



**Beyond Politics of School Size: An Essay Review**

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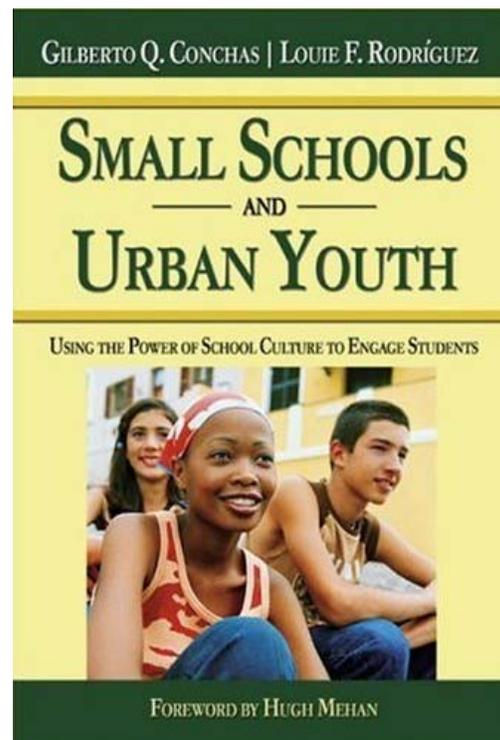
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This essay review is organized around three primary objectives. The first is to provide readers with a brief introduction on what has been empirically confirmed on the topic of small schools and to situate Gilberto Conchas and Louie Rodriguez's (2008) co-authored book within the literature by discussing their substantive contributions. The second is to offer readers ideas on where additional inquiries on school effectiveness should be directed to confront the challenges that lie ahead for urban students. Finally, Paulo Freire's work (1970) has inspired my approach to situate this review process in critical dialogue with the book co-author, and therefore I interview Louie Rodriguez to further elaborate on what schools must consider in order to bolster a culture for powerful teaching and learning to take place.

The relationships between school size and student learning have been well documented in educational literature (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000; Cotton, 1996; 2001; Lee & Smith, 1997; Meier, 2002; Raywid, 1996). With strong evidence, a good number of small schools have proven to be superior when compared to those large in structure (Fine & Sumerville, 1998; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak, & Powell, 2000). Studies in the urban contexts in particular show that the effects of using school size as the theoretical impetus to improve schools has been demonstrated to raise students' college-going academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Lee & Smith, 1995), sense of community (Antrop-González & DeJesús, 2006), attendance (Tung, Ouimette, & Feldman, 2004), graduation rate (Nathan & Febey, 2001; Vander Ark, 2002), ethnic pride (Antrop-González, 2006), and teachers' expectations toward students (Lee & Loeb, 2000). Beyond these tangible outcomes, small schools have been touted for its community-driven, autonomous governance (Meier, 1995; Raywid, 1996; Toch, 2003), and a variety of vocational and social justice missions (Capellaro, 2005; DeJesús, 2003; King, 2004). These effects are found to be more pronounced for students of color and the working poor (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2007), and since has been immensely influential in school restructuring efforts across districts in a variety of socioeconomic contexts. While the benefits are currently perceived to outweigh its limitations, my work in this area have found small schools to struggle with issues closely related to sustainability, inadequate facilities, low teacher retention rates, and range of curricular offerings.

Even though small schools has been influential in restructuring efforts for the past forty years, there is still a gaping hole in the literature on tracing the history and purpose of small schools in low-income communities of color. Predating Deborah Meier's work at Central Park East is community of color's longstanding history of using small schools as a space for antiracist pedagogy and decolonizing education. Small schools for African Americans can be traced back to 1798 when members in the communities mobilized to protect students from getting harassed by Whites in village schools (Yancey, 2004). During the civil rights movement, a number of small schools such as Rough Rock School in Lukachukai (Manuelito, 2005), Pedro Albizu Campos





