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The PUEDES Approach: A Paradigm for Understanding and Responding to the 21st Century Latina/o Dropout/Pushout Crisis in the U.S.

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Abstract

The statistics reflecting the dropout/pushout crisis are sobering. Whereas 70% of all U.S. students who enter high school will graduate four years later, only about half of all low-income students of color will graduate. Research continues to show that the dropout crisis is concentrated in residentially and educationally segregated communities that tend to be primarily poor, Black, Latina/o, and are typically characterized by a high rate of English Learners and immigrant students. While the dropout crisis is pervasive, there are few progressive frameworks that provide more robust explanations as to why students drop out, and even fewer provide direction for actual responses. This paper proposes Paradigm to Understand and Examine Dropout and Engagement in Society (PUEDES), a complex and context-relevant framework that centers equity and social justice at its core. PUEDES is explained and applied to a real-life case-study of one student who struggled to stay in school. Implications for research, policy and practice, particularly through the ways in which the culture of educational institutions can equitably respond to the needs of Latina/o youth in the 21st Century are addressed.

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Framing the “Crisis?”

The statistics reflecting the dropout/pushout crisis are sobering (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Whereas 70% of all U.S. students who enter high school will graduate four years later, only about half of all low-income students of color will graduate (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Graduate Summit Report, 2012). For the latter, for every 100 entering Black and Latina/o high school freshmen, roughly 50 will actually graduate four years later (Fry, 2003). Research continues to show that the dropout crisis is concentrated in residentially and educationally segregated communities that tend to be primarily poor, Black, Latina/o, and are typically characterized by a high rate of English Language Learners and immigrant students (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Orfield, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). This form of concentrated inequality is particularly concerning as Latinas/os, in particular, are the youngest and fastest growing racial minority group in the country (Rodriguez, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). A recent report found that school districts with a high number of Latina/o and African American students have approximately \$1,000 less spent per student on their public education, compared to districts with fewer students of color (Spatig-Americkaner, 2012). Thus, the issue of school completion and its relationship with pervasive and concentrated inequities remains a major civil rights issue in the U.S., particularly as the K-12 population becomes more diverse in the 21st century (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

This study aimed to not only strengthen the ways stakeholders understand the dropout crisis, but also to challenge the ways we respond to the crisis by taking a critical look *with* communities at the crisis. Through such an analysis, we learned that the problem is much more complex than any dropout/pushout statistic alone and found that the solutions are indeed *in* our schools and communities. A 21st century reality of dropout/pushout requires a 21st century response, and that a viable community and society requires all stakeholders to pay attention to the Latina/o community (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2011; Valencia, 2011). This paper suggests that if we are serious about educational reformation, we need to act for transformation.

The 21st Century Reality

To grasp the enormity of the Latina/o student presence in U.S. public schools specifically, 3,000,000 Latinas/os are born each year and 50,000 Latinas/os turn 18 each month (Martinez, 2012). One in four babies born in the U.S. are Latina/o and over 90% of all Latina/o kindergartners are U.S. born (Fry & Lopez, 2012). In California, half of all children in public schools are Latina/o, and in some districts and schools 99% of the student population is Latina/o. Furthermore, demographic change is occurring in areas across the U.S. that is not

consistent with historical trends. For instance, two of the fastest regions of Latina/o population and English language learner growth are Tennessee and Utah (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). These demographic trends only amplify the work by economists, sociologists, and policy analysts who continue to find that dropouts not only have a major impact on the social, political, and economic wellbeing of society, but also impact the quality of life and vitality for communities who have faced this reality for decades.

Despite the presence of the so-called dropout “crisis,” neither public policy nor educational practice has responded with great fervor. With the exception of President Obama’s State of the Union address in January 2012 where he called for raising the age to leave school from 16 to 18 years (Obama, 2012) and a sprinkling of conferences addressing the issue, the education discourse in the U.S. continues to be dominated by the “next” reform effort, such as the common core, often in isolation from the dropout crisis (Balfanz, 2012). There remains a lingering incongruence between the real challenges facing particularly low-income, urban schools and communities, and the ways in which we have responded as a society, particularly around the dropout/pushout crisis. In other words, if this were truly a crisis as in the case of national disasters, there would presumably be a wave of resources, debates, and policy action around dropout intervention and prevention. Instead, our children and most vulnerable communities continue in the struggle.

There has been a preponderance of empirical research over the last 20 years that helps explain why the dropout rate is so high. Research has shown that individual risk factors, poverty, institutional factors, and student-teacher relationships are vital to understanding why students drop out of or stay in school (Rumberger, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). For instance, students’ 4th grade reading and math scores, and 6th grade student attendance and behavior are strong predictors of school failure (or success) and dropout by end of high school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Teachers also have a tremendous impact on student development and success in and beyond the classroom (Ferguson, 2003). Others argue that the implementation of high-stakes standardized testing has contributed to an increase in dropout rates, even shortly after No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was implemented (Meier & Wood, 2004). In fact, punitive policies and practices such as testing and disciplinary approaches have proven to be counterproductive, particularly for low-income students of color in high poverty schools and communities, and have also contributed to the looming dropout crisis in the U.S. (Yang, 2009).

Despite the research, educational policy and practice has fallen short in responding to the crisis. Consider Martinez High School in urban southern California as a case in point. Mirroring the demographic characteristics of its region, over 90% of the 3,400 students at Martinez High School are students of color, just over 80% of the students are Latina/o students, and 30% are English language learners. Once labeled a “California Distinguished School” in the late 1980s, Martinez High School has faced waves of school violence, frequent changes in school leadership, and a 50% dropout rate. Upon a review of the entering freshman enrollment rates in comparison to graduating seniors four years later, 530 students out of 1100 actually graduated on time in 2009, yet the district reported a 20% dropout rate. When officials were asked about this reality, the whereabouts for most of the missing students were simply “unknown” (Rodriguez, 2010).

This situation was particularly troubling to me because Martinez High School is my alma mater. After spending 11 years on the East Coast in graduate school and working as a new faculty member in urban education, I returned to my community and my high school specifically in an effort to respond to this crisis. I quickly learned that not much had changed over the last 15-20 years. Half the students were dropping out, few students matriculated to four-year colleges, and there continued to be a permeating divide between the student experience and the “truth” in the eyes of the adults. In fact, the situation was similar to what I had seen as a high school teacher, middle school counselor, and researcher in urban school systems up and down the East Coast. As someone committed to principles of equity and social justice and with a personal tie to this community, which loses so much potential each year to drop out, I vied to meaningfully engage by using my personal, political, and intellectual capital to help change this condition. In fact, one of the more critical lenses that I brought back with me was differentiating dropout versus pushout. While conducting my dissertation research, I learned that “pushout” was a commonly used reference to the dropout rate during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s throughout the Southwestern U.S. where 1 in 3 students dropped out. The youth and communities who struggled for just schools and educational opportunities believed that students left school not so much on their own volition, but because they were pushed out by unjust practices and policies that denied the cultural, linguistic, and historical strengths that Chicana/o/Latina/o students brought to school. Recently however, popular discourse tends to embrace “dropout” to characterize the problem and it is the goal of this paper to contribute to this dropout/pushout dynamic by using a more critical and comprehensive that moves our students and communities forward.

