

“Homework is an Offering to God”:
A Participatory Action Research Study on Religious Community
and its Effect on Hispanic Educational Success

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Providing effective environments for the educational success of young Hispanic students is an understandably complicated endeavor, especially considering the complex ecologies of poverty, violence, religion, migration and immigration that many young Hispanics experience. As a group of non-Hispanic graduate students, we were fortunate in the spring of 2006 to receive the rich stories of such individuals as we conducted a participatory action research study with a discrete population of students at a primarily Hispanic Bible institute in Southern California. As a result of this experience, we conclude that participation in religious community can empower Hispanic students to overcome social and institutional barriers to post-secondary educational success.¹

I. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

“Victory Bible Institute” (VBI)² is a non-accredited, post-secondary institution in Southern California comprised of students, teachers and administrators of primarily Mexican and Latin American descent. The school, which is affiliated with a Protestant charismatic denomination, serves two primary groups of students who are preparing to enter (or are already practicing) either full-time church ministry or bi-vocational ministry (i.e., serving as pastor of a church while also working another job). One group of students is primarily older, first-generation immigrants who attend Spanish-only evening classes, so that they can work full-time while attending VBI. The second group—upon which our study focuses—is comprised of younger students who live in the dormitories on the small campus and attend classes (mostly in English) during the day. These students are at least “1.5 generation”³ immigrants, though many are also second and third generation U.S. residents. All the students enroll in two- or three-year programs in various facets of professional Christian ministry and related fields; graduates of the institution receive diplomas and go on to work in churches and/or non-parish jobs, or enroll at community colleges, correspondence programs, or four-year colleges and universities.⁴ VBI identified the continuation of its students to a four-year university setting upon completion of their VBI coursework as a new educational trend and an economic necessity for its students. Such an institutional shift presents the school with significant curricular challenges geared toward helping their students succeed in the university setting. VBI initiated this study in order to learn about the educational needs of its students, to better prepare them for continuing educational studies.

Participatory action research (PAR), a relatively young method in religious research, was selected as our primary method because of several core principles it embodies. First, PAR is conducted for the benefit of the community researched; therefore, the focus of the research was initiated by VBI, rather than by a research

¹ The authors are grateful for the work of two additional researchers who conducted initial interviews and external research with us: Isaiah Ekundayo Dada and Folauga “Junior” Tupuola. We also are indebted to Elizabeth Conde-Frazer, who served as our liaison and “insider” to the community we researched.

² To fully protect student confidentiality, a pseudonym is used to identify the institution.

³ The term “1.5 generation” commonly refers to those who immigrated roughly between the ages of five through 18 who must negotiate between their native culture and their new country (in this case, the United States).

⁴ VBI students who go on to four-year institutions usually attend a private, church-related liberal arts university associated with the same sponsoring denomination. While some enter into the traditional, four-year undergraduate program, the majority who continue on to this school enter an accelerated adult professional degree program, which holds classes at night and is limited in its degree options.

question imposed by our team. Second, PAR is conducted to assist the community with a question, dilemma, or problem of their own in order to help the community come to conclusions and solutions that will increase their well-being. The primary focus of our study was the educational background and needs of VBI students, so that the school might better prepare them to continue on to a four-year university setting. This is not a method with distinct boundaries between researcher and subject but rather is an act of cooperative empowerment. Therefore, the role of researcher is one of catalyst and facilitator who helps stimulate the community into self-reflection, with hope of changing the community's situation for the better.⁵ The generalizations regarding the unique role of religious community in the educational success of Hispanic students, then, are a secondary outcome of this study.

Building our research on these foundational assumptions of PAR, we began the study with an ethnographic observation of VBI, conducted interviews with a representative sample of VBI students⁶ regarding their educational backgrounds and future educational hopes, verified our interview findings with respondents, and coded major themes emerging from the interviews. Throughout the process, we were careful to establish relationships with the students to foster the level of trust needed to solicit honest answers about their experience.⁷ After we gathered and compiled the data, each team member composed a "core observation" of what was most important for them in these data. The group process provided effective methods by which to compare and verify individual findings with collective observations, ultimately resulting in complex and nuanced data that spanned several major themes that would have otherwise eluded individual researchers. In addition to the interviews, we supplemented our findings with perspectives from existing research in the areas of immigration, religious community, and educational success. These perspectives helped us contextualize our findings in the scope of existing research and begin the process of theorization and construction of new perspectives.⁸

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION, AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Educational Issues for Hispanic Immigrant Families

In a 2003 report on poverty in the Los Angeles area, the Brookings Institution concluded that "Immigrants, both new (arriving within the past ten years) and established

⁵ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 9-41. According to Stringer, the researcher fosters reflection from within the community (self-reflection) and from without (reflection upon social and contextual issues) with the intent of empowering individuals within the community and the community as a whole to act in ways beneficial to their own growth and empowerment. The community also is "co-owner" of the research, and we are indebted to VBI for their willingness to share the outcomes of this study with us for the purposes of this paper.

