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## Funds of Knowledge that Support Teacher-Student Relationships: A Narrative Study of Effective Teachers

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*Loyola Marymount University*

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## Funds of Knowledge that Support Teacher-Student Relationships: A Narrative Study of Effective Teachers

James Allan Pasto

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Funds of Knowledge that Support Teacher-Student Relationships:

A Narrative Study of Effective Teachers

by

James Pasto

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2014

Funds of Knowledge that Support Teacher-Student Relationships:

A Narrative Study of Effective Teachers

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by

James Pasto

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This dissertation written by James Pasto, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

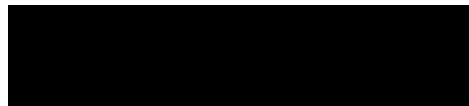
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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the person who was always there to motivate me when needed, pick me up when I was down, deal with me when I was stressed, and above all else continue to love and support me on my journey. To my beloved wife Lindsay without who this dissertation would never have been completed, thank you for everything.

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## ABSTRACT

Funds of Knowledge that Support Teacher-Student Relationships:

A Narrative Study of Effective Teachers

by

James Pasto

Latino/a students currently have lower graduation and higher dropout rates than their white peers. This population of students also performs lower on state exams. This qualitative study explored teacher-student relationships and their impact on Latino/a student populations. Using Funds of Knowledge and a social justice perspective, the study characterized positive teacher-student relationships and ways that schools can support their formation. This dissertation study consisted of two rounds of interviews; participants were interviewed individually and then as part of two focus groups. The first phase consisted of one-on-one interviews, where the participants were asked questions on effectiveness, teacher-student relationships, and administrative support. The results from these interviews were analyzed for themes. The themes were then brought to the participants in forms of two focus groups for further exploration and clarity. Findings indicate that teachers characterize six themes in positive teacher-student relationships; student voice, humanization, trust, openness, respect, and personal connections. Three areas of school support were also uncovered; this included community circle, time to

connect, and opportunities outside the classroom. The findings support the need for educators to be aware of the elements of positive relationships and to include these areas of school support in teacher and leader preparation programs.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

For the past three years, I served as an administrator for a charter management organization (CMO) located in Los Angeles. During this time, I worked at three different schools to turn around some of the lower performing schools in the organization. This process began with my first principal job, where I worked with staff to create an academic performance index (API) gain of 112 points. This reputation led to my being asked to take over as principal of one of our new high schools in the middle of a school year in order to help build the scholarly culture of the school. These turnaround efforts can be very difficult, since our CMO schools work with underserved populations. The mission of our CMO, nevertheless, is to ensure that all students graduate prepared for college success. Our schools exist in areas where students are not graduating from high school and those that do graduate are not always ready for college. This reality requires that all staff members on a campus approach the education of each student in ways that can effectively meet his or her particular needs.

As the principal at three different schools, I focused on one element that I believe has a profound impact on the achievement of students: relationships. I worked with students and staff members to create positive relationships between students and teachers, students and administration, teachers and administration, and parents with all staff members. This emphasis on relationships helped to support the turnaround of struggling schools and to increase the achievement of our students. I view every decision that is made at our schools through the lens of how to create better relationships on our campus. Throughout my career, this focus has driven me; and it is my belief in the power of relationships that underscores the research here. This

study reflects my burning desire to better understand relationships between students and teachers and how these relationships can increase student achievement, in ways that will prepare them for future college success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) is a CMO that operates 13 schools in Northeast Los Angeles and the Northeast San Fernando Valley. It consists of one elementary school, seven middle schools, and five high schools. The overwhelming majority (98%) of the students are Latino, and the overarching goal of the schools is to ensure every student graduates prepared for college. The schools have been successful by state measures, with API scores ranging from 750 to 907. As part of the work that the organization is doing to ensure that all of students are college ready, it partnered with the Gates foundation to increase teacher effectiveness. This work is known as The College Ready Promise (TCRP) and focuses on ensuring that highly effective teachers are in every classroom. This work led to the creation of an effective teaching rubric that is used in observation to provide more effective feedback and support to teachers (TCRP use permission granted see Appendix A).

Along with the rubric, several other factors are utilized to rate teacher effectiveness; these include student surveys, peer surveys, parent surveys, growth goals, and student growth on standardized tests (student growth percentile). All of these factors are combined to understand how effective teachers are performing with the students in their classroom. This system allows administrators to better meet the needs of teachers and students; it also helps to identify highly effective teachers who are increasing the learning and achievement of their students. These

highly effective teachers offer a unique opportunity to understand those practices that are working to increase the achievement of the students.

PUC is an organization that serves two very specific geographic areas in Los Angeles metropolitan area. The mission of PUC, as mentioned previously, is to ensure that every student graduates prepared for college success. To better meet that expressed need, educators must understand the conditions and educational needs of their students. Historically, Latino students in the United States perform more poorly than their White peers on a variety of educational metrics, including test scores, grade averages, and advanced placement (Darder & Torres, 2013). This state of affairs has created an achievement gap that has remained unchanged for decades, despite efforts to reduce and eliminate the disparities in achievement. Hence, there exists a clear gap between the performance of Latino students and their White peers.

Latino students also experience lower high school graduation rates and higher high school dropout rates as compared to their White peers. In 2009, 5.2% of White students dropped out of high school compared to 17.6% of Latinos; White students graduated 73.5% of the time, whereas Latino students graduated 51% of the time (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). These statistics stand in direct conflict with the mission of our organization, which is to ensure all students are college ready. As California switches to the Common Core standards that place an emphasis on critical thinking and literacy skills the relationship between teacher and student will become even more important. Moreover, this situation highlights the need for the charter organization to better understand ways to educate the Latino student population, as it continues to grow both nationally and in California.

The need to understand effective ways to educate the students we serve and my personal emphasis on relationships point to a need to better understand how teachers can impact students in the classroom. Research has been conducted that seeks to better understand the importance of the teacher-student relationship and how it can impact student achievement. Those studies found a significant connection between a student perception of the teacher-student relationship and student engagement in the classroom (Klem & Connell, 2004; O'Connor & McCartney 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). If students perceive the relationship to be positive, they are more likely to be engaged in the classroom and, therefore, are more likely to do well academically.

Research showed that teacher-student relationships can impact student motivation (Wentzel, 1998). Students can be more or less motivated depending on whether the relationship between teacher and student is positive or negative. Furthermore, connections were found between the teacher-student relationship and student achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). These studies all showed that relationships significantly impacted student achievement in the classroom, either positively or negatively, depending on the type of relationship students had with their teacher. It is possible that by understanding more substantively how these relationships were formed, one can better understand how to create future interactions that better meet students' educational needs.

Just as relationships impact student achievement, teacher effectiveness, as would be expected, also has an impact. Teacher effectiveness is something that my organization is currently involved in developing, through the initiative funded by the Gates Foundation. The goal of this study is to understand how to support teachers in the organization to become more



effective with their students. The goal is that all students will be taught by an effective teacher, which will then result in an increase in student achievement. Research demonstrated that effective teachers limit classroom disruptions, allow students frequent opportunities to assess learning, and readily identify gaps in student learning (Popp, Grant, & Stronge, 2011; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011).

Furthermore, several important dispositions can lead teachers to be more effective in the classroom. Teachers that are more effective are perceived as being fair and respectful with students, having a positive attitude in the classroom, and, thus, forming positive relationships with students (Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). Teachers who are effective create classrooms where students can learn effectively at a high rate. Both teacher-student relationships and effective teachers can have a positive impact on student achievement. In order to better educate students, it is important for researchers to examine these two elements of student achievement together.

Previous work regarding effective teachers was used in this study to better understand how relationships are formed in the classroom between teachers and students. In order to achieve this, the researcher examined PUC teachers identified, through multiple measures, to be effective in working with Latino students. To determine this, the scores from the teacher development system rubric used by PUC schools were the first element to determine effectiveness. A score of three or better was considered to be effective. Subsequently, the researcher used other data to examine effectiveness, such as past student performance (student growth percentile), existing student survey data, and years of teaching experience. These data

served as a starting point to explore the funds of knowledge that effective teachers had about creating positive teacher-student relationships in their classrooms.

### **Research Questions**

My experience with the issues of teacher-student relationships and effective teachers, as well as my organization's work with the Gates Foundation, has compelled me to examine teacher-student relationships and successful teachers of Latino students. Given the teacher's significance within the classroom, these two elements of education needed to be examined together, in order to better understand how to meet the educational needs of Latino student populations. Effective teachers work in a variety of ways to help their students achieve academically. Similarly, teacher-student relationships support students' achievement in the classroom. It is important to understand then how effective teachers create these relationships with their students. In order to best support teachers in creating effective teacher-student relationships, administrators need to understand how they can support teachers to be more effective in their classrooms. This study aimed to shed light on this issue by answering the following research questions:

- 1) How do effective teachers of Latino students within a charter management organization characterize effective student teacher relationships?
- 2) What do effective teachers need from administration to help create effective teacher-student relationships?

Along with these overarching research questions, specific focus was also placed upon those factors that both advance and limit effective teacher-student relationships, in the eyes of effective

teachers. In this way, this study aimed to provide a more complete picture of how to support the creation of positive relationships among students and their teachers.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the manner in which effective teachers characterized the teacher-student relationship and what they consider to be important factors that support teachers in creating effective relationships with Latino students. Effective teachers are in a position to offer a unique perspective about their experiences and, thus, can help other educators better understand how to reach and educate Latino students. Moreover, teacher voices can help other educators gain valuable insight into what is needed to educate a new generation of students.

For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that because these teachers are rated *effective*, according to the evaluation rubric and guidelines of the organization, they know how to create positive teacher-student relationships and possess knowledge of how to create effective relationships with students and how these relationships are established and nurtured within the classroom. Similarly, it was assumed that effective teachers are in an excellent position to provide valuable insight into how administrators can support the creation of positive teacher-student relationships. As such, their voices provided essential knowledge about how to best foster positive relationships, in order to increase the achievement of Latino students.

This study, as previously mentioned, was conducted utilizing The College Ready Promise (TCRP) evaluation instrument to identify highly effective teachers at PUC. These teachers have demonstrated a positive impact on the achievement of students. This means that teachers who participated in this study had already shown increases in the achievement of a predominantly

Latino student population. The teachers interviewed for this narrative study were selected based on their proven effectiveness in reversing the achievement gap, within the confines of their classroom according to the TCRP matrix. The lessons that can be gleaned from their reflections on the phenomenon of effective teacher-student relationships can potentially be used to help reverse the achievement gap beyond our classrooms, in schools across the state and nation.

Empirical knowledge about how effective teachers characterize teacher-student relationships can also help educational leaders understand how to create effective relationships and thereby help schools and districts foster an increase in the academic achievement of Latino students. Such an increase in achievement can potentially help shrink the achievement gap, increase high school graduation rates, and lower the high school dropout rate. Closer to home, the outcomes of this study may also help our charter organization to better achieve our mission of ensuring that all students graduate high school ready for college success.

### **Significance**

Latino children are the fastest growing population, across the nation. As the need for effective teachers to better meet the educational needs of Latino students continues to grow, it is important to hear the voices of effective teachers and begin to incorporate their knowledge and experience in the formation of policies and practices linked to academic achievement. The knowledge produced from their insights, well-grounded in effective practice, can help all educators and educational leaders to also become better grounded in principles of effective student engagement.

Hence, there is indeed valuable information to glean from the experience of teachers who have developed classroom approaches with their students that motivate and support them

academically. These teachers have helped students to achieve at a high rate and can now help other educators to better understand one of the most important elements for increasing student achievement—the teacher-student relationship. This research sought to shed light on the perceptions of successful teachers about relationships with students and examine how they build these relationships. This research also intended to assist educators in gaining insights into what administrators can do to help foster positive relationships at their schools.

Accordingly, recommendations are made that can help teacher education programs better prepare teachers to be effective when working with similar student populations. Researchers can also gain insight into how administrators can support and foster positive teacher-student relationship, which could be valuable for administrative and other educational leadership preparation programs, as well.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Justice Perspective**

It is important that educators strive to provide a socially just educational environment for all students. Nurturing, respectful, and equitable teacher-student relationships are key to creating such an environment. This study identified ways in which effective teachers characterize such relationships with their students and how administrators can more effectively support teachers in cultivating those relationships, within the context of a socially just mission.

As this research was conducted with charter school teachers who serve predominately Latino populations, it focused on better understanding the educational needs of these students. The education of minority students is one of the most important social justice issues of our time. It is imperative that all educators provide high quality educational opportunities to all students.

This sentiment was expressed in the work of Freire (1970), when he critiqued the *banking model of education*—where teacher-subjects deposit their knowledge into student-objects—and, thus, posited the need for educators and students to engage in problem-posing educational approaches, approaches that encourage horizontal communication and meaningful dialogue between students and their teachers. This pedagogical approach illuminates the need for educators to rethink the way they relate to their students and to place special focus on those populations that have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised.

This perspective also echoed the work of Antonia Darder (2002), who encouraged educators to engage and challenge practices that perpetuate social, political, and economic relationships of inequality. Effective teachers that undertake this work are considered to be especially important sources of knowledge, as they are the ones working to create the conditions for socially just and respectful relationships with all students in their classrooms. These teachers, according to Freire (1970), exhibit the courage and commitment to engage their *teaching as an act of love*, an indispensable quality of effective teachers (Darder, 2012). Freire (2005) insisted that:

It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short it is impossible to teach without a forged, and well-thought-out capacity to love. (p. 5)

It is, thus, imperative that educators come to better understand the ways in which teacher relationships with Latino students can enhance their academic success and how educators can work together to create a more socially just educational system.

## **Funds of Knowledge**

Although the primary lens through which this research was viewed is that of social justice, a subsequent theoretical frame also informs this study: the theory of *funds of knowledge*. The concept of funds of knowledge encompasses an understanding that each person has his/her own personal knowledge that is derived from a combination of cultural traits, history, and family life (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This means that every teacher, student, and parent brings a unique collection of information with him/her to the school. As such, it is important for educators to tap into these funds of knowledge, in order to better educate and learn from all school and community members. This research aimed to engage with effective teachers within a CMO, in order to better understand the funds of knowledge associated with their teaching that they, specifically, utilize in the construction of effective teacher-student relationship. As Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2005) argued, this is key in that “It is only through face-to-face interaction and one-to-one encounters with persons, through a mutually respectful dialog, that we can cross the constructions of difference” (p. 5).

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This study aimed to better understand how effective teachers characterize effective teacher-student relationships in their classrooms, through identifying the funds of knowledge that help them produce this phenomenon. In order to accomplish this, a narrative study was conducted to better understand the *stories* that teachers tell in regards to these essential relationships (Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished through the collection of narratives from a select group of teachers in order to gain insight into their perspectives of teacher-student relationship, specifically focused on their perceptions and descriptions of effective relationships

with their students, as well as the personal and environmental factors (with an emphasis on the support of school administrators) that support their practice.

Central to this research is an understanding of how an effective teacher is defined. As previously noted, there are several different factors that are consistently associated with teacher effectiveness. The ability to develop relationships that are fair and respectful, limit disruptions, and readily identify student learning gaps were all previously identified as characteristics that impact this phenomenon (Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011).

This research, however, did not aim to understand what makes teachers effective but, rather, how effective teachers characterize the different factors that result in effective teacher-student relationships. In this study, as noted earlier, effective teachers are identified based upon the teacher development system created through our CMO's work with the Gates Foundation. This assessment guideline was the primary way that teachers participating in this study were identified as effective and, thus, served as the selection criteria for participation in the study.

As such, this study focused on successful teachers of Latino students who work for this CMO. This CMO is comprised of 13 schools that serve students enrolled in grades K-12. It consists of one elementary school, seven middle schools, and five high schools. The student population is predominately Latino (98%) and serves over 4,000 students in total. In collaboration with three other CMOs, our network is involved in a project with the Gates Foundation centered on teacher effectiveness. The outcome of this work, as mentioned earlier, became known as TCRP, which served as the measurement criteria for effective teachers identified and selected for the study. The framework of TCRP includes a variety of factors: classroom observations, student growth percentiles, student, peer, and family surveys, and



individual growth goals. All of these factors are then included in an overall measurement, where each element is given a weight to develop a teacher score. This overall score serves to determine teacher effectiveness. The highest scoring teachers were identified across the CMO for inclusion in this study.

Eight teachers deemed *effective*, as described previously, were invited to participate in the study, with a minimum requirement of six teacher participants. Once the teachers were identified, they were interviewed individually to collect their stories about effective teacher-student relationships. Interviews focused on how teachers characterize effective relationships with students and how administrators can support teachers to form and sustain those relationships. The teacher narratives were then coded and analyzed to look for the common threads, topics, and themes. The stories that each teacher shared were examined carefully to better determine how these relationships are cultivated, nurtured, and sustained within the school environment.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This research aimed to understand how effective teachers characterize effective teacher-student relationships. The primary focus of this research was the narratives of eight effective teachers at one particular CMO using the TCRP framework. The scope of this research, however, created a few limitations that should be noted.

### **Threats to Validity**

In this study, the primary threat to validity is the selection of the participants. The study focused on a specific CMO, PUC Schools, and the teachers that work there. This sample selection method limited the pool of teachers that eligible to be identified as effective for

inclusion in the narrative interview process. Furthermore, this study used one measurement to identify effective teachers: the TCRP framework. Although this framework includes a variety of indicators to determine the effectiveness of a teacher, it was the only measurement used and, therefore, must be considered a possible limitation to this study.

### **Interpersonal Limitations**

In my current position, I serve as Principal of Lakeview Charter Academy, one of the schools that belong to the PUC CMO. In this capacity, I use the TCRP framework to provide feedback and evaluation of teachers at my school site. I am also involved in collaborative processes with the other school leaders throughout PUC. This could mean that teachers could view me as an evaluative member of the organization, even if I do not work at the school where they teach. It is possible that teachers were not as open with me in the narrative process, because of the nature of my position within the organization. It was imperative for me to explain fully the motivation behind the research, as well as assuage any possible fears about the issues of confidentiality to combat this potential limitation.

### **Delimitations**

This research focused on one CMO that serves a specific population of students. The CMO is 98% Latino in its makeup. This means that the research gained insight into one narrow population of students. The research aimed to give valuable insight into the education of this population but does not address other populations of students. It is impossible then for the research to be used to make generalizations about other population of students. Additional research would have to be conducted with other populations of students exploring traditional public schools, as well as other charter schools and CMOs.

The other main delimitation to this study involved the participants. This research focused only on the perspectives of a small group of effective teachers in this organization. It only included teachers identified as effective on their TCRP framework, leaving out a large percentage of teachers in the organization outside the field of the research. This research did not just exclude the voices of teachers not identified as effective, but also other key members of the school community. For example, this study did not include student voices. It focused solely on the teacher perspective of the teacher-student relationship. Parents, also considered other key members to student achievement, were also not included in the research. In the future, additional research will need to be conducted that includes both parents and students, in order to gain their insights and understanding into the teacher-student dynamic.

### **Definitions**

*Charter School*—An agreement between a school and its state and the state-authorizing agency. The charter formally and explicitly states the mission, regulations, governance, and responsibilities to which the school will be held accountable by the state and authorizing agency (Tryjankowski, 2012).

*Charter Management Organization (CMO)*—A governing organization that operates more than one charter school.

*Effective teacher*—This refers to a teacher that can move a majority of his/her students through one or more years of academic growth, during the school year. For the purpose of this study, an effective teacher is defined by a score of three on the TCRP's proficiency level indicator rubric.

*Effective teacher-student relationship*—Relationships between teachers and students that are committed to authentic forms of caring and that emphasize reciprocity between teacher and student (Valenzuela, 1999).

*Latino student*—A student of Latin American extraction or descent.

*Funds of Knowledge*—“[Historically] developed and accumulated strategies skills, abilities, ideas, practices or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a households functioning and well-being” (Gonzalez et al., 2005, pp. 91-92).