As such, while there are several promising programs spattered across the U.S. that are meant to respond to schools such as Martinez High School, there is a dearth of large scale policy initiatives aimed at this national and localized crisis. The dearth of equitable responses is partially related to the ways in which stakeholders have examined and understood the dropout/pushout (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008); that is, we lack a complex and contextually-specific analysis of the dropout/pushout crisis. This is partially related to the minimal critical tools or frameworks available to discuss, analyze, and respond to the dropout crisis. Much of the existing work on the crisis continues to focus on statistical associations between particular factors and characteristics and one's likelihood of dropping out of school (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). And while this work has gleaned critical insight into the challenges faced in this crisis, it leaves much to speculation and much to be discovered. Interestingly, the processes and practices that one would presume to matter, may very likely be among the most useful in helping us understand, explain, and respond to the dropout/pushout crisis. In fact, there are likely to be processes and practices that shape the dropout conversation that may not be measurable by traditional research approaches. Therefore, this calls for an analytical lens that incorporates critical perspectives.

Beyond research, teacher's lounge talk and school leadership consciousness often fail to do justice to the complexity associated with the problem. At worst, educators, policy-makers and the general public are more likely to engage in deficit-oriented discussions about the crisis where blame is placed on students, their families, and their communities for not having the right values or priorities. Such perspectives tend to be too over-simplistic such as "if only they would just care a little more about education." Deficit perspectives are also supported by deep-seated ideologies that intersect race and racism and typically inform educational policy and practice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In fact, Critical Race scholars have diminished the significance of deficit perspectives as they are largely based on prejudiced beliefs and lack support from credible empirical research (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Over the last several years, scholars have proposed more additive ways of responding the proliferation of deficit-oriented perspectives that have driven education research, policy, and practice (see for example, Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012; Yosso, 2005). For instance, Tara Yosso's (2005) work on Community Cultural Wealth has contributed significantly to the lenses that social-justice oriented scholars can use to engage historically marginalized communities. Other scholars rooted in social justice and critical pedagogy perspectives have also responded by engaging youth as agents of change resulting in personal, institutional, and community transformation

(Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2008). In fact, many of the student-driven initiatives resulting from the anti-Ethnic Studies policies in Arizona are the direct result of scholars committed to social justice (Cammarota, 2011).

This article aims to assist the research community, policymakers, and practitioners in generating more deliberate responses that are equitable and just, particularly for and with communities disproportionately impacted by the dropout crisis, such as the Latina/o community. The proposed framework is not just another analytical tool; rather it is concerned with a deeper and more robust analysis of the dropout/pushout crisis so we can respond more equitably. Thus, the framework is driven by the notion that schools indeed matter and dropping out of school is not solely a function of poverty or individual will alone but likely to be a far more complex process requiring a much more complex and comprehensive response.

In this article an overview of how the dropout problem, historically understood, is discussed, followed by some thoughts about what is missing in the analysis. Then the *Paradigm to Understand and Examine Dropout and Engagement in Society (PUEDES)* is described. This paper shows that social structures, institutional culture, and individual agency, in tandem, explain how and why school dropout is so prevalent among Latina/o students. This paper builds upon the theoretical groundings and findings from a larger qualitative study that examined Latina/o students' experiences during the dropout process (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). However this paper focuses on the operationalization and application of *PUEDES* by sharing the experiences of Ramon², a student I shadowed, interviewed, and learned from through a research project. Ramon's experiences highlight the importance of school culture when trying to understand why students drop out or are pushed out of school. I will then provide suggestions for educational leaders and other stakeholders to consider as they respond to the Latina/o dropout crisis. While this article does not claim to have discovered the proverbial silver bullet, it does make a bold assertion that *PUEDES* will push us forward in understanding and action to promote more widespread equitable access and opportunity, particularly in the Latina/o community where the crisis is pervasive (Valencia, 2011).

Research Context and Conceptual Framework

Before proposing an alternative framework for understanding the dropout crisis in the U.S., it is important to recognize the dominant conceptual framework that currently guides how dropout is framed and understood. There are two primary analytical approaches that have been

² Ramon is a pseudonym

used for understanding school dropout and typically found from research in the quantitative tradition³—the *individual perspective* and the *institutional perspective* (Rumberger, 2004). In the first, the problem of school dropout is implicated within students themselves through the so-called “risk factors,” such as race, immigration status, language proficiency, poverty level, and dis/ability as well as school-related dispositions and behaviors (e.g., whether a student does his homework, skips class, or likes school). The second perspective concerns the problem within institutions (e.g. family, school, or community). Such factors include the composition of the family, a school’s size and location, availability of resources, student body demographics, school-level policies and practices, and a community’s poverty level or degree of racial and economic segregation (Fry & Taylor, 2012; Rumberger, 2004).

While the individual-structural frame has helped researchers and other stakeholders understand what factors are associated with a student’s likelihood of dropping out, this framework is incomplete. Rumberger (2004) himself has argued that the individual-structural frame does not allow for an analysis of the role that school processes play in understanding and preventing dropout. Dropout scholars suggest that identifying and disentangling the complex intersection between structural and individual factors is necessary but methodologically challenging (Rodriguez & Brown, 2008; Rumberger, 2004). Research methodology is important to acknowledge because dropout has traditionally been studied using quantitative methods, although there are some notable exceptions (Fine, 1991; Rodriguez & Brown, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). It is common knowledge that quantitative methodology allows a purview into *what* factors have been significantly associated with dropout, however *how* and *why* explanations require process-oriented methodologies (Maxwell, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that allow researchers to look at the intersections between individual and institutional factors, and allow for an analysis of how school-based processes may or may not contribute to the dropout crisis.

It has been argued that individual and institutional factors are inextricably linked and co-constructed (Rodriguez & Brown, 2008). For example, a low-income Latina/o student (individual risk factors) cannot be isolated from the ways in which schools (structural and cultural factors) respond to low-income Latina/o students. The institution’s response comes in the form of the opportunity landscape across the school (e.g., strong teachers, curriculum options, mentorship,

³ The methodological approach is important to acknowledge because it not only impacts the kind of data that is generated but it also illuminates the epistemological values that guide and inform the results, interpretation, and implications of the study. This topic will resonate well with critical qualitative researchers.

counseling), and the complex ways that students and teachers actually negotiate that landscape of opportunities (e.g., what people talk about, the quality of relationships, the degree of student voice and leadership opportunities in critical decisions that shape the quality of education they receive). Therefore, the fact that majority-Latina/o student high schools fail to offer Latina/o history courses (structure as curriculum) further exemplifies why so many Latina/o youth continue to believe that school is boring (individual dispositions) or that they aren't learning anything meaningful (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). Further, the reasons why a school might be resistant to Latina/o history courses are fundamentally linked to the cultural fabric of the school itself—its values, priorities, norms, expectations and others. Additionally, students' dispositions towards school are shaped by their everyday schooling experiences that are comprised of the structure and culture of the school.

Thus, the idea of “disentangling” the individual and structural factors and processes in schools is a methodological and epistemological challenge (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). The framework in this paper attempts to address the epistemology of understanding the dropout problem because individual and structural factors and processes are indeed entangled (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008) as described in the example above where policy factors and institutional values influence individual students' dispositions and are also mediated by institutional culture. The methodological challenge lies in the fact that the traditional quantitative approach disallows for an analysis of the school-level processes, such as the role of school culture, community culture, or the culture of society and its role in shaping, facilitating, and understanding dropout. A paradigm that incorporates culture into the traditional individual-structure paradigm and sets the foundation for *PUEDES* is the structure-culture-agency paradigm.

The Structure-Culture-Agency Paradigm

The structure-culture-agency paradigm (see Mehan & Wood, 1975 for a discussion of the framework's origins) emerged from the notion that social action is a result of the interaction between social structures and human agency, a concept known to sociologists as structuration (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Giddens, 1984). Most simply, this approach suggests that people act according to the restraints or flexibility of one's environment, either based on the rules and policies (structure) and/or the cultural expectations (culture) that are characteristic of a particular context.

