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Los Caminos: Latino/a Youth Forging Pathways in Pursuit of Higher Education

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The underrepresentation of Latino/a students in postsecondary education has received considerable attention in the research literature (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Oliva, 2008; Santiago, 2007; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005) as well as national policy forums (Santiago & Brown, 2004; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010). Improving access to higher education for Latinos/as is predicated on increasing the pool of Latino/a high school graduates that are prepared to meet the rigors of college. Most often, research regarding the dearth Latino/a participation in higher education focuses on providing general statistical portraits or one-size fits all policy recommendations without adequately addressing the lived realities of Latino/a youth navigating school in a harsh sociopolitical climate characterized by racism, linguisticism, and xenophobia, as evidenced recent anti-immigrant legislation and efforts to ban ethnic studies in public high schools and colleges, the elimination of bilingual education in several states with large Spanish-speaking communities, and a general escalating assault on Latino/a youth. Remaining under-examined are the experiences, pathways, and variations among Latino/a youth on their journeys through high school and into (or away from) institutions of higher education.

In an effort to address this void in the literature and improve policy and practice relative to Latino matriculation into higher education, this article draws from data collected as part of a three-year ethnographic study that followed two groups of Latino/a students through their final years of high school, the college application process, and for some, into their undergraduate studies. At the onset of the study, all of the participants expressed aspirations to pursue higher education upon graduation from high school. However, over the years, as they encountered structural as well as personal barriers, they embarked on divergent tracks. Using Latino/a Critical Theory as an analytical framework, this paper provides an in-depth, longitudinal perspective on a seminal period in the journey from high school to college, offering an analysis grounded in the lived realities of Latino/a youth of the experiences and support structures that influenced students' academic trajectories. Insights into the distinct pathways—or *caminos*—taken by students in their pursuit of college, present significant implications for the development of policies aimed at increasing the presence and improving the performance of Latinos/as in higher education. The study aimed to address the following broad research questions: What are the experiences that influence Latino students' pathways into or away from higher education? How are educators responding to the Latinization of U.S. schools, and what impact do these responses have on Latino students' higher education aspirations and attainment?

Theoretical Framework

Because of the pervasiveness of race in the lives of the participants as well as the influence of race/ethnicity in the structuring of educational opportunities for young people in schools, I employed Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as analytical tools to extract meaning from the participants' experiences in their quest for access to higher education. CRT centers race in the examination of phenomena, underscoring the role of power within racialized systems such as schools. First applied within scholarship in legal studies, CRT has emerged as a valuable tool within educational research as scholars have sought to more effectively understand the role of race, racism, and racialization in the educational experiences and outcomes for communities of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Irizarry, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Milner, 2008; Solórzano, 1998). CRT explicitly challenges hegemonic epistemologies and ideologies such as notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality and seeks to expose the ways in which racialized power relations shape the experiences of people of color (Bell, 1980; Chapman, 2007; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). In this case, CRT is leveraged to expose how the disheartening academic outcomes for Latino youth and their disproportionately low rates of participation in higher education are not the result of depressed aspirations or insufficient effort but rather the product of an inequitable distribution of resources, broadly defined, and opportunity structures that limit choice sets for Latino youth.

While both theoretical frameworks center race in examinations of power and opportunity, LatCrit aims to extend the focus of analyses to include the intersections between race and other important variables, including but not limited to class, gender,

language, ethnicity, and immigration status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Huber, 2010; Yosso, 2006). LatCrit also challenges the Black/White binary that often limits considerations of race and racism to two groups, thereby creating discursive space for Latinas/os who can be of any race, and individuals who may be multiracial. Consistent with the five themes that characterize the application of LatCrit to educational research— the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and the interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) — I organize my research findings around refranes, Spanish language proverbs with a long history of application in Latino communities.

Refranes as an Analytical Tool within Lat Crit

Consistent with the goals of LatCrit Theory, I embarked on this project with the goal of conducting *humanizing research*, “a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants” (Paris, 2011; 1). In addition to the relationships that emerge with participants, it is also imperative that researchers apply these tenets to the ways the findings from research projects get reported. That is, how we report and speak about our findings is as important as the research project and findings themselves. To that end, in a concerted attempt to honor the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Neff, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992) and collective wisdom that exist in Latino communities, I use refranes to help illuminate the findings emerging from this research project while providing a unique, Latinocentric framework for analyzing,

understanding, and improving the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino students in U.S. schools. The application of refranes in this context also serves a teaching function, connecting readers with a Latino tradition used to pass valuable information from one generation to the next.

