

Belonging and School Participation: Lessons From a Migrant Student Club

*Margaret A. Gibson, Livier F. Bejnez,
Nicole Hidalgo, & Cony Rolón*

Contrary to popular assumptions that academic motivation is simply up to the individual (one student is motivated whereas another is not), current scholarship indicates that academic motivation “grows out of a complex web of social and personal relationships” and that a sense of membership in the school community directly influences student “commitment to schooling and acceptance of educational values” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp. 60–61). Research points as well to a strong and positive link between students’ subjective sense of belonging in school and both their participation and achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Osterman & Freese, 2000; Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson, 1997). *School membership* and *belonging* are similar constructs. They refer to “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others” in school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61). Quite simply, students function better and participate more in school settings and situations where they feel they belong. Conversely, in contexts where students experience feelings of rejection or alienation, their participation and performance decline (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

As we show in this chapter, students’ sense of fitting in and being comfortable in their surroundings during high school is strongly influenced by the nature of their connections with peers. By *peers* we refer to schoolmates and classmates irrespective of whether students are friends. *Peer relations*

refers to associations between individual students and between groups of students. In the course of our research, we have found that both intra- and interethnic peer relations can have a powerful influence—either positive or negative—on students' feelings about belonging in school and on the ways in which they participate in the social and academic life of the high school. Moreover, we have found that students may report an overall sense of belonging in school but are highly uncomfortable in those school settings and situations that bring them into direct contact with peers who they feel neither accept nor respect them. This sense of discomfort directly affects the nature of their school participation and academic engagement.

In a study of 2,169 Mexican American high school students, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found that students' sense of belonging in school was the only significant predictor of academic resilience and achievement. That study, like much of the literature on school membership, focuses on students' overall sense of belongingness and gives little attention to whether students' sense of fitting in varies from one school setting to another, to why this is so, or to how this affects student participation and achievement. In addition, this body of work gives little attention to student-student relationships and their impact on school membership and participation, focusing instead on students' relationships with teachers and other adults at school.

Belonging and not belonging emerged unexpectedly from our data as significant categories used often by Mexican-descent students in talking about school. (We use the term *Mexican-descent* when referring to students of Mexican origin, regardless of birth country or generation in the United States.) In general, our study supports the links made in previous research between belonging, school participation, and academic achievement. To this it adds a more nuanced look at the factors that promote and impede students' perceptions of belonging and membership in school, with particular attention paid to the role of peer relations across a variety of school settings.

A sense of fitting in at school may be a major incentive for participation, and for some youth even a prerequisite, but this alone is not sufficient to promote academic persistence and achievement, especially among economically marginalized minority youth. It must be coupled with other forms of support and assistance, including access to the types of adult and peer social capital that can enhance academic performance. Much like the literature on belonging, the social-capital literature points to the necessity for a bonding or "we-ness" with school staff and with other students as a precondition to accessing school resources. Following Stanton-Salazar (Chapter 2, this volume), we define *peer social capital* as adolescents' connections to peers and peer networks that can provide the resources and other non-

tangible forms of support, including proacademic norms and identities, that facilitate academic performance.

The concept of social capital dictates that supportive peer or adult relations lead students to the institutional resources and funds of knowledge that students need in order to "decode the system" and "participate in power" (Delpit, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Not all students have the same access to the types of adult or peer interactions that facilitate academic success. Those whose parents are college educated and who come from middle- and upper-class households generally have greater access to and a greater ability to draw from the sorts of relationships in school that can aid their academic progress than do working-class children and children raised in poverty. The achievement gap, thus, stems not only from economic differences but also from differential opportunities in school to connect with those "others" who can open doors and provide the resources required for academic success.

In addition, while children from affluent households generally acquire this kind of social capital directly from their families, many working-class youth, particularly those from marginalized communities, may find it only through connections at school. It is through close and sustained association with adults who can guide and support their educational progress and with peers who are college bound that working-class minority youngsters come to possess forms of knowing and behaving that they can draw upon to advance academically (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 2000). Often these connections are formed outside of the regular classroom, in clubs or sports or in other nonclassroom settings (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Quiroz, Flores-González, & Frank, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Of importance to our analysis is the question raised by Stanton-Salazar in Chapter 2 as to whether working-class students can themselves be a source of social capital for one another. We address this question by examining the role that one school club—the Migrant Student Association (MSA)—plays in the lives of Mexican-descent students at a school we call Hillside High (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). MSA members consist almost entirely of children of Mexican-descent migrant farm workers. As we shall show, migrant students themselves broker social capital through their relations with one another and with the teachers who staff the Migrant Education Program. Through their participation in MSA, members come to value and nurture a culture of inclusiveness, information-sharing, and academic engagement.

