

# **What Administrators Need to Know: Latinx Students, Equity, and the Normative Secondary Transition**

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## **Abstract**

*Although there is substantial research that has guided middle school reform, there is insufficient support of Latinx students during their normative secondary transition (middle school to high school). Current research emphasizes that students who are not prepared when entering high school will face grim academic futures. The study explores the experiences of eighth and ninth grade Latinx students, their teachers, and counselors in order to help educational leaders understand how to better address the structure, culture, and organization of agency within the transitional learning environment. Suggestions for responding to inequities, and increasing educational opportunity for Latinx students during the normative secondary transition will be explored.*

**Keywords:** equity, secondary transition, Latinx students, educational leadership, educational opportunity

Students make a critical decision regarding the direction of their educational trajectory within the first few weeks of the transition from eighth to ninth grade (McIntosh & White, 2006). Studies reveal that this time of vulnerability is compounded for minoritized students due to a lack of educational opportunity (Benner & Graham, 2009; McIntosh & White, 2006; Prelow, Loukas, & Jordan-Green, 2007; Smith, 2006; Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014). The normative secondary transition is recognized as a benchmark, milestone, and a significant barrier to the academic success of Latinx<sup>1</sup> students in high school (Black, 1999; Niesel & Griebel, 2005; Vasquez-Salgado & Chavira, 2014). According to Niesel and Griebel (2005), transitional competence is not an inherent quality or a characteristic of “the individual child alone, but a function of communication and interaction of all participants” (p. 7), where participants refers to the various constituencies that operate within the system of education or even within a given school site. Since educational leaders play a significant role in student achievement (Sun, & Leithwood, 2015), it is important that they are aware of all their students’ trajectory of success, and be prepared to address the significant hurdles for, and offer a more significant response to, their Latinx students who are more vulnerable during this time of transition. Prior research has focused on overall academic achievement via school accountability, policies, and mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); NCLB’s more recent reauthorization, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signals the necessity for educational leaders to address equity, access, and high academic standards for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Flores (2007) reported the need to shift from examining student academic outcomes to examining student school experiences.

This study responds to the gap in the literature and investigates the school experiences of Latinx eighth and ninth grade students during the middle and high school transition periods. It explores the following research question: What can educational leaders learn from Latinx students, their teachers, and counselors about the structural and environmental factors that affect the normative secondary transition of eighth and ninth grade Latinx students?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The study explores the transitional learning environment (eighth grade year of middle school and ninth grade year of high school), including the perceptions and experiences of Latinx students, their teachers, and counselors, in order to assist administrators in addressing the complex needs of their Latinx students. The theoretical framework is based on former studies grounded in sociology, which target the school learning environment and social network exchange between Latinx students and their teachers and counselors. The framework that informs the study is drawn from two sources: (a) the ecological framework developed by

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<sup>1</sup> Latinx- used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino/a (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). According to the California Department of Education, “the federal definition of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity is a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (cde.ca.gov/ds/dc/es/refaq.asp#q8).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) and (b) the structure-culture-agency framework utilized by Brown and Rodriguez (2009) which originated from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1960; Mehan & Wood, 1975). These two frameworks are helpful for this study due to the focus on the relationships, social supports, and exchanges within the structure of the school learning environment between eighth and ninth grade Latinx students and their teachers and counselors. According to Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, and Bámaca (2006), educational researchers utilize an ecological framework to explore the combination of developing student characteristics with academic outcomes and the influence of the environment. Social ecology emphasizes the relationship and influences the environment has on a developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1987). Educational leaders need to be prepared to understand and then lead in this complex ecological environment.