*The College Ready Promise (TCRP)*—An initiative founded by the Gates Foundation that aims to identify highly effective teachers.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study focused on the teacher-student relationships, and was guided by two theoretical frameworks: a critical perspective of social justice (Freire, 1970) and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). These frameworks served as the major conceptual lens and foundation for the analysis of the data collected for this study. Since the research focused on the education of Latino students, the current political-social experience of these students living in Los Angeles was contextualized. In order to place the research in context to the field, a review of the current literature was conducted that focuses on the areas of effective teaching, teacher-student relationships, and teacher-student relationships with Latino students. An analysis of the literature helps to provide a clear picture of our current understanding of effective teachers and the impact of their relationships with Latino students. This background serves to substantiate the need for more research in this area of study.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

##### **A Critical Social Justice Perspective**

Education is one of the most important aspects of a democratic society. Thomas Jefferson (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2006) argued that “America’s capacity to survive as a democracy would rely not only on free public education but on the kind of public education that arms people with an intelligence capable of free and independent thought” (p. 9). Educating our youth is not enough to ensure that students possess free and independent thought. It is essential that the system of schooling provide students access to a genuinely democratic education (Darder & Miron, 2005; Giroux, 2001, 2003). However, to ensure such an education requires a shift in

classroom conditions—a shift that ensures practices that support the voice, participation, and empowerment of students and teachers, so that they can freely experience democratic life in their classrooms.

Unfortunately, more and more teachers in poor communities experience a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness in their ability to engage their students or to support their critical formation (Darder & Miron, 2005). Too often this leads to an emphasis on assimilative and authoritarian forms of banking education, which also move away from engaging culture as a primary educational force (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2001). A great disservice is being done to America's youth, especially those of color, as the landscape has shifted away from the perspective first expressed by Jefferson and onto a landscape of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), which places greater focus on tests results, rather than on democratizing education.

Without a socially just and democratic education, students of color fall through the cracks, which in today's school system have become huge chasms (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This makes the job of educators who can foster positive relationships with students in these schools especially important. They become key cultural agents of the school, who can either reinforce and reproduce the status quo or create the necessary social change required to engage their students in ways that humanize education and enhance their learning (Darder, 2012).

Accordingly, teachers need to reject school practices that marginalize students and instead embrace teaching practices that center on inclusiveness, caring, and respect (Giroux, 2003). This type of education engages students consistently and places their needs at the center of the discourse, where care and respect is central to all educational practices. When this is missing from the classrooms, it can have disastrous effects that perpetuate current cycles of

racism and oppression. This is especially important with Latino students, as illustrated by Julio Cammarota (2008) in his work *Suenos Americanos*, where he synthesized the thoughts of Latino students:

[Latino students] Feel that is primary their negative relationships with school personnel that are deleterious to their education. The negative quality of these relationships with teachers, counselors, security, and administration develops from ideological assumptions of racial inferiority. A widespread belief in the incompetence of urban students of color shapes how teachers and other school personnel treat many Latinos. (p. 133-134)

Instead of receiving a caring and respectful education, many Latino students are placed in environments with teachers that often hold deficit notions and, thus, make negative assumptions based on stereotypes about Latino communities and faulty preconceptions about the nature of Latino students (Darder, 2012). Hence, a great need exists to examine areas where students are engaged in an educational community that focuses on care and respect, in order to achieve a more genuine practice of democratic education.

This research centered on schools that serve a predominately Latino student population. As mentioned previously, these students are facing significant challenges they need to overcome in order to ensure success in their educational pursuits. One of the most important social justice issues facing our nation today is that of education. The values and beliefs associated with a critical perspective of social justice were clearly delineated in Joseph Zajda, Suzanne Majhanovich, and Val Rust's (2006) book, *Education and Social Justice*. They referred to social justice as "the principles of equality and solidarity that understands and values the dignity of every human being" (p. 1). In this view of social justice, education should aim to value and

cherish those elements of every human being that make him/her unique and different. In this context, the educational experiences of our young people are important in ensuring that they are exposed to and receive educational experience that is based upon the fundamental principles of social justice.

How educators ensure students access to education serves as a true measure of the level of social justice that exists in a society. This concept of social justice impacting students arose from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's (1970) seminal treatise on the education of disenfranchised populations. In this text, he strongly critiqued the traditional system of schooling, describing it as a banking model of education. According to Freire, "The teacher's task is to organize a process which already occurs spontaneously, to fill the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers the true knowledge" (p. 76).

In his work, Freire (1970) described an educational system that does not take into account the human beings that exist within these classroom walls but, rather, turns them into mere receptacles or objects of *knowledge*, which teachers fill. Little seems to have changed in the years following Freire's work. With new accountability measures "students are reduced to test scores, future slots in the labor market, prison numbers, and possible cannon fodder in military conquests" (Lipman, 2009, p. 371). Clearly, the current educational system fails to live up to the ideals of social justice when it comes to the educational attainment of Latino students.

This illuminates the need for educators to rethink the way they educate and to place greater focus on those populations that have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised. Darder (2002) challenged educators to engage with the practices that perpetuate social, political, and economic relationships of inequality. Teachers who undertake this social justice work in



their classrooms must do so with courage and commitment in order to engage their teaching as an act of love, which Freire (2005) considered an indispensable quality of effective teachers. Teachers need to engage in “forms of teaching that are inclusive, caring, respectful, economically equitable, and whose aim, in part, is to undermine those repressive modes of education that produce social hierarchies and legitimate inequality” (Giroux, 2003, p. 10).

In this regard, the relationships that exist between teacher and student can be used to empower students and humanize their educational experiences. Through examining the qualities and particular features of effective teacher-student relationships, educators committed to social justice can better aim to provide students emancipatory educational experiences that enhance their motivation and capacity to learn. This process serves to support the humanization of education, an issue Freire first sought to articulate 40 years ago.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

The role of relationships in the humanization of education forms an important aspect of social justice and, therefore, this study as well. In order to gain insight into the formation of teacher-student relationships, it is useful to better understand the notion of funds of knowledge. As stated earlier, this theoretical approach refers to the understanding that each person has his/her own personal knowledge, derived from a combination of cultural traits, history, and family life. The concept of funds of knowledge is based on the notion that all people are competent and have knowledge and life experiences that contribute to that knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Given this aspect, funds of knowledge can serve as an effective lens for analyzing the formation and characteristics of teacher-student relationships.

A basic principle that shapes a theory of funds of knowledge encompasses the concept that every household is an educational setting (Genzuk, 1999). In this regard, each classroom teacher should look at every student as possessing a wealth of knowledge, which is derived from their household interactions. Key to its social justice potential is the manner in which this principle counteracts the deficit model of thinking often attributed to minority students. Reminiscent of Freire's (1970) banking model, these students are often seen as needing to be filled with knowledge that the teacher possesses. Accordingly, they are not perceived as entering the classroom with a tremendous amount of knowledge, but rather as deficit beings that must be fixed or reconstructed to fit the mainstream (Darder, 2012). Hence, the student's household is often viewed as a place from which "the child must be rescued, rather than as repositories of knowledge that can foster the child's cognitive development" (Gonzalez et al., 1993, p. 9).

In contrast, teachers who ascribe to a funds-of-knowledge perspective enter the households of students as learners and use the information and knowledge of their community context to create culturally centered educational experiences that enhance student learning. Darder (2012) affirmed the social justice significance of funds of knowledge in her writings on culture and power. More specifically, she argued that this pedagogical approach "constitutes the integration of cultural knowledge that is tied to important values and social practices necessary to understanding how society works, where students are located within society, and what opportunities or inequalities are at play in their lives" (p. 64). With this engagement of students' primary culture and language, teachers can more readily access and utilize the students' knowledge base to engage them effectively in the learning process (Darder, 2012).

The funds-of-knowledge approach encourages teachers to engage in ethnographic research within students' homes. The teacher should create a genuine relationship with the family, developing connections that would endure in the classroom. In this regard, teachers can create relationships with families that foster the connection between home and school, within the student's classroom experience. The underlying assumption here is that when teachers learn about and understand their students' everyday lives; they will be better prepared to enter into more grounded relationships with their students (Gonzalez et al., 2005). The more teachers know about their students, the better students seem to perform in the classroom. In essence, an approach anchored in funds of knowledge encourages teachers to create positive relationships with students, through better understanding the knowledge of their households. This knowledge allows them to better respond to the needs of their students and, therefore, allows them to create better educational opportunities in their classrooms.

These two theoretical frameworks constituted the conceptual foundation for this research study. A critical perspective of social justice and funds of knowledge perspective combine in ways that firmly support efforts to better understand the formation of positive teacher-student relationships. A critical perspective of social justice calls for educators to view education as an act of love and to embrace the humanization of the educational process as their purpose. The funds-of-knowledge concept is founded on the importance of understanding the student's world and tapping into the essential knowledge and strengths with which he/she enters the classroom.

The teacher-student relationship is the perfect vehicle by which to actualize a praxis anchored in the emancipatory ideals of both social justice and funds of knowledge. It serves as a means for humanization and love, while also creating the conditions for teachers to better know

their students and the unique knowledge they bring. In concert with these principles, this research will examine how effective teachers seek to humanize the educational process, through understanding and integrating their students' household knowledge.

### **Social/Political Context**

When NCLB was passed in 2001, a heightened emphasis was placed on student achievement. Schools were required to test students on a yearly basis and measure how much they had achieved. One of the main goals of NCLB, and its policy successor Race to the Top (RTTT, 2009), is to make closing of the achievement gap a national priority, thus emphasizing *stronger accountability*. This means that schools have to raise the achievement of all of their students, by whatever means necessary. In response to the law, California created a blueprint for how proficiency would increase in the coming years until 100% of students were proficient. This meant that proficiency levels of students would have needed to increase from 13.6% in 2002 to 100% in 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

In concert with this initiative, all schools in the state of California will be required to show that all their students have reached a proficient level by the year 2016. The goal of this initiative is to have students prepared for college and the future; however, this aim is complicated by high school dropout rates in Los Angeles County, where over 20% of students who enter ninth grade drop out before graduation. The largest populations of students who drop out are low income minority students, with Latino and African American students experiencing the highest annual dropout numbers: over 22,000 and over 4,000, respectively (California Department of Education, n.d.). These large numbers of students not finishing high school are, therefore, not eligible to sit for California high school exit examinations.

In a world of increased standards for student achievement and high dropout rates, it is clear that something different must be done. In order for educators to ensure that their students are successful, they need to understand how teachers can reach all students in ways that support these academic goals. One possible avenue is through establishing effective working relationships that enhance student learning and motivation in the classroom.

### **Effective Teaching**

**Classroom practices.** Many different ideas exist about the qualities of an effective teacher. A litany of research attempted to answer this question, and substantial philanthropic dollars were spent in an effort to identify those qualities that result teacher effectiveness. One method by which teacher effectiveness can be assessed readily is through observation of classroom practices that teachers develop and utilize to relate more effectively with their students. Classroom management is an area where teachers, especially new ones, can struggle on a day-to-day basis. Research suggested that teachers that minimize classroom disruptions are more effective and, thus, have a more positive impact on student learning (Stronge et al., 2011). A comparison of effective and less effective teachers showed that less effective teachers had three times as many disruptions as their more effective counterparts.

The work of James Stronge, Thomas Ward, and Leslie Grant (2011) provided a glimpse into how teachers can impact student learning and create more effective systems for classroom management in their practice. Some specific ways in which the research indicated effective teachers create effective classroom management strategies included establishing routines, monitoring students' behavior, and using time efficiently and effectively. Also included in their discussion were ideas about classroom organization. This included ensuring availability of

materials for student use, physical layout of the classroom, and using space effectively. Through the combination of these practices teachers create an effective system for classroom management which has a positive impact on student learning.

Other teacher-initiated practices are considered to facilitate student learning and increase teacher effectiveness. According to Patricia Popp, Leslie Grant, and James Stronge (2011), classrooms where teachers allowed students to demonstrate their learning and assess their performance constantly were shown to be more successful. Such teachers also seemed to create more effective learning environments. This work, however, cannot be accomplished in a vacuum, in that teachers need to integrate into their practice with student the knowledge they gain from assessment, if they are to be truly effective. Hence, teachers that are effective tend to use assessment data to modify instruction and create activities that fill identified gaps in student learning.

The importance of teacher-initiated actions can also be seen in the work of Marcia Gentry, Saiying Steenbergen-Hu, and Byung-yeon Choi (2011). Their mixed methods study involved student surveys and teacher interviews and observation to examine the characteristics of student-identified talented teachers. One of the four identified themes found among these talented teachers was the use of meaningful and relevant curriculum in the classroom. Effective teachers focus on ensuring that students can relate to the curriculum and instructional material that is being presented in the classroom. This finding illustrates that there are specific practices teachers can enact as part of classroom teaching—practices that both increase teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Some of these practices include taking personal interest in students, having high expectations for students, and having passion for the content.

**Teacher characteristics.** Although the aforementioned characteristics deal directly with how teachers interact with students, effective teachers also possess certain personal characteristics. In 1986, John Check conducted research to identify the traits of effective teachers. This study was conducted with college, high school, and eighth grade students, who all completed a 25-question survey that included 23 check-off questions and two open-ended questions. The research found that students strongly equated *teachers* with *helpers*, as almost 99% of respondents considered extra help from the instructor as important. Effective teachers need to make themselves available to help support students. It is also important that teachers be reflective practitioners who are constantly looking to refine and hone their craft (Popp et al., 2011). In order to improve their practice, it is important that teachers reflect on what has worked and what has not worked in a given lesson; through such reflection, they can strive to ensure all students are successful. When a student does not succeed in a classroom, an effective teacher does not blame the student, but rather asks, “What could I have done better?” (Popp et al., 2011, p. 285). Such characteristics are associated with classroom relationships that improve teacher effectiveness. When understanding the student perspective of effective teachers, these reflective dispositions should be visible and provide a starting point from which to examine teacher practices.

Although classroom practices are one of the ways for teachers to be effective, highly effective teachers also seem to possess certain characteristics. These personal characteristics help them to be successful with students in their classrooms and help to ensure that every student is successful. Returning to the work of Gentry et al. (2011), these researchers found that effective teachers have high expectations of their students and of themselves. While many

characteristics have been identified in the literature, a few appeared repeatedly (Check, 1986; Gentry et al., 2011; Grieve 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). These include possessing human compassion, taking an interest in students, and understanding students and their problems. Teachers who are effective are seen as being fair and respectful with their students and as having a positive attitude toward both teaching and their students (Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). This finding speaks to some of the relational skills mentioned previously that help teachers to become effective in the classroom setting.

Another key characteristic is linked directly with the interaction that occurs between teacher and student. In her study of teachers' ideas of excellence, Ann Grieve (2010) found that teachers identified the ability to form positive relationships as key to being an excellent teacher. The characteristics with which most teachers agree in their assessment of excellence comprise what Grieve calls "relationships in action" (p. 273). These included statements like "is caring and approachable," "established good relationships with pupils," and "exhibits positive regard, concern and respect for students" (p. 272). This finding was echoed in the study by Check (1986), who found that effective teachers "treat students as individuals" and have the "ability to relate to students" (p. 331). These relationships help teachers to have a broad understanding of their students, which can positively impact classroom teaching (Popp et al., 2011). This finding points to the significance inherent in a teacher's ability to form trusting and compassionate relationships with students and the powerful role of relationships to teacher effectiveness.

**Overall impact of student teacher relationships.** Relationships are key factors to every person's life and play a significant role in the lives of students within any school setting. Thus, the quality of interactions that teachers have with students can impact them in a wide variety of



ways, some of which are negative and some that are positive. On a daily basis, every teacher provides students feedback in a variety of verbal and non-verbal ways and this feedback impacts the interaction between the two. The feedback process can take place in specific responses to academic work produced or it can occur in more subtle ways, through body language and social interaction or even simply lack of interaction.

Negative feedback is considered to be a significant predictor of student social and academic performance (Wentzel, 2002). A negative feedback loop with students damages the relationship they have with their teachers, which in turn predicts difficult behavioral issues and, consequently, poor academic performance. In one instance, a student was advised by an algebra teacher to pursue honors geometry the following year. When this student inquired about the geometry class, the instructor of that class mentioned that students like her rarely succeed in the class and discouraged her from enrolling (Noguera & Wing, 2006). The feedback that students receive from teachers is then no light matter, in that it has been shown predictably to impact student motivation and hence, their academic formation and achievement.

Another component of the teacher-student relationship revolves around support. The amount of support that a teacher provides a student can also cause that student to form a positive or negative opinion about the relationship, which also can extend to the student's sense of self-worth or efficacy. When a student views a teacher as less supportive, it often can also have negative repercussions on student performance. Adena Klem and James Connell (2004) found that students who describe their teachers as less supportive are less likely to show optimal levels of engagement in class. How students view the teacher relationship—whether supportive or non-supportive—also can be a good indicator as to whether or not students are engaged in the

classroom. Students also view less involved teachers as less consistent and more coercive than teachers who are seen as supportive to students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). How students view their relationship with teachers, either in terms of feedback or support, plays a major role in how they act in the classroom. Negative opinions of the relationship, therefore, lead to a decrease in behaviors that lead to student success.

In contrast, when teacher-student interactions are perceived as positive, they yield great benefits to students and teachers. Interactions experienced as positive by students, accordingly, lead to positive student perceptions of the relationship with the teacher and the classroom experience. One of the major concerns in schools today is bullying, which has a wide range of negative consequences for students. When students report high levels of connectedness with their teachers, the negative effects of bullying are reduced (Konishi et al., 2010). Students who feel a sense of connection with their teachers can often overcome many of the obstacles that they may face within the school setting.

Effective relationships can not only act as a buffer to outside negative forces but also serve as a deterrent to negative student behavior. In a longitudinal study that followed a group of students from kindergarten through eighth grade, important connections were shown between kindergarten relationships with teachers and future outcomes. Students who seem to experience close relationships with their teachers in kindergarten were found to have fewer behavioral difficulties in later years (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

In examining the impact of different disciplinary styles and their impact on students, Joel Roache and Ramon Lewis (2011) found that “teachers need to avoid coercive styles of discipline in favour of techniques that reinforce a positive relationship between teachers and students” (p.

246). In their study of students aged 12 to 16 years old, they found that when students experienced positive relationships with their teachers, they placed a strong sense of importance on disciplinary actions, which was often associated with values of communal work and respect. The study also noted that when teacher exhibit aggressive displays of behavior toward students this could be associated with an increase in misbehavior (Roache & Lewis, 2011). The relationships that teachers cultivate with students are considered then to play a significant role in the disciplinary and behavioral responses of students in the classroom.

In order for students to be successful in school, it is paramount that their social and emotional needs are met. Hence, attending to their emotional needs is considered an important aspect of creating schools that are reflective of centers of care. Again, this points for the powerful role of relationships between teachers and students, particularly with respect to nurturing students' social and emotional health. One important aspect linked to student success is that they like being in school. One major factor that affects whether students like school is their ability to relate to of the teacher (Hallinan, 2008). Maureen Hallinan's (2008) study of sixth-grade through tenth-grade students in the Chicago public school system found that "students were more likely to be attached to school when they perceive their teachers care about them, try to be fair and praise them" (p. 278). This study included longitudinal data that found peer relationships to have little impact on students' liking of school and that teachers played a central role in influencing how students feel about school.

Another characteristic that impacts student attachment to school has to do with how teachers interact with students with respect to disciplinary action. When teachers display aggression towards students, students are discouraged from liking the subject taught by that

teacher and begin to feel disconnected from their peers or the school. The study conducted by Roache and Lewis (2011) showed that the use of aggression yields negative results in all respects, in that it fails to encourage students to act responsibly, individually, or collectively. This type of negative interaction with students thwarts their emotional development and causes them to become disinterested and unattached to the school environment (Hallinan, 2008; Roache & Lewis, 2011). In many ways, it can be theorized that the fate of students that drop out of high school, for example, may have been put in motion long before, through poor teacher-student relationships in the early years of a child's schooling.

