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The Smart vs. The Hardworking: The Academic Self-Concepts of Mexican Descent GATE students

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A Day in the Life of a GATE Student

Mr. Monroe has been a teacher for seven years and now teaches one of the three ninth grade Gifted And Talented Education (GATE) English classes that I observe. He is often enthusiastic in class and gives his students encouraging comments. One strategy that he consistently employs in the classroom is to refer to his students collectively as “honors” students. To be called an “honor” student implies much about one’s academic abilities, which is precisely why he uses the term. He does this in order to motivate them to participate and put effort into their work, and have faith in their abilities. Mr. Monroe holds high expectations of them and he wants them to hold high expectations of themselves. In this case, Mr. Monroe is promoting a specific kind of collective identity. This GATE identity is one that includes being smart, performing well on tests and essays, learning material quickly and easily, and engaging class material in a productive and creative way. Thus he tells them they should have “confidence” in themselves and not “stress out” over tests and assignments. He reassures them of their talent and reproduces ideas of innate superiority by telling them, “You are honor students...you won’t have a hard time.” In other words, he is telling them, “You won’t have a hard time because you are *smart*.” Therefore, GATE students have something that other students do not—natural talent.

On a daily basis, GATE students are sent messages that they are different from and *better than* “at-level” or “remedial” students, and most of the time it is the teachers who are conveying these messages. This distinction in terms of talent and effort is often invoked to justify why students are placed into GATE, college prep, vocational, or remedial courses. For GATE students specifically, talent is often seen as the primary distinction. In short, they are often told that they are in GATE classes because they are *smart*.

Constant encouragement and clear hierarchical distinctions from non-GATE students are two mechanisms in the process of creating high-achieving identities for GATE students. For GATE students of color, messages of exceptional ability have significant and unique effects. Being a student of color in a society that privileges

whiteness, the few students of color who are actually in these classes face difficulties that white students do not. While high-achieving white students face the possibility of being called “nerds” or “dorks,” high-achieving students of color face the possibility of being accused of “acting white” and therefore being ostracized by their friends of color (Fordham, 1986). Thus, what it *means* to have a high-achieving identity is qualitatively different for students of color than white students. In light of this, we are forced to ask: what do “high-achieving” identities look like for students of color? More specifically: what do high-achieving identities look like for students of Mexican-descent? In what ways do these students react to constant messages of superiority? How do their high-achieving identities affect their interaction with their non-GATE Mexican descent peers?

Methodology

In order to answer these questions, I observed three ninth grade English GATE classes at a high-ranking and affluent high school three times a week for six months. While Black and Asian students are overrepresented in GATE classes, Latina/o, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are underrepresented. Each of the English GATE classes I observed had twenty-one students: two Mexican-descent females in Period 2, two Mexican-descent females and one Mexican-descent male in Period 4, and three Mexican-descent females in Period 6. I conducted interviews with all eight students of Mexican-descent, however, this paper will focus on the findings of five students who are Engaging Latino Communities for Education (ENLACE) participants. ENLACE is a program designed to increase Latina/o participation in higher education, and due to their intervention efforts, these three classes have 100% more Latinos than would have otherwise been the case!

Having carefully coded and analyzed both my observations and their interviews, I find that there are two major ways that these students have created and internalized a high-achieving identity. The first method internalizes the messages that GATE students receive on a daily basis—that one is gifted, talented and smart. The second academic self-concept promotes the idea that one works hard. These two high-achieving identities affect how Mexican-descent students rationalize their placement into GATE classes. The crucial aspect that determines how they relate to their non-GATE Mexican descent peers is whether or not they believe that this identity makes them different from and *better than* other students. Ruby, the one student who has internalized a “smart” academic self-concept, has had a harder time relating to her non-GATE Mexican descent peers because her self-concept includes the idea that she is superior to

other students. On the other hand, Gabriel, Lizette, Ana, and Marissa's more humble "hardworking" identity is accompanied by a more egalitarian perspective. Thus they have had an easier time maintaining strong ties with their non-GATE Mexican descent peers.