When working with the youth over the three years of the study, we often exchanged refranes, each of us drawing from conversations with our elders and examples were loved ones tried to teach us life lessons using these Spanish-language proverbs. Applying them here not only seems methodologically appropriate but also liberating, as I get to bring more of my Latino identity into my scholarly writing while simultaneously honoring the communities from which the refranes are originate.

Methods

In 2008, I initiated Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators conducting Research to transform Teacher Education), a multiyear participatory action research project that engaged Latino youth in urban schools in meaningful, co-constructed research while enhancing their academic skills. FUERTE was designed specifically to inform the personal and professional trajectories of Latino high school students by addressing issues related to the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities of their lives. A primary goal of the project was to familiarize the students with the conventions of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), as a means of exploring the educational experiences of Latino youth and other students who have been historically underserved by schools (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The YPAR project was embedded in a class that I offered, first at Metro High School (2007-2008) and next at Rana High School (2008-2010).

Setting and Participants

Metro High School is an inter-district magnet school with a focus on global studies serving grades 6-12. It is a relatively new school attracting students from several urban communities, including Capital City, home of the participants as well as a small number of suburban White students. Students are selected for spaces in MHS through a lottery system, and once accepted, they are transported daily to and from the school by private school buses. Approximately 80% of the students attending the school are students of color. Rana High School is a more traditional, comprehensive high school in a community with a burgeoning Latino population. The school is one of the poorest and lowest performing in the state. The population of the school is divided fairly evenly between Latino and White students, who each represent a little less than half of the study body. The cohort completion rate for Latino students is approximately 50%, meaning that almost half of all Latinos that begin the ninth grade at RHS do not graduate in four years.

At Metro High School I worked with a group of four Latino seniors for the duration of one academic year and remained in contact with them out of a genuine personal interest in their futures as well as a professional interest in their pursuit of higher education. After that first cohort graduated, I moved the project to Rana High School and looped with one group of seven Latino students from 11th through 12th grade. I have since remained in contact with the group and have followed their post high school trajectories with great anticipation and angst. All of the RHS participants self identified as Latino, including two Mexican Americans and nine Puerto Ricans.

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Data Collection and Analysis

Over the three-year period, one year at MHS and two at RHS, I conducted an ethnographic study aimed at learning more about the educational experiences of students navigating schools within the context of Latinization (see Irizarry, 2011). That is, as the population of the United States becomes increasingly Latino, a phenomenon most evident in the shifting demographics of schools, I was interested in understanding how Latino youth made meaning of their educational experiences and how youth participatory action research could be leveraged by students to inform their academic and personal trajectories.

Employing critical ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1995), I spent more than 500 hours with students in formal educational contexts and another 250 outside of the confines of the YPAR project over that three-year period. I developed field notes after class meetings and other events, videotaped class sessions and student research presentations, and retained copies of many of the students' work products. In addition, I conducted 3 in-depth, phenomenological interviews with each participant each year of the study (Seidman, 2006). All of the interviews were transcribed and, combined with the other artifacts, serve as the primary data sources for the study.

A grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed to analyze the data. Open coding was used to consolidate the data into smaller meaningful units, and analytical memos were crafted to record ideas that emerged during the process of analysis. The data set compiled over the three years was large, so special attention was

given to students' conversations about pursuing higher education. After developing codes and culling themes from the data, I shared my findings with the student participants and solicited their input through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The experiences of the participants across the two different settings were organized into three themes that emerged from the data: Pathways through high school, Partners on the journey, and Divergent journeys. Each refers to distinct aspects of the students' caminos through high school and seminal experiences and institutional structures that either facilitated or hindered students' ability and aspirations to pursue post secondary education. Using refranes as an analytical tool rooted in the tenants of Latino/a Critical Race Theory, I explore the findings in what follows.

