

BRUCE RANDOLPH HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN SCHOOL BECOMING SUCCESSFUL FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

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Abstract

Working in a research collaborative between Denver Public Schools and the University of Colorado Denver, the authors selected Bruce Randolph High School (BRHS) as a case study because of its growth on state academic achievement tests and because of its multilingual learners. After a difficult beginning, BRHS has established an inclusive culture of expectation for learning and community participation, a reciprocal instructional culture emphasizing instructional coaching and continuous improvement, a strong emphasis on language development and literacy across the curriculum, and interventions to prevent course failure. These characteristics, facilitated by the school's Innovation Status in the district, are central to its emerging success.

Keywords: Multilingual Learners, Urban Education, Teacher-Researcher Collaboration, Academic Achievement

Conceptual Framework

Empirical and conceptual scholarship regarding the education of the large and growing population of multilingual learners⁸ in urban schools in the United States paints

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⁸We use the term "multilingual learners" to refer to those students whose daily lived reality involves the use and navigation of multiple languages. While the literature and schools generally refer to this population as "English

a picture of systemic failure. Urban schools often segregate and marginalize multilingual learners (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valdés, 1998). Policies create hostile environments for teachers (Arellano-Houchin, Flamenco, Merlos, & Segura, 2001), multilingual learners may be overlooked and prematurely pushed into mainstream courses with unprepared teachers (Harper & de Jong, 2009), and high stakes tests create stress and narrow curriculum (Wiley & Wright, 2004). In addition, many teachers have negative attitudes about teaching multilingual learners (Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004) and are unprepared to support their academic development (Li & Zhang, 2004). Some programs and policies have proved successful and supportive (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009), but these are isolated instances of accomplishment in the face of prominent systemic barriers.

The problems surrounding multilingual learners are particularly acute at the high school level. The on-time graduation rate for Latino high school students in the United States is just over 53 percent, as opposed to 75 percent for students of European descent (Swanson, 2004). Compared to students of European descent, Latino students are more likely to attend very large high schools with high concentrations of students from low income families and with higher ratios of students to teachers, all of which are characteristics of schools associated with lower achievement and lower graduation rates (Balfanz, 2009). In light of these circumstances, analyses of high schools in which Latino students from low-income families are succeeding are of particular interest.

A large body of research on school effectiveness, most of it involving elementary schools serving students from low-income homes, has identified several characteristics of urban schools generally associated with improved academic achievement. The seven correlates most frequently listed are: (a) high expectations for success, (b) strong instructional leadership, (c) a clear and focused mission, (d) opportunity to learn/time on task, (e) frequent monitoring of student progress, (f) a safe and orderly environment, and (g) positive home-school relations (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). Recent studies focusing specifically on successful schools for Latino students and multilingual learners have generally found that such schools exhibited these general characteristics, but also have additional characteristics supportive of language learners. These additional characteristics include: a language lens in the form of awareness and support for language learners through sheltered instruction: attention to academic language and language objectives across the curriculum (Nocon, Davis, Keenan, Brancard, Dray, Johnson, Mitchell, Nathenson-Mejia, Shanklin, Shannon, Poulsen, Tomas-Ruzic, Tzur & Verma, 2011); strong and positive relationships between students and teachers (Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; School Redesign Network, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, C., Pimentel, A., & Martin, M., 2009); strong collaborative systems to support ongoing professional development (School Redesign Network, 2007; Nocon, et al., 2011); and a coherent organizational culture (Jesse et al., 2004; Nocon et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to describe one increasingly successful urban high school for Latino multilingual learners, BRHS, in Denver. The school, located in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in North Denver, was selected for study because it has demonstrated the highest rate of growth on state tests of academic achievement and English language proficiency among neighborhood (non-magnet) high schools for

Language Learners” (ELL) or “Limited English Proficient,” (LEP) we choose to use the aforementioned term to refer to multilingual learners at all levels of English proficiency in an effort to shift the focus on this population from English deficiency to an asset based perspective centered on multilingual abilities.

