 2000; Lipman, 1998; Noguera, 2002). Therefore, this article explores two questions simultaneously: (a) In what ways do urban high school students in small school settings, experience personalized student–adult relationships? and (b) What influence does a school culture that prioritizes relationships have on students' dispositions in school?

To address these questions, I comparatively examine school culture in two distinct small school settings by prioritizing the voices and experiences of low-income Black and Latina or Latino students. First, I unravel the complex nature of student–adult relationships by discussing three elements salient to the existence of these relationships, as identified by students: (a) the importance of personal relationships, (b) the role of respect, and (c) the power of the encouragement-support dynamic. Then, I examine the significance of relationships by exploring the question, relationships for the purpose of what? Finally, I discuss how personalized relationships emerge when a school's culture commits to a host of practices and beliefs that shape the success of low-income minority students.

Literature Review

The Promise of Small Schools

Two decades of school reform research supports the notion that to understand the impact of structural reform (i.e., restructuring) on student achievement, an examination of school culture is vital (Elmore, 1995; Sarason, 1972). In fact, reformers question the extent to which structural factors (i.e., size) mediate the social processes in schools (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996). Elmore (1995) for instance, argues that structural reform is popular because it is driven by the belief that rearranging people and the teaching and learning structure will automatically transform practice. Elmore contends that although restructuring is symbolic and often politically favorable, failure to examine school culture can easily lead to ineffective reform.

Building on this critique, Valenzuela (1999) asks, to what extent do social processes mediate structures? In her work on the power of relationships for Mexican-origin students in a Texas high school, Valenzuela found that the authenticity of relationships played a significant role in student engagement and to a degree, mediated some of the ills associated with large school structures. Both perspectives suggest that *school culture* is essential to understand if any progress in school reform is to be made.

School Culture

But why are small schools not enough? Many educators concerned with equity and justice particularly for low-income Black and Latina or Latino children contend that interrogating school culture helps steer away from small schools that reproduce inequality (Ayers, 2000; Fine, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Sarason, 2000). Nieto (2000) for example, asserts that although small schools are "a gesture toward justice" and encourage students and teachers to "dream big," restructuring does not guarantee reculturing. Case in point is Lipman's (1998) observations after studying a school after having restructuring efforts: "Unless educators challenge existing values, practices, and policies that are taken for granted, meaningful and lasting change is unlikely" (p. 38).

Similarly, some argue that the creation of small schools can become another mechanistic reform exercise leading to elitist or racist schools (Ayers, 2000, Noguera, 2002). Conversely, Fine (2000) outlines an agenda for small schools—to focus on literacy and creating "citizens with a soul and a conscience" (p. 169). Small schools, according to Fine, need to focus on social relations that foster respect and reciprocation where power is challenged, shared, and

understood. This is evident by curriculum that addresses social justice and the historical imbalance of opportunities for poor and minority students and pedagogy driven by high expectations. Thus, “small” is far from sufficient. Although small schools have much potential, broader agendas of racial, social, and political justice should be pursued, specifically by focusing on school culture.

School Culture Defined

For the purposes of the current study, school culture is defined as a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures, and individual agency (Brown & Rodríguez, in press). The literature suggests that school level processes are driven by traditions, rituals, and norms that govern the actions, behaviors, and decisions of individuals within the institution (Ancess, 1998). School culture is created by “a genuine community bound by common, mutual sentiments and understandings” (Raywid, 1994, p. 218) informed by “the historically transmitted patterns of meaning . . . understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community” (Stolp & Smith, 1994, p. 1) School culture is also “the frame of reference that creates boundaries, categories, and rules in which meaning is negotiated” (Lipka, 1998, p. 23). Sarason (1972) believes that school culture is a fluid entity that reflects society and has the power to facilitate or resist change. According to Patterson, Purkey, and Parker (1986), school culture is: (a) partially responsible for explaining student behavior and achievement, (b) something that is manufactured, (c) unique in each school, and (d) the one factor that serves as the glue between practice and purpose in the school.