Education scholars applied this perspective to an analysis of school reform and found that culture was a powerful facilitating force in addition to structure and agency (Datnow et al.,

2002). In their work, Datnow et al. (2002) found that various dimensions of school culture—teacher ideology and teaching and learning processes—mediated the effectiveness of the reform efforts. They found that deficit-oriented perspectives about students of color and English language learners hindered the implementation of reform efforts because some teachers believed particular students were incapable of meeting the challenges of a newly implemented rigorous curriculum. Their work suggests that a teacher's deficit perspectives, for example, may not significantly influence the culture of the school, but a critical mass of deficit perspectives can certainly shape the normative beliefs and practices of a school, thus influencing the school's culture (Acess, 1998).

Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) also found the structure-culture-agency paradigm to be a reflexive and interactional framework where each element influences and is shaped by the other:

Inasmuch as culture involves power and is the site of social differences and struggles, we believe that culture is of equal importance and profoundly impacts both structure and agency...Structure and agency work reflexively. So do agency and culture, structure and culture. In the agency of individuals we see structure and culture operating; in culture, we see structure and agency; and in structure, we see agency and culture (Datnow et al., 2002, p. 16).

Therefore the structure-culture-agency framework privileges an interactive analysis of not only individual with structural factors as posited by Rumberger (2004), but it also encourages an incorporation of culture and in this case, institutional culture. The inclusion of culture and the application of the structure-culture-agency framework to education are likely to be the strongest contributions to PUEDES introduced here. PUEDES expands upon the individual concepts of structure, culture, and agency, applies the framework to the dropout crisis, and demonstrates its analytical strength by also shaping equitable solutions to this pervasive educational crisis.

Introducing Paradigm to Understand and Examine Dropout and Engagement in Society (PUEDES)

In an attempt to provide a practical, theoretically grounded, and context-specific framework to better understand the dropout crisis, *PUEDES* was developed. While *PUEDES* can directly be applied to understanding dropout, it also can be used as a conceptual framework to understand various issues in education (e.g., parent engagement, student success, teacher ideology) and as an analytical tool to understand broader social, political, and cultural issues. As stated, *PUEDES*, like the structure-culture-agency framework, recognizes the significance of

structure and agency, but also includes the dimension of institutional culture, particularly in the context of schools. *PUEDES* also builds upon the structure-culture-agency framework in many ways including how it: 1) expands upon our understanding of the three dimensions (structure, culture, and agency) particularly in the context of dropout; 2) acknowledges the inherent asymmetrical power relationship among structure, culture, and agency as three practically interrelated but theoretically separate forces; 3) provides a far more complex analysis of dropout, particularly in reference to low-income Latina/o students and other students of color who are often blamed for their failure through deficit perspectives; and 4) serves as a tool to design, create, and envision equitable solutions to student disengagement in the context of the dropout crisis.

Understanding the three dimensions of the *PUEDES* paradigm. The structure-culture-agency framework provided by Datnow, McHugh, and Stringfield (1998) provided a critical introduction and application of the framework to the field of education. However, there was limited attention placed on the operationalization of structure, culture, and agency. For the purposes of this framework, structure refers to policies, procedures, rules, and resources. Structure also refers to the ways in which people, resources, and space are arranged and distributed in any given environment. Most stakeholders would refer to structure as the “system” and includes family as system, school as system, and society as system. Each of these structures has a set of policies, procedures, and rules. In a family, a matriarchal structure may define the family. In school, the formal curriculum and enrollment characteristics help define the school structure, whereas the social policies and poverty concentration in the community or society comprise of the larger social structure.

Agency, on the other hand, refers to individual actions, beliefs, and perceptions of one’s reality (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). Agency is probably one of the most implicated reasons why students engage or disengage in school. One’s agency is also context-specific, as it may emerge differently from context to context. For instance, a student may exercise his or her identity at home in one way but in an entirely different way at school. Similarly, one’s agency may even change from class to class and teacher to teacher. An active, vocal, and engaged student in history class may appear to be inactive, silent, and disengaged in math class. The co-constructive nature of the proposed framework below demonstrates that agency is a function of the culture *and* structure of school.

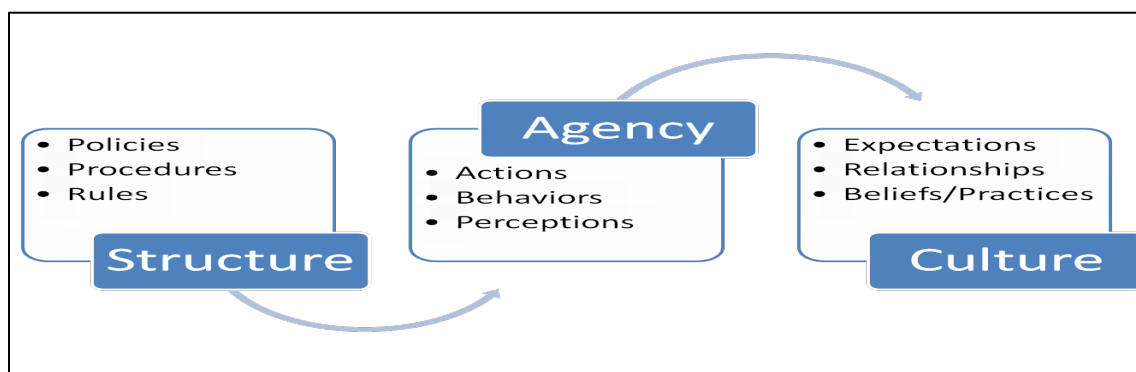
Culture, and school culture specifically, refers to the values, beliefs, and processes that characterize institutional life. In schools, school culture is defined by the social climate of the

school, the normative beliefs and practices of people within the school, and also is made up of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and modes of communicating. School culture also:

... embod[ies] the 'boundaries, categories, and rules in which meaning is negotiated' (Lipka, 1998, p. 23) which results in normative, acceptable, and sometimes contentious realities that characterize institutional life—a place where the student finds themselves negotiating their everyday existence...culture is referred to school-level matters associated with expectations, the nature of relationships, normative beliefs, and the ways in which things get done. (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008)

Thus, school culture is where meaning is made, identities are forged, and truth is co-constructed. The research has demonstrated that school culture helps provide a more complex understanding of the role that schools play in shaping students' experiences and has been shown to directly impact student success and failure (Conchas, 2001; Rodriguez, 2005; Rodriguez, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). School culture is comprised of the extent to which individuals in a school setting are able to interact with, respond to, and transform the structures—school policy, curriculum, and procedures. Similarly, school culture is the intersection between the impact of policy and its effect on individual agency such as the dispositions, behaviors, and perspectives and experiences that students have in school (see Image 1). Thus, school culture allows itself to be unveiled when epistemological and methodological frameworks, such as *PUEDES*, are available for stakeholders to acknowledge, examine, and create.

Image 1: Structure Agency Culture



***PUEDES* brings analytical complexity and rigor.** In addition to the operationalization of the different concepts, it is important to recognize how *PUEDES* provides a three-dimensional approach to understanding why students drop out or are pushed out of school. Such an

approach promotes an inclusive consideration of the ways that school policy, student-adult relationships, and individual student motivation, for example, provide a much more comprehensive explanation of the dropout problem. Such complexity and rigor is necessary when many perspectives, especially from a deficit-oriented paradigm, tend to blame students, their culture, or their families for their academic failure (see Valencia, 1997 for a critique of the deficit approach). Rather, the interactive nature of *PUEDES* encourages one to consider at least three perspectives and the ways in which they interact and intersect with one another.