Pathways through high school

The two high school settings the Project FUERTE cohorts navigated were different in mission and history, with one a "neighborhood school" forced to respond to shifting demographics and a burgeoning Latino population and the other specifically designed as part of a "school choice" initiative to give selected students from urban communities educational opportunities that were elusive for most students in their neighborhood schools. Consequently, the students' pathways through these institutions were fundamentally different, even though they were educated within public schools in the same state. The curriculum and extracurricular activities at Metro High School were

developed and organized to prepare students to meet the rigors of higher education, with an array of high-level and advanced placement courses and high expectations and support for all students. Because of its international focus, students had opportunities to travel abroad and host exchange students, fueling a personally and academic enriching cultural and academic dialogue among students of color from urban communities in the state that were “sending districts” for the school as well as with African, Asian, Latin American, and European students from across the globe. Generally speaking, the school, while not perfect, had a culture of academic opportunity.

In contrast, Rana High School fits the mold of “traditional” high school in every sense of the world. This comprehensive high school, the only district-run high school in the community, was in the midst of confronting significant demographic change, as the Latino population in Rana City has grown more than 500 percent in the past three decades. Once held up as a model of academic excellence, RHS is now one of the lowest performing high schools in the state and is in jeopardy of being taken over by the state. While the racial/ethnic and linguistic composition of the student body has changed considerably, the curriculum, teaching practices, and demographics of the teaching force in the school have changed very little. Project FUERTE students attending the school suggest that there are two schools operating within the confines of RHS, one for white students, who have access to college-prep and Advanced Placement courses and are tracked for academic success, the other for Latinos who are relegated to the lowest academic tracks of the school and have very little representation in school-sponsored extracurricular activities. Drawing upon the work of Antwi Akom (2003), the students

refer to the racialized patterns of academic tracking and the bifurcated opportunity structure at RHS as academic apartheid.

Many of the students at Metro High School were aware of how their school differed from more traditional neighborhood schools serving communities of color. They often articulated a feeling of being “lucky”, perhaps stemming from being selected through a lottery access to MHS. Students’ understanding of the resources, broadly defined, available to them and how these have shaped their journeys through high school and eventually into college, is evident in a conversation among Crystal, Tony, and Kristina during a class at the end of their senior year:

Crystal: I used to think that we just worked harder than other Latinos, that we were like motivated or smarter. That’s not it, I don’t think. You can see how different this place [RHS] is set up, what we have that many Latino students don’t.

Tony: Like laptops... Wow. You get here and they give you a laptop. You feel like a professional, like whoa. You have to do your work on it and email teachers and stuff. They are really strict with the uniform and stuff, but think about that. Think about all the AP classes. Think about the trips we get to take.

Kristina: I’ve been to China, Spain, France. I’ve taken 3 AP classes. Imagine... I’m a Puerto Rican from the hood and I roll like that. I’ve been to all these places, can talk about all these places. That’s big. They value that in college and when you are looking for jobs. They take you seriously because they see you have done all

of this serious stuff. That's what this school does for you. Unfortunately, this school isn't the norm. Most Latino students don't have [access to] all this.

While most public schools serving populations comprised largely of students of color and students from lower socioeconomic strata are underfunded and overcrowded (Noguera, 2000), thus limiting in the types of courses and experiences they can offer to students, MHS received special funding as a magnet school to be able to offer an alternative for inner-city students of color. MHS students asserted that they found some aspects of the school culture, such as the uniform and discipline practices stifling, but they were nevertheless appreciative to have access to the personal and professional development opportunities available at RHS. Equally important, they were acutely aware that their experiences were not "the norm," and they made sure to take advantage of all that was offered at their school, thus increasing the likelihood that they would be able to pursue higher education.

Students at Rana High School, on the other hand, were less aware of the racialized disparities within their school that impacted the quantity and quality of their educational experiences. That is, students had a scant understanding of the courses they needed to take to be eligible for college or the processes by which they could advocate for themselves to have their programs of study changed to include more rigorous, college-prep courses. They knew that they were underrepresented in "Fundamental Level" courses, but they assumed that was because "white students are smarter," an appraisal that was the consensus belief among the class at the inception of the research project. Most assumed the school was working in their best interests, and

that if they worked hard they would be able to achieve their goals of attending and completing post-secondary education. When I first met the Project FUERTE participants at RHS, they were in the 11th grade, yet only two of the seven had taken Algebra 1, a pre-requisite for applying to a four-year college in the state. As students came to a deeper understanding of educational inequality and the types of courses and experiences necessary to be a strong candidate for a four-year institution of higher education, they became increasingly frustrated, expressing a level of hurt and confusion that accompanies aspirations suppressed and dreams differed.

