“Key Interactions” as Agency and Empowerment: Providing a Sense of the Possible to Marginalized, Mexican-Descent Students

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This article discusses how key interactions between community members, teachers, and Latino counselors and advisers were integral in providing support, knowledge, and agency to marginalized, Mexican-descent students in their 1st year of college. Findings show that particular types of discourse and narrative exchanged between integral adult figures and the students helped to create a common point of cultural and personal understanding that fueled further efforts and motivation on the part of the students.

Key words: key interactions, agency, empowerment, marginalized, Mexican American

INTRODUCTION

Successful teaching is rooted in how the teaching is done. For Mexican-descent students who live situationally marginalized lives, either through poverty, anti-social activity like gang participation, or just not feeling like they can be a part of a

1Situationally marginalized in this study is rooted in the definition of marginalized, which is “to exclude or ignore, especially by relegating to the outer edge of a group or by diverting the public’s attention to something else” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1991, p. 827). It must be emphasized that marginalization is something that occurs to a student based on his or her personal and/or schooling situation(s), thus the term situationally marginalized, and does not attribute any characteristics to the student or define who he or she is.

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group that accepts them as them, the *manner* in which a teacher engages the students in a particular subject becomes especially critical in their school success. A great deal of Latino students live in urban settings. For them, this includes having teachers with high expectations who push them to work harder and show that they care by making students do their school work (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). That is, the actual subjects of math, science, or art initially are not as important as establishing some sense of rapport, respect, and understanding between a marginalized Mexican American student and the teacher. In the United States, academic underachievement and the high dropout rate for Mexican American students (Fry, 2003) in secondary schools is evidence that there is seemingly a perpetual inability to address some of the intricate matters that impact the schooling of these students. Although many more Latinos are enrolling in colleges today, the problem of retention and graduation has become an issue at this level of schooling (Fry, 2002).

Many Mexican American students living situationally marginalized lives deal with distinct and adverse life situations that have negatively impacted their personal life trajectories and ultimately their performance in school (Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Michie, 1999; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Smith, 2000, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Because living a situationally marginal existence often is extremely complex and difficult for adolescents who look to adults as role models to provide examples of how to live a positive life, students from such backgrounds will struggle with how to effectively navigate schools in order to be successful. Granted, they will exist, function, and “do school,” but it is extremely difficult for such students to succeed to their fullest potential. A student’s marginalization outside of school ultimately becomes the most powerful force that thwarts his or her trajectory toward being or becoming a successful student\(^2\) in today’s complex and high-stakes schools. This can result in further marginalization in schools where there is already segregation and isolation from communities and contexts (Orfield & Lee, 2005) that are conducive to teaching–learning dynamics that provide opportunities to learn what is required to be and become a successful student. For example, does the teacher allow students to engage in peer-group projects or critical thinking exercises, and does he or she frequently push the students to excel and create thoughtful, meaningful, and reflective school projects? Does the teacher invite marginalized students to participate in teaching–learning situations that allow such students to be leaders in the classroom or in small groups? Does the teacher speak with historically marginalized students after class to encourage them to study hard for a test because the teacher believes that they can pass it because he or

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\(^2\)Being a successful student is not simply a matter of being successful in the academic sense. Being “successful” in today’s U.S. schools, especially for students of color from situationally marginalized backgrounds, means also learning and knowing how to effectively navigate the bureaucracies of schooling, complex social networks, and “playing the game” (Urrieta, 2005) of schooling that is part of learning and education today for students of color.
she knows how smart they really are? Such interactions, which are explored as key interactions in this study, may be the necessary ingredient for students to see themselves succeeding in school and ultimately in life. Cummins (2000) suggests that if marginalized students cannot perceive themselves as positive and successful students, then academic achievement is not possible.

This article discusses the role(s) of key interactions between members of the community and educators and marginalized students of Mexican descent in their first year of college through the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). CAMP is a scholarship program that provides tuition and other resources for students from migrant or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, along with personal, academic, and social support throughout their first year of college. Through narrative inquiry and analysis, this article looks at particular moments (key interactions) in the schooling experiences of five students and how they reacted to and utilized the words and encouragement from members of the community and educators involved in CAMP.