Teachers then play a significant role in shaping how students feel about school. When students are happy in the classroom and enjoy the environment, then they will enjoy attending school. Relationships, as illustrated through this discussion, play a significant role in this process, because when students perceive teachers as warm and affectionate, they feel happier, more enthusiastic, and involved in classroom life (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Through their interactions with students, teachers can determine how happy and enthusiastic students will feel in their classroom. The reverse of this was also found to be true in the work of Elizabeth Shaunessy and Patricia McHatton (2009), who conducted research with high school students in general education, special education, and honors classes. When examining students' perceptions of teachers, they found that "the long term effect of classrooms that lack personalization, where students feel like teachers/adults are not interested, and where work ethic is questionable is the perpetuation of schools that are often despised by students" (p. 500). When students do not perceive that adults care about them, they disengage from the school environment, exhibiting a sense of apathy about education. Hence, the literature substantiates that teacher-student

relationships can result in either positive or negative impact on the social and emotional well-being of students.

**Impact of teacher-student relationships on students.** In the elementary school setting, students typically see one teacher for a significant part of the day. This creates an environment where the impact of the teacher-student relationship is different than in later years. As educators work to eliminate the achievement gap between white and minority students, it is important that students have a good educational foundation in their early years. One way that schools can help students from disenfranchised communities in the early years is for teachers to foster strong and connected relationships with their students. Jan Hughes and Oi-man Kwok (2007) found that one of the ways to help students who are at risk of academic failure is to focus on helping teachers connect better with these students. This emphasis on addressing students' emotional needs through fostering positive teacher-student connections can work toward helping educators in their efforts to close the achievement gap.

With first-grade students, emotional support offered by the teachers was an important aspect of closing the achievement gap between high-risk and low-risk students (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In an educational environment that is focused on *no child being left behind*, it is imperative that educational efforts address practices that interfere with student performance and their sense of well-being. Students who start off with a good educational foundation have a better chance of succeeding in later years. Positive teacher-student relationships can undoubtedly be very significant to the early education of young students.

In their early years, most children enter the classroom filled with wonder and excitement. It is important that teachers learn to harness that excitement and ensure students are able to

engage in the activities of classroom life. One way that teachers can accomplish this is through the relationships they build with their students. Erin O'Connor and Kathleen McCartney (2006) argued that students who have high quality relationships with their teachers demonstrate higher levels of classroom engagement than those with lower quality relationships. Students are more likely to be involved in the educational processes in the classroom if they have a strong relationship with their teacher that both motivates self-confidence and supports imagination in their process of learning (Darder, 2012).

The impact of teacher-student relationships on student engagement is further substantiated in the work of Klem and Connell (2004), who found that elementary students that experienced low levels of teacher support were less likely to show optimal levels of engagement. There are various levels of engagement in the classroom, but all are, to one extent or another, determined by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Students, then, need to be engaged in a variety of ways, both behaviorally and emotionally. Incorporating these two types of engagement with students appears to enhance their enjoyment of the classroom experience and their positive regard for the process of schooling. Therefore, the interactions teachers have with students are strong predictors of the behavioral and emotional engagement that students will have within the classroom (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Given this factor, how involved elementary students are in the classroom is greatly affected by the teacher's capacity to relate and connect in ways that are meaningful and supportive culturally, socially, and academically (Darder, 2012).

Educating secondary-school-aged students raises a unique set of issues that differ from the issues that arise when working with elementary students, which can pose challenges for

teachers as they struggle to help students be successful during this difficult developmental stage. As students get older, the excitement with which they came into elementary school begins to wear off, particularly if teachers are unable to engage them in ways that stimulate their interest in continued learning. Consequently, the characteristics of teachers can play an important role in determining whether or not students not only like school (Hallinan, 2008), but whether they believe that school has something to offer them in their lives. The better the relationship between the teacher and the student, the more students will report that they enjoy being at school and feel that their learning is meaningful. While it is important that students enjoy being at school, it is also essential that, once in the classroom, they learn effectively to progress academically.

Returning to Klem and Connell's (2004) conclusion, middle school students who had high levels of teacher support were almost three times as likely to report high levels of engagement. Therefore, there was a direct link between the nature of the supportive relationship with the teacher and how well the student participates in the everyday activities of classroom life. The connection between teacher-student relationships and the student's level of engagement was further illustrated in the meta-analytical work conducted by Roorda, Koomen, Split, and Oort (2011). In their analysis of 99 different studies, they found that teacher-student relationships influenced school engagement in both positive and negative ways. Roorda et al. (2011) found a positive correlation between positive teacher-student relationships and school engagement, and a negative correlation between negative teacher-student relationships and the absence of school engagement. This means that when students have positive relationships with teachers they are more likely to be engaged in school and when they have negative relationships they are more

likely to feel disconnected from the school experience. The existence of a supportive relationship can greatly influence how a student views both the school as a whole and his/her specific classroom experiences.

Another area of concern for secondary school educators is student motivation, which is considered necessary and important to students doing well in school. The increased demands of the middle school setting require that students invest a significant amount of time, in order to understand the various subjects they are learning. The relationship between the teacher and the student can impact students' motivation to do so. In the lives of young adolescents, the teacher-student relationship has great motivational significance (Wentzel, 1998) and thus is considered to be a key component to the pedagogy of effective teachers. How the student perceives the relationship between himself/herself and the teacher impacts the student's level of motivation and active participation in any particular class, which again impacts performance.

Returning to the work of Shaunessy and McHatton (2011), they also found that with high school students, a lack of personalization, or teachers not knowing or having a relationship with them, noticeably impedes the process of learning. This is so, given that high school students, in particular, need to feel that their teachers know them, that their learning experience is personalized, and that they are connected with their teacher. In the difficult secondary school years, the relationship between the teacher and students greatly impacts students, with respect to not only their motivation, but also how well they invest themselves in their process of learning and perform within the classroom.

**Impact of teacher-student relationships on achievement.** In the contemporary view of education, the key element towards which schools, and thus teachers, are striving is an increase



in student achievement. This can be measured in a variety of ways, from test scores on standardized testing to student grades. The teacher-student relationship, as noted earlier, plays a significant role in enhancing student achievement. Students who perceive positive connections with teachers are more likely to show greater math achievement than students who perceive a less positive connection (Konishi et al., 2010). For example, Yonezawa, McClure, and Jones (2012) confirmed that schools that have educators who are attentive to students' academic and socio-emotional needs show higher levels of success among their students on English Language Arts standardized tests. The relationship between the student and teacher then can be seen to positively or negatively impact how well students perform on state mandated standardized examinations, which also is often used to determine the academic and vocational direction of high school students in the future.

However, test scores are not the only measure of student achievement that is affected by the nature of teacher-student relationships. Students' weighted grade point averages, as would be expected, increase when adults in the school are consistently attending to student needs (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). The caring nature of the relationship then impacts student achievement, as evidenced by the achievement gains noted in the previous research. In their study of early childhood maternal attachment and later teacher-child relationships, O'Connor and McCartney (2006) concluded that students who had a high quality relationship with teachers were associated with higher levels of academic attainment. As noted earlier, Roorda et al. (2009) found positive associations between positive teacher student relationships and achievement, and negative associations between negative teacher-student relationship and achievement. The teacher, moreover, can have a direct impact on how much a child learns in the classroom, thus

the quality of the relationship between the two can go a long way in predicting how well the student will achieve in the future.

### **Latino Teacher-Student Relationships**

The impact of the teacher-student relationship is especially important with Latino youth in the context of their schooling. The teacher, whether Latina/o or not, plays a critical role in the lives of Latino students as seen in the work of Stanton-Salazar (2001): “they are often key participants in the social networks of low-status children and adolescents, and play a determining role in either reproducing or interfering with the reproduction of class, racial and gendered inequality” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 161). Extensive research showed the important role the teachers play with Latino students and the powerful impact that their relationship can have upon their social and academic development (Cammarota, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

The teacher-student relationships can serve as a way for students to either succeed or can be the impetus for students to either lose interest or simply not care (Cammarota, 2008). This is important for educators to understand as “immigrant and U.S.-born youth ... are committed to an authentic form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). In this regard, as with students in general, the relationship between teacher and student is a key element in how Latino youth perceive their schooling.

In previous research, Latino students emphasized the necessity of a caring relationship with their teachers (Cammarota, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). This relationship can be characterized in different ways: as *confianza*, or trust between student and teacher (Stanton-Salazar, 2001); in the cultural concept of *educación*, as schooling based on

caring, respectful relationships (Valenzuela, 1999); or via the common theme of care exhibited toward students from teachers (Cammarota, 2008; Nieto, 2004). When this positive interaction occurs, students interact with the teacher in a positive way and perceive the teacher as a good teacher. This is noted in the words of a Latina high school student speaking about a *good teacher*:

The good teacher always took time to find out who we were. They were always there, and they would find me absent. They knew about you; if you were absent, they said, “Where were you yesterday?” They always asked, “What do you want from me?”  
(Cammarota, 2008, p. 131)

When students can relate with school staff in this way, the benefit is that students develop a sense of confidence and mastery of the tasks laid out before them and greater trust in their capacity to learn (Valenzuela, 1999). In this holistic sense, positive interactions with school staff, and especially teachers, play a very important role in the educational well-being of Latino students, who often must contend with the bicultural tensions of navigating across cultural and linguistic differences and deflecting stereotypes and deficit notions that create false portrayals about who they are (Darder, 2012).

Numerous Latino education researchers have called attention to the significant contribution of Latino teachers to enhancing the teacher-student relationship with Latino students (Darder, 2012; Nieto, 2004; 43, 2011). More specifically, this is attributed to the experiential knowledge that Latino teachers may have with the primary culture and language of Latino students and the biculturation process (Darder, 2012). This speaks to the funds of knowledge that the teacher may bring to the relationship with Latino students (Gonzalez et al. 2005), which

can provide a familiar cultural foundation from which to communicate. However, since the majority of teachers that teach Latino students are not usually Latino themselves and this aspect is not a specific focus of the study for this dissertation, then, it is significant to recognize that in the absence of a shared funds of knowledge between student and teacher, then it is even more important that teacher-student relationships be founded on what Freire (1970) considered to be a humanizing approach—one that respects the dignity and humanity of students and communicates a deep sense of faith in the capacity of Latino students to learn and achieve.

While the interaction between teacher and student can have a positive impact on students, the reverse can happen as well, if students perceive their interactions as negative. This lack of caring or deficit views can fuel a sense of apathy among teachers towards Latino students, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy where Latino students are deemed as not caring about their education (Cammarota, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999).

However, it is worth considering that when students perceive that teachers do not care about them, students may often also demonstrate a lack of care as well, which the teacher then can interpret as Latino students not caring about school, placing the burden of responsibility and blame for the problem on the student (Valenzuela, 1999). When students internalize this lack of care they begin to lose trust, which is manifested in various avoidance strategies and in their inability to envision particular teachers as viable sources of support (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). These perspectives were evident in the words of a Latina high school student in Cammarota's (2008) study:

Every day it was the same in all classes—the teachers, they never made the effort to teach you anything. They don't care, and they could be talking you, oh, go to college and whatever, but are they doing something to help me? They ain't doing anything. (p. 118)

When relationships between teachers and students are seen as uncaring, they have a profound negative impact on students' school participation and their educational well-being.

As discussed in the previous sections, the teacher-student relationship has a significant impact on the educational experiences of all students. However, for the purposes of this study, it is important to better understand how these relationships, more specifically, impact the classroom lives of Latino students. The power of caring teachers, as noted previously, can play a significant role in the lives of adolescent Latino students, as these students are significantly protected from engaging in high-risk behaviors when they believe someone genuinely cares about their well-being (Black, 2006).

Students in secondary schools are looking for adults with whom they can relate and connect, particularly when they are facing difficult moments. This sentiment was echoed in the words of an urban student from Philadelphia, referenced in research by Dick Corbett and Bruce Wilson (2002):

Sometimes a teacher don't understand what people go through. They need to have compassion. A teacher who can relate to students will know when something's going on with them. If like the student don't do work or don't understand, the teacher will spend a lot of time with them. (p. 22)

This statement speaks loudly to the need for students to feel that they have a positive and caring connection with their teachers and other adults on campus. They need to know that the teacher

with whom they are working in the classroom truly cares about them and believes in their capacity to be successful.

This need for caring positive relationships is most important for working class Latino students, whose families are more apt to contend with the stressors of poverty, unemployment, poor health care, homelessness, and incarceration (Darder, 2011). As a consequence, school staff and faculty can serve as an important support system for Latino students in ways that can enhance their social and academic development. As such, school personnel can create opportunities to form relationships with students that serve as rich educational resources that might not exist otherwise (Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

As has been shown here repeatedly, the literature on this issue has consistently demonstrated that social relationships are important to the school success of all students. However, these social relationships are even more important for the school success of students from non-dominant or racialized ethnic groups (Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2008). This finding highlights the need for bicultural students, and more specifically Latino students, to find opportunities at school to establish meaningful and caring relationships with adults who exhibit dignity, respect, and faith in their intellectual abilities (Darder, 2011, 2012).

This sentiment is also echoed in the work of Lourdes Diaz Soto (2011) when discussing successful programs for Latino students at Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS), a highly successful alternative school in Chicago serving a multiethnic population. The research conducted with student narratives identified the school as a sanctuary and the reason for its success. One of the four key elements uncovered that create this condition was “multiple definitions of caring relationships between students and adults” (p. 40). This finding further

illustrates the importance of relationships for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but especially Latino students.

### **Positive Impact of Relationships on Latino Students**

Relationships are highly significant factors in the academic progress of Latino students. However, further examination is needed on the precise impact of these positive teacher-student relationships on Latino students. Substantial research examined middle school and high school aged Latino students in an effort to better understand the impact of positive teacher relationships on these students (Cammarota, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). One of the major connections found is in the area of student behavior.

**Behavioral impact.** In their examination of teacher support, Ann Brewster and Gary Bowen (2004) found that a higher student perception of teacher support corresponds to a decrease in the level of problem behaviors in the classroom (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). The more students feel that their teachers support and care for them, the less likely they are to be engaged in school behaviors considered negative or inappropriate. As students report a higher level of teacher attentiveness to their needs, the less likely they are to engage in troubling behaviors in the classroom.

The sense of connection between student and teacher can have other positive benefits to Latino students. Middle school aged Latino students were predicted to have higher levels of school satisfaction and positive behavior at school when they feel a connection with the school and adults at the school who facilitate their daily social and academic experiences (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006). In their study, Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton (2006) found that the more connected students were to the staff of a school, the more likely they were to love school and be

engaged in positive interactions among themselves and with adults at school. Latino students were shown to similarly benefit greatly from this level of connectedness and solidarity; it can be an important tool for helping them achieve success at school (Soto, 2011; Valenzuela 1999).

The value of relationships in the lives of Latino students, especially in terms of the behavioral impact, was also illustrated in a study conducted by Garcia-Reid, Reid, and Peterson (2005). In their examination of Latino middle school students, they found that “[youth] who feel supported by positive caring adults may also be more inclined to avoid trouble at school, to get good grades, and to pursue opportunities that will promote opportunities for future success” (p. 269). How Latino youth feel about the caring nature of the teachers they interact with has a tremendous impact on their school behavior and, thus, their academic pursuits in the classroom.

**Achievement and engagement.** As previously indicated, there are additional benefits of positive relationships between Latino students and their teachers: namely, improved school behavior and academic success. In a study of Latino immigrant high school students, Stanton-Salazar (1997) found that the relational and academic support provided to students by their teachers and other adults at school is fundamental to their education and their likelihood of graduation from high school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This appears to be the case consistently for racial and ethnic minority students, including Latino students. Unfortunately, Latino students do not always receive the support they need because their teachers are often unprepared to educate them (Garcia-Reid, 2007).

As with most students, the achievement of Latino students can also be greatly influenced by how they feel about the people who are educating them. Hence, Garcia-Reid (2007) found that being perceived favorably by teachers is critical to improving the engagement of low-



income Latino students, and students that perceived their teachers as having a favorable attitude toward them were most apt to be highly engaged in the school and their studies. Latino students who felt that their teachers cared about them were, then, more involved in school activities. This engagement has been shown to positively impact grades and graduation rates among this group.

School success can be measured in a variety of ways and is not solely a matter of student achievement level. As many educational organizations strive to ensure that Latino students are sufficiently prepared to enter colleges and universities, it is imperative that students stay in school and do not drop out (Cammarota, 2008). The teacher-student relationship can be beneficial in ensuring that Latino students stay in school and aspire toward greater academic possibilities. When studying seventh-grade through twelfth-grade Latino students, Davalos, Chavez, and Guardiola (1999) found that perceptions of school were predictive of students staying in school. The school perception scale used in this research included teacher perceptions (Do you like your teacher?), class perceptions (Do you like your classes?), and educational experiences (Do you think high school is fun?). Student responses to these questions predicted student retention and, thus, teacher perceptions, classroom perceptions, and educational experiences all play key roles in ensuring that Latino students do not drop out of school.

The literature in the field resoundingly showed the significance of teacher-student relationships and the enormous impact that school relationships have on the academic success of Latino students. This success can include heightened engagement, positive behaviors, and improved test scores and grades—all of which lead to a strong correlation with Latino students staying in school, graduating, and going on to college. In light of all this, Wooley, Kol, and Bowen (2008) adamantly asserted, “the current findings put the teacher-student relationship at

the center of the social context of school success for Latino students” (p. 67). Hence, the literature also overwhelmingly supported further study into the teacher-student relationship, particularly within a context that supports social justice for Latino students.

### **Summary of the Literature**

The variety of research discussed in this chapter points to several practices and characteristics that effective teachers enact in their classroom and demonstrate in their interactions with students. Effective teachers were shown to possess good classroom management techniques, use a variety of assessment strategies that allow students to demonstrate mastery, and introduce relevant curriculum to the class (Gentry et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). Along with classroom behaviors, research also indicated that effective teachers possess several key characteristics. Effective teachers were shown to be helpful and supportive of students, reflective practitioners, fair and respectful, setting high expectations, having a positive attitude, taking interest in their students, and forming positive relationships (Check, 1986; Gentry et al., 2011; Grieve, 2010; Stronge et al., 2011). These findings illustrated what makes teachers effective and points to the importance of the relationship between teacher and student.

The relationship between teacher and student can have both positive and negative impacts on students’ educational experiences. When these interactions are negative it can impede student performance, discourage students, cause teachers to be seen as more coercive, and increase negative behaviors among students (Klem & Connell, 2004; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Roache & Lewis, 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993, Wentzel, 2002). When interactions between teacher and student are positive there are positive outcomes such as a reduction in bullying, fewer behavioral

problems, and an increase in student attachment to the school (Hallinan, 2008; Hamre & Pianta 2001; Konishi et al., 2010). The relationship between teacher and student impacts on students' schooling in both negative and positive ways.

When the relationship between teacher and student is positive and mutually respectful, many positive benefits can occur. Positive relationships were linked to helping to close achievement gaps, increasing students' academic and behavioral engagement in the classroom, and increasing student motivation (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). These positive relationships can also play a role in student achievement. Research showed connections between positive student teacher relationships and increases in English Language Arts standardized test scores, weighted grade point average, and academic attainment (McClure et al., 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Roorda et al., 2009).

In the case of Latino students, the teacher-student relationship plays a significant role in the student's educational life. Research found that Latino students benefit from involvement in caring relationships with adults at school (Cammarota, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). These caring relationships manifest themselves in a variety of positive ways in the educational setting. Latino students who have positive teacher relationships engage in fewer high-risk behaviors, exhibit fewer problem behaviors, and avoid getting in trouble (Black, 2006; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Garcia-Reid, 2007).