For instance, the dominant narrative in schools and society would have us believe that students drop out because of their own wrongdoing. Such a perspective tends to isolate the problem as an issue of agency; not educational policy or factors associated with school culture such as the quality of student-adult connections and relationships in school (Valenzuela, 1999). Such a depiction of the problem is shortsighted and too simplistic. Framing dropout as such also allows a teacher, principal, counselor, or any other school stakeholder to absolve him/herself from the problem or isolate the problem within the individual, not the environment. If you follow that logic, the implications for framing the problem in such a way have far-reaching consequences for determining how to respond to the dropout crisis (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008). If agency is framed as static, such as one's disposition towards school (e.g., student doesn't like school), then the solution is created around the individual. So, if we learn that a student finds school boring, then the student is identified as "lacking interest." But *PUEDES* helps implicate how a student's boredom is actually quite dynamic when understood within the context of the curriculum (structure) offered in school and the quality of teaching and relationships that this student has or does not have with school adults (culture). In this case, we move from a simplistic and deficit analysis to an explanation that is likely to be much more complex and rigorous.

***PUEDES* recognizes power.** The original framework proposed by Datnow et al. (2002) visually positioned structure, culture, and agency in a seemingly equal way. That is, while structure, culture and agency are powerful analytical perspectives alone and interactive in nature as conceptualized by Datnow et al. (2002), there needs to be a power analysis between structure and agency, structure and culture, culture and agency, and all three in relation to one another. The application of the framework to an actual situation (see below) suggests that there indeed is a power differential among the different dimensions, especially if a student (in the case of low-income students of color) is in a powerless position in relation to the institution (e.g., school). While power varies by position within any given institution (e.g., school, family, job,

university, etc.), *PUEDES* helps illuminate how the various structures and processes within school shape student agency. For instance, while a ninth grade Latina/o student may know that attending school and aiming for high grades is important, dropping out of school only causes irreparable damages to the student, his/her family, future earnings, health, and general quality of life indicators. One can even argue that dropping out increases one's reliance on the social services system (e.g., welfare, incarceration, unemployment). However, when a student drops out, the institution (school) by and large remains the same. The policies, procedures, and rules do not change and relationships, beliefs systems, and institutional practices remain unaltered. Thus, while dimensions of structure, culture, and agency all do play a role in explaining why a student succeeds or fails in school, there are power imbalances that need to be acknowledged and analyzed in order to fully understand the complexity of dropout/pushout. *PUEDES* brings this analytical perspective to the conversation and suggests that power indeed matters and needs to be acknowledged when understanding and responding to the Latina/o dropout/pushout crisis.

Using *PUEDES* to Shape Equitable Responses. The application of *PUEDES* is not only useful for analytical purposes but it is also useful in designing implications for policy, practice, and future research on the topic. For instance, in the case of the bored student above, a narrow-minded solution might attempt to somehow fix the student's boredom by telling him that school is important and that he should take interest. The student might even be referred to a guidance counselor so that he can be convinced that he should take interest in school because an education is important for one's future. However, *PUEDES* facilitates opportunities for a principal, for instance, to reflect on the landscape of the school and examine how the structure of the school, such as the size, curriculum, or the way time is structured in the class may be contributing to student boredom. The principal may even learn from the student experience by visiting classrooms or shadowing a student for a day to see how he/she experiences boredom. This type of exercise can be a fruitful fact-finding mission that is beneficial to student engagement and for school leadership who seek to examine what is successful and what needs to be improved across the school. Similarly, a school culture lens encourages a principal to see how expectations are relayed to students, view how students and teachers interact with one another, or examine how classroom pedagogy engages or captures students' interest. A more critical perspective may encourage the principal to evaluate the nature of dialoguing in the classroom and the extent to which knowledge is co-constructed or not. Altogether, *PUEDES* contextualizes student boredom as an initial signal of individual

agency within the actual school context that helps us understand that boredom or engagement can be co-constructed by factors and processes associated with the agency of the student *and* structure and culture of the school.

In the case of Latinas/os, who graduate at rates around 50%, *PUEDES* is particularly timely as the nation attempts to rebound from the test-centered nature of No Child Left Behind. *PUEDES* seems to be all the more necessary to help facilitate equity-minded research, policy, and practices related to Latina/o and other marginalized youth. To illuminate the analytical significance of *PUEDES*, Ramon's story is discussed below.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher informed by several critical frameworks including Critical Pedagogy, Critical Theory, and Critical Race Praxis, my intellectual paradigm is largely informed by my personal realities. As a working-class Chicano born and raised in Southern California, my substandard educational experiences in the K-12 public schools seemed normal at the time. I didn't know any different. Fights, an absence of Latina/o teachers, and an outright dismissal of our cultural, community, or historical presence in the community found no place in the curriculum. Along the way, many of us dropped out, succumbed to the pressures of the streets, or were lucky enough to squeeze by without too much intellectual, physical, or psychological harm. I was one of the lucky ones but found myself graduating from high school ill-prepared for a university education. In fact, I didn't complete the minimum requirements to enter a four-year university. Like many of my friends, I just got by.

Later as a student of the field of education and as someone committed to equity and social justice, my lenses as a researcher are a blend of critical constructivist and phenomenological perspectives that push me to evaluate the student experience as one that reflects how the system may resist or perpetuate inequality. In cases where the systemic ills of the education perpetuate inequality, I reference the critical frameworks mentioned above. Similarly, in instances where hope and possibility characterize the student experience, these frameworks are equally instructive. Further, my epistemological base recognizes the power historically exercised over the voices and experiences of youth, particularly low-income youth of color in the school system (Rodriguez & Brown, 2008). Thus, I employ critical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory to understand and privilege the voices of students as legitimate sources of knowledge. In the case of Ramon, I employ a post-structural analysis on his experience as a struggling Latino that in some cases were not all that dissimilar to my own and that of many of the youth I knew growing up and as researcher in several parts of the country.

Ramon⁴

Ramon was a research participant in a mixed-methods research study examining student-centered perspectives on school structure, culture, and achievement in a large urban school district in the Northeast. Ramon's story evolved out of this larger study and he subsequently dropped out during data collection. Interestingly and upon reflection of the larger project, Ramon was not one of the initially selected participants; rather, he learned about the project through a friend and expressed interest to participate when he learned that we were trying to learn about the student experience.

When the project began, Ramon was 17 years old and in the tenth grade. He was proud of his Latino heritage and frequently referenced his people and his community. He lived in a single-parent home and attended Grand High School⁵ (GHS), a large comprehensive school. GHS and its larger community reflected the demographic realities of large urban centers across the country—a majority of the students are low-income students of color, nearly 100% low-income, and a significant percentage of English language learners. GHS was selected as a research site because of its recent reform initiatives and for its pervasive struggle to escape academic failure.

Contrary to much of the quantitative research that paints a profile of invisibility and isolationism of the typical school dropout, Ramon was an academically stellar and socially engaged student known by most adults and students. He attended a highly competitive public middle school but withdrew for reasons associated with what he called “cultural isolation.” He harbored a savvy street intellect that allowed him to successfully navigate the urban terrain and shared examples of how such experiences were often devalued or discredited in the classroom. By the 10th grade, he successfully passed the math and reading portions of the state's high school exit exams and was positioned, at least on paper, to graduate from high school.