In order to emphasize the educational impact of MSA on its members, we need first to provide some background information about our study and

then describe the position of Mexican-descent students within the larger school structure, the nature of their relationships with their non-Mexican peers, and the profound sense of not belonging that many "Mexican students" experience on campus.¹ Our attention then turns to how the structure and practices of MSA help to contest the marginalization of Mexican students at HHS and provide opportunities for students of diverse academic abilities and preparation to interact with and influence one another toward school participation and achievement. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this case study for school policy and practice.

ABOUT OUR STUDY

Hillside High is a suburban public high school located in the hills overlooking the California coast. HHS serves students from two very distinct communities, each with different needs and with sharply different school outcomes. The first is the town of Hillside, a mostly White, middle- to upper-middle-class professional community where the median family income is \$73,515 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a). The second is Appleton, a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American working-class town whose economy is based largely on agriculture. The median family income for Mexican families living in and around Appleton is roughly \$33,000, and many of the migrant families whose children are the focus of this chapter earn less.²

Hillside and Appleton are part of a large unified school district with only two comprehensive high schools, Appleton High and Hillside High. To relieve severe overcrowding at Appleton High—a school built for 1,500 students that now houses over 3,000—the district buses some 600 Appleton students each day to Hillside. As a result, HHS is also overcrowded, serving approximately 1,900 students in a school designed for 1,200. In the fall of 1998, when this study commenced, the ninth grade was almost equally divided between non-Hispanic White students, who comprised 44% of the Class of 2002, and students of Mexican descent (both parents of Mexican origin), who made up 43% of the freshman class; another 6% had one parent of Mexican origin. Asian Americans, African Americans, non-Mexican Latinos, and mixed-race students made up the remaining 7%.

We draw our findings from a larger longitudinal study of all members of the Class of 2002, in which we were able to follow students' academic performance from the time they entered HHS in ninth grade through to their graduation in June 2002. When students of Mexican descent left HHS, we also made every effort to keep track of their whereabouts and school

progress. Our full research sample includes all 588 students in the Class of 2002 who completed our ninth-grade survey, including 248 students of Mexican descent and 256 White students.³ Altogether 94% of the freshman class completed one or both parts of the survey.

In this chapter we focus on the school experiences and performance of the 160 migrant students in the Class of 2002, all of whom qualified for supplemental services provided by the federally funded Migrant Education Program (MEP).⁴ Although most of these students live permanently in Appleton—only a small number of families follow the crops seasonally—close to half leave the area in December when their parents are unemployed, many returning to Mexico. About 20% of these migrant students are absent from school for at least some days in January.

In addition to drawing from students' academic records—to which we had full access throughout the 4 years of fieldwork—our findings come from student surveys and interviews, participant observation both inside and outside of classes, and student essays on key topics addressed in this chapter. We also conducted interviews with a wide range of teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and migrant education staff over the course of the 4 years.⁵

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Having attended separate elementary and junior high schools in their respective neighborhoods, students from Appleton and Hillside, generally, come together for the first time in ninth grade. Thus, for most of these students, HHS is the first ethnically mixed school they have ever attended. Beyond ethnicity, there are many other differences shaping peer relations and student performance. Eighty-one percent of the Mexican-descent students have two immigrant parents. Most of the Mexican parents have migrated to California from small towns and *ranchos* in northern Mexico where educational opportunities were limited, and more than half attended school for 8 years or less. In sharp contrast, 89% of the White students had at least one parent who had attended college. In ninth grade only one third of the Mexican-descent students had a computer at home compared with 90% of their White classmates. That same year 93% of the Mexican-descent students but only 26% of the White students rode the bus to school. More than 90% of the Mexican-descent students speak Spanish at home, and half of these students were designated limited English proficient (LEP) when they entered ninth grade. Social class differences also distinguish the two groups. Whereas many of the White students live in affluence, most of the Mexican

students live in poverty or near poverty. Over half of the Mexican-descent students received a free or reduced-price lunch during ninth grade, and many more undoubtedly qualified based on the 80% free-lunch-eligibility rate at the elementary school that most of these students attended.