multilingual learners students in the city. During the 2009-10 school year, the school was made up of 95 percent Latino students, 84 percent of whom reported speaking Spanish at home. More than 95 percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Although scores on state and national tests were not high, with 43 percent of students proficient or above in reading, and 13% proficient or above in math (Colorado Department of Education, 2010a), multilingual students demonstrated very high rates of growth in Reading, Writing, Math, and English language proficiency. Colorado's growth model uses growth percentiles with a statewide median of 50 for each subject and grade to measure annual student growth (Betebenner, 2007). For BRHS, three-year averaged state-wide growth percentiles were 67 in reading, 69 in writing, and 60 in math, equivalent to annual effect sizes of .63, .70, and .26, respectively (Nocon et al., 2011). Students made an average three-year overall effect size gain of .31 above the state mean in English language proficiency, measured by the Colorado English Language Assessment (CELA) (Nocon et al., 2011). The graduation rate for Latino students at BRHS was 85.3 percent in 2010, compared to a statewide average of 55.5 percent (Colorado Department of Education, 2010b). As the case study neared completion, the school received national attention when President Obama mentioned it in his State of the Union Address in January, 2011, as an example of a school that had rapidly improved from being one of the worst schools in the state to one in which 97 percent of its seniors graduated (Obama, 2011); but this was praise that was challenged by Diane Ravitch because most students did not test at proficient levels on state tests (Ravitch, 2011).

Method

Three types of data were collected in the development of the Bruce Randolph High School case study. First, a series of guided semi-structured interviews were held with teachers and administrators of the school. The initial interview, which included the principal and four teachers, focused on the salient school-wide practices and characteristics of the school that the participants believed were most associated with the high rates of academic and language growth of its students. Three subsequent focus group interviews with teachers and administrators explored these nominated practices in greater depth. Second, a systematic visual environmental scan was conducted by photographing the hallways and every wall of multiple classrooms. These were analyzed to observe language and content learning resources, to identify prevalent symbols and messages, and to provide triangulation for assertions from interviews regarding school-wide practices (e.g., visuals present in every classroom, evidence of progress monitoring in each classroom, and evidence that students were encouraged to aspire for college).

The third type of data was a wide range of documents and online representations, including mission statements, master schedules, professional development schedules, handbooks, general messages to parents, and unified improvement plans. These data were used to examine the school's representation of itself and its practices as well as to analyze patterns of communication. The school's website was analyzed for ease of use, available resources, and use of multiple languages. These data were also triangulated with assertions from interviews. Finally, members of the research team conducted informal observations, spending time in the school, attending an assembly, and talking with school leaders and teachers as informal confirmation of consistency between verbal

descriptions and enacted practice. Table 1 provides a summary of data sources, dates, examples of the questions asked, and data collected.

Data analysis occurred in three phases. In the first phase researchers conducted a content analysis of the initial interviews, documents, observation protocols, and the photographic inventory. A number of a priori codes were identified by the collaborative research team (e.g., language and content objectives, and visual explanation), and emergent codes were inferred from the data using the constant comparative method. Data were first coded by two independent investigators and were then checked by a third investigator for inter-rater reliability. The research team then reviewed and refined the final analyses and produced a draft case report.

In the second phase, the draft report was shared with school leadership followed by a member-check interview. The interviewer began with a brief synopsis of the school's case and major findings, and then asked: (a) What elements of our case report of your school's practices do you find to be accurate, inaccurate, or too simplistic? and (b) To what do you attribute the success of learners of English as a second language at your school? Based on this member check interview, two additional interviews were conducted to refine case study findings, and the report was then revised. All research team members, several district administrators, and the school leadership reviewed the final case study report in order to ensure its accuracy and clarity. The principal gave explicit permission for quoted information to be attributed to him by name; quoted information from teachers and coaches are attributed as personal communication by referencing their professional positions.

Results

BRHS opened as a new school in 2002. Its first two years were marked with disciplinary incidents, declining test scores, and turmoil, all resulting in the school being designated Unsatisfactory by the state for three consecutive years. Dr. Kristin Waters, an experienced principal of European descent who had led a successful change effort at Morey Middle School in the same district (Denver Public Schools, 2009), was invited to become principal at BRHS and to lead a re-design of the school in the fall of 2005. All staff had to resign and re-apply for their positions, and the school was "built out" starting with grades seven and eight, adding lower and higher grades each year with the goal of serving grades six through twelve. A document drafted that year, Challenge 2010 (recognizing that the first graduating class would be the class of 2010), stated that the school would become one "where college students or DPS staff come to see high quality education executed effectively and skillfully" and where 100% of students would graduate (Waters, 2005, p. 1). Waters initially concentrated on establishing safety and order and eliciting support from parents, and then turned her full attention to inspiring collective efficacy, building a shared vision, and striving for a consistency of approach. Innovation Status from the district gave the school more autonomy with respect to its schedule and work hours, budget, curriculum, and hiring.