Latino students' positive relationships with teachers affects more than behavior. When engaged in positive relationships with teachers, Latino students are more likely to love school, stay in school, get good grades, and exhibit greater engagement in the classroom (Garcia-Reid,

2007; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Loukas et al., 2006). Positive caring relationships are an essential element for Latino students that can substantially impact their education.

Latino students are a growing population of students that needs and deserves to be educated by effective teachers who can engage in caring relationships with them. In order for this to happen and for educators to better understand how these relationships are formed, research needs to be conducted with effective teachers to provide insight into how positive, caring relationships are formed and what structures can be developed to help support them. Such research will help to shine a light on a crucial issue in the current landscape of education.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how effective teachers working with a large Latino student population characterize and create positive relationships in their classrooms, through an analysis of their narratives about their practice and experiences. More specifically, in an effort to gain knowledge about teacher-student relationships, particularly as these relate to Latino students enrolled in schools run by a CMO in Los Angeles, the study sought to answer the following two overarching research questions:

- 1) How do effective teachers of Latino students within a charter management organization characterize effective student teacher relationships?
- 2) What do effective teachers need from administration to help create effective teacher-student relationships?

These questions were the central focus of the research that informed this dissertation, through the examination and analysis of narratives provided by 8 effective teachers. From an analysis of this data, recommendations are presented regarding how to prepare teachers and administrators to create positive teacher-student relationships.

#### **Research Design**

Qualitative research differs from other forms of research in that it is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In this sense qualitative research focuses on understanding the human experience from the perspective of those that have

experienced it. John Creswell (2009) identified nine characteristics that comprise qualitative research:

- Natural setting,
- Researcher as key instrument,
- Multiple sources of data,
- Inductive data analysis,
- Participants meanings,
- Emergent design,
- Theoretical lens,
- Interpretive, and
- Holistic account.

These elements are similar to the ones posed by Sharan Merriam (2009), which require the research to focus on meaning and understanding, researcher as primary instrument, inductive process, and rich description. In order for research questions to be answered by qualitative measures, they must meet these criteria. In qualitative research, the researcher typically conducts research where participants experience the topic and are the means by which data is collected (Creswell, 2009). In the analysis, the researcher focuses on understanding the phenomena and build his/her concepts and theories out of the research (Merriam, 2009). Out of this work should evolve a rich descriptive text that presents a holistic and big picture view of what is being studied (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

While there are multiple forms of qualitative research methods that could be conducted, the major tenets of this research will focused on case study and narrative analysis. Case studies

have been defined by Robert Yin (2009) as “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real world context” (p. 18); this can be understood as an in-depth understanding of a particular *bounded entity*, which could be a study of a person, an organization, or even a social phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2012). Although, as previously mentioned, all qualitative research uses the experiences of participants, one of the main data collection components in case studies is open-ended interviews (Yin, 2012).

Narrative analysis can be defined as the study of how human beings experience the world (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Similar to case studies, narrative analysis is often conducted with smaller groups of individuals, where a single case study could be based on several hours of an interview (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). It is based on the stories of individuals that help to illuminate human action and complexity (Webster & Mertova, 2007). These elements combine to create an understanding of a specific group (effective teachers), as they interact in a specific network; in this study, that network is PUC schools.

The narrative analysis design is especially important as it serves as a tool to transfer knowledge in the scope of human centered research (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This makes narrative analysis an excellent avenue through which to examine educational practitioners. It further refines qualitative research by allowing researchers to understand people’s lives as it relates to their work as teachers (Jessop & Penny, 1999), which will allow teachers’ understanding of their roles to emerge in the narratives they share. In this process the focus of the research is on the teachers themselves and their understandings, as opposed to the teaching process (Caduri, 2013). This approach centers the teachers and places them at the focus of the research being conducted. They are positioned as knowers; they are the experts in educational

situations, curriculum, students, and culture (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). This concept, in particular, makes this research design the perfect fit when engaging teachers on their ideals of teacher-student relationships.

Research was conducted on the benefits of teacher-student relationships with a variety of different student populations (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). It was shown that these relationships can have an impact on the academic success of students in the classrooms. However, limited research focused on how effective teachers, themselves, characterize the nature and effectiveness of these relationships in their classroom, particularly with Latino students. An important element of being an effective teacher connotes the ability to form positive relationships; yet, there still exists a gap in the knowledge related to this subject, as little work has explored this relationship building process directly with teachers who are considered to be effective educators.

More specifically, little research was done focusing on the teacher perspective of these relationships with low-income Latino students. Thus, the need exists for in-depth qualitative analysis focusing on the teachers of this student population, which is centered directly on the teacher-student relationship. This teacher-driven narrative study aims to find “new learning about real-world behavior and its meaning” (Yin, 2012, p. 4), in regards to how effective teachers characterize the teacher-student relationship with Latino students. The case study dimension is also used to provide an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). In this case, the focus is on the formation of effective teacher-student relationships within a one specific CMO.



Most research in the field regarding teacher-student relationships focused primarily on the general benefits and or consequences of positive and negative relationships. Little research was done from the teacher's perspective with an emphasis on a specific case study that focuses on a particular area of research. The nature of a case study calls for the research to be particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). In this case the particularistic nature of this study was the focus on the effective teacher's perspective of teacher-student relationships, with an eye towards how site administrators can support teachers in creating these relationships.

The end product of this study was a thick descriptive account of the teacher perspective that was collected over the course of this case study. The setting for this particular study was not as important as the insight gained around the characterization of the teacher-student relationship. The heuristic nature of case studies calls for bringing about "new meaning, extend the readers' experience, or confirm what is known" (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). The research questions were designed to elicit teacher narratives focused on their particular perceptions of how they build effective relationships with their students and what they consider to be the resources required from the administration to cultivate and sustain them. The goal was to gain new meaning into how effective teachers understand teacher-student relationships that are formed in classrooms with large Latino student populations.

The result of this research was an in-depth analysis of the narratives or voices of effective teachers regarding their perceptions of teacher-student relationships. This process involved collecting individual narratives and focus group responses to better understand the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships and how they are created in the classroom. This process also helped to shed light on how effective teachers form positive relationships and what site

administrators can do to foster such relationships at their school settings. As such, the study helped to create a narrative about relationships that can be used to help benefit both teachers and administrators and better prepare them to engage with Latino students.

Moreover, as is evident from the preceding discussion, the best methodology by which to answer questions posed by this study and to gain insights necessary about the particular phenomenon of teacher-student relationships was a qualitative approach.

### **The Context**

PUC is a CMO that operates 13 schools in the Northeast San Fernando Valley and Northeast Los Angeles. The first school, Community Charter Middle School, opened its doors in 1999, and the most recent schools, Lakeview Charter High School and Triumph Charter High School, opened their doors in 2010 (PUC Schools, n.d.). The organization consists of one elementary school, seven middle schools, and five high schools. Collectively these schools serve approximately 4,000 students and employ over 300 teachers. The geographical location in which these schools are situated has a large Latino population, which is reflected in the school's student body: 98% of the students are Latino/a.

The mission of the organization is to “develop and manage high quality charter schools in densely populated urban communities with overcrowded and low achieving schools” (PUC Schools, n.d., para. 1). The goal is to “create school programs and cultures that result in college graduation for all students” (para. 1). The organization has three main commitments that inform all decisions made in the operation of the schools:

1. Produce five times more college graduates from the communities we serve,
2. After four years with us, students are proficient, and

3. Students commit to uplift our communities now and forever.

Based on API scores, the organization had succeeded in increasing the test scores for its student population. In the most recent API results, eight of the 13 schools exceeded the state target API score of 800, with four of them being within 35 points of 900. The remaining four schools were well above an API score of 700; one school had a score below 700.

In 2009 five CMOs came together to form the Partnership of California CMOs and to apply jointly to the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation for a \$60-million-dollar grant (Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, Aspire Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, Inner City Education Foundation, & PUC Schools, 2009). This coalition was originally comprised of Aspire Public Schools, Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, Inner City Education Foundation (ICEF), and Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC). These initial five schools eventually became four when ICEF dropped out of the coalition. The collaboration sought “to have [its] high-need children nearly match the current college readiness rates of children in school districts like Beverly Hills and Malibu by 2014, on a path to exceeding them over ten years” (p. 3).

Toward this end, the coalition aimed to measure its success across four measures: (a) teacher effectiveness, (b) college readiness, (c) increased scale, and (d) cost effectiveness of their model (Alliance College-Ready Public Schools et al., 2009). This study focused on the teacher effectiveness measure established by the coalition. The group defined an effective teacher as one who can drive student growth substantially more than one year of academic progress in one school year.

In collaboration with three other CMOs, the network entered into work with the Gates Foundation to focus on teacher effectiveness. The outcome of this work became known as The College Ready Promise (TCRP), which served as the measurement criteria for determining effectiveness in the selection of teachers identified for this research. The framework of TCRP includes a variety of factors: classroom observations; student growth percentiles; student, peer, and family surveys; as well as individual growth goals. All of these factors are then included in an overall pie, where each element is given a weight to develop a teacher's score. This overall score served as a measurement for the effectiveness of a teacher; the highest scoring teachers were identified across the CMO for inclusion in this study.

### **Determining an Effective Teacher**

As part of the work with TCRP, PUC Schools created a metric by which to evaluate teacher effectiveness. This metric includes several different components with the goal of achieving a complete and holistic look at teacher effectiveness. As previously mentioned, these components were broken down into a pie chart (See Figure 1) with different weights given to different measures to create a complete teacher rating. The rating was divided into two main sections; teacher practice and behavior constituted up 60% of the rating, and student outcomes constituted 40% of the evaluation.

# Teacher Evaluation Components

PUC Schools, 2012-2013

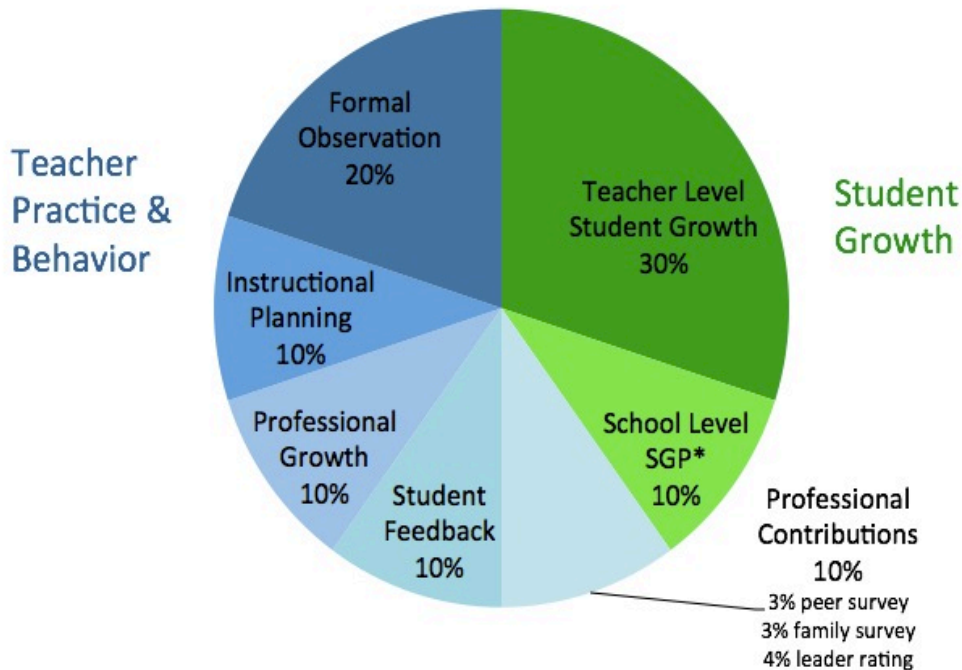


Figure 1: Teacher Evaluation Components. Teacher practice and behavior is broken into five smaller categories: formal observation, planning review, growth goals, student feedback, and professional contribution. The last category, professional contribution, has three components: peer survey, family survey, and a leader rating on domain 4. The sub-category weights for the teacher practice and behavior are: formal observation 20%, planning review 10%, growth goals 10%, student feedback 10%, and profession contributions 10% (3% peer survey, 3% family survey, 4% leader rating). These components make up the teacher practice and behavior sections of the evaluation metric. Adapted from *PUC Teacher Guidebook* 2011-12.

The other part of the evaluation metric is the student outcome section; this section makes up 40% of the overall rating. There are two smaller categories within this section: teacher-level student-growth (30%) and school-wide student growth percentile (10%). Both of these areas use a measurement known as student growth percentiles (SGP). Student growth percentiles describe “how abnormal a student’s growth is by examining their current achievement relative to their academic peers those students with the same starting point demonstrating identical prior achievement” (Bettenbenner, 2009, pp. 2-3). This measurement looks at how much students grow when compared to students who started at the same academic level.

In order to achieve student growth percentile the previous year's California Standards Test scores are used. A student's growth is compared to the growth of other students who started with the same proficiency score. For example, students who scored a below basic score of 300 would only be compared to students with the same below basic score of 300. In order to produce a more robust data set, the TCRP schools have entered into an agreement with the local school district to purchase their student data for the purposes of evaluating SGP. This allows the SGP measurement to include all schools in the district, both low and high performing schools, in order to have a more complete picture of how much individual teachers, in comparison to their peers, are increasing student achievement.

The formal observation of the teachers uses a rubric to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction in the classroom. The rubric is composed of four main domains: (a) data driven planning and assessment, (b) classroom learning environment, (c) instruction, and (d) professional contributions. These domains are then further broken down into 17 standards and those standards are broken down into 39 indicators. These indicators are rated on an increasing scale from 1 to 4, with the lowest rating being 1 and the highest being 4. The observation process involves a pre-conference, observation, and post-conference. During the post-conference, the teacher and administrator agree upon final ratings and three growth goals are created to support teacher growth. Every year, administrators undergo a recertification process to ensure proper data collection, alignment, and rating based on the rubric. The rubric is set so that an average score of three is seen as an effective teacher and is, therefore, the target score for teachers in all indicators.

These varied components of the process are all rated on the similar scale of one to four. All pieces of the pie are converted into one score for each teacher, based on the one to four scale. An effective teacher is identified in this process as a teacher whose composite score is three or above. This score is equated to increasing student achievement by one grade level year or more. This study used this effectiveness metric to help identify participants in this study and constitutes the criteria by which teachers were identified as effective.

### **Study Participants**

Central to this study, as explained previously, was the understanding of how an effective teacher is defined. As noted earlier, various factors are associated with teacher effectiveness. Fair and respectful positive relationships, limiting disruptions, and promptly identifying student learning gaps were identified as characteristics of effective teachers (Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). This research did not aim to understand what makes teachers effective, but rather how effective teachers characterize the different factors that result in effective teacher-student relationships in their work with Latino students.

Participants were selected through an evaluation process of the teacher evaluation metric data, as explained previously. First, the researcher worked with CMO teacher development team to identify all teachers of grades six through 12 within the network who met the effectiveness criteria. In an organization of roughly 400 teachers, nearly 100 teachers met the metric's effectiveness criteria. After creating an initial pool of teachers that met the effectiveness criteria, the researcher narrowed the potential pool of participants.

The researcher also examined the academic performance of students in the teachers' classrooms, looking for teachers with high student growth over the past two years. The

participants with the highest student growth over the previous two years were selected from the initial pool of effective teachers. Additionally, the researcher examined the student survey data from these teachers to further limit the number of participants, looking for the teachers that had the highest scores on their student surveys over the previous year. Participation in this research was completely voluntary. Teachers who met the criteria were solicited for participation through an email that informed potential participants as to the nature of the study and the voluntary nature of participation.

Potential participants were also informed as to the nature of the research and the individual narratives and follow up focus group required of all participants. The research included the participation of eight teachers, to ensure a well-rounded sample of effective teachers. The eight teachers with the highest score on the effectiveness metric were selected. The rationale for minimizing participants, in concert with narrative research, was to ensure that the researcher had sufficient time for in-depth engagement in both collecting teacher narratives and analyzing the rich data generated by this approach.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process took multiple steps. Initially, each of the participants was interviewed individually. The collection of narratives began in October 2013 and completed prior to the end of the first semester of that school year (December 2013). The participants were scheduled for a one-hour time period, to ensure sufficient time to delve into the topic of teacher-student relationships with participants.

Prior to the beginning of each interview session, the researcher again explained the goal of the research as well as reminded the participants of the confidential nature of what was shared



(See Appendices B and C). The approach to collecting narratives consisted of a series of open-ended questions (See Appendix D) and the process was recorded for later transcription of the conversation. The data was then coded and analyzed to understand the major themes within the interviews. These themes were given to all participants prior to the next steps being conducted. After the initial narratives were analyzed and trends uncovered, a focus group process followed. In order to have focus groups of manageable sizes, two groups were conducted with four participants in each one. These focus groups served as a way to delve deeper into the trends that were uncovered from an analysis of narrative data and created an opportunity for further insights to emerge within a group setting. This data was then transcribed, coded, and analyzed with the individual interview data to look for repeated concerns, insights, and differences that helped to answer the research questions.

### **Data Analysis (Triangulation), Narrative Analysis**

This study sought to better understand how effective teachers characterize effective teacher-student relationships in their classroom through identifying the funds of knowledge related to this phenomenon. To accomplish this, the researcher performed a narrative analysis to better understand the *stories* these teachers tell in regards to these essential relationships (Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished through the collection of narratives from a select group of teachers about their relational practices with students, to gain insight into their perspectives of the teacher-student relationship. Narrative collection focused specifically on how the participants described their relationships with students and the personal and environmental factors that they considered to support their practice.

After collecting the narratives, an analysis of the data was conducted in order to answer the research questions. This analysis took place following the transcription of individual interviews. The data was analyzed by using a system of coding to determine reoccurring categories or themes within the narratives. This process began with open coding, where the researcher reviewed the data and made notes next to any pieces of data that might be relevant to responding to the research questions. These initial codes were examined to determine which codes could be put together into categories of themes. These initial themes served as the basis for further review of the transcribed interviews, until were further perfected and narrowed down into the most comprehensive and complete themes that the data presented. In order to ensure that these categories were the best, in relation to the research questions, the researcher ensured these were responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive (Merriam, 2009). This process helped to make sure that the categories and data collected within them were the best possible ones to answer the research questions that are at the center of this study. This process served as the vehicle through which the data was examined and served as the means by which the participants could respond coherently to the research questions.

### **Limitations**

As with all studies there are limitations to the research being conducted. One of the primary limitations at work in this study was the fact that the researcher had an established working relationship with the participants. As an administrator within the CMO where the research was being conducted, there was the potential that participant teachers might not be as open with their answers as needed. However, all teachers were given pseudonyms and the

researcher guaranteed their confidentiality. The researcher limited this possibility, based on the pool of participants who were eligible to participate in the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

After the completion of all individual and initial coding of the results, the preliminary findings were brought back to the participants, who were invited to convene in focus groups to discuss, elaborate upon, and more fully specify the themes that had been identified by the researcher. The fully developed concepts that emerged out of the focus groups present a vivid picture of how effective teachers identify themselves, as well as how they characterize positive relationships with students, and what steps can be taken by administration to help them foster and support the formation of these relationships. For the purpose of this study, the themes are grouped into three categories: teacher effectiveness, teacher-student relationships, and support from administration.

#### **Participant Profiles**

A total of eight teachers both met the requirement for effectiveness as outlined previously and were also willing to participate in the study. At the time of data collection, all were classroom teachers. While the PUC organization consists of 13 schools (12 of which were included in the research), the eight teachers represented five schools that are all located in the northeast San Fernando Valley. These schools were Community Charter Middle School, Community Charter Early College High School, Triumph Charter Academy, Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy, and Lakeview Charter High School. All five of these schools had API scores above 800, which is a measure set by the state as a sign of high student progress. Of these schools, two were identified as California Distinguished Schools and one of the schools had been

identified to apply for National Blue Ribbon status, which is a national award for high-performing schools.