**Gilberto Conchas**

High School in Chicago (Antrop-González, 2006) and the forty Mississippi freedom schools that were created, were designed to use self-determination, culturally affirming and decolonizing curriculum to disrupt the persistent trends in the relationships between racism and educational achievement (Payne, 2007; Perlstein, 1990). Although school outcomes have been underreported, some of these schools have shown to share a strong emphasis on core academic skills, strong leadership, orderly environment, and high expectations for students' academic success (King, 2004). These schools were not only committed to providing alternative spaces to counteract the political circumstances these communities face, but they reinforce the overlapping values of culture and education and their children's ability to be successful. Given that the ideas of small school is currently being supported through private foundations and school leaders (Minor, 2005), lessons from these earlier small schools could provide the public with a more accurate understanding about its history and a wider range of options for school designs to further contribute to the current small schools movement.

My recent visits to a number of historically large comprehensive high schools currently being converted into small learning communities have instilled a new level of optimism upon the teachers I met. Before I get equally swept away by their enthusiasm, I came away with several unsettling questions: If small schools are superior in expanding educational opportunities for students, what are the major cultural elements within it that are responsible for these results? Does "small" assure the kinds of institutional conditions that make schooling effective for underserved students to overcome the racial achievement gap?

Assuming small schools are the real deal, can this reform paradigm be the leap of faith to turnaround all struggling schools?

The recent top-down proliferations of small schools represent a paradigm shift and Conchas and Rodriguez' book led me to four case studies in Oakland and Boston for an in-depth look at students' lived experiences with the small schools reform. Using school culture

as the conceptual and analytic frame (Finnan & Meza, 2003; Noguera, 2002), the authors go beyond the structural and symbolic dimensions of school reform and call attention to students' perceptions of their classroom experiences as a method to understand the effects of school size and common practices that make up the culture of the school. Conchas and Rodriguez are able to identify three key student outcomes of



**Louie Rodriguez**

their case study: personalization, racial cohesion, and greater access to educational opportunities. They refer to small schools as educational units that have an enrollment of less than 700 students and vary in governing structure between small learning communities and separate autonomous schools which include charters (p.3). This account differs from other studies that conclude these two models do not offer equivalent benefits and cannot be viewed in the same light (Howley, 2003). This inconsistency in the literature reveals a diverse, but problematic approach to define and make cross school comparisons (Cotton, 2001; Stern & Wing, 2004; Vander Ark, 2002), which further complicates dataset comparisons as the book involves four case studies under two different time periods: two schools prior to, and the other two that functioned under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). By combining the datasets, additional clarification on data analysis can be useful to increase readers' understanding about whether NCLB has had an impact on the academic focus and outcomes of these particular schools (Strike, 2008). However, the strength in the authors' design rests upon their comparable characteristics in city and district size, student demographics, and adds to the literature given the recent increase in numbers of small learning communities that are loosely defined and claim to be a part of this reform. The range of definitions challenges me to redefine "small" as an idea that is not structurally rigid but a commitment that brings together an assortment of cultural elements into a set of effective practices that transform a school into a "sanctuary" for students (Antrop-González, 2003; Meier, 1998).

Compared to some of the large-scale studies, this book is accessible for teachers and policymakers, and provides an insightful perspective into the lives of students and how school size facilitates their academic achievement. By drawing upon youth voices to shed light on the cultural elements that usher both possibilities and constraints, this mode of inquiry has proven to be a powerful tool to privilege the unheard as the frame of reference to raising consciousness, and to press upon institutional authorities with first hand policy analysis for school transformation (Brown & Rodriguez, in press; Freire, 1998; Liou, 2007; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Noguera, 2003; 2007; Ruben & Silva, 2003; Stovall, 2005). Conchas and Rodriguez' evidence shows that the combination of reduced school size and caring teachers facilitate a culture of personalization and racial cohesion for which increases the likelihood for students to seek and receive academic support. Through applying opportunities to strengthen interpersonal contacts, cultural conditions are created to inspire students' intellectual curiosity while position them as the rightful owners of their education. Such methods of personalization reduce student anonymity and increases students' racial cohesion and academic achievement. Although the efforts of downsizing can position teachers to better facilitate the regularities of effective practices, the authors insist size alone is not the sole determinant in success but caring and committed teachers are the core catalysts

