The Organization and Administration of a Deficit Curriculum: The Dominant Operating Core Curriculum of a Hispanic Serving Educational System

James Satterfield
Lesli Gonzales
Stephanie Zelanek

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The demographic face of the United States is quickly changing as the Hispanic population approaches majority minority status. The changing demography brings with it many implications as far as the general condition and functionality of society is concerned. Especially important are educational practices and the construction of public education policies as the public schools are traditionally relied upon as an institution of socialization, as a common denominator to Americanize the young, the poor, the marginal, and the immigrant populations (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). These categorical descriptions, one could say, largely characterize the Hispanic population, which in fact represents the youngest members in American society, with the highest per capita birth rate, the poorest household conditions, and a large immigrant population (U.S. Census 2000).

When one thinks of the schools as a tool of Americanization, there is perhaps some degree of indication that along with reading, writing and arithmetic, schools have adopted some sort of hidden curriculum, perhaps, one where conformity and status quos are more valued than diversified knowledge and practices. Schools are powerful institutions that validate select forms of knowledge, language, and cultural practices. When this happens, those children whom bring with them those cultural assets that have been deemed valuable by institutional leaders are less likely to feel marginalized. Such practices support the idea that schools are the dependent variable. In adopting this perspective, one might assume that as American demography has transformed so has the context of the education-for-socialization process. Such change would not only entail an organizational understanding of the diversified phenomenological experiences which surround the school, but more importantly an appreciation for the pluralist character of their community and a dedicated effort to implement this character into the very heart of the organization.

However, as recently as Gareau (2006), it has been found that teachers and administrators have very specific expectations and images of how children and families should function, both as independent units as well as in their interactions with the schools. Gareau (2006) states that such preconceptions have an impact, either positive or negative, on the relational exchanges between teachers, students, and their families. Cortese (1960) found similar parallels when he observed classroom interactions between school personnel and Mexican-American families back in the 1950’s. Cortese also found disturbing patterns regarding the treatment of Mexican-American students. He specifically states that “majority teachers sometimes hold negative attitudes toward minority children and that the teachers’ expectations can affect student achievement” (p. 75). Thus, to assume that the educational context of socialization, the teaching and learning exchange, and the capital building approaches in schools have evolved to reflect an authentic portrait of contemporary American multi-culturalism would be as premature an assumption today as it was in the 60’s.

Because the researchers have focused on a Hispanic community, the researchers ask readers to try and recognize whether or not their own educational system policies and practices have moved beyond a cultural deficit paradigm. As stated by Yosso (2006), it is a deficit paradigm that characterizes Hispanic families in a negative light, assuming that the Hispanic population is culturally and socially
It is definitely not our intention to adopt an essentialist view. However, the researchers loosely recognize that the several Hispanic or Spanish speaking populations in the U.S. share some common traits and value systems. For instance, the majority of Spanish speaking people in the United States are Catholic. Hispanics are also likely to be tightly knitted with, not only their immediate families, but also with extended families. In a comparative regional research study, Gonzales, Dumka, and Deardorff (2004) examined a group of adolescent Mexican-American girls, whom live on the border and a population that lives about five hours north of the border in New Mexico, which self-identifies as Spanish descent. In the results, they found that the value systems of the two groups were strikingly similar, with family and religion ranking first. While the study was by no means exhaustive, it does exemplify that, while there are many unique subsets of Hispanics in America, some of their cultural threading is very similar. Tight knit families are not exclusive to Hispanics as Lareau (2003) finds that most working poor or working middle class families have strong family ties, as they are more likely to depend on one another for various reasons, such as child care. Being that a large portion of Hispanics are working poor, family closeness and interdependence is more likely. These cultural traits, unfortunately, are not always recognized nor appreciated by school leadership.

These special cultural and social traditions should be embraced by school leadership and capitalized on in order to build curriculum and programming that closely reflects the personal life of students. Additionally, the researchers want to emphasize that cultural appreciation and normative value incorporation should not and must not be instituted at the cost of accountability and high expectations. Personal talents and critical thinking skills can still be cultivated in a culturally competent school environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the dominant technical core curriculum in a Hispanic serving public school district and teachers perceptions about the curriculum. Moreover, this study helps explain how a public school district perpetuates a deficit model through its curriculum and maintains a lack of cultural and social competence within the school district. For the purpose of this study the researchers defined “Hispanic serving public school district” as a district that has more than fifty percent of its student population that identify as Hispanic. To develop an understanding of the district’s dominant technical core, the following questions guided this study:

1. What are the dominant technical cores of the Sun Valley Public School District?

2. How do the dominant technical cores within the Sun Valley Public School District serve the student population?

Theoretical Framework

To understand the concept of dominant technical core curriculum within a public school district the researchers utilized a Scott’s (2002) concept of structural complexity and technical core in open systems. Scott’s idea was developed from Parson’s (1960) theory of three levels of organizational control—the technical, the managerial, and the institutional. This study focuses on the technical core of an organization, meaning the way in which an organization performs its work. However for this study the
researchers only used the technical level.