Most simply, school culture is *what schools do and how they do them.* The challenge to research is to understand what school culture looks like, and in the scope of this article, how personalization facilitates students’ experiences.

Personalization

Another underexamined area of inquiry within the school reform literature is the concept of *personalization.* That is, personalization is often associated with relationships, particularly in the small schools because of their potential to produce relational accountability (Fine, 1998) that is more personalized in nature (Allen, 2002; Fine, 2000; Klonsky, 2000; Meier, 1995a, 1995b; Wagner, 2001). Such research contends that stronger student–adult relationships lead to higher levels of student engagement and more favorable academic outcomes (Conchas, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The current study attempts to disentangle the nuances of personalization through an analysis of school culture across two small high school settings. My review of the research leaves many theoretical and empirical questions unanswered, begging a more in-depth examination of school culture and personalization. The current study attempts to deepen our understanding of what happens in small schools and highlight students' voices so they can teach us about conditions necessary for them to thrive.

Research Design

Case study methodology was employed to explore the *how* and *why* questions within specific settings (Yin, 1994); therefore, an in-depth examination of school culture was necessary, particularly through the experiences and understandings of student participants (Maxwell, 1996). Students' perspectives were legitimized because their experiences should guide theory, policies, and practices designed to improve urban schools (Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Nieto, 1994; Rodríguez, 2003; Wasley et al., 2000).

Process theory was also utilized to examine events and the processes by focusing on a controlled number of cases (Maxwell, 1996). According to Maxwell (2004),

> To develop adequate explanations of educational phenomena, and to understand the operation of educational interventions, we need to use methods that investigate the involvement of particular contexts in the processes that generate these phenomena and outcomes. (p. 7)

Selection of Schools

Both high schools under analysis were participants in the *Pathways for Student Success Project.* This project was a multi–high school study examining the relationship among school structure, culture, and student achievement in a Northeastern U.S. city conducted during the 2001 to 2003 school years. Both schools shared similar demographic information (90% or more of the students were students of color and most qualified for free or reduced lunch).

Grand High School (GHS) and High Achieving Academy (HAA) were committed to personalizing the student experience and boosting student achievement, particularly because of the unique structural arrangements of each school.[1] GHS created smaller learning communities (SLCs) among its larger structure, whereas HAA was altogether small and autonomous. One

major difference between GHS and HAA was student enrollment—1,500 and 200 students, respectively. Although GHS had a much larger student population, each small learning community enrolled about 200 students, warranting the comparative nature of this study. At GHS, 51% of the teachers were either Black or Latina or Latino, whereas 69% of the teachers at HAA were of color. Although the percentage of Black teachers were relatively consistent across schools (40% at GHS and 50% at HAA), there were twice the number of Latino teachers at HAA (19%) than at GHS (9%; a future analysis seeks to understand the role of teacher demographics on student–teacher relationships; however, this article seeks to unravel how students responded to different school cultures).

School Profiles

Facing poor attendance, low promotion and graduation rates, and school violence, reformers (i.e., district personnel, school leadership, and community stakeholders) selected GHS as a site to restructure into thematic SLCs. HAA, on the other hand, originated as a small school and aimed to model educational excellence (Pearlman, 2000) by creating a rigorous academic experience for its students. Like GHS, HAA reformers believed that a combination of high expectations and a theme-based curricular focus would be the formula for student success.

Participant Selection

Twenty students, ten from each school, were purposely selected using achievement data criteria (Yin, 1994). Purposeful sampling permitted a selection of students diverse in achievement (low, middle, and high), using two criteria—grade point averages and test scores. This procedure minimized chance variation, avoiding the over- or under-representation of students within any one category (Maxwell, 1996). Before data collection was initiated, parent permission was secured.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews and participant observations were used to understand the complex nature of school culture from the students' perspective. Each participant was interviewed three times and each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. The interview explored students' general feelings toward school (i.e., race, culture and language in school and student life