behind the high qualities of instructions that students receive. These factors encompass the processes for which achievement related opportunities and information are distributed (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), and making classroom practices the center of attention for caring relationships and academic excellence to jointly occur (Howard, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). With strong evidence, the authors demonstrate that small schools have the capability to address the deeply racialized achievement gap as a symptom of inequitable structural and material advantages within and across race, class, and gender (Leonardo, 2004; Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Despite remarkable improvements, small schools have yet to show full resiliency to eliminate the racial order of student achievement. The Oakland data suggest the stifling climate of competition that often encourages students to seek racial divisions and group rivalries between the presumed high versus low achievers, which can lead a school back to the deficit models and their links to race and academic excellence (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). In the making of a vicious cycle, the persistent racial achievement gap within and between small schools only reshuffles these ranks instead of repudiating them. Although the literature suggests strong relationships remains between school size and students' overall success, it is far too premature to argue that such diagnosis can close the racial achievement gap. For one, the authors argue that uniformity in school structures does not guarantee a network of authentic, personalized relationships that will transform into a culture of personalization and strong academic excellence. As the case for Boston, the dynamics between teachers and peer groups are central to the reciprocation of learning and teaching to empower one's academic environment. The depth and intensity of human interactions increase teachers' efficacy to provide guidance for students to overcome life struggles associated with the urban context. Even though these benefits for students are significant, I believe social justice is one missing cultural quality in the mission and practice at these schools that precludes teachers and students from rejecting normative perceptions of race and academic excellence.

The authors' cross schools comparisons reveal the centrality of respect among students and teachers as an interconnecting thread between personalization and academic engagement. To apply this idea to my recent school visit, the students with whom I observed were relegated to facilities that do not have lavatory papers and running water which hardly count as a method of personalization and care. Both male and female students made it a point to tell their peers during class to not use the "yucky bathrooms." These cautionary accounts of poor facilities later escalated when a student could not resist any longer, leading the conversation to sidetrack what the math teacher was attempting to accomplish in a group problem-solving exercise. Had the resources been there, students would have access to the facilities they deserve, and the classroom

activity would have taken on a different direction. Despite improvements made to the school in certain areas, the lack of deeper commitments to profound change to all aspects of the school puts reform at risk of recreating the old (Fine, 2005).

The authors contend that the power of smaller schools is only beneficial to the extent that educators exercise political will to take advantage of the new structure to transform interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and to expect and inspire higher orders of academic achievement. The book concludes with this point by suggesting readers to prioritize school culture over school size in future research initiatives (p. 126). The authors expose the change theory's fundamental flaws by making clear that structural changes provide the spatial advantages, but it is the cultural practices of schooling that are most salient in yielding the effects for success (Fine & Sumerville, 1998; Howley & Howley, 2004; Noguera, 2002). It is clear that the synergy of structural changes requires simultaneous changes in organizational behaviors and power relationships (Sarason, 1990). I argue however, that structural and cultural analyses of schooling should not be debated as dichotomous propositions, and given the historic shortcomings of large factory schools (Franklin & McCulloch, 2007), size still matters. Referring to my earlier definition of small schools, not only does the data show how structure and culture intermingles, reformers must not lose sight of the social meaning of school size in conjunction with its physical significance.

The book has successfully captured ways a culture of success plays out in the lives of students, which is defined by the beliefs and values of respect, encouragement, caring, support, and reciprocity between students and teachers. Student voices are robust in operationalizing the essential cultural elements at all levels of these schools to produce the outcomes of personalization, racial cohesion, and access to learning opportunities. The book merely signals for further inquiries on the topic of school effectiveness. To expand upon the authors' recommendations, we need to revisit issues concerning teacher and school expectations for students' academic achievement as a strategy to further our understanding of effective classroom pedagogy as the basis to create a culture of high expectations. Along this point, we need to identify additional strategies to increase teacher efficacy in heterogeneous classrooms and prepare teachers to serve students across a wide range of achievement levels since normative teaching practices are found to teach to the middle (Lee, Smerdon, Alfeld-Liro, & Brown, 2000). We need to use these efforts to assist small and large schools alike to continue the path of innovation, cultivate strategies to meet students' non-academic needs, and expand learning opportunities to provide a well-rounded education without being pigeonhole by its thematic focus (Cook & Tashlik, 2005). The evolution of small schools need additional evaluation regarding their current capacity to improve upon its extracurricular activities since its first initial assessment of school size has proven them to be strongly correlated (Barker & Gump, 1964).