In school reform efforts, the intricate matters are sometimes the ones that get overlooked in trying to determine what constitutes successful teaching practices. This article theorizes that key interactions in social educational settings are those that significantly matter to situationally marginalized Mexican American students in today’s urban and rural schools where poverty is prevalent; student marginalization is common; opportunity is limited; and teachers and parents struggle to understand how to get such students motivated to learn, care, and succeed.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Paulo Freire believed in the power of words, as do many others. Words can often transform a person, motivate, inspire, and empower. Freire (1970) believed that “human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world” (p. 88). In the interactions between people, there are words and ideas that sometimes trigger profound understanding and insight and lead to some sense of transformation. The theoretical framework that grounds this study is based on the idea that such interactions that occur between students and others (including teachers, parents, members of the community, and the like) have the power to change students in a positive sense and lead them to some level of success.

Early research indicated the importance of the nature of interactions that occurred in the classroom between teacher and student, especially for minority students. A 1973 study conducted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights showed that teachers tended not to engage, provided little praise for, and overall ignored Mexican American students in their classrooms. The study concluded that “educational opportunity is primarily affected by what goes on in the classroom” (p. 7)
with numerous subtle and overt types of interactions. They found that the Mexican American students were not provided with the actual opportunity to engage in meaningful interactions with the teacher or with others in appropriate teaching–learning situations. The students were essentially denied access to interact in situations that would promote learning. A more recent study looked closely at the moment when student and educator recognize each other’s role in the teaching/learning dynamic and the power that each possesses in that dynamic, referred to as third space (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). This third space may be the “connection” that is created when, as in the present study for example, members of the community present a discourse landscape that students recognize and allow to become a part of their presently forming identity and trajectory toward a new sense of self.

Who we as people are today, what we know, and the way we are in the various worlds in which we participate on a daily basis is being shaped and has been shaped by our actions and interactions with that which is around us. Vygotsky (1978) said that “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). The dynamics and intricacies of various forms of interaction in social contexts, in essence, shape what it is that we learn (and do not learn) about ourselves and the world in which such experiences occur.

Some claim that the relationship between teacher and student—not specific methods, approaches, or curricula—is the most important aspect of effective teaching and learning (Bartolomé, 1994; Reyes, 1992). Trueba (1989) believed that the absence of communities with effective teaching–learning contexts and relationships indicates a failure of the school system to provide learners with the necessary opportunities to engage in social interactions that lead to learning. Cummins (2000) called these micro-interactions and suggested that these interactions are extremely powerful, especially in determining how students perceive themselves: “These micro-interactions form an interpersonal space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity is negotiated. Power is created and shared within this interpersonal space where minds and identities meet” (p. 44). Furthermore, Cummins (1996) believed that

the interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are central to student success … and when powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike in inner city and rural areas. (p. 2)

In essence, the interactions and collaborative relationships that are created between marginalized students and teachers can empower the students to defy their marginalization and succeed in school. Although an empowering education is nec-
ecessary for all students, it is crucial for less privileged, marginalized students who may have lost hope in a schooling system that should be providing them with a chance to better their circumstances. In her study of high-achieving Latino students who overcame a number of social, linguistic, and/or economic obstacles, Gándara (1995, 1999) noted that not all of her student case studies were dedicated to schooling early on. Many in her study did not decide to become dedicated to their schooling until late in their schooling careers, when a teacher or adult role model encouraged them or someone saw potential in them. It was a particular moment in time, or an interaction with a certain teacher or school official, that prompted some of the students to change their lives, their schooling trajectories, and the way(s) in which they viewed themselves and their potential.

Within this framework, I approached this study examining how students with historically marginalized backgrounds with regard to their schooling and life experiences (former gang members, migrant students, high school dropouts, teen mothers), experienced and understood their learning to become a successful student in their first year of college. More specifically, this study examined the thoughts and reactions of these students to interactions they had with members of the community, educators, and CAMP and college personnel who were committed to encouraging them; pushing them to work hard; and dialoguing on personal, social, and educational issues that mattered to the students in challenging times of their first-year college experience.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The central research question that guided this inquiry was the following: What role(s) does participation in CAMP (and its various activities) play in the lives of marginalized students of Mexican descent in their first year of college? To answer this question, I did a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998) of five student participants (Ruben, Luz, Cristina, Laura, and Laura—all pseudonyms) using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and ethnographic methods (interviews and observations; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) as the principal forms of data gathering. In the field of education, especially for qualitative studies, narratives have become a popular form of inquiry. They are used to study the practices of people and how they interact with and come to know the world around them, and they are especially useful for “highlight[ing] the experiences of people who have been oppressed or marginalized where they live” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 87). Data sources included the following: (a) structured and unstructured interviews; (b) participant observation field notes; and (c) documents, such as transcripts, class schedules, student journals, and coursework and writings.