Academic Performance Patterns

Even though HHS is recognized for its solid academic programs, excellent cocurricular activities, and a strong teaching staff, it nevertheless reflects long-standing, disturbing national and state patterns of generally low academic attainment among students of Mexican descent (see Chapter 1, this volume). Only half of the Mexican-descent students at HHS go directly into college preparatory math and English classes upon entering ninth grade. The other half, mainly students with limited proficiency in English, take from 1 to 3 years of English language development (ELD) or sheltered English classes. Almost all White students, on the other hand, take algebra or geometry as freshmen, and 1 in 3 takes an accelerated English class. Grades offer another indicator of the performance disparities. At the end of ninth grade, the mean grade point average (GPA) for White students was 3.03 (a B average); for Mexican-descent students it was 2.09, or a C average.

The achievement gap persists through high school, and by the end of 12th grade just 20% of the Mexican-descent students had completed all courses required for admission to the University of California or California State University compared with 64% of the White students. It is notable, however, and important to the focus of this chapter, that 68% of migrant students stayed at HHS and graduated from 12th grade, compared with just 27% of the nonmigrant first- and second-generation Mexican-descent students and 58% of the third-generation Mexican-descent students. In addition, 9% of the migrant students finished elsewhere in the area, bringing the migrant student high school graduation rate to 77%. Not only do these graduation rates compare favorably with those of the nonmigrant Mexican-descent students at HHS, particularly the first- and second-generation students, but they also far exceed the nationwide graduation rate for migrant students, which is estimated to be about 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

It is also noteworthy that among the most academically at-risk students—those with a ninth-grade GPA of 1.8 or lower—47% of the migrant students graduated from HHS, compared with 11% of the nonmigrant Mexican-descent students (all generations) and 13% of the White students with similarly low freshman-year marks. The roles of the migrant program and the migrant student club that it sponsors are key to the migrant students' comparatively high graduation rate, especially in light of the many

obstacles that these students must overcome. Chief among these is a sense of not fitting in or not belonging to the larger school community.

Fitting in at Hillside High

In general, the gathering spots of White and Mexican students are very separate. Between classes and during lunch, large numbers of White students hang out in the school's central courtyard, commonly referred to as "the quad," and their occupation of this area is both contentious and privileged. Mexican students, on the other hand, generally gather in peripheral spaces where they are less visible, such as the cafeteria or the migrant education office. Many Mexican students describe feelings of nervousness and alienation, some even shame and inferiority, as key obstacles to their active participation in spaces and activities dominated by their more privileged White peers.

It is important for readers to understand that there is a historical context of contention at HHS fueled by the attitudes and actions of some parents, students, and community members from the Hillside area. For example, many Hillside parents believe that academic standards have suffered since the school district began busing Appleton students to HHS in the early 1990s. Over the years a vocal contingent of Hillside area residents has unified around a call for secession, pressing the state to permit them to form their own separate school district, a district that in essence would serve predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class White students. This history and its impact on the position of Mexican students at HHS are described elsewhere (Donato, 1987; Hurd, 2003).

When asked why they don't hang out in the quad, Mexican students explain that "The quad is only [for] White people." They also explain that White students "judge you a lot," "stare at you as you walk by," and on occasion "throw food at you." Even some third-generation students—those who identify as Mexican Americans and who speak English fluently—express discomfort about passing through the quad, saying they feel they "don't belong" there. Mexican students whose English is limited express even greater anxiety. Because most school-sponsored lunchtime activities take place in the quad, these turn out to be mainly White affairs, limiting Mexican students' access to and participation in school-wide activities. (When we pointed this out to the principal, she moved lunchtime activities to a more neutral space on campus.)

White students recognize the social divisions, observing that "the quad is English and the outskirts are more Hispanic." In addition, White students explain that they don't know many Mexican students because, for the most part, they take different classes and are not part of their social circles. They

also express unease about hanging out or even passing through areas of campus where groups of Mexican students congregate, but their discomfort rarely seems to limit their social and educational opportunities at school. With the exception of AP Spanish, most Mexican-majority classes and clubs are of little interest either socially or academically to the White students.

In large measure, HHS belongs to the students from Hillside, and they form the dominant groups on campus. Their parents control the PTA and Site Council and have substantial influence over school programs and activities. Hillside students also fit easily into the social and academic life of the school. In addition, they benefit disproportionately from the school's advanced placement and honors classes, its extracurricular programs and activities, and its leadership clubs. Although some of these predominantly White students certainly recognize the alienation felt by Mexican-descent students, few have any real understanding of Mexican students' lives outside of school or the difficulties they encounter on a daily basis in school. Nor do they see any particular need to integrate socially with their Mexican peers.