For this study, the transitional school learning environment (or mesosystem of students, teachers, and counselors) was emphasized due to the influence on developing adolescent Latinx students' experiences and academic trajectory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Components of the transitional learning environment include structure, culture, and agency. Examples of school structure include rules and regulations, protocols, and policies, multiple types of schedules (i.e. bells, and assigned classes); culture is representative of beliefs, including perceptions regarding authoritative figures such as teachers, counselors, administrators, and norms of behavior within the learning environment; and agency represents adult actions, exchanges, inter-connectedness, and the contextual relationships with Latinx students. According to Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) school culture fluctuates between structure (i.e. policies) and agency (i.e. actions), suggesting that a teacher's personal beliefs or values can affect a student's educational trajectory. More specifically, the interconnections between structure, culture, and agency influence Latinx educational opportunity. As personal values merge into a collective shared value, a school culture is developed (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006). The school culture transforms policies to reflect the shared beliefs that only administrators through their leadership can interrupt. Wang (2017) argues,

School leaders' professional responsibility centers not merely on the improvement of students' achievement to meet the requirement of accountability policy. They have additional important mandates, that is, to serve as change agents to promote social and economic justice in increasingly culturally diverse schools (p. 324).

Thus, educational leaders need to recognize the connection between the learning environment and agency. For example, a student's response to a teacher is dependent upon how the teacher responds to the student. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) clarify this as they explain that "the 'effect' of being poor and Latina/o on dropping out of school cannot be isolated from the ways in which schools respond to poor, Latina/o students" (p. 222).

## **Method**

This qualitative multisite case study explores the experiences of eighth and ninth grade Latinx students, their teachers, and counselors in order to assist educational leaders

with understanding how to better address the complexity of the structure, culture, and agency within the transitional learning environment, respond to specific inequities and increase educational opportunity for their Latinx students during the normative secondary transition. Hearing the voices of Latinx students may enable educational leaders to transform school culture and promote social justice for their Latinx students within the transitional learning environment. Using interviews as the primary data source for this study provides access to Latinx students' perspectives and experiences of the learning environment during secondary transition.

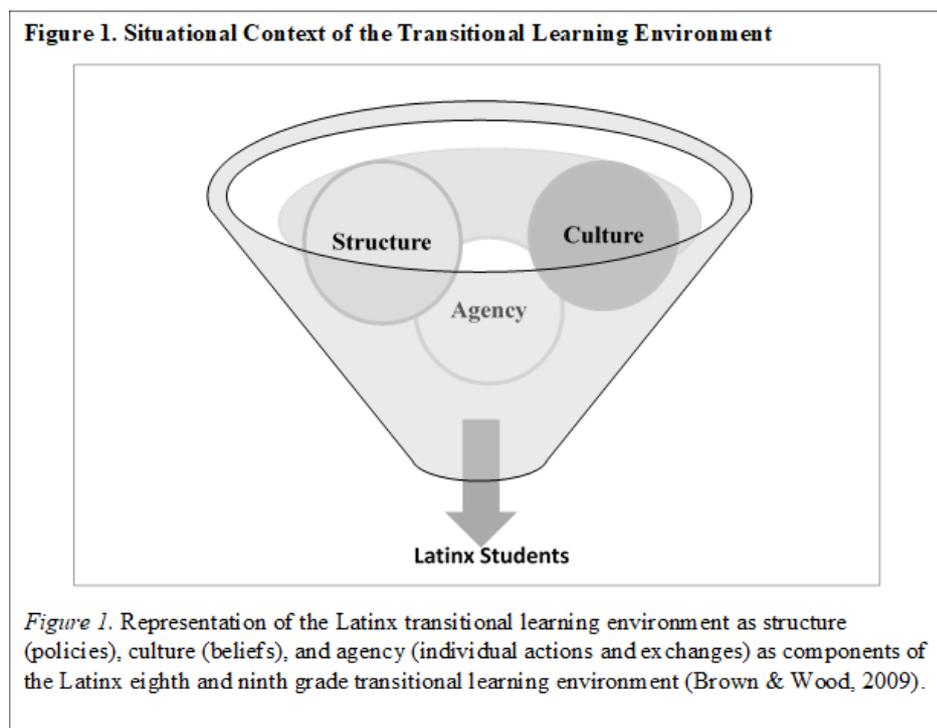
The study examines a middle school that feeds into a high school. Although they share students, the two schools are in different school districts. The feeder 6-8th grade middle school, (N=1,152) is part of a suburban-rural elementary school district. The zoned 9-12th grade high school (N=1,895) is part of a suburban secondary school district. Relevant demographic data includes 28% Latinx middle school students with 7% designated as English learners, and 22% Latinx high school students with 5% designated as English learners. At the time of the study, the teacher ratio was 46 White, Non-Hispanic teachers to 2 Hispanic/Latino teachers out of the 53 total teaching staff at the middle school and a ratio of 77 White, Non-Hispanic teachers to 12 Hispanic/Latino teachers out of the 98 total teaching staff at the high school site.