The participants represented a wide range of ages, experience, and ethnic backgrounds. Six of the eight teachers were from middle schools, while the other two were high school teachers (as identified in participant survey, see Appendix E). They ranged in age from 24 years old to 46 years old. In terms of teaching experience, the participants ranged from three to 15 years in the classroom. Of the eight teachers, six identified as White, one identified as African American/Latina, and the other identified as mixed ethnicity (White and Chinese American). Four of the eight participants were mathematics teachers, two were history teachers, and two were English language arts teachers. All participants were classroom teachers at the time of data collection. Collectively, the participants had a combined 53 years of classroom teaching experience, and all had worked in the PUC organization for at least three years.

## **Results**

### **Effectiveness**

Teacher effectiveness was the first area that participants were asked to discuss in the focus groups. This allowed the researcher to learn more about how the participants identified their own effectiveness, in order to better understand how their individual views matched the data that originally identified them as participants for this study. Through the analysis of the individual interviews and follow up with the focus groups, a series of themes emerged around ideas of what characteristics or factors makes a teacher effective. The themes were structure, strictness, individual support, high expectations, and feedback. While none of these themes is mutually exclusive and many are in fact intertwined, they represent an important picture of how

these participants viewed their effectiveness in the classroom in their interactions with students. Each of these themes was analyzed to achieve a more robust understanding of each.

**Structure.** Each teacher was asked to describe his/her classroom on a given day. Overwhelmingly, what came out of that description was the idea that these teachers had a very structured routine which students were expected to follow. All eight participants described some type of ritual that begins their class each day. For example, one respondent explained, “Well I guess the students walk in; they have a set ritual that they start up the class with” (Tom, Individual Interview). This was echoed in the other teachers’ responses where they described having a “Do Now” activity, a teacher practice that involves having students begin an assignment immediately upon entering the classroom. With this practice, the students began their work without teacher prompting; one teacher even had a set way of opening up his classroom with a call-and-response, “So nice to see you today, and they would say, ‘So nice to see you too, Mr [...]’” (Rob, Individual Interview). This practice is motivated by the idea that whenever the students come in the classroom, no matter what the learning objective is for the day, they know exactly what to expect from their teacher, as their class begins in the same way no matter what.

Structure did not stop at the opening of the classroom; teachers described how this concept was extended into their lessons on a daily basis. Structure was expanded to incorporate the idea that structure creates space where students know exactly what is expected of them at any given time. Giving students clarity of expectation was a significant feature of how the teachers structured their classrooms. As Mary explained,

I think opening procedures combined with routines kind of sets the tone for the class and students know what's expected of them, they know what's next, they know what's coming and in turn it maximizes the structure. (Mary, Individual Interview)

In this sense, given a clearly defined structure, students are able to always know exactly what the next step is for them in the lesson and what is expected of them. This allows a certain level of transparency to develop, as students become more aware of what the structures are and why they exist, so that students can more fully participate in the lesson and meet specified learning goal. The participants believed structure to be extremely important for their own effectiveness.

While structure was a very important theme through which the participants viewed their effectiveness, it was not simply structure for its own sake. Rather, the teachers sought structure that allowed them to fully plan for their day and minimize wasted time that could potentially distract from student learning. It was essential to how they described their own thought processes. For example, Rob stated that if you think to “yourself I haven’t really thought through that structure, that’s somewhere you are wasting time and you could put thought and a system in place” (Rob, Individual Interview). For the participants in this study, structure was considered vital to their planning and teaching process and something that they believed required constant revisiting and tweaking. Structure was considered clearly as instrumental in determining the effectiveness of this group of teachers.

**Strictness.** When participants were asked to discuss how their students viewed them in the classroom, one of the more interesting themes that developed was the idea of being strict or strictness. When asked to imagine how their students would describe them, the participants either used the word “strict” or described themselves in a manner that could be interpreted as

being strict. As Mary described, “They would say that I’m probably very strict. I don’t let them get away with a lot” (Mary, Individual Interview). A strict approach was seen as very important to being an effective teacher, and while students complained sometimes about strictness, the participants believed that the students really want their teachers to be strict. The participants believed that students want teachers who are strict, but supportive, with solid classroom management skills. Participants believed that if strictness, support, or classroom management were absent, students would be unhappy with their classroom experience. Joe stated, “The fascinating thing is when a teacher is strict sometimes the students complain, but when a teacher isn’t strict and doesn’t have classroom management [capabilities], the students complain even more” (Joe, Individual Interview). Strictness was not only believed to be essential to fostering classroom effectiveness but was also considered a teaching quality that students would crave if it was not part of the pedagogical style of their teacher.

The participants in the study not only believed that being strict was important for themselves in creating a more effective learning context, but they also saw it as something that the students expected from their teachers. For example, Mary explained, “She’s mean or she’s strict, at the end of the day they really appreciate that and they want that” (Mary, Individual Interview). The participants, thus, felt that students were looking for strictness from their teacher because it demonstrated that their teacher cared for them and wanted to create a safe space for learning. Amanda spoke to the issue in the following way:

The kids are like “oh, that’s so mean, that’s so mean,” but really they’re saying is that there are guidelines and they are enforced and that is seen as mean or strict but really it



makes the kids feel safe, like this is an ok place, I'm in control, you're going to be okay and I do what I say I'm going to do and there are no surprises. (Focus Group)

Strictness was perceived as an important tool that helped students to understand the classroom and to view it as a safe learning space. Respondents also believed that strictness in the classroom allows students to focus on the task at hand and to become immersed in the lesson if the assumption is that there is no room for behaviors that fall outside of classroom norms.

While the quality of strictness was seen as a very important part of being an effective teacher, the participants also believed that this strictness was initially difficult for students to comprehend. They were aware of how their students perceived them initially in the classroom and were fine with it not being positive at first, feeling confident that it would pay off in the long run. Samantha explained the process by saying, "Intense is how they would—I think the gist in the first two months or first month, kids hate me ... after that first two months or maybe even the next year, I'm your favorite teacher" (Samantha, Individual Interview). The teachers maintained that their strictness was essential to being effective with their students, even though it could initially have a negative impact on their interaction with students.

All the participants stated that they were willing to sacrifice the immediacy for the long run, in order to put a greater sense of strictness in place, within their classrooms. The participants were also aware that it was important for them to establish the strictness early on, so that they could get to a place where they had an understanding with their students about what was needed or expected from them in the classroom. Over time, teachers felt that they would be able to get to a place where, together with the students, they could all be on the same page and students understood why the teacher was strict. As Rob described a conversation with one of his

students, “‘Mr [...] you’re strict, but in a good way,’ and they understand the difference. They understand when being strict is productive and for the good of them” (Rob, Focus Group). Hence, strictness in the classroom seemed commonplace for the teachers in this study, who believed that their approach allows students to better understand where the teacher is coming from and to feel that, while their teacher might be strict, it was done in the students’ best interest.

**Individual support and feedback.** When describing their classroom and student interactions, the participants honed in on individual support and feedback as important features that helped them to be effective teachers. They all felt that it was very important to provide students with both the individual support they require and constant, consistent feedback about how they are doing in the classroom. Amanda described how important it is for teachers to support students, scaffold their learning, and sit with students one-on-one in order to provide the level of individual support that helps students achieve. The participants considered the combination of individual support with ongoing feedback as essential to the work of an effective teacher. Moreover, respondents believed that their students found this kind of support absolutely necessary. Tom explained, “They work at their own pace, so they’re used to getting feedback from me. They like immediate feedback, and that way I can kind of gauge how they’re doing” (Individual Interview). The teachers in this study believe that cultivating this cycle of support and feedback to students, on an individual basis, is a necessary element of effective teaching and one that they work to incorporate consistently in their classrooms.

Respondents spoke often of the value of supporting students individually, as this allows them to make interventions that are necessary to help students meet their learning goals and increase their overall academic success. Amanda described individual support as “teachers

working with students that are not at grade level and so supporting them, scaffolding their learning and when students sit with a teacher and they see that teachers spend time individually with them” (Individual Interview). Effective teachers work with students on an individual level to ensure that students get the proper support needed. About this point, Tom said, “consistent academic feedback can be something that students respond to very well and they want to know if they’re right or wrong and they want to...they want to be guided towards this thing and so as a part of making them successful” (Tom, Focus Group). In order for a teacher to be effective, participants insisted that they must support the student and provide them with consistent feedback to ensure that the students understand how they are currently doing and what they need to do in order to reach the intended goal and achieve teacher expectations.

**High expectations.** The final theme that emerged in discussions of effectiveness was the need for high expectations. Respondents in the sample believed that it was essential for a teacher to have high expectations for all of their students and to strive to ensure that those students met those expectations in their classroom. They believed, moreover, that this quality was one of the main aspects of their teaching practice that made them effective in the classroom. Samantha shared, “I expect a certain level of work and students have to reach that” (Individual Interview). They talked about setting high expectations for their students and that they worked to ensure that student met that high level of expectation, on a daily basis.

In the focus groups, consensus on the importance of high expectations led to a discussion about how to describe high expectations. If every teacher purportedly has high expectations, then why are some teachers more effective than others? This was best articulated by Rob, who explained, “high expectations [is when] the little thing becomes the big thing, so that the big

thing never happens” (Individual Interview). In similar ways, the teachers expressed that every little thing mattered in their classroom, and this was communicated to the students through the high expectations they held for them.

Although high expectations were considered of paramount importance, the participants also noted that their expectations shifted over time, while working with their students. They believed adamantly that essential to preserving high expectations in the classroom was also the willingness to continue challenging students consistently. Mary explained, “I think setting those expectations within reach and then once they get there, maybe even setting another expectation; and say ‘you’ve gotten here’ and celebrate and that keeps them going” (Focus Group).

Hence, effective teachers say there is a constant need to set expectations, help students reach them, celebrate that goal, and then set the next level of expectations for students to reach, constantly pushing them toward greater achievement. This, however, was presented with a caveat; it is important to ensure that students do not become overwhelmed by teacher expectations that are unrealistic. The participants felt that it was important that students did not feel suffocated or discouraged by unrealistic expectations placed on them by their teachers. About this issue, Mary noted that “high expectations [have to be] within the bounds of like you have breathing room, you’re not feeling strangled by these expectations” (Individual Interview). It is important, then, that students can realistically reach the expectations that are being set by the teacher.

The line between realistically high expectations and overwhelming ones is not always an easy line to draw, even for an effective teacher. However, despite the difficulty, participants expressed ardent commitment to the role of high expectations in teaching. Amanda put it this

way: “It’s reminding them when I stop...when I don’t think you can do it is when I’m going to stop asking for it and that’s when you should really be insulted” (Individual Interview). For respondents, high expectations were an essential part of teacher effectiveness. If teachers did not have high expectations for their students, then this was tantamount to insulting students, for it suggests that a teacher has given up on them.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

The second area that participants were asked to discuss was the question of teacher-student relationships. This allowed the researcher to better understand how the participants characterized their own relationships with students and gave particular insight into what the participants do to help form these positive relationships in their classrooms. Through the analysis of individual interviews and the follow-up with focus groups, a series of themes emerged that centered on creating positive teacher-student relationships. The major themes were student voice, humanization, trust, openness, personal connections, and respect. While none of these themes is mutually exclusive and many are in fact intertwined, these factors provide an important picture of how participants in this study viewed their relationships with students in their classrooms and how they worked to form these interactions. Though the themes interact in practice, for the sake of analysis, they are addressed separately in the sections that follow.

**Student voice.** Student voice was a major theme that emerged in the focus group discussions. Respondents believed that in order to have good relationships with students, students must feel they have a voice in the classroom, that there is a time and place for them to be heard by their teacher. Further, participants agreed that students need opportunities within the classroom structure to have their ideas, thoughts, beliefs heard and validated by the teacher. To

encourage voice in his students, Joe tells them, “I understand your frustration, I understand all of that. How can I support you?” (Individual Interview).

The participants felt it was very important for students to know that their teacher listens to them and understands where they are coming from, as this in turn enables a teacher to better support the students. This concern for creating a place for student voice fosters an environment where students can feel safe and respected, which allows them to develop better relationships with their teachers inside the classroom. Joe explained the issue of student voice in the following manner, “Yeah, it’s that idea of you’ve created an environment where they know their voice is respected and they know that it’s safe and they’re willing to share that” (Focus Group). In this way, the teacher and student together create a space where students can voice how they are feeling or thinking. As such, participants considered the students’ free expression of voice as a strong factor in creating positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom.

When discussing student voice and its role in teacher-student relationships, the participants also felt that voice had to grow out of a democratic process, so that the expression of voice was not solely permitted on the teacher’s terms. Students should also feel that they have the ability to share feelings and thoughts when it is most appropriate for them, rather than just when the teacher feels it is appropriate for students to speak out. The participants supported students’ self-expression, even when it took the form of disagreement with the teacher or one another. Joe elaborated on this point: “Share their voice whether they agree or disagree with you, and I strongly encourage them to disagree with me and kind of creating an environment of safety and trust where they know they can disagree with me” (Individual Interview). This

openness to student voice was seen as an important avenue for nurturing and cultivating positive teacher-student relationships in their classrooms.

**Humanization.** Humanization, with respect to both the teacher and the student, also emerged as a central theme. The teacher is not simply a robot in front of the classroom presenting general information to non-descript, interchangeable students. Rather, both teacher and student are people coexisting in the classroom together. Tom explains, “I think if you can approach them as a person and as a person teaching a person then you can start actually collaborating with the students as opposed to starting the year opposed” (Focus Group). Respecting the personhood of each was seen as an important element to understanding teacher-student relationships, in that both parties needed to be seen as human beings and as working together to achieve a common goal. The participants felt that it was vital for both sides to understand the humanity of the other, in order for teacher and student to create a positive working relationship together in the classroom.

The participants felt that it was particularly important for students to humanize their teachers, by coming to understand that they too are people who seek to help and support them academically. Tom made a reference to this point by saying, “along with the concept of humanization of students you need to talk about the humanization of the teacher because a lot of them don’t see teachers as people. They see them as these monsters, disciplinarians, or ‘he said I was stupid’ or whatever it is” (Focus Group). Instead, by humanizing their teachers and seeing them as real people, students can come to better understand them and, thus, become far more comfortable establishing relationships with them.

One key place where participants felt that they were able to express their humanity to students is when they make mistakes in the classroom and allow that to be an acceptable thing for them to do. For when teachers admit they have made a mistake to their students, they also demonstrate to students that we are all human and all make mistakes from time to time. Mary stated, “We’re human. We make mistakes, and make it a safe environment for if they make a mistake its normal. It happens and it’s about what you do thereafter and how you address it” (Focus Group). This ability to be open and accepting of the mistakes that human beings make also allows teachers to express their own humanness to students; and by so doing, students can come to better understand the people who are teaching them.

Along with admitting mistakes, participants reflected on the benefits of using humor in the classroom to illustrate their humanness to their students. Joe spoke about using humor when correcting his mistakes: “Whenever I make a mistake I try and turn it into a joke of some kind, but being able to incorporate humor and realizing that sometimes students have to make a quick joke too, and you shouldn’t scold them immediately because they make a two-second joke, so kind of allowing that human side, I guess, to come through” (Focus Group). This ability to laugh at oneself as well as allow students the freedom to laugh as well was considered to be a significant aspect to the humanization of both teachers and students. This permits teachers and students to be human in engaging mistakes and to share in the laughter that may arise in that moment together.

Humor was viewed as a vital element of the humanization process by the participants. Whether it was simply, as Mary put it, “being able to laugh at yourself” or to just be silly with your students (Individual Interview), or as Tom explained, “Yeah or just laugh with your kids



too, like yeah, we're talking about school and we're in academics but you're still a middle schooler [sic] and you do silly things and I have to see that on a daily basis and sometimes it's funny and I want to just laugh at that point" (Individual Interview). The teachers in this study expressed often that this ability to laugh with students creates a space where both the teacher and student are seen as humans working together in the classroom and each in turn is humanized by the other through their open interactions. This process of humanization then allows teachers and students to help create positive and meaningful relationships.

**Trust.** Another theme that arose repeatedly over the course of the interviews was the idea of trust that must be present, if positive teacher-student relationships are to develop. Participants felt that it was crucial for students to be able to trust in their teachers. According to Amanda, "They [students] have to trust that your motivation is pure, and it's good, and you really have their best interest in heart, and they are in good hands, so it's super important" (Individual Interview).

It was seen, therefore, as imperative that students felt a sense of trust in the person who was teaching them. They needed to know that the teacher is someone that they could rely on as they struggled to learn new material and meet their teacher's expectations. It is also important, according to Amanda and Mary, that teachers offer consistency so students can trust them and their follow-through. Both expressed that if "I say I am going to do something and I do it" (Amanda, Focus Group) and "you can trust me. I will do this" (Mary, Focus Group), then their students feel more trusting of their efforts and intentions. This idea of building trust with students was viewed as an essential component in creating and maintaining positive relationships between the teacher and student.

Respondents articulated another core element of trust: that students can trust that a teacher has their best interests at heart. Students need to know that their teachers understand what they are going through, accurately perceive their best interests, and can lead them in the right direction. About this, Samantha said,

They need to trust me that I know what I'm talking about. I can trust them that they're going to try their best. Like that kind of stuff is very much tied in too but they need to trust me that I know what I'm doing and they're in good hands. (Individual Interview)

To establish positive relationships, respondents spoke about the need to help students overcome negative preconceptions they might bring with them about teachers and the process of education, in order to break through preexisting distrust. Samantha alluded here to this process, by saying, "It was like I had to erase all the mistrust they [the students] had from their previous teacher" (Individual Interview). Teachers in this study felt that it was not only important to establish trust with the students they taught, but also to understand and actively work through with them whatever notions of trust or distrust that the students brought with them from their previous experiences. For example, Samantha honed in on this idea, particularly for teachers who taught remedial classes or students who were taking a class for the second time:

I had to erase all those ideas about why they were taking this class and why they got put in it and how the teachers respond to these types of students. Like basically CAHSEE prep and algebra one are all the dumb kids and the teacher doesn't like teaching them because they're dumb and they misbehave. So I had to get rid of all those ideas in order for them to recognize that I was a different teacher. (Individual Interview)

Through acknowledging students' preexisting ideas about trust, these educators felt they could work directly with their students to address misconceptions that could disrupt the relationship. In this way, teachers and students could cooperatively build a new level of trust to support their current classroom learning.

Trust was also considered a two-way street by participants: teachers must show they trust students, in order for students to develop trust in their teachers. Participants identified various ways in which they reached out to their students, to show their trust for them. About this, Mary said, "I think it will also build trust being there for them, maybe even giving them your phone number, [or saying] 'hey if you need to talk to me at some point I'm available to you'" (Individual Interview). So, participants agreed that teachers demonstrate their trust for students when they make themselves available to students and trust them with personal information such as phone numbers. This was well-illustrated in a comment by Amanda, wherein she discussed teachers giving phone numbers out to their students as a sign of trust:

All my kids have my phone number. In the beginning they were like, "what if someone prank calls you?" And I would be like, "I trust that you're not going to do that in eighth grade." And they would be like, "but what if?" And I'm like, "it hasn't happened yet." (Individual Interview)

Hence, the respondents in this study clearly viewed the process of building teacher-student relationships as a two-way street, where trust had to be given and received on both sides.

**Openness.** When discussing teacher-student relationships, another major theme that emerged was openness. According to the respondents, to achieve openness, teachers must share themselves candidly with their students and allow them to know something about who they truly

are as people. In a sense, this element of openness complements with the earlier discussed notions of humanness and trust. Participants expressed that it is always a delicate balance to know what to share with students, based on their age group or maturity level, without sharing too much. Mary felt that teachers are well served by honestly admitting to students that they too are “going through a lot of similar experiences and just having that knowledge of things that they’re going to end up going through” (Focus Group), as this is helpful in building relationships. Participants also believed that students benefit from hearing about their teachers’ biographies—early stories from when they were students, to facilitate more meaningful teacher-student connections. About this, Rob shared, “so I might say ‘you know it’s like when I was a kid, when I was in eighth grade” (Individual Interview). When teachers share of themselves, it helps students to know more about what their teacher is like and how they have handled academic or life experiences similar to those that their students are now facing. This process of sharing personal aspects of life with students allows participants and students to better understand one another in very real ways. Thus, through a willingness of teachers to be sincerely open, positive student teacher relationships can develop and evolve.

