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## **Personalismo, Small Schools, and Latino Students' Academic Success**

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DePaul University  
School of Education

PERSONALISMO, SMALL SCHOOLS AND LATINO STUDENTS'  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

A Thesis in  
Curriculum Studies

By  
Isabel Mesa Collins

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

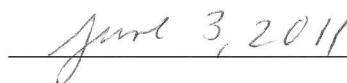
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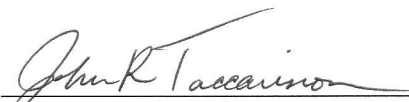
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## Abstract

A growing body of research indicates that Latino students continue to struggle academically presenting educators and school leaders with serious concerns about a cultural achievement gap. Guided by the work of Lee & Loeb, (2000); Lee & Freidkin, (2007) and Stevens, (2008) who have examined small personalized learning communities, this paper examines the concept of *personalismo* as a conduit for establishing a platform that may help narrow the achievement gap within the Latino population in the public school system.

Through a series of T-Tests, conducted in two small public schools with varying levels of *personalismo*, within a Chicago Public School Latino community this study will examine whether the construct of *personalismo* has a significant effect on the academic achievement of Latino students.

Grounded in national research findings conducted across various urban populations about small learning communities, this study proposes that small learning communities promote interpersonal closeness and connectedness between students and educators, particularly for Latino students, that yield improved academic outcomes.

The results should help school leaders, teachers and policy makers understand why Latino students' academic achievement improves when enrolled in small, personalized environments. The findings suggest that training professionals on the benefits of *personalismo* in large urban schools will help narrow the achievement gap across the nation.

## CONTENTS

I.	CHAPTER I	
	Introduction.....	1
	General Purpose.....	3
	Hypothesis.....	3
	Definition of Terms.....	7
	Organization.....	10
II.	CHAPTER II	
	Review of the Literature.....	13
	Significance of the Study.....	15
	The Latino Population.....	16
	Minority Students and SLCs.....	18
	The Achievement Gap.....	20
	Theoretical Perspective.....	21
	Latinos and Schooling .....	25
	The Latino Family.....	31
	Family and School Communication.....	32
	Latino Parent Perceptions about Schooling.....	33
	<i>Personalismo</i> in the Health Field.....	35

Equity and Latino Interactions.....	42
Small Learning Communities.....	43
Chicago’s Commitment to SLCs.....	50
Trust, Hope and Respect.....	53
Leadership in SLCs.....	56
Public Schools and School Size.....	58
Challenges of Small Schools .....	62
Effects of School Size and Achievement.....	66
Latino Students and the Middle School Experience .....	69
Challenges for Latino Students .....	73
A Culture of Caring.....	75
Systemic Initiatives and Personalismo .....	81
Personalismo and “essential relationships”.....	83
<b>III. CHAPTER III</b>	
Methodology.....	85
Demographics of Schools A and B .....	87
School A .....	89
School B .....	91
Research Questions .....	95
Delimitations and Limitations .....	96

	Current Research Findings.....	97
	Hypothesis .....	99
	Significant Research about Personalization .....	100
IV.	CHAPTER IV	
	Results.....	113
	ISAT Historical Data.....	117
	Value Added Metrics.....	127
	Academic Rigor .....	141
	Summary.....	144
V.	CHAPTER V	
	Discussion.....	146
	Interpretation of Data.....	151
	Implications.....	156
	Limitations.....	156
	Conclusion.....	158
VI.	Bibliography .....	160
	References.....	167
VII.	Appendices.....	168
	A. Appendix A: Cover Letter	
	B. Consent Form	
	C. Recommendation Letter	

## VIII. LIST OF TABLES

A. Table 3.1 Demographics School A and B.....	86
B. Table 3.2 Student Population/ ISAT 2009-2010 .....	87
C. Table 4.1 <i>T</i> -test procedures.....	114
D. Table 4.2 School A Descriptive Statistics .....	115
E. Table 4.3 Sample Summary of Data.....	116
F. Table 4.4 ISAT Reading Overtime.....	118
G. Table 4.5 School A 8 <sup>th</sup> grade ISAT 2009-2010 .....	119
H. Table 4.6 School A 6 <sup>th</sup> grade ISAT 2009-2010 .....	121
I. Table 4.7 ISAT Math Overtime.....	123
J. Table 4.8 ISAT Science Overtime.....	124
K. Table 4.9 ISAT Composite Overtime.....	126
L. Table 4.10 School A Value Added 2009-2010 .....	129
M. Table 4.11 School B Value Added 2009-2010 .....	131
N. Table 4.12 ISAT Reading 3 <sup>rd</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grades T-tests .....	133
O. Table 4.13 ISAT Math 3 <sup>rd</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade T-tests .....	135

## IX. LIST OF FIGURES

A. Figure 3.1 Formula for <i>t</i> -test.....	111
B. Figure 4.1 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade ISAT Math Schools A and B.....	137
C. Figure 4.2 2009 Student Connection Safe Climate .....	138
D. Figure 4.3 Student Connection Social/Emotional Climate.....	134
E. Figure 4.4 Student Connection Academic Rigor.....	140



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have tried to accurately define *personalismo* (personalization) and how it serves as a binding interaction for people to make personal connections. This paper has utilized definitions provided by researchers whose expertise in the field has gained national recognition and has brought the concept of *personalismo* to the forefront of education as a possible indicator of success for Latino students.

The first definition of *personalismo* is “closely knit interpersonal relationships” coined by Delgado (1995) as part of a health field study conducted with Hispanic patients. The second definition is “formal friendliness” (Flores, 2000; Perez-Stable, 1987). The third definition is taken from a study conducted in the middle schools where according to the research findings, the element of *personalismo* is synonymous with the feelings of care and respect permeates classrooms, lunchrooms, and corridors are embedded within the school culture (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne and Powell, 1990). Hence, this paper will explore whether *personalismo* may be the binding construct that can provide educators with a process that may help narrow the achievement gap of Latino students enrolled in urban public schools. Additionally, throughout this paper, the concepts of *personalismo* and *familismo* (care of the family structures) are used interchangeably as they are derived from supportive interactions that are built in relationships fundamental to the Latino culture (Halgunseth, 2006).

In order to understand how the concept of *personalismo* can impact urban schools, we have operationalized it. First and foremost, *personalismo* is grounded on establishing meaningful and genuine relationships between the learner and his/her teachers and other adults. These relationships allow students to establish trust and respect within the educational setting

before learning takes place. One example of a personalismo-based model utilized in the middle school settings is the element of advisory. Here teacher-students teams are formed to forge close relationships throughout the middle school years which are vital to the development of young adults. The focus of advisory teams is to know students in ways that parents know their children in a way that adults become advocates for students. In well-run advisory teams, the team provide opportunities for personalized guidance and active monitoring of students' needs from socio-emotional to academic issues (Turning Points, 2000).

Secondly, personalismo requires educators to collaborate with colleagues in a purposeful and meaningful manner, always focusing on the needs of students. This behavior is evident in schools where there are common preparation periods for teachers to meet on a weekly basis to discuss student work and evaluate curriculum practices. Such procedures enable teachers to constantly evaluate their work and modify it according to the needs of students.

Thirdly, in order to meet the needs of all learners and personalize instruction, the curriculum must be differentiated and teachers become diagnosticians, "prescribing the best possible instruction for the students" (Tomlinson, 1999, p.2). In differentiated classrooms, teachers focus on the essentials, modifying content, process and products based on what assessment data reveals about students' readiness, interests, learning profiles and most importantly, cultural and linguistic needs. Students in these settings feel cared for and valued which is at the core of personalismo.

Personalismo is also evident in external setting and operations such as in the way parents and teachers relate. Studies have shown that when Latino parents feel valued and respected within the school system, students thrive and achievement improves (Gloria and Castellanos, 2004).

McLaughlin and Talbert (1990) find that a personalized setting rests at the core of the Latino cultural values sought by Latino children as they enter school and begin to build self esteem, trust, and understanding of the socio-emotional settings within the school structure. Ten year later, as part of a groundbreaking report, *Turning Points* (2000) reveals an emerging movement which has gone unrecognized by many policymakers, where personalization is noted as the basis for student achievement, especially in urban middle schools where the majority of students come from minority ethnic groups. In a later study, Gloria and Castellanos (2004) concur and inform that *personalismo* involves interpersonal interactions that provide emotional support, personal connections, and encouragement, necessary for student achievement in marginalized populations.

### **General Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to determine if the concept of *personalismo* has a significant effect on the achievement of Latino students enrolled in small learning communities (SLCs). In order to understand how academic challenges among the Latino student population may be addressed, the researcher will explore the following questions:

- Is there a statistically significant difference in the reading ISAT scores of Latino students enrolled in two small schools that exhibit varying levels of *personalismo*?
- Is there a statistically significant difference in the mathematics ISAT scores of Latino students enrolled in two small schools that exhibit varying levels of *personalismo*?
- What are the most important school structures and behaviors that provide personalized learning opportunities to Latino students?

The hypothesis, supported by Lee & Loeb (2000) whose research was conducted in 264 K-8 Chicago elementary schools explored teachers and students influence by the size of inner-city elementary

schools, focusing on teachers attitudes about their responsibility for student learning and achievement. While Lee & Loeb (2000) will be further discussed in the literature review and the methodology, it is important to note that the authors conclude that school size and its effects on teachers' attitudes or *personalismo* "directly and indirectly influence student achievement" (Lee & Loeb, 2000 p. 3).

Through the review of the literature, we examined how research about small learning communities has made significant inroads in narrowing the achievement gap that currently exists within the Latino student population in United States, particularly in Chicago, Illinois. We theorize that such success in small schools is due to the level of *personalismo* that is embedded within small learning communities. This theory is supported by Gladden (1998) whose research on this subject provides a sound basis for this paper.

*Personalismo* at the school level is manifested in the way teachers and students build nurturing and caring relationships. These interactions lead to a school climate where students feel valued and respected and where their intellectual development can thrive. At the instructional level, *personalismo* is conceptualized through a series of structures that include effective teaching models and strategies such as advisory, collaborative teaming, block schedule, year-round schooling, looping, inclusion, tutoring supports, project-based learning, performance assessment, differentiation, community-based learning, portfolios, student mentors, journaling and internships (Lambert and Lowry, 2004).

Our methodology included a 2x6 model of *t*-tests that examined whether the means of two sample schools are statistically different from each other. Furthermore, we examined how Latino students who are exposed to varying levels of *personalismo*, enrolled in two similar small elementary Chicago Public Schools, with multiple commonalities, will perform on the Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT). We then hypothesize that, when paying attention to *personalismo*

as a culturally-based concept, its practice may contribute to the improved academic outcomes of Latino students.

The hypothesis is also supported by both qualitative and quantitative work from numerous researchers such as Cotton, 1996; Delgado (1995); Eberts, Kehoe and Stone (1982); Meier (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000); Raywid (1996), and Stevens (2008) who have made significant contributions about personalized learning structures and its affect on improved academic outcomes, particularly when working with marginalized populations.

The literature review begins with a definition of *personalismo* from educators and health care providers and is followed by a historical overview about small learning communities (SLCs) and how they have addressed the academic needs of marginalized students. Secondly, the paper takes the reader through a series of studies conducted by nationally recognized educators among many whose research about small schools, small learning communities and *personalismo* have made inroads in the academic outcomes of Latino students documented by the U.S. Department of Education Reports (1996, 1997) and Anthropol-Gonzalez, & De Jesus (2006).

Guided by the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), whose ecological paradigm on relationship-building provides the reader with background information and a theoretical framework about how students build trust, motivation and intellectual outcomes that impact academic achievement, this paper provides alternative options on how minority students learn best and what educational structures best meet their needs.

We conclude by offering a series of recommendations based on nationally-recognized studies conducted across the nation including Fry (2008), Garcia, Jensen & Cuellar (2006), Walberg (1992), and Wasley and Lear (2001) whose recommendations are focused around the concept of *personalismo*, or personalized learning structures, as a vehicle for improved learning

outcomes of poor, marginalized students. As the reader completes reading this paper, it is our hope to bring about a new sense of awareness about *personalismo* and its connection to student achievement.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Personalismo:** Defined as “formal friendliness” (Flores, 2000; Perez-Stable, 1987), or “closely knit interpersonal relationships” (Delgado, 1995) or the “caring and respect permeates classrooms, lunchrooms, and corridors” (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne and Powell, 1990).

**Personalization- Small Schools Project define “personalization” as:** Making a difference when the following conditions occur: 1) Adults in the school know kids (and often families) so well that instruction and learning opportunities can be tailored to individual students based on that knowledge. 2) Students in small schools are known and have a sense of belonging that sustains mutual trust between the teacher and student. 3) Students trust teachers sufficiently to grant their teachers the moral authority to make greater demands on them as learners (Lambert and Lowry, 2004).

**Latino:** “Persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban Central American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund - MALDEF, 2008).

**Hispanic:** “Including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central or South American origin” (NCES).

**African-American:** A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa (NCES).

**Small Schools:** Schools where a maximum of 500 students are enrolled at the elementary level (Cotton, 2001). Other researchers contend that 400 maximum at the elementary level and 500 at the high school level are most successful (Raywid, 1996).



**Small Learning Communities (SLCs):** Any separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes (Lee, Ready and Welner, 2002).

**Autonomous small school:** May be in its own building or in a building with another school(s), but is organizationally, fiscally, and instructionally independent (Anness & Ort, 1999).

**Historically small school:** A school that predates the new, small-by-design schools in Chicago that are the focus of their large-scale study. Such a school is also an autonomous small school (Wasley, 2000).

**School-within-a-school:** These autonomous schools (or houses/pods) operate within a larger “host”, either as the only (SWSS) in that school or one of several.

**Multiplex:** In a multiplex, the entire building is made up of schools-within-a-school, usually three of them. The term also includes new buildings that are specifically designed to house multiple small schools.

**Familismo:** “The desire to maintain strong family ties, the expectation that the family will be the primary source of instrumental and emotional support...and the commitment to the family over individual needs and desires” (Halgunseth et al., 2006 p.1285).

**Minority or minority student:** The Higher Education Act (HEA) (20 U.S.C. 1067k (3)) definition of “minority” as students who are Alaskan native, American Indian, Asian-American, Black (African-American), Hispanic American (Latino) Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (NCES).

**Minority students:** A student who is Alaska native, American Indian, Asian-American, Black (African-American), Hispanic American (Latino), Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander US Department of Education 34 C.F.R. 607.7).

**Asian:** A person who is native to or whose parents were born in China, Japan, Korea, Viet Nam, and /or the Asiatic Islands.

**Leadership and governance:** “Effective school leaders share responsibilities, encourage collaborative work, and include members of the school community in policy decisions.” (Spillane, 2001)

**Academic achievement:** Academic achievement standards are explicit definitions of how students are expected to demonstrate attainment of the knowledge and skills reflected in the content standards. Academic achievement standards should be conceptualized as a system that includes achievement levels, achievement descriptors or competencies, and cut scores which separate one level of achievement from another.

## Organization

This paper is organized in six parts: I) Introduction, II) Review of the Literature, III) Design, IV) Methodology, V) Results and VI) Discussion. Each part includes a series of sub-headings that guide the reader through the section, building knowledge about the concept of *personalismo* while providing historical, theoretical and cultural perspectives about Latino students and their academic needs in the United States.

The introduction provides an overview of the concept of *personalismo* and its impact on building effective relationships that promote positive academic outcomes. These important relationships or personalized learning structures, may impact the academic outcomes of Latino students. Part II presents an in-depth review of the last thirty years in educational research, cultural perspectives and values about Hispanics which are closely associated with academic achievement (Cotton, 1996).

In chapter II, the literature review introduces *personalismo* as a concept that is closely-associated to the practices seen in small schools and small learning communities (SLCs). A theoretical perspective provides a framework based on Bronfenbrenner's "Ecological Paradigm" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) which argues that "in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs" (p. 1643). This section provides the reader with a background that will help understand why *personalismo* is deeply-rooted in the pedagogy of education. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994) this pedagogy seems to be necessary for educators to build relationships with their students that translate to understanding the child and successful academic outcomes.

Also in chapter II a sub-heading entitled "Latinos and Schooling" offers background information about the Latino experience in United States followed by demographic data that

support Bronfenbrenner (2005) developmental theory regarding immigrant groups. A third sub-heading found in Part I is “The Latino Family” which provides a basis for concepts such as “familism”, motherhood, community as they significantly impact “personalismo” within the framework of the family and its expectations about education.

Another important component of the review of the literature found in chapter II is *Personalismo in the Health Field* which is supported by Delgado (1995) and Evans, Coon & Crogan (2008) who examined the concept of *personalismo* and found it to be a vital component of patient rehabilitation processes in hospitals. The Delgado (1995) research is central to this paper as it provides a framework within a similar service field where educators can learn from the findings about personalization, care and trust relations with patients.

Chapter III includes the research design which illustrates how the quantitative study will be conducted using two t-tests which will be conducted to assess the means within the two schools to identify whether they are statistically different from each other. That is, comparing school A (the control school with high levels of personalismo) with school B (identified with low levels of personalismo). Secondly, a series of t-test at each grade level will be conducted to further investigate statistical differences among grade levels thus identifying whether personalismo, even at the grade level, can produce higher ISAT scores in reading and/or mathematics.

Also in chapter III, we cite three major quantitative studies conducted at the national level about small learning communities, student achievement and teacher’s attitudes about their students. This section concludes with information about general assumptions, the hypothesis and methodology, delimitations, limitations and concluding with a timeline for the research.

Chapter IV provides the reader with a detailed explanation of the methodology that based on a series of t-tests conducted in each grade level (3<sup>rd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) for each school using the ISAT Reading, Mathematics and Science standardized tests as the basis for the analysis.

Chapter V brings the reader to a deeper understanding of the results of the series of t-tests conducted in third through eighth grade for schools A and B. Along with the quantitative results we qualitative include reports from CPS “My Voice Survey” which captures the perspectives of teachers, parents and students from the two sample schools as it relate to achievement, personalization and expectations of academic success within each school. Chapter VI provides closing remarks derived from the data analysis. It is our expectation that this paper brings the construct of *personalismo* to the forefront of current research in order to narrow the Latino student achievement gap. Before this is accomplished, the review of the literature begins with an overview about the Latino student population in United States, its cultural values and beliefs.

Chapter VI concludes with a discussion that includes a brief interpretation of the data, followed by implications for further research and the limitations faced throughout an eight-year research where the researcher finds herself transformed as an educator, conscious about the significant impact the concept of *personalismo* can make on the lives of Latino students in urban schools.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One of the most important advocates of small schools is Deborah Meier whose teaching career began in the South Side of Chicago. During her teaching experience, Meier discovered the need to provide marginalized children the opportunity to have a voice in their learning. This was made possible through the creation of small learning communities (SLCs) which provide children with a vehicle to develop academically within a more personalized environment.

In 1974 Deborah Meier opened *Central Park East School in New York City*, the first of two dozen small elementary and middle schools in the East Harlem district. By 1982, the district's rankings on reading tests had moved from 32<sup>nd</sup>, last in the city, to 15<sup>th</sup> and by 1985, Meier's small school vision had gained national attention and as a result, she proceeded to open a secondary school, also known as *Central Park East*, where 550 students in grades seven through twelve were housed. In less than four years, the students had increased academic achievement to 90 percent, compared to 55 percent citywide.

As a result of Meier's small schools initiative in New York, the U.S. Department of Education reported in 1997 that more than half of small school principals reported either no discipline or minor discipline problems, compared to only 14 percent of the big school principals. The New York small school triumphs spawned an explosion of small schools in the 1990s, driven in large part by the efforts of educational pioneers such as Meier and her colleagues. The effects of creating small learning communities resulted in the increase of academic achievements, mainly from minority students, to levels never seen before in New York's public school history.

According to a 1996-1997 U. S. Department of Education report that compared small to large schools, (that is schools with fewer than 400 students versus larger schools with 1,000 or more) revealed large schools with 825 per cent more crime, 270 per cent more vandalism, 294 per cent more fights and assaults and 1000 percent more weapons incidents. By the late nineties, over 300 of New York's 1,000 public schools had fewer than 600 students and reported significant reduction in crime, vandalism, assault and weapons violations. (Meier, 1995 and 2002; U.S. Department of Education Report, 1996-97).

Much of the success of small schools was due to the concept of *personalismo* which Meier (1995) explains as follows:

“A small school provides the possibility of being accountable for our own collective work. It means that every adult in the school feels responsible for every kid and has insights that when shared can open up a seemingly intractable situation to new possibilities” (p. 111).

There are small-schools across the country, yet some states maintain proportionally more small schools than others. There is no agreement of what structures should be included in these small-schools. Even among small schools advocates, there is no clear definition of what kinds of structures they should follow. For example, small schools in rural Vermont differ considerably from those in Queens, New York or Chicago, Illinois, and high schools in rural Vermont are significantly larger than those in rural Montana. This variability indicates that school size, more than just class size, is the issue that requires further research (ERIC Development Team, 1999).

## Significance of the Study

According to Meier (1995) in schools where the majority of students are marginalized and where teachers and leaders fail to create a sense of personalization, students' outcomes may not be as significant. Meier adds that such effect is strongly associated with teacher's attitudes about collective responsibility as teachers develop nurturing, caring and trusting relationships with students which are centered on the concept of *personalismo*. This early finding will be validated by later studies throughout this paper.

This paper seeks to broaden information about what practices are inherent in successful small schools or in small learning communities (SLCs) that help promote academic achievement particularly among Latino students. Additionally, we will cite nationally-recognized quantitative research about small learning communities that have built an impressive case in favor of *personalismo*. Furthermore, these reports examine how benefits from SLCs continue to provide students, in particular minority children whose culture values relationship-building-structures and personalized settings, where trust and respect are at the core of their foundation (Lee & Smith, 1995).

The significance of this paper falls on the concept of *personalismo* as an indicator for Latino student achievement. This paper demonstrates an empirical link between the achievement gap of Latino students and high levels of academic outcomes made possible through the teacher-student interactions associated with *personalismo*.

Additionally, we find that the majority of studies that discuss *personalismo* as a means to provide a more personalized relation between the teacher and student, have been qualitative cases gathered by researchers as they interact with their students or patients. Instead, this paper uses a quantitative approach that examines how the concept of *personalismo* may serve as a



means to improve academic outcomes of Latino students. Furthermore, we provide a combination of quantitative data, such standardized assessment data, and qualitative reports from the “My Voice” Chicago Public Schools (CPS) annual survey administered to parents, students and teachers offer a more comprehensive testament to the practice of *personalismo* in schools.

### **The Latino Population**

Presently, urban public schools are challenged by the number of Hispanic students enrolled which doubled from 1990 to 2006, accounting for 60% of the total growth in public school enrollments over that period. According to the 2008 U.S. Census Bureau, latest projection on Hispanic population, enrollments are expected to continue for decades. It is projected that by 2050, there will be more school-age Hispanic children than school-age non-Hispanic white children. To put this in context, minorities comprise 45% of the student population (NCES, 2008) and Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority population in the schools (NCES, 2004). Latinos constitute 13.3% of the U.S. population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003) and 19.8% of the U.S. school population (NCES, 2008).

The Chicago demographics reveal similar findings as Hispanic students account for 43.4% (180,054) followed by African-Americans with 42.7% (177,012), Whites 8.6% (35,830), Asians 3.2% (4,528) and Multiple Races, American Indian, Alaskan Natives and/or Hawaiians accounting for the remaining 2.1%.

This demographic reality and its impact on education and the socio-economic wellbeing of Latinos in the United States reveal a significant fact that impacts educators and policy-makers across the nation. The reality is that minority children continue to exhibit a wide achievement gap that must be bridged in order to bring equity into the education systems in United States.

This assertion is supported by numerous researchers, quantitative and qualitative in nature, which we will examine throughout this paper.

Gloria & Castellanos, (2004 and 2007) describe *personalismo and familismo* as a key indicator of success. These indicators are steeped within Latino cultural values which are embedded in familial relationships as well as with friends, teachers and co-workers. At the school level, these essential relationships help create a special bond that allows Latino students to forge critical friendships and associations with educators which help promote positive academic outcomes.

Importantly, these relationships are strengthened over the years as respect and trust is built yielding improved academic outcomes. Furthermore, through daily relationships and successes, students begin to formulate persistence and focus for achievement. Additionally, according to Gloria and Castellanos (2004) these elements of psychological validation and cultural affirmation that Latino students can connect and sustain positive academic outcomes will take them towards the graduation pathways. Our hypothesis is grounded on the above findings from Gloria and Castellanos (2004) and results of our study confirm that *personalismo* can be an indicator of success for Latino students when other important best instructional and leadership practices are in place.

In an urban district such as Chicago where as noted above the majority of the students are Latino, the concept of *personalismo* plays a significant role in their academic outcomes. This reality will be explicitly discussed throughout this paper as results from numerous local and nation-wide studies illuminate our findings.

### **Minority students and small learning communities**

Over the last thirty years, researchers have reported that minority students as well as poor students are overrepresented in low-performing large public schools. They have also found that rigorous practices and methods offered to low-performing schools are typically less stimulating to students than those with higher ranking schools. Researchers have also found that for the most part, low performing schools have a negative effect on students' academic achievement, particularly poor minority students Cotton (2001).

The implications for this serious situation are evident in the current national achievement gap where minority students continue to trail their White peers. **Latino children remain twice as likely as White children to score in the woeful "below basic" category at both the fourth and eighth grade reading levels on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP, 2009). National findings show two in five Latino eighth graders scoring "below basic," the test's lowest category, the odds against earning a high school diploma are extremely steep. Worse still, however, is that Latino proficiency levels essentially failed to improve between 2002 & 2009. Daunting implications are noted in the Pew Trusts' projection that state 29 percent of the U.S. population will be Hispanic in 2050.**

Nationally, the higher the percentage of Latino students that attend a large high school, the more likely they are to be taught by teachers who lack a college major in the subject they are teaching. School overcrowding is another issue that confronts Latino neighborhoods and adds to the urgency of the need for new options. Some options considered by large urban districts include creating SLCs such as schools-within-schools in order to manage large student enrollment.

In Chicago, SLCs began to surface in the early 1980's in some communities however large factory-like buildings continue to reign over the district. According to a 2009-2010 CPS Research and Evaluation demographics report, Chicago is currently the third largest public school system in the United States with over 410,000 students enrolled in 675 schools, many of whom fall within the 86% classified as low-income and over 13% percent English Language Learners (ELLs). These figures confirm that Latinos not only represent one of the largest ethnic communities in Chicago (39.1%), but are also a significant political power base which lends political expediency in this important mission (Valdez & Espino, 2003).