I gathered the stories, thoughts, and reactions of the students’ schooling and life experiences during their first year of college at Next Step Community College (a
pseudonym; September through September) through CAMP; who they interacted with; and how they interpreted their experiences with the college world around them and the people within it. Because a qualitative methodological approach provides a fuller picture of the lived experiences of marginalized student populations and considers multiple variables in their lives and education (Smith, 2000), these qualitative case studies were necessary to better understand the profundity of students’ marginalization in schooling and life. This could provide insight into a student population that has remained elusive for many educators, who may then be able to use this knowledge to interact with these students in more effective and empowering ways.

I conducted a narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which I studied the thoughts and experiences of the CAMP students to see where they created stories that illustrated their struggles, successes, and understandings of their first-year college experience. I also did a domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) in which I grouped and chunked key words and phrases from the CAMP student interviews and other forms of data (field notes). In this particular analysis, although I observed that the CAMP students interacted in various ways with individuals throughout their experiences in class, outside of class, in the student lounge, in hallways, and the like, I found that students reacted to and spoke of particular and specific interactions that had more of a profound impact on them, the trajectory in their schooling, and their identity as (struggling and successful) college students. I found that students spoke of interactions with community members, instructors, mentors, and CAMP officials that changed their perspectives and attitudes about that with which they might have been struggling at the time. These interactions, which I call key interactions here, go beyond everyday interactions for students, but especially for marginalized student populations, and tend to have more of an impact on them. I first discuss the major finding of key interactions and how I defined those based on my analysis, and then I discuss particular types of key interactions that occurred between CAMP students and others during the students’ first year of college.

**FINDINGS**

**Key Interactions**

Throughout the CAMP experience, the students were exposed to various contexts of learning and interactions with others—in classrooms, CAMP orientation, meetings, individual meetings with CAMP staff or instructors, adventure learning courses, the student lounge. There were moments in many of these situations when a student had a key interaction with another individual involved in the support and retention efforts of the CAMP program design. This interaction contained a type of
“connection” of experience, history, or community and provided a sense of agency or empowerment to the student. Many of the students expressed a sense of affinity with individuals from the CAMP community or with others invited to speak to them on matters of education, struggle, survival, and success. These key interactions helped to maintain the students on their trajectory toward the goal of guiding/teaching/apprenticing them to be and become successful students. They brought to the surface a sense of the students’ place and consciousness in their schooling continuum and how they were functioning within that context. Some of the key interactions involved students listening not just to guest speakers but to course instructors, CAMP staff and advisers on matters of academics and student potential. These particular key interactions are discussed below.

Community Latinos Asserting the Importance of Education

Before the school year began, there was a full-day orientation for CAMP students and participants. CAMP staff and personnel made presentations on various aspects of the program and discussed academic and other expectations. Instructors also introduced themselves, as did the dean of the campus. There was also a guest speaker, Lalo Delgado, a Chicano poet, writer, and professor and former migrant worker, who spoke to the students about the meaning and opportunity in the CAMP experience. He was vibrant, passionate, and emotional about his own experiences in life and school, which was evident in his poetry readings and discussions with the students. His talk resonated with Ruben, a former gang member, and also made him think beyond himself and what this college experience could do for himself and his community:

> There was one person … He made a speech … Lalo Delgado! I remember he said something, and it just caught my eye, but it was because of the Raiders. That year we won the Superbowl … was due to two Mexicans: the quarterback and the wide receiver. He goes, if they can do that, we can do anything. I really liked it, maybe we can do it, you know? Just how he put it, he made it come out so strong. That my culture, my people, what I am, come above all the struggles and frustrations and make it out, and see that light, and not be stuck in the tunnel no more. (Ruben, Interview, 3/4/03)

The cultural connection that Lalo made for Ruben contributed to a sense of knowledge of self within a grander community—the Latino community—of struggle. Ruben found hope in the possibility of overcoming adversity to “see that light” because members of his community had done so, while another had highlighted such an accomplishment.