The theme of openness, however, was not only limited to sharing personal experiences about when the teachers were students, but also sharing bits of information about themselves currently. Participants felt that it was important for teachers to share their stories and for students to understand who they are, beyond the teacher they see in the classroom. Samantha spoke to the purpose of this self-disclosure in the classroom: “I think I had to tell them [students] my story, in order for them to know where I was coming from and know the ways we were similar and the ways we were different” (Individual Interview). There was general agreement

among the teachers in this sample that sharing parts of themselves and information about their lives with their students supports the formation of positive relationships. For example, Tom identified a way that he encouraged openness with the students:

Like whatever period of time it takes me to do roll and this stuff they can just ask me questions and I tell them these stories from my life that has to do with those things. It ends up being pretty awesome actually and the questions they come up with are amazing, like what's the worst fear? What's the worst thing that ever happened to you in this way? Or what's this? (Focus Group)

Hence, when teachers create many opportunities for students to ask a variety of questions, this also gives teachers better insight into students as people, which also goes a long way in helping to nurture positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom.

While participants felt that openness was essential for creating positive teacher-student relationships, they also seemed very aware of a line that exists between sharing and over-sharing with students. Teachers must consider the students' age and maturity to ensure that whatever they are sharing with students is appropriate for everyone in the classroom. Mary also related her strategy of "knowing the line" by imagining whether a particular remark is likely to be met with parental approval:

Knowing the line and the balance of what is age appropriate, what age is not appropriate, and I know sometimes teachers think they're ready. I know them [students] that well that they can handle this, but again knowing that if you were that parent on the other end would you be okay with that? (Focus Group)

Participants conveyed that although they knew their students well and it was important to be open with them, teachers still have to be conscious of what and how they are sharing with students. Related to this issue, the participants described teachers who they felt had been too open with students and how this had caused negative repercussions on their relationships with students. For example, Joe explained, “I feel like one of the things I’ve seen from teachers who are too open...maybe they’ll be the cool teacher or whatever but I feel a lot of the students won’t have the level of respect for that teacher [that is necessary]” (Focus Group). So, while being open with students is considered an important aspect of healthy teacher-student relationships, it is also as important that the adult in the classroom, the teacher, is consistently aware of the risks of oversharing. In short, effective teachers are open, but they carefully monitor how their openness is shaping classroom climate.

**Respect.** Respect is another theme that emerged as participants discussed teacher-student relationships. Respondents felt that respect was a significant aspect of building effective relationships with the students that they teach. Similar to other themes mentioned earlier, respect was conceptualized by these educators as a two-way street, where both the teacher and the student show respect for one another. According to Amanda, “I just think that having respect with them and being real with them can go a long way, because [the relationship is] a two-way street” (Individual Interview).

While respect was identified as a two-way street, participants also felt that the responsibility lies with them, as teachers, to initiate a high level respect with their students, in order to ensure that it will be returned. Of this, Samantha said, “It definitely has to go, in my opinion, in the other direction first (teacher to student)” (Focus Group). Hence, establishing a

classroom environment of reciprocal respect was considered as a key element in the formation of teacher-student relationships and a classroom condition that is essential to nurturing relationships that are effective.

Participants discussed several different ways in which they foster respect with their students in their classrooms. One of the common ideas that emerged was that of allowing oneself to be vulnerable, admitting to students when one was wrong, and accepting responsibility by apologizing openly for mistakes made. Mary described this vulnerability as, “I think even being vulnerable, like if you know you did something wrong or you upset the student, even if its minor, I think apologizing and being vulnerable and putting yourself out there [is important]” (Focus Group). Similarly, participants across the board expressed that is extremely important for the teacher to model respect in a variety of ways with students, during their classroom interactions. Apologizing and putting oneself out there, is seen as going a long way in demonstrating to students that the teacher respects them, while simultaneously communicating what the teacher expects from the students.

Participants seemed, again, keenly aware of the need of teachers to model respect for their students, in order for students to also engage with teachers in respectful ways. Amanda addressed the issue of fostering classroom respect in the following manner: “If you respect the person you’re working for and working with and it’s not-you’re not micromanaging, so I’m not trying to micromanage my students. I’m trying to help them and coach them and facilitate them so that they could eventually, innately do this on their own” (Focus Group). The teachers in this study asserted that respect must be extended to their students in order to coach them in how to reciprocate respect in their relationships, within and outside the classroom. Respondents

expressed a firm belief that respect is an essential quality of teacher-student relationships, and as students learn how to give and receive mutual respect, they will become more successful in their interactions in the world. Samantha also linked the issue of respect to the act of listening:

I mean we're going to be working with people for the rest of our lives. We're going to be around people and the only real way you can communicate with people is by listening and listening through respect. I mean having the respect to actually hear what you are saying. (Focus Group)

The theme of respect, then, was considered by participants as a relational trait that was not only extremely beneficial to the teacher-student relationship, but one that students needed to cultivate in their everyday lives in and outside of the classroom.

**Personal connections.** The final theme that emerged from participants in regards to teacher-student relationships is that of establishing personal connections between teacher and student. Of all of the teacher-student relationship themes, this one was mentioned the most frequently in the interviews. Participants felt that it is imperative that teachers make personal connections with their students, if they are to create positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom. Tom, for example, expressed that making personal connections helped greatly in teacher engagement with students: “You’re trying to draw them in and connect as much of their personal life with what you want to give them” (Individual Interview), he said. Similarly, Mary felt that it was important to do “whatever, anything you can connect to with the kid ... [and] build that connection” (Individual Interview). As would be expected, participants stressed how important it is for teachers to take time to get to know their students more personally and, thus, connect with them on a deeper level.



Additionally, the participants believed that, because each student is different, the process of forging teacher-student connections varies greatly and should be unique to each student, according to his or her needs. They were adamant that the teacher bears the responsibility of figuring out how to connect to the student and, then, to work to build on this knowledge. Joe described the process in the following way: “I don’t have the same connection with more than one student so finding that personal connection, its soccer with one boy, it’s dancing with another girl, it’s a certain movie or book with another kid, finding whatever that personal connection is” (Individual Interview). Participants expressed the need to become attuned to the little things that are particular to each student. By fostering a unique personal connection with each student, effective teachers support student by making them feel appreciated for who they are.

The study participants acknowledged the magnitude of this task, when teaching 120 students a year. However, they did not shy away from it; but rather, they believed that it was essential to create personal connections with every single student, as this practice enhanced the classroom experience for all. Mary explains the importance of doing this with all of her students:

I think for me I try and have personal connections and relationships with every single one of my kids. It’s not just 80 percent of them and you have those kids that are quiet and shy and don’t necessarily open up but I make it a point to get them to open up. Whether it’s “hey, do you just want to have lunch with me?” (Individual Interview)

Hence, participants understood the significance of establishing personal connections with each and every student that they teach. It is not enough just to reach most of one’s students; it is

imperative to sincerely work to make personal connections with all them, in order to help ensure that positive teacher-student relationships are built across the classroom.

### **School/Administration Support**

The final area that participants were asked to speak about was centered on how the administration and the school could support them in establishing positive teacher-student relationships. This aspect of the interviews allowed me to better understand how participants thought they could be supported by the administration and the school structure, forming effective relationships with their students. Through careful review of individual interviews and follow up with the focus groups, a series of themes again emerged related to this question. The themes identified included community circle, time to connect, and opportunities outside the classroom. While, again, none of these themes are mutually exclusive and many are, in fact, intertwined to the previous discussion, these themes represent an important picture of how participants view their relationships with students in their classrooms and what they consider necessary in forming these relationships. Each of the themes will be analyzed separately in the following sections, so that a more robust understanding of each can be provided.

**Community circle.** When discussing how schools and administrators can help to support the creation of positive teacher-student relationships, a major recurrent theme raised by participants was that of establishing community circles. The concept of community circle came from the book *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Gibbs, 2001) which has been used at PUC schools since the first one was opened. While it has been modified to meet the individual needs of the organization, this model is executed similarly across the various schools

within the organization. All schools might slightly modify its use, but it comprises a practice of every single school included in this research.

During a community circle, the teacher and students in the classroom form a circle with their chairs. The teacher facilitates the community circle, by posing a question for the students to answer. There are four main rules that are upheld in the practice of community circles. These include:

1. Mutual Respect
2. No Put Downs
3. Right to Pass
4. Active and Attentive Listening

These rules are introduced at the beginning of every circle and are posted in most classrooms. While students have the right to pass initially, all students are required to answer the question; and those who pass initially are circled back around, until the end. At PUC the following two steps were added to the community circle to ensure increased participation and sharing. After everyone has shared the first time, there are two additional steps in which anyone can participate during the circle time. The first is identifying common themes that were heard, and the second is making statements of appreciation for what was said inside the circle.

Participants felt that the community circle constitutes an incredibly vital tool in the creation of positive teacher-student relationships. The practice, according to Rob, provides an opportunity for “first of all, getting a chance for everybody to be heard, so even if they are repeating, someone’s talking” (Individual Interview). Students are involved in listening to one another. The participants felt that having this structure in place at the schools allowed them to

connect with students more intimately, because all the students in the room had a chance to express themselves, no matter how big or small the expression may be. Mary spoke about the power of this sharing:

It's just so powerful and the structure is around it that everybody has to share out.

Because if you just threw out a topic and the kids were to just respond to it I don't know if those quiet shy kids would necessarily respond. But kind of forcing that, whether it be one-word answers or a five-minute story and that also tells you a lot about the kid and their personality. (Focus Group)

Community circle gives teachers concentrated time and space to better understand their students and allows the students the opportunity to listen, be heard, and express their own ideas more openly. According to the respondents, the type of socialization process enabled in the community circle enhanced their knowledge of their students and, thus, enhanced their ability to form more meaningful relationships with them.

Community circle was not only cited as a vehicle for student expression but also as a safe place for students and teachers to share and to be their true selves. Being your true self during community circle is considered an important part of the circle experience, and committing to this type of honest helps the teachers build relationships with their students. Joe affirmed this quality of the process: "I feel like community circle allows people to be who they really are and not who everybody else thinks they want to be" (Focus Group). The structure of the community circle activity creates a space that allows students to share themselves in authentic ways with their classmates and their teachers.

The community circle practice, in turn, allows teachers to build positive relationships with students, as they continue to learn more and more about who their students truly are. This process increases the shared sense of community. Mary spoke to this point: “You get into the community, you see people and I talk about that a lot when we’re talking about community circle, like how important it is. It’s like it’s a lot harder to disregard people’s feelings or be mean to people and stuff when you really get to know them” (Focus Group). The participants felt that community circle was a safe space created by the school, which worked to support and enhance their interactions with students. The structure of community circle provided teachers an excellent opportunity to know their students better and cultivate more positive teacher-student relationships through this shared experience.

**Time to connect.** While community circle is a specific type of space and time to connect, participants also identified the need for additional time to connect with their students beyond the classroom. They believed that one way in which administration can support them in establishing more effective relationships with their students is by creating more time for them to interact with students and connect with them in different ways. Participants expressed that a mandatory item of their contract should require teachers to participate in at least six events per academic year with their students, outside of the traditional school day. On this issue, Mary stated:

Making it mandatory that you go to six family nights ... and not even family but it could be a celebration, and end-of-year celebration, a semester celebration and forcing you to be there. I know teachers at the end of the day don’t want to stay until 7:30. But seeing kids perform in drama, like a play, seeing kids perform and sing, which I don’t see on a

daily basis ... I see them in one form math class. I don't see them in other forms and I don't know what they're good at outside of ... I mean yes I have these conversations but it doesn't actually resonate with me until I see it happening. (Focus Group)

Participants felt that these mandatory activities, while difficult on them due to long hours, were also an important element in their relationship building with students. Moreover, participants believed that beyond after school activities, many small things that occurred with students during the day were similarly important. According to Amanda, "We have built in games ... like once a month just games with the kids during community circle. Like minute to win it kind of thing and like we have to find out who the best cohort is and this is the only way to do it so how many marshmallows can you fit in your mouth" (Individual Interview). These types of activities enhance the ability of teachers to form positive relationships with their students. While these activities are mandated by the administration, the participants did not express resistance or animosity toward fulfilling them. On this point, Joe mentioned, "It's really interesting because almost everything that we're saying is mandated by admin but yet it's for a good reason" (Focus Group). Participants, thus, felt that while these activities were mandated by the school administration, they considered these to be in the best interest of both teachers and students and were beneficial to fostering in consistent ways positive relationships with students.

**Opportunity outside the classroom.** While participants talked about time to connect as being important, they also spoke again about opportunities outside of the classroom, as supportive in developing strong relationships with their students. The activities mentioned here differed from those discussed in the previous section, in that here teachers described activities that occurred off of the school site. Tom explained, "Yeah, field trips, anything where

students...events on the yard, the fair, any event where we can start building relationships outside of the classroom” (Focus Group). The teachers in this study felt that events and activities that took them outside the realm of the classroom went a long way in helping to create more positive understanding between teachers and their students. Rob shared an example of this: “I know it’s not for every grade level and not for every grade student, but the Washington, DC trip that the school allows us to go on with the kids is huge in building [relationships]” (Focus Group). Participants truly felt that activities where they could interact with their students outside of the school context were significant in the formation of effective relationships and a clear way in which the school administration could support their efforts with students.

Respondents also spoke with enthusiasm about the need for teachers to take part in extracurricular activities with their students. For the participants, these activities, like coaching a sport, were an excellent tool for learning more about their students’ motivations and building more meaningful relationships with them. Scott explained that “Teachers that have coached or been a part of the sport activities. The students learn different things about those teachers and it’s just another ... it’s another thing that people start to understand about the teacher” (Individual Interview). This allows teachers and students to see each other in a different light and to understand different aspects about one another. Again here, Scott mentioned that “students understand this different facet of the teacher so it’s just another level of being able to understand the entire person” (Individual Interview). Participants, across the board, insisted that encouraging teachers to be a part of extracurricular activities can help them immensely to better understand their students and for the students to better understand their teachers, which in turn allows for successful relationships to be established between teachers and students.

## **Conclusion**

In their interviews, participants clearly identified important factors for establishing effective, positive teacher-student relationships. Respondents also introduced a variety of ways in which the school administration could support their efforts. Over the course of the interviews and focus groups, numerous specific themes emerged that allowed the researcher to better understand how these teachers understood themselves, their relationships with students, and the impact of structures that exist in their schools that also support teacher-student engagement. The results of this study provide some revelatory perspectives, with respect to the greater question of teacher-students relationships. Further analysis through the lens of the literature discussed in Chapter Two will help to place these findings in broader context to make clear their significance and implications.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

The central aims of the present study were twofold: first, to understand how effective teachers characterize positive teacher-student relationships, and second, to identify ways that schools and administrators can better support teachers in developing and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships. Respondents were asked to describe what made them effective teachers in an effort to understand whether their self-identified traits aligned with characteristics that previous researchers found to be associated with effective teaching. By considering the connections between previous literature and this research, a better understanding of these elements will emerge, so that continued dialogue around the topic of positive teacher-student relationships will be supported through this work.

#### **Effectiveness**

##### **Classroom Practices**

The previous research on effective teachers indicated that some of the characteristics that make teachers effective have much to do with how teachers behave with students in the classroom. The work of Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2101) provided a glimpse into the practices that engender teachers as effective. Their research showed that good classroom management was an indicator of an effective teacher. Specifically, in a comparison of effective and less effective teachers, less effective teachers had three times as many disruptions as their more effective peers (Stronge et al., 2011). This was echoed in the words of the participants who identified two important themes related to classroom management: structure and strictness. The teachers identified that they were strict and had clear expectations for the students from day one.

For example, one respondent explained, “At first...I’m very strict. I have my expectation very high to the point where I sometimes get called mean, but after a couple of months go by and how consistent I remain, they realize okay, that’s who she is” (Mary, Individual Interview). The participants identified the quality of being strict as an important aspect of their effectiveness, also suggested in the research of Stronge et al. (2011).

The concept of strictness that participants raised in their discussion of teacher effectiveness needs to be reviewed in terms of power and authority in the classroom. The expression of power can be a struggle for those who view themselves as engaged in social justice and practitioners of democratic thought and practice, in their efforts to create conditions for the empowerment of students. It is important that educators “do not exercise power oppressively in the classroom” (Bizzell, 1991, p. 55). The participants did not express how their strictness was implemented in their classrooms and in which context they enacted this authority with their students. There appeared, however, to be some conflict between the ideal of strictness and the ideal of empowering students in the classroom. This was evident in the voices of the participants. Mary (Individual Interview) described her students’ perceptions of her as “She’s mean or she’s strict,” while Rob (Individual Interview) believed his students viewed him as “strict, but in a good way.”

Though these descriptions seem similar, Rob’s addition of “in a good way” draws attention to subtle differences in the ways in which power can be expressed in the classroom. The type of power that Mary described is most closely related to the idea of coercion, which Bizzell characterized as a person exercising power over another without the consent of that person (Bizzell, 1991). On the other hand, in Rob’s quote, students recognized strictness but

understood that as beneficial and there for the best interest of the student. Accordingly, it is an excellent example of another power dynamic: persuasion (Bizzell, 1991). These represent the opposite sides of the power spectrum and offer different insight into the ways in which teachers choose to enact their authority in the classroom. Educators must be critically aware of how they exercise their authority in the classroom. Often, educators essentialize their authority and do not reflect on the ways in which it is enacted. Often, the use of authority can be an element that serves to further enact oppressive environments on students, especially when those students are members of traditionally underserved populations (Bizzell, 1991).

Educators must be aware of the conditions that they create in their classroom. The way that authority is exercised in a classroom does not have to immediately move to a place of authoritarianism (Darder, 2012). There is a need for authority in the classroom, and it is important that educators reflect on this, as it can be a tool to either subordinate or empower students (Darder, 2012). The need for teachers to use their authority was evident in the words of Amanda (Individual Interview), who spoke of her students' perception of her "that [she] is seen as mean or strict but really it makes the kids feel safe, like this is an ok place." There is a need for students to feel safe and be allowed to share their voice in the classroom. Strictness can be a tool to allow for these things to happen, as long as it is used in ways that provide more effective boundaries for supporting a democratic environment. Teachers should strive not to fall too far on one side of authority or the other—neither authoritarian nor *laissez faire* or permissive in their approach. Ultimately, authority in the classroom needs "to create conditions for a critical transformation of consciousness" (Darder, 2012). It is only through this lens that authority can be seen as a means by which students become more empowered and engaged in a socially just

education. This element is extremely important. While the teachers represented in this study engaged with their students in ways that they felt were important and essential to their teaching, their words hinted at a more repressive form of authority. Too often, teachers from the dominant culture lean more towards an authoritarian approach, especially when instructing working-class students of color (Darder, 2012). If teachers are not reflective of their practices and their use of authority, effective teachers can inadvertently reproduce oppressive social conditions in the classroom that they are working to overcome.

Similarly, the emphasis this sample placed on structure mirrors the finding by Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) that reducing disruptions enabled more effective teaching. The participants all identified structure as a key element of their effectiveness, noting that having a set procedure, clear expectations, and a specific plan for every element of their lesson was important to their relationship with students. Rob reinforced the preparatory aspect of creating a consistent structure in his classroom:

All sorts of structure with just where the kids are sitting and procedures that we set up in the classroom. I would imagine like how to come into the room and what to look for. So I mean getting stuff done and cutting through a lot of wasted time. (Rob, Focus Group)

The teachers identified the need to limit wasted time, which permits little opportunity for students to be distracted; as they have a clear plan and procedure for what they are supposed to be doing at every given moment. In many ways, they consider their strict adherence to particular classroom structures or rules as a positive factor in the relationship.