Hart and Risely (1995) indicate that much of the achievement gap rests on factors such as readiness to learn, expectations and health issues studies. McLaughlin & Talbert (1990 p. 231) state that “personalized environments engender the most fundamental sort of accountability” as “accountability is interpersonal” and it is “an obligation or contract” between the teacher and the student which is similar to those in other personal relationships. This is an important aspect where *personalismo* is directly linked to student achievement which can provide educators with a process that can help Latino students improve academic outcomes. This process will be further developed in the literature review as research findings show a “unique influence on students’ academic accomplishments” about the benefits of small learning communities, “personalismo” and minority student schooling (Howley, 1996, p. 26).

The above studies indicate that large impersonal school buildings, where teachers fail to make genuine connections with students, may be a significant detriment to the needs of at risk students. Meier, (2006) find that “the “power of smallness lies in the effectiveness of

learning through the company one keeps” (p. 659). The “company” Meier (2006) mentions is what she calls “powerful adults” (p. 659) which help students to learn how to be a citizen, to inquire, to discover and to be engaged in the learning process in ways that are meaningful to them. This paper also focuses on the relationships adults build with students and parents as they help create an environment that is conducive to learning which according to Meier (2006) serves as the catalyst for improved academic outcomes or marginalized students.

While the Latino student population has improved academic outcomes during the last five years as measured by the Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT), they still continue to trail Asian and White students. This is confirmed by the reading city wide over time report for years 2001 through 2009 (excluding English Language Learners). This report shows Chicago Public Schools students 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade overall scores of meets/exceed rate in 2005 was 47.7% to 67.8% in 2009. Asian/Pacific students lead with 91.4%, followed by Whites with 86.4%, Native Americans with 80.4%, African American students with 59.4% and Latino students from 54.3% in 2005 to 72.5% in 2009 (CPS-REA, 2009). These figures confirm the racial and cultural achievement gap still remains despite the efforts in creating small learning communities at the high school level.

### **The Achievement Gap**

At a time when small schools are being re-considered by policy makers across the nation as an alternative to reduce achievement gaps in poor communities, this paper highlights other variables of interest that are embedded in many small school structures that may significantly impact achievement. Described throughout the literature review, lessons from the small schools movement in urban communities will guide the reader throughout thirty years of

research about the benefits of personalized structures. Secondly, this study will also utilize the concept of ‘caring’ interchangeably with *personalismo*, also utilized in the health field and synonymous to the “aesthetic and authentic” connections that patients and health care providers make to build trust-based relationships that promote improved diagnosis (Delgado, 1996).

Throughout the literature review we will explore how trust-based relationships, also known as *personalismo*, may provide Latino students with the means to make the necessary connections between home and school that can help them improve academically. Some of these special relationships can be found in small schools, where all stakeholders purposely follow the construct of *personalismo* as a way to link home-school relationships which are centered on trust and respect. We then hypothesize that if personalismo-based practices can be integrated within the curriculum, all students particularly Latino students, whose cultural upbringing is grounded on these behaviors, can improve academically regardless of the school size. The following sub-heading will focus on the theoretical perspective framed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The relationship building process of how an individual’s experiences help build his/her world has been a topic of many researchers and theologians. Framing these experiences within an ecological paradigm has been the focus of Urie Bronfenbrenner. In his study, Bronfenbrenner (1979) conducted several international experiments with hundreds of mothers and their infants about how the interrelatedness of people and their physical, emotional, and cognitive behaviors stimulate the lives of those they care for and their academic outcomes.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the ecological paradigm is a way to explain human development as a function of nurtured and layered systems of interpersonal relationships

that occur within physical settings. In his Russian doll-analogy, Bronfenbrenner illustrates how the ecological model has concentric systems of progressively more distant environmental relationships, from micro-to exo (or external)-to macro-system levels. That is, an individual's micro system level consists of a single, a dyad or people linked as pairs and/or triads of face-to-face interactions. For example, teachers and students are composed of dyads where interaction is done by two people. The meso-system is comprised of the interconnections that exist between the various face-to-face settings, such as the person's home, school or work place.

Then outer macro-system, according to Bronfenbrenner (1997) consists of the individual ethnicity and culture, that is, the larger social and political organization, belief system and lifestyle. Thus, Bronfenbrenner's inner "Russian doll" represents immediate settings which are embedded in childhood interactions as a child. These recollections are centered within one's own cultural experiences that, when nurtured help promote confidence, self-esteem and academic success. Conversely, if these cultural interactions are not encouraged or cultivated by those we value such as teachers and principals, our potential is diminished significantly.

Central to Bronfenbrenner's ecological paradigm is the notion of roles which, although grounded in the macro-system, are experienced in the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner adds that roles dictate expectations for individual behaviors in interpersonal interactions and predicts that the degree of super-ordination versus subordination and empowerment versus disempowerment, typify different relationships along the various systems which can significantly affect a person's view of him/herself within society. That is, a person's self esteem is deeply affected by his/her ecological paradigm. Therefore, if the ecological "me" is highly motivated throughout his/her interactions with others within proximal structures, he/she will have positive intellectual outcomes throughout life. On the other

hand, if these interactions are negatively impacted, harmful consequences are bound to happen. This finding is significant to the hypothesis presented in this paper as it provides a sound theoretical framework from which to base this study in a quantitative format.

Concisely, environmental contexts influence relationships and produce positive developmental outcomes. Hence, Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis states that as the level of proximal process is strengthened, indexes of competence will rise, and those of dysfunctional interactions will fall, and the value of heritability (or connectedness between family members and/or close relationships such as a teacher and a student) is significantly influenced.

Bronfenbrenner's methodology was composed of a quantitative study that included one hundred working mothers and their infants randomly assigned to four groups of 25 dyads each. Mothers in what the author called the responsive group were given a workbook about how to take care of their infants that stressed that young children learn most from the effects of their own behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By contrast, mothers of the stimulation groups received a workbook that emphasized the importance of providing their child a great variety of perceptual experiences, in other words to speak a lot to their infants.

Findings from Bronfenbrenner's in-home observations for a period of three months indicate detailed observations about how infants of mothers from the responsive group exhibited higher levels of exploratory behavior than any other group. These mothers were also more likely to favor a novel play toy to one that was already familiar. The babies also learned more quickly in a related task. Bronfenbrenner discovered that the most successful experimental treatment engaged subjects in activities that required initiative from mothers and reciprocal interactions with their environment. Moreover, this engagement was not short-lived, but continued on everyday over a period of weeks. According to the researchers, these results satisfy their



hypothesis in showing that randomly selected dyads of mothers and their infants in the responsive treatment group (or proximal process) exhibited a higher level of cognitive development.

Bonfenbrenner (1997) have led educators to focus on the importance of developmental social relationships for students across key micro systems such as home and school. These “micro- and macro systems” also play a significant role in the lives of poor and minority students and how these relationships assist learning (p.576). Furthermore, Bonfrenbrenner places equal value on the “interconnected influences” (p. 576) across home and school, which are critical for adolescents as they prepare to transition from intermediate grades to middle school and high school. Therefore “interconnectedness” is closely associated with the concept of personalismo as it provides a micro system from which adults and students can build trusting relationships that in educational settings can promote improved academic achievement.

Bonfrenbrenner’s ecological study (1994) presents an appropriate model for understanding how *personalismo*-centered experiences may contribute to Latino students’ academic success. This statement is supported by Bonfrenbrenner (1994) ecological model which places a large emphasis on the developmental impact of proximal interactions in poor environments as an index for predicting success or dysfunction during childhood. This finding has a significant impact on the cultural perspective about how the Latino family raises their children as proximal relationships, or closeness within the family, is a behavior that is evident across Latino families from all countries in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. Bonfrenbrenner (1994) confirms the Latino community expectations about schooling in United States. Parents of Latino children look for schools where the same level of personalismo practiced at home can be replicated in the schools (U. S. Census Special Report: *We the People*.

Hispanics, 2004). The following section will provide a fundamental understanding of Latino students' aspirations and what they hope to gain from schooling and their cultural meaning of education.

### **Latinos and Schooling**

The term "Latino" is used to describe an immigrant population because it is the term preferred by those who have migrated to the United States from Central and South American countries and speak Spanish as their native language. "Latino" is the umbrella term used for this group of people who come from many countries, with the largest migration coming from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. "Hispanic" is defined as any student whose home language is predominantly Spanish as measured by the Language Assessment Test on file in each school building. Students born in United States but who speak Spanish at home will be counted as "Hispanic" in this study. The term "Latino" is also used interchangeably as it also addresses students, descendants of Spanish-speaking parents who speak their native language at home and who may be English language learners (Falicov, 1998; U.S. Census, 2000).

Over the last several decades, the racial and ethnic composition of the United States has changed dramatically. Minorities are increasing their presence across all regional areas, urban as well as rural, and according to the U.S. Census 2000, will continue to escalate for the foreseeable future. The Latino population is driving these demographic transformations as one out of every eight residents of the United States is Latino. It is projected that by the year 2035, Latinos could account for one out of every five residents and by 2100, one in every three resident will be Latino.

According to the 2000 United States Census Data, the total U.S. population grew by 13% from 1900 to 2000 while the Latino population grew by 58%. The same census data reports that

as of 2003, Latinos made up 13% of the nation's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, the number of Latinos is likely to be under-represented throughout the United States since many Latino people did not participate in the 2000 census.

As a growing community, Latinos are also the largest non-dominant ethnic group in the public schools (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2008). Despite the disturbing body of research that reveals the importance of personalized instruction for Latino students as a vehicle that contributes to positive learning outcomes, efforts to promote similar research have been delayed and as such, the transition to middle school Latino students has suffered greatly (Midgley, Anderman & Hicks, 1995).

The Latino population explosion has had a significant impact not only on the demography of the U.S. population, but also in the increasing popularity of its culture as seen by the prevalent Hispanic restaurants across the nation, its acceptance of its varied and vibrant music that people from all over the world want to emulate. The ever-increasing Latin American presence in United States is evident not only in key regions such as Southern California, the Southwest, South Florida, New York and the Midwest, but also in rural America where increased Latino population rates have been noticed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2004) the increase in the buying power of the Latino population over the past eighteen years has had greater impact on America's economy, greater than White, African-American, American-Indian and Asian populations. Additionally, politicians increasingly recognize the political impact of the Latino population, especially with the group's concentration in the most populous states in the nation. While their greatest diversity presents challenges in understanding the rate and extent of its group into mainstream America, the Latino population compels educators, policy-makers, business people and politicians to better

understand how to effectively tap onto their needs and expectations to expand beyond traditional hub areas into mainstream USA.

In this section, we explore the social context in which young Latinos grow up in the United States, and how this social context shapes their ability to navigate successfully through school, the community, and college. It is important to note that most research on Latinos points out that this population is gravely disadvantaged and woven into their struggle, there are serious implications to their level of academic achievement in America. Worse, critics may note that the Latino culture may be to blame for their situation. Moreover, this paper aims to show that the abundant evidence of the resilience of the Latino people and its close-knit community, coupled with the element of *personalismo* are key factors to their substantial progress in academics over the last five years (NAEP, 2007).

In 1996, the impact of the Gates Foundation was evident in students' improvement in standardized tests results were in New York's Hispanic students scored at 28 per cent at or above basic levels. By 2002 and with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other philanthropic organizations, the New York Department of Education (DOE) closed many large non-performing high schools and created hundreds of smaller secondary schools. Also, over 75 percent of these small high schools were populated by minority students, 75 percent of whom are of Hispanic origin (NAEP, 2008). Following this reorganization of schools, the New York State Board of Regents, (2007 p.2) published a report that noted "New York's Hispanic students have made gains that exceed those of the nation."

Comparable national results showed 38 percent of students scoring at or above national levels in 1996 later increasing to 54 percent in 2007. However, the average scale score for New York's Hispanic students was 244 in 1996 (250 for the nation); in 2007 it was 264 (262 for the

nation) trailing White and Asian students by 25 points (NAEP, 2007). It is also important to note that New York is the largest public school system in the United States with over 1,200 schools and more than 1 million students enrolled each year (U. S. Department of Education, 2007).

In a recent report to the National Task Force on *Early Childhood Education for Hispanics*, Hernandez (2006) finds Hispanic children and their families exhibiting a number of positive attributes. This report, which incorporated into the census data, revealed that 77 percent of young Hispanic children (from birth to age 8) lived with two parents in 2000. The proportion ranges from 81 to 86 percent of young children in immigrant families from Mexico, Central and South America and Cuban. However, after the first generation, the proportion of children living with two parents decreases in families from those regions, and from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

Hernandez (2006) also reports that there are many challenges while serving Hispanic children and families due to the complexity of the various Hispanic groups that make up the Latino population. For example, individuals from a Mexican population group who do migrant work may have different issues; their level of literacy and familiarity with various community organizations might be different from Cubans, or Puerto Ricans. The same is true for other South American groups such as Guatemalans or San Salvadorians whose reason for coming to America varies depending on their educational background or economic status.

According to Hernandez, (2006) young Latino children for the most part live in families with strong work ethics and desire to succeed. The same study reports that ninety three percent of these children have fathers who worked during the year previous to the 2000 U.S. Census. Moreover, Latino children are approximately three times more likely than other groups to have additional working adults living in the home. According to Hernandez (2006) parents of young

Latino children on the average did not have high levels of formal education however they expressed an interest in enrolling their children in early education programs. Hernandez (2006) concludes by recommending that those who aim to provide supports to the Hispanic population should familiarize themselves with the particular cultural mores that separate one group from the other. Hernandez (2006) adds that those who work closely with Hispanic groups must engage in genuine personalization practice that allow for trust-building relationships (or *personalismo*). Moreover, a survey by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute confirms Hernandez' point and found that "more than 90 percent of Hispanic parents believe that it is very important or somewhat important for children to attend preschool" (Perez & Zarate, 2006).

Similarly, Garcia, Cuellar & Jensen (2006) conducted a study where dual language curriculum for Hispanic students was researched, showing many young Hispanic children are also prepared to become fully bilingual in Spanish and English. Given the social, cognitive, and economic benefits of bilingualism, schools would be prudent to provide Hispanic children with opportunities to maintain and develop their dual language proficiency. Garcia et al. (2006) focused on Hispanic children from infancy through the third grade, roughly 0-8 years of age, and the educational background of their teachers. This study also reviewed information on how important highly qualified preschool teachers are and whether their credentials for Pre-kindergarten impacted students' academic success. In their recommendations, the authors infer that establishing personalized learning environments (or *personalismo*) where pre-school children feel nurtured, as they experienced during their infancy while being cared for by their mothers, may influence their pre-school academic outcomes.

The Garcia et al. (2006) seven-year longitudinal report also reveals that Hispanic children, on average, achieve at a much lower level from kindergarten forward than the non-

Hispanic white majority and Asian Americans. Thus one of the most important educational challenges for U.S. is to increase the percentage of Hispanic children who enter kindergarten “ready” for school. The researchers conclude that one of the key findings of this study centers on the element of personalization and cultural sensitivity.

In Chicago, the 2009 NAEP average score of fourth grade students was 202. This was lower than the average score of 210 in large urban communities. Also, the 2009 score gap between students in Chicago at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile and students at the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile was 49 points. This performance gap was not significantly different from that of 2002 (48 points).

The results from student groups in 2009 showed males at 41 percentage at/above “Basic” and 14 points at/above “Proficient” while females reached 50 points at/above “Basic” and 18 points at/above “Proficient.” The same report looks at the main ethnic groups and shows White students with 74 point at/above “Basic” and 41 points at/above “Proficient” then, African-American students scored 36 points at/above “Basic” and 10 points at/above “Proficient” while Latinos scored 47 points at/above “Basic” and 15 points at/above “Proficient” followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders with 78 points at/above “Basic” and 46 points at/above “Proficient.” That is, in 2009, Latino students had an average score of 25 points lower than that of White students and 31 points lower than Asian/Pacific Islander students (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Educational Science (NAEP), 2002-2009 Reading Assessment).

The above NAEP 2009 reports substantiate the need to consider other options when working with the Latino population. Still, in spite of the substantial data about the benefits of SLCs, urban districts across the country continue to build factory-like buildings and the achievement gap between Latinos and their White and Asian counterparts continues to widen. It is important to note that in New York, after a careful reorganization of large schools converted

into smaller learning communities, Latino students who were the second largest population enrolled in New York public schools (21.3%) showed significant gains (NAEP, 2009).

### **The Latino Family**

For Latinos the concept of family extends beyond the nuclear structure as we know it, and can expand to a network of friends, neighbors and even organizations. The word network when used in this form means a support system that enables Latinos to address a variety of problems or crises that may occur. When this happens, these networks of extended family members, friends and neighbors provide support during times of need. Vega (1990) finds that members of the Latino community enjoy large extended family networks that serve a variety of functions. Some of the functions extend from on-going visiting and similar exchange of care and affection, to more involved relationships where family members purposely live in near proximity to each other in order to enable the family relationship to remain strong.

In general, the concept of family, or *familism*, helps the family overcome the difficulties that occur throughout life away from the mother land (Delgado, 1998). Garcia-Prieto (1998) concurs and reports that within the concept of family, *motherhood* is also an important goal for many Latino women who believe that a mother is expected to sacrifice for her children and take care of the elderly relatives. Likewise, in his national study of Latino families, Falicov (1998) agrees with Garcia-Prieto and adds that within the Mexican community, the primary goal of marriage is to have children hence motherhood becomes a special role for Latino women.

In a later study, Skrogrand, Hatch, & Singh, (2004) report that Latino men and women share the decision-making process within the family structure, but different roles were clearly obvious for women. The same study adds that Latino families talk through issues and discuss problems until they come to a decision. This process of communicating is passed through the



children and as such, it allows children to partake in the family as important stakeholders where they have a voice (Skogrand, et al. 2004).

These findings are significant indicators to issues or personalization that are expected by the Latino family at the educational level and one that is sought by parents as they enroll their children in public schools across the nation (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004).

### **Family and School Communications**

Critical to student success is home-school communication. The University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) has conducted several studies about building family-school relationships to promote achievement and as Roderick & Stone (1998) report, too often “Hispanic parents feel the least able to support their children’s schooling and express the greatest interest in programs that provide information and basic supports” (p. 2).

Subsequently, there is some good news in the Roderick et al. (1998) study where they report that as a result of the need to improve parental participation in schooling particularly from Latino families more attention has been focused on the need to make schools more personal and academically focused environments. When the authors compared the 1994 teachers’ surveys with those obtained in 1997, they found that teachers reported better communications and more positive relationships with parents than they did in 1994.

In a later study Stevens (2008) in conjunction with the CCSR confirms the growth of parental participation within the last decade and clearly articulates parental participation as one of the key factors that are closely related to “bolstering student achievement” (p. 4). This report is one of many locally and nationally recognized studies that list indicators of success within small high schools to be closely aligned to *personalismo* or “collaborative relationships” (p. 15).

We will re-visit the CCSR (2008) study in a later portion of this paper as we develop the concept of *personalismo* which is embedded within the structure of small learning communities.

The following section presents information about The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative (NSRII, 2005) which was a multi-state initiative that developed a set of indicators at the state level to track results from birth through age 8 (second grade). The goal of this study was for states to use school readiness as indicators that would inform public policy about decisions and tracking progress in meeting important goals for young children.

### **Latino Parent Perceptions about Schooling**

A 1999, U. S. Department of Education study examined parental involvement reporting no differences in the percentage of Hispanic and Black students whose parents participating in general meetings and school events, acting as volunteers, or serving on a committee. Two years later, a similar report was conducted reporting “parents’ involvement in their child’s education is part of the connection between school and home, and it is often related to parent’s income level” (NCES, 2001 p. 17). However, all the Latino family percentages were lower than those of White students’ parents (NCES, 2001). This is a troubling data which according to Bracey & Smith (2000) “impacts student achievement” (p. 15) as parents do not feel connected to their child’s school and are not actively involved in school events. The lack of home-school connection coupled with poverty issues will be further discussed in the following section.

Later, Pew Survey (2004) findings show that in spite of the negative press public schooling receives, Latinos appeared distinctly optimistic about public education in the U.S. This is true despite the achievement gap that existed in the early 2000s as well as the high school dropout rates and low levels of college completion showing Latinos trailing their White, Asian and African-American counterparts. While 60% of native-born Latinos expressed the

importance of a college degree, 77% of those surveyed indicated the cost of tuition is the number one barrier why college is not a reality for them and the same number indicated the need to seek work takes priority over higher education. The same report finds 58% of Latinos feel they are receiving a “poor high school education” (Pew, 2004 p. 36) and as such, it impedes them from achieving the required college entrance test score.

In the fall of 2006, Latino student accounted for 60% of the total growth in public school enrollments within a period of fifteen years. There are now approximately 10 million Latino students in the nation’s kindergarten through twelve grade public schools which make up about one-in-five public school students in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

The Latino Policy Forum (2010) reveals that one in three Latino parents in Illinois can find a preschool slot for his or her child. This means that the majority of Latino students ready for pre-school stays at home until they turn five or six years of age. As a result, the learning gap widens as children enter kindergarten. Furthermore, this situation exacerbates as findings from a recent study show “one in four Illinois children under the age of 5 is Latino, and one-in-three babies born in the Chicago region has a Latino parent – statistics that have dramatic implications for early childhood and bilingual education in Illinois.” The same study reports that, across Illinois, nearly 20 percent of Illinois kindergartners are ELLs, and that number jumps to 36 percent in Chicago (Latino Policy Forum, 2010 p. 1).

Regarding socio economic levels for Latino populations, Pew Report (2008) concurs with a an earlier study conducted by Bracey, et al., (2000) and reports that the median household income of Latino families with children enrolled in public schools is \$40,248 which compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts, whose average annual income is \$60,372 presents an

alarming economic disparity, placing “foreign-born Latino families at the 35% poverty rate” in United States (p.13).

### ***Personalismo in the Health Field***

Marin (1989) examined the concept of *personalismo* within the health care system and noted that although there are important socio-demographic differences among ethnic groups (i.e. country of origin, educational attainment, and acculturation level) Latinos seem to share core cultural values that differentiate them from other groups. The researchers in this field have found that “to be successful with Hispanics, for example, health communications messages need to consider the following Hispanic/Latino values: ‘

- familism’ (the significance of the family to the individual),
- ‘collectivism’ (the importance of friends and extended family in helping to solve problems),
- ‘simpatia’ (the need for smooth interpersonal relationships in which criticism and confrontation are discouraged),
- ‘personalismo’ (the preference for relationships with members of the in-group),
- ‘respeto’ (the need to maintain one’s personal integrity and allow for face-saving strategies), and
- ‘power distance’ (certain persons, such as the powerful, the elderly, and the educated, should be treated with special differences” (Marin, 1989 p. 167).

Additionally, Johnson & Delgado, (1989 p. 9) medical research indicates that the aforementioned cultural beliefs and the “the importance of family among Hispanics” versus “superficial references to family” encourage the identification of powerful images and messages that can activate positive behaviors directly linked to prevention goals (p. 9). Moreover, several

researchers within the health field have expressed an interest in the need to increase communications within ethnic communities as a vehicle to improve patient health and have coined the title of “trusted messenger” as the person who is trusted by the community and who is familiar with the people with whom he or she communicates (p. 9).

Education and the health field are closely related as each provides critical services to the family and as such, personalized care can contribute to improved patient outcomes (Delgado, 1995). This statement is supported by Iberty Gedeon, a well-known psychologist from the Mattie Rhoades Center in Kansas City, Missouri where a state-wide study on Cultural Competency and Mental Health in the Hispanic Community of Jackson County, Missouri was conducted. In this report, Gedeon (2003) defines *personalismo* as a way to relate a relevant personal life experience, to show empathy or share ideas on how to cope with a problem (Mattie Rhodes Center, 2003).

Given the topic of relevancy to personal life, physicians then examined issues of miscommunication which can occur due to cultural differences in the communication styles between Latino patients and non-Latino health care providers. Moreover, the Mattie Rhodes, (2003) research shows, medical communication in the U. S. can seem impersonal and uncaring, and health care providers may seem to be more interested in facts about patients rather than in building trusting relationships. Gedeon (2003) states that,

“In graduate school we were taught not to get too personal or involved with the lives of your clients-don’t tell them too much about yourself, don’t accept gifts, decline invitations, don’t hug, etc., that doesn’t work with Hispanic people. If I can relate a relevant personal life experience to show that I am empathetic to my client’s situation or share ideas about how to cope with a problem, I did it!” (p. 23).

Gedeon (2003) adds that “in order for a therapist to be successful when working with Hispanic clients they must be willing to be less detached and more personal” (p. 23). Therefore, in an effort to maximize efficiency within the health care institutions generally lack of *personalismo* negatively impacts the Latino community as they seek health care supports (National Alliance for Hispanic Health, 1995).

Health researchers also have noted that Latinos traditionally turn to their families and communities for help and advice. They prefer to deal with health problems by consulting those with whom they have developed personal relationships over time, people who know their life situations and problems and who are perceived by the seeker of care to have genuine interest in the total person. Here, the element of *personalismo* is noted as an important component for Latino patients (Delgado, 1995) hence family education is a vital means for making a “connection” about how their children should be educated. Consequently, school administrators can model these practices in order to provide students with the same caring and nurturing settings in schools where minority students are enrolled. Thus, *personalismo* has the potential “to pre-empt Hispanics from seeking professional care from institutions that have not served them well and are not trusted” (Delgado, 1995).

The concept of the “trusted messenger” is further developed by Delgado (1995) who provides a demographic profile of the Hispanic patient along with a description of some critical health issues for Hispanic communities followed by a discussion of the misconceptions that exist and act as a barrier to meeting the health needs of Hispanic populations. The author concludes that in order to understand how pervasive the influence of culture is in health care, we must put ourselves in the place of someone who does not speak English but needs immediate medical assistance. Delgado (1995) also states that the reality is that in many clinics and hospitals there

are few Spanish speaking nurses or doctors who can clearly understand the patient. In addition, the climate of many hospitals is not conducive to promoting trust or relationships among the patient and the health care provider. These experiences confirm the need to establish a process whereby health care providers can learn more about their patient's cultural values and language which may impact their well-being and prognosis. Delgado (1995) whose review of the demographic and health status data of Hispanic communities, recommends that promotion programs for Hispanic communities should focus on specific community data in order to understand the impact of culture and language (cultural competency training and staffing), develop strong outreach programs and work in partnership with community-based organizations who understand the language and culture of the patients.