We also need to examine the non-voucher public choice programs that many districts such as Oakland and Boston are using to promote small schools. Although choice as a lottery-based, self-selection policy is implemented differently by district and appears democratic, the research community still needs to understand its complexity and degrees of transparency in influencing families' methods of choice-making (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). As revealed in the Oakland data, small learning communities have greater variety in attracting students from particular achievement levels that often incite racial assumptions about who has a record of success versus those who has the potential to be successful. For instance, Daniel Solorzano and Armida Ornelas' (2002) Los Angeles study shows that racial attitudes are salient in the choice program implemented by magnet schools through cross population comparisons. Through cross population comparisons, all of which deepen problems of selection effects in inquiry, ability grouping by school size and enrollment, and how equity and excellence are assessed and understood (Schneider, Wyse, & Keesler, 2007).

Therefore, even with the most progressive lens to which the development of new small schools is analyzed, the retention of a critical mass of teachers seems to be a continual challenge for small schools. As for how the choice paradigm implicates English learner populations, particular for those attending large schools that are currently downsizing, there is currently no evidence that shows small schools advocates having a keen interest in serving this growing segment of the school population (Hood, 2003). Educators and the communities they serve cannot act sluggishly to these problems as I view them as major threats to an empowering school culture for all students. To expand upon the possibilities that the small school movement has brought to us thus far, we need to build within them a more robust school culture in which all students and teachers are empowered to thrive and succeed.

To extend these discussions, I interviewed co-author Louie Rodriguez about the concerns I have for small schools research. Below is the transcript of the interview:

*Daniel:* Thanks for agreeing to a meeting. Congratulations on your first book. Some have referred to small schools as structurally challenged to serving heterogeneous populations. What have you seen in your research that either supports or refutes this view?

*Louie:* Small schools are definitely criticized for their "selectivity bias." Because small schools often operate under different choice policy, they are often not required to abide by an open access process. Therefore, small school leaders are able to pick and choose the criteria for selecting students. In other words, if a small school is not able to support English Language Learners, they are able to justify a non-

admission of an ELL because the school is unable to provide the language and social support necessary for the student to thrive. The other problem with serving heterogeneous populations in small schools is the simple fact as to whether students and families know such opportunities exist. Within large urban districts, those most likely to provide opportunities within small schools, students and families who are on the margins of the system are least likely to know that such schools exist. Therefore, small schools in many ways take the cream of the crop from the large comprehensive high and middle schools. This means that such students are often already tied into the system or their parents have a certain degree of intellectual capital to know and use this knowledge to benefit their children. So, in many ways, the small schools do not necessarily serve a representative sample of students from any given school system. Of course there are exceptions, but this reality exists.

*Daniel:* In a time of economic crisis, how do you think a shrinking tax base will impact small schools in ways that are different from large schools?

*Louie:* Despite the context of economic crisis and state budget cuts, I still believe that districts have the local authority and will to ensure that small schools will be sustained because of their ability to show results. While small schools should not automatically be associated with positive academic and social outcomes for students, they often do serve as reference points for district officials and researchers to show that something positive is happening within large districts and despite the budget crisis, so I believe they will survive.

*Daniel:* Do you know of any small schools that are effective in addressing the needs of English language learners or students who come to schools with more needs than their peers?