Luz, once a migrant worker herself, remembered how Lalo Delgado, who had also spoken of his days of doing migrant work compared to his life now, made her
think about what a chance the scholarship provided to get a higher education. This took her back to the days of working in the fields with her family:

... when Lalo Delgado read his poems and how much he told us about education. I realized that we have the opportunity, we have the scholarship, so why not take advantage of it? Yes, I really did feel that I would succeed ... It just reminded me of when my sister and I would work in the fields and how hard it was for us to have money. It was hard, we had a lot of family problems. Now that I’m in college and look back on it, I’m just glad that I don’t have to be working in the fields anymore. But then in a way, working in the fields made me, not happy, but in a way proud of myself, because I did what I was able to. I was very young. I worked for 3–4 years. I really didn’t care for it, I’d rather have played. But I got to work with my sisters. It contributed to the family income. All of us, nine of us, did the work. My six sisters, my mom and my dad and me. (Luz, Interview, 3/11/03)

Cristina, who struggled with the English language and low self-esteem, also remembered the CAMP orientation and how Lalo Delgado made her think about pride in her heritage and the accomplishments of other Chicanos. She expressed how

when I see people from my heritage and culture become doctors and writers and all this, it makes me proud. I guess probably that was something that motivated me, because I heard his poems and books and how he did this and that, and that was nice. (Interview, 3/5/03)

Support Staff Understanding Student Struggles

Other key interactions that occurred for students happened with staff and instructors in CAMP. These persons were integral in creating a link of experiences that would resonate with students to support their academic endeavors and provide a renewed sense of agency for them to continue on their trajectory toward being and becoming successful students in school. There were others who worked in the college, like Israel (a pseudonym), a Next Step Community College advisor and retention coordinator who worked for CAMP, who had a pivotal role for CAMP students in the program and their first year of college. Israel influenced Ruben in a profound way that made him think about his culture, his lifestyle, and his role in the broader community:

He gives me advice. He comes from a similar family, his cousins, he knows what I’m going through. He lost a cousin and he knows the lifestyle. We tell stories and stuff, and he says he went through the same thing I did. He was in college and his primos [cousins] and homeboys were making fun of him going to college, like I was trying to be Mr. White Boy. But it’s true, you get that. But he says, when you’ve graduated,
they’re going to come to see you, man. Wanting help or wanting a lawyer friend or something. He says, don’t worry about what they say, just stick to your ideals. Let their words go in one ear and out the other. They don’t mean it. If you get frustrated here at school, don’t blurt it out. Try to calm yourself. That’s what I’ve done. Because, when I do get mad, it’s hard to hold my temper. He’ll sit down and talk to me, let me get it out, so when I go back to my next class, I’m relieved and refreshed. He keeps me motivated sometimes. He comes up to me and says, you can do it, I don’t want to see you leave. He knows what to say to certain people, like, come on your raza’s depending on you. I’m like, damn, why do you got to say it like that? He’s right. My raza is depending on whether I make it in college. One person at a time it makes a difference. Don’t think I’m racist or nothing, but when my people come up, it’s a wonderful thing to me. If I’m one of those people who come up, maybe that’s another person who sees it. That’s how he makes it go, and that gives me motivation. (Ruben, Interview, 3/4/03)

The Chicano ethnic identity and background was a common discourse landscape on which Ruben and Israel could communicate. Israel connected issues of education to social mobility and the notion of community and cultural representation through success in his discussions with Ruben. Such discussions also provided Ruben with a sense of agency to help him overcome his struggles inside and outside school. Because Ruben expressed such great pride in his cultural background, the historical, cultural, and community knowledge exchanged between he and Israel was a way to make strong connections between schooling efforts and a sense of place in college for a (re)developing/(re)shaping Chicano and student identity.