Delgado (1995) finds that Latino patients also place great value on familial relationships, considering them more important than status or material gains. Here, the element of *personalismo* is fundamental to Latino elderly patients (Delgado, 1995) and it is also important to Latino families as they seek to find effective interventions (American Psychological Association, 1993).

Moreover, Delgado (1995) states that “personalismo has the potential to pre-empt Hispanics from seeking professional care from institutions that have not serve them well and are not trusted” (p. 240). To further analyze this complex relationship, the Arizona Department of Health and Human Services and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau provided *promotoras* or trusted community members, to serve as a liaison between physicians and patients. These *promotoras* served as advocates or liaisons between the patient and health care providers. This special relationship between the *promotoras*, their patients and the physicians provided Spanish translations, clarification of medical concepts, and terminology for their patients. The

*promotoras* reached their clients in a non-traditional manner visiting homes, Laundromats, factories, churches, and shopping malls conducting health chats or “*platicas*” similar to the American workshop or seminar. In doing so, the *promotoras* built trust among the communities visited which allowed patients to utilize them as liaisons in when visiting their physician.

It is important to note that while Delgado (1995) was limited to Arizona Spanish speaking communities within the health field, it supports the hypothesis of this paper. Furthermore, findings from the Delgado study about the importance of *personalismo* may inform educators about the unique aspects of Latino populations, the kinds of situations faced by Latino youth, cultural considerations, and existing community institutions that can assist school leaders in learning how to make genuine cultural connections that promote academic achievement.

Delgado (1995) concludes by stating that in order to meet the needs of Hispanic communities, health promotion programs must target the specific community they seek to serve. Hence, if educators want to improve the academic gap that exists among the Latino student population, they should learn more about their students’ language and cultural values. Based on these findings, educators just as health care providers are finding, should focus on specific community data, such as cultural competency training and staffing, in order to develop strong outreach components. These outreach programs can serve as advisory boards who act as educational advocates that understand the cultural needs of the population. Each of these efforts is related to the others, and is all necessary according to Delgado (1995) to improve the delivery of preventive health care (and education) to Hispanics.

The Delgado (1995) findings in the health field and its relation to *personalismo* not only confirm the need to personalized the learning processes of Latinos students, but are a significant dynamic that may serve as the catalyst for improved communications with Latino students. Also,



given the aforementioned research, whether in the educational world, the health field or in socio-cultural experiments, *personalismo* is seen as a significant agent in the way people of certain collectivist cultures see the world and adapt to society. Moreover, these are pivotal findings that support the need to further examine *personalismo* in a larger scale.

A significant finding from the literature is the relationship between *personalismo* in the health care profession and *personalismo* in the educational field. These findings are significant to this paper as both fields deal with trust-building-relationships necessary to provide necessary services. As a result, this paper includes the perspective of physicians and health care providers that confirm the need for a more personalized model for improved patient communication and diagnosis that can be replicated at the school level in order to narrow the achievement gap of Latino students.

A subsequent study generated by a group of physicians interested in how patients reacted when they were treated with dignity and respect by service providers was conducted by Beach, Sugarman, Johnson, Arbelaez, & Cooper (2005). The researchers used a survey-weighted logistic regression analysis to evaluate independent associations between 2 measures of respect (involvement in decisions and treatment with dignity and respect) and patient outcomes (satisfaction, adherence, and receipt of optimal preventive care). Beach et al. (2005) calculated adjusted probabilities of the outcomes and performed stratified analyses to examine results across racial/ethnic groups. This report showed a direct relationship to improved diagnosis. In addition, it showed that while adjusting for demographic characteristics, the probability of reporting a high level of satisfaction was higher for those treated with dignity and respect versus those not treated with dignity and respect (0.70 vs 0.38,  $P < .001$ ) and for those involved in, versus not involved in, decisions (0.70 vs 0.39,  $P < .001$ ). These associations were consistent

across all racial/ethnic groups. However, in the case of adherence, the study data suggested that being treated with dignity and respect (traits of *personalismo*) might be more important to racial/ethnic minorities than it is to whites. These findings are significant to this paper as it confirms the hypothesis.

Consequently, the Beach et al. (2005) findings are noteworthy because in the health field, the modern concept of respect is synonymous to autonomy, which inadequately captures the notion of dignity. Conversely, in the educational field, personalization is an expectation as educators are expected to establish bonds with their students which according to Cotton (2001), may not take place in large urban schools as personalization strategies suffer given the large enrollments and limited staffing.

Research also suggests that there is a need within the health field, to expand the definition of respect, not to negate the importance of respecting autonomy (Delgado, 2005). In addition, Beach et al. (2005) add that their findings have significant implications for practicing clinicians, educators, researchers, and medical ethicists who deal with patients as well as students, particularly those of minority groups, and whose cultural needs are not being adequately addressed.

The Beach et al. (2005) study concludes by emphasizing the difference between having respect for autonomy and respect for persons is not the same. They add that further research is needed in order to adequately identify the proper concept that includes respect and dignity. We then hypothesize that the binding concept that connects patients with physicians and educators with students may be *personalismo* as it provides all stakeholders with a process whereby relationship-building is nurtured among all participants thus influencing improved health outcomes as well as academic achievement. This hypothesis is validated in an earlier

study conducted by Cotton (2001). Consequently the importance for educators and health care providers to work toward cultural competence and cultural proficiency with the population they are caring for is a priority.

### **Equity and Latino Interactions**

Triandis, McCusker, Betancourt, Iwao, Leung, Salazar, Stiadi, Sinha, Touzard and Zalenski (1985) explored the concept of equity in a study where they examined how various ethnic groups apply *collectivism*. Collectivism is defined as the individual not being an end to himself but as a tool to serve the ends of the group (Triandis et al., 1985). Additionally, the researchers used a quantitative stepwise multiple regression method utilized by including five hundred questionnaires, measuring various demographic variables (SES, urban residence, occupation, age, gender, English fluency, overseas experience, family size and educational level). The questionnaires were distributed through 13 different school systems across the island of Sri Lanka. Parents of school age children completed the survey and returned it as agreed. There were 438 valid respondents which constituted an overall 88% rate. This sample was made up of 52% female, with a mean age of 44.9 years. Proportional racial and religious representation was achieved, thus representing an exceptionally wide range of economic, geographic, caste, occupational, and educational backgrounds.

Triandis et al. (1985) note that Latinos are one of the groups directly associated with collectivism as they thrive in environments where there are high levels of interactions with multiple generations and members of the community. The findings in the Triandis et al. (1985) study showed a greater differentiation of social behavior across group boundaries than does showing traits of individualism. In other words, among collectivists, social behavior within group members tends toward higher levels of association, subordination, and intimacy, while in

the individualist group members it tends toward higher levels of treatment. Hence *Personalismo* is deeply rooted within collectivism and as such, expected at the school level by many Latino families (Triandis et al. 1985). Also, according to Triandis (1985) social relationships will be enduring and relatively simple in collectivistic cultures, whereas, in individualistic cultures, the relationships will be more complex and temporary. Also, collectivistic societies place a greater emphasis on large groups, while individualistic societies will place a greater emphasis on smaller groups, where flexibility and privacy are valued.

Social behavior is also more intense and interdependent in collectivistic cultures, and more distant and detached in individualistic ones (Bond, 1986). Furthermore, embedded in the Bond (1986) study is the element of *personalismo*, prevalent in collectivistic societies such as the Hispanic culture, where inter personal interactions are an intricate part of everyday activities. This significant finding provides a sound framework for this study. This study helps us hypothesize that Latino students enrolled in schools where elements of *personalismo* are significantly evident will achieve positive outcomes in state standardized tests. (p. 16).

### **Small Learning Communities**

Since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the idea of small schools and small learning communities (SLCs) re-emerged as a possibility for struggling high schools and low achieving elementary schools. Over the last twenty five years, most research has consistently found small schools outperforming large ones through making notable improvements in student achievement (Howley, 1994; Lee and Smith, 1995; Stiefel et al., 2000), and in academic equity (Howley et al., 2000; Steifel et al., 2000), and safety (Klonsky & Klonsky, 1999).

Betancourt (1995) writes that small learning communities, due to their small structures and staff, significantly benefit Latino students build special closely-knit, high-quality

interpersonal associations with teachers. Raywid (1996) concurs and adds that smaller learning communities facilitate leaders with the ability to lead schools to improved outcomes and “teachers’ abilities to build student skill and knowledge in important ways” (p. 66). She also adds that “downsizing may be necessary to school’s ability to effectively initiate the changes essential to improvement” (p. 51).

Cotton (1996), a Northwest Regional Education Laboratory researcher who surveyed more than a hundred school-size studies, found that over half the research finds no difference between the achievement levels of students in large and small schools, including small alternative schools. However, Cotton (1996) finds student achievement in small schools to be superior to that in large schools but none of the research finds large schools superior to small schools. This dilemma continues to haunt educators as small schools seem to be especially effective for marginalized and low-achieving students.

Cotton (1996) also finds that structurally, small schools provide rich opportunities for exploring the kind of reforms that educational research recommends. Closer interaction among staff tends to encourage creativity which is the creation for authentic learning experiences, and assignments tailored to students’ individual learning styles and interests. As a result, school-within-schools (SWS) where the goal is no more than 600 students in a learning community (Gregory, 2001) have emerged particularly in high schools, thus allowing students and teachers to work in smaller, nurturing and caring environment where adults get to know students in a deeper sense and interact in a more personalized manner (Somerville, 1998).

In a later study, Cotton (2001) reviews literature about small learning communities and shares her findings stemming from articles, journal and current research. In her report, Cotton (2001) states that in spite of the successes of the small-school movement such as those seen in New York and Chicago, the importance of small schools and its bearing on the academic achievement of minority students has not been sufficiently recognized by policy makers. She adds that nationwide, the push for “one size-fits-all” curricula and similar modes of instruction continues to run counter to the individualized approaches valued in small schools.

When defining small schools, Cotton (2001) concurs with Meier (1998) and offers an operational rather than numerical perspective when she defines small schools as “small enough for faculty members to sit around a table and iron things (such as standards) out, for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time” (p. 86). Cotton (2001) also adds that a “key element for success” (p. 21) is personalization and knowing the students via teacher collaboration. Lear (2001) agrees with Cotton (2001) and states that “high personalization follows closely after autonomy as a key requirement” (p. 2).

Cotton (2001); Fine & Somerville (1998) and Raywid (1996) have promoted the advantages of Small Learning Communities (SLCs) on students and teachers. In spite of their vast contributions to the study of small schools, there is still a need to further investigate what specific curricular, cultural and organizational factors; prevalent in many small schools, may contribute to the academic success of Latino students. Moreover, the phrase “small is not enough” coined by Fine & Somerville (1998) creates a sense of urgency for educators to continue to seek for the right construct that can demonstrate how to best address the needs of

Latino learners. Within this context, Lee & Smith (2002) raised concerns about whether research results on small schools can justifiably be used to endorse SLC programs. The authors agree that while there is evidence that points to the success of small schools and its improved academic outcomes, much less information is available on the results or implementation of SLCs since there are various curricular structures (over 21 types) and learning strategies (64 types) that may impact the success of these programs. Therefore, it is unclear as to what makes SLCs successful, so generalizing claims of their effectiveness needs to be further researched. Nevertheless, one can therefore add that *personalismo* may provide an added value of success that can gauge the already rich dialogue about small learning communities provided by nationally-prominent studies (Lee and Loeb, 2000).

### **Chicago and Small Learning Communities**

In Chicago, SLCs have surfaced as part of the Chicago Public High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) and the United States Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Program greatly funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation since 2001. As a result of this opportunity, 12 million dollars were awarded to large CPS high schools to support the conversion of 5 high schools (each with no more than 400 students each in grades 9-12), over a period of 5 years. This special grant was matched by \$6 million contribution from local Chicago foundations, and the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative was formed to guide this effort. This initiative was released via an RFP for CPS high schools that desired to be completely transformed into separate autonomous schools. Seven schools applied and 3 were chosen for the first round thus converting schools to open 4 small schools within their buildings over the next several years. By the 2002-03 school year a total of 5 new small

schools opened in these converting schools. By 2003, The U.S. Congress had appropriated \$142 million for the Smaller Learning Communities Program.

Four years later, one of the most significant quantitative studies about small learning communities was conducted by Lee & Friedkin (2007). Through an ANOVA analysis of multiple standardized data sets of 193 SLCs, the Lee & Friedkin (2007) study provides significant quantitative empirical data that supports this paper. In addition, the authors conclude that based on their findings regarding personalized learning structures, educators may be able to incorporate *personalismo* as an indicator of success, particularly for Latino and marginalized students. In this particular study, Lee et al. (2007) “affirm the effectiveness” of small learning communities as compared to large schools in term of student achievement and “overwhelmingly” confirm their valuable impact on the improved academic outcomes of Latino students (Lee et al, 2007 p. 262).

The Lee & Friedkin (2007) study gives added reliability and validity to this paper as it provides a sound statistical methodology to the analysis of data collected from 193 High Schools across the nation from 2002 to 2004. Secondly, Lee & Friedkin (2007) also provides significant empirical validity as it closely examined 193 small-learning-communities (SLCs), investigating the key issues behind their academic success, providing this paper with a sound quantitative basis from SLCs across 30 states. We will later discuss the methodology of Lee & Friedkin (2007). However, we feel this national quantitative study provides a reliable and pragmatic basis to this paper as we explore the effects of *personalismo* within two small urban schools and the academic achievement of their largest student populations composed of Latino students.



The Chicago experience brought the newly-created SLCs at the high school level where elements of *personalismo* were evident as the cross-disciplinary teams seek to provide integrated thematic curriculum that area culturally meaningful and engaging. In these SLC's, students work in small teams under the guidance of teachers who are facilitators as well as knowledgeable about the needs of the students they teach. SLC schools have been identified as the agent for achievement, especially for Latino students whose culture values, smaller, more personal settings that foster trust and respect as the basis for learning and engaging activities that motivate students to learn (Stevens, 2008). Stevens writes, "these conditions, evident in small schools show that in environments where teacher collaboration and common instructional focus in monitored by a focused leader, the work environment is more likely to raise student achievement and improve instruction" (Stevens, 2008, p. 17). Stevens (2008) will be further discussed in the methodology part of this paper as he presents a unique quantitative and reliable study conducted around the concept of small school structures and personalized learning.

The newly-created SLCs emerged to eliminate the racial disparity and the achievement gap that existed in prior generations. By definition, SLCs refer to an 'individualized learning unit within a larger school setting where students and teachers are scheduled together and have a common area of the larger building where classes meet regularly" (Sparger, 2005 p.9). The federal government, seeing SLCs as a new way to impact the achievement gap, provided \$275 million to schools across the nation from 2000 to 2004. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation quickly followed, funding similar programs with \$650 million. As a result of these substantial funding resources, there have been over 1500 SLCs created nation wide and the numbers continue to increase even during the present difficult economic times.

*The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR, 2008)* about small schools and personalized learning environments find that “providing students with personalized academic and social supports also appears to be important for student achievement, as three of the four schools in their study (2008) had strong student course performance” (p. 3). However, the CCSR also makes an important observation that “personalized student support may facilitate improvement” but it (personalization) “may not be essential for schools to raise student achievement...in cases where leadership and professional community are absent” (CCSR et al. p. 12).

The following year, CCSR published “Building Strong Schools: The Importance of Relationships, Organization, and Culture” where Director, John Easton addressed Chicago Public School leaders at an administrators conference in February 2009. Easton indicated that the way to increase the graduation rates, improve grades, and raise test scores is by working with elementary and secondary schools to improve student preparation and improve the high school experience by providing student with meaningful and trusting teacher-student relationships. This observation is supported by data from an earlier research (CCSR, 2008) in which 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, where there were strong indicators of classroom *personalismo*, with fewer absences (2.8 days versus 10-15 days) and fewer failing grades. A second CCSR report (2009) shows that in schools with high levels of *personalismo* teachers and students reported a low level of “sense of disorder” which increased with external crime evident in the school community and neighborhoods surrounding the school building. This data is also evident at the small high school levels.

Both CCSR (2008, 2009) studies make a parallel testimony to this paper as the variables (sound leadership, coherent curriculum and nurturing environments) are essential

elements of *personalismo* that are closely embedded within the daily practices and pedagogy of effective schools as a possible elucidation to improved student achievement, supporting the hypothesis. Thus, this paper offers the following framework and necessary actions. First, *personalismo* coupled with a sound leadership and a focused instructional base can produce significant improvement in student achievement (Delgado, 1995). Secondly, collaborative planning combined with effective leadership and focused instructional support best meet the needs of Latino students (Sebring, 2006). Thirdly, there is an evident urgency to institutionalize an ethic of *personalismo* in all schools to transcend the boundaries that currently exist between Latino students and their counterparts to create a social condition and relationships that are aligned to the students' cultural values (De Jesus and Anthrop-Gonzalez, 2006). These conditions, according to De Jesus et al. (2006) can inspire marginalized minority students to improve academic outcomes and reduce the achievement gap.

### **Chicago's Commitment to Small Learning Communities**

During the last twenty year, Chicago Public Schools officials have demonstrated commitment to small schools and its advancement particularly in the high school setting. With the support of the Gates Foundation, we have seen high schools reinvent themselves into Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) where collaborative teacher teams work with students, parents and community members.

Chicago has also seen an increase in the design of new Charter Schools where they maintain a medium to small student enrollment (less than 500 students) which provides a personalized school environment. While there is much more to improve, particularly at the elementary school level, there have been genuine efforts to improve the concept of small

schools. However, this paper proposes that in order to succeed at the elementary level, administrators, legislators and educators will need to look into how *personalismo* can be truly embedded into the professional development practices. This statement is reinforced by Howley et al. (2000), where the study confirms that cultural awareness and sensitivity to students' learning styles and values must be woven into the school's pedagogy. This is a critical component missing in the current scenario which for the sake of our students, needs to be revisited (Cotton, 2001).

The *Bank Street Report* (2000) where Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak & Powell (2002) collaborated on a groundbreaking report, is another significant study that supports personalized learning structures which examined 150 small schools from 1997 through 1999. As part of a two-year study divided in three parts, the *Bank Street* study built a database that allowed them to identify small schools and separate them from the larger system. Second, they looked at a variety of indicators of school performance, such as dropout rate, absenteeism, and standardized test performance. Using data collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), the authors constructed a quantitative database from small schools that allowed the researchers to make comparisons between the 1997 and 1999 between different types of small schools and the larger system. This database contained information about the demographic profiles of new schools, such as racial composition, percentage of special education students, and the socio-economic status (SES) of the neighborhoods from which the students came. The quantitative analysis focused on small schools founded between 1990 and 1997 and tracked their progress through 1999. The third part of the study included an ethnographic analysis of a set of eight small schools in order to clearly understand what is actually taking place inside these structures.

The *Bank Street Report* (2000) focused on one overarching question: “What is the relationship between small schools and student academic achievement?” (p. 5). Achievement was broadly defined as “consisting of three parts: student attachment, student persistence, and student performance” (p. 18). The authors agreed that in order to improve student outcomes, a school needs to first engage its students. The Bank Street findings show significant correlation between small schools and academic outcomes ranging from improved attendance that showed small schools with attendance rates “4-5 more days of school per semester than students attending the average high school” (p. 19).

Another important finding in the *Bank Street* study included course failure rates. Here, 40.9% of students attending small schools showed failing grades whereas 54.8% of students attending the larger schools received failing grades. Retention rates showed similar results as only 16.9 % of students enrolled in schools within schools (SWS) were retained versus 26.3% of students attending large schools being retained. Additionally, the Bank Street study showed students in SWS achieving significantly higher grade point averages (2.11) than their larger school peers (1.98).

Fine et al. (2000) authors of the *The Bank Street Report* found several commonalities in their study that are significant to this paper. Their recommendations include three basic steps that emerge as the basis for improved academic outcomes, particularly for minority students. First, for funders, there is a need to provide the necessary funding for state and local initiatives that benefits and challenges the needs of small schools (Bank Street et al, 2000). That is, funders can facilitate networks of schools that can learn from one another and provide direct support to new schools, as they need all kinds of resources if they are both innovative and more rigorous (Bank Street, et al, 2000). Second, for districts, there is a need for smaller schools to receive

waivers that release them from conflicting district policies. Additionally, schools with large Latino and/or minority student populations should be freed from policies requiring a particular staffing formula or curricular approach until such time as the school has demonstrated that its own approach is not working. Thirdly, current research points to the need to redesign professional development supports that are framed on the small school philosophy where *personalismo* is an essential part of the instructional strategies (Cohen, 1986). Hence, small schools provide a structure where *personalismo* is embedded within the school's philosophy, its practices and expectations from all stakeholders. Overall, The Bank Street (2000) findings are pivotal to this paper as they speak to effective practices necessary for small learning communities to succeed.

### **Trust, Hope and Respect**

Elements of trust, hope and respect are evident in many small learning communities (Fine et al. (2000). Throughout this paper, we define small schools as having enrollments which limit elementary schools to no more than 400 students and high schools to 600 as they seek to maintain a personalized setting that fosters trusting relationships between students and teachers (Cotton, 1996). According to a local study conducted by *The Consortium on Chicago School Research* (CCSR) found that schools with fewer than 350 students do better in many areas, including school safety, classroom behavior, school leadership, parent involvement, positive school-community relations and trust among faculty members (The Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1992-1996).

As one of the pioneers of small schools, Meier (1996 pp. 12-14) cites seven key reasons why schools of 300 to 400 work best and are more conducive to learning:

- GOVERNANCE. There is easier communication when the whole staff can meet regularly in a small school setting.
- RESPECT. When students and teachers get to know each other, there is a sense of common respect which serves as a common ground for improved learning.
- SIMPLICITY. Less bureaucracy makes it easier to individualized instruction.
- SAFETY. Strangers are easily spotted and teachers can quickly respond to security issues, frustration and any stressor that may affect focused instruction/learning.
- PARENT INVOLVEMENT. Parents are more likely to form alliances with teachers who know their child and genuinely care about their well-being and academic progress.
- ACCOUNTABILITY. No one needs bureaucratic data to find out how a student is doing when working in a small school. Teachers have clear and simple information on what students need and are able to articulate this with the principals and parents.
- BELONGING. Every student, not just the academic and the athletic stars, are part of the community that contains caring adults.

In reporting these conclusions, researchers are careful to point out that positive results are found even when variables other than size—student attributes, staff characteristics, time-on-task, etc.—are held constant (Eberts, Kehoe, and Stone 1982, 27; Fowler & Walberg 1992). Since many small schools are rural schools, investigators have also wondered if it might be the *ruralness*—rather than the smallness—of these schools that is beneficial to students; research shows that smallness is beneficial, regardless of the setting of the small school. Walberg writes, “...even discounting the positive effects of rural location, smaller high schools yielded greater achievement and years of attained education after high school. Thus smaller schools showed

“long-range effects, independent of rural advantages” (Walberg, 1992 p. 47). A second report finds that one of the advantages of safety where smaller school size is consistently related to stronger and safer school communities (Franklin & Crone, 1992; Zane, 1994).

In a later study, Deborah Meier shares her experience with youngsters in East Harlem were seriously marginalized and in great need of caring learning structures. In her quest to provide students with the required nurturing settings, Meier set out to create what was later called the “small school movement” which ignited educators across the nation to replicate her school models, as numerous urban districts were experiencing the same impersonal environments in large, factory-like school buildings where she states “big school buildings are mistakes that are hard to undo, but fortunately, big buildings can house small schools” (Meier, 2008). As a veteran small school principal and the voice of small schools across the country, Deborah Meier (1997), offers an operational definition of small schools:

“It helps if schools are of a reasonable size, small enough for faculty members to sit around a table and iron things (such as standards) out, for everyone to be known well by everyone else, and for schools and families to collaborate face-to-face over time... small enough so that children belong to the same community as the adults in their lives instead of being abandoned in adult-less subcultures... small enough to feel safe and be safe... small enough so that phony data can easily be detected by any interested participant. Small enough so that the people most involved can never say they weren’t consulted” (p. 194).

Given the current state of safety in our schools nationwide, the data supports the need for educators and policy makers to consider small learning structures as an option for students. Additionally, data from a 1998 report from the Department of Education reports that “1 out of 3



schools with 1,000 students or more reported incidents of serious violence such as armed assault, gang fight and rape (NCES, 1998).

Another advantage of small learning communities is the relationships formed between teachers and students which significantly impact the level of personalismo in schools. In small school settings, teachers are known to have closer relationships with their students (Ancess, 2004). Ancess, an associate director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST) finds small schools work because they allow close personal relationships between kids and teachers, kids and kids, and teachers and teachers. In this report, Ancess (2004) describes five components critical to the success of new schools and provides a clear vision of personalismo as we try to operationalize it. These are:

- 1) vision,
- 2) organizational structure,
- 3) perseverance to implement the vision,
- 4) commitment to staff, parents and students and
- 5) sophisticated understanding of the local education bureaucracy, and financial resources.

### **Leadership in Small Learning Communities**

Raywid (1977) finds that in small learning communities collaborative and organizational leadership has a direct affect on academic achievement. In this setting, every member of the staff is vital to the effective function of the organization. Additionally, Raywid adds that in small schools everyone is needed and expected to collaborate in various school-related activities.

Bryk & Driscoll, (1988) found that there are three common practices to effective small schools: The first and the most significant is school size. Secondly, an organizational structure

led by a collaborative curriculum leader departing significantly from traditional leadership models. Third, is a setting that operates as a community rather than a bureaucracy. Here, school leaders work collaboratively with all stakeholders while addressing the needs of all students, using a distributive leadership model. This important finding is revisited in the Discussion portion of this study as our findings from schools A and B concur with Bryk & Discoll (1988).

Meir (1995) and Blanchard (1999) write that school leadership impacts student achievement and it is a vital indicator of school efficacy. The authors add that leadership (which is expected to be provided not only by the school principal but by teachers) determines whether the staff sees their job primarily as a mere service or as professionals who help contribute to build thinkers rather than laborers. Blanchard (1999) adds that, “an effective leader will make it a priority to help his or her people produce good results in two ways: 1) make sure people know what their goals are, and 2) do everything possible to support, encourage, and coach them to accomplish those goals” (p. 7).

