Constructing Latino Cultural Citizenship in the GED Classroom: Mexican Migrant Students Claim their Right to an Education

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According to the GED (General Educational Development) Testing Service, 452,000 individuals earned a GED certificate in 2010 in the United States. Texas, California, Florida, and New York show the highest testing volumes. In Texas, the ethnic distribution of GED passers is the following: Hispanics (44 percent), Whites (39.5 percent), and African Americans (14 percent). Although the average age of the GED tester is 26.8, the 16-18 and 19-24 year olds are the largest age groups served in Texas. This paper examines the value of the GED credential for a group often not studied: Mexican migrants who dropped out of high school (in the United States) but have returned (as young adults) to the GED classroom to claim their right to an education in this country. The findings presented provide a critical piece to the puzzle of Adult Education by including a group that has not been studied within the context of the GED educational setting. In addition, I will include instructional recommendations for GED instructors on how they can ensure student retention among this specific group. If what Quinn (2002) said, "The GED has become America's largest high school, and the cheapest" is correct, urgent changes are needed within Adult Basic and Secondary Education Programs. Adult Education scholars and practitioners should begin to examine not only how the GED program has changed since its conception, but also acknowledge the instructional needs of these new students in order to prevent the "double-dropout".

Literature Review

The ongoing education crisis and high attrition rates have prompted scholars to examine the value of the GED credential. Academic interest in the GED credential has come primarily from the field of economics and studies are mainly quantitative. Economists and economics journals are most interested in this topic, especially in comparative analyses that differentiate between the wages earned by GED completers and those obtained by high school graduates. Such research has demonstrated that the GED certificate is not equivalent to the traditional high school diploma. Other studies refute these claims and affirm that not only does the credential translate into a long-term increase in hourly wages, but also completers are also more likely to participate in vocational training programs, and feel motivated to seek better employment opportunities (Murnane et al., 2000; Hawking, 1995). Qualitative data supports these findings. The benefits gained by enrolling in GED programs can include counseling, relationships with other students and instructors, improved skills, higher levels of satisfaction and optimism, more confidence, and an opportunity to start over, and leave the "dropout" label behind, and access to higher education (Brouillette, 1999; Golden et al., 2005; Ou, 2008). Although relevant research about the value of the GED has revealed important information for Adult Education, it has also provided limited data on how new groups of students (such as Mexican migrant dropouts) are doing in GED programs and the value that this credential will bring to their lives.

The policy implications of the GED credential have been discussed briefly in the literature. Smith (2003) shows that the GED credential makes the U.S. public education system appear equitable and even masks the high attrition rates across the nation. He explains,

"Counting GED graduates as successful completions allows the educational system a shield against critics
claiming widespread school failure. States can meet their stated education goals, and maintain their
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legitimacy in providing equal educational opportunity, without intervening at the school district level or
extensively funding adult education or night school courses. At a time when increasing graduation
standards is a priority in many states, it is notable that there is very little discussion of standards relating to
the GED (p. 405)."

Another policy implication is the continued growth of the teen student population in adult education programs. Rachal and Bingham (2004) provide a statement from the executive director of the GED Testing Service in 2002, Auchter who clearly stated, "After sixty years, there should be no illusion about the purpose of the GED Program- it is to provide adults a second opportunity to certify their high school- level academic knowledge and skills" (p. 32). Rachal and Bingham warn that not only does the *adolescentizing* of the GED have implications on the instructional setting of adult education but also has policy related consequences. Federal and state funds provided for adult learners will instead be used for youth education. Also, high schools will begin to use the GED credential to encourage unsuccessful students to withdraw from high school rather than focus their efforts on attrition interventions. The authors recommend policy modifications that include age restrictions (for example, must be 18 years old to enroll in a GED program or to take the exam) on the GED credential. They state, "As advocates of adult education, we believe that the greater good for traditional GED classrooms and the adults who attend them would be to require students, as a matter of state policy, to wait until their high school class has graduated before they can enter an adult GED program or take the test" (p.43). In a parallel study, Perin and colleagues (2006) found that increases in youth enrollment were due to: higher state standards for high school graduation, difficult relationships with teachers, expulsions due to behavior problems, substance abuse, teen parents were often encouraged to leave school, and students were referred to adult education programs. They state, "High school students who cannot accumulate sufficient credits toward graduation may be "pushed out" so that their presence does not reflect negatively on school achievement rates" (p.171). This review of the literature reveals a transitional phase in the GED, not only in terms of the instructional needs of new students but also the important role that this credential plays in the lives of many.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Latino Cultural Citizenship framework to show how Mexican migrant young adults are using the GED classroom to construct, negotiate, and transform their lives in the United States. The Latino Cultural Citizenship framework explains, "Cultural citizenship names a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country" (Flores & Benmayor, 1997, p.1). Many scholars have used this framework to examine how different generations of Latinos are actively claiming their labor rights, asserting their political participation, and contesting boundaries of social belonging in the United States (Delgado Bernal et al, 2008; Stephen, 2003; Galindo et al, 2005; Getrich, 2008). A