Luz told me that Israel helped her on both an academic and social level. As a Chicano who came from a similar background as Luz, he was able to relate to her in many ways, making her feel comfortable and more open:

He gives me advice. It’s the way we get along. He understands my family. He knows where we come from and how it is. When he sees me sad or something, he inquires as to why. He gives me personal advice, and tells me not to waste my time dwelling on minor family problems. He says I’m going to get out of there sooner or later and not to worry about their arguments or whatever. So, I can relate to him a lot. He has a similar background. He tells me his stories from California. They wouldn’t let him go out, too. Now I guess, his sister and brother can go to Las Vegas, but he didn’t have that kind of freedom with his parents. Things just change. He understands that before, with my sisters too, they wouldn’t let them go out. But he says that they allow me to go out more compared to my sisters. He says that’s because I’m spoiled and I’m the last sister. We get along jokingly that way. (Luz, Interview, 6/19/03)

Luz suggested that had she not found some person who had a similar background affiliated with the college institution, it would have been a horrible year for her. She said that being able to relate to someone like that allowed her to feel easier
about communicating with others in the college community and staff. She said, “I think it would suck. I’d be shy still. I wouldn’t talk as much” (Interview, 6/19/03).

There was also a guest speaker in the Master Student class who resonated with Luz’s life and her struggles with family members who did not support her school endeavors. Although Luz had support from her immediate family, outside family members, who were a constant presence in her close-knit family, always questioned her pursuit of a college education. The guest speaker was a prominent Latina educator from the community who had once attended Next Step Community College. Luz recalled:

She had a speech about marriage and the way she struggled with her husband and how she got her degree eventually. She said that if you want to succeed, that it’s your choice and nobody else’s. Nobody else can choose for you. That really helped me because I would always pay attention to what other people said. My relatives, my cousins, my aunts, and all that. They would all say, you’re just wasting your time, you’re going to get married, that’s all you’re studying for. That’s in a way why, when I was in high school, I questioned why I would go to college. After the speaker said that, I realized it’s my choice, and if I want to get married, I’ll do so, but it’s not up to them. My aunts and uncles tried to discourage me from college. They told me that education was a waste of time, that I should just get married. They said it would be a waste of my parents’ money. When she said that, I felt it was true. I wanted to prove my family wrong. (Interview, 3/11/03)

Teachers Valuing the Latino Voice and Life in Writing

Another key interaction occurred between Ruben and his English teacher, William (a pseudonym). Ruben talked about how William allowed him to be himself and express himself creatively in a way in which he was familiar. In his previous schooling experiences, Ruben had always been told that he could not write about his gang life for writing assignments. William let him write about his gang life and told him that he was a good writer, which provided a boost of self-confidence for Ruben. Ruben said, “I’m really diggin’ that class. [chuckle] … ‘cause he’s letting me write, where I don’t have to hold back nothing. You know, I can’t write about nothing I don’t know” (Interview, 1/27/03). This particular experience for Ruben was a moment in which he regained a sense of confidence in his abilities as a writer, as well as the value in his voice and experience as a writer. This interaction also renewed Ruben’s faith in teachers, especially White teachers, because of his sense that White teachers did not like Chicano students. William especially impacted Ruben’s efforts with his creative writing and the work he did in William’s course. Ruben said that “if he hadn’t encouraged me, I don’t think I would have put that much effort into it. With his encouragement, I knew I wanted that strongly” (Interview, 3/4/03):
Ruben’s reactions to William’s comments and compliments on his writing were seen in the student lounge later on. Below are field notes taken from that day that illustrate this point:

I’m talking to two CAMP students, Bobby (pseudonym) and Ruben. Bobby is at the computer working on a paper and Ruben is standing talking to me. They have become very good friends this year. I ask them how school is going they both tell me “alright.” Ruben, however, continues to tell me with growing enthusiasm that “it’s cool!” because his English teacher, William, just met with him and told him that he “did a good job” on his writing assignment, which was an essay on his personal life story, and that he thought his writing “was real.” Ruben has a big smile on his face, swinging his arms as if he were running a slow race, and he says, “ain’t no teacher ever told me that they thought I was doing a good job on something like my writing.” He says that he thinks “it’s cool” and that the teacher told him that he needed to work on his grammar a little, but the writing itself was good. Ruben then proceeds to tell me how he’s been helping others with their writing class. I then see Ruben walk over to Bobby at the computer and wanting to help him. He asks Bobby, “What are you doing, let’s see” and sits down at the computer with him to read his paper. Ruben asks Bobby what he’s doing his paper on, and talks about ideas for the content he could put in the paper. After a few minutes of helping Bobby, Ruben’s mother comes in to pick him up and take him home. (Field notes, 2/4/03, Next Step Community College, Student Lounge)