A sense of not belonging and not being respected permeates many aspects of Mexican students' lives at HHS, including their decisions about whether or not to speak up in class or ask for help when needed, whether to participate in the social life of the high school, and ultimately whether to remain at HHS, transfer to another school, or drop out of school altogether. Some Mexican students, a small minority and mainly boys, consistently act out in class, disrupting learning for themselves as well as their classmates (see Chapter 4, this volume). More, however, simply remain silent in those classes where they do not feel comfortable, not wishing to draw attention to themselves.

As we explained earlier, students who fail to attain a sense of full membership in the school community are likely to be less engaged in school, less motivated academically, and at risk for psychological and perhaps even physical withdrawal from school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Such is the case at HHS. Many of the students we interviewed and "shadowed" through a school day spoke of being intimidated or embarrassed in classes where they are in the minority (for similar findings, see Davidson, 1996; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). An interview with several Mexican students, all cheerleaders, all high achieving, and all on track for college, illustrates how student discomfort impacts academic engagement. One, Gaby, mentioned her fear that she might mispronounce some word in English or otherwise show some lack of knowledge that middle-class White students take for granted. "It's scary," she explained. Another, Marisol, added, "They'll probably laugh at

you," and "they just think we're little Mexicans." Marisol cited her creative writing class as an example:

We wrote poems in there. There was this kid who was so talented, like busting out with this poem . . . [using] these words I've never even heard. I'm like, "You're probably making them up." Then my poem is like, "Once upon a time . . ." just basic words you hear all the time. That's what intimidates me too. My writing is not as good. I don't know all these words that they do.

When asked if White students actually put her down, Marisol said, "sometimes they laugh," but mostly it was the way she feels around White students. Gaby said much the same, pointing to "the looks that they give you," but also explaining that it was more her expectations based on things that have happened in the past. It is notable that these girls express such a sense of discomfort even though they are members of the varsity cheerleading squad and are well known on campus.

Because of their discomfort, some Mexican students will switch to "easier" classes to be with a larger number of Mexican students, even though they need the "tougher" classes to meet college admissions requirements. "You feel better among your own kind," students explained, and they noted, too, their unease when placed in classes "where you see just White people." When this happens, Mexican students generally sit in the rear of the classroom or to the side and rarely ask questions or contribute to discussion.

One Mexican student, an officer in the MSA club, described his behavior in classes with predominantly White students: "I am more quiet; I just talk about schoolwork. I don't talk about what I do in my free time. . . . I don't really talk that much." He and other students contrasted their behavior in these classes to their behavior in settings where they have the support of their friends. In AP Spanish classes, for example, where Mexican students not only are in the majority but generally are very comfortable using oral Spanish as the medium of exchange, they point out that they "help each other," "work better," and are "more active." Classroom observation supports this view. In these classes, interestingly, it is the White students who tend to be silent, reluctant to speak up, and cautious about drawing attention to themselves.

Clubs and Sports

Although students have little control over class placements, particularly those who wish to meet all requirements for college admission, they do

have choices about which extracurricular school activities to participate in, if any. Again, most Mexican-descent students shy away from activities dominated by White peers. Careful analysis of sports and club rosters for the 4 years of our study reveal that far more White students participate in school-wide clubs and sports than do students of Mexican descent. In ninth grade, for example, only 11% of the Mexican-descent students were involved in a school-sponsored sport compared with 52% of their White classmates. For those who completed 4 years at HHS, sports participation rose to 30% for the Mexican-descent students and 72% for White students. Club membership follows a similar pattern. Only 6% of the Mexican-descent students joined a club their freshman year compared with 22% of the White students. Club participation increases each year for both groups, but Mexican students mainly join clubs such as MSA, where all or most of the members are Mexican. HHS sponsors five student clubs with 100% Mexican-descent membership and 12 with no Mexican-descent students (based on 1999–2000 club rosters and yearbook photos). In the rest, participation by students of Mexican descent is extremely low, and those who join tend to be third-generation students who speak only English and who fit comfortably into the middle-class mainstream of HHS. In sports it is much the same, with the exception of boys' soccer, rugby, and cheerleading.