outside of school). In addition, all participants were observed in classroom and nonclassroom contexts, including classrooms, transition time between classes, in the cafeteria during lunchtime, and during field trips. Particular attention was placed on how students responded to academic work, disciplinary policies and procedures, relationships with peers and school adults, the school mission, and other dimensions of school life. All observations were recorded via jottings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and transferred into descriptive field notes providing a rich contextual foundation for the interviews employing a practice of data triangulation.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and field note data were uploaded into ATLASti, a qualitative data analysis software program providing a systematic approach to data analysis. Open coding allowed for a systematic categorization of the data to compare and contrast cases within and across schools. The grounded theory approach drove much of the analysis honing in on school culture and personalization (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Running code lists were then created to employ categorizing and contextualizing analytical strategies (Maxwell, 1996; Maxwell & Miller, 1991). Such techniques provided opportunities for more complex analyses on how school culture influenced students.

Findings

A rigorous analysis of school culture facilitated a deeper understanding of the role that personalization played in lives of students. Below I discuss three dimensions of personalization: (a) the "personal" feel of relationships, (b) the role of respect, and (c) how a healthy balance of encouragement and support effectively serves students' needs. Personalized relationships, according to the students, significantly influenced the student experience across schools.

The "Personal" Feel to Relationships

Black and Latina or Latino students across both schools spoke in detail about the importance of personalized relationships, however varied in nature. The small size of HAA afforded students immediate and frequent contact with school adults and personalized relationships meant having access to school adults during the school day. For others, personalized relationships

were significant when students were faced with serious personal challenges often having nothing to do with school. One student explains,

> [The teacher is my biggest motivator because he] gets to know me as a person, I mean I can confide in him [teacher]. I tell him my problems inside school and outside school . . . and I feel better, I'll be more focused in class and he gives me so much encouragement like, "I know you can do it!" It's so good to feel that someone knows that you can do it, you know?

A teacher who legitimized the nonacademic realities that students face can facilitate a student's academic engagement.

Relational authenticity and reciprocity allows for the progression of relationships between students and teachers (Valenzuela, 1999). Here, for example, is an example of a teacher who creates a space within the classroom to establish relationships with one another:

> We [students and teachers] talk about getting to know each other's names at first, what grade they're in, what class the teacher's teaching, from there we build, we tell each other day-to-day, you know we ask each other how we're doing, and sometimes we'll tell—it depends either the teacher or student to start telling things about our personal life, and I think that's good to have a relationship between each other because for a teacher to have a relationship with a student is to get to know them.

Teachers who spoke about their personal lives diminished the power line between student and teacher and humanized the teacher as person.

Although personalization buffered the interpersonal and academic experiences of many students, such relationships also mediated non-school-related moments of turmoil. One student reflects,

> Like there was this one incident freshman year, when a family member died and I came to school the next day but they didn't know she was my family until I think I was sitting somewhere over here and I started crying. And then my English teacher came [to talk to me] and then he was like, "How is she related to you?" and I was like, "That's my [family]." He was like, "Oh my God. I should have known that." So then he went to tell my counselor, and she took me out of class and was like, "If you don't feel like talking about it I understand, but if you do, I'm here to help you out, or whatever." They'll be there for you whenever you need too.

During the course of the study, many students witnessed or were personally involved in matters related to community violence and death. According to

students, personalized relationship with various school adults made help seeking much easier (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Similarly, GHS students spoke about the personalized attention they received during moments of turmoil. However, when compared to HAA students, there was a qualitative difference. For example, when asked if there are adults to support his personal needs, one student stated,

> No, I don't tell no one anything personal [at this school]. Like my brother got shot. And some of the people here knew about it, but I didn't really say nothing. But, they find out on their own. Like yesterday, someone else I know got shot. It's like too much gunshots going off. Like yesterday, around 1:00, I heard like gunshots.

Although less forthcoming, another GHS student recounts when help was apparent and realized,

> I would say only one [school adult knows me as person], but I don't have him as a teacher no more. But, I've spoken to him before when I was having problems . . . . He saw me and he just noticed that I wasn't as happy as I was . . . . He knows me, . . . my expression and stuff. So, when something's wrong, he would just ask me cause he knows something's wrong. [What kinds of things do you talk to them about?] Like, personal problems. For advice. And he gave me good advice. I don't want to get into details, but I felt real comfortable with him.