Interestingly, a purely psychological explanation as to why he dropped out of school would suggest that he was unmotivated to excel, incapable of completing the academic work, and likely to be socially and academically detached and disengaged from school. But an application of the *PUEDES* framework provides an opportunity to engage in a much more complex understanding of how the co-construction of school structure, culture, and agency

⁴ Pseudonym

⁵ Pseudonym

contributed to Ramon's disengagement with and eventual departure from school, or in other words, how he was pushed out of school.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected over the course of one academic year. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with Ramon where he described various aspects of his schooling experiences, such as his relationships with school adults and peers, his experiences and perspectives about school rules and practices, and his thoughts and experiences towards learning (Pippa, 1996). All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interviews, I also observed Ramon for at least 50 hours by "shadowing" him in school to get a sense of his everyday experiences. During some of these observations, I engaged in informal discussions with Ramon. From these observations and discussions, detailed fieldnotes were typed from each observation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package, in which the data was coded. Coding was largely inductive; that is, I focused primarily on what was significant to Ramon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Cross-case and cross-theme comparisons were performed within and across interviews and observations to understand the complexity of Ramon's engagement and disengagement from school (Maxwell & Miller, 1991).

Applying PUEDES to Ramon's Situation

Data from interviews and observations with Ramon portrayed him as critical, disengaged, neglected, socially and intellectually alienated, and at the same time he was socially engaged, inquisitive, and a critically conscious individual. A surface level analysis would bring one to the conclusion that Ramon lacked interest in the academic content, complained too much about school, and when possible, skipped class and slyly defied authority. However, a deeper and more complex analysis demonstrated an interaction of structural and cultural processes that shaped his agency and denied him opportunities that only fueled his agency to critique school that only relayed to the world that school was not working out for him.

Ramon: How Structure, Culture and Agency Pushed Him Out of School

Upon entry to the school, our research objective was clear: to learn from the experiences and perspectives of students, particularly in the context of several school reform initiatives. One

of the district reform efforts revolved around the implementation of schools-within-a-school and theme-based small learning communities. In the middle of the reform effort, Ramon critiqued the small learning community effort by connecting it to a critique of the curriculum and resource availability (e.g., books):

The school's not challenging... [Besides] All we learn about is Christopher Columbus but most kids don't know what really happened. We need new books and keep them up to date--recycle the old books. Sincerely, school is bullshit. I thought there were going to be opportunities, like in Arts Applications [a small learning community] but it is not happening. In World Relations [small learning community] they are learning about [city's name]. We already learned about [city's name] in the 2nd grade. Why are we still learning it? (Ramon).

“Not learning anything” was a frequent theme for Ramon and many of the students interviewed for the project. Lacking interest would be the further descriptor attached to Ramon as he had interest and thoughtful critical commentary about September 11, 2001, and the wars in the Middle East. During my interviews with Ramon, he mentioned on more than one occasion the issue of curricular repetition. For Ramon, these structures were insulting, irrelevant, and failed to meet his expectations as a student.

Later Ramon critiqued the implementation of the small learning communities by linking it to a worsened social/interpersonal environment between students and teachers. This socially alienating environment, according to Ramon, also contributed to a culture of “nobody cares” for students:

The only change I see [after small learning communities] is that the adults don't know you.... There is no sense of community--nobody cares [about school] except the teachers. School is like a popularity contest--they [students] don't care about learning. The schools asks, "what [small learning community] do you want to be in?" not "what do you want to learn?" I am in Art Applications and they are not teaching anything related to that (Ramon).

Ramon identified a key contradiction between the school's zero-tolerance late policy (structure) and what actually happened to students once they were inside the building. For Ramon, there was too much concentration and control over student movement and location versus whether they were engaged and learning (culture). When asked about his general feelings towards school, it was apparent the school's discipline policy as a school structure was unfair and had unintended consequences. For Ramon, pushing students away was another indication that there was little accountability for the presence or wellbeing of students:

I feel that it [school] is a waste of time sometimes. Half of the time you aren't learning. About half of the people don't want to learn, about 15 out of 30. I don't like it [school]. I want to take GED and go to community college. They [school]

have this stupid late policy that if you are late after 7:55 a.m. This is bad because they send students away, push them off. I am not a little boy, I shouldn't have to have my mom with me [when I come late to school]. It [discipline policy] has no purpose to deal with things in life. [Besides] Punishment is a vacation. Most kids know the consequences and usually get suspended on Thursday or Friday for a 5-day weekend. Then there is detention but some students have jobs. You just sit there for an hour after school (Ramon).

In addition to the apparent structure-culture contradictions illuminated by Ramon's critiques, he also believed that the school's mistreatment of Latina/o students (culture) was in part attributed to teachers and the school:

Spanish kids [Latinas/os] have the most trouble [in school]. Nobody motivates them here [at school]...you have to motivate them from early on--you can't just begin at 17 years old. You have to begin when they are small. The problem is not with the students, it's with the school (Ramon).

Motivation, according to Ramon, had to be directly addressed in order to respond to the needs of Latina/o students. Upon analysis, Ramon could have been projecting his own experiences to that of his peers suggesting that he needed more adult intervention to motivate him. And, while friendly and cordial with most of the school adults, he believed the solution lay with the presence of strong teachers:

[A good teacher is] A teacher that can relate to her students--teachers are usually authoritarian--no one wants that--but a teacher who sees you like a friend--who is down with me--students like that--For example, Mr. Carter, he respects us, we respect him. You can't gain respect by demand--you have to earn it by respecting. Ms. Kendall is cool--she respects kids--they will do the work. There is a difference between a good person and a bad teacher. Do they know what they are teaching? Some teachers don't know what they are teaching. Some need the teacher's guidebook (Ramon).

It is important to note that Ramon dichotomized teachers as two potentially separate beings—those who are good teachers and those who are bad teachers but good people. This insight speaks to his thirst for strong intellectual engagement, even in the presence of decent interpersonal connections (culture) with school adults. In other words, for Ramon, he had amicable, respectful, and in some cases asymmetrical power struggles and relationships with his teachers; however, these connections did not automatically translate to rich academic engagement to which he seemed to yearn.

Ramon's experiences were not simply detailed in our one-on-one interviews. I also conducted hours of ethnographic observations as I shadowed Ramon from class-to-class, during lunch, and after school. One repetitive cultural theme within the classroom was the absence of instruction, as reflected in Ramon's notion of "not learning anything." To capture the

complex and co-constructive nature of Ramon's disposition and disengagement from school as a function of the structure, culture, and his own agency, below is an excerpt from an observation:

I pulled Ramon from first period. Before we left to the cafeteria, Mr. Dixon asked Ramon if he had completed his assignments and Ramon said that all he had to do was print them out. Mr. Dixon requested that he print them out before we leave and Ramon did so. As we walked to the cafeteria, I asked Ramon what the assignment was about and Ramon said that they had to answer a question in paragraph form, import a picture from the web, and print it out. It seemed mundane and resonates with Ramon's previous contentions that "'they' (the teachers/the school) really don't teach us anything" (Fieldnotes).

Upon reflection, Ramon was wrong in one of his assertions: he was indeed learning something. He was learning that it was acceptable to attend school, get hassled if not in school on time and in some cases get turned away, then encouraged to go to class, yet find oneself in an environment that did not engage students in any meaningful or intellectually rich discussions.

It seemed that over time Ramon's experiences with the structural and cultural environment of the school and classroom life fueled his agency to critique school. Perhaps due to the lack of dialogical spaces to discuss school or other critical issues that he had much to say about, he verbally expressed his frustration with peers, occasionally towards teachers, and towards the researcher during an interview or observations. This ongoing critique seemed to further alienate and marginalize him, likely because no one really had a response to his critique of what was happening.

