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# Examining Latino Paraeducators' Interactions With Latino Students

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Sociocultural theory emphasizes the social nature of learning and the cultural–historical contexts in which interactions take place. Thus, teacher–student interactions and the relationships that are fostered through these interactions play a vital role in student learning. This digest discusses a study that examined the impact of sociocultural factors on the interactions between Latino language minority students and Latino paraeducators and the relationships that result from these interactions. The study explored whether a knowledge of students' culture and communities, primary language, and interaction styles helps paraeducators and their cooperating teachers meet the students' academic and social needs.

## Background

The study took place in two large, inner-city public elementary schools in Southern California that serve low-income Latino language minority children. Paraeducators were the subject of the study, because they often live in the communities in which they work and likely share a knowledge of the students' culture. The premise of the study was that these paraeducators would prove to be important resources for tapping into students' prior knowledge and for providing cultural scaffolding. Participants were 32 Latino paraeducators, 8 of whom had recently become teachers.

Each participant was interviewed individually and was observed working with students in the classroom. The paraeducators also engaged in informal conversations with study researchers. Topics explored included teacher beliefs, school roles, the role of culture and language in learning, and student–teacher relationships. Because paraeducators' comments indicated some conflict between them and their cooperating teachers, interviews were also conducted with at least one teacher working with each of the paraeducators. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The *Activity Setting Observation System* (Tharp et al., 1998), which allows for analysis, quantification, and description of school-based activities, was used to record classroom observations. The *Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans–II* (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995) was used to determine whether interactions with students were related to paraeducators' levels of acculturation.

## Familiar Contexts for Learning

Generally, Latino paraeducators were found to interact with students in ways that seemed culturally defined, resembling home and community interactions. Students appeared at ease with those who used such interactional strategies and often initiated interactions with them. Sometimes students' questions or comments related to the instructional activity in which they were engaged, but more often, they talked about out-of-school experiences, revealing their funds of knowledge and providing a glimpse of their capacity in out-of-school contexts. These conversations were rarely pursued by paraeducators in the classroom, but they were encouraged and valued in out-of-class contexts, such as recess. The potential that these contexts provide for accessing students' funds of knowledge—the knowledge gained through participation in household and community activity—is critical, and the interactional behaviors that foster these opportunities are worth describing.

### • Demonstrating *cariño*

*Cariño*, a demonstration of affection commonly found in the Latino community, was observed often between paraeducators and students. *Cariño* is characterized verbally through endearments such as *mijo/a* (my son/daughter), *papito* (little daddy), and *mi amor* (my love). It is also expressed behaviorally through touch, proximity, and softened facial expressions. *Cariño* often serves to minimize the negative effect of correcting students' behavior or academic errors and to encourage student participation in classroom activities.

### • Relaxed instructional style

Classroom interactions with students took on features typically associated with informal conversations. Students tended to speak out spontaneously as is common when conversing with friends or family members. Students were rarely called on without having first volunteered, and when calling on students did take place, it was typically done in a low-stress environment to encourage participation. Care was taken not to embarrass students. Academic and behavioral corrections were sometimes made in ways that the children recognized as verbal play, a culturally based strategy used to make students comfortable.

Students were allowed to complete their independent work while chatting with peers. Often, students were seen looking at and commenting on others' work and sharing their own. There appeared to be little expectation that students work silently or individually. The paraeducators engaged with students in informal talk as they helped them with their work. It was during these times that students tended to talk about their out-of-school experiences. In doing so, they were able to connect with the paraeducators in more personal ways, as people rather than just teachers. Likewise, paraeducators gained knowledge about the children in their out-of-school roles.

Although Latino teachers used the same relaxed instructional strategies as the paraeducators, they had fewer opportunities to interact informally with students. Apparently aware of teachers' focus on the instructional task at hand, students were rarely observed initiating off-task talk with teachers in the classroom.

### • Accepting students' ways of being

Paraeducators were rarely heard raising their voices, using sarcasm, or embarrassing students. They were tolerant of student misbehaviors and dealt with them discreetly. Public corrections, when needed, were brief and to the point. Paraeducators rarely took privileges away from students for misbehavior. Instead, they tended to talk to students about their behavior and offered *consejos* (advice).

Teachers were much more likely than paraeducators to place students in time out or take away privileges. Teachers and paraeducators both commented that students perceived the teacher as the authority figure and that they seemed to be more comfortable asking paraeducators for assistance. The teachers who were formerly paraeducators noted that their relationships with students had changed since they became teachers.