Feeling like someone is "looking out for me" was particularly meaningful, especially in the large school context. Such is important when most urban high school students attend large high schools where personalized student–adult interactions are far less frequent.

For other students at GHS, the small learning communities significantly impacted their experience. For example, one student stated,

> Like, cause last year, several members of my family died . . . . And they had to send me to somebody [guidance counselor], cause they didn't like want me to . . . . I don't know how to put. It's like when so many people die in your family at the same time, like something goes through your brain, and you have to go see somebody about it. So, they sent me to him.

Students' experiences showed that when schools committed to fostering personalized student–adult relationships, a culture manifested itself by facilitating processes and practices that promoted student success. Such

findings reflect the literature that suggests that relationships influence academic engagement, particularly for Black and Latina or Latino students in urban settings (Rodríguez, 2005). In a zero-tolerance climate, particularly when Black and Latino males are quick to be disciplined, a personalized relationship between student and teacher can promote a more pleasant and productive learning environment for the child and may be the buffer that diffuses rather than exacerbates a situation.

The Role of Respect

Respect was also a vital feature of personalized relationships across both schools. The education literature typically places the academic content between teacher and student as a means of forging a relationship. However, a major assumption within this dynamic is that students place value over the academic content (Rodríguez, 2003). This is problematic when some research shows that students often feel alienated, uninterested, or bored with the academic content and the process of schooling itself. Therefore, respectful relationships may need to be forged before meaningful engagement with the content (Rodríguez, 2005). Respect is defined by reciprocal recognition among student and teacher with particular attention placed on positive and negative uses of power (Valenzuela, 1999). As will be explored, GHS students characterized respect as a function of the individual skills and traits of specific teachers, whereas for HAA students, the school culture as a whole was committed to promoting respectful relationships.

A majority of HAA students believed that teachers must give respect to get it. However, students also spoke about their role in extending respect to teachers, especially to those with high expectations:

> Teachers expect respect. Most of the time the teachers respect the students but the students don't seem to want to give the teacher respect. And that's not good. Like something that happened the other day in my class, the teacher was teaching and this girl was writing letters and stuff and the teacher was trying to take the letter and she [student] looked like she was about to punch the teacher or something and then everybody started laughing. And the teacher said, "Give me that," and she said "No, you're not my mother. Don't be touching it." You know, giving her attitude. I mean she's not your mother, but she's old enough to be your mother or older than your mother. You're supposed to give her respect.

This student highlights the significance between respect and learning. For many students, respect precedes engagement. Even more powerful is the

above scenario situated in HAA's context—the situation is somewhat paradoxical in a larger culture that believes in and practices relationships driven by respect. The student reflected that disrespect directly challenges the school's mission.

Respect was also central to GHS students' experiences. One student connected respect to caring and communication:

> I have had some other teachers that are pretty good. My teachers could be good for me, but for other students, they might not be the same. So it's kind of like your relationship with them. All of my teachers have been there for me, except for one. [Is there anything else about them that makes them good?] I'm the kind of person that if you show me that you care and respect, I'll do the same for you. If we have communication, then it's cool.

Another student reflected on the openness he experienced with the school headmaster, specifically in comparison to a teacher who he struggled with:

> I got mad [much] respect for [the headmaster]. He's got respect for me; I've got respect for him. [What's the difference between Mr. A. and (the headmaster)?] [Headmaster] is mad cool. He actually listens to you. Mr. A. says that if it's wrong, it's wrong. You can't make it right.

These two students further demonstrate that respect and disrespect are critical to relationships and learning. The students' voices across both schools demonstrated that school cultures that prioritize respectful relationships can significantly mediate academic engagement or disengagement. This observation highlights the common denominator present across both schools under analysis—the urban context. In this context, students often harbor years of antagonistic school-based relationships that sometimes originate from elementary and middle school. Schools, either directly or indirectly, teach students that respect is a major principle that guides school life and students learn about the power it carries. The students' experiences show the significance that respect plays and why it must permeate the school's policies, procedures, and practices.