In 2009, Waters left BRHS to lead a district-wide school reform initiative. Cesar Cedillo, who had served as Assistant Principal since 2005 under Waters' leadership, became the new principal. Cedillo refers to Waters as his mentor, and believes that he shares a similar vision of high expectations for the school. Like many of the students in

Date	Data Component	Participants	Data Type	Data Source
January 2008, 2009, 2010	CELA	Students grades k-12	Assessment of English proficiency	Accountability, Research and Evaluation (ARE) Department
March 2008, 2009, 2010	CSAP	Students grades 3-10	Assessment of Reading, Math, Writing standards	ARE
September 2010	School Performance Framework	All DPS schools that contains at least one grade that takes CSAP	Schools are accredited using a number of factors related to school performance.	http://testing.dpsk12.org/public/spf/current/ISPF_summary_traditional.pdf
12-10-10	Interview/Focus Group #1	Principal Humanities Coach Reading Intervention Coach	Interview questions e.g., What are the top three essentials explaining your school success?	Transcription
1-07-11	Environmental Scan	E.g., Entryway, Walls, Cognate word walls	Photograph and observation protocol e.g., Take notes about languages and cultural and ethnic groups which are included on signs, posters, etc.	Photographs, environmental observation protocol
December 2010 – January 2011	School Documents	E.g., Challenge 2010 Document, Coaching Cycle, BR Website, Referral Ladder	Document analysis e.g., analysis of root causes of priority needs areas identified in Unified Improvement Plan	Data were received from school and district officials; UIPs: http://www.cde.state.co.us/uiip/
2-08-11	Interview/Focus Group #2	Principal Parent Liaison Heritage Spanish	Interview questions e.g., What elements of our case initial do you find to be accurate, inaccurate, or too simplistic?	Transcription
2-24-11	Interview/Focus Group #3	Special Education Special Education 10 th Grade Language Arts 10 th Grade Science 10 th & 11 th Math	Interview questions e.g., What is the approach in this school to helping teachers continue to grow professionally?	Transcription of interview
2-25-11	Interview/Focus Group #4	9 th Grade Language Arts 11 th & 12 th Grade Lang. Arts 10 th & 11 th Grade Science	Interview questions e.g., What does teacher collaboration look like at your school?	Transcription of interview

the school, Cedillo was born in Mexico, came to Denver at age eight, is multilingual, and grew up attending public schools in Denver not far from the Bruce Randolph neighborhood.

BRHS Today: A Culture of Learning

For several years, the leadership and community at BRHS have worked to create a culture of learning in which students embrace the value of learning and post-secondary education and feel confident they can succeed. Teachers and administrators identified three important elements contributing to the culture of learning emerging in the school: high expectations, a safe and orderly environment, and strong parent involvement.

High expectations. The Challenge 2010 document described forth a vision for BRHS when re-design began in 2005 and set a goal of 100% graduation. In our initial interview session Principal Cedillo (Personal communication, December 10, 2010) said, “The vision now, which I think nearly every teacher can recite, is to graduate 100% of kids prepared to succeed in a four-year college or university without remediation. That’s our mission.” This message is reflected in the college banners on the walls of the school, and signs in classrooms identifying the teachers’ alma maters.

The emphasis on high expectations is linked to teacher efficacy. “There’s a culture here among the staff that you need to believe in our kids,” said the Humanities Facilitator (Personal communication, December 10, 2010). “You feel awkward if you don’t believe in our kids.” In response to the question, “What does the school do to bring students on board as seeing themselves as successful learners?” the principal responded, “First and foremost, there is an expectation that you will learn at this school.” (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). In subsequent interviews, teachers confirmed the theme of positive expectations, and agreed that most students internalized these expectations.

A safe and orderly environment. When the re-design of BRHS began in 2005, creating a safe and orderly environment was the first priority. All of our interviews and informal observations in the school confirmed that a safe and orderly environment was now established, but never taken for granted. It was maintained in part through the consistent implementation of a seven-step process across all classrooms in the school. One of the special education teachers noted:

To me one of the biggest things that we do well here is our behavior and our discipline structure. I mean you walk down the halls and for the most part they are very quiet. All of the classrooms are pretty well behaved so, I think it’s the on-task time. (Special Education teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Another teacher who was new to BRHS in 2011 stated, “One of the reasons I came to this school was the ... referral policy. Kids want to be here, they know what is expected.” (Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Strong parent involvement. The school funds a full-time parent and community liaison who works closely with parents to support their input into school processes. Parent meetings are held once or twice each month, with simultaneous dual-language translation, chaired by parents on a rotating basis. The parent and community liaison explained:

Whichever language is the native language of that parent who is leading that part of the agenda, that part of the agenda is led in that language. You are going back and forth between English and Spanish, which means that everybody has headsets, not just Spanish speakers. (Parent and Community Liaison, Personal communication, February 8, 2011).