### • Validating student resources and instructional needs

Latino paraeducators seemed particularly attuned to the needs of their Latino students. All identified Spanish as their primary language, and most indicated that they had grown up in working-class communities similar to that of their students. Many

worked. They talked about the financial difficulties of the community; the lack of supervision for students whose families had to work late hours; and the obstacles families experienced in assisting their children with homework, especially when it was in English. At times, this knowledge seemed to guide their decisions about organizing activities and offering instruction.

- Incorporating students' knowledge in instruction

Study participants were keenly aware of the importance of language proficiency for instruction. To varying degrees, they all utilized their primary language to make content comprehensible to students. They were also observed relating instructional content to students' cultural or community knowledge. While these efforts were not always directly tied to comprehension or analysis of instructional content, this strategy seemed to foster a sense of shared knowledge and understanding. Comments that brought to mind students' background produced enthusiastic participation. Interviews suggested that while teachers were aware of the value of tying students' background knowledge to instruction, paraeducators, who tended to have little understanding of how their knowledge of the culture and community could be tied to instruction, viewed cultural compatibility as a way to provide students with an environment that was comfortable and familiar.

- Wait time

Study participants sometimes waited longer than is typical for students to respond to questions or to decode words while reading. They often told the class to wait and give a student time to think. This seemed particularly important for English language learners, many of whom need to translate information to the primary language, process it, then translate it back to the second language before offering a response. Paraeducators were also observed giving students extended time to understand new concepts and skills, often repeating information many times for students who were having difficulty.

- Structuring for individual and community needs

Recognizing community constraints, teachers structured classroom activities accordingly. Many were flexible about homework completion. To accommodate the lack of supplies at home, one teacher sent extra paper home for homework assignments and allowed students to color the assignments in class the following day. Other teachers set aside time in the morning or after school for students to complete their homework. Paraeducators, on the other hand, focused on meeting students' social and emotional needs. They used informal talk to learn about students' personal lives. But they did not appear to consider this information relevant to the content of instruction.

### Building *Confianza*: Mediating the Social and Emotional Needs of Students

Paraeducators were particularly concerned with the emotional and social welfare of students. They believed it was important for children to have someone in school they could trust, and that being Latino and speaking the same language helped them foster a sense of *confianza*. Those who had gone on to become teachers were also aware of the difficulties students experienced and their need for emotional support, but their primary concern was to prepare students academically, which typically left little time for anything else.

- Shared experience

Having a sense of shared experience was thought to be key to the development of close relationships that fostered *confianza*. The Latino paraeducators suggested that sharing common experiences allowed them to connect to students in meaningful ways. They believed that a special bond was created through interaction in the primary language, regardless of the students'

fluency in English. Typically, non-instructional talk between paraeducators and students was in Spanish. Non-Latino teachers working with Latino paraeducators also noted a special connection between students and paraeducators. Paraeducators reported using personal disclosure as a means of establishing a sense of shared experience. They shared with students their own experiences growing up in similar communities with similar needs and concerns.

- Reciprocal interactions

The paraeducators in this study believe that interacting with students "at their level" is an important way to establish *confianza*. They try to relate to students as friends and foster reciprocal interactions. Listening to students emerges as an important way to develop a close relationship with them. Paraeducators comment that teachers are often so busy meeting the academic demands of the whole class that they do not have time to listen closely to students when they attempt to talk about non-instructional issues. Paraeducators also have the advantage of regular opportunities to interact informally with students while they supervise recess.

### Academic Impact of Social Relationships

Although the cultural scaffolding strategies discussed above supported the development of personal relationships with students and gave paraeducators access to students' out-of-school experiences and interests as well as insights into their instructional needs, this knowledge was rarely used to enhance instruction and support academic growth. Furthermore, although the knowledge that paraeducators gained through social relationships with students would have been relevant to teachers in making instructional decisions, paraeducators rarely shared this knowledge with teachers. Two factors are most likely responsible for this situation: (1) Most paraeducators are hired with little or no initial preparation; they have not been trained to use what they know about their students' funds of knowledge to enhance instruction; (2) Paraeducators have very limited opportunity to interact with their cooperating teachers; no time is scheduled for teachers and paraeducators to meet together to make plans or share information (Rueda & Monzó, 2000).

### Conclusion

Students from diverse backgrounds benefit from opportunities to use the cultural- and community-based resources that they bring to school. The Latino paraeducators in this study use a number of strategies to help students draw from their rich and extensive repertoire of resources to negotiate and create meaning in the new linguistic, cultural, and academic contexts they encounter in school. Creating such contexts requires a knowledge of students' cultural and community experiences as well as their modes of interaction. Paraeducators, often members of the communities in which they teach, are key resources to this knowledge for teachers who come from cultural backgrounds that are different from their students.

### References

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