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ABSTRACT

In an ethnographic study, teachers investigated a cultural difference between Anglos and Hispanics involving organization of space and activities at home, and applied the findings to high school classroom organization. The research was undertaken in a small community where a significant proportion of Hispanic students have English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction at school. Visits to Hispanic homes and interviews with their inhabitants found that household life often allows more fluid boundaries between spaces and activities than is found in mainstream Anglo homes. Schools in the United States generally favor the Anglo style over the Hispanic, ignoring or even inhibiting Hispanic communication conventions. One high school ESL teacher designed her classroom using Hispanic stylistic parameters, with no clock, an open door, and less rigid use of time, and encouraged students to speak Spanish and help each other. The teacher took a role closer to that of a mother than a supervisor. Observation of interactions within the room found the atmosphere to approximate more closely the fluid Hispanic home environment, with students feeling positively about it, and ultimately treating it as a haven. Attendance and effort of lower-achieving Hispanic students improved. Implications are discussed. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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The Organization of Space and Activities among Latinos: A Strategy for Making School More Culturally Familiar

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Heath (1983), Philips (1983) and others have described various differences in interactional style between U.S. minority groups and mainstream Anglos. They show how such differences can make some minority students appear unmotivated or unskilled in school—when judged by mainstream Anglo norms—and can thus contribute to disproportionate minority school failure. This paper describes a stylistic difference between many Latinos and mainstream Anglos, one involving the organization of space and activities at home. Briefly, Latino household life often allows more fluid boundaries between spaces and activities than one finds in mainstream Anglo homes. U.S. schools almost always favor the Anglo style over the Latino one. This paper describes and evaluates a classroom designed by the second author to match the Latino home style. The paper is organized as follows: ethnographic background on the community studied; a description of how Latinos often organize space and activities at home; a discussion of the mismatch between this organization and that practiced in U.S. schools; background information on the second author's high school ESL classroom; and results of our ethnographic study of this classroom.

"Simultaneity" in Havertown

The classroom innovation and the ethnographic research described in this paper occurred in a small rural American town ("Havertown"[1]) far from Mexico, and far from any sizable Latino community. About 200 Latinos, mostly from Mexico or Southern Texas, live in Havertown. Virtually all of the adults have come to work at a local meat processing plant. At any given time, about 50 Latino children are enrolled in the local schools (2-3% of the total school population). Turnover is very high, as families regularly leave town for other jobs or to return south. In the high school, the site of this study, there are between 15 and 20 Latino students. Between 20 and 40% test as "limited English proficient," and many of the rest have trouble with academic English. Margaret Contreras taught at this high school for 3 years, where she designed and staffed an ESL room for the Latino students. All the students attended mainstream classes, but many were pulled out of one or two classes a day in order to work in the ESL room. The other three authors observed the ESL room daily for two

[1]All names and many identifying details have been changed.

months, and interviewed teachers and students, as part of an ongoing (now year-long) ethnographic study of the Havertown Latino community.

Latino adolescents have mixed feelings about life in Havertown. On arrival they usually suffer culture shock at being transplanted into a community so devoid of Latinos. Margaret spent many hours with new students—often in tears—who refused even to leave the ESL room for fear of the unfamiliar, totally Anglo world of the school. The adolescents miss their Spanish-speaking friends, and Spanish language radio (although many families do have satellite dishes and watch Univision). Due to the lack of friends, relatives and familiar activities they often find rural American life sterile and boring. The transience of Latino families also takes a toll. As reported by Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992), the turnover of workers in this sort of meatpacking job can be 6-8% a *month*. Turnover among Havertown Latinos approaches this at times. Even children from families resident for several years often speculate that they will be leaving soon, and this expectation disrupts their commitments to school and friends.

On the other hand, many adolescents and their parents appreciate the quality of the schools—which they find far better than those in southern Texas or rural Mexico. Some parents remain at extremely difficult jobs just so their children can finish school in Havertown. Many adolescents and their parents also value the lack of drugs and gang violence. Students report that they feel safe here, and parents worry less about the bad influences their children might fall under. The primary reason for these Latinos' presence in Havertown, however, is work. As described comprehensively by Griffith and Kissam (1995), recent changes in mechanization and some disintegration of job-finding networks have disrupted the migration patterns of many agricultural workers. These workers now value a *steady* job above all else, and they find that in Havertown. The jobs are exhausting, dirty, and (at least from a mainstream American point of view) low-paying. But workers get steady work and ample overtime year-round, and there is no shortage of new applicants.