⁶ The students were chosen by the academic dean; when asked why these specific students were chosen, the dean answered that they were engaging and bi-lingual (or English-only speakers).

⁷ The research team also engaged the students informally by having lunch on several occasions and touring their dorm rooms. The team also collaborated with the students and administration in producing a separate event—a college fair—which further enhanced relationships and trust between the researchers and students.

⁸ This method is described in detail by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998), 101-142.

(arriving ten or more years before), are disproportionately represented among the poverty population, composing 61 percent of the region's adult poor. As in 1970, new immigrants in 2000 were roughly twice as likely as adults region-wide to be poor."⁹ The cycle of poverty corresponds with low educational achievement for non-Anglo students, as only 26 percent of Hispanic high school graduates in 2004 exhibited the minimum academic requirements required for admission to California State University and University of California campuses, compared to 43 percent of whites and 57 percent of Asians.¹⁰ The poverty Hispanics encounter in the Los Angeles area, combined with other social and economic factors related to immigration, have a deep impact upon their educational success. "Education," says one report, "has a profound impact on both the individual and society at large, and it is one of the surest ways to increase one's social and economic levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and deprived social conditions."¹¹ The ability to achieve higher levels of economic stability affects one's ability to invest in the future, including such investments as education.¹² Likewise, higher educational achievement helps ensure higher earning power in the economic system. This is implicit knowledge, they say, a "fact that Americans of all walks of life understand."¹³

Religious Community and Education in the Immigrant Context

Inasmuch as VBI is demographically homogeneous, it is also a religiously uniform community, with low variances of religious belief and practice. With this in mind, it lends itself well to comparison to cohesive religious, church-based communities. The immigrant church plays a significant role in racial-ethnic minority communities. Churches are not just places of religious practices and worship; they additionally function as social centers for promoting communal bonds among fellow immigrants as well as preserving their own cultural traditions. Churches have also become places of psychological and spiritual healing for people who have suffered from racial and socio-economic discrimination in the U.S. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier has addressed the uniqueness of the church in the Hispanic community. As "a place of re-creating family and fellowship...it creates a space where one goes to gain the strength and support for maintaining one's faith and culture."¹⁴

David Sikkink and Edwin I. Hernandez report that religious community provides abundant educational opportunities outside of middle school and high school for Hispanic students and their families.¹⁵ Churches, they say, are important sources of "extracurricular" learning in the Hispanic context, offering tutoring programs, language programs, and other educational events for children. Hispanic churches maintain social

⁹ The Brookings Institution, "The Living Cities Census Series" (November 2003), 10.

¹⁰ The United Way, "Introduction," *Scorecard 2006: Road to Action* (January 2006), 5.

¹¹ Watson Scott Swail, Kenneth Redd, and Laura W. Perna, *Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education: A Framework for Success: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Series*, Volume 30, Number 2 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass ASHE Higher Education Report Series, 2003), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Hispanic Bible Institutes: A Community of Theological Construction* (Scranton, PA: The University of Scranton Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁵ David Sikkink and Edwin I. Hernandez, *Religion Matters: Predicting Schooling Success among Latino Youth*, (University of Notre Dame: Institute for Latino Studies Interim Reports, vol. 2003. 1), 12-13.

networks within a broader community and enable people to access useful information about ways to pursue educational goals. The authors also describe this network as an “unintended social benefit” that links students to role models and transmits values in their communities that support their identity formation and educational achievement.¹⁶ They find that religious involvement strengthens the relationships among family, church and school that help keep the students on-track and out of trouble in their school. Also, they found that high levels of religiosity in Hispanic students offer higher likelihood of achievement in their schoolwork, as evidenced by higher scores on achievement tests.¹⁷ This research was foundational for the research team as we engaged the VBI students.

III. THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT VBI

Family Backgrounds

As we found through the interviews, the students at VBI embodied the social and educational challenges reported by the research above. In asking about students’ family backgrounds, nearly all the respondents reflected the educational limits of their parents, who needed to work to contribute to the income of their families, both in their home countries and as immigrants to the U.S. One student describes his parents as having to leave school as early as fifth grade in order to contribute financial support to their extended family. Due to this lack of opportunity for continued education, and thus to the earning power necessary to overcome poverty, many families immigrated to the United States to obtain access to a larger pool of resources than is available in their own countries, including access to jobs and education. In the case of many of the students, access to education and thus to economic viability was a major reason for their family’s immigration to the U.S.

Due to their limited access to education and their knowledge of the financial and social opportunity that education provides in the U.S., the students say their parents exhibit a desire for their children to achieve higher levels of education and therefore to live more comfortable lives than they were able to live. One young woman describes her parents’ hopes for her to achieve more in comparison to their own achievement, saying, “My parents, they’ve always had that, ‘You had to do better than we did.’ And, so they have always, they pushed us... They never held us back or anything like that. Even though the three of us [siblings] are here at school, they’re paying it out of their pocket... They don’t let money become an issue of why we don’t go to school.” Another student reflects his parents’ encouragement of him to pursue higher education: “My parents pushed education, because they wanted me to continue ... My parents pushed me to finish high school and consider a bachelor’s degree to be able to get a job.” Thus, the social and economic opportunity attributed to higher levels of education is a decisive factor in the attainment of higher education for Hispanic students of immigrant families. This is based in large part upon the influence and encouragement of their parents who desire for a different and better life for their children than the lives of poverty they experienced.

At the same time that many parents urge their children toward higher levels of education, they also lack the knowledge or resources to support fully their children’s learning. Sikkink and Hernandez found that

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., 38-39.

Latinos tend to feel high levels of alienation from public school culture which values professionalism, technical expertise, and bureaucratic organization. This bifurcated world of family and school makes Hispanic parents feel less comfortable getting involved in school and perhaps less likely to challenge (if necessary) the expertise of teachers and administrators. That school and home are worlds apart causes some Hispanic parents to disengage from their adolescents' education (though they may focus on education of the younger children), since they are not as comfortable with the more advanced years of education and assume that their teenagers know more than they do about their own education.¹⁸

Compounding this issue, many of our respondents note the seasonal absence of their parents from their lives due to migratory work patterns. One respondent notes, "I grew up with my nana [grandmother] because my parents were away in the fields working ... Twice a year, two months a year, I would stay with my Nana. And I just get used to being away from my parents." While many of the students receive moral support and encouragement from their parents to pursue further education, their parents often do not have adequate support and resources to help their children press on in the educational journey.

Educational Background

The students also noted the quality of the secondary schooling they received in the low-income, predominantly ethnic minority neighborhoods in which they were raised. Many experienced what they describe as "low-quality" education, based primarily on the socio-structural implications of the large presence of ethnic minorities in their schools, particularly when found in urban areas. One student describes the association of his largely minority high school as a "fight school," naming social relationships and strategic alliances with other students and teachers/administrators as the primary focus of his attention in school. Additionally, many reflected difficulties with adapting to the learning environment of American schools, including significant language barriers. Immigration to the U.S. involves learning an entirely new language, and for children it means quickly internalizing the social and cultural mores of the educational environment. Many of the students, upon arrival to the U.S., found themselves in remedial or special education programs at school. One student describes the confusion of adapting to a new learning environment, "At first it was kind of confusing. I was scared because of the language ... The changes in going back to Mexico, coming back to U.S.A., it turned me to a lower level in school. And, a lower level, too, learning language."

Finally, several of the students described experiences of overt racism and cultural suppression at school. One student told us about continually receiving detention in junior high for speaking Spanish in class. This example further suggests structural barriers to cultural expression in education, reflective of an assimilative model of education. Whether explicitly or implicitly, racial/ethnic identity and immigrant status deeply influences these students' experiences with schooling.

Student Experience at VBI

¹⁸ Sikkink and Hernandez, 18.