few have examined the lives of migrant youth within educational settings. For example, Mirón
and Inda (2004) document how Latino migrant high school students use the ESL classroom to declare their right to learn English and therefore assert a social and cultural space in this country. Benmayor (2002) further explains the educational journeys of first generation Mexican-origin college students and says, "As these students negotiate a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities, they are constructing and affirming their cultural citizenship" (p.116). The narratives gathered during this study show that by working towards a GED diploma, Mexican migrant young adults are actively asserting their role in the United States and creating a new social space for themselves.
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Research Method and Questions
Research goals were aligned with Merriam's (1998) description of the purpose of a basic qualitative study. He explains, "Researchers who conduct these studies simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11). The focus was to gather "rich, thick, descriptions" that provided useful information for educational, community, and policy leaders (Merriam, 1998, p.156). It was also influenced by the work of Freebody (2003) who outlined the central characteristics of qualitative research as, "inductive, descriptive, and humanistic" (p.37). Furthermore, this study was also guided by Hatch (2002) who presents a comprehensive list of the elements of qualitative research in educational settings. His work emphasizes the significance of participants' voices and reflexivity and these concepts were central to this study as well. Qualitative studies within educational research, more specifically narrative inquiry, have created a space for experiential data from immigrants. This study followed narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2000) and qualitative research methods to obtain the narratives of Mexican migrant young adults (ages 18-24) enrolled in a Central Texas GED program. The study was situated around three main questions:
1. What were the factors that led Mexican migrant students to return to an educational setting to complete the GED credential?
2. What is the value of the GED for Mexican migrant students?
3. How has the GED program contributed to their academic development and future aspirations as they continue to form an adult life in the United States?
The main goal was to gather these students' educational journey, return to a GED program, their progress within the program, and future goals (Merriam, 1998, p.156). In-depth interviews were conducted during the Spring 2011 and each participant completed five in-depth interviews. The sample size is small (4 participants/ both male and female) in order to ensure a rich description and accurate interpretation rather than generalization (Lichtman, 2006). In order to reduce variance, the participants shared important characteristics. All four students were between the ages of 18 to 24 during the time of the study; they dropped out of the same school district in Central Texas; and were 12 to14 years old at the time of migration from Mexico. Data analysis strategies included: open-coding, developing categories (and subcategories) from data, and forming concepts as prescribed by the inductive principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Hatch, 2002). With the help of the guidelines provided by this prominent theory in qualitative research, I was able to focus on "discovery and not verification" (Ambert,et al, 1995).

Findings

Academic research of immigrant communities in the United States has provided extensive information on the socio-political factors that impact their lives daily. Much has been written about the educational performance and school context of immigrant adolescents (Kao and Tienda, 1995; Portes and MacLeond, 1996; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; López, 2003). Narratives that speak about family separation (Rumbaut, 1997; Suarez-Orozco et al, 2003), the new family roles of the children and adolescents of immigration (Valenzuela, 1999; Orellana et al, 2003; Cammarota, 2008), and the persistent educational inequity faced by these students (Romo & Falbo, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; López & López, 2010) are set aside and not

included in the immigration debate. The research makes clear that immigrant communities navigate, persist, and succeed in the United States. The following are selected findings of this study:

1. The factors that led Mexican migrant students to return to an educational setting to complete the GED credential include:

• Students return to complete educational goals such as enrolling in college and/or to fulfill professional goals to advance in current employment.

• Students also voiced a desire to be role models for family members or own children.

2. The value of the GED for Mexican migrant students:

• The GED credential will give these students the opportunity to gain admission to college or vocational programs.

• The learning community provided by GED classes also increases their educational selfconfidence.

3. The GED program contributed to their academic development and future aspirations:

• The GED program provided access to information about available educational opportunities such as College for a Day and dual enrollment (vocational) programs.

• The GED program brought students the opportunity to move forward, empowered them to change their own reality.

This project also shed light to the stories of international migration and migrant life from youth. These narratives are complex. This is only one:

I was 14 years old and did not want to come to the United States because I had everything over there, I had everything. Yes, I needed everything, but I had everything… my family… a life. I did not know where I was going, I did not know anything. But, I told myself, I am going to be with my mother. I even asked a good friend who was older than me, I was 14, she was 24-25 years old. I told her that I wanted to stay with her but she responded that my mother was here and I had to go live with her. But I would've preferred to stay with my friend. But unfortunately that was not possible.