The principal shares in the cultural and linguistic background of most of the families, and contributes to creating a responsive environment for parents.

Parents of students also have access to BRHS for health, wellness and learning. There is a community health clinic in the building and parents come to the school for the workout room and exercise classes, and many attend English classes for non-native speakers. These efforts have broken down some of the barriers that traditionally prevent parents from varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds from effectively engaging in schooling processes (Mitchell, 2010). Parents at BRHS are an explicit part of the culture of learning, and receive weekly academic progress reports about their child that they are asked to sign and return.

Positive teacher-student relations. Several educators commented on the positive relationships between students and teachers, and the importance of those relationships for learning. Principal Cedillo said that believing in students and being able to relate positively to them is essential in a teacher. In turn, he said, “We found that once our students have a positive relationship with a teacher, they’ll go through a brick wall for them” (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). A math teacher commented, “I see all students really completely comfortable coming to teachers asking for help, and relying on teachers for things beyond academia. And that really gives them a feeling of comfortability [sic]” (Math Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Academic Focus and a Language Lens

When we asked teachers and coaches at BRHS about classroom supports for English language learners, they emphasized that because 83% of their students were English language learners, English language acquisition supports were woven into all aspects of instruction. Three aspects of instruction emerged as important to our understanding of the success of the school: extended literacy instruction, consistent and scaffolded instruction, and initiatives to prevent course failure.

Extended literacy instruction. Elective courses were reduced to extend the amount of time for literacy instruction. All students have a seventy-minute language arts. Extended independent reading takes place every day, and all language arts classes have classroom libraries with high interest chapter books grouped by reading level to assist students in finding books that are appropriate for their reading level. According to a

Literacy Coach, “Our high school teachers are sticklers about independent reading time every day. When you walk in there, all of those kids are reading” (Literacy Coach, Personal communication, December 10, 2010).

Consistent and scaffolded instruction. Over time, instruction at BRHS has come to involve core elements that are shared across most classrooms. Among these elements are direct instruction, supports for multilingual learners, and daily progress monitoring. The following exchange between a language arts (LA) teacher and a science teacher illustrates the common approach:

LA Teacher: Often times it’s direct instruction at first, and then practicing it all of us together, going through the steps, releasing it for them to do with their partners.

Interviewer: Is that pretty consistent across language arts, or do you think that is isolated to just your room?
[Everyone agrees it is consistent across classrooms.]

Science teacher: It’s pretty much in everybody’s classroom, throughout the different subjects. Every classroom has a warm up. Every classroom has some direct instruction. Every classroom has some sort of way of assessing learning. (Focus Group #3, Feb. 25, 2011). (Language Arts Teacher and Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011).

Instruction is scaffolded for all students in ways that have been found to be important for multilingual learners. Word walls, visual resources, and sheltered English are employed in content instruction. Each classroom is also equipped with a document camera, a projector, and a laptop so that teachers can refer to specific places in a text as well as use their laptop for PowerPoint presentations or web-based.

Students are encouraged to explain things to one another in Spanish during class to scaffold comprehension in English. For example, a language arts teacher explained, “There’s a whole lot of conversation that goes on where my language learners are allowed to speak in Spanish to figure out concepts and figure out what exactly they need to do. But they always need to present their mastery in English” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011). Teachers in the focus group confirmed this practice in other content areas.

Initiatives to prevent course failure. A key to the high graduation rate at BRHS is the diligent implementation of procedures to prevent course failure. Each week during grade level meetings teachers discuss students who are failing a course. These students are required to attend tutoring and show evidence with a staff signature and submission of any assignments. A language arts teacher explained, “We pour over the F lists and say, ‘Okay, this kid, what’s going on with this kid?’” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011). Teachers remind one another to congratulate students who improve failing grades. Seniors meet weekly with an assigned adult mentor. A science teacher explained how he communicates with the mentor of a struggling student:

I have one of those students in my class. He is a senior taking a junior class

because he failed it last year. So I emailed his mentor and said, “He’s got all this stuff he just needs to turn it in.” And she said she would be in his face every day. (Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

A Culture of Reciprocity and Continuous Improvement

A sense of coherence has come about at BRHS, not because consistency is mandated from above, but because teachers, students, parents, staff, and administrators decide things together and because all are committed to learning from one another. A sense of functioning together as a team that works towards improving results now characterizes the school at several levels.

Receptive leadership. Principal Cedillo describes himself as a leader who thrives off of the input of others. He seeks stakeholder input on important decisions and has a leadership team comprised of a variety of community representatives that includes teachers, students, and adult family members. The approach was recently illustrated when discussing the problem of students having cell phones in class.