In the lives of its residential students, we found that VBI serves as a significant shift from previous educational environments. The school is a safe-haven community that offers the opportunity for personal formation through behavioral discipline and ministerial preparation, practices that seek to support the students' ongoing educational achievement. The story of VBI can be told through the metaphor of a surrogate family, in many ways an ideal community for these young people trying to make sense of their family heritage, their religious belief and vocational preparation, and the economic realities of life in the U.S. In this metaphor, VBI teachers and administrators serve as parental figures, while their classmates are siblings in the struggle. Just as actual families change over time, the VBI family is transitional for these young people, as they continue their educational journeys from their high schools into whatever educational institution they enter next—if they pursue further education at all. The institutional metaphor of family is one way to understand the complexities of what these students experience at VBI and what the school must do to prepare them for further education.

It seems that students also relate with the VBI community—the teachers/administrators and other students—as they might with their families. The similarities are glaring, exhibited both in the structure of the institution and the rhetoric of the students. As an institution, VBI enforces a strict behavioral code of conduct for its residential students, such as early prayer and Bible study before classes each morning as well as a curfew in the dormitory at night. “[T]he disciplines that they have here on the school, they were really kinda hard for me . . .,” said a first year student, “because I was not used to . . . I was not a disciplined guy [before coming to VBI].” In this way, the rules and administrators at VBI serve parental functions of behavioral control, providing students strict boundaries of habit and educating students into disciplined patterns of spiritual and academic life.¹⁹

Relationships with other students also take on characteristics of relationships among siblings. “[L]et’s say you’re wanting to argue with someone,” says one student. It’s an argument, but you’ve got to see each other all the time, you can’t run away from each other, because you’ll see each other all the time. You have to work through it. You have to, because if you don’t, it messes everything up. One fight affects everyone here, because it’s so small. Because it’s tight. You can’t have conflict with someone, because his friends are your friends.

These relationships obviously create an environment of cohesiveness or camaraderie among the students wherein they can address issues specific to their shared experience with their institutional brothers and sisters.

This familial bonds also extend to the relationships students have with VBI faculty. According to the students, the faculty present themselves much differently than did their teachers in high school. “The teachers here have a lot of dedication and passion for what they do,” said one student. “I haven’t met one teacher here who comes and gives a lesson and then ‘he’s done.’” “They do it because they love it and they want to,” said another. “They get very personal with you . . . you can just come up to them and

¹⁹ While entering students seem to struggle with these rules of conduct, second and third year students understand the value of this discipline. “I think the discipline will help,” said a third-year student, “because, when you’re locked in your room, that’s your time of meditation, reflecting . . . right here, you’re just building a close relationship with God.”

pour out your life.” One student described the teachers as mentors; another told the story of one teacher who “made me cry a couple of times.” She said to him, “Why do you want to quit? You can do much better. You are better than you think you are.” The student concluded, “All these things are something you don’t hear even from your parents.” Clearly, the role of teachers as mentors at VBI is critical in the formation and community of these students and reinforces the familial structures of the institution as a whole.

IV. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research led to the conclusion that these students’ religious commitments help them find a higher purpose and personal motivation for going about common student activities. While Sikkink and Hernandez suggest that church involvement positively supports educational progress, we found in this community a conflation of education with divine calling. We found that VBI students often consider their education as a way of serving God. One student shared her basic principle about education that comes from her family: “You should be educated, because that’s a part of serving God.” Another student provided the title of this paper, declaring that “Homework is an offering to God.” These straightforward statements demonstrate the students’ distinct understanding about their education as a way to respond to what they discern as God’s call. They identify pursuing education and responding to their calling as inseparable aspects in their lives. The simultaneous experience of education and participation in religious community brings positive results to their situations.

The students’ perspective about education also affects their likelihood to persist through higher levels of education. Many VBI students face significant financial obstacles before and after entering VBI, and they need to work during vacations and breaks to pay for their tuition and life expenses. However, as we discovered in their narratives, their dual understanding about education and calling plays an important role in their commitment to continuing their education. One student who had financial difficulties said, “Lord call [sic] you, he will provide for you.” A student in another group, speaking about his finances, said, “God will provide everything for me.” This strong conviction has become a leading force for encouraging the students to make consistent efforts to continue their education in order to respond to the calling from God.

In the end, we found the meaning of “calling” in this community is not confined to a vocational draw toward professional ministry. Rather, these students’ understand calling as enhancing the understanding of the self and cultivating one’s own potential ability in a deep relationship with God. As a religiously cohesive and ethnically homogeneous family community, VBI reinforces this notion of calling, blending one’s understanding of potential for achievement with practical persistence and a belief in God’s providence for sustaining the ongoing educational journey.

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