In small learning communities, leadership is collaborative. Teachers are empowered to lead grade level meetings and to work with the building principal on a regular basis. Given the small school setting where everyone feels comfortable with their peers and administrators, less time is wasted on logistics because there is shared leadership. Teachers are aware of their responsibilities and administrators have a linear relationship with the staff where there is a constant communication between the two groups thus enabling them to have a clear understanding of goals and expectations. In addition, effective leaders also help determine how teachers are grouped to facilitate curriculum planning (Cotton, 2001).

Although it has been documented through the literature review that Latino students succeed in a supportive social environment, which is an important precondition for productive

schooling, this does not guarantee positive academic outcomes (Gewert, 2001; Wasley, 2000). However, Meier (2006) points out that having a visionary leader that provides a cohesive curriculum supported by focused and collaborative planning, supported by parents, enables learners the ability to succeed.

### **Public Schools and School Size**

At the local level, while there is much room for improvement, many Chicago Public Schools administrators continue to look at innovative ways to reduce school size in spite of the physical and fiscal challenges that may impede a large school from attaining *personalismo*. In the past decade, large high schools have made an effort to reduce school size to accommodate for personalization. Presently, there are over 250 schools within schools and small schools within the Chicago Public School system whose philosophy is centered around personalized learning structures where marginalized students seem to thrive. However, elementary schools have not been targeted for personalization at the same level as high schools and as a result a large number of large elementary schools continue to see student enrollment of 1,200 to 1,500. Given the current fiscal crisis where district #299 (Chicago) is experiencing deficits of \$600 million, school size and classroom size will most likely be affected as well as the concept of *personalismo*.

In Chicago, some of the initiatives in the area of personalization include the reorganization of large schools into smaller settings such as freshmen academies that focus on supporting incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders at the high school level, school-within-schools at the high school level, forming charter schools within larger public school buildings and creating pods. The latter model provides personalized supports for each grade level where an assigned administrator or teacher leader works with grade small level teams as they plan curriculum and work closely with

student groups. These pseudo-SLCs are prevalent in large high schools whose membership range from 1,000 to 3,500 students.

In addition, across the nation there is an effort to reduce class size whenever funding allows and to focus on quality teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction. Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) states that developing academically responsive classrooms is important for improved outcomes in all school settings. In fact, this kind of personalization causes teachers and students to try various roads to differentiation and in doing so, students learn to reflect on their learning and it causes teachers to reflect on their teaching strategies. Collectively, they help make teaching and learning an engaging experience that is purposeful and rigorous as students learn to question while teachers become facilitators Tomlinson (1999).

Another key factor found in many small schools, explains Tomlinson (1999, p. 4) is the need for teachers “to develop an alternative approach to instructional planning beyond covering the text or creating activities that students will like.” In these special small school settings, students explore key generalizations or principles, varied cultures, shared common elements, beliefs and values and in doing so, they learn to conceptualize learning versus memorizing facts. These personalized strategies help all students, particularly Latino learners, to improve meta-cognitive skills that will allow them to visualize difficult concepts. The task is differentiated in several ways as teachers create centers and interest groups that fuel student conversations and engaging activities (Tomlinson, 1998).

Tomlinson (1998) also notes that “the journey to successfully differentiated or personalized classrooms will succeed only if we carefully take the first step-ensuring a foundation of best-practice curriculum and instruction” (p.8). In addition, personalized settings supported by Tomlinson’s research, represent forms of *personalismo*-like approaches that have

been found to be significantly instrumental in the improved learning not only of marginalized students but all students, as it addressed the individual needs of the learner while maximizing best instructional strategies.

Another feature of small schools and their relationship to *personalismo* exists in the premise of size in relation to collaboration, relationship-building and partnerships between communities and schools, all prominent in the practices of small schools. These interactions are intricate component of *personalismo* as they provide a vehicle for building trusting relationships that filter through the classroom setting. This statement is echoed by The National Middle School Association (NMSA) that lists six significant advantages of small schools which hold “personalization” or *personalismo* at the crux of its success:

- 1) Increased student performance
- 2) Reduction in the achievement gap and dropout rate
- 3) Positive school climate, including safer schools, more active student engagement, fewer disciplinary infractions, and less truancy
- 4) A more personalized learning environment
- 5) Greater parent involvement and satisfaction
- 6) Cost efficiency

Nationally, in spite of the aforementioned strategies to combat isolation of students in large school buildings, by the end of the 1990’s many urban school areas across the nation struggled with high drop-out rates, low attendance at the elementary level, increased violence, low academic levels, low levels of student engagement, and inequitable standards mainly in areas where children of color attend school (Bank Street, 2000). Presently, these issues continue to challenge educators and policy makers as the average size of many urban community

elementary schools in this country continues to range between 1,000 to 1,500 students and in high schools where student enrollment can add up to 3,000. Moreover, in a recent Pew Hispanic Center study, Latinos (56%) attend the nations' largest public high schools (Pew, 2005). The same study reports that Hispanic teens are more likely than African American and Whites to attend public high schools that have the most students, the highest concentration of poor students and highest student-teacher ratios. In addition, nationally there was a 24 percent increase in the number of Latino freshmen in postsecondary institutions in 2001 compared with 1996. Among four-year colleges, Latino freshmen enrollment increased by 29 percent over the same period and in two-year colleges it increased by 14 percent. However, despite the Hispanic gains, the gap between Whites and Hispanics in four year college enrollment continues to widen. For example in California, a 9 point gap in 1996 widened to 16 point in 2001 and is expected to continue to widen exponentially annually.

The Pew Report (2005) report shows findings that conclude with a poignant reality. This reality points to Latino students lagging behind in college readiness standards and as such chasing a moving target that is accelerating before them. This factor, coupled with the majority of Latino students being enrolled in large urban schools (NCES, 2007, pp. 28-32) limits their ability to establish personalized learning structures that can facilitate learning at an optimal level.

Additionally, by the 2010 NCES Common Core of Data (CCD) report shows large numbers of African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students enrolled in large urban schools. The report further lists the percentage distribution of elementary and secondary students by race, ethnicity and locale showing, "47% of Black and 45% of Hispanic students enrolled in large urban schools, while 10% of Asian/Pacific Islanders were enrolled in rural areas, and 36% of White students were concentrated in suburban communities." (p. 30). This

disproportionate number of children of color enrolled in large urban schools contradicts the theory presented in this study supported by Meier (1995, 2002) and Wasley et al. (2000).

### **Challenges of Small Schools**

A quantitative study conducted by Friedkin and Necochea (1988) utilized data gathered by the state of California's Department of Education (California Assessment Program) as part of its school census in school districts from 1983-84 academic year. A regression analysis was utilized using data which included SES, academic achievement of students from third, sixth, eighth and twelfth grades. Analysis by grade level allows for assessment of the reliability of findings across various types of academic settings and student populations at different stages of maturity and academic development.

Friedkin and Necochea (1998) include empirical support for a new theory about small schools and the relationship between the size and performance of school systems. The theory predicts that "the strength and direction of the relationship depend on the socioeconomic status (SES) of the school systems." The prediction is supported with data from the California Assessment Program on both schools and districts. Friedkin and Necochea (1988) found that "as the SES of a school system goes up, the association between the size and performance of a school goes from negative to positive." Friedkin and Necochea (1988) also found that "the negative association among low SES school systems is much stronger in magnitude than the positive association among high SES school systems. Consequently, it appears that school system size has strong negative effects on performance that are eliminated, but not strongly reversed, in high SES settings" (pp. 237-249).

While Friedkin and Necochea (1988) assert their support for small school settings, they can not justly assert that large, low SES school systems ought to be broken into smaller units nor

are they ready to promote that opportunities for economies of scale might be best pursued among school systems that are relatively high in SES in light of their finding which states that size alone has no negative consequences on performance in such school systems. The authors add that future studies on the effectiveness of small schools as they relate to personalized structures, will need to address the “intervening conditions that presumably link variations in system size to various performance outcomes...best pursued among low SES school systems where these total effects appear to be most pronounced” (p. 248). This recommendation is critical to this paper as it validates its purpose and focus on the importance of *personalismo* within urban school structures.

Lee and Smith (1996) note that savings projected by proponents of school consolidation have not materialized. Instead of long-assumed economics of scale, they discovered “dis-economics,” or penalties of scale (p. 207). The authors note that large schools need more layers of support and administrative staff to handle the increased bureaucratic demands. It is also important to consider how cost-per-student is calculated. Standard operating costs are usually computed by dividing the total amount spent by the number of students enrolled. However, when cost-effectiveness judgments are based instead on the figure derived by dividing dollars spent by the number of students who actually graduate, the results are entirely different. Fowler (1992) and others found that although large schools offer greater curricular variety, only a small percentage of students take advantage of advanced and alternative classes.

As previously noted in this paper, there have been numerous studies that have examined the relation between school size and student achievement. Most studies show that students in small schools are at least as successful as their counterparts in larger schools (Eberts, Kehoe, & Stone, & Martellano, 1989, Fowler, 1992, Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Guthrie, 1979; Melnick et



al., 1987). However a reticent exception was found by Friedkin & Necochea (1988) where they observed that the size-achievement relationship is a contingent one: negative in low socio-economic status (SES) schools and positive in high SES schools. The study notes that even in the latter case, its negative effect was substantial.

Another important study was the *Bank Street Report* by Wasley, Fine, King, Powell, Holland, Gladden and Mosak (2000) whose findings reveal teachers in small schools are concerned about teacher burnout which leads to teacher turnover. The authors reveal that teacher turnover is another challenge often seen in small schools. In many cases, staff members who support the mission and vision of small schools are specially selected; therefore replacing them becomes a serious issue for administrators. The reports states that in small schools, when one faculty member leaves, the rest of the staff feel the void left by one teacher who had multiple responsibilities within the school. Furthermore, while looking for a replacement, strain is placed on other teachers who are asked to take extra responsibilities such as team leaders, student advocates, committee chair, recruiting and training new teachers.

Other factors that concern teachers in small school include, staff fragility, participation in consensus decision-making, concerns about school-within-schools and teacher collegiality and limited budget. All these factors are crucial in order to lead effective schools (Holland, 2002).

While most of the small school research points to small learning communities as the setting for improved academic achievement, many researchers agree that size alone is not sufficient. Researchers who have studied the benefits of small schools have stressed that by reducing school size students are not guaranteed improved achievement. Instead, they have concluded that school size should be seen as having an indirect effect on student learning and added that school size acts as a facilitator for other desirable practices. In other words, other

school characteristics that tend to promote increased student learning such as collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability-are simply easier to implement in small schools (Anness & Ort, 2001; Gladden, 1998; Lear, 2000; Meier, 1998; Raywid, 1999; Wasley, 2000).

Anness and Ort (2001, p. 8) reveal that “strong, trusting, personal bonds between students and faculty and strong faculty affiliation with schools’ educational vision” (all traits of *personalismo*) were found to be indicators of success to even in schools where disadvantaged, low-achieving minority students were enrolled. This finding is significant to this paper as it validates our hypothesis with empirical data as the Anness & Ort (2001) study, conducted in New York’s poorest communities included both qualitative as well as quantitative methods that addressed questions about the structures of small high schools and students’ graduation rate. The project included a large and low performing high school with a graduation rate of 36% and a similarly low performing high school whose graduation rate in 1992 was at 23%. The New York Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) created 11 new high schools in separate smaller spaces in hopes to address the declining graduation rates. The researchers wanted to investigate what practices or strategies contribute to improved graduation rates. Findings indicated significant improvement in attendance and graduation rate.

Anness & Ort (2001) credit their findings to strong teacher-student bonds made possible by the small communities setting which allowed for trusting interactions between and among teachers and students. Anness & Ort (2001) conclude by noting that as a result of the high level of personalization, evident in the smaller learning communities which formed part of the restructured high schools, college admission rates rose to an all-time high of 75%.

## Effects of School Size and Achievement

The preponderance of information noted in this chapter about *personalismo* within small learning communities is a significant factor as it consistently supports the hypothesis. This section reviews several national studies that examine small schools and its impact on student academic achievement.

In a large-scale quantitative analysis, Howley, Strange & Bickel (1994 & 1996) studied the influences related to achievement and attainment (e.g., high school dropout rates), and noted significant evidence in small schools where impoverished communities were served. Also noted are several structural features such as grade-span and the number of grades in the building that had been reported to bear on the issue of size. Four years later, the authors conducted a third study with the same focus on small schools and its benefits and concluded that school size was a significant factor in reducing the negative effects of poverty by 20 to 70%, and usually 30-50% depending on grade level Howley et al. (2000).

Another significant quantitative study that supports Howley et al (1994 & 1996) was *The Matthew Project*, conducted by the Washington School Research Center (WSRC) included four additional replications by Brickel & Howley (1999) including data from six states (Arkansas, California, Georgia, Ohio, Texas and West Virginia) to reflect the range of schooling conditions in the United States that include ethnicity, locale, poverty, region, and school district organization. The findings indicate that overall, “smaller districts and smaller schools demonstrate greater achievement equity” (Bickel & Howley, 1999, p.7).

Bickel & Howley (1999) utilized a Hierarchical Linear Modeling through the HLM software program. This quantitative approach attempted to specify the joint relationships and

cross-level interactions of two structural levels both at the district level as well as at the state level where they could accurately identify academic performance.

In *The Matthew Project* (1999) Howley examines the influence of district size, school size and socioeconomic status on student achievement in Washington. The method applied by the WSRC (2002) study comprised of a hierarchical linear modeling which included plotting the relationship between school size and achievement data for districts across the state including data of percentiles of poverty and district size on math and reading both at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade grades. While the interactions were not significant, they were in the expected direction as the tendency for larger schools to be more beneficial in more affluent districts than in less affluent communities.

A significant finding from the WSCR study was the relationship between school size and poverty. In their findings, data indicated that scores in math and reading showed highly significant negative relationships with districts of poverty versus those in affluent communities. However, math and reading reports showed no significant relationships with school size. This is an important finding for this particular study in that *personalismo* was not tested on either the later study conducted by Brickel and Howley (2000) nor the Washington School Research Center (2000) study; thus the importance of this study can provide further data about the importance of personalized school structures that may impact academic achievement of marginalized students.

One of the major goals for the WSRC study was to determine whether the cross level interactions (school x district level) between size and socioeconomic status (SES) as reported by Bickel and Howley (2000) would replicate within the Washington study. Also, the WSRC focused on whether the data from Washington would replicate two major patterns reported in the

Bickel and Howley study. The first pattern showed that larger schools are beneficial within affluent communities whereas smaller schools seem to benefit less affluent communities. The second pattern showed that the “achievement cost” associated with less affluent schools is greater in large districts (i.e. the negative association between school level poverty and achievement is stronger and larger district). Hence, the first pattern would require an interaction between school size and district level SES while the second pattern would require an interaction between school level SES and district size. Studies such as those noted above suggest that small schools may provide an achievement advantage for minority, low-socioeconomic populations, but not for affluent students, who may fare better in larger schools (Howley, 1996; Bickel and Howley, 2000). We highlight this finding pivotal to this paper as it supports the hypothesis at a national level.

The WSRC (2002) study confirms earlier findings and state that small “schools appear to have the greatest equity effects, while large districts are the most detrimental” (p. 14). This is also confirmed by a wide difference of achievement rates (WASL scores) where students enrolled in small schools outperformed their counterparts where “small schools in small districts explain the least amount of variance (13% to 24% of the variance in achievement associated with poverty), but the largest amount of variance is in large districts irrespective of school size (41% to 54%)” (p. 14).

The WSRC along with Bickel and Howley (2000) confirm previous findings from Cotton (1996); Raywid (1999) and Lee and Loeb (2000) about how achievement being more equitable in smaller school structures where personalized learning strategies take place. Secondly, the numerous national studies noted in this paper are central to the findings as its quantitative methodology mirrors those conducted by national organizations. The methodology used also

supports this paper's quantitative model, where a series of t-tests will provide a strong statistical procedure from which to analyze the two sample schools. The variance will measure the use of *personalismo*-like behaviors which varies within the structures of our two sample schools.

### **Latino Students and the Middle School Experience**

As previously noted, in the late 1990's, Gladden (1998) provides a sound context for this paper as it reviewed contemporary research on secondary schools that explore the relationship between school size and schools' social environment such as student discipline, disorder, violence dropout rates, student attendance, teacher/student attachment to school/peers, teacher satisfaction, stakeholder relationships and student academic achievement. This study reviewed 54 articles which noted the relevancy to education and small schools from 1988 to 1998. In his study, Gladden (1998) provides sizeable and all-inclusive indicators of success which extends beyond Bonfrenbrenner (1993) previously noted in this paper.

Gladden (1998) also included a comprehensive examination of empirical research published in the ERIC database that noted the relationship between school size and educational outcomes. Furthermore, other relevant nationally-recognized articles were indentified including governmental reports and reports issued by organizations not replicated in ERIC.

Moreover, Gladden proposes that the following structures must be in place in order to reap academic achievement at the high school level:

- maximum enrollment of 500 students;
- heterogeneous mix of students that represent the local community;
- cohesive, self selected faculty led by a teacher-director;
- high degree of autonomy concerning issues involving curriculum, instruction, and assessment;

- coherent curricular or pedagogical focus that provides a continuous educational experience across a range of grades and,
- inclusive admissions policy that gives weight to student and parents' commitment to the school mission.

One of the findings in the Gladden study deals with the issue of the ideal size for a high school. Gladden (1998) indicates that while many advocates of small schools propose enrollment should not exceed 500 at the high school level, they fail to identify how the process should take place. Others recommend creating small high school communities that include a maximum of 500 students to increase students' and teachers' attachment toward their schools as it also reduces the feelings of alienation. The study concludes that the effect of school size is "assumed to be linear: decreasing enrollment from 2,000 to 1,500 students is assumed to have the same effect as reducing enrollment from 800 to 300" (Gladden, 1998 p. 115). Also examined in this reports were the effects on school size and social environment and student academic achievement. Gladden's findings were alarming as it confirmed previous theories noted throughout this paper that although school size may not directly affect student academic achievement, it may affect the environment of schools, and that environment affects students' academic outcomes. For example, in a small school students are closely involved in a variety of school extra-curricular activities and in turn, their academic achievement also improves (Howley & Huang, 1991). Therefore, while changes in school size may not *directly* affect academic outcomes, they may raise students' participation in school life, which then raises their achievement. Hence the level of personalization (*personalismo*) that exists in many small schools may be a contributing factor to student participation which impacts achievement.

Gladden (1998) finds that according to the linear theory utilized in the research, the optimum school size should try to maximize the social advantages of small schools to produce closer relationships between students and teachers while simultaneously minimizing the perceived economic disadvantages of smaller size schools such as limited materials, supplies, sports opportunities and course offerings. Additionally, it is important to note that the Gladden's recommendation closely align with the concept of *personalismo*.

Gladden (1998) concurs with Howley & Huang (1991) in areas dealing with violence and discipline infractions as small schools suspend lower number of students than larger schools. Gladden (1998) noted that overall, 9 out of 11 studies reviewed found a positive relationship between small school size and lower levels of violence, vandalism, and drug-abuse and student victimization. However, according a WestEd (2001) report, no studies have shown a significantly positive relationship between larger school size and lower levels of school violence and disorder.

Gladden (1998) also examined student attachment and attendance and found that research findings were inconsistent in the area of student attachment and building relationships. They suggest that school size alone is insufficient to improve students' general attachment and attitudes. Only one of the four large surveys reviewed found a relationship between school size and student attachment to their schools. Gladden (1998) adds that since there is a strong relationship between school size, attendance, and school disorder, one can not determine if there is a positive relationship attributed to school size alone and student attachment. As a whole, the general surveys suggested that school size has no effect on student's attachment to their school and academic attitudes. However, in a New York Schools evaluation system, students' rating of



their schools' social and academic environment were significantly higher in smaller schools, suggesting that students felt safer and therefore more apt to achieve in smaller school settings.

First, Gladden (1998) finds a consistent and often strong relationship between smaller schools, lower levels of alienation, and higher student engagement which promotes high academic outcomes. Second, smaller schools seem to lower alienation and increase, especially for "at risk" children's academic improvement. Third, small schools with a focused curriculum increase positive effects that improve academic outcomes. Fourth, decrease in school size fosters collegiality among administrators and faculty, builds collaboration between teachers, brings consensus-building practices to the forefront of school policy and builds relationships with parents and the greater community.

Finally, according to Gladden (1998) small schools show evidence of a significant relationship to student achievement in their ability to improve the academic performance of minority students and students with low socioeconomic backgrounds due to its high level of personalization. Moreover, small schools appear to have the strongest positive effect on outcomes such as the sense of community, focused curriculum, and teacher collaboration which have been identified by the Gladden report as key indicators of academic success.

Gladden (1998) concludes that the positive effects of focused schools seem to most benefit "at risk" students. He also adds that "school size alone, seems to be unrelated to students' satisfaction and attachment to their school. However small focused schools can significantly improve students' academic and social environment" (p.121). Gladden also adds that in reviewing the comprehensive literature from hundreds of national studies and numerous urban systems, the data suggests that the relationship between school size and students' social environment reveals four significant findings.

Two years later, the results of a groundbreaking report, *Turning Points 2000: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* strengthened the emerging middle school movement that recognized the importance of small learning communities in the middle school years. In the same report, the authors reveal that “large middle grades schools should be divided into smaller communities for learning so each will receive sustained individual attention” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. x).

In a later study conducted by *The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic American* (PACEEHA, 2003), the authors outlined numerous problems that currently exist which contribute to poor Latino student outcomes and possibly exacerbate issues Latinos face. The PACEEHA (2003) report finds an over-representation of Latino students in special education programs and notes the challenge that the U.S. Department of Education system faces in meeting their needs.

Some of the problems cited on the PACEEHA (2003) report include low societal expectations, weak cognitive language development due to poverty and transience, limited parental resources, lack of early-childhood education opportunities, and lack of community resources. This commission also documented that there are a lack of teachers who are properly prepared to teacher Latino students. The same study reports that one of the indicators of success for Latino students is positive teacher-student relationships. This indicator is directly embedded within the concept of *personalismo*.

### **Challenges for Latino Students**

Latino students are faced with many challenges as they try to achieve higher academic outcomes. One factor that confronts educators is how to improve instructional strategies that can reach all students. This challenge is even more severe for minority students whose achievement

gap continues to broaden despite many attempts made by school districts across the nation (2007-2008, NCES).

Lee & Loeb (2000) whose Chicago-based study focused on the effects on teachers' attitudes and student achievement, found that school size and its personalized settings has an influence on teacher's attitudes which significantly impact student's academic outcomes. Lee & Loeb (2000) examined 264 Chicago elementary schools (including large schools with 1,500 students or more, mid-size schools with 500-800 students and small schools with less than 500 students; all with significant low SES) and found that "the largest schools enroll fewer Black and more Hispanic students, whereas Black students are especially prevalent in middle-sized and small schools" (p. 16). The same study adds that "students in small schools are characterized by relatively higher levels of social advantage, at least in comparison to other students in Chicago schools" (p. 6). Hence, this researcher proposes that *personalismo*-based structures may be the concept that can bring together best practices and culturally-based experiences to produce higher academic outcomes for Latino students who for the most part enroll in larger low SES schools.

According to Ancess & Ort (2001) for the Latino child, academic challenges begin to emerge as they enter the primary grades and worsen by middle school, leaving very little chance to graduate from high school. In 2007 the Latino students dropout rate is 21.4 % (2007, NCES) and in 2008 dropped to 18.3 (2008, NCES). Additionally, research shows that Hispanic teens are more like than African-American and Whites to attend large public high schools, the highest concentration of poor students and highest student-teacher ratios, according to a Pew Hispanic Center (2005) analysis. This report found that more than half of Latinos (56%) attend the nation's largest high schools with enrollments of up to 3,000 students. The Pew report also

found that about 37 percent of Latinos attend 10 percent of schools with the highest student-teacher ratios.

Current research continues to show that the achievement gap is an enormously complex issue, as they too agree that there are no magic bullets. A recent study by the Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2009) showed that the average national performance for nine year old African-American students is roughly one standard deviation below the average performance of White students. This report notes Hispanic students showed a slight improvement but they continue to trail their White peers by 21 points as indicated in the 2009, NCES 8th grade Mathematics report where White students had a cut score of 289; African American students scored a 252 and Latino students reached a 268.

The Chicago Public Schools, 2009-2010 Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) composite report from grades 3<sup>rd</sup>-8th, which looks at students meeting standards, showed Latino students at 72.5%, African- American students at 59.4%, White with 86.4% and Asians at 91.4%, (CPS, 2009). This report reveals that the achievement gap continues to affect Latinos and African-American students. As schools prepare to receive the reports from the 2010-2011 ISAT, interim assessment data shows the achievement gap remains the same as Latinos and African-American students trail their White and Asians peers by 10-20 percentage points each year. Similar findings from our two sample schools are discussed in detail in chapter V.

### **A Culture of Caring**

A common denominator in the small schools and small learning communities models is the concept of “a culture of caring” which is synonymous to *personalismo*. One of the intellectuals who has made great contribution in exploring ways in which identity and context mold experiences of caring for Latina/o students is Angela Valenzuela (1999). In her book

*Subtractive Schooling: US Mexican Students and the Politics of Caring*, describes the ways in which traditional urban comprehensive high schools are structured formally and informally in ways that deprive Latina/o students of “important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (p. 25). Valenzuela (1999) analyzes how the “notions of caring’ (aesthetic vs. authentic) among teachers and students are rooted in schools and can fundamentally impact expectations about the nature of schooling” (p. 28).

Valenzuela (1999) provides a contextual framework to this paper as she illustrates how Latino family values may emphasize the importance of such social relationships for middle school Latino students. Given the potential importance of these key systems and their influence, it can be expected that social environmental influences can impact the outcome of its members through the nature and relationships that are formed in the school setting. These vital dynamics, which are forms of *personalismo*, inform the cultural construct of relationships as it supports the academic outcomes of Latino students.

In her compelling ethnographic story of regular track youth attending a comprehensive, virtually all-Mexican, inner-city high school in Houston, Texas, Valenzuela (1999) brings to light a framework for understanding the pattern of immigrant achievement and U.S.-born underachievement frequently noted in her research. Valenzuela argues that schools subtract resources from youth in two major ways: first they dismiss the definition of education and second, through assimilation-based policies and practices that minimize the child’s culture and language. A key consequence, Valenzuela adds, is the “erosion of students’ social capital evident in the absence of academically-oriented networks among acculturated, U.S.-born-youth” (p. 28). Throughout her book the concept of *personalismo*, while not spelled out, is absent in the students’ academic lives and as a result, negatively impacts Latino students.