The use of Scott’s idea of technical core captures the academic essence of the institution and enables the technical core to accurately represent what happens within the academic organization. Moreover, because schools are the dependent variable, examining the technical core helps demonstrate how schools sometimes allow environmental factors to lead toward behaviors that reflect institutional legitimacy.

Additionally, this theoretical framework allows the researchers to consider the school as part of a larger environment, while at the same time, remaining cognizant that schools juggle the local, socio-cultural environment as well as the larger political dynamic that shape school policy.

Methodology

The researchers utilized a method of inquiry commonly referred to as field study research. This approach allowed for multiple methods and multiple kinds of information. Using a variety of methods enabled us to collect data in a manner that permitted the conceptual framework and additional research questions to emerge directly from the data. The research tradition driving this study is the interpretive approach. “Interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations” (Yanow, 2000, p. 5). The entire school district curriculum was analyzed, coded, and re-coded through what is known as open and axial coding process. At the conclusion of the coding process, three major orders within the district’s curriculum taxonomy were identified. They include: Remediation/Test Prep, Vocational Career Education, and Public Service Education.

After the process of coding the curriculum, teacher interviews were conducted at 11 of the 13 schools. The teachers whom were interviewed did so entirely on a voluntary basis and were selected through an informal snow-ball method. The questions which were presented to the interviewees were open-ended, as the researchers aimed to incorporate an interpretivist’ approach. For each interview participant we used semi-structured interviews. Since the research tradition guiding this study was the interpretive approach, the use of qualitative methodologies was the most appropriate for several reasons. First, it allowed for the use of thick descriptions in the data collected as wells as it enabled the researchers to understand the meanings people have institutionalized over time about education in the Sun Valley School District curriculum. What is also important about using the interpretive method is that it is “based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations” (Yanow, 2000, p. 5).

The researchers were able to make the most of long-term participation in a field setting that led to “subsequent analytic reflection on the documentary record obtained in the field and reporting by means of detailed description, using narrative vignettes and direct quotes from interviews, as well as by more general description in the form of analytic charts, summary tables, and descriptive statistics (Erickson, 1986, p. 121). The interpretive approach helps answer the questions “What is happening here? And what do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?” (Erickson, 1986, p. 124). The interpretive approach also allows individuals to have a voice and enables them to tell their story. Because this study is phenomenological in nature and the researchers considered major Division One athletics programs to impact the lives of numerous individuals, a phenomenological approach worked best. Creswell (1998) states that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived
experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). Moreover, it helps to deconstruct myths about minority education, specifically the Hispanic student population and explains how the cultural and social aspects further maintain institutionalized racism. The tradition behind the interpretive approach and the specificity with which it addresses issues of meaning allowed the researchers to examine organizations from varying perspectives.

To determine the core technologies, the researchers examined school district curriculum manuals that contained all courses taught in the district. Because of the in-depth nature of core technologies, the researchers did what Miles & Huberman (1994) suggested by laying out the data, seeing what was there, and drawing some initial conclusions about patterns, themes, comparisons, contrasts, and clustering. This process enabled the researchers to build true academic themes that reflect the districts dominate core technologies. In order to develop initial themes the researchers conducted open coding and axial coding. Through these processes, the researchers were able to break down the data, make comparisons, and recategorize the data according to general similarities and differences. During this stage of analysis, the researchers developed some initial categories that were abstract enough to include all the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted that when developing categories, the conceptual name given must be more abstract than the concepts grouped under it.

Setting

To conduct this study, the researchers selected one of the largest districts in the Southwest region of the United States, which has a Hispanic student population that exceeds 80%. Sun Valley School District is a pseudonym for a large Hispanic serving public school district. Sun Valley is located on one of the largest bi-national metropolitan areas along the U.S./Mexico border. With the complexity of a border region and the fact that most of Sun Valley’s faculty, staff, and students speak and write in both Spanish and English makes for a unique higher education environment.

Sun Valley’s administrative leadership is aware of the important role the school system plays in the community. Moreover, they are uniquely aware of the problems associated with the national Hispanic high school dropout rate and what that means for a Hispanic serving institution (Kramer, Rincones, Author, & Sorenson, 2004). Moreover, district leaders are familiar with the poor rates of completion of undergraduate college degrees by Hispanics and realize that Hispanics fall far behind the college completion rates of other racial and ethnic groups (Fry, 2002).