Beyond the school walls, students also know (from direct experience) the weight associated with respect. For many students that live in poverty and have a history of pervasive school failure, respect or dignity is often the one dimension of their life that they may have some control over. In the urban context, especially in street culture, respect is often ruled by certain "codes" (Anderson, 2000) that often spill into school life. Students may find themselves applying street codes to their engagement with teachers, however such

ways of engagement may be misaligned with school codes because of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1996). Thus, students' actions or behaviors may easily be misinterpreted or judged without understanding. Therefore, it is essential that educators understand the differences between school codes and street codes, particularly how this is played out in student–adult relationships.

Structures of Support

Personalized experiences also emerged by the school's ability to foster structures of support as a function of relationships between students and adults. For example, one student discusses the availability of school adults and the expansive network of knowledge and information they had access to at HAA:

> It depends on what your situation was. They'll [school adults] just try to get you the best help they know how cause they [school adults] know a lot of people so if it's like a certain type of situation, they probably know somebody who can help you out with it. I know mad [a lot] people got a lot of connections.

Another student shared how support was provided from multiple directions, including the school principal.

According to the student below, supporting students became a core belief that drove the staff's practices at HAA:

> The unique thing about our school is that we get attention—sometimes individual attention from teachers and stuff and sometimes the principal. The teachers sometimes say that they're open to help you . . . and I've noticed that this year from a lot of teachers. They are actually willing to help and willing to do stuff with you and stay after school.

In-depth analyses also showed that HAA students were more likely to associate the help and support they received in school with their individual goals, such as graduating and attending college. This demonstrates how relationships help facilitates one's goals.

One student addresses how HAA provided support for struggling students, who often find themselves lacking the social safety net beyond the school walls:

> They [school adults] don't wanna leave you out there stranded—"I don't know what to do and my parents don't know what to do either." No, you don't have to be like that. They can try to help you with colleges or even with your school. Cuz there may be a subject and they see that you're struggling. It may feel like

> they're pickin' on you, but they're trying to look out for you in a little way because some people have nobody lookin' out for them even though the people around them say, "Oh, I got your back," but they're not really looking out for them. They [school] would actually say, "If you need help, don't be afraid to ask for it." That's what they're tryin' to get everybody to realize.

This student's experience affirms how HAA recognized that many students lacked the social and informational capital needed to access college and made explicit efforts by "tryin' to get everybody to realize" their goals as a school community.

The following student associated how help and support was threaded with high expectations and the common belief that "everyone can succeed."

> I'm not sure what they [school adults] expect, but they *tell us* just to try our best, basically. Like if we ever need help with anything, we can go to them and ask them. I mean they all want us to succeed—just finish high school, go to college, just become something. They just blatantly tell us—just communication within the classroom or with the grades. They might offer some extra help, so that shows me they want to be involved in our futures in a way, so we can succeed.

This suggests that the school culture, as practiced and reinforced by school adults, personally and academically helped and supported students by enhancing and maximizing the availability of school adults, by sharing important knowledge critical for academic success, and by explicitly communicating high expectations and support to students. This also indirectly highlights the ways in which school size influenced opportunities to build student– adult relationships. That is, had it not been for the small school size, perhaps the school adults could not have maximized their opportunities to relationally engage students. However, to be sure how size impacts school life, an analysis of school culture is critical, as illuminated by the students' voices.

For GHS students, similar relational experiences were shared however the extent to which help and support were realized by way of the school culture was far less salient. That is, although both settings were physically small, the actual impact that school size had on school culture as carried out by the practices and beliefs of educators was less powerful when compared to students at HAA.

One GHS student, for instance, described how care and support helped him reach his personal goals:

> Partly this school is going to help me achieve my goal, cause of the guidance counselor. She's the one, who I think could help me. She has seen me a few times. She's very helpful, she worries [concerned].

Another student explains how his English teacher helped and challenged him academically:

> [My most interesting class is] um, Ms. B's class. English class. I like her class, 'cause she really challenges us. She helps us a lot. And she sort of goes and sort of is there for us and teaches with our lessons.

