The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth by Gilberto Q. Conchas. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. 147 pages, ISBN# 0-8077-4660-6

How and why are some students of color able to achieve academic success despite the limited opportunities that come along with attending urban schools? *The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth* offers important and informative scholarship that highlights the factors that contribute to school success among urban youth. In contrast to the general trend of focusing on the problems and challenges that contribute to school failure in urban schools, including lack of resources and cultural deficiencies, Conchas investigates and presents the successful school characteristics of high-achieving students of color. His findings draw from his study of academically successful black, Latino, and Vietnamese-American students attending an urban high school located in Northern California, "Baldwin High School." Using the students' voices, Conchas seeks to uncover how and why these students of color excel in school despite limited opportunity, and to reveal how urban schooling may empower youth and facilitate success. The following two questions drive this study and represent the heart of the book: (1) How and why do some low-income students achieve academic success despite urban school inequality? (2) How do sociocultural processes shape low-income minority school success?

A theoretical framework linking cultural-ecological assessments of students of color with institutional explanations of school success guides Conchas' findings. His framework directly "situates race, ethnicity, and student success at the center of the analysis through a comparative racial formation lens" (p. 6). Beyond the usual focus on a single race, this comparative racial and ethnic study expands our knowledge of urban schools by exploring inter-group and intra-group differences. The case studies of black, Latino, and Vietnamese-American students expose whether social scaffolding implemented in an urban high school equally supports students across divergent racial, cultural, and structural arrangements. "The case studies delve into how these high-achieving racial minority youth interpret and respond to social scaffolding institutionalized in the various school programs imbued with college-culture ethos" (p. 15).

Conchas calls out repeatedly for collaboration and unity across racial lines, reiterating numerous times how racial segregation among students and faculty negatively impacts school culture and student academic success. His description of Baldwin High reveals its bold and blatant racial tension. *The Color of Success* points out three ways that racial segregation harms the schooling experiences for all. First, racial stereotypes impact teachers' perceptions of student's academic potential. Therefore teachers' attitudes and expectations

(tainted by racist thinking) affect how students experience school. Finally, given this context, students self-segregate.

Digging deeper into Baldwin High's structure and culture, Conchas studies three college preparatory academies present at the school: the Medical Academy, the Graphics Academy, and the Advanced Placement track. The majority of the book, chiefly focused on the Medical Academy, reveals how these "school within a school" programs impact students' success. Readers quickly come to understand that the Medical Academy serves as the best model for empowering urban youth and encouraging and facilitating their ability to excel. Unlike the other two programs, the Medical Academy teachers, believing all students can learn at high academic standards, commit themselves to recruiting a racially mixed population that closely reflects the racial make-up of the school. They put forth concerted efforts to include students deemed low-achieving (i.e., "high-potential") learners. Through rigorous recruitment efforts, teachers and former students in the Medical Academy reach disenchanted students and students from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, creating a truly diverse pool of students for the program.

Conversely, the Graphics Academy and the Advanced Placement track target and recruit students who are already high achieving, particularly those excelling in mathematics. A counselor supplies the director with a list of students with the highest math test scores; these students receive invitations to participate in the Graphics Academy. As a result of this recruiting process, their racial demographics mirror those routinely associated with tracking—an over-representation of white and Asian-American students in comparison to the whole school population.

Each racial group has a chapter devoted exclusively to detailing its unique schooling experiences. These chapters help readers to understand how races experience academic success differently. Chapter 3, entitled "'Ain't No Thing But a Chicken Wing': Constructing Black Student Success," portrays a backdrop of contemporary and historical challenges black students face in schools and shows how they fare specifically at Baldwin High, with a close look at the Medical Academy in particular. African American students at Baldwin cite the following three factors as key to their school success, "(1) the importance of family and home life; (2) the significance of adult role models; and (3) the role of the school context." Overall, black students thrive on supportive teacher-student and peer-peer relationships, a challenging course load, and a small learning community that emphasizes teamwork.

Chapter 4, entitled "'I Want to Make a Difference': Forging Optimism Among Latino Students," discusses research on Latino school achievement generally and the schooling experiences of Latinos at Baldwin High in particular. Conchas documents Latinos' feelings of isolation and invisibility at Baldwin High

and their struggles with identity formation across the school's stratified system. Among their available choices, Latinos in the Medical Academy fare best, as they too benefit from a structured positive learning atmosphere and collaboration and harmony among all races that promotes a strong sense of belonging. Latino perspectives bring to life supportive institutional and cultural processes as significant in the creation of a community of high-achieving students.