When visiting the homes of these Latinos, the first author (a typical Anglo in this respect) has been overwhelmed by the level of noise and activity. The entire extended family, plus visitors, generally occupy the central area of the house—usually the kitchen and living room. Many activities often go on simultaneously, and in the same place: the TV is

on; children are doing homework; more than one conversation is occurring, in person or on the phone; people transact business activities (selling things to visitors, filling out tax forms, etc.); some of the women are cooking; music is playing; neighbors are dropping by to borrow something or to chat; and family members are coming and going on various errands. Most amazing to the Anglo observer, people seem able to attend to several of these activities at once. While making progress on their homework or their tax forms, people chime in at exactly the right moment with some comment for the ongoing conversation. There is generally a feeling of warm togetherness in such a scene, which is readily extended to guests. These Latinos report that they like this arrangement in the home, because it allows them to communicate and help each other with the various tasks, and because it makes them feel connected to the group. One adolescent was horrified when the first author asked why he didn't do homework alone in his room. He would feel alone and uncomfortable there, he said, and he would also be cut off from others' help.

We have been unable to find an extended treatment of this cultural pattern in the literature. Vélez-Ibáñez (1993; personal communication) describes something similar, as the "simultaneity" of activities in time and space. He reports that spatial and temporal boundaries between activities are generally more fluid among Latinos than among Anglos. Some other researchers refer to this pattern in passing. Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon (1994), for instance, describe scenes from daily Mexican-American home life that involve the TV blaring, children playing noisily, adults and older children engaged in academic or business tasks at the kitchen table. Gallimore and Goldenberg (1993) describe children moving from activity to activity among adults in Mexican-American homes. Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, and Perez-Stable (1987), among many others, describe the closeness among Latino family members that underlies the spatial proximity we have observed. Rothenberg (1995) describes how Latinos generally do not share Anglos' fetish with precise time. To supplement this evidence from the literature we have contacted several well-known Latino ethnographers, and asked whether they have observed the same fluid spatiotemporal activity boundaries as we. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez, Luis Moll, and Ana Celia Zentella all replied that they have in fact observed the same sort of fluidity—although they warn that more systematic research would be required to support more definite conclusions about Latinos in general.

A couple of qualifications are in order here. First, it is likely that the high spatiotemporal fluidity we observe in Havertown represents the Mexican working classes in particular. Rothenberg (1995) describes substantial differences between rural and urban Mexicans, and notes the often-cramped quarters of the rural working classes in Mexico. (Note, however, that Vélez-Ibáñez [1993] suspects middle-class Mexican households also have more fluid spatiotemporal boundaries than Anglo ones). Second, it is important to note that Latinos do of course have some spatial and temporal differentiation in their activities. Eisenberg (1986), for instance, describes family members going outside on the stoop to relax and socialize after chores are done. More fluid boundaries also do not mean that Latinos tolerate constant interruptions. Valdés (1996) describes how respect for parents keeps children from interrupting their activities until the parents finish. We have observed such boundaries among Latinos too. We claim merely that the spatial and temporal boundaries between activities are *more* fluid among many Latinos than among middle class U.S. Anglos. Mainstream Anglo homes have relatively firm spatial and temporal boundaries around activities: children often do homework separately in their rooms, until they are finished—and if they need help an adult goes to their room; people watch TV in the living room, and the TV will often go off when dinner or another activity commences; parents pay bills at a desk, in an office or study, etc. More research would be required to document the extent of this difference among various sub-groups, but a difference clearly exists between mainstream Anglos and the less Americanized Latino families in Havertown.

Mismatch

Carrasquillo and Rodríguez (1996) and Gennessee (1994) remind us that language minority students face three simultaneous challenges in school: learning the majority language; learning the academic subject matter; and learning the majority communicative conventions. The third of these is often overlooked, as most language minority students get most of their instruction from teachers with little training in recognizing subtle cultural and communicative differences (Spangenberg-Urbschat & Pritchard, 1994). The subtle difference in fluidity of spatial and temporal boundaries that we have observed might well cause problems for Latino students in U.S. schools. Most U.S. high schools enact an extreme

version of the mainstream Anglo pattern, as spatial and temporal boundaries are strictly policed. Each subject matter has its own room and its own time during the day, and teachers generally discourage students from importing other activities into the time and place reserved for a given subject. Many Anglo students have trouble tolerating this rigid separation of activities. One imagines that it might cause even greater problems for Latinos used to more fluid boundaries.

Before exploring this issue further, however, we must briefly examine the "difference" hypothesis: that minority school failure can often be explained by a mismatch between minority and mainstream cultural beliefs or styles. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995), Valdés (1996), and Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon (1994) argue against a simple difference hypothesis. They emphasize the complexity of Latino practices and beliefs, and the existence of substantial individual differences among Latinos. We agree about this complexity, and that cultural differences cannot suffice to explain disproportionate Latino school failure. We do not claim to characterize all Latino families, nor to explain most Latino school failure. Nonetheless, we do claim to describe a more fluid organization of space and activities that exists in many Latino families, especially among the lower classes in Mexico. And our research shows that selective use of this more fluid organization in U.S. high schools can help some Latino students' performance there.