Initial inclusion criteria for student participation entail enrollment in eighth grade at the feeder middle school site and identification as Hispanic/Latino. To help identify diverse experiences and perspectives a stratified sampling strategy was then utilized, reflecting participant academic achievement levels of high, medium, or low. The criterion sampling strategy include two measures of achievement proficiency levels: (1) the California Standards Test (CST) in English Language Arts and Mathematics achievement proficiency levels of proficient, basic, below basic, and (2) the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) achievement proficiency levels of early intermediate, intermediate, and early advanced. Incorporating achievement data helped in the selection of students' voice regarding perspectives and perceptions of the transitional learning environment. The Latinx student participants had 60% classified as limited English proficient (LEP), which includes levels from high basic to intermediate, while 33% had been reclassified from limited English proficient to English proficient, and 7% of students were designated as English only speakers.

The primary data source include 15 semi-structured interviews of 15 Latinx students within the transitional learning environment during the spring semester of their eighth grade year, and then 11 of the former students participated in one of four focus groups during the fall semester of their ninth grade year. Secondary sources include two semi-structured interviews of two eighth grade (MS) teachers, two semi-structured interviews of two ninth grade (HS) teachers, two semi-structured interviews of two eighth grade intervention/guidance counselors, and two semi-structured interviews of two ninth grade intervention/guidance counselors. Additionally, two school observations were conducted to assist in the exploration of the organizational structures and protocols within the transitional learning environment. The utilization of interviews, focus groups and observations helped to

provide rigor and trustworthiness due to the triangulation of multiple data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The initial approach to data analysis was deductive. Categories were developed based on themes from the literature review and reflected in the conceptual framework (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Figure 1 illustrates the situational context of the school learning environment as: structure (e.g. policies and organization), culture (e.g. beliefs), and adult agency (e.g. individual actions and exchanges) within the situational context of the school learning environment. Analyzing the data through the lens of structure, culture, and agency helps to maintain the focus on the contextualization and reflexivity of the exchanges between Latinx students and their teachers and counselors.



## Results

This study provides additional evidence of ideological incongruence between teachers and counselors, and Latinx eighth and ninth grade students within the transitional learning environment. The analysis revealed the following three findings:

- (1) Deep and personal internal conflicts and confusion which affect *access to social capital or resources and educational opportunity*;
- (2) Feelings of unease and distress due to a *perceived lack of care by teachers and counselors*; and
- (3) Personal anguish due to *varying structural systems* of tracking.

## **Access to social capital or resources and educational opportunity**

The analysis reveals that Latinx students experienced internal conflict between their home environment and the transitional learning environment. This includes a conflict between school and family obligations, especially in the hours after school. The conflict was often described as a struggle between respecting one's parents and family and respecting one's teachers and counselors. Pilar (ninth grade) expressed this internal conflict. "There are problems over here [at school] and problems at home, helping our parents. Well, at times, when my parents aren't at home, I have to take care of my brother and sister. Sometimes cook, sometimes clean." When asked whether she ever explained her circumstance to either the counselor or to her teachers, she replied, "No, not really... I don't think they [teachers and counselors] have interest in our families."