As shown in the research literature, high school students who get involved in extracurricular school activities are more likely to remain in school (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), develop bonds with their teachers (Fletcher & Brown, 1998), identify with school (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002), and experience positive educational trajectories (Brown & Theobald, 1998; Eccles & Barber, 1999). In addition, participation in sports and clubs is correlated positively with greater leadership skills (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999); higher grades, aspirations, and levels of self-esteem; and improved race relations (Brown & Theobald, 1998; Holland & Andre, 1987; O'Brien & Rollefson, 1995). Research findings also indicate that students from wealthier families participate in extracurricular activities far more than their working-class peers (Eckert, 1989; McNeal, 1998; O'Brien & Rollefson, 1995), thereby "acquiring comparatively greater human and social capital" (Flores-González, 2002; Quiroz et al., 1996). However, when students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do participate in extracurricular school activities, the benefits that accrue to them are significantly greater than those for wealthier students (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). As Stanton-Salazar (2001) points out, extracurricular activities offer a site for the development of community and the acquisition of social capital, both much needed by working-class Mexican-descent students if they are to successfully navigate their way through high school and on to college.

Our findings are consistent with these studies, revealing that many

Mexican-descent students at HHS are involved in no sport or club, thus precluding them from access to the well-known advantages. There are many reasons for the low participation, including the cost, transportation problems, the time commitment, and inadequate opportunity to learn a sport at an early age, but added to these reasons is the fact that many Mexican-descent students believe they will not fit in. They explain: "Most sports and clubs are made up of White people, and if you join you probably feel out of place"; "we . . . feel embarrassed or afraid as to what other people might think"; and "you feel intimidated because you are thinking the White people are better than you."⁶ The migrant student club is different, however, a setting where Mexican students know they will be welcome and supported.

THE MIGRANT STUDENT ASSOCIATION

MSA is a student-run club that functions in similar fashion to many student clubs on campus. Its members elect officers, hold weekly meetings, organize fund-raisers and community service events, and contribute to a range of school-wide activities held throughout the year. Much of the planning and socializing takes place in the office of the Migrant Education Program. MEP sponsors the club and the two MEP teachers, Mr. Rodriguez ("Mr. R.") and Mr. Guzman, serve as club advisors.⁷ With 110 members in the 2001–02 school year, MSA is one of the two largest clubs on campus. Some students come to almost every meeting; others may only attend once a month or when there is an activity of particular interest. The club is open to all students, but almost all who participate are current or former migrant students.

The club mission, as stated in the *MEP Handbook*, is to "promote higher education, celebrate cultural differences, participate in school activities, and organize community service activities." MSA functions as both a social and an academic club—a hub of student life on campus for its members. Its activities reinforce a positive sense of identity for students as Mexicans and as academically oriented. In fact, it is the integration of these two aspects of students' identities that becomes a powerful catalyst for school engagement.

MSA is very inclusive. Its social and academic focus attracts and welcomes a wide array of students, freshmen to seniors, including recent arrivals from Mexico and those born in the United States, those in the top quartile of the class and those struggling academically, those who are at risk of gang affiliation and those with no gang association. Two thirds of the members are seniors, many of them attracted by the club's focus on higher education. One third of the senior members had a cumulative GPA of B- or better their senior year and had completed all the courses required for admission to a 4-year college. Other club members had lower GPAs, some much lower,

and had completed only a few college preparatory classes. Three fourths of club members are female. (See Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, this volume, for more detailed attention to gender differences in school performance.)

We focus on several aspects of MSA, which together, we believe, help to contest the marginalization of Mexican-descent students at HHS and to support their school engagement: a strong sense of community; the development of norms and values that promote an integrated identity as Mexican and academically oriented; and the role of peers and adults as social resources.

Creating Community and Proacademic Identities

The drawing together of students' multiple worlds—home, school, peer, and community—is a hallmark of MSA and a major reason for the unusually high level of participation by club members. MSA is a community where students feel free to be themselves and where their Mexican identity is valued and supported. Sandra, a high-achieving student who is one of the club officers, and who also participates in other “mainstream” clubs, summed up her feelings about MSA: “It makes me very comfortable, it makes me feel safe, it makes me feel like I’m wanted, like I belong somewhere, like I’m important to someone.” MSA is different from other clubs, she noted, because “everyone gets along” and because “I just feel like I’m more wanted.” MSA members, she said, “see me as who I am and they respect me.” Many other students made similar comments, describing how the club provides them with a sense of security and support in a school where they often feel neither supported nor accepted. Students consistently noted that everyone in MSA “treats us equally,” it “makes us feel important,” and it “allows people that are Mexican or migrant to have somewhere to go.”⁸ MSA helps to unite Mexican students on campus, gives them a voice and a presence in the larger school community, and helps them to make new friends. It also keeps some youth away from trouble, “like being out there and gang banging,” as a couple of students observed. The sense of acceptance, trust, and fairness that MSA engenders is especially important to its members and provides the foundation and motivation necessary for academic engagement.