Although GHS students were able to identify and discuss the ways in which adults addressed their academic needs, there was less depth and clarity in connecting the support they received with achieving one's goals of succeeding or going to college, particularly in comparison to the HAA students.

One student, for example, articulated the ways in which the help of one teacher had an impact on him:

> [If I need help with my homework in school, I go to] the teachers that I know are going to help me and I know won't like push me away. They help me understand what I need to know about what we're doing. Say it's like math, Mr. C will slow everything down to like help me, to understand what I need to do and how to do it. And not tell me, just [deepens voice] "Like do it like this and that's it, just go home and try it."

Although this student did recognize the positive efforts of one teacher, he compared the nature of this experience with other GHS adults that were more negative in nature. This implies that although personalized student–adult relationships are supposed to thrive in the small school context, this student's experience suggests otherwise.

Consistent with the research on high achieving minority students, the students' experiences at HAA demonstrate that a healthy balance of support and encouragement (not coercion) was central to the student–adult relational dynamic (Conchas, 2001; Ferguson, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). In many schools, including those under analysis, schools may emphasize a significant degree of academic press but fall short on the side of student support. HAA students showed that a healthy student–adult relationship fostered the quality of support and encouragement they received from adults.

The Push Factor

A significant number of students also spoke about the role that encouragement or being "pushed" played in their engagement with school. For instance, one HAA student said,

> You know how sometimes teachers . . . give you work and I say, “I don’t know how to do it,” and they’re like, “Yes you do. You know how to do this. I know you.” They tell you, “I know you can do this—just put your mind to it,” and stuff like that.

Another student shared,

> They [HAA teachers] are all the same, they just like know what you can do, and they just keep pushing you until do it, whatever, then you know, they just believe in you and if you don’t have faith in yourself, they tell you, “You can do it.”

Teachers who pushed students proved to be an important dimension to the personalized student–adult relationship. For most HAA students, such practices and beliefs drove the school culture.

Finally, one student captured how being pushed by teachers was a reflection of high expectations shared by the larger school culture:

> They [teachers] expect enough and somewhat more, because they know that you can do more . . . . That’s also the relationship between teachers and students . . . cuz I can just get an *A* on a paper, and the teacher himself knows that I can do *better* than an *A*, and even if you do worse . . . teachers will try to get you there, at least, that’s how I see it. That’s a good thing, like, I have not seen a teacher neglect a student yet, like they’re so into us that sometimes I feel like they just want to BE us, you know—again.

The experiences of GHS students on the other hand, were different. Although they did share how some school adults pushed them, the depth of their experiences was vastly different compared to HAA students. For example, one student stated:

> Some of the teachers try to push you. Every time they see you messing up, they try to make you better, or whatever. Try to get you to stay after school. They give you a lecture, you know what I mean.

Another student specifically spoke about his guidance counselor, someone that served as a source of motivation:

> My guidance counselor [is my biggest motivator in school]. He makes sure I’m getting good grades, and if I get a grade like a *C*, he’ll try to push it or [motivate me] bring it up a little bit.

The ways in which the culture at GHS pushed students was weak in comparison to the HAA student reflections. In fact, several students at GHS struggled with identifying an adult who personally or academically motivated them:

> I don't really know [who my biggest motivator is in terms of school] . . . . I think I motivate myself. There's really nobody that helps me motivate. There are those teachers that do come close to helping me motivate, one's that want to see me learn, so some teachers, but mostly myself.

This finding is profoundly different from those typically shared by HAA students who had little problem identifying at least one and in nearly all cases more than one school adult who was supportive and encouraging. The differences across schools reflect the overall school culture surrounding relationships. That is, having one meaningful relationship with an adult can be moving, however an entire school culture driven by high expectations is an entirely different reality.

Relationships for What?

Why do relationships matter? What influence does a school culture that prioritizes relationships have on students' dispositions in school? At GHS, students shared the limited, if not negative impact that relationships can have when not met with commitment in both belief and practice. Conversely, HAA students were more likely to associate the role of personalized relationships with their success in and beyond high school. Such differences across schools reflect each school's culture.