Ramon's experiences with the school's discipline policies and curriculum (structure) and presence of "not learning anything" and apathetic teachers (culture) who did not take responsibility for motivating Latina/o students triggered his outward discontent with school and schooling (agency). His discontent seemed to trigger a subtle yet symbolic marginalization by school adults, particularly when his critiques were directly and indirectly aimed at them. The *PUEDES* framework demonstrates that the co-construction of Ramon's experiences is much more complex than any thoughtless critique of him "not caring about school." *PUEDES* helps explain how Ramon's decision to eventually leave school and drop out (agency) was actually shaped by various structural and cultural factors and processes in school.

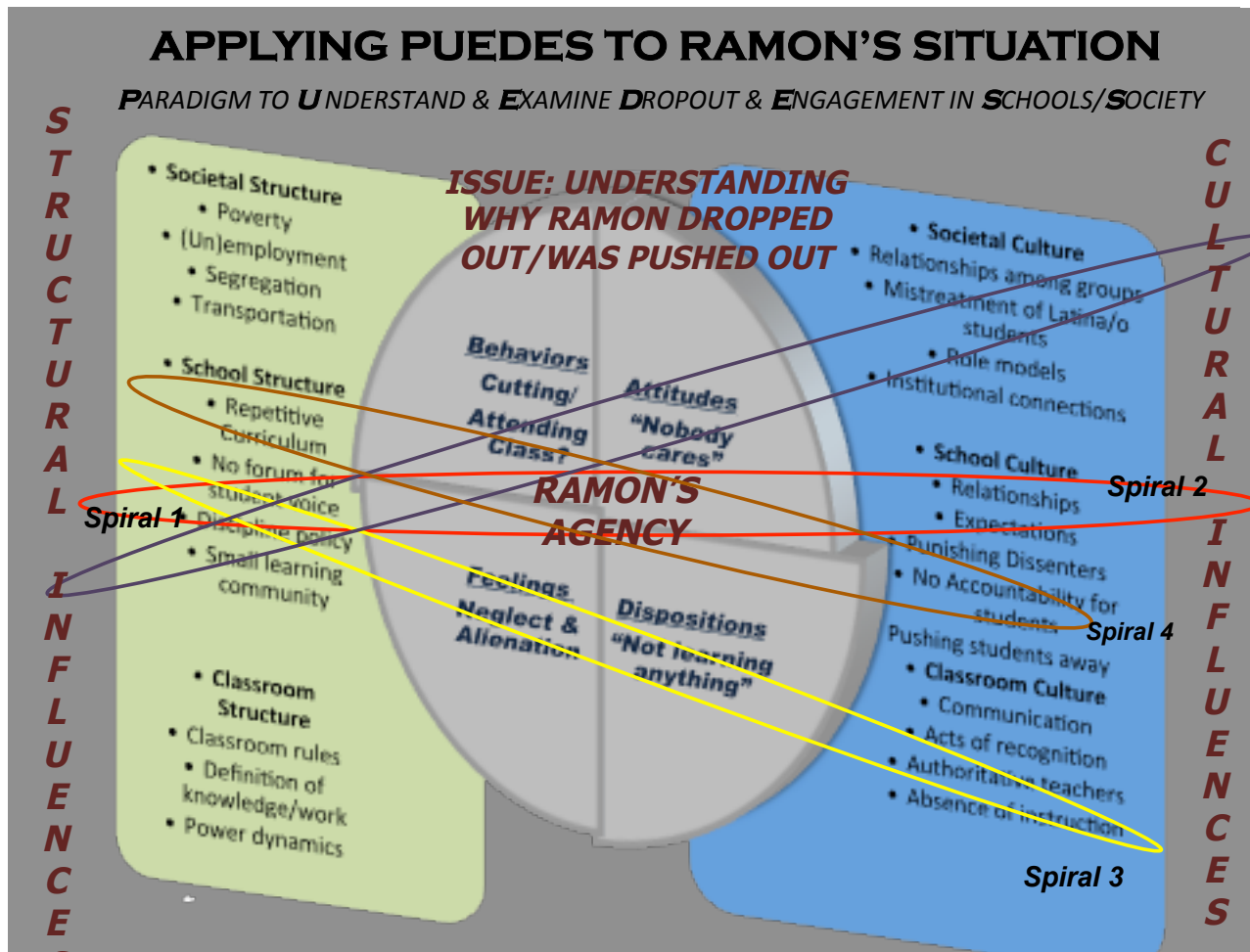
Understanding Ramon's Situation through the PUEDES Framework

Ramon undoubtedly valued education. He was unquestionably intelligent, insightful, and had excellent interpersonal skills. While he spoke eagerly about a wealth of issues, he failed to

find a responsive structure or cultural environment within the school to which he could commiserate or dialogue. In isolation, one may surmise that the small learning community structure failed to benefit students like Ramon, or the low expectations for Latina/o students as part of the school's culture contributed to Ramon's isolation and disengagement. However, it was the process of schooling altogether that contributed to the co-construction of Ramon's critique and disengagement from school. In other words, it was not just one factor or process that contributed to his ultimate departure from school; rather, it was a combination of structural, cultural, and individual agency.

Specifically, Ramon's experiences and perspectives show a complex interplay between various factors associated with the societal, school, and classroom structure, with societal, school, and classroom culture, and with Ramon's agency. In the visual below, the spiral rings show the interconnected relationship between structure, agency, and culture. For instance, PUEDES allows us to recognize that poverty (structure) shapes student (dis)engagement (agency) as does communication and expectations (culture) within the culture of the classroom. Similarly, disengagement from school (agency) is also a function of one's relationships with school adults (culture) and the extent to which students are given a voice in school (structure). Further, individual critiques of schooling (agency) may very well be shaped by the power dynamics between students and adults within the school environment (structure) which are likely to influence the ways in which students and adults interact or fail to interact in the larger community (culture). The spirals imply that the three factors are reflective in that structure influences culture as culture influences structure, structure influences agency as agency influences structure, and culture influences agency as agency influences culture. Thus, rather than focusing solely on one reason why students like Ramon drop out or are pushed out (i.e., the fact that he felt school was a "waste of time"), the *PUEDES* framework not only allows for a consideration of multiple factors, but the interplay of those factors. Let us take a closer look at Ramon's situation using PUEDES as an analytical framework.

Image 2: Applying PUEDES to Ramon’s Situation



For instance and in reference to Spiral 1 on the PUEDES visual, Ramon’s inability to access challenging and relevant curriculum (structure) in conjunction with Ramon’s interpretation of low expectations for Latina/o students (culture) helped shape his negative critique of school (agency). Similarly and in reference to Spiral 2, his critique of school further pushed some teachers away (culture) and even contributed to a climate of weak accountability for students like Ramon (culture), which may have made the small learning community efforts (structure) seem ineffective and the curriculum uninteresting (structure).

Ramon also found his desire to dialogue and engage (agency) in debate was diminished by an irrelevant curriculum (structure) and through the adults’ inability to challenge him (culture) as demonstrated by Spiral 3 on the PUEDES visual. Thus, the school’s weak accountability for student learning (culture) in part as a function of the institutional power of adults through the enforcement of the school’s discipline policy (structure), operated to create a climate that

silenced dissenters like Ramon (culture) that gradually pushed Ramon away from school (agency) as demonstrated by Spiral 4 on the PUEDES visual.