The Smart

Of all the Mexican-descent students interviewed, Ruby is the only student who has internalized a "smart" identity, which means that she believes she is smart, talented, and gifted. She also has internalized the belief that this makes her *better* than other students. Of particular significance is that she is also the only one who actually *tested* into the GATE program and now has more GATE classes than all the other students I have interviewed. To test into GATE means that she scored within the 98th or 99th percentile on at least one battery test, and in the 90th percentile or higher on another. As a result, she now has GATE English, GATE physics, and GATE geometry. Ruby's smart identity has been influenced by the fact that she tested into GATE, she performs well in GATE classes, and she is a part of the elite and isolated "traveling" GATE class. Ana, a student with a hardworking identity, explains to me that, "GATE classes are like the traveling classes, like you have (the same students) 4th, 5th, and 6th, cuz they're all in GATE...it's a little group." Being a part of this traveling class means that her identity is shaped by the fact that she is surrounded by GATE students, GATE teachers, and thus GATE culture. This culture includes positive feedback, encouragement, and messages of superior ability.

Ruby expresses her internalization of a smart identity in the way she discusses her abilities, classes, and interactions with peers. She has an air of superiority about her abilities and she is very self-confident and proud of her straight-As. She believes GATE students in general are "really smart," and she stresses that GATE classes are "not hard at all" for her and that she is doing very well. Thus she includes herself in the description of GATE students as "really smart." All the other students I have interviewed, even those currently receiving an A in GATE English, acknowledge that there are some difficulties they encounter in this class, however, Ruby does not. She is not humble and makes it very clear that she does not consider GATE English challenging. While this "smart" identity no doubt helps her perform well in her classes, the air of superiority that goes along with it has created trouble with her ability to maintain non-GATE Mexican-descent friends.

A Superior Smart Identity as Acting White

In elementary school, before Ruby entered into the GATE program, her friends were mostly Mexican-descent girls. She did not have white friends because she thought that they were “show offs.” Then in junior high, Ruby began encountering problems with her friends because of her academic achievement. She was in honors classes and received good grades. Her friends began to accuse her of trying to be a part of the white group that showed off. She tells me,

This one girl, she would always tell me, ‘So now you feel white cuz you’re all, cuz you’re all in (honors) classes and we’re not?’ And I would wanna be like, ‘Well, no, of course I’m Mexican, you know I wanna hang out with you guys.’ And she’s like, ‘Well, no, you know, cuz you’re too smart for us.’ Like that. Like they would tell me that I would make them feel dumb, and I didn’t want that, you know, cuz obviously they were my friends. So that’s why I decided, like, not to talk to them anymore cuz, I mean I do still say hi and stuff, but I don’t hang out with them that often anymore.

Ruby’s comments suggest that it was not her academic achievement, per se, that caused a rift between her and her Mexican-descent friends, but rather, it was her placement into accelerated classes. Honors classes are like GATE classes in that they both regularly promote ideas of superiority in terms of effort and talent. It is highly likely that Ruby’s current “smart” identity, which she expresses freely and assertively, began to take shape when she first entered the honors program. Therefore, if she was expressing this smart identity that included perceptions of superiority to her friends—consciously or unconsciously—then it would mean that she was presenting herself as *better than them* and any other students who are not in honors classes. Since honors and GATE classes have low numbers of students of color, then she would be claiming to be superior to students of color in general. Thus, Ruby’s air of superiority could also be perceived as a form of racism and/or subordination; she was “acting white” by expressing forms of white superiority. If Ruby did in fact express this kind of “smart” identity, then this would account for why her friends believed she made them “feel dumb.” Given the current level of confidence and pride that Ruby has in her academic performance, it is very possible that Ruby’s expression of her new “smart” identity offended them.