Another recent study which supports the “culture of caring” and *personalismo* conducted by Balagna (2008), concurs with Valenzuela’s theory. Balagna indicates that Latino students had “strong preferences for teachers who were kind, lenient, and used active, engaging teaching methods” (p. 91). In addition, Balagna found similar studies that concurred and added, that while research has shown that a good teacher-student bond is important to Latinos and their success, half of Latino students report that their interactions with school personnel do not allow for a supportive relationship.

Balagna (2008) examined a large school district within the intermountain west. Teachers at four secondary schools composed of two middle schools and two junior high schools agreed to participate while using “Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders” (SSBD). This assessment is a three-stage multiple gating screening used for the treatment schools and the others as the control group. Students in the treatment schools who were identified by teachers via the SSBD were eligible to participate in a class titled, Achievement Plus. The Achievement Plus core curriculum contained several strategies and skills taught for the purpose of preventing more severe and future behavioral or emotional problems. The class specifically focused on self-management skills, emotional skills and social skills. Students identified as “at-risk” by their teachers were ranked by those same teachers from most to least at-risk students. Students not ranked by those same teachers were not included in further screening processes. Only those students who met or exceeded the normed cut-off scores of the secondary level of risk were eligible for the Achievement Plus program and the qualitative interviews.

Once all required permissions from parent were gathered, Balagna began to interview at-risk Latino students, their parents and teachers in the spring of 2005. The interviews were conducted in the language parents preferred English or Spanish. While building a trust-based

relationship between parents students and the researcher, Balagna interviewed fifteen students from sixth, eighth and ninth grades. In addition, in the school-wide screening of spring 2006, a total of 25 junior high (6th through 8<sup>th</sup> grades) Latino student were identified by their teachers via the SSBD criteria and twenty three agreed to partake in the second set of interviews.

Balagna (2006) data analysis followed a qualitative approach as it tried to interpret basic behavioral principles. These principals assumed that human action, as opposed to movement of a physical object, is inherently more meaningful to the student. It is interesting to point out that Bonfrenbrenner's theory of human development also agrees with this treatment as it yields more positive interactions between the student and his teacher. Balagna's study also points out that culture plays a large role in the meaning of behavior and problems that Latino student s face in school. He also adds that some of the problems which Latino students face in school may be partially caused by misunderstandings or educators lacking knowledge about life and world context of students (p. 47).

According to Balagna (2006) the interpretivist philosophy maintains the importance of context or culture when interpreting meaning. He also adds that "understanding the meaning of human actions entails the inclusion of the context under which the social actions occurred (p. 48). Hence, the importance of *personalismo* in schools where the majority of the student population are Latinos and whose family value system centers around *familismo* and *personalismo*-like behaviors is vital to the academic performance of the students.

The results of the Balagna (2006) study were grouped in themes which included topics such as peers, willingness to give individual attention, negative interactions, difficulty asserting need, adjusting in Middle School, and reciprocity. One of the main findings of the Balagna study showed that "parents of Latino students in the sample appeared to lack

involvement with their child's education attributed to parents' work schedules, or lack of educators' responsiveness to the cultural values and needs of Latino students" (p. 86).

Under the theme of social support and *personalismo*, Balagna (2006) showed that social support is a construct that appears to be congruent with *personalismo*. He also adds that while social support can produce outcomes that include academic competence, leadership, and adaptive skills, social support is also related to positive outcomes of at-risk students and buffers the effects of discrimination. In addition, social support can be a safeguard to Latinos yet, based on the results of the Balagna results, it appeared that Latinos' efforts to offer support to peers is seen as inappropriate in school systems built on Anglo-American values. Balagna (2006) indicates that significant negative correlations of social support include conduct problems, aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. In fact, the students in the Balagna (2006) study did not appear to be receiving as much social support as they would have liked, possibly contributing to escalating negative behaviors therefore explaining the effects of lack of social support exhibited by Latino at-risk students in the sample.

Balagna (2006) concludes that while these values are not mutually exclusive, each contribute to students' feeling of connectedness within the school setting. Balagna also notes that students may desire supportive (*personalismo*-like) relationships, especially from the predominant Caucasian culture, namely teachers and Caucasian peers. Hence, lack of *personalismo* among non-Latino peers could be a contributing factor in the chronic, discriminatory remarks that the majority of the sample participants revealed in their interviews (p. 88).

In a later study, Balagna (2008) concurs with Valenzuela (1999) and reports that building relationships is a vital component of *personalismo*. In the same report, Balagna (2008)



reveals that teachers tended to blame Latino's behavioral problems on the individual and Caucasians' behavioral problems on the environment. Moreover, there is vast research that supports that environmental factors like discrimination negatively affect Latinos and other minorities (Kessler, et al., 1999).

Additionally, Balagna (2008) reported students feeling angry, engaging in fights as a result of frequent disparaging remarks. These findings not only highlight that negative verbal remarks were prevalent, but also that such remarks were often out of the awareness of school personnel which further aggravated students thus making it less likely that teachers would see the entire context of students' unacceptable behaviors which may actually be culturally appropriate ways of coping. Balagna (2008) indicates that while Latino students need wide ranging support from their teachers, "it is perceived less favorably by many educators, yet these discriminatory perceptions are likely to significantly affect the teacher-student relationship and student outcomes" (Balagna, 2008, p. 88).

Balagna (2008) also examined the issue of teacher-student perception. These results were consistent with previous research where Howley (1991); Bonfrenbrenner (2005); Gladden (1998) and Cotton (1991 and 2001) reveal student problematic behavior decreases as Latinos receive teacher support and personalized instruction. Based on these studies and other similar literature discussed in this paper, it appears very unlikely that Latino students are consistently receiving the support they need in order to succeed in school.

The Balagna (2006 and 2008) findings are significant to this paper as it confirms the need to further examine the merit of *personalismo*, not just in small schools but in all kinds of schools where marginalized students are enrolled. It is also important to note that in the area of Latino cultural values, Balagna's study reveals findings that are incongruent with the values of

the predominant culture, which is inherent in the U.S. public school system. Here, the students appear to struggle when their surroundings were inconsistent with the traditional Latino values, some of which were evident in the students' behavior when students felt school staff did not care about them. Balagna concludes that, some of the students' descriptions of what they would like to see take place in schools seems to align with the definition of *personalismo*, *familismo* and *respeto*.

### **Systemic Initiatives and Personalismo**

According to Huffman & Lawrenz, (2004) despite public schools' commitment to small learning environments, there seems to be little to no organized information about what personalization implies for the daily lives of students and teachers as they inter-act and how do they achieve personalization much less how do they sustain it. The following studies provide another strong base for the need to further examine how *personalismo* may be the catalyst to Latino students' academic achievement as it examines how personalized structures help transform educational outcomes.

Huffman & Lawrenz' (2004) investigated the extend to which a State Systemic Initiative (SSI), a National Science Foundation program designated to improve science education across an entire state, implemented in the United States, could reform science education. Impacts were measures including teacher's instructional practices, personalized relationships with students and professional community, influence of SSI on school policy, external influences on science instruction, and family involvement. In addition, student's views on instructional practices, school-community and family involvement were measured.

A retrospective comparative design was used to collect survey data from 46 middle schools; 23 that had significant amounts of contact with the SSI and 23 matched schools that had

little to no contact with the SSI. The results suggested there were important differences favoring schools whose science teachers had participated in the SSI. Included were differences in the use of standards-based instruction, and external influences on science instruction and policy. No differences between the two groups were found for professional community or family involvement. For students, significant differences were only found for access to standard-based instruction. Results imply that SSI can help change specific aspects of the system, but broader impacts are difficult to achieve.

In a similarly important study, Chavkins, Gonzalez, & Rader (2000) examined how middle school students benefit from transitions or one-on-one communications during this important time of their developmental. For adolescents, such transitions or interconnectedness are just as difficult during this developmental time since teenagers depend on each other for peer support and look to adults for guidance, as they learn to navigate the early stages of adulthood.

Seven years later, Chavkins, Rivera-Mosquera, Phillips, Castelino, Martin, Mowbray & Dobran (2007) utilized quantitative data collected from 841 Latino middle school students to examine direct and indirect linkages of students' relationships with teachers, parents, and friends with students' outcomes. Structural equation models revealed that teacher support was associated with both student behavior and satisfaction with school and was indirectly associated with time spent on homework and grades. Parental support, friend support, friends' school behavior, and parental monitoring of educational issues were directly associated with student reports of teacher support and were indirectly linked to school behavior and satisfaction. Friend behavior at school also showed a significant direct association with student behavior, and parental education monitoring directly predicted student satisfaction with school.

Directions for future research and implications for school policy and programming mentioned the need for personalized learning structures as a means to improve academic outcomes. This major quantitative research also demonstrates the importance of parent and teacher support particularly for Latino students Chavkins et al. (2007) and the importance of instituting personalized frameworks in schools, especially in settings where minority students are the prominent group (p. 69).

### **Personalismo and “essential relationships”**

Meier (2002) states that, “the key building block of this relationship between student and teacher is trust” (p. 13). She also adds, “the more complex the learning, the more children need genuine adult company, and the more trusted the adults must be” (p. 13). In a later article, Meier (2006) who refers to personalized relationships as “the kind of company I want children to keep with adults is essential to learning” (p. 659). She adds that a non-negotiable function for public schools in United States should be to “strengthen our democracy” and to “examine all the issues that that affect the ability to do so” (p. 657). She also adds that students learn from adults and as such, we must provide them with a “robust” school community that provides a personalized setting conducive to rigorous academic practices and professional collaboration.

Meier (2006) adds that in the Latino culture, these “essential relationships” are the basis for establishing trust among home, the community and school as Latino parents expect their children to develop nurturing relationships with teachers and school personnel that will allow them to have positive interactions during their children schooling years. Moreover, the aforementioned studies bring to light several local and national research that examine small learning communities and the elements that are embedded within the concept of *personalismo*. These elements such as caring, respectful and nurturing environments, coupled with cohesive

leadership that support collaborative teaming have yield positive academic outcomes, especially in urban areas populated by marginalized student populations such as Latinos (Stevens, 2008).

Additionally, national studies such as Delgado (1995), Meier (1995), Cotton (1996), Gladden (1998), Lee & Loeb (2000), Ancess & Ort (2001), Lee & Friedkin (2007) and CHSRI (2008) concur that student achievement requires leaders to utilize a combination of effective instructional supports. School size has been identified by the above studies as a vital component of effective schooling. However, according to CSSRI (2008) reducing the achievement gap requires schools to simultaneously develop a combination of “strong professional community, deep principal leadership, and teacher influence” (p. 18).

More importantly, it is important to recognize the success of numerous small schools across the nation which, since the Meier years have provided marginalized urban students with a personalized structure. These structures have been indicators of success which, as personalismo-based processes, have helped schools improve attendance, reduce feelings of alienation and anonymity, increased teacher collaboration and allowed students to focus on learning thus resulting in improved academic outcomes nationwide (Duke, DeRoberto & Trautvetter, 2009).

Though not a perfect model, small schools offer Latino students a caring and nurturing environment which is highly valued by their culture. Based on the aforementioned studies on small schools and the concept of *personalismo*, which provide a foundation for learning, particularly for Latino students, it is reasonable to expect significant academic benefits that will result from efforts to create smaller learning communities in large urban areas where minority students reside.

### **Chapter III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

As noted in chapters I and II, a plethora of local and national studies conducted in numerous small schools, schools within schools and small high schools, findings demonstrate significant positive outcomes in student academic achievement, particularly within minority student populations.

A sampling group of two (2) elementary small schools, whose aggregate student population totals (n=712) was utilized by the researcher. The schools were randomly selected by the researcher as schools with the following structures and demographics: 1) small structures with <500 student membership, 2) >85% Latino student population, 3) Community schools (without any type of selective enrollment programs) and 4) Within the same community (i.e. CPS instructional area) and 5) with >85% free or reduced lunch rates.

In order to preserve the students' and schools' anonymity, all data was coded using school A and school B, followed by grade levels under each school code. Hence, as noted on table 3.2 the total number of students tested was n=402. The independent variables are the schools and the dependent variables are the grade levels. Additionally, it is important to note that the following populations are exempt from taking the ISAT test: 1) Kindergarten through second grade students and 2) ELLs with ACCESS composite score is <4.8. Additionally, we used classroom aggregate data from ISAT 2009 to 2010 reading and mathematics tests in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> excluding Pre K through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students. Following, Table 3.1 illustrates demographic data for schools A and B. The schools were selected at random, focusing only on the element of size and demographics.

Table 3.1

## Demographics of Schools A and B

	School A	School B
Enrollment	276	436
Racial Composition		
Hispanic	87%	86 %
African Amer.	9%	8.5%
White	3%	3%
American Ind.	1%	2.5%
Class Size	25	25
PK program	Full Day	Half Day
Mobility	20%	25%
Grades	PK-8 <sup>th</sup>	PK-8 <sup>th</sup>
Community School	YES	YES
Low Income	96%	97%
Special Needs	13%	14%
LEP	24%	26%
ELL	17%	25.3%
Probation Level	1	3 (Probation)
Student Attendance (09-10)	95%	94.7%
Teacher Attendance (09-10)	96%	95%
Teachers Average # yrs. Teaching	10.6	15

Table 3.2 illustrates the total number of students enrolled in schools A and B along with the students tested in 2009-2010 ISAT.

Table 3.2

Student population tested in ISAT 2009-2010

School	Enrollment	Number of Students Tested
A	276	159
B	436	244
Totals	712	402

The statistical analysis used in this test was a 2x6 model paired *t*-tests where six grade levels were paired (i.e. School A 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with School B 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; School A 4<sup>th</sup> grade with School B 4<sup>th</sup> grade etc.). The independent variables are the schools and the dependent variables are the grade levels.

### **Demographics of Schools A and B**

As noted on table 3.1 schools A and b share many common elements. Both schools are community schools with no selective enrollment programs. Each school is housed in relatively small to medium size buildings with an average of 25 students per classroom. Both schools are located in heavily-populated Latino communities in Chicago's Humboldt Park community.



Schools A and B are considered small schools by CPS standards, both with a membership of less than 500 students that service PK-8<sup>th</sup> grades. School A is a small school building by design with a membership of approximately 295 students. School B is housed in a larger building where in the past, student populations reached upwards of 1,000 as there were mobile units added on to the premises. However, due to recent gentrification, as many CPS schools have experienced membership declines to which school B is no exception and as a result, the building is now shared with a Charter school. School B has a membership of approximately 480 students all of whom live in the neighborhood.

Additionally, both schools have similar student demographics where Latinos make up 87% of the student population. Each school is located in the same Latino academic area under the supervision of a CPS-Chief Area Officer who serves as a sub- superintendent in a smaller district known as an area. Additionally, both schools have varying levels of *personalismo* as reported on the CPS “My Voice” (2010) survey report where respondents give their opinion about the various daily interactions between students and school staff.

Among the similarities, both schools have principals whose tenure average six to ten years and both include 96-97% low income families out of which 14-15% are enrolled in Special Education programs. School A has a 15.9% English Language Learner (ELL) population while school B has 25.3% ELLs.

As noted by the Chief Area Officer (CAO) assigned to schools A and B during the time of this research, School A principal is a long-time teacher who works closely with teachers, staff, parents, students and local community members evident in the way all stakeholders feel about the school and how they are appreciated, this is supported by the data reported in the “My Voice” Survey (2009). The CAO also reports that school A principal is actively involved in analyzing

student data at the classroom level and works with teacher teams as they plan for effective instructional strategies. School B principal works with the Local School Council and has close ties with the community and its leaders.

The overall racial composition of schools A and B are also similar. School A has 87% Latino students, and school B has 86% Latino students. Schools A and B have 8.5-9 % African American and approximately 3% White and an average of 2% American Indian students. The Free and Reduced Lunch report indicates school both schools with 88%+ of their students receiving free lunch. The average classroom size for schools A and B is 25.

### **School A**

School A received an “Excellent Standing Level 1” from Chicago Public Schools as part of the 2009-2010 Performance Policy report thus not on probation status. In addition, the same reports shows School A students with an overall 2010 performance of 91.3% in Reading, 90.7% in Mathematics, and 91.0% in Science. School A also met Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2010 where 77.5% or more of its students met or exceeded state standards.

The principal from school A was a classroom teacher in school A for many years and then became the Assistant Principal. She then was selected by the Local School Council as the principal and has been there for many years.

The 2010 School Improvement Plan for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA) lists areas of strengths that include having an extended day program, data teams, teacher collaboration, a “21<sup>st</sup> Century” Grants that makes School A, a “Community School” which keep school doors open to students several hours beyond the regularly scheduled hours. Some of the concerns are meeting the needs of Special Education students who have not shown as much

gains as the regular education population. A second concern is that the school can not provide extended program supports to NCLB students who are bussed.

### **Instructional Materials**

School A has chosen Harcourt “Story Time” as the Reading textbook series for Kindergarten through sixth grade and McDougal Littell as the Literature textbook for seventh and eighth grade. The Mathematics textbook series for Kindergarten through sixth grade is Scott Foresman (Pearson) and the seventh and eighth grade math textbook is Prentice Hall (Pearson). For Science, Kindergarten through sixth grade students follow Houghton Mifflin “Real Science” series while seventh and eighth grade students use McMillan “Glencoe Science” textbooks.

### **Partnerships**

School A has several partnerships that include several community partners, a local university that provides tutoring services and several performing arts organizations that support the Arts within the content area.

### **Instructional Staff Demographics**

School A has an average of 16 instructional staff plus the Principal and Assistant Principal. There are seven teachers with less than ten year experience, four ten to nineteen years and five with twenty or more years of experience. Out of the sixteen teachers, twelve are female and four are males.

**School B**

School B received a “Low Academic Standing Level 3” from Chicago Public Schools as part of the 2009-2010 Performance Policy report thus placing it on probation status. In addition, the same reports show School B students with an overall 2010 performance of 57.0% in Reading, 76.2% in Mathematics, and 47.3% in Science. As a result of this rating, School B did not meet Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2010. The principal from school B is serving her first four-year contract. The principal is also involved in the local community and is a student advocate with ties in the local community organizations.

The 2010 School Improvement Plan for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA) for School B lists areas of strengths that include school wide data analysis where teachers identify necessary interventions for struggling readings. However, the school identifies a weakness in the area of monitoring student portfolios and how to clearly align goals for students as the assessment data suggests more interventions are needed in Reading. A concern noted on the 2010 SIPAAA states that while there has been an increase of 5% in the number of students who feel safe in the school, there has been a decrease in their participation on extracurricular activities.

Some concerns noted on the 2010 SIPAAA from School B include a 25% mobility rate and 98% low income families where 25% of them are Second Language Learners. In addition, teachers absentee rate average 7.6 days per year. Additionally, there is a perception that parents are not able to provide basic skills supports at home since many of them are not English language speakers. In addition, School B has a large number of homeless families that add to their mobility rate thus causing a lack of consistency across grade levels. Also, many classrooms

had to be reorganized as a result of new students enrolling throughout the year. Some of the strengths noted by School B include having two Nationally Board Certified (NBC) teachers.

### **Instructional Materials**

School B has chosen Pearson District Wide Core Reading Materials (SCRMA) as part of the core reading program for grades K-5<sup>th</sup> and “Readers Journey” as the Literature textbook for sixth through eighth grade. The Mathematics textbook series for kindergarten through sixth grade is “Everyday Math” for K-5<sup>th</sup> grades and Connected Math for sixth through eighth grades. For Science, they have selected SEUP (Lab Aid) materials for sixth through eighth grade.

### **Partnerships**

School B has several partnerships that include numerous community partners, some of which provide after school supports, tutoring, coat donations, and self esteem-building programs. In addition, as part of the *CPS After School Program*, School B utilizes the assistance of four vendors who work closely with below level students on a daily basis.

### **Instructional Staff Demographics**

School B has an average of 25 instructional staff in addition to a Principal and an Assistant Principal. There are eleven teachers with less than ten year experience, seven with ten to nineteen years and eight with twenty or more years of experience. Out of the sixteen teachers, twelve are female and four are males. Also, out of the twenty seven teachers in school B, twenty five are females and two are males.

### **Racial / Gender Composition**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade student composition and demographics of school report indicates a slight gender difference between the two schools. School A has 95 Hispanic females (59%) and 64 Hispanic male students (40.3%) totaling 159 tested on the ISAT in FY 2010-11.

School B, the larger school, has 117 Hispanic females (48%) and 127 Hispanic males (52%) with a total student population of 244 tested on the ISAT for FY 2010-11.

### **Attendance for Schools A and B**

Student attendance reports indicate school A exceeding district averages (95%) by +2.5% with a 2010 attendance rate of 97.5% while school B has a 94.7% rate as of 2010. As noted in this report, school A has higher attendance of 97% for both, African American as well as Latino students, both exceeding District and Area rates since 2007-2008 school years. Both schools are community schools where students from the local community can enroll freely.

Teacher attendance in school A averages 96% while school B has 95% attendance. Both schools have averaged the same rate since 2008. Teacher experience varies as school A shows 10.7 years as the average while school B teachers have an average of 15 years experience. Teacher gender demographics vary significantly as school A has 75% female teachers and 25% male teachers while school B has 93% female teachers and 7% male teachers.

It is important to note that while the above variables contribute to a school's academic achievement, this paper will solely concentrate on ISAT 2009-2010 results, 2 paired *t*-test results and reports from the CPS "My Voice" Survey 2009-2010.

We therefore asked if there was statistical difference in standardized test results of two similarly small schools exhibiting varying levels of personalismo. The researcher assumed three possibilities with the first test being that there may be moderate variability of scores within each school. The second situation may show high variability and the third may show low variability. In order to test the significance between the two schools, we conducted an alpha level at .05. This meant that five times out of a hundred we found a statistically significant difference between the two schools even if there were none or by chance.

We also determined the degrees of freedom (*df*) for the test by including the total sum (number of students) from both schools minus 2. Given the alpha level, the *df*, the *t*-value and their significance, using a standard table of significance, we determined whether the *t*-value was large enough to be significant. We illustrate in chapter 4, findings of a statistically significant difference to conclude that the difference between the means of the two schools were different (even given the variability).

Consequently, the results of the *t*-tests can be considered reliable since responses variables were normally distributed, samples were independent, variances of populations were equal and the sample is a Simple Random Sample (SRS). Also, the population in which the two sample schools are drawn was normally distributed since each of the two schools in the sample enroll less than 500 students (small to medium size schools).

Secondly, each school is independent from each other thus allowing for independence of each case. Thirdly, homogeneity within the two schools provides a similar variance that is approximately equal. Hence the hypothesis was tested positive as the *t*-test yielded a normal distribution among the independent variables from each small school indicating a positive significant variance between small school's level of *personalismo* and student academic achievement on standardized tests. That is the Null hypothesis was rejected.

## Research Questions

The following questions guided this paper and allowed to determine if the concept of *personalismo* had a significant effect on the achievement of Latino students enrolled in small learning communities (SLCs). In order to understand how current academic challenges among the Latino student population may be addressed, the researcher will explore the following questions:

- Is there a statistically significant difference in the reading ISAT scores of Latino students enrolled in two small schools that exhibit varying levels of *personalismo*?
- Is there a statistically significant difference in the mathematics ISAT scores of Latino students enrolled in two small schools that exhibit varying levels of *personalismo*?
- What are the most important school structures and behaviors that provide personalized learning opportunities to Latino students?
- Do small learning communities contribute to closing the racial and cultural achievement gap among Latino students enrolled in small public schools?



## DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

### **Delimitations**

This study confines itself to analyzing quantitative information gathered from CPS data base sources. The focus is placed on hard disaggregate data to narrow the scope of the study on elements found in two small schools whose pedagogical practice center around the use of *personalismo*, a factor that is associated with improved academic outcomes of marginalized students, namely Latino students.

### **Limitations**

The purposive sampling procedure of only two small schools may decrease the generalization of findings. However, given the randomly identified schools and their findings per grade levels, we can identify with significance the impact on the academic achievement of Latino students attending both schools. We then utilized such findings to formulate a framework from which educators can further develop similar larger studies across the district. Such study should enhance the practices found in this paper associated with *personalismo* to positively effect teaching and learning across all schools.

Secondly, this paper has excluded the variety of curriculum materials and resources among the two sample schools use, thus limiting the study to the school structure and its socio-emotional practices exhibited via the concept of *personalismo*. Given the variety of curriculum resources and textbook series available to all schools, presently there is no quantifiable data that ranks textbook series and its correlation to positive academic outcomes.

Lastly, although findings from Lee & Friedkin (2007) find that school structure and its effect on academic achievement were found to be a significant factor for improved academic outcomes of marginalized students, we conclude this study with a statementn that warrants

further research at a larger scale. Such research may solicit further research about the concept of personalismo as a significant indicator of success that can make a significant difference in the academic performance of Latino students.

### **Current research findings**

Starting with the pioneering work of Meier (1995) in New York to a more recent report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2008) this paper has reviewed several quantitative and qualitative studies where the consensus points to one basic question: What size should a school be to optimize learning and teaching when serving low socioeconomic and Latino students? Lee and Loeb (2000); Lee and Friedkin (2007) and Stevens (2008) agree that the answer appears to indicate small learning communities better serve students of color.

Research indicates that in many small schools, where the majority of Latino students enrolled meet and/or exceed academic outcomes, feel connected to their teachers and peers and attend school at a 97% annual rate while students thrive academically (Cotton, 1996; Lee et al, 2007 CHRSI, 2008 and My Voice Survey, 2008-09). In these schools, there is evidence that the learning environments are conducive to personalized academic and social support to students and their cultural values (My Voice Survey, 2008-09). Additionally, indicators such as positive leadership, strong curriculum planning, and practices that are embedded in the concept of *personalismo* may contribute to improved learning among Latinos (Stevens, 2008).

The empirical data collected from Chicago Public Schools Department of Research, Evaluation and Accountability (REA) will include:

- Annual school wide and 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade aggregate data in reading and mathematics from the 2009-10 Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT).

- Benchmark aggregate grade data collected from the same CPS source in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> from Reading and Mathematics from Fall 2009 to Spring 2010.
- Illinois State Board of Education Annual *School Report Card* for 2008, and 2009.
- Other secondary research to be discussed in this paper will include CPS *My Voice* 08-09 parent, student and teacher surveys reports provided by CPS Research and Accountability Data Sources.