Ruben exhibited a sense of pride and confidence in his writing and a new sense of ability and empowerment to help others with their writing. He felt that if an authority figure and teacher like William had enough confidence and faith in his writing abilities, then he too could begin to have those sentiments about himself, and even enact those sentiments in helping others. That key interaction between William and Ruben and its effect on how Ruben utilized that agency was evident here in this action of support and his applying his newfound knowledge and skill for others in CAMP.

DISCUSSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF KEY INTERACTIONS FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

As the findings illustrate, key interactions are those that occurred between students and educators or members of the community and that contributed a sense of agency, knowledge, and/or empowerment to students. However, key interactions may also come in the form of a brief compliment, a dialogue on the excellent improvement of academic work, or words of encouragement in the hallway. Such an interaction may be the impetus for students to perform better academically; decide not to ditch class for the day; and/or realize their potential in school, a sport, or an
activity they had previously been discouraged from committing to. Key interactions do not have to be involved and/or exhaustive relationships with students. They can also be the strategic use of additive and positive discourse, words, and ways of being with a student that create a moment of understanding, learning, development, collaboration, and ultimately empowerment. Additive discourse seen through key interactions may result in additive schooling (as opposed to subtractive schooling; Valenzuela, 1999), which would allow students who have been marginalized to hear words that include their language, culture, and identity as part of broader everyday interactions and pedagogy.

A key interaction also involves recognizing something good, or potentially good, about a student and acting upon that knowledge by interacting with the student in a way that reflects the need to recognize. That is, someone who is in a position of power, authority, and/or respect acknowledges that a student may be living in or has come from a marginalized or stigmatized place in society and then commits to presenting a sense of what is possible for the student rooted in the knowledge of the student’s background. This was seen, for example, in Ruben’s English instructor, William, allowing Ruben to write about his past and life experiences. Other interactions, such as those involving CAMP staff like Israel and the community member Lalo Delgado, may utilize a common understanding of struggle, hard work, effort, and ultimately success as a target for a student to reach. Additionally, ethnicity, race, language, and life hardship may also be utilized as a common discourse between a student and a person of authority. The student then builds upon that understanding as a point of departure for learning and uses those words of encouragement, wisdom, and such as fuel for his or her agency and potential in accomplishing a particular goal. Key interactions are moments that allow students to gain a deeper sense of self and understanding in their role as students in that immediate reaction to an exchange of discourse that feeds that sense of self.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that schools and classrooms today must contend with sociohistorical, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects of schooling that affect the learning and development of marginalized students. Despite observing students living under conditions that may negatively impact their schooling, educators must assume that all students have some sense of agency. Students from marginalized life situations need access to learning situations in which key interactions may occur to fuel their agency and development of their sense of self as learners and potentially successful students. By providing a community in which that agency can be nurtured, and in which students can be placed on a trajectory toward learning, being, becoming, and succeeding, even with chances of successes and failures, the educator creates a
pedagogy of hope and possibility by letting the students be there in that effort and try.

Paying attention to sociocultural contexts and the interactions that occur between a student and those involved within those contexts, and how these impact one’s identity as a successful student, is integral to knowing how to bridge the gap in creating successful teaching–learning dynamics for situationally marginalized Mexican American student populations today. Even though this study took place at a community college, educators at all levels of schooling must realize the power in creating situations in which key interactions can occur between them and their students who need recognition. Because there is often a lack of time for educators to establish profound communication and relationships with students, key interactions can help with the task of creating rapport and respect with students and between students and educators so that effective and engaged teaching and learning can occur in the classroom. As was shown in this study, even speeches and stories on life and possibility can be powerful motivational and pedagogical tools. This study shows how key interactions can be positive and empowering exchanges with students that can go a long way toward bridging the gaps that often exist today between educators and their students, especially marginalized students of color.

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