Carmen: I never really thought about how I was being taught less than everybody else. I come to school everyday thinking that this is what I am supposed to do. The fact is they are not preparing me for anything really, except for maybe a job in fast-food as a cashier or something like that. I'm learning less than everybody out there, so how am I going to compete. Hard work by itself is not enough. I'm gonna make it, but right now I am not sure how.

Similarly, Alberto, a Mexican-American student who immigrated to the United States as a second grader, commented:

I'm not learning anything, really. What is this going to do for me? I'm probably going to wind up cutting grass and shoveling snow either way. Sometimes I think I wanna be a teacher. Sometimes I am really positive about that. Then I go to my classes, teachers be giving us worksheets, yelling at us all the time, not teaching

anything we need for college, and I'm like, damn what am I going to do to get there [to college and the teaching profession]?

The pathways available to the students in these two educational settings serving Latino students are disparate, to say the least. Metro High School, because of its' status as a magnet school, has the resources as well as the commitment to serve students from communities that have been underserved by schools. The rigorous courses offerings, educational resources (i.e. laptops, smart boards, and state of the art facilities), and high-level of expectations for students convey a clear message for Latino students that they are worthy of investment and capable of attending college. Conversely, as indicated in Alberto's and Carmen's comments above, students in Rana High School seem lost, set on a course that, despite students' best efforts, is unlikely to lead them into institutions of higher education or prepare them for the promising careers to which they aspire. Both groups of students come from communities with very similar demographics. In Rana and Capital City Latinos account for more than half of the population, and they are two of the poorest communities in the state. The students share many commonalities as well, with the majority being Puerto Rican and coming from female-headed homes that place a high value on education. However, the pathways through high school available to them are fundamentally different, and, as I will discuss later in the article, so are their eventual destinations after graduation.

Applying a LatCrit perspective, the role of race and racism in structuring learning opportunities for students is made evident. The pathways available to students are the result of a highly racialized process whereby school officials, educators, and policy

makers make decisions about the capabilities of students and then shape policy and practice around their perceptions, which are often rooted in deficit notions of Latinos. The refrain, *Mal camino no va a buen lugar* (loosely translated as: A bad path doesn't lead to a good place), poignantly underscores the ways that schools can portend a pre-determined, pessimistic fate for students. Certainly there are and will continue to be students who persevere and achieve academic success and post-secondary access despite being set on a "bad path," to extend the metaphor. However, the social reproductive function of urban schooling is clear in the relegation of Latinos at Rana High School to the least rigorous academic tracks of the school.

Pointing to the wonderful array of academic opportunities available at Metro High School, which serves a large percentage of Latino students from urban communities, critics might suggest that institutional racism is not at play in that setting. Mapping institutional racism at MHS is far more complex because the manifestations are more subtle, offering tangible benefits to students in the form of academic opportunity but concurrently embedded in a problematic ideology that continues to exalt Anglo culture and the needs of White students over those of students and communities of color. That is, Metro High School was created in response to a desegregation order legislated in Capital City. To fulfill the mandate of addressing segregation and racial isolation of students of color in Capital City, a series of inter-district magnet schools were constructed, most outside of the community. One of the primary goals was to create learning environments that would entice suburban white families "back" by offering beautiful facilities and a college-prep curriculum on par with

the offerings at suburban schools. The message to Latino students is that they have to physically leave their home communities and operate in a system designed to attract and meet the needs of White students in order to obtain a quality education that prepares them for college. The racist undertones of this mission underscore the continued pathologizing of communities of color.

In sum, the racialized pathways offered in both settings are problematic, although there are more tangible, ancillary benefits for the students at Metro High School that assist in student development and the college going process. The academic pathways students pursued at their respective high schools were largely reflective of the opportunity structure and school climate in their respective institutions. Course offerings and extracurricular learning opportunities are undoubtedly seminal aspects influencing students' capability to pursue higher education. Another important variable influencing students' college aspirations and attainment is the personal relationships students develop with adults in these settings that can provide an additional layer of support for navigating high school and pursuing post-secondary education. The role of these "partners on the journey" in supporting the achievement of Latino students is discussed in what follows.