## HYPOTHESIS

**Hypothesis 1:** Paying attention to *personalismo*, when working in an elementary school setting that provides interpersonal closeness and connectedness between students and teachers may contribute significantly to improved ISAT scores in Latino students.

**Hypothesis 2:** Small elementary school settings provide interpersonal closeness and connectedness between students and teachers which may contribute to improved benchmark scores in Latino students.

**Hypothesis 3:** *Personalismo* provides an atmosphere of trust and respect where Latino students feel valued. This atmosphere contributes to Latino student academic outcomes and helps reduce the achievement gap.

The Null hypothesis will assume that the means of all groups are equal. We then propose that Latino students in Chicago Public Schools who are exposed to significant levels *personalismo* in their schools will perform higher on ISAT scores than students in these same grades who are not significantly exposed to *personalismo*.

### **Significant Research about Personalization**

Throughout the literature review, this paper has examined a series of significant research conducted during the last thirty years about small schools and small learning communities. Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a theoretical framework for considering aspects of positive proximal processes analogous to *personalismo* that overlaps and converge among individuals' micro- and macro-systems and experiences. The ecological model also facilitates the comparisons that are contained within this paper and adds validity to the quantitative study of four small schools that show evidence of *personalismo* in varying degrees.

We also examined how small academic settings are structured in a way that allow marginalized students with supports that helps personalize learning and achieve positive academic outcomes. These findings have brought the element of *personalismo* to the vanguard of educational discourse as a means to impact improved outcomes for minority students.

According to Meier (1995, 2000 & 2002); Lee and Friedkin (2007); Howley (1994); Raywid (1996); Cotton (1996); and Caldas (1993), Latino students learn best in schools that have high evidence of *personalismo* embedded within the curriculum. Stevens (2008) confirms these findings in his recent study about small learning high schools that personalize learning and states that personalized structures, found in small learning communities, may be the catalyst to the evident academic improvement cited by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, and much acclaimed CHRI report (2008).

This paper is guided and supported by Lee and Friedkin (2007) which proposed that school structure and its effect on academic achievement were found to be a significant factor for improved academic outcomes of marginalized students. In their concluding reports, the researchers noted that the effectiveness of an SLC structure on improving student achievement

tended to fall within the academic achievement academies and magnet programs where students tended to show increased outcomes versus those schools not implementing the special programs (p. 271).

Lee and Friedkin (2007) collected data from 193 schools using three different sources. First, primary information about the SLCs such as name, locale, district, structure, strategies, racial proportions, teacher-students ration, SLC grant period etc., was gathered from the Southwest Developmental Laboratory and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Another dataset used in the Lee and Friedkin (2007) report came from the Public School Ranking Dataset which provides substantial ranking data across the country. In addition, Lee and Friedkin (2007) analyzed student achievement data from 2002 to 2004 which was gathered and organized from compounded data sets by changing school rankings into quantified raking variables. From the conversion of school rankings, the researchers were able to identify how much progress each SLC school made on student achievement year by year. Then, the data on racial diversity was linked to the achievement data to test how much racially diverse schools improved in terms of student achievement. The hypothesis behind this decision was that “the more racially diverse schools make progress in student achievement, the more students of color in those schools experience gains in achievement” (p. 270).

In analyzing the dataset, Lee and Friedkin (2007) utilized repeated measures of ANOVA tests. First, in order to identify yearly progress in student achievement for SLC schools, a repeated method was employed. Then, an independent *t*-test and descriptive statistics were used to reveal the most effective SLC structures and strategies for improving academic achievement. Then, the relationship between the environment of the SLC school and student

achievement was investigated through the use of an ANOVA and post hoc analysis. The final test was racial achievement gap which examined correlations coefficients and repeated measures ANOVA.

Derived from this analysis, Lee and Friedkin (2007) concluded that from the 32 schools where Latinos represented the major ethnic group, there was significant yearly progress in student achievement,  $F(1.12, 34, 89) = 13.62, p < 0.01$ . This implies that Latino students are more likely to perform better academically in those SLC schools where large number of Latino students are enrolled. In other words, the high proportion of Latino students enrolled in SLC schools led to high academic outcomes among Latino students. Lee & Friedkin (2007) add that “predominantly Hispanic SLC schools on the average improved their state-wide ranking from top 31.5 per cent to top 33 per cent during 2002-3 and from top 33 per cent to top 43 per cent during 2003-4” (p.275).

Lee and Friedkin (2007) concur with Cotton (1996); Meier (1995); Lee and Smith (1996) and Wasley and Lear (2001) and assent that “small is better in narrowing the achievement gap” and agree with an earlier report from Wasley et al. (2001 p. 263). Additionally, much of the empirical evidence on SLCs show school size and the element of *personalismo*, which is embedded in SLCs models, to contribute toward improved academic outcomes of students of color, namely Latino students.

Another noteworthy finding from Lee and Friedkin (2007) fell under the area of adult advocate systems and teacher advisory systems where a significant student achievement was evident. This finding indicates that in schools where teacher collaboration and adult advocacy was the norm, student achievement was significantly increased versus those schools with low teacher collaboration and adult advocacy programs ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that in schools

where the existing of caring adults is significantly related to student achievement. Hence, *personalismo*-like practices may have contributed to improved academic outcomes.

Lee and Friedkin (2007) also found that SLCs adopting academic teaming, alternative scheduling, freshman transition activities and multi-year groupings showed lower achievement than SLC schools not adopting these strategies. In fact, according to Lee and Friedkin (2007) out of the “158 schools adopting these types of strategies, the majority of them showed same or lower academic increases” ( p. 272). Hence the mere grouping of staff, students, or programs may not yield improved academic outcomes.

In regards to the environment, those SLCs located in large urban areas (63 schools) lagged behind schools located in mid-sized cities (30 schools), sub-urban areas (64 schools), and small town or rural communities (11 schools) (p. 272). An important fact which merits mentioning is that most ethnic minority students tend to enroll in schools located in large central cities (Lee et al., 2002), and the achievement of ethnic minorities seem to lag behind versus that of their white counterparts who tend to enroll in schools located in suburban areas (p. 273). Consequently, the authors illustrate data which show Hispanic students enrolled in SLCs to have higher standard deviations and wider range of their proportion in SLC schools than those of Asian and Native American groups. This means that SLC schools involved in this study were likely to be dominated by one race or two particular races. Also, racial diversity of SLCs was 38.7, which indicates that most of these schools were, in effect, segregated. Most importantly, while the proportion of white students had strongly positive correlations with yearly achievement (0.694, 0.919), that of black peers showed strongly inverse correlations with yearly achievement (-0.552, -0.578, and -0.637).



The Lee et al (2007) findings about the effectiveness of small schools where Hispanic students are enrolled raise the following question which is pivotal for this study: What causes Latino students to achieve at higher academic levels when enrolled in small learning communities? Lee et al. (2007) speculate that SLC schools tend to employ Hispanic teachers and educational support staff that may play a positive role in facilitating Hispanic students' academic performance. In this study, staff members are synonymous to the "critical friends" Delgado (1995) cited in his earlier study on Latinos and the health field and as such, also "provide critical resources to non-Hispanic teachers and support staff in understanding Hispanic students" (Lee et al. 2007 p. 275).

Lee and Friedkin (2007) also found that SLCs where Latino students were enrolled, show a high level of *personalismo*-like behaviors, which they describe as "advocate systems" (p. 276). These systems or relationships showed significant impacts which are correlated to improved academic outcomes of the Hispanic students enrolled in SLC schools. Thus, this paper will utilize the Lee and Friedkin (2007) study as a base to support its methodology as well as the hypothesis that proposes *personalismo* to have a positive significance in the academic outcomes of Latino students.

Additionally, earlier research has shown some evidence that the racial achievement gap between white students and students of color has been reduced in many smaller schools located in large urban areas such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia among others (Cotton, 1996). According to Cotton's 1996 review of 31 studies which researched the relationship between small schools and academic achievement, students in small schools performed equal to or better than their larger schools counterparts. Cotton also states that "It is important to note that the effects of smallness and achievement are indirect. Achievement may

not only be a result of smallness, but connected to other variables such as environment and attachment" (p. 16).

Another nationally-recognized study that provides a sound quantitative framework for this paper is a Chicago-based study conducted by the Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR). In this report, Stevens (2008) utilized qualitative and quantitative indicators across a sample of ten Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) schools. In this analysis the researchers identified three conditions found in schools with comparatively high student achievement which are: 1) strong teacher professional communities, 2) deep principal leadership, and 3) strong teacher influence and collaboration. All three indicators are a part of what *personalismo* offers in many small schools and may be replicated in other schools, hence the purpose of this particular paper.

The general strategy utilized in the CHSRI quantitative analysis was to identify schools within the sample size (N=10) with strong student achievement and compare them with other schools in the sample on factors potentially related to student achievement. The methodology used by the CHSRI study included a three-level hierarchical linear model (HLM) that examined how teachers at CHSRI schools had higher expected levels of teacher influence, measured by the 2005 teacher survey. The first level adjusted for measurement errors produced by the Rasch analysis. At level two the researchers modeled individual teachers' "real" scores by controlling for background characteristics such as gender, race, years of experience, level of education, certification and assignment to classroom or as a support staff. They then fixed the slopes for all variables at level three so that the relationship between each variable and the outcome measure was held constant. The intercept in the level two equation can be interpreted as the school mean adjusted for individual background characteristics such as incoming eighth-

grade achievement level of the student body, adjusted for current grade, aggregate socioeconomic status, and whether the school was at least 70 percent African American or Latino. All variables were grand mean centered.

Furthermore, CCSR found that “using the residual file produced by the HLM analysis, the researchers divided the empirical Bayes residual for the level two intercept by the square root of the posterior variance”. They add “if the result was greater than 1.96, the school was flagged as having strong teacher influence” (CHSRI, p. 25).

Each of the ten sample schools participated in the Consortium’s biannual district-wide survey which was administered in April and May of 2005. Additionally, the researchers conducted principal interviews and one teacher focus group in each of the ten schools during the May-June period in 2006. The data used in survey analysis were taken from the 2005 biannual survey where principals, teachers in 103 non-alternative high schools were invited to participate. Overall, approximately 4,150 teachers in 87 schools responded, as did approximately 35,600 students from grades 9 and 10, and 10,600 in grade 11. Only schools with 50 per cent or higher rate of return were included in the CHRSI sample.

The CHSRI (2008) quantitative analysis included multiple items from the teacher and student surveys into measures using Rasch analysis where each measure was on a continuous, linear scale that was used for statistical procedures. Then, the survey items were used to define measures based on the relative probability of a respondent choosing each category on each item. A fit statistic was also used to omit or include items into measures. The internal consistency of scale items were also evaluated using person reliability statistics. Individuals were then placed on measure scales based on their particular responses to items in the measure. Placement of

measure indicated the amount of characteristic or skill that an individual possessed (CHSRI, 2008 p. 24).

For the indicator titled as “personalized student supports”, CHRSI combined six measures into a single factor using principal component analysis. This technique, according to CHSRI researchers, examines the relationship between several observed variables to identify underlying factors that can be represented with small number variables.

Student outcomes were identified by using grade point average (GPA), On-Track (to graduate) rates and relationship between academic press and student outcomes. This was possible through the level two HLM analysis were they controlled for variable such as gender, race, socioeconomic status , prior academic achievement measured by the eighth grade Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) reading test, whether a student was receiving special education services, and whether a student was old for his/her grade. All slopes were held constant across all ten schools.

To examine relationships between school-levels academic press and average GPA and on-track rates, CHSRI used a two level hierarchical model than controlled for student-level characteristics at level one. All slopes were held constant across all ten schools. However, at level two schools’ CHSRI included a variable for academic press. Subsequently, CHSRI then identified schools with strong student achievement using records of first-time freshman grades for the 2005-06 schoolyear. They examined school’s average GPAs and on-track (to graduate) rates. Then, students’ un-weighted GPA was used for the analysis where four points area given for an A, three for a B, two for a C and on for a D, and none for an F. Other indicators of success utilized by the CHSRI study included students’ performance in courses, independent of test scores.

The CHSRI (2008) study chose not to utilize test scores as indicators of student achievement for several reasons. One being that in Chicago it is difficult to determine with confidence whether standardized test scores, even after controlling for school demographics. This is much do to the fact that many schools retain low-performing students and then administer standardized tests during their second and third year years; such schools then will incorrectly look worse when compared to other schools.

Finally, the CHSRI researchers decided to create an indicator of student achievement by comparing the performance of each school within the 10 school sample to the average performance of all high schools in the district serving similar student populations. The CHSRI schools in the sample were then coded as having strong course performance if both their average grade point average (GPA) and on-track rate were statistically better than the district average. This was accomplished by conducting a two-level hierarchical model that identified schools that were better than expected at the  $p < .05$ . For quantitative indicators, the hierarchical model identified schools with teacher and student survey responses that were statistically more positive than schools serving similar students.

The indicator of teacher professional community was derived from a qualitative data which included surveys from principals and teachers about activities pursued during the year to improve academics. Their responses were then used to examine whether schools engaged in developmental practices. To do so, the researchers coded each improvement activity in each school as it involved a developmental model and each activity received a designated value.

During their field work, the CHSRI group observed principals and their role on improvement efforts. They noted these principal-led tasks as they related to academic improvements namely, identifying problems, developing improvement strategies, coordinating

and participating in improvement work, and monitoring the progress of activities. Also, they noted that some principals engaged in deep instructional leadership activities.

The teacher leadership indicator was measured by capturing teacher influence in schools. It asked if teachers had influences in their schools as well as how much influence they had on school policy, scheduling, budget, professional development and instruction. It also asked how involved teachers were in important decision making and if they felt comfortable voicing their concerns.

Lastly, as for the indicator of personalized student supports, the CHSRI group created a factor that combined six survey measures. The first measure, closely related to *personalismo*, is the factor was named *School-Wide Future Orientations*, which asked students about how teachers work to make sure that all students stay and succeed in school as well as help students plan for their future. A second indicator was A Sense of Belonging where researchers asked students to report their feelings about “fitting” in a school or whether the school feels like a family, and the level of their participation in school activities. These indicators are closely related to the concept of *personalismo* as they deal with feelings of student-school connectedness and relationships within the organization. Another indicator examined by the CHSRI study was classroom *personalismo* where analysts measured whether students’ Math or English teacher gives them individual assistance with their academic problems.

It was noted in the CHSRI study that, through the student-teacher trust measure, students reported the following indicator of *personalismo*: teachers cares about them, keep their promises, try to be fair, listened to their concerns and ideas and treated students with respect and help them. Among the other indicators used in the CHSRI study Teacher Supports and Peer

Support for Academic Achievement measures how teachers and peers talk about what they do in class and how they find support systems to help with homework and personal problems.

Contrary to what the CHSRI researchers thought they would find strong first year course performance was not associated with high levels of academic rigor. In fact, CHSRI authors found that all students within the 10 school sample showed their schools to have average academic press. Comparisons with junior CHSRI students as well as an analysis of academic press' unique relationship with student outcomes showed findings not usually associated with student outcomes. Instead, findings indicated that the transition from middle school to high school were the most identified barrier by students where freshmen identified as having high levels of difficulty as they transitioned to high school.

Furthermore, the CHSRI (2008) findings show that having a combination of strong professional community, deep principal leadership, and teacher influence was necessary for schools to produce high student achievement. In other words, the authors find that when schools engage in professional communities that integrate high levels of *personalismo*, relationships become more familiar and students thrive academically. This collective work between school leaders, educators and students requires a robust school philosophy that engages all stakeholders that include everyone, their roles and situations in ways that become more than just a school but a community of learners where *personalismo* permeates all classrooms and behaviors (Stevens, 2008). This finding is pivotal to this paper as it supports the hypothesis.

Supported by Lee & Friedkin (2000); Stevens (2008) and the CHSRI (2008) studies, this paper investigates whether the concept of *personalismo* significantly impacts achievement in the two sample small schools with opposite levels of personalismo. In order to provide a qualitative balance to this paper, we have included reports from the "My Voice" survey

conducted annually by Chicago Public Schools. This survey reports responses from parents, students, teachers and administrators to several questions regarding the schools' culture, academic press, teacher collaboration and socio-emotional learning structures.

As previously noted, two *t*-tests will be conducted to assess the means within the two schools to identify whether they are statistically different from each other. That is, comparing school A (the control school with high levels of *personalismo*) with school B (identified by CPS "My Survey" reports with low levels of *personalismo*). Secondly, a series of *t*-test at each grade level will be conducted to further investigate statistical differences among grade levels thus identifying whether *personalismo*, even at the grade level, can produce higher ISAT scores in reading and/or mathematics.

Using the formula for *t*-tests, we compared signal over noise thus equating to difference between the two schools over the variability of each.

Figure 3.1:

Formula for t-test

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$$\frac{\text{Signal}}{\text{Noise}} = \frac{\text{Difference between means of school A and B}}{\text{Variability of two schools}}$$

Findings from our literature review showed increased scores on standardized tests of Latino students on the NAEP 09-10 and ISAT 09-10 (Chicago) tests. However, Cotton (2001), Lee & Loeb (2000), Howley (1996) and Stevens (2008) assent that more research is needed about how Latino students can significantly narrow the achievement gap. Hence this paper



proposes that the concept of *personalismo* may offer such opportunities for educators, by embedding personalismo within the pedagogical practices of schools.

The following chapter illustrates our findings followed by a series of recommendations for educators to consider while planning instruction when working with Latino students.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The 2009-2010 Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) which tested students in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> in Reading, Mathematics and Science indicates significant differences between school A and B. As we analyze test results from both schools, it is important to note that third grade is the first benchmark grade where all students are administered a standardized test, therefore many schools find this particular grade level to test at a lower level. Then, as students become accustomed to standardized tests, a steady increase is seen in fourth through eighth grades. We must also note that ELL students who have participated in a bilingual program for a minimum of three years, and who have successfully exited the “Assessing Communication and Comprehension in English from State to State” (ACCESS) test with a 4.8 composite proficiency level are administered the ISAT test.

#### **Process for Calculating *t*-Tests for School A and School B**

As stated in the Methodology, a 2x6 *t*-test model was conducted in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> in schools A and B. ISAT 2005-2010 Reading, Math and Science scores for Hispanic students were extracted from the state data tables in MS-Excel for the two schools being analyzed. The school theorized with higher levels of personalization (*personalismo*) was labeled School A and the other comparative school was labeled School B. We utilized results from the Chicago Public School “My Voice” survey as a base for this assumption. In order to maintain students’ anonymity, student IDs were replaced with A-numbers and B-numbers and organized by grade level.

Table 4.1 illustrates how the researcher used the MS Excel Data Analysis Add-In and selected *t*-test 1 Sample Assuming Equal Variances from the tool kit. Hence,  $t(26) = 2.06, < .05$

We then directed the  $t$ -test results for each grade level to appear on a different worksheet as noted on the workbook illustrated on Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1

$T$ -test procedures (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

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	Mean	SD	N	$t$	$p$ one- tail
School A	216	32.8	26	2.06	.02*
School B	216	24.4	42	.03	1.68*

---

\*Significance at .05 alpha level

Then, Standard Deviation and Standard Error were calculated using the MS Excel Data Analysis Add-In and selecting Descriptive Statistics. After identifying the range of data to analyze the resulting data table was directed to another worksheet with these sample results noted on table 4.2.

Table 4.2

School A Descriptive Statistics

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School A	N	Mean	SD
3 <sup>rd</sup>	26	216	32
4 <sup>th</sup>	26	242	25
5 <sup>th</sup>	25	249	30
6 <sup>th</sup>	18	272	19
7 <sup>th</sup>	37	302	36
8 <sup>th</sup>	36	309	20

---

We then calculated manually random samples of the data for both schools to ensure the formulas and data ranges were accurate. The data was then transferred to another worksheet summarizing grades as illustrated on table 3 using 3<sup>rd</sup> grade as an example.

Table 4.3

## Sample Summary of Data

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School	Grade	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	p=Equal Variance	<i>t</i> -value	p=unequal	<i>t</i> -value
A	3	215	32	6.0				
					.04	2.00	.06	2.01
B	3	201	24	4.0				

---

\*Significant at  $p < .04$  alpha level

## ISAT historical data

The Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) measures an individual student's achievement relative to the Illinois Learning Standards. These standardized test results give educators, parents, and school leader one measure of a student's learning and school performance. The data is reported using cut scores. Hence, the cut score on a test (or on multiple tests) separates test takers into various categories, such as a passing score and a failing score, or a selected score and a rejected score. While the purpose of analyzing ISAT scores is not to indicate students failure, it provides educators with a standardized set of data about students that enable them to provide resources, prepare for promotion and assign reading Lexile levels.

Table 4.4 illustrates 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8th grade historical ISAT reading scores. When comparing school A with school B, we see school A students outperforming school B in all grades. When looking at grade level progress per school, we see some interesting trends that inform our thesis. For example, school A 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in 2006 showed a significant annual growth of 10-15% which resulted in a total cut score of 97.2% in 2010. Then, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students from school B seem to have had an irregular annual growth since 2006 which only resulted in a total cut score of 55.3% by 2010. A similar trend is observed in 5<sup>th</sup> grade where students from school A scored 87.5% in 2010 while their counterparts in school B scored 39.5%. If we follow the 2006 School A 4<sup>th</sup> grade class through an annual progression, we see that scores remained flat (79.9%) for two consecutive years and in 2008 scored dropped to 67.7% but by 2009 scores increased to 90.9% and by 2010 reached 100%. A similar trend was observed with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class of 2007 which received a score of 100% in 2010 in spite of irregular trends during the previous four years. While these rare test results can be attributed to a variety of circumstances that may include a possible change in teacher assignment, a new reading curriculum, or even

students becoming better test takers. We investigated this matter further and found information illustrated on table 4.5.

Table 4.4

## ISAT Reading 2005-2010 and Overtime Meets/Exceeds (with ELLS)

School	Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
A	3 <sup>rd</sup>	71%	59%	59%	82%	92%	73%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	0%	77%	70%	30%	68%	87%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	53%	47%	77%	86%	62%	84%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	58%	59%	68%	93%	100%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	0%	73%	76%	56%	91%	97%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	61%	62%	86%	71%	96%	100%
B	3 <sup>rd</sup>	19%	39%	48%	32%	41%	33%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	0%	48%	36%	47%	37%	40%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	31%	62%	73%	29%	49%	41%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	56%	56%	61%	59%	63%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	0%	58%	42%	70%	64%	55%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	51%	56%	71%	58%	84%	74%

Our investigation found that the percents noted on table 4.4 are correct at the levels. Tables 4.5 and 4.6 further show our work as we broke scores down into the meets category as well as added the stanines to illustrate the spread.

Table 4.5

## School A Grade 8 ISAT 2009-2010

	Meets	Exceeds	Number
<i>Range</i>			
Reading	231-277	257-360	N = 36
% of students within	57.1%	42.9%	
<i>Range</i>			
<hr/>			
Math	Meets	Exceeds	
	246-287	288-410	N= 36
% of students within	7.1%	92.9%	
<i>Range</i>			
<hr/>			
Writing	Meets	Exceeds	
	21-27	28-33	N = 36
% of students within	59.5%	7.1%	
<i>Range</i>			
<hr/>			



The preceding Table 4.5 shows the Reading scale score spread is very large for the “exceeds” category (257-360). We see that 57.1% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students fell within the meets range while only 42.9% were at exceeds. We should also keep in mind the CPS report used showing scores of 100% reflect the meets category as the exceeds category is part of a different report not included in this research. However in Mathematics 92.9% of students fell within the “exceeds” range (288-410) thus reaching a stanine of 6 or better.

Table 4.6 shows 71.4% school A 6<sup>th</sup> grade students with Reading a range of 231-277 and a stanine of 5 or better. But only 28.6% scored within the “exceeds” range (257-360). Math scores show 57.1% of students at the meets range (225-275) with a stanine of 5 or better. In Writing 58.5% of students scored at meets level and only 7.1% at “exceeds”, thus 28.6% students were below standards and 4.8% were at academic warning.

Table 4.6

School A Grade 6 ISAT 2009-2010

	Meets	Exceeds	Number
<i>Range</i>			
Reading	231-277	257-360	
% of students			N = 21
within	71.4%	28.6%	
<i>Range</i>			
Math	Meets	Exceeds	
% of students			N = 21
within	225-275	276-379	
<i>Range</i>	57.1%	42.9%	
Writing	Meets	Exceeds	
% of students	21-27	28-33	N = 21
within	59.5%	7.1%	
<i>Range</i>			

Just as in Reading, Table 4.7 shows a similar trend in Mathematics school A 4<sup>th</sup> grade students scored 29.4% then in 2009 as 5<sup>th</sup> graders the score increased to 62.5% and the next year this group, now in 6<sup>th</sup> grade scored 100%. The same is true for sixth grade students in 2008 whose score was 67.7% followed by 90.0% in 2009 and 100% in 2010. For school B third grade students, Mathematics seems to be less challenging as 81% scored at the meets level while third grade students in school A scored 76.9% (-4.1). A significant increase is seen at the fourth grade level where in 2005 students scored 0%, yet each year thereafter scores increased steadily resulting in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class of 2009 8<sup>th</sup> scoring 87.5%. It is important to note that despite some steady increases seen in school B as students progress from grade to grade, students from school A outperformed school B in all grades in the 2009-2010 ISAT test.

Table 4.7

## ISAT Math 2005-2010 and Overtime Meets/Exceed (with ELLs)

School	Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
A	3 <sup>rd</sup>	82%	100%	83%	100%	87%	77%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	0%	100%	85%	53%	100%	96%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	63%	69%	100%	93%	80%	82%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	74%	71%	81%	90%	100%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	0%	82%	94%	48%	97%	92%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	18%	76%	83%	71%	87%	100%
B	3 <sup>rd</sup>	47%	64%	71%	65%	67%	81%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	0%	77%	88%	80%	85%	70%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	29%	77%	93%	67%	77%	74%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	65%	80%	80%	74%	69%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	0%	77%	62%	83%	78%	73%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	39%	77%	78%	63%	80%	87%

Table 4.8 illustrates 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades Science results from both schools. It is important to note that these are the only two grades where elementary school students are assessed in Science with a high stakes test such as the ISAT. Historical data illustrated in Table 4.8 shows school A outperforming school B in fourth grade since 2005 except for 2008 when school B students outperformed school A by 23.7%. In 2010, fourth grade students from school A scored 87.5% while school B students in the same grade scored 41% (-46.5%). Seventh grade Science scores for school A are similar to those in 4<sup>th</sup> grade where school B seventh graders outperformed school A seventh graders in 2008. However, data from 2005 to 2010 shows school A significantly outperforming school B. In 2010, school A seventh grade science scores reached 97.2% as school B seventh grade score was 48.9% (-48.3%).