The pervasive dismissiveness experienced by Ramon was a signal that no one cared and therefore there was no accountability for student learning or wellbeing (culture). Over time, Ramon increasingly questioned the viability of his own role as a student in the face of teachers' failure to nurture and respect him as an intellectual being (agency). That is, while Ramon was clearly a visible presence in school as evident through his popularity with school adults, the same adults also rendered him invisible by denying his intellectual thirst for engagement with school. Ramon's visible invisibility speaks to the needs for schools to recognize the intellectual, relational, and personal dimensions to students' existence in school (see Rodriguez, 2012 for a theoretical discussion of a praxis of recognition).

Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that the asymmetrical power dynamic between institutional structure and culture versus individual student agency. That is, while Ramon expressed his discontent with school (agency), it was the school's policies and procedures (structure) compounded by the relational dynamics between Ramon and school adults (culture) that determined how the institution responded to his dissent. In other words, dissent alone did not equal his exportation from school but worked in tandem with the rules, policies, and procedures (structures) in operation at his school, along with the culture of accountability and receptivity or deflection of students like Ramon who are obviously unhappy with the realities of school life (culture). This suggests that schools, as institutions of power over the marginalized students, must recognize this power imbalance and work to respond and not punish and marginalize students like Ramon. The graphic representation of *PUEDES* attempts to visually depict how the overbearing and sometimes overpowering nature of the "Structural Influences" are positioned in relation to Individual Agency and Cultural Influences.

Next Steps: Putting PUEDES into Action

This paper sought to illuminate the veracity of *PUEDES* by examining the experiences of Ramon as an in-depth case study. Ramon's experiences are unfortunately all too common among low-income and working class Latina/o youth and other youth of color across the country. *PUEDES* suggests that the interplay between the policy and curricular environment alongside Ramon's progressive disengagement were facilitated by a cultural environment of low academic expectations, the silencing of dissent, lack of adult caring, and a general culture of apathy towards Ramon's detachment from school. In-depth ethnographic studies have

confirmed the prevalence of these conditions [in schools]? serving low-income youth of color, especially Black and Latina/o students (Lopez, 2003; Nieto, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

Nevertheless, there needs to be an honest conversation about what schools can and cannot do. We cannot expect schools to remedy all these matters, especially when youth at risk of dropping out are facing social and economic challenges beyond the limits of what schools can provide (Noguera, 2003). Schools alone cannot eradicate poverty. Schools alone cannot create or find jobs for parents. Schools alone cannot promise access to quality health care. Schools alone cannot guarantee that children and youth will eat breakfast before school or dinner after school, nor can they provide decent and safe housing. However, there are several things schools *can* do to help reduce the dropout/pushout crisis and promote engagement, achievement and graduation rates, especially among low-income youth of color in our public schools.

In order to move forward, we need bold policies and practices that contribute to an environment where students like Ramon can thrive. *PUEDES* can be utilized as a guide that proposes policy and practical responses through a structure, culture, and agency perspective. The following recommendations are based on the premise that grassroots change must be instituted from the level of the people—school adults, young people, parents, policymakers, and the community (Freire, 1973; Noguera, 2003; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). That is, in order for any of these recommendations to succeed, there needs to be cross-institutional collaboration, shared accountability, and a focus on process *and* outcome. Below is a set of culturally-based recommendations that can promote student engagement and reduce disengagement.

Using PUEDES to Boost Student Engagement and Achievement

Using *PUEDES*, this final section focuses on the ways in which student engagement can be improved and enhanced when certain cultural elements within schools work in tandem with school structure and individual agency. This section will focus on three approaches: 1) Engaging Youth as Intellectuals, 2) Listening to Marginalized Students, and 3) Investing in Relationships. The visual of *PUEDES* below is a replica of the original framework but focuses on various structural and cultural responses that can shape individual agency and enhance a culture that boosts student engagement and achievement. In the visual, the spiral is deliberately wider than previously characterized. The purpose of the wider spiral insinuates that establishing a relationship-rich culture that values each member of the community and positions youth as intellectuals will result in a culture that is much more likely to engage students meaningfully and equitably.

Engaging Youth as Intellectuals

The role of youth in the process of educational change has been the topic of inquiry over the last decade, particularly using Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Camarota & Romero, 2009; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). In PAR-related projects, youth are repositioned from objects to active subjects within the research process (Rodriguez & Brown, 2008). In such initiatives, youth are encouraged to raise their consciousness about the world in which they live (Freire, 1973). Through the research process participants also learn about identifying and framing issues and problems in their schools and communities, creating research questions and design, learning data analysis, and producing a final presentation to be shared with relevant stakeholders. Equally important is learning to question and dialogue (Solórzano, 1989). Through PAR-related initiatives, youth begin to recognize their role as critical, intellectual beings, especially in school where such practices should be the norm, and particularly among youth who are marginalized socially and intellectually. Stakeholders need to create opportunities (structures) for youth to share their knowledge, become the teacher and co-construct meaning (agency), when the environment is safe and receptive (culture). When such opportunities are available, youth can frame themselves as public intellectuals as they begin to transform their identities as actors within the process of positive social and educational change (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). From this perspective, students construct knowledge, become champions of equity, and are transformed as intellectuals in their schools and communities.

To facilitate this process, educators can work directly with youth to develop curricular and pedagogical activities that treat the classroom, school, and community as a social laboratory. If students gripe about irrelevant curriculum, unfair school or community policies, or low expectations, these experiences become topic areas for research inquiry. Teachers must be willing to explore, question, and adjust as the project evolves. Teachers must have the support of local leadership and local leadership needs to be courageous enough to listen and lead their faculty into dialogue with youth. Equally important is the role of community. Because the youth will be sharing much of their work publicly (e.g., in faculty meetings, community groups, university settings) teachers and school leadership must ensure that students are supported by key school allies, parents, school alumni, and community actors who will support their research and suggestions for policy and practice.

In turn, promoting youth as intellectuals challenges and even incorporates curricular structures, indirectly establishes a stage for student voice, and can even implicate some of the local policies. In the process and as a result of this type of student engagement, students

exercise their individual agency through active participation, demonstrating a desire to learn and engage, are likely to feel connected and belong to a community of caring adults, and feel recognized as human beings because someone is listening and legitimizing their experiences.

Listening to Marginalized Students

It is widely believed that motivated, involved, and achieving students are typically the most engaged students in school. Because of previous academic preparation, involvement in special programs (e.g., college-prep programs), and enrollment in the highly selective courses, students essentially assume the identity, either through their own identification or that of the school/teachers that they are on a pathway towards academic and personal success. These students are likely to be involved in school activities such as student council. By and large school is working for them, they cause minimal disruption in school, and administration and teachers may even use them as examples of how the school is actually working well for students.

But what about quiet students or those who are silenced by policies, practices, and processes in school? What about the students who are not engaged with school, not involved in activities, and not taking the most selective classes? What about the students who are critical of school and sometimes find themselves on a path of being exported by school processes and practices (Fine, 1991; Brown & Rodriguez, 2008)? Sometimes these students may even be those that are acting out in class, giving teachers a hard time, and have sparse attendance. Some of my own research shows that these students can often be the most insightful about solutions for school improvement and promoting student engagement (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010).