Partners on the journey

The second major theme that emerged from the data collected in both settings was students' references to the support, or lack thereof, received from the adults entrusted with their formal education, documenting how teachers and counselors

served as gatekeepers or critical liaison's to facilitate the successful completion of high school and preparation for college. Most notably, students at Metro highlighted the value of having faculty of color, including Latino teachers, who they believed, as one student put it "get us in special ways, like ways that your family get you" and critical White allies, who were successful in crossing lines of cultural and linguistic differences to work effectively in this setting. The students at RHS longed to interact with educators of color, but they were in short supply in the school, and students had limited access to Latino or other professionals of color in the field of education. Equally important, they cited a lack of meaningful relationships with White teachers and feeling alienated from the school and subsequently from the content and procedural knowledge needed to successfully complete high school, apply to and gain admission into an institution of higher education.

Describing the value of relationships in providing support for Latino students, Sara Hernandez, a Puerto Rican student from Capital City, noted the following in an interview:

When I came to [Metro High School] I didn't know anything about college, really. It was like this idea, like "yeah I want to go to college," but I had not clue about how to make that happen. Then, like the teachers here start talking to you. You have the guidance office making sure that every student applies to college. It is like the norm here. They expect you to go to college and if you don't you are the exception. College is the norm. The longer you are here, the more you believe it.

Those teachers and counselors, they help you and you start to believe that [going to college] is real, not just a fake dream.

Many of the students at Metro High School echoed a similar sentiment, referencing their relationships with teachers as central to their ability to successfully complete high school and move on to college. In addition to the more general support offered for students to pursue post-secondary education available at MHS, students named and expressed a sincere appreciation for faculty of color at their school who were willing to speak to their personal experiences as students of color and their college-going process. Hearing about the racialized aspects of the process, which is rarely included as part of the “traditional” college advising that takes place in most schools, proved especially valuable for Kristina and Anthony, who exchanged the following during a focus group interview conducted in June of their senior year, as students prepared for graduation and after they had been admitted into institutions of higher education:

Anthony: For me, one of the main things was teachers like [Mr. D. and Mrs. S.] keeping it real and telling what is was like for them to be Latino and Black and go through this. They told us about being ignored by Guidance [staff], teachers not believing in them, like their stories of this process. That meant a lot to me. A lot of these White kids have parents who went to college, so they know how to do it. We are first-generation [college applicants and soon to be students], so we have to learn.

Kristina: That's real. It can be nerve-racking and a scary process, but they like took the mystery out of it. You see they made it, you are like them in many ways, Latino, and you know this is possible. They tell you like it is. [The process] is hard, but you can do it.

Having the support of teachers and counselors was invaluable for students at MHS. The development and successful implementation of a policy whereby every student was expected to apply to at least one college and provided with the support to do so, is noteworthy. The students' relationships with faculty of color provided a much-needed additional layer of support that helped students realize their dreams of attending college.

Students at Rana High School were not as fortunate, as the expectations for Latino students were far less ambitious than those at Metro High. The Guidance staff at RHS was overcommitted, with one guidance counselor for each class who looped with them from grades 9 through 12. Only one guidance counselor of the four was bilingual (English-Spanish), and students felt alienated from other staff members in the Guidance Office. When the bilingual counselor took a position at another school prior to the students' senior year, the participants felt forced to navigate the rough terrain of high school and the college-going process alone. They also lamented a lack of support from teachers who consistently reminded them that they should depress their educational and professional aspirations to conform to teachers' perceptions of them. The meaning students assign to what they perceived as a lack of institutional support is evidenced in a

conversation that took place as they prepared to present the findings from their research project at a regional conference.

Carmen: I'm going to include [in our presentation] how teachers always say are not "college material."

Alberto: Yo, that happened to me just yesterday. I was on my grind, working hard and ask the teacher for some work I missed. She asked me why, and I said because I want to get a good grade to get my GPA up and go to college. She like basically laughed in my face and was like, "Don't worry about it; you aren't going to college."

Taína: What? I would have flipped on that lady.

Ramiro: That's not that bad. They say worse to me all the time (letting out an awkward laugh).