Ruby does not view the breakdown of her friendships as a process that she herself possibly provoked. Rather, she sees herself as a victim. She believes that her Mexican-descent friends were “jealous” of her achievement and therefore began to consciously hang out with white students. She now has a very negative view of Mexican-descent students as students who do not value educational success and have low goals and aspirations. She states,

A lot of Latinos don't really want to shoot for their highest, so I feel kinda like sometimes disappointed cuz it's like, if families come here you know to have a better future for their children, why aren't the kids studying?

Ruby's past experiences suggest to her that Mexican-descent students *choose* not to do well in school. She believes they do not take advantage of the opportunities offered to them because “they don't care about their future” and do not realize the consequences of their actions. They “don't really want to shoot for their highest.” Now that Ruby is in GATE classes in high school, she witnesses on a daily basis that there are not many Mexican-descent students in her classes. She admits that she only has about five Mexican-descent students in all her GATE classes. Because she tested in and strives hard to be a good student, she believes that the low numbers of Mexican-descent students prove what she believes to be true: Mexican students do not value education. She clearly values the dominant ideologies of meritocracy and individualism.

Ruby is caught up in a vicious cycle that is fueled by the educational system. She entered a program that encouraged her to believe that she was better than other students, which in a highly racialized space carries highly racialized implications. This attitude caused a rift in her friendships with Mexican-descent students and she was ostracized and accused of “acting white.” This social rejection has now caused her to view Mexican students as low achievers, which is the exact mentality for which she was ostracized in the first place. She now has white friends, which for many of her former friends probably confirms that she really did “feel white.” In the end she was ostracized for something she did not initially believe in, but now does. Through the combination of her *inclusion* into a predominantly white GATE culture that promotes superiority and her *exclusion* from Mexican-descent peer circles, Ruby now thinks of herself as an exceptional Mexican. This is strikingly different from the self-concepts of Gabriel, Ana, Marissa and Lizette.

The Hardworking

Gabriel, Ana, and Marissa are all Mexican immigrants, while Lizette is a second generation Mexican American. All these students have all internalized “hardworking” identities. This identity features the idea that one works hard and this is why one has been placed into the GATE program. While Ruby internalized the idea that she is “better” than other students because she is smart, these students have more egalitarian beliefs. They often acknowledge that GATE students in general are “smart,” but they argue that they themselves are not smart or better than other students simply because they are in the GATE program. They believe anyone can be in GATE. I believe this identity is influenced by the fact that they all were *recommended* to be in the GATE program. Unlike Ruby, they did not test into it. Also, they are not isolated in and surrounded by GATE culture. Ana and Marissa joined the GATE program in 8th grade and had GATE science, GATE social studies, and GATE English, but now only have GATE English. Gabriel and Lizette joined for the first time this year and also only have GATE English. Thus they all are not as separated from their non-GATE peers, and they are not bombarded with ideas of superiority from as many sources. Another factor that I believe contributes to this identity formation is the fact that they all recognize that they have some difficulties in the GATE English class.

A Humble Hardworking Identity as Being an Equal

Gabriel’s humble and hardworking identity is expressed when he tells me why he believes ENLACE helped him to get in the GATE program. He states,

They knew I had like uh, well, not talent or anything, but they knew I knew a lot of English. You know, I had a lot of skills in English. So that’s how I went about getting into it.

Gabriel is careful not to state that he is “talented” but rather than he is skilled. His choice of words are very telling in that if he were to say “talented” then he would be implying that there is something innate about his ability. It is also interesting that he would reject this word since the word “talent” is in the name of the program—Gifted And Talented Education. Therefore, one would think that it would be easily internalized. However, this is not the case with Gabriel. Rather he states that he has “skills.” This word choice implies that he has become well-versed in the material and has learned the necessary requirements. This implies that he has *worked* for his entrance into the program. When I ask him about his perceptions of GATE students in general, his response is similar to the other students I have interviewed. Gabriel’s perception of

GATE students is that they are “smart.” He asserts, “Man! GATE students, they all are gifted. Gifted, yeah, definitely.” To say that they are “all gifted” demonstrates that he believes *everyone* in GATE falls into this category. This is quite striking because now he is choosing to use a word that *is* included in the program name.