All MSA members are Spanish speakers, and the fact that they feel free to use either Spanish or English, or both, when interacting with one another and with MEP teachers about social and academic concerns, contributes directly to their comfort in MSA and related activities. “You feel you belong,” one student explained, “because there are people that you know and that even speak the same language you do.” In other school contexts students are more guarded in their speech, fearing they may be teased

if their English is not “perfect” and worrying, too, that their use of Spanish may draw criticism from non-Spanish-speaking peers and teachers. MSA, thus, provides a much needed “safe space” for Mexican-descent students at Hillside High, where students feel free to express the range of their Mexican identities from styles of communicating to styles of appearance (see Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997, for their discussion of the importance of “safe spaces”; see also Chapter 8, this volume).

In addition, MSA offers an environment where students feel secure in voicing opinions and taking initiative in ways they do not in other school settings among their White peers and teachers. One major club event that actively integrates students' home, peer, and school worlds is the end-of-year migrant-student awards ceremony and graduation banquet, held jointly with Appleton High. Each year, a student organizing committee is in charge of deciding most of the details: recruiting adult and student volunteers, seeking donations, choosing a venue, inviting speakers, and so forth. It is a time when all migrant students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members come together to celebrate the academic achievements of graduating seniors who are part of the migrant program. Many are the first in their families to finish high school, and students use this occasion to formally thank their families and MEP for all their support. MEP teachers and staff also use this occasion to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of the various influences—family, community, church, and peers, as well as school—that support students' scholastic accomplishments. Organizing the banquet and ceremony is one of the many occasions where MSA students work together to help one another in the accomplishment of shared goals. It is an example of how MSA strengthens the bonds between students' academic, social, and cultural lives in order to form community at school.

Peers as Social Resources

MSA provides a training ground for students to develop leadership skills through running club meetings and through the organization of school and community activities. Club meetings typically include information about community and school events, volunteer opportunities, discussion and problem solving of issues relevant to students' lives, and information about college. In addition, MSA members help organize school-wide activities to celebrate Mexican holidays. Unfortunately, these celebrations are often contested by White peers and their parents and garner little support from school staff. In recent years the staff has chosen to remove these celebrations from the school calendar rather than to address the underlying issues causing the confrontations (for fuller discussion, see Hurd, 2003).

Fund-raising is another central activity, necessary to support the cost

of college field trips, which, together with the end-of-year banquet, are a highlight of the club's work. Members also reach out to younger students in Appleton's elementary schools, helping them to see that they, too, can do well in school, and they offer assistance to families in need, through food and clothing drives. In such a fashion MSA supports both the norm and the value of sharing resources with one's community.

In similar fashion, students learn how to share academic resources with one another. We often observed students in the MEP office helping one another with schoolwork, and peer assistance extends to other sites outside of club activities and the migrant office. For example, members commented that they could reach out to "any student or advisor and talk to them really about anything." Students talk to one another about plans for college and look out for and assist one another when assigned to the same section of an advanced college prep class. They recognize that they "motivate each other," and they note explicitly that those going to college are "a good influence on the rest." Our interviews confirm that some students who initially had no plans to go to college find themselves considering the possibility. As one girl explained, "We motivate each other, the members. For example, Yadira and I, we talk about where we got accepted and we say 'Oh yeah! We are going to college.'" Another MSA member noted, "We first try to help each other, and then we talk to teachers."

The MSA T-shirt offers a visual symbol of the club's academic orientation. Designed by the students themselves each year, the shirt for the 2000-01 school year had a colorful Aztec calendar on the front along with the words *Migrant Student Association* and *Hillside High School*. On the back, bordered by more Aztec symbols, were the words *Only the educated are free, educate yourselves Raza!* Worn proudly, the shirt provided a constant reminder to club members of their proacademic Mexican student identity.