Natasha: Me too. They let you know straight up that you aren't worth anything, not worth teaching. Even if you want to go to college, with teachers like that, how can you do it? They have the control over you.

Carmen: I'm going to go [to college] no matter what. I already put my mind to that.

Jasmine: The only one who really cared about us, about us going to college was [Ms. B, the bilingual guidance counselor], and now she is gone.

For students at Rana High School, their pursuit of higher education was a solitary journey undertaken without the support of adults more knowledgeable about the college application and admissions process. Prior to their participation in Project

FUERTE, none of the students had not heard of a fee waiver, even though because of their family's economic status (they all received free or price-reduced lunch), they qualified to take the SAT and apply to certain colleges free of charge. Access to school-based knowledge networks with the potential to positively influence their ability to pursue postsecondary education was scarce.

LatCrit theory emphasizes the importance, value, and utility of the experiential knowledge that exists in communities of color. When applied to this data set, it is clear that the extra layer of support provided by faculty of color at Metro High School. Moreover, their mere presence provided a counternarrative to challenge and debunk the well-entrenched, dominant narrative that depicts Latinos as apathetic about education. Conversely, students at Rana High School did not have one teacher of color teaching a core subject, and the Bilingual Guidance Counselor, who they perceived to be their only ally, took a position at another school. Without these role models and important relationships, students at RHS were even more vulnerable to the discriminatory practices that limited their access to information and depressed their performance.

The popular refrain, *Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres* (tell me with whom you walk, and I will tell you who you are), has particular utility here. The data suggests that the experiential knowledge that teachers of color have amassed as a result of successfully navigating K-12 schools and undergraduate (and often graduate) education as people of color, when shared with Latino students, can instill a sense of

confidence and genuine hope that can help them persevere in spite of great odds against them. The support teachers of color at Metro High provided is reflective of Patricia Gándara's (2008) model for "cocooning," which she describes as follows:

Sometimes the most effective antiracist strategy for helping students of color to navigate high school and move on to college is to give them opportunities to be 'cocooned' for some period of time in contexts that allow them to analyze in a safe environment what it means to be a racial-ethnic group member in and out of school and to draw inspiration and support from those who have traveled the same road before them (Gándara, p. 48).

Given the unique positionality and experiential knowledge of Latino educators, perhaps more attention should be given to supporting pathways for Latino students into the teaching profession. Such a movement has the potential to increase the likelihood of cocooning experiences for more students on their journeys from high school to college, resulting in greater Latino participation and completion of post-secondary education.

Divergent destinations

The first two findings unpack some of the experiences of Latino students with college aspirations in two very different settings. I highlighted the academic climate and culture of expectations in both schools, with special attention given to the tracks, or pathways, students took through school and the support, or partners on the journey, they had during the process. This section answers the question: Where are they now?

As one might expect, the students Metro High School, with a solid academic preparation, including access to college-level coursework and credit through Advanced Placement courses, and support from faculty of color experienced academic success. All of the participants graduated from high school, applied and were accepted to institutions of higher education. Three of the students enrolled in four-year institutions; one began his college career at a two-year college. Four years after our first meeting and three years into their college careers, all of the students are still journeying toward completion of undergraduate degrees and are in good academic standing after their junior year of college. Several have distinguished themselves, making the Dean's list several times and excelling in internships and other professional experiences. All are on track to graduate in May of 2012.

The students in Rana High School were not as fortunate. All of the students graduated from high school, a noteworthy accomplishment given the high school completion rates for Latinos, and all applied to college. Two of the students are undocumented, and their state does not currently have a version of the "Dream Act" that would, in addition to conferring other benefits, allow them to pay in-state tuition to attend state schools. The financial burden of college for these students was too severe, and they both decided to secure employment after high school and save money for college. Of the remaining five students, one joined the military, two enrolled in a local community college, and the other two did not feel prepared for higher education and chose to take jobs while they weigh their options. One of the two community college students terminated her studies after the first semester, citing resentment against

taking remedial courses that, in her words “wouldn’t count toward a degree,” and the need to work as reasons for her premature departure. The one remaining college student hopes to complete her Associate’s degree by May of 2012, and as of right now has no plans to transfer into a four-year institution to pursue a Bachelor’s degree. The RHS participants all work in low-wage jobs in the service industry.