Findings

It became clear through the course of individual interviews that the sociological nature of the Sun Valley School District focuses primarily on training its student population for immediate entrance into the workforce. By examining the curriculum within the school district this study explores three themes that emerged through data collection and analysis: (1) Remediation/Test Prep; (2) Vocational Career Training Education; (3) Public Service Education. These three themes emerged through data collection and carry specific academic and cultural meanings within the Sun Valley School District.

Test Prep/Remediation

School is an inherently youth-centered space, where major aspects of self-identity are engaged both, formally and informally, consciously and unconsciously. According to some education scholars, small
group communications in schools sometimes displays specific class and ethnic inequalities that are a part of the larger socio-cultural group (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Thus, the school setting is a central place where the racial/ethnic and social class distinctions and divisions in society are potentially and candidly reproduced. This being true, Steele and Aronson (1995) concept of stereotype threat becomes active among high school students because students believe they are confirming existing stereotypes about Hispanic culture. Moreover, because the school system has such a heavy focus on remediation and state test preparation the district itself may be unknowingly perpetuating this fear. When Teachers and counselors in this Hispanic Serving School District were asked how they felt about the district’s curriculum in relation to student performance and more specifically remediation and test prep, a 15 year veteran Hispanic teacher commented about her frustration:

I didn’t sign up for this; I mean what is this all about. Testing, testing, and testing. Why am I not allowed to do what I was trained to do? Teachers have administrator after administrator checking in on them. I guess that is their way of making sure we have what we need. They are making sure we are following the marching orders. This whole process is just sick and the kids are the biggest losers. We focus so much on testing and if the kid does not do well they are crushed because we tell them this means everything.

A critical theme in Latino studies is that minority students have a tendency to “internalize a state of mind that they belong in a subordinate status and are less than the dominant group” (Acuna, 1988, Blauner, 1972, Fanon, 1967). “These youths frequently tie their identity with inferior inscriptions rather than positive proscriptions. Their identity is a liability rather than an asset in relation to mainstream America” (Bejarano, 2005, p.45).

The content of the curriculum in most classrooms is designed to be relevant almost exclusively to the typical middle class Anglo child of the dominant society. Although there have been improvements made to textbooks, source materials, and teacher training, even in this day and age current research indicates a different predisposition in attitude on the part of teachers working in schools with high percentages of minority students. Legislatively mandated and privately designed standardized tests rarely make use of the skills and experiences, which are familiar to children of Mexican descent and with standardized testing playing a greater role in schools, nationwide, this lack of cultural competency could have serious negative implications for minority children. Valenzuela (1999) refers to the concentration of testing and narrowed curriculum as “subtractive schooling.” Again, the testing trend does not lead to a narrowing of curriculum for Hispanic students alone, but because of the multiple minority status, the impact is compounded at multiple levels. A testing coordinator says:

Schools are not in charge of anything in regards to curriculum. It’s the illusion of autonomy. My job is all about TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) preparation. Don’t get me wrong, I love working with the kids, but I wish I didn’t have to focus on the testing as much as I do. Truth be told, I am not sure how much we actually teach them. But I do know we teach them to take a test.

Vocational Career Education

While it is generally assumed that variety encourages a child’s love of learning and that diversity in teaching is good for our society, the current climate in public schools does not reflect this assumption. In addition, whereas the concept of student choice and empowerment might be very popular amongst
middle and upper class families, whom like Lareau (2005) suggests are more open to debating and democratized, empowered children, this may not be the case for international or recently immigrated families. As researchers initially saw was a curriculum that appeared to offer choices that perhaps led to freedom and social mobility through vocational programming; however a closer and more detailed look uncovered a naming game that has the potential to confuse students and parents.

Vocational career education appears within the Sun Valley as a Health Science Academy. One participant spoke about her role in the educational process as a teacher in the academy:

I love what I do. I think teaching is so important. Not every child will go to college. I think our district provides opportunity where there may not be. Our program in health sciences gives students a solid background and prepares them for jobs like blood bank technicians and certified nurse’s assistants.

When asked how her program is perceived by parents and how she thought it co-existed with the district’s emphasis on test preparation she said:

I believe a language barrier exists that confuses the idea of educational preparation. I think the word academy is confusing to parents in our community. It sounds elite but it is really a twenty-first century vocational education. As far as our state test goes I feel like I am preparing them for life after high school. I am giving them tools to attend some program after high school and earn a certification. But I understand the importance of the TAKS test.