Chapter 5, "'We Just Make the Best of What We Have': Understanding Vietnamese-American Student Motivation and Success," illustrates issues and challenges particular to Asian-American students and details how Vietnamese-American students at Baldwin High experience school. The academy the student participates in impacts the way Vietnamese-American students view their own model minority stereotype. The Medical Academy provides conditions for Vietnamese-American students to look critically at the pervasive stereotype. These students understand that it is detrimental and unfair to categorize all Asian-Americans as high achievers, recognizing that many need extra help and support in school. Conversely, Vietnamese-American students in the Graphics academy and the Advanced Placement track accept a model minority status, attributing their academic success to their upbringing and regarding their parents as integral motivators to their academic success. The voices of Vietnamese-American students suggest that different institutional academic structures and cultures form different types of student agency.

Directly from the voices of successful urban youth, Conchas shows educators organizational and structural ways to empower youth and facilitate their school success. Readers come to understand that schools need to be "racially well integrated, foster a sense of community and teamwork, and provide valuable educational and career opportunities" for students (p. 18). Most significantly, Conchas advocates for small learning communities as he believes they are central for student engagement. He writes, "There are too few programs available… Educational policy must recognize the need for more specialized programs that serve distinct students populations" (p. 122).

Conchas' suggestions about how urban students can attain school success are important; however his call for implementing more programs like the Medical Academy, while enabling some to excel academically, leaves the *majority* of non-academy students behind. While promising and successful, the academies and the Advanced Placement track leave larger unjust structures and outcomes at Baldwin High intact. Conchas' book neglects the reality that the vast majority of Baldwin High students, not fortunate enough to access the Medical Academy or the other two programs, are left to experience a school where failure is more likely. Thus, in advocating for more restrictive programs rather than schoolwide reform, Conchas' maintains the status quo, keeping urban school success limited.

Academy students' successes in schools may merely represent the special treatment of a few.

Given his argument, Conchas could advocate transforming the entire school culture and structure to more closely match those successful components of the Medical Academy model. All students can potentially benefit from high standards, a challenging and rigorous course load, supportive teachers, a cooperative environment, and collaboration and unity across all races. For example, one student writes, "The academy makes you do good, and the teachers come and tell you that anything is possible. There's a lot there to make you wanna do good… The academy is there to support you when you need it cause without the support thing… you wouldn't be able to do anything" (p. 37). All students can benefit and should have access to supportive educational settings.

Exclusive specialized programs like the Medical Academy perpetuate tracking, a system notorious for structuring inequality in urban schools, as well as schools in general. While the Medical Academy successfully challenges traditional notions of tracking by including a substantial number of low-income students of color who are troubled academically, the program itself is still a form of tracking, as not all students receive equal access. Many notable educators suggest that detracking efforts in schools are possible and can potentially allow *all* students access to a quality education and academic success (Oakes, 2005).

Tracking, as presently practiced all across our nation's schools, results in the disproportionate placement of low-income students of color into low-level and remedial classes, and in the over-representation of white and Asian-American students in advanced and honors courses (Braddock, 1990; Oakes, 1990). Also, minority and students of lower socio-economic status "participate in higher rates in vocational curricula and at lower rates of academic curricula than do affluent and white students" (Oakes, Guiton, 1995, p. 4). Furthermore, within the vocational area, low-income and students of color disproportionately take courses related to low-skill jobs; whereas whites and affluent students take classes that teach general skills or that include substantial academic content (Oakes, 1992).

In short, tracking structures are grounded in widespread and deeply rooted beliefs that human capacity differs according to race and social class. Thus, this system ultimately serves to perpetuate the status quo. Because of the inequities in opportunity it creates, tracking is a major contributor to the continuing gaps in achievement between disadvantaged and affluent students and between minorities and whites (Oakes, 1992; Oakes, Guiton 1995). Therefore, it is tremendously promising that educators and researchers report that detracking schools can be done successfully (Ascher, 1992; Cooper, 1996; Oakes, 2005).

Ultimately, *The Color of Success* is an important and valuable resource for educators and all those interested in bettering schools systems, to read and consider in efforts to reform school structures. However, Conchas' book would be

even more useful if he advocated that his findings and suggestions be applied schoolwide so that all urban students, who traditionally perform poorly in school, have an equal opportunity to succeed. Perhaps then, our nation's schools can genuinely symbolize equality and democracy, and truly leave no child behind.

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Reviewer

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