

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: *The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth* by Gilberto Q. Conchas

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32f1f0c6>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 2(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Chiu, Grace

Publication Date

2006-06-14

DOI

10.5070/D422000569

Peer reviewed

The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth by Gilberto Q. Conchas. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. 147 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-4660-8

When an urban school success story is depicted by the lights and cameras of Hollywood, we find ourselves captivated by the mythologized teacher who stands like a beacon amidst young brown faces who are stereotypically portrayed as violent, dangerous and shiftless. Unfortunately, movies like these tend to shape myopic notions of what works in the schooling of urban youth: the one, irreplaceable educator who leaves an indelible mark on every student. Off-screen, we are reminded that such pedestal hoisting often leads to the neglect of more systemic analyses of effective urban schools. In *The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth*, Gilberto Q. Conchas goes beyond conventional accounts of school failure and the lone superstar teacher and provides fresh insight into the cultural processes and structural forces that contribute to the high achievement of Black, Latino and Vietnamese high school students. Using students' own voices and perspectives, Conchas provides a comparative analysis that reveals alternatives to current practices and structures of inequality that are prevalent in urban schools today.

In a mixed-method approach, Conchas primarily employs case study methodology, but also incorporates a smaller quantitative study drawn from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). While the NELS data is not introduced until the end of the book, Conchas' use of statistical generalization largely substantiates the theoretical expectations he initially confirms through qualitative findings. Conchas interviewed and observed 80 high-achieving students of color who participated in at least one of three "school-within-a-school" career academy programs at Baldwin High School: the Advanced Placement (AP) program, the Graphics Academy and the Medical Academy. Although each program yielded impressive results and profoundly influenced its participants, Conchas reveals significant programmatic and pedagogical differences between the three.

According to Conchas, unlike the AP program and Graphics Academy, the Medical Academy did not exclusively recruit "high track," predominately white and Asian students. Instead, the Medical Academy recruited a racially heterogeneous population that represented low-, middle-, and high-achieving groups; at least two-thirds of the academy's entering class consisted of underachieving students. While the other two programs engendered competition, stress, and isolation, the Medical Academy nurtured a racially integrated, collaborative learning community among its students, which was demonstrated by a high level of camaraderie and students' ability to associate with classmates from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, Medical Academy students

were more likely to express a desire to use their future careers to help revitalize urban communities. Conchas discusses how the culture of an academic program like the Medical Academy is crucial in determining how students interact with one another and define academic success. He is careful to point out that “urban schools by themselves are hard-pressed to circumvent structural inequality at the wider social and economic levels, but they can have a powerful effect on students’ experience of social conditions” (p. 62). Ultimately, *The Color of Success* demonstrates how both the structure and culture of school programs are in fluid interplay with the development of student agency.

Conchas devotes a chapter to each of the three racial or ethnic groups represented in the book, and uses individual case studies of high-achieving students of color to critique the cultural-ecological paradigm and substantiate his belief that such a simplistic framework “does not allow for within-group variations nor does it emphasize institutional processes and support systems within the school that can mediate school success” (p. 113). For example, Conchas observes that while Asian students generally benefited from the *model minority* stereotype, Vietnamese Medical Academy students viewed the stereotype more critically and “were quick to point out inconsistencies” (p. 88). Conchas also notes that the deliberate racial integration of the Medical Academy significantly affected its students, as they “were cognizant of the changes occurring within themselves concerning racial and ethnic stereotypes” (p. 72).

In his respective analyses of Black, Latino and Vietnamese students, Conchas calls attention to the gender differences within each of these groups, and acknowledges that educational socialization differs not only across class and race lines, but also across gender lines. For example, he explains that while low-income African American males thrived in the Medical Academy and recognized the program’s value in helping them get into college, they placed their primary career aspirations on athletic fame and considered college to be their *back up plan*. Similarly, in his discussion about high-achieving Vietnamese females, Conchas documents students’ painful experiences that point to the tension between their aspirations to attend college and the sexist values held by their families, and in identifying this tension indirectly points to the importance of educators in Vietnamese females’ identity formation.

The only element that is lacking in *The Color of Success* is a more critical analysis of the social reproduction of white affluence that occurs within the other two academic programs at Baldwin High School. Conchas points out:

One interesting difference, however, between the [Black] Medical and Graphics Academy females was the Medical Academy students’ desire to pursue medical careers and provide health care in urban communities. This pattern was repeated among both male and female Medical Academy Latino and Asian students in this study. Low-income Medical Academy students were most likely to say they

wanted to return to urban communities and work, while middle-income female Graphics Academy students expressed no interest in revitalizing inner cities when they became engineers or architects (p. 57).

Meanwhile, these same students from the AP and Graphics Academy experienced high levels of depression and stress, reporting “mental and physical alienation from the rest of the school culture and the larger high school in general” (p. 114). Thus, the question begs to be asked, *Who defines success? What are the costs associated with attaining success?* Although he is critical of the ways American public schools “both assimilate and discriminate against minority group children” (p. 12), Conchas neglects to address persisting and opposing notions of success, the word prominently featured in this book’s title. Conchas points out that the Medical Academy nurtured students to be more collaboratively minded, but his readers would benefit if he further problematized and challenged different notions of success by specifically discussing the intersection of and dissonance between *success* and *high academic achievement*. I would argue that the two terms are not exclusively synonymous, especially when examining case studies where high-achieving students of color abandon the struggle of their people for other ideals.

Nonetheless, *The Color of Success* should be read by education scholars and practitioners alike. It is both refreshing and captivating, as it not only critiques the structural inequities and racial prejudice within urban schools, but sheds light on viable solutions such as creating smaller learning communities within schools, providing caring teachers with more opportunities to foster cross-ethnic engagement, ensuring healthy collaboration among students, and more importantly, introducing low-tracked students into a culture of academic achievement. Conchas provides us with a compelling illustration of what work in urban schools actually looks like, and with impeccable clarity discusses how these lessons might be translated into the daily lives of schools, educators, and students.

Reviewer

Grace Chiu is a doctoral student in the Urban Schooling division of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is a former first grade teacher and literacy professional developer, and has worked with urban youth in Los Angeles, Boston, and Baltimore.