One school created a culture that was conducive to academic and personal growth; the other suppressed the aspirations and attainment of students. The culture in each institution was reproduced by educators and students, to the detriment of Latino youth at Rana High School, which is more reflective of the types of schools attended by the majority of Latino students. The refrain, *A la tierra que fueras haz lo que vieras* (To the land you go, do what you see), appropriately summarizes this phenomenon and offers a potential explanation to better understand the disparate journeys and divergent outcomes of the two groups. Students surveyed the metaphorical landscape of the school, made consistent appraisals of the opportunities afforded them, and then adjusted their aspirations accordingly. It is important to reiterate that both groups of students were overwhelmingly similar in terms of racial/ethnic identification, family structure, socioeconomic status, and other variables. Most notably, all of the students expressed strong aspirations to attend college. The kids were virtually the same, but the opportunity structures at their respective schools were drastically different, predictably resulting in differential outcomes.

Discussion

The poor quality of their educational experiences leaves many Latino youth unprepared to meet the rigors of college. Consequently, fewer than 13% of Latinos/as are college graduates (Lopez, 2009). The experiences of the participants suggest that Latino students are typically relegated to schools that are often unable or unwilling to meet their needs. The success of the students from Metro High School clearly indicates that, contrary to popular opinion, Latino students are not the problem. With opportunity and support, Latino students can and do achieve at the highest levels. However, in order to access those opportunities that positioned them as strong candidates for higher education, the MHS students had to win a lottery. Educational opportunity and the preparation of students for postsecondary education should not be left to chance.

The overt discrimination experienced by the participants from Rana High School, through negative interactions with educators and academic tracking, represents a grave injustice committed against Latino youth. Efforts to improve Latino participation in postsecondary education must take into account the racialized system that systematically hinders the ability of so many Latino students to pursue higher education. The oft-cited refrain, *A grandes males, grandes remedios*, suggests, grave injustices, like those endured by Latino youth at Rana High School require large-scale, sustained remedies, not quick fixes. In addition to creating access to rigorous, college-prep curricula and sharing important information about the college application and financial aid process, the data also suggests that increasing the presence of Latino educators should be an important aspect of the solution.

The student participants in this study were not looking for adults to rescue them per se. Rather, they want critical allies to work collaboratively with them to transform the system so that they, and future generations of Latino students, will be able to achieve their goals. There were many teachers at RHS who empathized with Latino students and genuinely wanted them to do well. However, because students did not see them as change agents, it was assumed that they were fine with the status quo, which was detrimental for Latino youth. Similarly, there were probably teachers at MHS who were not invested in promoting the success of Latino youth, but the system in place was sufficient to help students move on to higher education. Ideally, students wouldn't have to fight for access to quality education, but the reality is that many do. And they are looking to us to join them and act in solidarity to promote the educational well being and higher education aspirations of all students.

Conclusion

I have had the privilege of accompanying these two groups of students for part of their journey through high school. We have worked collaboratively over several years, becoming enmeshed in each other's lives. Through my sustained interactions with the participants over time, I have been able to map their journeys through school, celebrate academic and personal successes, and sometimes even grieve losses and failures with them. Through the research project and the relationships developed with the participants, I have gleaned insights into the *caminos* they have taken students in their pursuit of college and the significant implications for researchers and policymakers that result from their experiences.

At times, as the voices of the participants suggest, students feel alone on this journey, completely disconnected from their teachers and other school personnel. The students reported feeling forced to navigate alone the often foreign terrain of school and the college-going process. Some students are triumphant on their solitary journeys, successfully completing their K-12 schooling despite a lack of support or connection to the institutions they attend or those that govern them. Many others, as evidenced by the obscenely high dropout/pushout rates among Latinos, never reach their final destination.

As teachers, administrators, researchers, policymakers, and others search for ways to ameliorate academic outcomes for Latino youth and others traditionally underserved by schools, they often fail to include those constituents most directly affected by their policies and practices—namely, Latino youth and their communities. In doing so, teachers and administrators also often walk alone, although unnecessarily. If we are to effectively respond to the Latinization of U.S. schools and significantly improve Latino student achievement, then students, their communities, teachers, and other school agents need to walk together on a shared journey with a common mission to forge new pathways into higher education for Latino youth.

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