Another teacher expressed her similar unrest:

I helped organize the program for the Health Science Academy. It has turned out not to be what we originally planned. I’m not blaming anyone; I really don’t know whose fault it is, but I remember us talking about creating a program for kids who wanted to go on to college and become doctors or nurses. Not to say the program we have is not good, but it isn’t what we set out to do, nor does it serve the student population we thought it would.

Comments like these illustrates Sun Valley’s tendency to operate from a deficit model. This division within the curriculum makes minority students more susceptible to a lack of social mobility. Moreover, the curriculum in this academy does not appear to provide students with the appropriate knowledge base to transition into another academic direction if they desire. Something like this can eventually lead to long term academic failure (Bejarano’s 2005).

Public Service Education

School systems across the country are educating a more diverse student population. (Hernandez & Charney, 1998; McPartland, 1998; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Given that Hispanics are rapidly becoming the nation’s largest minority, it is concerning that “Hispanic immigrants are the least likely to attend high school and college, a finding consistent with differences among racial/ethnic groups for the native born as well” (Contreras, 2002, p. 135). As the United States becomes an increasingly multi-ethnic nation, the student populations in our public school systems are growing more diverse. However, educators who are unfamiliar with this population often mistake cultural differences for indifference on the part of Mexican parents and students, rendering communication disjointed. What is more, it may lead to an educational path of least resistance. A Spanish teacher gives an example of an educational
path of least resistance experienced in the Criminal Justice Academy:

Many of our students are bicultural and bi national and understand the nuances of life as an undocumented person in the U.S. I think what our academy really does is allow students to utilize their cultural knowledge to explore law enforcement opportunities. Central office will never say this but our emphasis isn’t college, its work. You do not have to have a college degree to be a border patrol agent. Most of these kids already have Spanish speaking ability, so they are ahead of the game. Like I said, many of them can make cultural distinction that can carry them far in law enforcement. For those who want it, I see this as an immediate path to a good career. They can go to college later.

Comments like the above quote provide evidence that educators must challenge themselves to see their own teaching assumptions through a culturally different lens—one that ultimately broadens their understanding of their own teaching values and methods. Learning about the assumptions and expectations of particular families is vital in any classroom or school setting.

Conclusion

According to Mintzberg (1979) “the operating core of the organization encompasses those members – the operators – who perform the basic work related directly to the production of products and services” (p.24). The products and services, in this case, are the curricular offerings in a school. Through this study the researchers were able to determine the districts primary focus is on school to work. The researchers found that the entire district supports a technical core or operating core that supports the production of a service industry. The core curriculum at the Sun Valley Public School District, a Hispanic-Serving public school district, maintains a system of organization that supports low end occupations in the service industry. The curricular focus is also highly centered on test preparation and remediation. Very few curricular offerings within the district prepare students for college.

In order for change to occur within the district, Sun Valley must challenge some of their current academic curriculum and move beyond service oriented work. By failing to recognize the vitality that each student has to offer and essentially allowing students to focus on education as a path to a majority of low end service level occupations, Sun Valley is missing a great opportunity to cultivate leadership and influence policy for the fastest growing minority group in the U.S.

When thinking about the family-school relationship, the family and the extended life experience of students was hardly mentioned at all in our studies, unless it was work related. We concede that perhaps, with younger children, parents and families, in general, might have been more of a focus for teachers and administrators. However, sadly, teenagers must also feel culturally and socially validated; this means that their values which most likely lie in the familial framework must be noted and appreciated.

The quality and level of education provided to minority students will strongly affect the value of the future labor force, the demand for public services, and the contribution to a flourishing democratic society. What this indicates for Sun Valley and other high minority serving districts alike is that school leaders should focus on reform efforts that standardize high school graduation as a minimum and college attendance as a possibility that is easily actualized because of how and what students are taught (Contreras, 2002). To make this change, school leaders must focus on the task environment of the organization. By changing the task environment, change occurs in the curricular offerings. In addition,
these changes must also be culturally appreciative and competent. By doing this, Sun Valley and others alike can distance themselves from a deficit model that fails to provide students with worthwhile, challenging, and extensive curriculum that educates well beyond service oriented occupations.

Through the use of institutional theory and core technologies we can better understand how students are being educated; thus giving us a better grasp on how to properly address the needs of minority students, in this case specifically Hispanic students. Institutionalization is defined as “a process...that happens to an organization over time, reflecting the organization’s own distinctive history, the people who have been in it, the groups it embodies and the vested interests they have created, and the way it has adapted to its environment. The degree of institutionalization depends on how much leeway there is for personal and group interaction,” says Selznick (1957, p.16). The classroom is the setting in which a child’s schooling takes place and the interaction between teacher and students is a process of institutionalization. We simply ask people to examine the process of institutionalization when it comes to educating children.

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