Having spent many years in Colombia and among Latinos in the U.S., Margaret Contreras had personal experience with more fluid spatiotemporal boundaries before she began teaching. She designed her ESL room with this in mind, by arranging more fluid boundaries between activities in order to help Latino students feel more at home. She hoped that this sort of familiar organization for activities would help Latino students do better academic work.[2] The room was designed for "limited-English-proficient" students, as a place for special ESL classes and for tutoring in Spanish. In fact, the few students who qualified as "LEP" went to another building for their one or two ESL classes each day (at other times

[2]From personal experience Margaret was aware that schools in Latin America, and Mexico in particular, themselves have quite rigid spatial and temporal boundaries. She did not plan to mimic Latino schools, but to provide one room in school which felt more like a Latino home.

these students attend mainstream classes, and occasionally Margaret or another Spanish-speaking tutor will go with them to translate). Thus Margaret's room was available most of the time for any Latino student who wanted help, or needed someone to proctor a test, etc.

Margaret describes her goals for the room as follows: to create a more comfortable learning environment; to provide a place where students can feel proud of their language and culture; and to create a sense of community and mutual responsibility among the Latino students. To accomplish these goals she organized activities in the room somewhat differently than the Anglo norm. Students could enter and leave the room at will, without regard for passes. There was deliberately no clock. While in the room students were expected to work on something, but allowed to wander off-topic for a while before going back to their task. Fluid boundaries, as Margaret said, do not mean lack of substance—just a different organization of it. She encouraged students to help each other, hoping that they would both build community and draw on each others' energy. Everyone was encouraged to speak Spanish. And Margaret supported all projects or activities on Latino topics: students with class projects came to the room for support, and school-wide projects like "Latin Day" used the room as their home base.

Findings

The three other authors spent two months observing Margaret's classroom. We found that the room did indeed approximate the fluid spatiotemporal activity boundaries of local Latino homes. Many Latino (and some other) students moved into and out of the room during free periods, or during their classes for help on specific assignments. Margaret let students stop one activity and join another when they wished, and waited a few minutes before bringing them back to their original task. As we observed them doing at home, the students attended to more than one activity at once—and managed to progress on their assignments while still participating in other activities. Students did appear tied together as a group, and helped each other with their assignments. On one occasion, for instance, a math teacher wanted her three Latino students to do oral reports to the whole class in Spanish. These reports became a main topic of conversation in the ESL room for several days, as other students helped these three prepare. One of the three was a shy boy who did not want to do

the report, but encouragement and support from his Latino peers led him to follow through with it (even though, when he gave the actual report, he did so in English).

Margaret told the rest of us that there are two primary roles she could have adopted towards her Latino students: boss or mother. If she were the *jefe*, students would have complied but withdrawn. She chose instead to be the *madre*. This fit with her organization of the room like a Latino home, and the students accepted her as a quasi-maternal figure. The room had the warm feel of a Latino home.[3] Margaret often referred to herself as a "proud mother," and to the students as "*my* students." Over the first year she established relationships with students, such that they knew she would accept them regardless of their behavior. This allowed Margaret to accomplish discipline in a new way. Rothenberg (1995) and Valdés (1996) describe how Latino children are often particularly concerned not to upset or disappoint their mothers. Margaret did not have to resort to extrinsic reinforcement like grades and detentions with her students, because they knew she cared and did not want to let her down. Once, when one of the boys had gotten into a fight and was awaiting punishment in the office, he dropped his stoic expression when Margaret entered and said: "I'm sorry I let you down." This concern not to disappoint her apparently prevented the boys from acting out on many occasions.

Students felt positively about Margaret's room. Some said that it "feels like home," and most of them noted its comfortable feel. Many reported it was the only place in school where they could comfortably speak Spanish. They appreciated the opportunity to chat and joke, but all insisted that they were also able to concentrate and get work done. Some students credited Margaret's concern for them with reversing their impressions of school as hostile and pointless. A couple of particularly tough boys—whose own mothers were down south for months at a time—treated her as a mother. They confided in her, which was an accomplishment given the suspicion these urban boys brought to every situation. Some boys

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[3]The third author, who grew up in a Mexican home in South Texas, called Margaret's room her "home away from home." She looked forward to her ethnographic work every day, and visited many more days that we had planned because she found the room a culturally familiar haven. She appreciated in particular the constant activity and the camaraderie among teacher and students.

brought her mother's day presents, and were particularly affectionate that day.