Research in the field supports participants' claims about consistent structure, particularly in conjunction with other classroom practices related to teacher effectiveness (Gentry et al.,

2011; Popp et al., 2011). Popp, Grant, and Stronge (2011) found that effective teachers are those who create classroom conditions that allow students to constantly assess and demonstrate their learning. Data from the present study concurred with Popp et al. in that the study participants believed in the importance of providing students with individual support and feedback. However, in contrast to findings by Popp et al., the respondents in this sample did not link constant assessment to effective teaching

Whereas Gentry et al. (2011) found that talented teachers use meaningful and relevant curriculum in the classroom, this result was not directly replicated in the present study. Although the participants made a variety of comments about connecting with their students, including Samantha's concern about the curriculum—"does it connect with the students and is it explained and well thought out?"—they were not explicit in discussing this connection in terms of the relevancy of the curriculum. Instead, most of the comments made about classroom practices focused on expectations, structure, and the other similar themes. The idea of assessment and relevancy in the curriculum were not themes substantively discussed by the participants in their individual interviews or in the focus group conversation.

### **Teacher Characteristics**

In addition to specific classroom practices, there were also specific characteristics that participants believed effective teachers possess. These include strictness, supportive, and having high expectations. One characteristic repeatedly identified in both existing research literature and the present study is high teacher expectations. In concert with this finding, Gentry et al. (2011) found that effective teachers have high expectations for their students and themselves. Study participants considered high expectations to be extremely important. Rob explained how

he constantly keeps students aware of his high expectations and offers feedback about whether they measuring up to that expectation. “I do the living above the line thing that we do and so I’m always referencing it and like ‘where are we living right now?’ And so I used it and when I say ‘we’re living below the line’ they get it” (Rob, Individual Interview). The participants agreed that their high academic and behavioral expectations for their students helped make them effective teachers. They inferred that without such expectations, students were bound to perform poorly or lose motivation for their studies.

Teacher reflectiveness is another characteristic that has been identified in several previous studies as related to teacher effectiveness. Popp et al. (2011) reported that effective teachers consistently ask themselves, “What could I have done better?” Their research highlights that effective teachers constantly reflect on and refine their practice, in order to continuously improve their teaching. Although this theme of reflectivity did not explicitly surface among these respondents, this omission may be attributable to the organizational culture of the schools, as opposed to an omission of practice. PUC schools expect all teachers to be reflective practitioners. Reflectiveness is one of the four key elements of a PUC teacher, so it is possible that participants did not mention it precisely because it is already a commonsense organizational expectation.

### **Teacher Effectiveness and Relationships**

While the teacher-student relationship will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections, several characteristics of effective teachers that were found in previous research are also evident in the present data. These include possessing human compassion, taking an interest in students, and understanding students and their problems (Check, 1986; Gentry et al., 2011;

Grieve, 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). The characteristics of making personal connections and extending respect are particularly integral to effective teaching. Participants considered enacting personal connection and respect for students and parents to be central to effective teaching. Amanda made the point in the following way:

I need to always keep in mind that their parents sent the absolute best eighth grader to school today, and their best is not at home. Their best is sitting in front of me, and I have to really honor that from the parents' perspective. I can't take advantage of, oh, that kid's here again. Oh, man if only that kid were absent. That's someone's child and that mom sent her best son even though his is challenging ... so honoring who they are as eighth graders. (Amanda, Individual Interview)

The participants were aware of the need to both understand and respect their students and approach them with a high level of compassion and sincerity, in order to construct effective relationships with students.

### **Characteristics of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

The focus of this research was to better understand how effective teachers characterize positive teacher-student relationships. The first of the two research questions guiding this study was: How do effective teachers of Latino students, within a charter management organization, characterize effective teacher-student relationships?

Effective teacher-student relationships supported and cultivated a process of humanization with students, as first articulated by Freire (1970) in his work on literacy. It is imperative that teachers engage in forms of education that are inclusive and that reflect a grounded understanding of their students (Giroux, 2003). Accordingly, the effective teachers

who participated in this study embraced an inclusive understanding of their students' social and learning needs in their classroom. They also possess funds of knowledge, similar to those proposed by Gonzalez et al. (2005), whereby effective teachers bring with them unique lived experience and personal knowledge centered on the creation of positive teacher-student relationships.

The themes uncovered in this study speak to the humanizing character of these relationships. Through the juxtaposition of particular themes raised by this study and our current understanding of teacher-student relationships, a clearer picture can develop of teacher-student relationships among Latino/a student populations. In the sections that follow, themes identified by participants, including student voice, humanization, trust, openness, respect, and personal connections, will be examined through the scope of current research.

### **Student Voice**

Central to the concept of funds of knowledge is the idea that every student enters the classroom with certain knowledge that can play a significant role in their education (Gonzalez et al. 2005). Thus, it is essential for students to have a voice in the classroom and to feel that the teacher is someone who listens to them and understands their culture. Participants articulated this clearly as they spoke to the importance of student voice as a form of validation. For example,

Oh, so when they can give their opinion and tell what these things are that happened to them. No one really seems to think to ask. Because a lot of our kids have a lot of kids at home, a lot of people, and that really is validating for them. (Amanda, Individual Interview)



The teachers identified that students need to be heard in their classrooms; their opinions and ideas need to be shared in order for them to feel validated and respected. This approach also allows students to share their funds of knowledge with both the teacher and their classmates. This in turn allows for the teacher to better understand the student and to thereby create a more positive relationship with them.

While student voice in terms of vocal expression and understanding is a key element to students sharing themselves with their teachers, written work can also serve as a vehicle for student voice. According to Amanda, “We’re using writing as a tool of expression and to have our voices be heard, and they really like that in eighth grade, because a lot of them are angry and they don’t know why. So giving them just different tools to figure out who they are” (Individual Interview). This avenue for student expression is important to Latino/a students; because, as with all students, one of their fundamental educational needs is to be understood and respected by their teachers. A participant in Corbett and Wilson’s (2002) research reinforced this point when the participant said:

Sometimes a teacher don’t understand what people go through. They need to have compassion. A teacher who can relate to students will know something’s going on with them. (p. 22)

Students are often seeking an outlet for their voices, and effective teachers can provide outlets for expression.

In a socially-just world, every human being must be treated with respect and dignity (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). In this regard, teachers must create the conditions for students to feel included and heard. When teachers value student voice, students can explore

verbal and written expression more confidently and openly. Student work can represent a powerful form of personal expression. In order for students to truly feel that they are a part of something, they must feel ownership of that space. Beth explained how the physical space of the classroom itself can serve as a conduit of student expression:

Just if you were to look at my classroom, I feel like you would see a lot of rich student work up on my walls. You would see academic and content vocabulary. You would see anchor charts that the students created. (Individual Interview)

Through the classroom practices identified here students have an actual means for expressing voice, by way of the very materials presented on the walls of the room. In this way, they can achieve a sense of ownership and pride as they look around a room filled with their work. In this type of classroom, a student can feel safe and at home, knowing that what they say, no matter how they express it, is important and a central part of the educational experience.

### **Humanization**

When Paulo Freire wrote his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he addressed the need to humanize education and move away from the banking model that plagues traditional school systems. Students should not be treated as receptacles of knowledge, but as partners in an educational setting. This very idea came through as one of the central themes surrounding the formation of positive teacher-student relationships. What emerged from the participants was the concept of humanization being a two-way street. It was not just about humanizing the students; educators in the sample also felt it was important for the students to know them as humans, too, this is seen in the words of Samantha:

I have a picture of my family and I talk about my husband and I model the writing and the writing is very like ... narrative writing is you have to write about your life and I tell them stories and that's when they're like this is a person and I've had a lot of their siblings and their siblings were there when I got engaged and when I got married and so there's that idea and I'm very transparent. I don't have anything to hide, and it gives them the space to do the same. (Samantha, Individual Interview)

Based on the ideals and principles of social justice, it was expected that the participants would talk about the need to know and humanize their students, but it was just as important for them to also be known and humanized by their students.

While teacher humanization was an unexpected outcome, the more traditional idea of humanization of the student was still a central element of participant discussion on this particular theme. Previous research indicates that Latino/a students feel a particular need to be known by their educators, given the negative impact of the racism and often poverty that Latinos face in their lives. In Cammarota's (2008) study, a Latino student asserted this need, in saying:

The good teacher always took the time to find out who we were. They were always there, and they would find be absent. They know about you, if you were absent they said, "Where were you yesterday?" (p. 131)

These students are seeking to be known and respected by the people who are teaching them. To be treated in fair and humanizing ways then is an essential element for Latino/a students that characterized positive teacher-student relationships. These students, as mentioned earlier, need to feel a sense that their teachers know and respect them as full human beings who also have a life outside the classroom. As Scott explained,

I definitely have a sense of the difference between being someone's friend and being their teacher. There's definitely a difference. But I also, I mean I-I think it's very important to really do my best to get to know them and really understand their personality and their experiences outside of school 'cause I know they bring those things in. (Individual Interview)

Study participants frequently remarked on the willingness of teachers to sincerely strive to become genuinely familiar with their students as people. Through learning about students and their personalities, the teachers felt they could better know what students were bringing with them to the classroom. This promoted both humanization and deeper interpersonal connections, as teachers acknowledged the funds of knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom. This permits teachers to establish a more accurate base point from which to foster positive relationships with each student in the classroom, beyond the collective relationship with the group.

### **Trust**

Trust was another key element described in the literature on building teacher-student relationships with Latino/a students. Stanton-Salazar (2001) posited the need for trust or *confianza* to exist between the teacher and student. The respondents in the present study affirmed this quality as essential for establishing positive relationships between Latino/a students and their teachers. Participants often spoke of trust as a form of social contract they hold with their students, built on a foundation of equity and fairness. Mary explained this idea, when discussing how she interacted with her students.

You know if your goody-two-shoe kid is doing something wrong, but you don't call it out, but you only call on that one kid that's always misbehaving, I think the student that misbehaves is going to look at you like, "you know what, he did the same thing or she did the same thing and you didn't say anything." (Individual Interview)

In this regard, participants noted that trust is also shown to students through consistency and follow up. Effective teachers act in a fair and responsible manner with all the students in their classroom, and trust is established as that equity is made visible to students. In other words, the respondents asserted that effective teaching demands consistency across every single student, no matter how one of them might act on any given day. This, participants believe, creates trust between the teacher and student, through the exercise of social equity in the classroom, which allows for the on-going formation of positive teacher-student relationships.

Within the theme of trust, two concepts emerged repeatedly in participants' responses: consistency and follow-through. The participants were keenly aware that in order for trust to be established with students, teachers had to show their students, with their actions, that they were in fact trustworthy. Amanda connected consistency and trust by saying, "I think it goes back to your comment about consistency, like if I say I'm going to do something I'm going to do something" (Focus Group). This was similarly illustrated when Mary asserted, "You can trust me. I will do this" (Focus Group). While trust was identified by the participants as an essential characteristic of the teacher-student relationship, it had to be built by acting in fairness and equity with the students. These values are, in fact, essential to creating a socially just and democratic society. Therefore, when and teachers practice these values with their students, they

not only create trusting positive teacher-student relationships, they also prepare their students to participate in the world as just and responsible human beings.

## **Openness**

The theme of openness intersects in many ways with the previous theme of humanization, and while there are similarities between the two, it is important to identify why they were identified by participants as two separate ideas. Humanization speaks to a relational process in which everyone in the classroom is respected as an evolving human being who thinks, knows, and feels, while openness here is more associated with the act of sharing one's story or one's funds of knowledge with another. Undoubtedly, openness can serve as a vehicle through which the process of humanization can be expressed, yet both concepts can be understood independent of the other. Moreover, openness enhances possibilities for shared or reciprocation of funds of knowledge. In the process, teachers seek to provide students with opportunities to dialogue openly with them, so students might gain greater insight into the funds of knowledge they possess. In this way, Mary affirmed that she can share herself more openly with her students as well, in ways that shorten the distance between their age differences:

I really think it just holds true to who I am and I'm human just like everybody else. I'm just like you. I've sat in that chair. I've been in your shoes. I know how it is to be in middle school and go through these weird, awkward hormonal changes and deal with break ups and friendships that go awry, whatever. (Mary, Focus Group)

This practice of openness allows teachers to tap into their own funds of knowledge related to their experiences growing up or as a student and to share these experiences with students in real and authentic ways.

Openness was particularly interesting as it emerged from the research unexpectedly, given that the literature does not focus much attention on this theme. However, research from Cammarota (2008), Nieto (2004), Stanton-Salazar (2010), and Valenzuela (1999), examined the significance of caring relationships among Latino/a students and their teachers. These studies discussed teachers' practices of personal sharing. Nevertheless, in this study, the open sharing of personal background information between teachers and students proved to be a central idea with participants, who repeatedly explained why it was important for them to share their experiences with their students in reciprocal ways. Samantha reported that she begins her school year in precisely this way, to model the expectation of openness:

In the beginning of the year I share- I write a letter to my students that I read out loud. Sharing about my background, why I teach, random bits of information, and then I give students the opportunity to do so as well the very first day of school and that night I write a pretty lengthy comment to each one of them. (Individual Interview)

Hence, these participants talked openly about sharing their individual funds of knowledge with the students, even as early as the first day, in order for the students to begin knowing the teacher and one another. This then allowed students to see a different side of their teacher and begin to understand them in a different light. This study clearly shows that openness serves as an important gateway for teachers to establish positive relationships with their students.

## **Respect**

The theme of respect truly incorporates the ideals of social justice in the form of teaching practices that respect students and their needs (Giroux, 2003). Participants in the study identified respect as one of the values that is most essential to positive teacher-student relationships. Here,

perspectives intersect to create an overlap between social justice and the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. When participants discussed the value of respect for the teacher, it was extremely important to them that respect be understood as something earned, not just a wholesale regard that any teacher can walk into a classroom already possessing.

I think that's the plight of a first-year teacher, you're not prepared you don't know what you're doing, they sense it somehow, so they have no respect for you because you look crazy. I know what I'm talking about, I know math, right, but it's like the teacher part, no clue...as a first year teacher you don't earn, whatever, like you assume that students must respect you because you have these credentials or you're the adult in front of the classroom and it totally doesn't go that way. It definitely has to go I think in my opinion in the other direction first. (Samantha, Individual Interview)

Additionally, respect was seen as something that must be given in order to be received. Respect is essential to the dynamic of relationship building between Latino/a students and their teachers, and both previous research and the present study support this position. Valenzuela (1999) addressed this value through the concept of *educación*, which signals a process of schooling based on caring and respectful relationships. Reciprocal respect fosters the type of positive relationships that are essential for Latino/a students to be successful in school. The participants, in concert with the literature, were very aware of how important respect is to their interactions with their students. Tom considered the importance of this issue in terms of mutual respect:

Respect is it's very important to me, but also I think it's really important especially in our community ... it can be a good conversation point to make sure they know mutual respect is important not only in the community circle but in their interactions in class. I don't



agree with, I respect you, but I disagree with you and I disagree with you because of facts; I don't disagree with you because you're stupid. (Focus Group)

Tom's words further illustrate the need for respect to be mutual—both given and received—in the teacher-student relationship. This ideal helps to create an environment where different individuals work together and can disagree with one another but still respect one another.

Through this exchange of respect between teacher and student, and especially Latino/a students, a positive relationship can be cultivated. This positive teacher-relationship, more importantly, can work as a great catalyst for student success in the classroom as well as the outside community.

### **Personal Connections**

The final theme that emerged from the participants when discussing positive teacher-student relationships was that of personal connections. Establishing personal connections involves knowing the student on a personal level and understanding their individual and community funds of knowledge, who they are as full human beings, and how they make sense of the world. Personal connections allow teachers to recognize each student's uniqueness, while creating on-going opportunities to know them better. Mary provided an example of how her personal connection and knowledge of three students supports her relationship with them:

Oh, just the idea that if you show that you understand the intricate little details of that student. I have three Jehovah's witnesses this year. I have never had that before. And so knowing that if I talk about Christmas or your favorite holiday or something that that student's going to be embarrassed, recognizing that and not having that conversation [about holidays and birthdays] helps to build that relationship. (Individual Interview)

Mary's words revealed an understanding that no detail or personality trait of a student should be thought of as too small or insignificant to a teacher who sincerely seeks to foster personal connections with students. This same point was echoed in the work of Cammarota (2008), when a Latino/a student describing a good teacher stated, "the good teacher always took the time to find out who we were" (p. 131). Every one of the students who sits in a classroom brings with them an amazing personal story and in order for teachers to know their students and educate them, it is imperative that they know these lived histories, which can enhance their personal connection with students.

These personal connections serve as a gateway to creating a space for students that is uplifting and allows them to feel humanized by their educational experience. This personalized approach with students allows them to feel that their teachers are approaching their teaching as a true act of love (Darder, 2002, 2012). That they, as individuals in the classroom, are cared for and understood by their teachers constitutes the type of authentic caring relationships that are essential to Latino/a youth in today's society (Valenzuela, 1999). Through the creation of personal connections with their students, the participants aimed to understand the person who was sitting in front of them and not to view them as simply an object to be educated, but rather someone who is sharing in a powerfully reciprocal educational experience. Samantha illustrated this point in her experience with a student struggling with math:

I have this one student, and I'm thinking that horrible math student, but that aside, is the most phenomenal kid and I think as soon as we got to the point where I understood that math was not his thing but that he was a rock star genius at history, that was so cool for him to see that I understood that this wasn't his thing but he loved history so we would

have conversations about if high school is like a rite of passage and you have to take this now but later on you can totally study history and dive into it and do it but we have to get through the right now. (Individual Interview)

Samantha understood, as did other teachers in this study, the importance of knowing the student and being able to understand that, for example, that this particular student did not love math, but he loved history. The two of them could build their relationship around this common thread, so that the student could be successful in math, by entering it from a place he loved. Knowing the students and understanding who they are as individuals helps them to feel more connected with and appreciated by their teachers. This also allows teachers and students to form positive relationships with one another, which is paramount to the education of all students, but in particular to Latino/a youth.

### **School and Administration Support with Relationships**

The other focus of this research concerned understanding better how school leaders and the structures of the school could support teachers in the creation of positive teacher-student relationships. Accordingly, the second central research question posed by this study was: What do effective teachers need from administration to help create effective teacher-student relationships? This question served to uncover ways in which schools can support teachers in the creation of effective relationships, essential to the educational success of Latino/a students, in the current educational climate. This question aimed to access the participants' funds of knowledge, as they are uniquely situated to understand and express from experience the characteristics of effective relationships.

As such, participants could shed light on how schools can support them in working to create these positive relationships with their students. What was uncovered can serve school leader to support their teachers to better understand the funds of knowledge that students bring with them to school. An answer to this research question also encourages greater dialogue between teacher and student within a space where a socially just education can take place. The themes that emerged from the participants included community circle, time to connect, and opportunities outside the classroom. These themes will be discussed in relation to previous literature to understand how participants saw these as potentially supporting the creation of more positive teacher-student relationships.