Table 4.8

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 ISAT Science 2005-2010 and Overtime Meets/Exceeds (with ELLs)
 

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School	Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
A	4 <sup>th</sup>	62%	92%	77%	25%	65%	88%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	54%	79%	82%	65%	97%	97%
B	4 <sup>th</sup>	32%	58%	54%	49%	46%	41%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	39%	64%	44%	68%	72%	49%

---

Table 4.9 shows the ISAT composite meets/exceeds including ELLs for fiscal year 2010. Although school A experienced some irregular growth in third and fifth grades, the 2010 score in third grade of 75% outperformed school B (57.1%) by a margin of 17.9%. In fourth grade, school A reached a 90.3% while school B received a 50% (-40.3%). Fifth grade students from school A scored 84.1% while school B fifth graders scored 57.8% (-26.3%). Sixth grade students from school A scored 100% while school B sixth grade class scored 65.8% (-34.2). In seventh grade, school A reached to 95.4% while school B reached 59.2% (-36.2%). Finally in eighth grade, school A reached 100% and school B scored a 80.3% (-19.7%).

Once again, we see that while third grade students in school A experienced some irregular scores from 2005 to 2009, they managed to outperform their third grade counterparts in school B by a margin of 17.9%. In fourth grade, school A fourth grade class experienced a drop in the composite scores at the fourth grade level scoring a 36% while school B fourth grade class scored a 58.6% (+22.6%) but the same class in 2009 dropped to 56.1 while school A fifth graders increased to 78%.

Table 4.9

## ISAT Composite 2005-2010 Overtime Meets &amp; Exceeds (with ELLs)

School	Grade	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
A	3 <sup>rd</sup>	77%	80%	71%	91%	90%	75%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	62%	89%	77%	36%	78%	90%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	58%	58%	88%	90%	71%	84%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	66%	65%	74%	92%	100%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	54%	78%	84%	56%	95%	95%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	40%	70%	84%	71%	92%	100%
B	3 <sup>rd</sup>	34%	52%	60%	49%	54%	57%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	32%	61%	60%	59%	56%	50%
	5 <sup>th</sup>	30%	69%	83%	49%	64%	58%
	6 <sup>th</sup>	0%	61%	68%	71%	65%	66%
	7 <sup>th</sup>	39%	66%	50%	74%	71%	59%
	8 <sup>th</sup>	45%	63%	74%	60%	82%	80%

## **Value-Added Metrics**

An interesting new metric utilized by Chicago Public Schools to measure academic growth at the elementary level is ‘value-added’ metrics. This metric measures the impact of schools on the academic growth of students and allows leaders to identify high achieving schools at all levels of attainment. Value-Added (VA) is a nationally recognized way of measuring academic growth that emphasizes continual student improvement and provides information to understand what drives continual improvement.

Since student academic growth varies by grade, prior grade experiences and performance and demographics, Value-Added metrics measure the student learning independent of student demographic factors, accounting for prior ISAT reading and math scores, grade level, gender, race and ethnicity, low income level, ELL and IEP status, homelessness and student mobility. These controlling factors give confidence for growth to low achieving schools that may serve unique populations. Therefore, we include Value-Added reports in our results because it does not compare similar schools but it compares growth of students in each school to students across the District while controlling for student demographic factors listed above.

CPS utilizes a regression methodology that was developed in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin and CPS research development analysts. Hence, by measuring the impact of each student factor, the regression model isolates the impact of the school on student growth which may be explained by external factors. The growth that is left over after removing the impact of these external factors is attributed to the school. This then becomes the value added of a school. A finding worth noting is that all students who are making normal grade promotion who took the ISAT in previous years are included in the analysis. Also, mobile students count towards the VA score in each school attended, however they are weighted in the analysis by the amount of time they were in a school during the year. Moreover, English Language Learners in



program years 0-5 are excluded from the analysis. Students with disabilities are differentiated by the type of individual educational plan (IEP) so that those with profound disabilities are not measured the same as those with mild disabilities.

*Value Added* also measures the difference between the growth of students at a school and the growth of similar students across the District, thus a positive VA score indicates a school or grade whose students are growing at a faster pace than similar students. Since zero (0) is the District average, a score near zero indicates a school or grade whose students are growing at about the same pace as similar students within the District. A negative score indicates a school or grade whose students are growing at a slower pace than similar students (CPS, Performance Management, 2009-2010).

Table 4.10 includes school-level standardized VA scores for school A. The reading VA score for school A in 2010 was 4.2 and mathematics was 4.6. Both scores are at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile therefore at the high performance category. Therefore, the reading grade-level VA for school A shows a developmental process whereby fourth grade students were weighted at the 0 mark and each year moved gradually towards positive intervals reaching 6.3 for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students thus placing them at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile.

The mathematics grade-level VA for school A also shows steady growth. Fourth grade students start with gains of +0.5 and gradually move towards positive intervals where seventh grade students reached a VA of +5.7 (99<sup>th</sup> percentile) while 8<sup>th</sup> grade students reached a 2.2 (97<sup>th</sup> percentile).

Table 4.10

## School A Value-Added FY 2009-2010

		Number of Students (Weighted)	Value-Added Score	Percentile
Reading		129.7	4.2	99 <sup>th</sup>
Math		129.7	4.6	99 <sup>th</sup>
Reading	Grade			
	4 <sup>th</sup>	21.1	0.0	49 <sup>th</sup>
	5 <sup>th</sup>	24.3	0.1	54 <sup>th</sup>
	6 <sup>th</sup>	14	1.5	95 <sup>th</sup>
	7 <sup>th</sup>	34.3	2.3	98 <sup>th</sup>
	8 <sup>th</sup>	36	6.3	99 <sup>th</sup>
Math	Grade			
	4 <sup>th</sup>	21.1	0.5	74 <sup>th</sup>
	5 <sup>th</sup>	24.3	1.5	93 <sup>rd</sup>
	6 <sup>th</sup>	14	2.1	97 <sup>th</sup>
	7 <sup>th</sup>	34.3	5.7	99 <sup>th</sup>
	8 <sup>th</sup>	36	2.2	97 <sup>th</sup>

Table 4.11 illustrates school B with a -0.6 VA for reading and +0.8 VA for mathematics, hence reading received a 23<sup>rd</sup> percentile ranking while mathematics reached the 80 percentile. School B reading grades 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> did not reach beyond the 0.0 level while mathematics did show some gains in 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades however, 6<sup>th</sup> grade shows a low performance category of -1.3. Table 6 also includes school-level standardized VA scores for school B. the reading VA score for school B was -0.6 (below average) and the mathematics VA score was +0.8 (high).

The reading VA level for school B shows some irregular ranges per grade. Fourth grade scored a -0.7 (below average) followed by fifth graders who scored a 0.0 (average). Then sixth graders declined to -0.8 (low) while seventh graders improved to -0.2 (average) and eighth grade declined to -0.3 (below average). This erratic VA scores caused school B to score below the District's average of zero (0) in reading.

Table 4.11

## School B Value-Added FY 2009-2010

		Number of Students (Weighted)	Value-Added Score	Percentile
Reading		199.1	-0.6	23 <sup>rd</sup>
Math		199.1	0.8	80 <sup>th</sup>
Reading	Grade			
	4 <sup>th</sup>	38.4	-0.7	21 <sup>th</sup>
	5 <sup>th</sup>	0.0	0.0	51 <sup>th</sup>
	6 <sup>th</sup>	33.6	-0.8	18 <sup>th</sup>
	7 <sup>th</sup>	46.6	-0.2	43 <sup>rd</sup>
	8 <sup>th</sup>	36	6.3	99 <sup>th</sup>
Math	Grade			
	4 <sup>th</sup>	38.4	0.1	53 <sup>rd</sup>
	5 <sup>th</sup>	35.8	0.8	80 <sup>th</sup>
	6 <sup>th</sup>	33.6	-1.3	9 <sup>th</sup>
	7 <sup>th</sup>	46.4	0.6	72 <sup>nd</sup>
	8 <sup>th</sup>	44.8	1.7	94 <sup>th</sup>

As noted on table 4.11 the 2010 Performance Policy Report lists school B on Probation level 3 receiving 20 out of 42 possible points (47.6%). A probation status of <50% means that less than half of all students fall below the zero (0) mark which is the District average. A school near zero indicates a school or grade level whose students are growing at or about the same pace as similar students across the district. However if a school or grade level falls below the zero mark, the odds of making Adequate yearly Progress (AYP) lessen. Thus, School B received only 1 point out of possible 6 points and a VA of -0.6 as illustrated in table 6 while school A received 3 out of possible 6 points and a VA of +4.2.

The mathematics VA levels for school B also had erratic ranges exhibited in fourth grade at +0.1 (average) followed by fifth graders with a +0.8 (high). However sixth graders declined significantly to -1.3 (low) improved by seventh graders to +0.6 (above average) and by eighth graders to +1.7 (high) placing eighth graders at the 94<sup>th</sup> percentile. Table 6 also shows a constant variance between reading and mathematics scores where students from school B school significantly lower in reading than in mathematics across grades.

Following, table 4.12 shows the results of a series of *t*-test conducted for grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> between schools A and B Reading ISAT 2009-2010. As we look at the per grade results, we see that third grade results show  $t=2.0$  thus falling outside of the critical region by 0.048. We see the same results in fourth grade as  $t=2.0$ . Fifth grade *t* value results of  $t=2.0$  show a slight difference but still outside of the critical region by 0.048. Sixth grade *t*-test results show  $t=2.0$  thus 0.036 outside the critical region as well. Seventh grade *t*-test results  $t=2.0$  thus closer to the critical regions by 0.021 and eighth grade *t*-test results reaching  $t=2.0$  with 0.024 from reaching the critical region of 2.0. Thus, all *t* values fell outside the critical value from third through eighth grade.

Table 4.12

Reading ISAT 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade *t*-test results

Schools	Grade	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-value	<i>p</i> value
A	3	207.3	38	7.5	2.02	.000*
B	3	174.9	29	4.5		
A	4	227.1	30	6.0	2.02	.000*
B	4	191.8	23	3.5		
A	5	229.3	19	3.8	2.0	.004*
B	5	208.1	28	4.3		
A	6	247.6	11	2.5	2.0	.000*
B	6	221.5	24	3.9		
A	7	255.1	17	2.8	2.0	.000*
B	7	225.9	24	3.4		
A	8	277.4	28	4.7	2.0	.000*
A	8	242.9	21	3.2		

\*Significance of &lt; .05 alpha level

Table 4.13 represents how the Mathematics ISAT  $t$ -test results for grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> compare between schools A and B. As we look at the per grade results, we see that third grade results show  $t=2.01$ , thus falling outside of the critical region by 0.05. In fourth grade as  $t=2.00$ , thus 0.038 outside the critical region. Fifth grade  $t$  value results of  $t=2.00$  also outside the critical region by 0.037. Sixth grade  $t$ -test results show  $t=2.00$  thus 0.039 outside the critical region as well. Seventh grade  $t$ -test results  $t=2.0$  slightly closer to the critical regions by 0.029 and eighth grade  $t$ -test results reaching  $t=2.0$  with approximately 0.024 from reaching the critical region of 1.968.

It is important to note that, although all 12  $t$ -test results conducted in ISAT reading and mathematics fell outside the critical region, seventh and eighth grade seems to be the grade closest to the critical region while third and fourth grades  $t$ -test results were the farthest from the critical region by 0.048. However, all data indicates each grade level  $t$ -test falling significantly outside the critical region. Thus the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 4.13

Mathematics 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade t-test results

Schools	Grade	Mean	SD	Standard Error	t-Value	p- Value
(A)	3	216	32	6.4	2.01	.000*
(B)	3	201	24	3.7		
(A)	4	242	25	4.8	2.00	.000*
(B)	4	212	24	3.7		
(A)	5	248	30	6.0	2.00	.001*
(B)	5	234	32	5.0		
(A)	6	272	18	4.4	2.00	.001*
(B)	6	246	31	5.0		
(A)	7	302	36	6.0	2.00	.000*
(B)	7	257	26	4.0		
(A)	8	308	20	3.4	2.00	.000*
(B)	8	242	21	3.2		

\*Significance at &lt; .05 alpha level



When we further analyzed the per grade results of the ISAT Reading *t*-test we notice that the results across all grades had a significant variance from school A to B, as school A consistently outperformed school B in each grade. We also notice that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade results from school B had the largest signal ( $S=26.14035$ ) as school A reached  $M=247.6667$  and school B only reached  $M=221.5263$  affecting school B Value-Added rating in Reading.

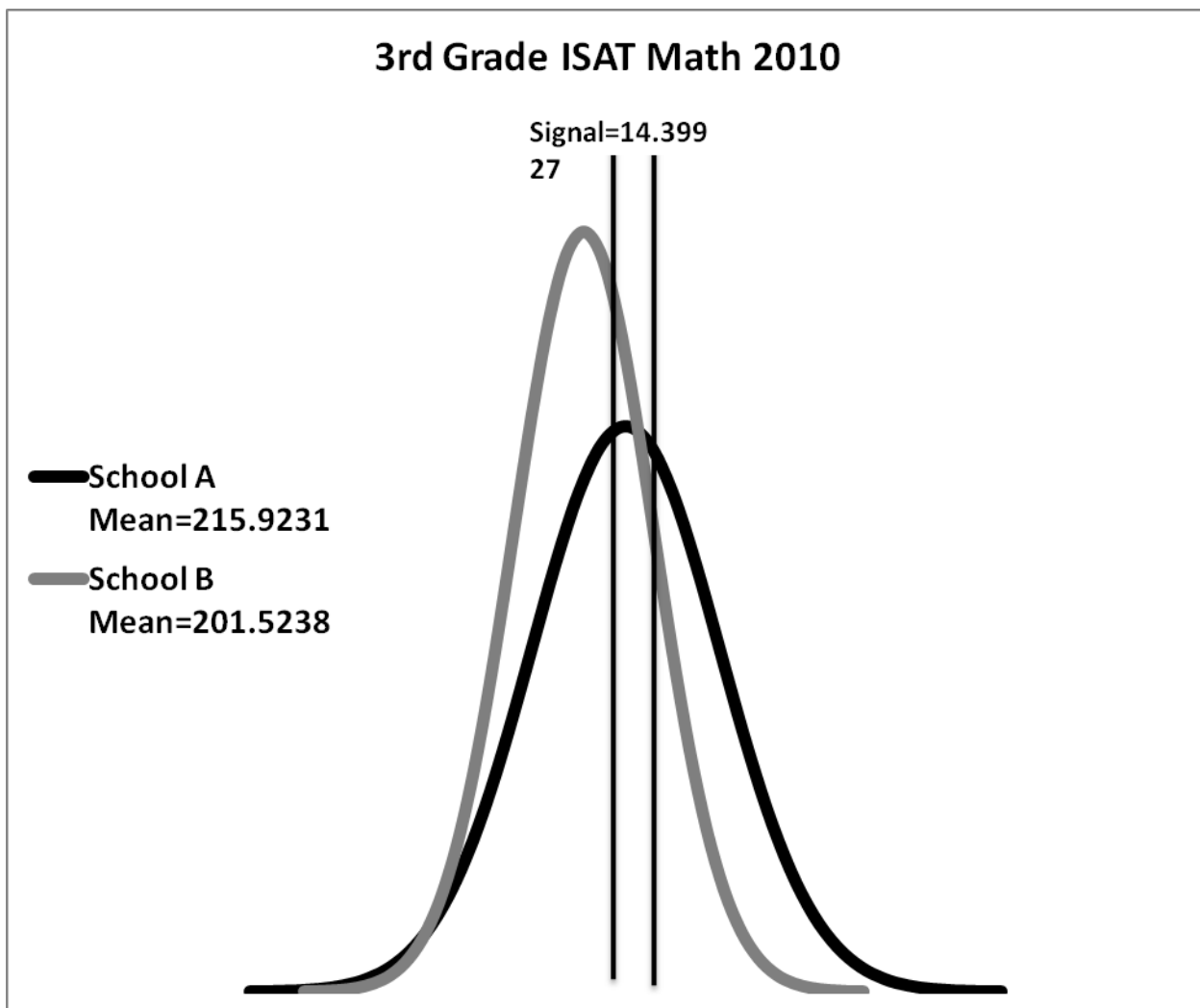
We then examined the per grade results of the ISAT Mathematics *t*-test and notice that the results across 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8th grades show less variance with the exception of 6<sup>th</sup> grade which shows a consistent gap between the two schools. School A showed  $M=272.5556$  while school B only reached  $M=246.3421$  and a signal of  $S=26.21345$ . This significant difference affected school B Value-Added rating in Mathematics.

As noted on table 4.11 the 2010 Performance Policy Report lists school B on Probation level 3 receiving 20 out of 42 possible points (47.6%). A probation status of <50% means that less than half of all students fall below the zero (0) mark which is the District average. A school near zero indicates a school or grade level whose students are growing at or about the same pace as similar students across the district. However if a school or grade level falls below the zero mark, the odds of making Adequate yearly Progress (AYP) lessen. Thus, School B received only 1 point out of possible 6 points and a VA of -0.6 as illustrated in table 6 while school A received 3 out of possible 6 points and a VA of +4.2.

This study is enriched by results from a qualitative study conducted by Chicago Public Schools where students, parents and teachers share their perspectives about their schools, focusing on issues dealing with safety, academic rigor, and factors that are directly aligned to elements of personalismo. The “My Voice, My School” survey results for school year 2009-2010 are summarized in the following section.

Figure 4.1 is a histogram which illustrates gains in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ISAT Math scores from School A with a  $M = 215.9231$  while school B 3<sup>rd</sup> grade scores trails with a  $M = 201.5238$  showing moderate variability of  $R = 14.3993$

Figure 4.1: 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ISAT Math Schools A and B



Schools as a way to capture and measure aspects of the student experience. This qualitative element adds an important component to this study as it reports on the voice of key stakeholders within the school environment: the students.

The *My Voice, My School* report is divided in four parts or scales, namely Safe and Respectful Climate, Social and Emotional Learning, Academic rigor and Student Support. Students in grades 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> have an opportunity each year to complete the survey as do teachers and parents in each school. The report is a public document available to everyone as it provides graphic results of each scale under four levels of satisfaction namely excellent, high adequate, low adequate and needs improvement. These results are reported to school leaders and posted on the CPS public website.

Following, we have summarized each scale report and given a synopsis of how schools A and B responded. Principals are urged to utilize the survey data to develop strategies to address areas of concern.

Figure 4.2

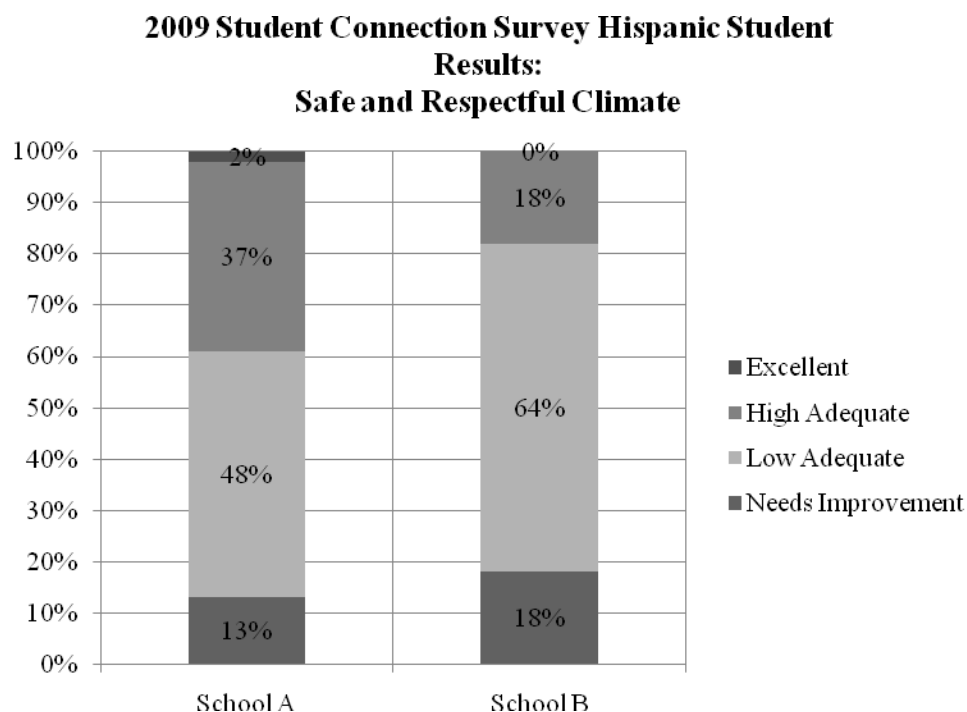


Figure 4.2 above illustrates how students rated each of their schools when asked about safety, respect, social emotional learning, academic rigor and student supports. These elements are closely related to personalismo and have a direct impact on student's socio-emotional learning (Valenzuela, 1999). It is important to note that for both schools, 98-99% of students participated in the survey.

The Chicago Public Schools Safe and Respectful Climate scale measures how physically and emotionally safe students across the district feel at their schools. According to CPS, students who attend safe schools are more likely to be academically engaged and are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors such as drug use or violence. Also, students are less likely to drop out of schools that offer a safe and secure environment.

In figure 4.3 we have listed schools A and B side by side and the elements of socio emotional learning on the left to compare students' response. We see that when looking at "safe and respectful climate" students from school A rated their schools 39% "excellent and high adequate" followed by 48% as "low adequate" and 13% as "needs improvement." Hence, the overall total for excellent to adequate for school A is 87%. The rating for school B under the same element is similar, however 16% of students feel safety and respectful climate needs improvement thus adding to 85% as the overall excellent to adequate levels.

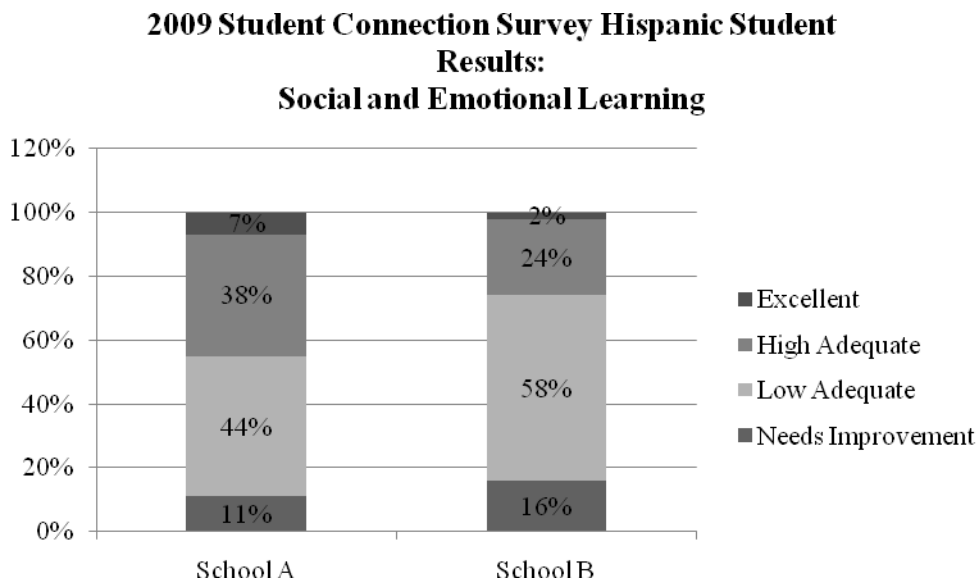
Figure 4.5 illustrates students' survey results regarding social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools A and B. School A students rated their school with a 89% overall excellent to adequate level while school B students rated their schools with 84%. In this category, students from school B identified their school with a 58% in "low adequate" level and 16% in "needs improvement" and only 2% as "excellent."

Research about SEL reports school climate as a vital element of student academic achievement (Cohen, 2006). Large urban districts such as New York and Chicago have considered SEL as core components of a healthy learning environment and have included them in their districts' education framework. Additionally, the state of Illinois has also included SEL in its state-wide educational frameworks.

Figure 4.3 below illustrates how students from schools A and B feel about student support. According to Chicago Public Schools, Students Supports scale measures how much students feel listened to, cared about, and helped by teachers and other significant adults within the school environment. This scale is closely aligned to the element of personalismo as it relates to the relationship-building process that helps create a connection between students and those around them. CPS stresses that strong relationships between teachers and students lead to higher academic outcomes, especially for disadvantaged or underserved populations.

Figure 4.3

## Social and Emotional Learning

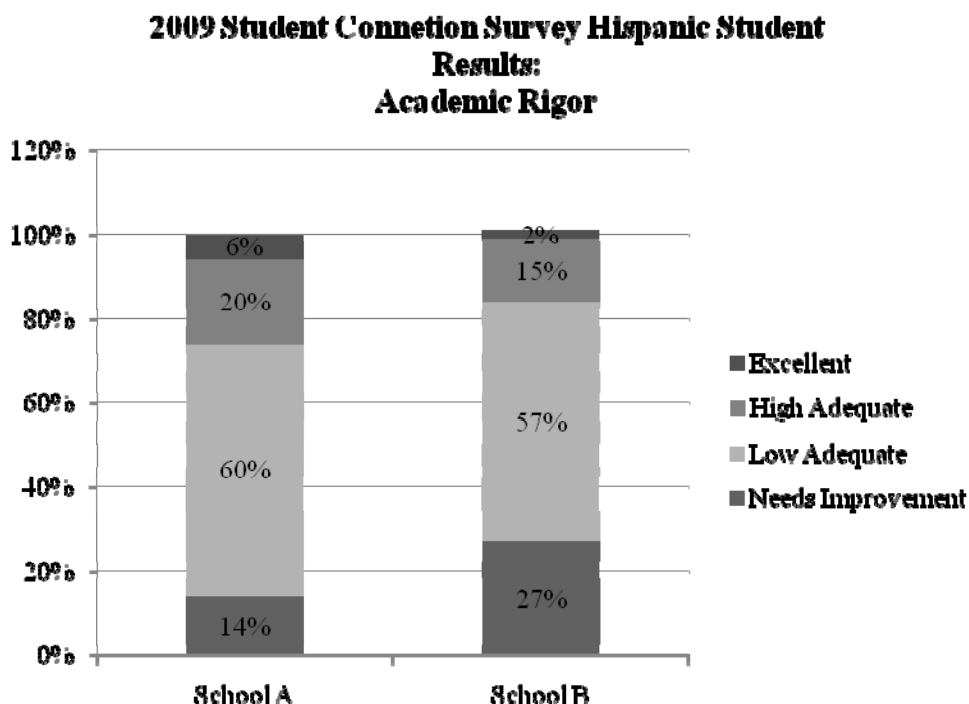
**Academic Rigor**

Wagner (2008) defines rigor as “a focus on skills for life: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.”