After we arrived in Central Texas, two months passed before we enrolled in school. I used to cry everyday. I wanted to return to Mexico, I did not want to be here.

With exception of the ESL class, all classes were in English and it was a shock for me. I did not understand what they were saying or what I needed to do. The girls in class mocked me. This made me very mad.

Now in the GED class, I feel better, I feel happy, sometimes I feel encouraged to finish, to continue… -Erica (GED Student at Central Texas Community College)

Recommendations: *Care* in the GED Classroom

The theories of authentic care and critical care can be incorporated into the instructional plan of a General Educational Development instructional setting. These theories demand that instructional settings are transformed into learning communities of communication, trust, respect, rigor, and high expectations. So…how can the goals of authentic care (presented by Valenzuela (1999) and *critical care* (De Jesús and Antrop-González, 2006) become part of adult education (GED) classes? The goals of authentic caring and critical care include:

1. To gain an understanding of the student as an individual as well as the sociopolitical contexts that have shaped his/her life.

Many times GED instructors focus solely on test preparation without giving importance to getting to know the student at an individual level. It is very important for instructors to know their students' personal and academic backgrounds, their strengths, who they are, as well as, who they want to become. In addition, educators must understand the socio-political contexts that have shaped their students' (minority or not) lives and schooling experiences. My recommendation for ensuring this goal includes:

a. Create opportunities (activities) within the classroom that promote an open instructorstudent dialogue. De-center the role of the instructor and give students control of their own learning by creating inductive and collaborative activities.

b. Incorporate and discuss texts such as critical ethnographies relevant to schooling experiences to allow students to examine or share their own academic experiences. Other reading material can include relevant newspaper articles or short scholarly articles.

2. To build a strong relationship with the student

A respectful mutual exchange between students and educators is the foundation for learning (Valenzuela 1999). Such relationships have the power to impact student progress and academic achievement. This reciprocal relationship between students and educators will help students develop a "sense of competence and mastery over worldly tasks" (Valenzuela, 1999, p.62). In the adult education classroom, a positive relationship between the instructor and the students encourages attendance, progress, and completion of the GED diploma. Instructors can create lessons that foster relationships and support networks. My suggestions are:

a. Build a community of support rather than an instructional setting. Emphasize to students that their peers and instructors are part of their support network and not simply night school attendees. The role of the instructor should be that of a reciprocal facilitator.

b. Provide individualized goals for students. Build *confianza* (trust) through weekly conversations about individual goals and aspirations. Create activities that incorporate reflexivity.

3. To maintain high expectations and standards.

Educators sometimes misunderstand important components of caring such as humanness with pity and lower expectations for their students. This notion can be left out or confused with understanding, empathy, and niceness. Although the literature on this topic explains that this is 6

likely to happen to teachers who describe themselves as "nice" and refrain from placing rigorous standards on minority students, this can happen in all classrooms and across different ethnic groups. De Jesús and Antrop-González (2006) describe this as *hard caring.* They explain, "This

form of caring, recognizes that students of color will not benefit from forms of caring that are not
tied to the expectation of academic excellence" (p.294). In the adult education classrooms this means that adult students should provided with college level reading material, activities that develop critical thinking, and opportunities that give them recognition and agency. Some suggestions are:

a. Create a comprehensive syllabus that includes GED Test preparation as well as culturally relevant materials that foster college readiness. Implement high standards in the completion of home and in-class assignments, as well as, in the attendance policy.

b. Avoid handout-based instruction; use handouts as supplemental material. Utilize class time to engage students in inductive lessons.

Conclusion

Mexican migrant students do value education but circumstances many times forced them to make adult decisions and postpone their education. As young adults, they return to the educational setting, this time to complete the GED credential. By doing so, these Mexican migrant students are not only asserting their right to an education in the United States but also redefining the meaning of completion. Furthermore, the tenets of authentic and critical care: education (*educación*), respect (*respeto*), strong student-teacher relationships, and high expectations (Valenzuela, 1999) can be used in a GED classroom. This pedagogical framework has proven successful in the high school setting in addressing the educational needs of Mexican migrant students and can be even more successful if implemented within adult education. Again, if what Quinn (2002) said, "The GED has become America's largest high school," then it is critical for scholars and practitioners to come together to formulate retention strategies that speak to who they are as individuals as well as consider the socio-political contexts that have shaped their educational journeys.

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