Although peer relations in the larger school leave many of the Mexican-descent students unwilling to engage fully in the schooling process, peer relations in MSA aid students in their academic endeavors. Students network with one another and with club advisors to share and acquire information about school activities, college admissions, and community work. With the leadership of the migrant teachers, students are socialized into a culture that values information sharing, networking, and peer support. In such a fashion, club members serve as resources for one another, consciously and actively helping each other achieve academic goals.

The Role of the MSA Advisors

The sense of belonging, trust, and mutual support that exists within the MSA does not just happen; it is created. Without the careful guidance of the

MEP teachers and the structure within which it operates, the MSA club might have a very different outcome. The teachers consciously and deliberately set out to build a space where students can bring their whole selves into the schooling process. "We need to provide an environment," Mr. R. notes, "where students feel they belong," and to do this, he explains, it is necessary to become friends with the students:

I think in order for me to trust you, I need to feel that you're my friend. There's no way I'm going to share things with you or believe what you tell me, if I don't see you as a friend. It's something we really try to do with all our students.

Mr. R. also points to the importance of building relationships that extend beyond the formal classroom or school setting. Like many MEP teachers, Mr. R. lives in Appleton nearby many of his students, and he attends the same Catholic church many of them attend. He also plays soccer and basketball with the students on Saturday mornings. In such a fashion, Mr. R. takes an active role in students' lives outside of school, which in turn serves to promote stronger linkages between the students' home, school, community, and peer worlds.

Other MEP teachers exhibit similar qualities of care, involvement, and dedication to supporting the students personally and academically. They believe that by developing a close relationship with the students based upon trust and rapport, they can make it possible for students to put aside differences and to work together to create a proacademic community. MSA "becomes like a family," Mr. R. observed, once students "see that we really care and we want to help."

Many of the MEP teachers are themselves the children of migrant farmworkers, and they recognize that students view them as role models and even surrogate parents. "I really treat them like I was their father," Mr. R. explains. "If I see students doing some dumb things in the club, or saying some comments that they shouldn't be making, I'll act like the father. I'll call them aside and talk to them." He and other MEP teachers also continuously remind students that they need to stay in school, often driving home a point through the use of concrete examples or personal stories. At one MSA meeting, Mr. R. recounted how Juan, a club member, had recently told him that he didn't like to be bossed around. "I am the same way," Mr. R. explained, "but that's why I decided to go to school." He then reminded students that their parents work in the fields because they have no choice. "You," he said to the students, "have an option to get an education."

Mr. R. and the other MEP teachers also deliberately share personal stories with the students to create an environment within MSA where stu-

dents feel safe to share what's going on in their lives. Advisors also talk to students about "when you get to college," and students who might never have envisioned higher education as a realistic goal come to see it as within their reach. In such a fashion, the MEP teachers help to mobilize an otherwise marginalized student population into an engaged, motivated, and resourceful peer group. It is a very deliberate and explicit process. The advisors and members collaborate to create and perpetuate a set of standards and beliefs based on school achievement. Their high expectations, their explicit support, and their availability draw students into a relationship with caring adults who are committed to their educational success. This adult-initiated caring relationship is a key to the migrant students' willingness to persist in school in spite of the many obstacles in their path (Bejnéz, 1998).

Our study of the MSA, a school-sponsored and institutionally organized peer group, shows that it operates with demonstrable success in promoting and supporting school participation and achievement among its members, but it has little impact on the larger school. Because MSA is a supplemental school program, it is not within MEP's power, or that of the migrant-student club, to change the larger school. As noted by Stanton-Salazar (Chapter 2, this volume), pockets of peer and adult social capital within school settings may spur individual academic achievement and mobility, but they do little to alter the institutional structures that continue to marginalize working-class Mexican-descent students. In spite of the "we-ness" that students feel in MSA and in spite of the social and academic support they receive through MSA and MEP, a large percentage of these students continue to feel uncomfortable sitting in the central quad or interacting on an equal footing with non-Mexican peers. Even as seniors, many feel hesitant to participate actively in college preparatory classes where Mexican students are in the minority.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL POLICY AND PRACTICE

HHS and other schools serving similar student populations need to actively and deliberately counter the alienating influences working-class Mexican-descent students frequently experience in school. Schools also need to contest prevailing notions that Mexicans are disinterested in education and therefore, to be successful in school, they must leave their "Mexicanness" at the schoolhouse door.