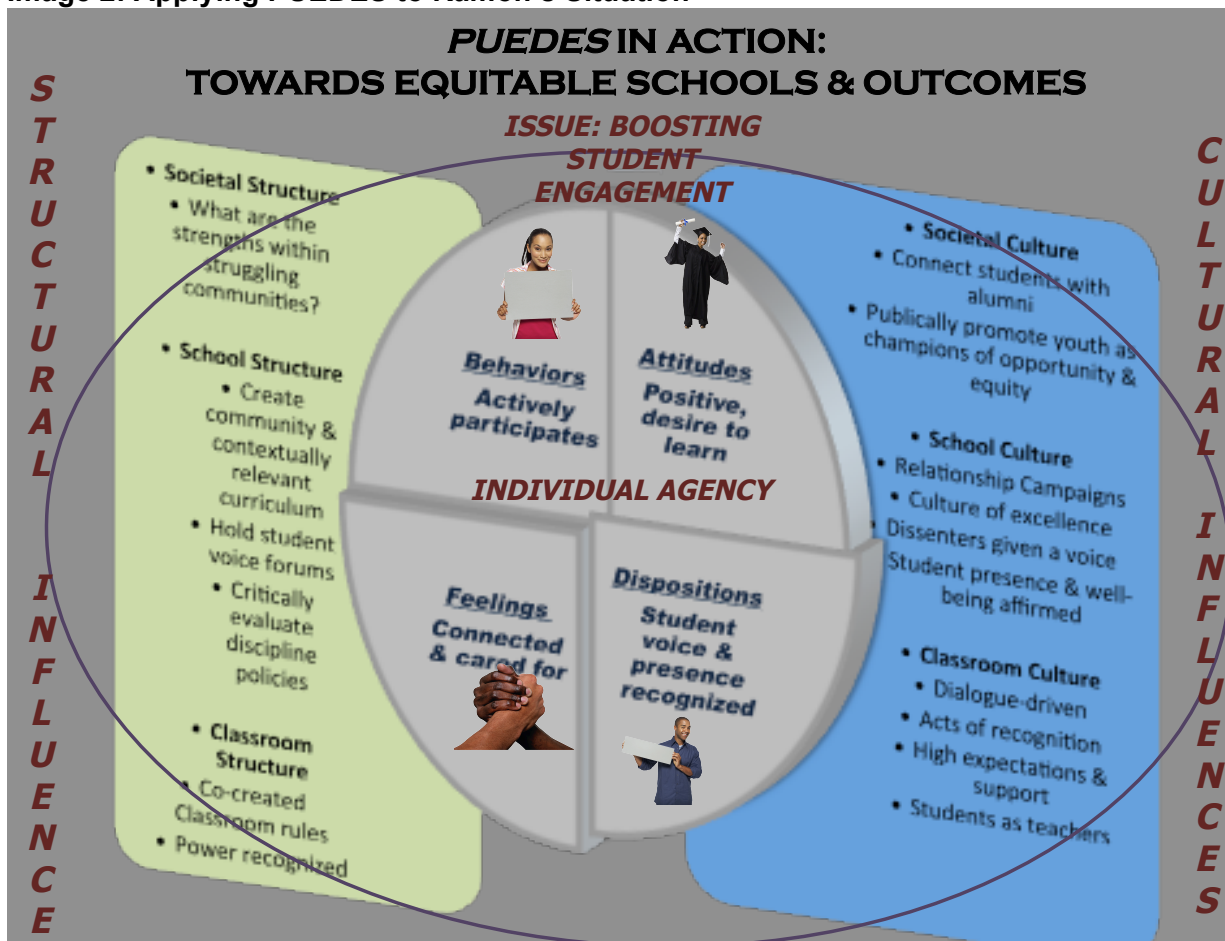
Concerns, experiences, and the expertise of students like Ramon typically go unregistered and thus their voices and experiences are silenced or overlooked. Yet, when given the opportunity to share, reflect, and critique the school, they tend to provide great insight into the inner-workings of school life and provide perspectives that can inform the work of teachers, school leadership, and policymakers. Stakeholders should seek out and centralize the voices and experiences of these students as a mechanism to promote a school culture that is reflective and deliberate in producing Latina/o student success.

One way to establish this culture is to identify the spaces these students are most likely to occupy. These spaces can be a particular table at lunch, in-house suspension, or in the vice-principal's office awaiting disciplinary action. These kinds of spaces are typically already in place but forward-thinking stakeholders need to be deliberately extend and take advantage of

these opportunities over a period of time. These efforts can be framed as “learning from student” forums or focus groups. Those who carry out these efforts will learn that students are honest and quite forthcoming about their experiences and about what works and does not work in school. Students also will be honest and sometimes even protective about the information they wish to disclose, particularly when it involves certain teachers. These moments are vitally important to understand the investment these students have in the school. Imagine what it means when a seemingly disengaged student goes out of his/her way to protect the identity of mediocre or weak teachers? Similarly, what does it mean when a student is completely forthright in their willingness to put a teacher “on blast” who is doing a disservice to students and the school? In either case, these students need to be protected and heard.

Observers will notice that committing to and establishing a culture of listening to the marginalized student voice not only pushes the boundaries on capitalizing on existing school structures (e.g., in-house suspension), but it also shapes individual student agency by perhaps shifting the way students engage with school. By feeling that someone is listening, they may feel more connected to particular adults to school. They may begin to shift their distant relationship with school to one that may be more optimistic and engaged. Further and perhaps most importantly, marginalized students may begin to feel that their experiences and stories are legitimized and that their presence is valued. Feeling like someone is paying attention can be the fodder to facilitate student-connectedness and engagement.

Image 2: Applying PUEDES to Ramon's Situation



Investing in Relationships

At least 15 years of solid research shows that student-adult relationships in schools matter, especially for Latina/o and Black youth across the U.S. Like Ramon, many youth are eager to find adults who are “down” with them, committed, and respectful (Rodriguez & Wasserberg, 2010). For too long, educational policy such as NCLB has created a narrow definition of a qualified teacher. For youth of color, a college degree, a credential, and knowledge of subject area are not enough. Low-income youth and youth of color need teachers who recognize, inspire, motivate, and support them. School leaders should find evidence of these kinds of practices and characteristics when hiring and evaluating teachers. Educators who do this need to be recognized and applauded and those that fall short need to “reinvent” themselves as encouraged by the work of Paulo Freire (Darder, 2002). Relationships are a reflection of school culture and are often the gateway to student engagement and learning (Rodriguez, 2005).

In order to emphasize the critical role that relationships play in boosting student engagement with schools, there need to be school and community campaigns that focus on relationships. School leadership, teachers, and students need to dialogue about the significance of relationships in people's lives and in the context of learning. A committee should be developed that recognizes those who believe in and invest in relationship-building in school. Community members should investigate the nuances of relationships, how they are formed, how they are sustained, and how they are used to boost student engagement and achievement. Relationships are perhaps the most inexpensive solution to the problem of vast inequity across most low-income school systems across the U.S.

A relationship-rich culture begs questions of structure (e.g. traditional power dynamics between students and adults, negotiating school rules, etc.) and those relationships are likely to shape student participation, introduce opportunities for students, boost student connectedness, and affirm the student presence in school. This culture in turn shapes other cultural dimensions of school life such as high expectations, gestures of support, and multiple forms of recognition (Rodriguez, 2012).

The assumption that a student's success or failure is solely a matter of individual agency is too simple and shortsighted and, in fact, an injustice. Our response to this ongoing injustice cannot be accidental or happenstance. It must be deliberate. Thus, the *PUEDES* framework encourages a social justice analysis, response, and perspective in thinking about the dropout/pushout crisis facing the U.S. and Latina/o communities in particular. If the U.S. is truly going to dialogue about equitable educational opportunities for all children, especially those that have been historically excluded from adequate opportunities to succeed, *PUEDES* can help facilitate dialogue, analysis, and advocacy. Until stakeholders, such as the principal I recently spoke with, begin to look at the issue of dropout in a much more bold and complex manner, we will go another 20 years without any large-scale policy or practical changes.

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