*Louie:* In my research, I have not seen any small schools effectively serve the needs of ELL's largely due a point I made earlier—they are not obligated to do so. For the most part, they have the ability to pick and choose who they accept. Another factor I mentioned earlier was the idea of knowing that small schools exist in the first place. This issue is indeed a major challenge to small schools related to ELL's, particularly around issues of equity and opportunity.

*Daniel:* In your book, you have described the ways in which school size facilitates personalization for students. Could you elaborate on how teachers can personalize learning for students while holding everyone to high expectations, such as meeting the college eligibility requirement as a benchmark for success?

*Louie:* For historically marginalized students in particular, our argument in the book is that relationships should be the glue that makes teaching and learning more effective. This argument is not only supported by our data but is also argued by many scholars who have looked at the relationship between relationships and learning and school engagement such as Angela Valenzuela and Sonia Nieto. Our other goal of the book was to take a nuanced look at “personalization” and we discovered that was both academic and relational. The idea here is that both types of personalization are necessary and helps facilitate the overall goal of producing high-performing, highly-skilled students who are college-ready by the end of high school. A simultaneous goal of course is to understand the degree to which students also are critically engaged in issues that raise their consciousness about themselves and society. Within our research, the latter was much more elusive but I know there are small schools across the country that factoring in the idea of consciousness into the equation of success within the small schools model.

*Daniel:* What can schools do to better to support teachers and staff to assist students with the most needs and hold them to high expectations for academic success?

*Louie:* I think they need to have explicit conversations about the significance of personalization and relationships. What do effective relationships look like and why? What are some principles that can guide the work of building a culture of relationships and school engagement for the most underserved students within small schools? In other words, the professional development efforts need to explicitly engage the school community in dialogue about the significance of high expectations. I have found that many schools believe in the significance of high expectations however there is often the assumption that everyone knows what high expectations actually look like in practice. In our book, we provide a series of questions that can serve as discussion starters for schools interested in engaging such

dialogues. I would also encourage schools to engage in such dialogues with students and parents. We found in our research that students are more than willing to share views and experiences that are both conducive and counterproductive to their learning and engagement in school.

*Daniel:* In what ways do faculty diversity may or may not play a role in the practice of personalization for students?

*Louie:* Based on our research, there seemed to be two factors that contributed to building a culture of personalization—faculty diversity and building a culture of relationships and learning. Since our study was focused on students' voices and experiences, they seemed to be more focused on teachers who were committed to their individual development rather than the race or gender of their teachers. While I expected to see a strong relationship between teacher's race and student's race, students were more focused on the commitment of teachers and how this commitment emanated a sense of personalization for students. While in some cases students spoke about the significance of their connections with individual teachers, in part due to a cultural connection with a teacher, the overall school culture was a more salient factor in facilitating personalization. Of course faculty diversity played a role of personalization, faculty diversity and building personalization should work in tandem.

*Daniel:* What do you think teacher education programs can do to assist pre-service teachers in developing the beliefs and attitudes necessary to contribute to a successful school culture?

*Louie:* As someone who works in teacher development, I believe that it is essential to explicitly engage pre-service teachers in dialogues about school culture. Pre-service teachers should be exposed to the research that focuses on school culture and given exercises to arrive at a working understanding of the significance of school culture for all stakeholders. Often there tends to be an overwhelming focus on macro policy or micro-level issues within the classroom and we overlook school-level processes that play a major role in facilitating students' experiences and outcomes. One possible way to do this is engage pre-service teachers in reflecting about their own school culture experiences and also use their current clinical experiences as data to

engage in analysis of school culture. To an extent, this approach can unearth how pre-service teachers' own experiences shape their own understandings of school culture and use this opportunity to engage other issues such as equity and opportunity.

*Daniel:* Beyond looking at size, what are the other important structural and cultural factors that educators and policymakers need in order to make schools effective?