When I ask him if he includes himself in this category, he again distances himself from this “gifted and talented” rhetoric. He tells me,

Nah. Nah, I wouldn't say I was gifted. I wouldn't wanna like, you know, umm, yeah, cuz anybody can do GATE, you know. Yeah, because I didn't think I was gonna be able to do GATE, you know, when they told me I was gonna have that class. But, anybody can do it.

It is interesting that Gabriel has a conception of what GATE students are like, but that he does not consider himself to be a part of this group's definition. This is unlike Ruby who includes herself in the “really smart” category. Since official rhetoric argues that the test supposedly identifies “gifted and talented” students, it would not be surprising to find that those who excel on the Cognitive Abilities Test would identify themselves using the same language. They would self-identify as gifted and talented. I believe that Gabriel and the other hard-working students do not self-identify as gifted and talented because they did not test into GATE. Therefore, since Gabriel performs well in the class, he sees it as a result of his hard work and effort, not his natural talent or ability. Thus, he argues that “anybody can do it” precisely because *he* can do it and has done it. This means that he does not consider himself to be better or superior to non-GATE students.

It is a fact that there are not many students of Mexican-descent in the GATE program at this high school. Whereas Ruby blamed this phenomenon strictly on individual students' lack of motivation, the students with hardworking self-conceptions believe that more Latinos are not in GATE for larger structural reasons. For example, Lizette addresses what can be called the mystification of the GATE program; she believes more Mexican-descent students are not in GATE because they are led to believe that the classes are extremely hard. However, since she performs well in GATE she believes anyone can if given the chance. Therefore, she rationalizes that her placement in GATE does not make her “better” than other students. Similarly, Ana, does not blame Mexican-descent students for not being in GATE classes. She recognizes that limited English language skills and low educational attainment of their parents can

contribute to their underachievement in school. While Ana believes that hard work and determination are necessary, she also understands that a person's background may place them at a disadvantage.

None of the four hardworking students, Gabriel, Ana, Marissa, and Lizette, has had any major fights or divisions with their Mexican-descent peers. Although they have changed their classes somewhat, they have not changed their friends. In fact, none of these students are really more than acquaintances with the other GATE students in their classes. Although Ruby experienced trouble with her Mexican-descent peers, these students have not. In fact, these students expressed that most of their friends are supportive of their academic achievement. I argue that this acceptance is a result of their egalitarian views and expressions.

Conclusion: A Superior vs. An Equal

The five students whose interviews I presented in this paper demonstrate that Mexican-descent students in the GATE classes I have observed for two quarters have two distinct ways of internalizing high-achieving identities. The first way is to accept the rhetoric embedded in GATE culture and believe that one is "smart," "gifted," and "talented." The other way is to reject this construction and instead believe in a more "hardworking" identity. For these students, what will decide whether or not these constructed identities interfere with their friendships with other Mexican descent students is how they *express* them. Ruby encountered a rift with her Mexican-descent female peers because in addition to internalizing a "smart" identity, she also internalized a *superior* identity. Her actions and expressions made her peers feel that she was looking down on them; thus they rejected this air of superiority like they reject another form of superiority—white supremacy. Seeing this affiliation, they rejected her and accused her of "feeling white." Gabriel, Ana, Marissa, and Lizette, on the other hand, have expressed their "hardworking" identities with modesty, humility, and with egalitarianism. Thus, their friendship circles have not changed and their friends are even *supportive* of their academic achievement. Therefore, the argument that "acting white" is simply directed at all high-achieving students of color is too simplistic; it fails to see the role that feelings of superiority play. Thus, high-achieving students do not only choose from internalizing a "smart" or "hardworking" identity, they also choose between being "a superior" or "an equal." As for one's friendship circles, this makes all the difference in the world.

Work Cited

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