For example, when one HAA student was asked to articulate her definition of success, she stated,

> [I need to be] succeeding in high school—if I want to take it to the next level, I really have to make this foundation solid. [How do you do that?] I think how well I do in my classes, how well I share a relationship with my teachers and my advisors and the administrators.

For this student, the nature of her relationships with school adults (personalized, respectful, and encouraging or supportive) directly facilitated her success in high school and that "next level" (college). This reality demonstrates to students that healthy relationships with important institutional figures can be productive for students—a source of social capital that can influence one's success.

Another student makes a more direct reference to his in-school relationships and his future:

> If you talk with them [school adults] one-on-one, you don't have to feel as though "If I say something to them, they might just tell my parents." So it's kind of unique the way how they try to get to know you. They actually are willing to give you information that they actually have in return that you would use it and actually build on that information that they give to you. For colleges, they give you scholarship information . . . . They say, ok we can work with you on how to get this, but in return you, have to, you know, to help yourself. "We're only giving you this piece, but you gotta try to put two and two together."

This student equates trusting relationships with adults with his own success. Trusting relationships facilitated the value that the student placed on the message (go to college) and messenger (teacher). The student also appreciated how adults shared information that seemed to ignite his own agency. This student implies that within a culture of personalized relationships that encourages, supports, and divulges critical information to students, they recognize their role (agency) in creating their own future that influences positive dispositions toward school.

Another student described how the school's emphasis on college preparation was largely facilitated by personalized relationships:

> I would say yes [I'm focused on college] because I'm in the 11th grade and a lot of teachers are giving us hints and being more strict like, "You have one more year—you should take this year more seriously than last year 'cause this is when you should be thinking about your future and what are you gonna do after high school."

A teacher's genuine investment in a student's future fosters the personalized relationship and larger culture needed to encourage the student's success.

Finally, one student discussed the ways in which school structures facilitated information pathways to college, but highlighted a particular encounter with a teacher who shared his personal experiences to connect with students:

> We had junior seminar and senior seminar to start thinking about college, and even teachers themselves, in ninth grade, were like, "Just because you're a freshman doesn't mean you don't need to start thinking about college, start thinking now, then you can make good choices." And even teachers themselves tell us about their personal experiences in college wise, because you don't have to choose a school that's just well-known because there's a school out there for

> everybody—that's what one of my teachers said . . . which is true and we have staff and teachers giving us choices, that's a good thing, you know not saying, "Oh you have to go here if you fail." And plus we have Kaplan for SATs . . . . They are very serious about that.

This student suggested that not only do personalized relationships permeate the school culture, but such experiences shape students' dispositions. For many HAA students, the school culture positively positioned students to respond, respect, and react to the efforts put forth by school adults. In turn, student agency, to a degree, reinforced and contributed to the school culture by encouraging actions aligned with the school's mission, thus producing student engagement and positive outcomes. At HAA, healthy student–adult relationships led to a culture of students who were academically engaged, prepared, and equipped to make informed decisions about their futures—meeting some of the promises made by the small school movement (Nieto, 2000).

Antagonistic Relationships at GHS

GHS students described a significantly different and somewhat negative culture of relationships between students and adults. Typically, GHS students began their reflections describing the ideal characteristics of "good teachers" but almost inevitably fell into a description of negative interactions and relationships with school adults. One student, for example, said the following:

> I think a good teacher, is one that not only wants the students to learn, but looks out for them. And like, understand where they're coming from. Like, sometimes kids blow up at teachers, and it's like, teachers don't take the time to pull them aside and like ask them what's going on. They [teachers] just like automatically blow up at them [students]. It's like, teachers, they don't realize, like how much a teenager can go through. And it's like they don't understand, they just send you to the office. And the office, they like really only listen to the teacher, and so then they're like, "Okay, she's disruptive," and then they like suspend you, and that's gonna make the students worse. So, the teacher's don't communicate. They need to communicate better.

The student articulates that recognition of students' needs and communication are central to healthy relationships, yet such practices fell short at GHS and to a degree were more destructive resulting in academic failure and dropout.