Chicago Public Schools Social Emotional Learning scale measures students’ perception of their peers’ social skills and problem-solving abilities. CPS studies reveal that when students show strong emotional skills their academic levels improves as does attendance, behavior and attitudes about schooling. That is, students with high-quality social and emotional skills are less likely to drop out of school.

Figure 4.4

## Academic Rigor



As noted above in figure 4.4 school A students reported their schools with an 86% overall excellent to adequate level of academic rigor while school B was rated as having 74% academic rigor. This qualitative rating confirms quantitative data gathered from the ISAT Reading 2009-2010 *t*-test results listed on tables 7 and 8 , where school A “exceeds” composite score (3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade results) reached 30.2% while school B “exceeds” scored a 5.7% composite rate.

It is important to note that an “exceeds” score positively impacts a school’s on track to graduate rating. The on-track measurement is a consistent indicator that looks at course grades and credits during a student’s first year of high school. Freshmen who are designated as “on-track” are three and a half times more likely to graduate from high school in four years than those who are “off track” as a result of receiving failing grades in two or more subjects during an

academic year. The on/off track to graduate indicator was originally developed by the Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago (2005) as predictors of high school graduation and it provides more detailed information about school trends.

According to Chicago Public Schools (*My Voice, My School* Survey, 2009-2010), *Students Supports* scale measures how much students feel listened to, cared about, and helped by teachers and other significant adults within the school environment. This scale is closely aligned to the element of *personalismo* as it relates to the relationship-building process that helps create a connection between students and those around them. CPS stresses that strong relationships between teachers and students lead to higher academic outcomes, especially for disadvantaged or underserved populations.

Students in school A whose composite *School Support* rate their school with a 97% satisfaction rate, which is one of the highest in the city according to the *My Voice* Survey, 2009-2010, gives evidence of the school's levels of *personalismo* as it provides students with high levels of trust, nurturing environment and adults who care about them and treat them with respect. These qualitative elements are in alignment with the quantitative reports illustrated in tables 1-8 where the ISAT Reading and Mathematics scores for 2010 for school A consecutively outranked school B across all grade levels.

While these reports only focus on results from quantitative analysis as documented by the *t*-tests, it provides a strong basis in favor of the hypothesis. Yet, its findings imply a strong alignment to the work of (Cotton, 2001) and (Lee & Loeb, 2000) who propose school size and their highly personalized structures as having a “direct and indirect effect on student achievement” (p. 9). Furthermore, the findings as well as the reports from the *My Voice Survey* (2009-2010), show that school size is strongly associated with teacher's attitudes about joint



responsibilities as teachers develop nurturing, caring and trusting relationships with students which are centered on the concept of *personalismo*.

## Summary

Research cited in this study has found the concept of *personalismo* deeply embedded in Latino cultural values. This study provides empirical evidence that shows *personalismo* to be a significant indicator of academic success when coupled with other important “best practices.” Findings from the two small schools in the sample show that when visionary leaders provide opportunities for teacher collaboration, student voice, safe and nurturing environments, and academic rigor, a foundation based on *personalismo* is created. Such foundation, rooted in the Latino culture and values, allows Latino students to thrive academically as seen in data from school A.

Results from the data sources provided in this paper such as historical ISAT data from 2005 to 2010, ISAT 2009-2010 Reading, Mathematics and Science score reports, Value Added rates, *t*-test trend results from schools A and B, and “My Voice” Survey responses, support the hypothesis. Hence, paying attention to the concept of *personalismo*, as an indicator of Latino student success, when working in an elementary school setting that provides interpersonal closeness and connectedness between students and teachers, may contribute significantly to a sound foundation that allow Latino students to have positive academic outcomes measured by standardized test scores.

Furthermore, we suggest our findings should not only be taken into account when designing meaningful curriculum practices for social interventions such as Response to Intervention (RTI), but should they should also be seen as a natural resource available to educators to use when working with marginalized population, particular Latino students. Furthermore, we recommend *personalismo* to be thought of as teaching skills and abilities that

lead to effective relationship-building between the teacher and student which set the foundation for learning.

While this was a small study of N=712 students, we believe the findings will add a new dimension to the debate about how to narrow the achievement gap of Latino students by further examining the perceptions of teachers, principals and parents about the concept of *personalismo*. We therefore recommend further examination of how *personalismo* can be integrated into the daily instructional and socio-cultural behaviors of school personnel so that urban students can benefit academically. We further feel this is a worthy topic that can be replicated in a large scale urban district to include schools of varied sizes with varying degrees of *personalismo* to measure its impact on student academic achievement.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This study addressed the issue of “Personalismo, Small Schools, and Latino Students’ Academic Success” as a concept that may help educators narrow the achievement gap of Latino students. While we do not propose personalismo to be the single, most important variable that can improve achievement, we advise it can establish a foundation to improved academic outcomes.

*Personalismo* is coined by several studies as a medium for establishing strong, trusting, and meaningful relationships between students and faculty that create a special bond which according to numerous researchers on the subject, yield improved academic outcomes (Meier, 1995; Lee & Loeb, 2000; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak & Powell, 2000; Aness & Ort, 2001, Lee & Friedkin, 2007 and Stevens, 2008). Additionally, our focus is the Latino student and small urban public schools where the concept of *personalismo* may be present in varying degrees.

Research about the benefits of personalismo, which is embedded in everyday practices of stakeholders within most small schools, has shown that personalismo may lay the foundation to significantly impact academic achievement. Additionally, this study presented the findings of a myriad of educational theories and quantitative studies conducted over the past thirty years about the benefits of small schools, particularly for marginalized students. The researcher therefore makes a series of observations about how the concept of personalismo can transform teaching and learning within an urban community where the majority of students are Latinos.

This study focused on only one facet of a school social organization that is the concept of personalismo as exhibited by the stakeholders in each school. We acknowledge that there are other variables that may contribute to academic outcomes such as instructional strategies, textbook series, student mobility, students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), Limited English Proficient students (LEPs), teacher mobility etc. We also acknowledge that the findings were limited to two schools whose total student population is  $n=712$ . Nevertheless, the study provides us with empirical data that supports the need to further research about the benefits of personalismo as a foundation for Latino students to thrive academically.

Additionally, this study provides a platform for improved professional development efforts in the way educators gain knowledge about the socio-emotional needs of Latino students found in the behaviors exhibited by the stakeholders in school A. These behaviors have been identified by Lee & Loeb (2000) as "school size is strongly associated with teachers' attitudes about collective responsibility" which is related to student learning (p. 22).

Collective responsibility is an integral part of personalismo and as such, it provides educators with a sense of duty to focus all instructional efforts and activities on the needs of the students. In schools where personalismo is evident, teachers' primary task is to address the needs of students over any other issue. Therefore, in SLCs teachers are charged with the responsibility to plan collaboratively, following a student-based mission as part of a unified organization, under clear norms, led by a visionary leader.

Although we designed this study to focus on the effects of personalismo and student academic achievement, it is difficult to see how one concept can have such a direct outcome. Moreover, we do not imply that personalismo is the answer to narrowing the achievement gap of Latino students. However, our hypothesis proposes personalismo behaviors, evident in many

SLCs, can facilitate personalized interactions among all stakeholders that result in personal communities where Latino students feel respected. As a result, teachers are able to build intimate trust-based relationships with their students that allow Latino students to improve academically when other variables are also present.

This study also focused on several nationwide pivotal studies on school size that have informed this long debate, examined the perceived benefits to be derived from small learning communities (SLCs), considered the costs of maintaining smaller structures within larger buildings known as schools-within-schools (SWS), and addressed student, teacher and parent perceptions about personalization and its relationship to improved academic outcomes.

The results of this study support the findings of earlier researchers (Meier, 1995, 2000) who examined this subject showing SLCs present an opportunity to replace large impersonal school buildings with a place where students feel nurtured, respected and meaningfully cared. This is also supported by Lee & Loeb (2000) whose Chicago-based study that included 5,000 teachers and 23,000 sixth and eighth grade students from 264 K-8 schools indicate that “school size influences student achievement directly and indirectly, through its effects on teacher’s attitudes” (p. 1). The same study concludes that when teachers know their students in a personalized setting, they are likely “to worry more about their failures,” and as such may provide more help directly toward academic improvement (p. 23).

This study is also supported by Wasley et al (2000) *Small Schools Great Strides* in conjunctions with the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) which showed that among the hundreds of small schools examined findings indicate small schools, while controlling for student demographics, are more positive learning environments than those of large schools. Hence, providing Latino students with highly personalized academic and social supports appears

to be important for student achievement as school ISAT scores from school A outweighed school B.

Additionally, this study also suggests that personalismo, when coupled with a sound curriculum, a teaching staff that is committed to collaborative practices and a leader whose visionary style leads all stakeholders to exceeding standards, can have a significant outcome on the academic lives of Latino students.

As an educator who has spent over thirty years of my professional life in search of ways to help Latino students succeed, this study has illuminated my career in ways that were never envisioned when I began the research. In reading the literature, I began to internalize how personalismo could make a difference in my own school where I implemented teacher teams whose primary focus was to assess students socio-emotional needs, academic performance and cultural perspectives. These activities, embedded in the concept of personalismo, allowed our school team to be more cognizant of students' personal struggles that prevented them from learning. As a result of these new interactions, there was an increase in standardized scores within a year from establishing highly personalized structures. Over the years, the school continues to exhibit great academic accomplishments much due to the level of personalismo required by the current leadership in order to address the needs of the whole child. This value system is also embedded in the behaviors of all adults within the school as well as the parents and local community.

Now as an area leader whose responsibilities include working with twenty eight schools where eighty five percent of its student population is Hispanic, my practices are centered on personalismo. These practices include building an area team where coaches, staff and administrators firmly believe and model personalized practices that promote relationship-

building based on respect, trust and care of the whole person. We believe these highly personalized practices must be embedded within the daily practices of the area leadership team and coaches in hopes that they are replicated at the school level. Personalismo is now evident not only in the daily interactions with adults, parents and students as we visit schools but also during performance management sessions (PMs) where the area team conducts quarterly data analysis with school leaders to monitor academic progress.

We propose to continue this work by further operationalizing the concept of personalismo represented by key strategies and behaviors. Such practices can include differentiating curriculum, the creation of centers where students are able to work independently while teachers assess their daily work, student journaling, one-on-one teacher and student sessions, advisory blocks, block scheduling, counseling and teacher collaborative teaming where student needs is the priority for all adults. We believe these behaviors do not guarantee improved academic outcomes, but enable teachers and students to set a sound foundation that allows students to learn in a trusting, safe and caring environment. These environments are deeply-rooted in the Latino cultural values and as such, they create a safe place for Latino students to thrive academically.

As further research is conducted about the concept of personalismo, a longitudinal study may add validity and reliability to what is already a significant indicator for student achievement. Hopefully, visionary work about the needs of Latino students will lead to increased academic achievement and reduced drop-out rates within this growing population.



## INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The results of this study support the hypothesis that *personalismo* provides an atmosphere of trust and respect where Latino students feel valued. This atmosphere contributes to Latino student academic outcomes and helps reduce the achievement gap. Additionally, small elementary school settings provide interpersonal closeness and connectedness between students and teachers which may contribute to improved benchmark scores in Latino students. Also, despite the different textbook series, academic programs and teacher demographics in schools A and B, *personalismo* appears to be more of a salient variable that significantly impacts student achievement in school A versus B. Moreover, the data collected via the quantitative analysis as well as the qualitative CPS “My Voice” results appears to support our thesis.

The health field provides a gateway for identification, screening, referral and access of Latino patients to the larger community. Through their supports to Latino families, health care providers have discovered the need to personalize their interactions with Latino patients as the way to build trusting relationships that can translate into improved patient-doctor rapport. The Delgado (1995) study in the health field supports the hypothesis as it confirms the need for health care providers to provide patients with personalized procedures that help build trust and respect between the patient and the health care provider. Additionally, Delgado (1995) concluded that in order to meet the need of Hispanic communities, health promotion programs must target the specific community they seek to serve and know about their culture, language and values. This paper draws an analogy between the health care and educational fields as they both provide a critical service to the Latino community that is based on trust and relationship-building, thus a critical part of *personalismo*.

Meier (2002) reported that small schools provide students with “the key building block” (p.13) that help build trust among students and teachers. These relationships, according to Meier, were proven to be a vital component in the academic lives of Latino students whose cultural values rest on personalismo-based interactions.

Meier (2002) revealed that in order to narrow the achievement gap, school leaders need to establish climates that are based on social trust. Meier adds that the gap that exists in many urban schools that impede children of color to succeed, has to do with equity of resources that include not only instructional materials, state of the art technology regardless of the size of schools and most importantly, high teacher qualification standards. The author concluded that even if all the resources were in place, “we need to fix the quality of relationships we have with kids and their families” (p. 152). Meier reinforced the need for all stakeholders to tackle the achievement gap “without building cultures of trust that overlap race, language, and class” (p. 152) as these factors allow children and their families to feel they are important members of the community.

Lee and Friedkin (2007) showed that the effects on academic achievement to be a significant factor in favor of SLCs, as marginalized students showed measureable gains when enrolled in small schools. This national study included over 193 schools where Latino students represented the major ethnic group. In it, the authors found Latinos reaching significant academic gains during the two-year study where Hispanics SLC schools on the average improved from 31.5% to 43% from 2002 to 2004.

Lee and Loeb (2000) found Chicago small schools noticeably more advantaged than middle-sized and large schools, academically as well as sociably. Academically, small schools showed significantly higher gains from 1997 to 1998. That is, the means between schools with

less than 400 students were 21.47 while middle size schools showed 17.56 and large schools at 16.72. Comparable findings were found in this study where as illustrated in table 4.3 ISAT Reading overtime meets/exceeds results show school A 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores exceeding school B from 2005 to 2010. Similar findings were found in mathematics as illustrated in table 4.4 where the ISAT Mathematics overtime meets/exceed reports show school A 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores exceeding school B from 2005 to 2010. Similarly, as table 4.5 illustrates, the Science overtime meet/exceeds scores including ELLs show school A 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students surpassing school B 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010.

The above findings support Value Added (VA) data in Reading and Mathematics where on table 4.7 school A reached percentile levels from 49 to 99 from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades; averaging 99% in Reading and Mathematics while school B as shown on table B averaged 23% in Reading and 80% in Mathematics. This data coincides with the qualitative information shown on figure 4.3 where respondents rated school A with 87% excellent to adequate levels of safe and respectful climate while respondents rated school B with 18% under the “needs improvement” level and 64% as “low adequate” level.

Ancess and Ort (2001) study on school dropouts in America looks at school size and personalization and agreed that “organizational and pedagogical practices that are important for student achievement” include personalization (p. 17). In these SLCs, rigor or academic press as defined by Ancess and Ort (2001) is prevalent in small schools as they exhibit “caring and intellectual communities” (p.17) that contribute to positive academic outcomes. The authors add that improved outcomes are the result of the meaningful relationships between teachers and students that create a special bond based on respect and trust embedded within the concept of *personalismo* which is steeped within the culture of small schools.

A parallel finding is revealed in figure 4.4 where the 2009 CPS *Student Connection Survey* “My Voice” reports school A with 86% overall excellent to adequate levels of academic rigor while reports from the same topic show school B with 74% rate of academic rigor. This is supported by the *t*-test reports illustrated on table 4.9 where grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> from schools A and B were tested. Each result indicated school A with significant *t* levels outside the critical region. Similar results surfaced when conducting the Mathematics grade level *t*-tests as illustrated on table 4.10 thus, placing school A at a significant level outside the critical range.

The Balagna (2006, 2008) study supports the hypothesis that confirms the need to further examine the merits of *personalismo*, especially in underserved communities. Findings from this report reveal that Latino students appeared to struggle when their surroundings were inconsistent with the traditional Latino values that include elements of *personalismo*. Balagna (2008) reported that Latino students in the study reported the need to see school environments that were focused on building relationships and understanding the needs of each child. In the same report, Balagna showed that teachers tended to blame Latino students’ behavioral problems on the child, and Caucasians’ behavioral issues on the environment. Balagna concluded that most of what Latino students wanted to see improved in their schools was aligned to *personalismo* and *familismo* characteristics.

A pivotal study that aligned with our hypothesis was the Stevens (2008) study written in conjunction with CCSR about the benefits of small learning communities in Chicago. Findings indicated that by providing students with a personalized structure appeared to have significant results in students’ academic achievement. However, as previously noted by Lee & Loeb (2000) in their Chicago study (p. 8), the CCSR (2008) study found that “personalized student support may facilitate improvement” but personalization “may not be essential for schools to raise

student achievement in cases where leadership and professional community are absent (CCSR, p. 12). This is a critical finding that confirmed the hypothesis as *personalismo* is not only about student-teacher relationships but also about building communities where all stakeholders are responsible for establishing meaningful and purposeful relationships that foster rigorous academic behaviors. Furthermore, *personalismo* is about having a “collective responsibility for student learning” (Lee & Loeb, 2000 p. 8) where adults’ attitudes directly influence learning.

## IMPLICATIONS

According to the empirical data shared in this paper, the concept of *personalismo* embedded in the pedagogy of small schools and small learning communities appear to have significant impact on the academic achievement of children of color, specifically Latino students as their culturally valued beliefs are validated by all school stakeholders (Meier, 1995, 2002; Lee and Loeb, 2000; Aness and Ort, 2001 and Stevens, 2008).

By implementing *personalismo* in urban schools where children of color are prevalent, we propose that this concept can not be discounted as a significant contribution to educational practices that may impact the achievement gap, especially in marginalized communities. Despite its expense and much-needed professional support to bring awareness to all stakeholders about *personalismo*, the return on the investment in our students toward narrowing the achievement gap across urban public schools is so important that merits immediate action.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations in this study that warrant further analysis in the future. The study only included two small schools whose total population is  $n=712$ . The quantitative analysis via the *t*-tests did not take into consideration all the feedback from various stakeholders about the benefits of small schools and *personalismo* in a qualitative manner which could have added a richer and more personable basis. If time had permitted, an additional survey including administrators, teachers and parents would have been added. Also, the research might have been expanded to include the voices of administrators and district leaders as well as Local School Council members whose recommendations about small schools and *personalismo* might have reaped the most benefits.

The following recommendations for further research are put forth to advance the research about small schools and *personalismo* to impact student academic achievement, particularly among Latino students:

- To conduct a longitudinal study across the district with larger populations including small and large schools. This would have shown a comparable difference between the two kinds of school structures.
- To conduct a study addressing student perceptions about *personalismo* in their schools. This would have allowed students to speak to their perception about building meaningful relationships as a means to improve learning.
- To include variable such as leadership skills, teacher quality, various types of instructional materials and textbook series utilized by schools and their achievement rates. These variables might have an important impact on how *personalismo* is viewed in each school.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the concept of *personalismo* has been linked to an ongoing debate that centers on the achievement gap evident in urban public schools between children of color and their White counterparts. While we do not imply that the concept of *personalismo* is a panacea for Latino student academic success, our findings indicate *personalismo* to be an indicator of academic success for Latino students as it provides a culturally-based foundation for learning. Furthermore, *personalismo* and small learning communities may not be the most significant factors that can transform education in isolation, or if they need to work in combination with other factors such as strong school leaders who employ highly qualified teachers who understand the importance of collective responsibilities within a school community.

This study has focused on two similarly-designed small schools in a Chicago Latino community. The ISAT data analysis revealed evidence which confirms the findings that validate the reason for having small learning communities. We show that when leaders of SLCs, such as that of school A, effectively employ the concept of *personalismo*, the results show improved academic outcomes.

An emerging result of this study seems to focus on effective school leadership which according to Stevens (2008) must focus on distributive leadership skills that allow teachers to collaborate and play “an active role in decision making and school management” (p. 5). Hence, without good instructional leaders at the helm of small schools, we run the risk of dwarfing its development, thus failing over time. Moreover, we recommend that in order to build on the concept of *personalismo*, creating awareness about small learning communities and building



student-advocate teams of teachers must be the nations' top priorities for parents, administrators, educators, community leaders and policymakers.

Additionally, we suggest that the concept of personalismo, when other structures such as a sound standards-based-curriculum, led by a visionary principal who works with teacher teams to collaborate regularly, can have a significant outcome on the academic lives of Latino students. Hence, we recommend further research on ways to operationalize the concept of personalismo to illuminate the way educators address the socio-emotional and academic needs of Latino students in United States.

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## APPENDIX



Educate • Inspire • Transform

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Office of Performance  
125 South Clark Street, 16th floor Chicago, Illinois 60603  
Telephone: 773/553-3580  
Fax: 773/553-3758

September 16, 2010

Isabel Mesa-Collins  
AIO #10  
5201 N. Monitor Street  
Chicago, IL 60630

Dear Ms. Mesa-Collins:

Thank you for your interest in conducting research in The Chicago Public Schools. The Research Review Board of the Office of Performance has reviewed your proposal for research entitled Personalismo, Small Schools and Latino Students and has approved your request to conduct research. Although your study has been approved, school principals have final authority over activities that are allowed to take place in the school. If data collection continues beyond a year from this approval, please complete the Modification & Continuing Review Process Checklist.

Upon completion of the research study, a copy of the final report or summary of the results must be provided to the Research Review Board. The Board reserves the right to use the information in the research report or summary for planning, solicitation of grants and staff development.

Please note that your study has been assigned Project ID #329. If you have any questions, please contact Michelle Acker on my staff at 773-553-2452.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Amy Nowell", is located below the "Sincerely," text.

Amy Nowell  
Chair, Research Review Board  
Office of Performance



Institutional Review Board  
1 East Jackson Boulevard  
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2201  
312-362-7593  
Fax: 312-362-7574

# Office of Research Protections Memorandum

## Non-Reviewable Determination

**To:** Isabel Mesa Collins, Graduate Student, School of Education  
Roxanne Owens, PhD., Faculty Sponsor, School of Education

**From:** Office of Research Protections

**Date:** August 27, 2010

**Re:** IRB Review of Protocol # IM081710SOE

The Office of Research Protections has received the application materials for your research activity entitled "Personalismo, Small Schools and Latino Students." After a review of these materials, the Office has determined that the activity does not involve human subjects as defined by 45 CFR 46.102 (f), because it does not involve living individuals about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains either:

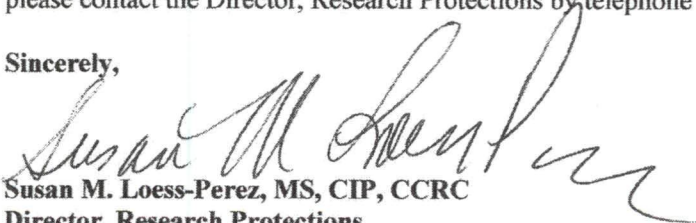
- (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
- (2) identifiable private information.

Although the research activity clearly data about people, the data is being provided to you completely de-identified and in aggregate, so that it is in no way individually identifiable. For these reasons, the Office of Research Protections has determined that the activity is non-reviewable.

Please be reminded that revisions to the activity may change its eligibility for IRB review. If you are unsure whether a revised version of this activity requires IRB review, you should contact the Office of Research Protections prior to implementing the changes.

The Office of Research Protections would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact the Director, Research Protections by telephone at (312) 362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

Sincerely,

  
Susan M. Loess-Perez, MS, CIP, CCRC  
Director, Research Protections



# DEPAUL UNIVERSITY



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August 9, 2010

Ms. Amy Nowell  
Chicago Public Schools  
Research and Accountability/ 16th Floor  
125 S. Clark Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60603

RE: ID # 329

Dear Ms. Nowell,

Isabel Mesa Collins, a current doctoral candidate, has submitted an Application for Expedited Review to the DePaul University Institutional Review Board. Her dissertation proposal has been approved by her committee. Her study is entitled "Personalismo, Small Schools, and Latino Students." Her committee members are Dr. John Taccarino, Dr. Patrick McDevitt, and myself. She plans to use aggregate ISAT data, so we anticipate approval of her expedited proposal.

Sincerely,

Roxanne Owens, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor



Ron Huberman  
Chief Executive Officer

Dr. Barbara Eason-Watkins  
Chief Education Officer

Flavia Hernández  
Chief Officer

**Office of P-12 Management**  
125 South Clark Street, 10th Floor • Chicago, Illinois 60603  
Telephone: 773/553-2150 • Fax: 773/553-2151

May 20, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my understanding that Mrs. Isabel Mesa Collins, Chief Area Officer, is conducting an internal research as part of her dissertation for her Doctoral degree. The purpose of this letter is to inform you of my support for Mrs. Mesa Collins' research project on the effect that *personalismo* may have in the academic achievement of Latino students.

As noted in the research project title, "*Personalismo, Small Schools and the Academic Achievement of Latino Students*", *personalismo* may be the "agent" that can provide educators with ways to positively impact the lives of Latino students and in doing so, help improve their academic outcomes. This construct can be of great significance to the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and in particular to the way in which teachers and administrators look at their schools' infrastructure.

Mrs. Mesa Collins' work is important because 41%, a significant percentage, of CPS students are Latino. The findings from this study can provide a framework that could guide future initiatives, geared towards narrowing the achievement gap between Latino and their counterparts. This work can also compliment some of the recent findings of the Consortium on Chicago School Research about small schools and personalized learning environments.

As per the executive summary prepared by Mrs. Mesa Collins, she will conduct a quantitative study that will use secondary data from REA thus, avoiding any contact with students or staff from the four sample schools. The schools will not be identified in her study as she will use a general coding system.

I understand that she will deliver the executive summary to your office on or before Friday, May 21, 2010 and this letter of support. I trust that Mrs. Mesa Collins will share her work with the appropriate CPS leadership, if needed to provide useful data on student learning among the Latino community.

Thank you for your attention. If you have any questions, please call me at 773-553-3616 or Mrs. Mesa Collins at 773-535-8080.

Sincerely,

Flavia Hernandez  
Chief Officer