*Louie:* We really need to push back on high-stakes standardized testing. As a structural feature of public schooling, it has had a profound impact on the culture of education in this country and a dire impact on the school culture in some of the most struggling schools. I have found that high-stakes standardized testing has resulted in what I call a "test prep pedagogy" where content has been narrowed to test content, student-teacher relationships have been compromised, and accountability has been subtracted from local schools and communities. That said, I am hopeful about the possibilities that "test prep pedagogy" bring to educators. For instance, educators, students, and communities should be brought together and use this issue of testing as a point of analysis. We should also use other critical issues in schools and communities as the curriculum and as the organizing tool to engage in dialogue. This practice alone can address the structural and cultural challenges currently facing schools. Many are already doing this work and many more, at all levels, need to contribute.

*Daniel:* One major element in your work is to encourage students to speak up about their experiences with schooling. Could you elaborate on what school leaders can do to structurally embrace and integrate critical dialogue into the school's decision-making process?

*Louie:* One of the ways we used our research to impact practice was to try to understand how the silencing of students' voices impacted their dispositions in school. Using this data, we reported back to the leadership team of this particular school and brainstormed a venue for student voices. We created a "fish-bowl" where students would engage in dialogue with the principal in an inner circle of chairs and teachers and other students would observe from an outer circle. This structure began to build a culture of de-silencing of students' voices.

The principal then used the information to drive dialogues with faculty and staff about some of the challenges facing the school. At the very least, these fishbowl exercises sent a symbolic message to students' that their concerns are being listened to and a useful tool for the school administration learn about some of the challenges facing the school, as identified and framed by students.

*Daniel:* Could you provide some examples of this with the teachers you are working with?

*Louie:* Teachers are in the best position to engage youth in dialogue. Teachers have what Pedro Noguera calls a "captured market" audience of young, energetic and dynamic students who have experiences, perspectives, and knowledge from which adults can learn. As a former teacher and now a researcher in some of the most struggling high schools in large urban cities, there are many constraints (i.e., standardized testing) facing the work that teachers could actually engage in with students in the classroom. I also recognize, however, that teachers need to have what Lilia Bartolome calls politically and ideologically clarity. That is, they need to recognize their roles in institutions and contexts and how their own ideological positions affirm or challenge traditional theories and assumptions about students, cultures and communities. Once a teacher is able to develop this on-going process of clarity, they should arrive at a personal and professional place to push the envelope, engage youth in dialogue, and use the classroom as a space for liberatory practices for transformation.

*Daniel:* To conclude this book review, could you offer a few words to the teachers who may be facing political obstacles in bringing equity and social justice to their school?

*Louie:* As educators driven for social and political change, we cannot do the work alone therefore the first step is to find allies. There is literature on the power of building communities of practice among teachers with common goals. I believe educators should capitalize on schools as organizing spaces to build capacity for change. I feel like the physical space of schools is a natural place where people automatically congregate. The question for me is: do we know how to

capitalize on this organized space to work for equity and social justice?

Another layer to this question is interrogating the work of researchers who are primarily responsible for conducting research that doesn't necessarily have to be applicable or useful to a school or community. I would like to challenge researchers to offer themselves as direct stakeholders in the success and failure our nation's most struggling public schools. While research, especially policy research is necessary to understand the impact that certain interventions have had on education, I believe that more action-oriented, community-centered research is necessary that both strives to address challenges within our public schools, but also to use the resources that universities bring to engage and capitalize on the wealth that youth, families, educators, and communities bring to dynamic. Otherwise we get caught in projects that engage in research for researcher's sake rather than engaging in initiatives that are inquiry-based and solution-oriented for the direct benefit of schools and communities.

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## About the Reviewer

Daniel D. Liou is a Ph.D. candidate at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. Since 1993, Daniel has been working and researching with youth in urban high schools in the United States. Daniel's current research examines students' perceptions of classroom practices, school culture, and policymaking as indicators for school effectiveness. Daniel's latest publication with co-author Robert Cooper, "The structure and culture of information pathways: Rethinking Opportunity to Learn in urban high schools during the ninth grade transition", is in the 2007 October/November issue of the *High School Journal*. Daniel thanks Louie F. Rodriguez for graciously consenting to the interview, and Rene Antrop-González, Dolores Calderón, and Pedro Nava for their thoughtful feedback.





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