Another student corroborates by explaining feelings of silence and powerlessness in comparison to school adults:

> [A good teacher is] someone who's actually willing to teach you *and* listen to you. Not just teach you and just like do what everything he says. Like I think Mr. B's a good teacher, but he needs to start listening to students, and stop getting angry like really quick. Cause when you bond with a student, instead of being like an angry person, or keep yelling at them, or don't listen to what they have to say, or like disagree and everything. Like, that doesn't make a good teacher. That just makes somebody who uses their power all wrong. Being a teacher . . . they're not using it the right way. Like, that's messed up. I think a good teacher is someone who will bond with the students.

These students suggest that the overall relational climate was driven by either overlooking or negating students' needs and devaluing their voices. Students articulated how such experiences produced disengagement from school and created apathy toward learning.

In conclusion, the students' experiences across both schools in this study showed that producing personalization is not only possible, but essential in forging a hopeful direction in mediating student engagement with school, especially for Black and Latina or Latino high school students who are graduating at a rate of 50% (Orfield, 2004). An analysis of students' experiences suggests that school culture, particularly in reference to student–adult relationships, can be a more effective factor that influences student engagement than structure alone. That is, although social structure (i.e., size) is a significant mediating factor in what schools do, forging a culture committed to meaningful relationships can be the one cultural practice that keeps students connected to school and adults within the school feeling motivated and successful.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The lessons learned from the students' experiences imply that just as failure if manufactured (Berliner & Biddle, 1996), so is success. Cultures of success result from efforts implied in the name—beliefs and practices that are proactively employed to result in a desired outcome—student success. Students in this study defined success as the school's ability to deliver pertinent college information to students and help students understand that a key dimension to their success is their own initiative. Although it is unclear if teachers were professionally trained in relationship building or simply followed the lead of their colleagues, creating cultures of success resulted from a schoolwide commitment.

Policy makers should recognize that small school reform does facilitate opportunities to forge cultures of success in the context of high school reform.

However, such cultures are only created when schools actively commit to forging high-quality relationships. Fifteen years of reform research suggests that restructuring alone guarantees nothing. Desired outcomes such as student success are driven by processes and practices committed to producing such students.

Policy makers should also be wary of reform packages that solely focus on the "small is better" mantra. Rather, attention needs to be redirected toward the question, to what extent do such reform initiatives help create conditions that promote student success, especially low-income Black and Latina or Latino students? Although creating smaller schools may be a promising reform initiative, more efforts need to be focused on creating just school cultures in all types of schools.

Until such policy discussions are met with serious action, practitioners are to a certain degree the last line of defense for this nation's most shameful acts (Kozol, 2005). School leaders, teachers, guidance counselors, and other on-the-ground practitioners comprise the most hopeful actors that can curb many of the counterproductive policies enacted. However, such hope should not be assumed present nor should we believe that opportunities to act on such hope are justly granted. Many practitioners in urban settings work in systems that stifle creativity and the will to be courageous. Therefore, our educational leadership has a particularly challenging task ahead. State, district, and universities need to find ways to identify courageous leaders with political and ideological clarity about themselves, the system, and the teachers who commit to serve urban communities (Bartolomé, 2002; Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001), otherwise we will continue to produce systems that reproduce inequality.

Finally, researchers should continue illuminating the "pockets of hope"(de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2001) to academics and lay community and advocate for policies, practices, and processes that are laced with wider agendas for social justice. In this study, a culture of success was possible to create despite the challenges associated with the social context. This study also fundamentally placed value on students and their experiences—a constituency that is most directly effected by reform yet least likely to be consulted for input. Although the use of student voice may not and should not be a novel approach to educational research, we are living in a climate that terrorizes schools, educators, and children via testing rather than providing them with the support necessary to ensure their success. In an era that supports elected officials who fail to act on behalf of the most vulnerable in this nation, researchers, scholars, and intellectuals need to rigorously call for immediate action that is backed by sound empirical research.

Note

1. All proper names, including those of high schools and students, were changed to protect anonymity.

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