Many Anglo school staff, however, found the room overwhelming and chaotic. They did appreciate having someone in the building who spoke Spanish and had some expertise in bilingual education—because, as many teachers freely admitted, "we don't know what to do with them." Several teachers were also great fans of Margaret's, and felt she "made a big difference" for the Latino students. But most school staff generally interpreted the multiple activities and fluid boundaries in Margaret's room as evidence of sloppy academic work. As they conceived it, Margaret might be doing successful "mentoring," and perhaps occasional "tutoring," but she did *not* do "instruction." To them, Margaret's students seemed to be "hanging around." They also did not like Margaret's disdain for hall passes. Some went so far as to call Margaret "unprofessional," and to attribute the organization of her classroom to her "sociable personality." For these Anglo staff, professionalism required boundaries between activities and distance between people. They did not seem aware of cultural differences in this realm.

Evaluation

By Margaret's last year, the room had become a haven for the Latino students. Even those fluent in English and at the top of their class came to the room—to chat, to do their work, and to help others. One academically successful girl, who had sworn only a year earlier never to speak Spanish again, was willingly translating passages and tutoring other students in Spanish. Many students opened up enough to discuss sensitive topics like boyfriends and pregnancy with Margaret. Due primarily to her encouragement and administrative help, several Latinas have gone on to college. The students also came to care for each other. Whenever someone was in trouble, many people were concerned about the problem and willing to help. So Margaret succeeded in building community and providing a culturally familiar space within the school. This in itself had salutary effects: formerly disruptive students were less so; students skipped school less often; and students would attempt assignments in Margaret's room that they would not have bothered with otherwise. But did this substantially improve Latino students' academic performance?

At first it seemed not to. The academically successful Latino students probably would

have done well regardless. The less successful did benefit some from the room, but they nonetheless failed many classes. A cynic might say that, while the ESL room may have created some community, it primarily kept bad students out of trouble until they decided to drop out. As we have no control group, we cannot definitively refute this cynic. We can, however, compare results from the same room during 1996-97, when it has reverted to a more traditional style.[4] The room is now used almost exclusively by LEP students, for formal instruction. Whereas before there might have been six or eight students in and out of the room during a given period, now we have observed no more than three. Student activities are much more spatially segregated now, with staff using a table in an adjoining room for students working on unrelated projects. There is no longer student work on the walls. There is also a new clock.

LEP students and those who were formerly successful in school are doing about as well as before. These students, however, report that "everyone misses Margaret." Even though current staff might be effective instructors, these students miss the support and camaraderie. Tellingly, students no longer know much about what other Latinos in the school are doing. When asked how some other Latino student is doing, people now report that they "haven't seen her." We have also observed teasing among the Latino students—particularly the less successful calling the more successful "school-girl," and the like. Losing Margaret has had most serious consequences for the less academically successful students. These students report that they never go to the ESL room any more. Current staff try to motivate them with extrinsic reinforcements like grades and punishments, but these are not working. Some staff have good intentions, but because they are perceived as unsupportive the students will not give them a chance.

It seems, then, that Margaret's more fluid ESL room did help in three ways: it made students feel more comfortable in school; it built community among Latino students; and it improved attendance and effort among some lower-achieving students (although these students still failed many courses). But can we credit the more fluid spatial and temporal boundaries

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[4]Margaret left the school at the end of 1995-96, partly because of budget cuts and partly because of conflicts between her and the Anglo staff whose views were summarized above.

with this success? Couldn't their improvement have resulted from the fact that Margaret obviously cared about them? Or couldn't it have been her maternal persona and the family-like classroom organization that helped? From this study we cannot disentangle these factors. But perhaps they should not be disentangled in practice. One salient way that Margaret accomplished her success was by making her room more like a Latino family. She did this in part through more fluid spatial and temporal boundaries, and this aspect of her room seemed to have an effect. One might accomplish similar effects without the more fluid boundaries, but why not include them?

We are ambivalent in answering this last question. Our study shows at least some positive results from using more fluid boundaries in a classroom—teacher, students, and researchers felt more comfortable there because of this alternate organization. But many Latino students also plan to stay in a society that does not appreciate such fluid boundaries. And the Anglo style of compartmentalizing activities has its own strengths. Thus we run into the difficult but central question Valdés (1996) ends her book with: how can we help Latino students succeed in the U.S. without losing their own distinct and perfectly functional cultural patterns? As Valdés and others show, Anglo schooling can undermine Latino values like the emphasis on family obligations and connectedness. Could we organize some spaces in U.S. schools so as to preserve the value Latinos place on connectedness, but still have students learn to navigate mainstream U.S. patterns? As educators go about the hard practical work of answering this question, we suggest that they also attend to the spatiotemporal boundaries of activities.

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