More specifically, we believe that our study highlights the importance of building community within schools. All high school students, and most especially those from marginalized minority backgrounds, participate more

and do better academically in school settings where they are respected and accepted as equal members of the larger school community. Constructing an inclusive school community may be an essential factor in promoting academic success for working-class students of Mexican descent.

As a step toward building community and a sense of belonging within the larger school, it may be necessary at times to create and support social and cultural safe spaces that are ethnically segregated. The support of groups like the migrant student club can make the difference between staying in school and dropping out, or between taking basic classes and preparing for college. Moreover, as Fine and coauthors (1997) remind us, "a flight into sameness by a marginalized group may be essential for and not a distraction from integration" (p. 275).

Community building must be combined with other forms of institutional support and assistance. As noted throughout this chapter, and indeed this volume, students need entrée to the kinds of social relationships that can put them in touch with the resources they need to guide their academic progress. However, because these social relationships occur within a stratified school system where power and resources are unequally distributed, school personnel need to be proactive and purposeful about making sure all students, especially low-income minority students, have access to the particular kinds of information and support they need to be academically successful (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Peers play a pivotal role in helping students stay on track during high school. For students from working-class and immigrant families, whose parents in many cases do not possess the institutional knowledge or educational background to help their children succeed in high school, peers generally play an even more critical role than they do in the lives of youth from more advantaged circumstances. Moreover, school policies, programs, and practices directly influence the ways that peers interact, including the skills and knowledge they develop in working with one another. All too often school personnel overlook the power and responsibility they have for structuring peer relations in their classes, in extracurricular school activities, and in the everyday life of the school.

Extracurricular school activities, when well designed and supervised, can serve as an important force in creating community and fostering a sense of school membership. In addition, they can provide students access to the types of social relationships with adults and with their peers that foster and guide school success. They also have the potential to bring students into close caring relationships with adults who can serve as mentors, advocates, role models, and friends. Unfortunately, the low-income and minority students who stand to gain the most from these sorts of activities are

often involved the least, a fact that has obvious implications for school policy. We return to these implications in Chapter 9, where more specific suggestions for school change are offered.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research discussed in this chapter was made possible through generous grants to the first author from the Spencer Foundation (MG #199900129) and the U.S. Department of Education/OERI (#R305T990174). We also wish to acknowledge all the students and staff from Hillside High School who have contributed to this work, and most especially we thank the students and teachers involved with MSA, whose many conversations with us have provided the basis for our understanding of this peer group.

NOTES

1. First- and second-generation students of Mexican descent typically refer to themselves as Mexican, irrespective of their country of birth. Some were born in Mexico; more were born in the United States, but in both cases most refer to themselves and are referred to by non-Mexican students at HHS as Mexicans. The term connotes ethnicity rather than nationality. However, not all Mexican-descent students identify themselves or are identified by others as "Mexican." Students whose parents are college educated, middle class, and assimilated into mainstream American culture are more likely to identify themselves as Mexican Americans. At HHS such students are few in number.

2. This estimate is based on the median family income for the Appleton census tracts with the highest concentrations of Mexican-descent families (U.S. Census, 2000b) and on data provided by the regional director of the Migrant Education Program regarding the average earnings of migrant workers (personal communication, July 23, 2002).

3. Following students' own usage, we refer to non-Hispanic White students as "Whites" or in some cases, when quoting students, as "Americans." We also recognize that these terms—*White* and *Americans*—are social constructions and that students of Mexican descent at HHS may themselves be both White and American, as well as Mexican.

4. To be eligible for MEP services, a child must have moved from one school district to another within the past 3 years in order to obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing, or to accompany family members seeking this kind of work. Each migratory move can initiate a new period of eligibility. Of the 160 migrant students in our sample, 146 received MEP services during high school; the other 14 received services prior to high school.

5. Coauthors Livier Bejinez (1998) and Cony Rolón collected much of the field data on the Migrant Education Program and the MSA club. Nicole Hidalgo, herself

a HHS graduate, assisted with field research on the larger school context, including classroom observations and student and teacher interviews. She also carried out research on Mexican students' participation in cheerleading (Hidalgo, 2001).

6. These comments come from an open-ended survey on club and sports participation completed by 170 HHS students in grades 9 through 12, including 72 students of Mexican descent.

7. MEP teachers are not part of the regular teaching staff at HHS but rather provide supplemental instruction and other forms of support to migrant students and their families (Bejinez, 1998; Gibson & Bejinez, 2002).

8. Student comments come from a survey given to 64 MSA members in March 2002 and from student interviews.

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