Science Teacher: A few months in, we had a cell phone issue, especially with our high schoolers. Cesar took it on and talked to everyone and asked for teacher feedback on the issue. And then we had several staff meetings to make sure we are all being consistent. And it seemed to help with the cell phone issue.

Math Teacher: Virtually wiped it out! Really. (Science Teacher and Math Teacher, Personal communication, February 24, 2011)

Similarly, in the monthly meetings for parents, leadership proactively seeks input.

Professional collegiality. “We have great teachers,” Principal Cedillo told us in our first interview (Cedillo, Personal communication, December 10, 2010). Teachers are positioned as content experts and professional colleagues, and actively discuss instruction. When we asked how teachers had come to embrace a common approach to instruction, they described how they had arrived at it together:

Interviewer: Is that something that was put to you, that this is how we teach here? Or is this just something that you guys all decided?

Science Teacher: It was everyone’s input.

LA Teacher: We saw that it was a practical model. ... And so we collaborated and it’s just grown from there. (Science Teacher and Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

A science teacher reported, “All the teachers also we have a system of backing each other up. If there is a teacher that is struggling with something, there is another

teacher with an idea on how to approach something for a behavior issue” (Science Teacher, February 25, 2011).

Teachers frequently make use of the district’s data system, Infinite Campus, to post notes about individual students, which, in turn, are read by other teachers of that student, thus facilitating interventions. Several teachers commented on the importance of that method of sharing information about students.

Coaching and continuous improvement. All teachers at BRHS work regularly with an instructional coach for their content area, and new teachers have access to a behavior coach to help with classroom management. There are six instructional coaches: one for the language arts core (a humanities coach), one for reading intervention, and one each for math, science, special education, and fine arts. Coaches help teachers to recognize and reflect on their own strengths and to set goals to improve on areas of weakness (Humanities Coach, ,, December 12, 2010). Teachers feel substantially valued through this work and expressed appreciation for opportunities to grow without fear of being labeled “poor” or “ineffective.” A new science teacher explained:

I have taught at three other schools, where if you are having a problem, obviously there is “something wrong with you”. That is not the atmosphere here. I’m having a problem and someone says, “Let me help you figure out how to fix it.” (Science Teacher, Personal communication, February 25, 2011)

Professional development (PD) and instructional decisions at BRHS are based on teacher led initiatives. Every month teachers have PD opportunities created by the instructional coaches who seek input from teachers and then create learning opportunities to meet teachers’ expressed needs. These locally developed PD opportunities appear to be exceptionally effective as well as the natural out-growth of a strong coaching and mentoring model.

In short, teachers told us that BRHS is a supportive community for educators, students, parents, and support staff. A language arts teacher expressed it this way:

LA Teacher: I know every day I go home and my husband says, “You just glow” (Language Arts Teacher, Personal communication, December, 10, 2010)

Interviewer: And do you think that’s the tenor of all the faculty here? That they just love working here?

LA Teacher: I’d say 95%. And you just feel it in the halls, you feel the energy in the kids. I mean the other schools that I worked at it was, I didn’t go in the teacher lounge because it was nothing but a bashing session of students or other teachers. And you just don’t have that here.

Conclusion

Through the creation of a culture of learning and high expectations, and reciprocity, as well a relentless commitment to continuous improvement, an integrated

emphasis on language development and literacy, and interventions to prevent course failure, has seen dramatic improvement in the educational outcomes of multilingual learners. While the school must continue to improve for all students to reach proficiency and be college ready, great strides have been made through the integrated whole school approach to educational improvement that all members of the BRHS community have had opportunity to engage in.

The school-wide practices at BRHS echo the familiar correlates of effective schools from more than thirty years of research (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). The school also enacts characteristics more specifically associated with effective schools serving multilingual learners such as scaffolded instruction, the use of home language, and positive teacher-student relationships (Nocon et al, 2011; Jesse et al. 2004; School Redesign Network, 2007). In these respects, the school's success is not surprising. Nonetheless, urban public high schools serving predominantly low income, multilingual Latino students attaining graduation rates above 85% are exceedingly rare, in part because multilingual students and their families often sense that the dominant culture of the school is dismissive of their home language, their agency, and their potential (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997). In light of this, the insistently high expectations for students, the status afforded Spanish through the use of two-way simultaneous translation in parent meetings, and the encouragement of Spanish in content classrooms may be important to creating the sense of belonging that is manifested in student effort and perseverance. Research attending explicitly to the perceptions, aspirations, and experiences of students (particularly multilingual students transitioning to high school) who cope with academic challenges and adjust their aspirations, would be an important complement to studies like this one, which relies only the perceptions of educators and researchers.

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