### **Community Circle**

One theme that emerged repeatedly was the practice of community circle. While this practice could also fit under the category of time to connect, it was specifically referred to so often that participants felt strongly that it constitutes a formative element in the creation of positive relationships. The idea of community circle arose from *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Gibbs, 2001) and has been practiced at PUC schools since the inception of the first school. While this theme too was unanticipated prior to conducting the research, its emergence makes sense given the nature of community circle as an activity. As teacher and students sit in a circle and openly share answers to a single question, a true dialogue transpires among participants. It is, moreover, rooted in the ideals of Freire (1970), as participants learn from one another through this open dialogue. Many of the themes identified by the research participants are actualized in the community circle, since respect, opportunity to be heard, trust,

openness, and personal connections are all a part of this activity. Mary briefly described the power of the experience:

It's just so powerful and the structure is around it that everybody has to share out, because if you just threw a topic out and kids were to just respond to it I don't know if those quiet, shy kids would necessarily respond but kind of forcing that, whether it be a one-word answer or a five minute story and that also tells you a lot about the kid and their personality. (Focus Group)

This activity becomes a focal point for teachers at the school to interact with their students, and it allows both groups to share about themselves and learn about one another. Valenzuela (1999) discussed this type of education in relation to Latino/a students, when she described the concept of education as schooling based on caring, respectful relationships. Community circle, which only takes 20-30 minutes, can become a gateway for teachers to build positive relationships with students as well as to create a deeper sense of community. Participants felt that making a commitment to these types of activities, as a school leader, can help to shape the culture of a school and create a sense of community among teachers and students, as well as the students with each other. This kind of activity in a school ultimately helps to forge the type of positive teacher-student relationships that are essential to Latino/a student success in the classroom.

### **Time to Connect**

When discussing how administration and schools can promote strong, positive teacher-student relationships, participants identified the need for time to connect. Respondents unexpectedly spoke about mandatory activities and how these support relationships. It was unanticipated that a group of teachers would praise extra events mandated by their contract.

However, all of the participants felt that being required to attend school events, after the completion of the day allowed them to see their students in a different context than they did in the classroom.

Time to connect is especially important for schools and administrators to understand, as mandated activities are often resisted or shied away from, because they may be seen (by teachers) in a negative light. Behind the idea of mandatory activities, however, is really allowing for time and space for the teacher and students to interact in new and different ways. Previous research pointed to the idea among Latino/a students that “the good teachers always took the time to find out who we were” (Camarota, 2008, p. 131). This is the exact sentiment that the participants identified in their interviews. Mary explained it best by saying,

Seeing kids perform in drama, like a play, seeing kids perform and sing, which I don't see on a daily basis. I'm not a music teacher; I'm not an arts teacher; I'm not a PE teacher. I see them in one form in math class. I don't see them in other forms and I don't know what they're good at outside of [math]. (Focus Group)

These events allow the teacher to know students beyond their capacity at a given subject. Students can be perceived in a positive new light as artists, musicians, athletes, and all the other aspects that make them unique. Subsequently, teachers can better understand the funds of knowledge and talents that students possess. They get the opportunity, through this extra time to connect, to capture a more complete picture of the student, and in so doing, build stronger and more positive relationships with their students. These acts are remarkable in their simplicity: a teacher simply needs to attend an event. But through that action, they come to know more about

the student they are teaching, which then allows for the space in which other positive aspects of the relationships can build.

### **Opportunity outside the Classroom**

This theme, in particular, expressed participants' desires to expand the educational and life experiences of students and teachers to outside events where they participate together. The participants talked of field trips: eighth-grade trips to Washington, D.C. sporting events, field days and staff student competitions. This is similar to after-school events that participants spoke of in the previous theme but was more targeted at activities that took the students and teachers off campus and allowed them to interact away from the confines and roles that exist within the school setting. Tom and Scott described events that they felt allow these types of interactions to take place:

Tom: Or the field trips or just taking advantage of any time you have with them.

Scott: Yeah going to see their games. Going to attend events, talent show, whatever time you can spend building a relationship outside of the classroom. (Focus Group)

This suggests that positive teacher-student relationships will be better supported if administration and schools create more time for teachers to be able to interact with students outside of traditional academic settings. Through these types of interactions, teachers get to see a different side of their students. They get to learn more about the unique elements that make them a person, this allows them to better understand the funds of knowledge that each student possess, while also creating a picture of them that is more far more complete and, hence, far more humanizing.

## **Conclusion**

The present research affirmed many previous studies in identifying familiar characteristics of effective teaching (Gentry et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2011). Additionally, this study contributes new results, as participants identified several elements of effective teachers that had previously been uncovered in research. Solid classroom management, strictness, and high expectations were identified by participants and were also very evident in the research in the field (Check, 1986; Gentry et al., 2011; Grieve, 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). The methods used to identify effective teachers for participation in this study may have contributed to congruence between participants' responses and the literature on positive teacher-student relationships.

In focus groups and interviews, participants identified a variety of themes that characterize positive teacher-student relationships: student voice, humanization, trust, openness, respect, and personal connections. These confirmed the types of teacher-student relationships that previous research has identified as essential for Latino/a student (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, these themes were considered to expand the funds of knowledge shared between teachers and students. Through enacting the values and characteristics identified in both this study and the literature in the field, the teaching practices they inform offer both teachers and students a relationship that values both parties and is grounded in a socially just experience of classroom life.

The participants also identified themes that focused on how administrators could better support these relationships: community circle, time to connect, and opportunity outside the classroom. All of these themes were centered on the idea that teacher and students should have



multiple opportunities to interact and know one another better. This offers both teacher and students a place for open dialogue, where together they learn to better understand each other and the unique fund of knowledge that each possesses.

One element that, surprisingly, was not expressed explicitly by participants in the study was the issue of culture. As the teachers were all educators of bicultural Latino/a students, the researcher had assumed that culture would play a major role in teachers' creation of positive relationships. Culture forms a major element in the education of bicultural students and is important for their academic success (Darder, 2012). Only one of the eight participants made reference to culture and the role that it plays in understanding students and forming relationships. The participant who brought up culture is an African-American teacher and therefore bicultural herself. The other teachers all identified themselves as White, and it is possible that they do not understand the importance of culture to their students. This element was one that was clearly lacking from the narratives of the majority of participants, which the literature in the field indicated plays an important role in building of positive teacher-student relationships with Latino students (Cammarota, 2008; Darder 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

This lack of finding is an extremely important. The funds-of-knowledge approach suggests that culture plays a major part in the ability of teachers and students to form positive relationships. Too often, members of the dominant culture overlook the importance that culture plays in the lives of their students who are not from that dominant culture. Research has shown that teachers from the dominant culture have a tendency to homogenize and universalize relationships, without questioning that ways in which their engagement with the students' culture

might enhance these relationships (Darder, 2012). This points to the need for all educators to ensure they engage with their students' cultures to support the development of authentic, caring, inclusive relationships, rather than interactions that devalue the cultures of bicultural students and perpetuate practices of hegemony.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

This research set out to better understand positive teacher-student relationships that are formed in the classrooms between Latino/a students and their teachers. In order to achieve this, a group of teachers identified as effective were interviewed individually and in two focus groups. While there was some emphasis on teacher effectiveness in order to validate the claim that participants were indeed effective teachers, the majority of the study sought to answer the following two central research questions:

- 1) How do effective teachers of Latino students, within a charter management organization, characterize effective teacher-student relationships?
- 2) What do effective teachers need from administration to help create effective teacher-student relationships?

What was uncovered through this process sheds light on a variety of significant characteristics of positive teacher-students relationships. The findings also illustrate some effective ways that schools and administration can support teachers in the creation of these vital relationships. In so doing, this study reinforces various previously identified characteristics and some new ideas about how teachers can better establish positive relationships among Latino/a students and their teachers—an important pedagogical element for this group of students to be successful in their educational pursuits.

## Significance

Latino/a students in the United States and especially in Los Angeles County are not achieving at the same rate as their non-Latino/a peers. This has led to an increase in the number of Latino/a students who are dropping out and not graduating from high school (California Department of Education, 2010). In 2008-2009, an estimated 20,000 Latino/a students dropped out of high school in Los Angeles County (California Department of Education, 2010). Clearly, schools are not meeting the educational needs of this student population. What became evident through researching the educational needs of Latino/a students is the need that these students have to connect with adults at their schools and to have authentic caring relationships with their teachers (Camarota, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). While the research shows the need to form positive relationships among Latino/a students and their teachers, sparse evidence existed regarding what these relationships look like or how they are formed. This study thus addresses an important gap in the literature by examining how these relationships are characterized by the educators who help create them.

This research uncovered a variety of themes that characterize positive teacher-students relationships from the perspective of educators. Knowing that previous research has highlighted the necessity for Latino/a students to be engaged in positive, caring, and authentic relationships with their teachers, this study generated valuable insight into how those types of relationships are formed. While this data was gathered from a small group of educators who work within one CMO, the findings still help to shine light on the formation of positive relationships with Latino/a students. Six different themes emerged from the research that, when combined, create a clear picture of the contours of positive teacher-student relationships. These six themes are:

1. Student Voice
2. Humanization
3. Trust
4. Openness
5. Respect
6. Personal Connections

Through the voices of participants, these themes enable a more grounded understanding of what authentic, caring relationships look like between Latino/a students and their teachers. The participants gave many examples of what these themes meant to them and how they worked to enact them, through their words and actions within the classroom. Educators and educational leaders can now utilize these themes as guide posts for their interactions with Latino/s students in their classes and use them as a basis for advancing more positive teacher-student relationships in the future.

When considering the entirety of the educational setting in which students live, educators must also look beyond the classroom to find ways to support the formation of positive relationships. Accordingly, the second research question was designed to garner better understanding of how administration and schools can support teachers in the formation of positive relationships. The conclusions that were shared by participants, in regards to the first research question, place significant burdens on teachers. They need to work consistently and diligently to implement words and actions that adhere to the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships.

In order to find avenues for teacher support, participants were asked to share ways in which they could be supported by administration to create these types of relationships. Since positive relationships are an important aspect of the education of Latino/a students, then it is imperative that school leadership place an on-going importance on supporting teachers to establish caring and nurturing relationships. This research identified three themes in the area of schools and administrative support:

1. Community Circle
2. Time To Connect
3. Opportunity Outside the Classroom

While there is no claim that these themes are exhaustive when thinking about ways in which teachers can be supported, they do provide some clear and practical ideas about how relationship formation can be promoted within the context of the school setting. This helps to highlight areas in which school leaders can support their teachers and staff in developing and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships.

### **Implications**

This research points to several implications with respect to the preparation of teachers as well as school leaders. Future teacher education programs would be well-served to consider the knowledge that has been produced here and elsewhere on the characteristics that foster positive teacher-student relationships. Time is spent on pedagogy, theory, and practice, in teacher preparation programs. However, this research suggests a need for greater focus on how power dynamics in teacher-student relationships impact students' academic development. Increased

attention should be devoted to teaching future educators how to create the conditions necessary for building positive teacher-student relationships.

The very themes that have been uncovered by this study can become a center piece to better prepare teachers for life in the classroom. This will be especially important for those educators who will be working within underserved populations. As the populations of Latino/a students increase in both the United States and Los Angeles County, educators must strive to better understand the unique educational needs of that student population. With this in mind, this research characterizes the relationships between teacher and students that are an essential part of Latino/a students' school experience and central to their academic achievement. The themes that have been identified can give teachers a starting point for understanding the unique funds of knowledge that their students possess, so that they may begin to tap into their strengths and talents and forge relationships that will better support students' social and academic development.

The second research question has specific implications for administrators and training programs for those individuals. Administrators, especially in charter schools, are asked to wear many different hats and have a wide scope of responsibilities. The findings in this research open up additional possibilities that administrators need to consider regarding the important pedagogical question of how to support teachers in developing positive relationships with their students. Time must be spent when planning, on a year-to-year basis, to determine how to find space and time for teachers and students to interact meaningfully inside and outside the classroom. It is essential that school leaders are cognizant of the importance of teacher-student relationships, especially with Latino/a populations, so they will devote sufficient attention to this

issue. They will need to think about scheduling time during the school day, week, and year for teachers to engage with students outside of the traditional academic setting, get to know their students, learn about their funds of knowledge, and also share their own funds of knowledge. School leaders will need to spend time working with their teachers to educate them about the importance of positive relationships with the student populations they serve. This will force administrators to develop new professional development around these topics, as well as new ways of viewing how we educate teachers and students to ensure that socially just relationships remain a central part of the pedagogical experience at school and beyond.

### **Recommendations**

This research identified numerous themes that can inform educational pedagogy on the education of Latino/a students. As colleges and universities prepare teachers and administrators for the educational field, an emphasis should be placed on the social-emotional skills that are necessary for those particular positions. It is no longer enough that an educator has specific content knowledge and educational pedagogy prior to entering into the field. They must also be prepared with the skills necessary to cultivate enriching relationships with their students. This would require a shift in our current forms of teacher and administrator preparation and training. That is not to say that the current methods do not offer skills necessary for educators, only that they lack the complete skills required within the quickly changing demographics of the modern educational landscape. The importance of relationships and the skills required to foster and establish relationships with students need to be integrated as an essential component of all teacher and administrator preparation programs. A shift in current educational pedagogy is needed to include these aspects that are so important to a growing population of students, in



order to ensure new educators and administrators are prepared to meet their unique educational needs.

Along with the themes around teacher-student relationships that were uncovered, the research discovered two areas where teachers and administrators require professional development: the issues of strictness and culture. Strictness brings up significant concerns about the use of authority in the classroom and must be exercised with care or else it can compromise an emancipatory environment for all participants. Ongoing reflection about the ideas of power and authority and how these are enacted in the classroom can help to ensure that a socially just education is at work. Teachers and school leaders need to engage with the critical idea of authority in the classroom and pursue ongoing dialogue with one another to foster empowering teaching practices. This includes the need for continuing professional development, reflection, and discussion to ensure students are not placed in oppressive environments.

Similarly, the absence of discussion about culture in the formation of relationships points to a need for continuing education and professional development for both leaders and teachers. Educators must understand the ideas of biculturalism and their own role as teachers, in either integrating students' biculturalism into the classroom or forcing students to assimilate into the dominant culture. This requires ongoing professional development on the theme of biculturalism and the importance that culture plays in the lives of Latino/a students in classrooms and schools.

### **Future Research**

This study focused on one particular CMO that served a predominately Latino/a population of students. In order to better understand the various ways that positive relationships are characterized, further research should be conducted in other CMOs and in traditional public

schools. With data from more schools and different types of schools, a more robust picture of positive teacher-student relationships could be obtained.

As described in detail in the chapter on methodology, to gather data on effective teaching, this study relied on in-depth, one-on-one qualitative interviews and two focus groups with eight effective teachers. While data from the research provides some justification for the effectiveness measurement that was used, there are many other measurements that exist. Further research could vet the effectiveness of the measurement that was used for this research, to ensure the criteria for effectiveness succeeded in identifying highly effective teachers. This would help to give a more complete picture of how various effective teachers across a variety of schools characterize positive relationships with their students.

The respondents were all identified as effective teachers prior to their participation in the study and, on that premise, the research helped to give these teachers a voice, inviting them to access more deliberately their funds of knowledge about teacher-student relationships. This, however, only gives one side of the story about relationships. Further research would need to be conducted with Latino/a students to better understand the ways that they characterize their relationships with their teachers. This would then allow both parties to have a voice in this important discourse. This research could then be compared to current research to create a multi-layered understanding of positive relationships between teacher and student.

When considering future research in this same area, it is also important to look beyond the particular group of students that make up the population of the schools that were included. The vast majority of the student population at the schools included in this research is Latino/a. Further research should be conducted to understand the importance of relationships among

different ethnic populations of students, especially those that are historically underserved by the current educational system. This would help to create a better understanding of the importance of relationships in ensuring that all students have their educational needs met.

## APPENDIX A

**From:** Jonathan Stewart  
**Sent:** Wednesday, December 12, 2012 1:49 PM  
**To:** James Pasto  
**Subject:** FW: TCRP Question

**Follow Up Flag:** Follow up  
**Flag Status:** Flagged

You're cleared for takeoff. No approval needed.

**From:** Erin Abshere <[eabshere@thecollegereadypromise.org](mailto:eabshere@thecollegereadypromise.org)>  
**Date:** Wednesday, December 12, 2012 1:42 PM  
**To:** Jonathan Stewart <[j.stewart@pucschools.org](mailto:j.stewart@pucschools.org)>  
**Subject:** Re: FW: TCRP Question

Jonathan,

Per our Global Access Agreements, I believe that James would be able to use TCRP's name or any of our created materials without any issue.

Does that answer your question?

--

Erin Abshere

Program Officer

The College-Ready Promise

c. 405-408-5962

find us on [facebook](#) and [twitter](#)

On Tue, Dec 11, 2012 at 7:34 PM, Jonathan Stewart <[j.stewart@pucschools.org](mailto:j.stewart@pucschools.org)> wrote:

Erin,

I can ask Kate, but maybe this is a question you've already fielded for someone else?

Jonathan

**From:** James Pasto <[j.pasto@pucschools.org](mailto:j.pasto@pucschools.org)>


**Date:** Tuesday, December 4, 2012 6:24 PM

**To:** Jonathan Stewart <[j.stewart@pucschools.org](mailto:j.stewart@pucschools.org)>

**Subject:** TCRP Question

Jonathan,

Lets say I was using the TDS metric and the TCRP name in my dissertation. Who would I get approval from the Gates Foundation to be able to use the actual titles in my name.

 **James Pasto** | Principal  
Triumph Charter High School  
9171 Telfair Ave. | Sun Valley, CA 91352  
voice: 818-356-2795 | fax: 818-256-3213 | [www.pucschools.org](http://www.pucschools.org)  
"Our mission is to ensure every student graduates high school prepared for college success."

## APPENDIX B

### LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

## Informed Consent Form

*Note: This form is only a template and is invalid without information particular to a proposed research study. It is the responsibility of the Principle Investigator (PI) to complete all blanks prior to submission.*

Date of Preparation \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Loyola Marymount University**

- 1) I hereby authorize James Pasto, Doctoral Student to include me in the following research study: Finds of Knowledge that support Teacher-Student relationships: a Narrative study of effective teachers.
- 2) I have been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to examine how effective teachers characterize positive student teacher relationships, and which will last for approximately 6 months.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I have met the criteria as a highly effective teacher.
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will answer interview questions and participate in a focus group.

The investigator will conduct the interview and record the answers for inclusion in the study.

These procedures have been explained to me by James Pasto, Doctoral Student

- 5) I understand that I will be videotaped, audiotaped and/or photographed in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: discomfort or nervousness with the questions being asked in the interview.
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are a better understanding of how to form positive relationships between teachers and students.
- 8) I understand that James Pasto \_\_\_ who can be reached at 818-795-5615, j.pasto@pucschools.org will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.

- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, [david.hardy@lmu.edu](mailto:david.hardy@lmu.edu).
- 15) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C

### **LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY**

#### Experimental Subjects Bill of Rights

Pursuant to California Health and Safety Code §24172, I understand that I have the following rights as a participant in a research study:

1. I will be informed of the nature and purpose of the experiment.
2. I will be given an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the medical experiment, and any drug or device to be utilized.
3. I will be given a description of any attendant discomforts and risks to be reasonably expected from the study.
4. I will be given an explanation of any benefits to be expected from the study, if applicable.
5. I will be given a disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures, drugs or devices that might be advantageous and their relative risks and benefits.
6. I will be informed of the avenues of medical treatment, if any, available after the study is completed if complications should arise.
7. I will be given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning the study or the procedures involved.
8. I will be instructed that consent to participate in the research study may be withdrawn at any time and that I may discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.
9. I will be given a copy of the signed and dated written consent form.

10. I will be given the opportunity to decide to consent or not to consent to the study without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, coercion, or undue influence on my decision.

## APPENDIX D

### Teacher Interview Questions

1. Please describe your classroom, if were to observe what would I see and hear you and your students saying, doing?
2. How would a typical student in your classroom describe you as a teacher?
3. What do you think makes you an effective teacher?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your students?
5. In what way do you form relationships with your students?
6. What impact do you think your relationship with your students has on achievement?
7. How would you define a positive relationship between yourself and your students?
8. How would you characterize an effective student teacher relationship?
9. What steps do you take in your classroom to create these relationships?
10. What structures exist at your school to help create these types of relationships
11. What could your site leader do to help you create positive relationships with students?
12. What other steps could be taken at the school to further develop student-teacher relationships?

**APPENDIX E**

**Participant Survey**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Years Teaching: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Teaching Assignment: \_\_\_\_\_

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