Other students described a similar conflict. Angel, who was a ninth grade participant explained, "I have to help my brother. He has his own little company, he lets people rent his chairs, tables, and my dad wants me to help him. He usually gets four or five calls or orders [a night]." Lupe, also a ninth grade participant, described a similar experience,

Maybe it's like trying to explain certain things, like the way people do different things, as like in our home. There's certain things, like, oh, some people have to go to work with their parents, or they have to help them with other things, or they just have to take care of others [siblings]. Yeah, then like you have it's really late, and you have homework, and you try to do it, but you can't. You don't have time. No, I just leave it as [responding to the teacher in class the next day] I didn't do it. I just let them think I'm just too lazy to do it. Well, there's no point because I didn't turn it in either way. It's late, you know. It would be like [mimicking with sarcasm, a teacher's response] well, you should have done it before.

When asked why she would rather let her teachers think she was lazy instead of revealing that she cared about her education, Lupe shared how she did not want her teacher to embarrass her in front of her classmates. In fact, some participants felt that their teachers would just view their personal struggle as an excuse.

Eighth grade student, Sylvia, explained that mutual respect was important and that embarrassing moments in class just made her upset, angry, and ultimately caused her to find a way to leave class. Sylvia confessed that whenever she was uncomfortable in class she would deliberately not comply with school rules in order to extricate herself from the room. At times she would verbally fight back when a teacher humiliated her. Sylvia acknowledged that it was wrong to disrespect a teacher, but said she could not remain in class when a teacher made her feel bad, ashamed, or embarrassed in front of her classmates.

I don't let teachers talk to me in a rude way and I guess that upsets them which I should [not] disrespect them I understand [that]. But they shouldn't be rude in the first place. If they don't, I don't know. I shouldn't be talking or doing or messing around but they shouldn't be saying rude comments in front of the whole class. Saying things about my grade to the whole class, that's embarrassing. Yelling at me

in front of the whole class, and I talk back and then they send me out or they call up to the office for someone to get me [remove me from the class].

In this excerpt, Sylvia revealed a personal “they versus us” belief, exposing tension within the transitional learning environment.

Another manifestation of tension was the conflict between academic priorities and social responsibilities at school. Angel explained that although he did not have very good grades, he chose to spend time with his friends rather than go to an intervention (help) session during lunchtime. Angel highlighted the conflict between spending time with friends and accessing academic support many struggle with, when he explained,

Sometimes when I am having trouble at home then they [counselors] are wanting me to do good, I have trouble between home and school. Sometimes they will give me advice, like try for homework [club] tell me to try to go before school, nutrition, or lunchtime. It feels good [to do the work] but then, it feels like you are ditching your friends, and you are almost losing them. Yeah, like some people do, [go to homework club] ‘cause they want to have their grades up, but also they want to spend time with their friends, to see if something’s happened in their family.

Angel’s explanation reveals his internal frustration, and is an example of what some students experience when they have to choose between academic priorities and social priorities.

Manolo, a ninth grade student echoed Angel’s sentiment,

Well for a lot of teenagers, like I think it would be – a lot of points [for teachers] to look and see through our eyes, our perspective, you know kid eyes. So, they could understand us better. Like my mom doesn’t speak English so sometimes I get frustrated at home. I can’t get help to do my stuff [schoolwork] and I get so frustrated. And then we get frustrated [at school] because we have to come in at nutrition to do stuff.

Moreover, Angel and Manolo shared an additional problem: their frustration with homework due to their parent’s unfamiliarity with the curriculum and inability to help them. To summarize, Latinx students experience tension, and conflict which becomes a barrier to accessing resources and educational opportunity.

### **Perceived lack of care by teachers and counselors**

A second finding was that Latinx students perceived teachers and counselors as uncaring. The Latinx students in the study yearned for genuine, caring teachers who would be there to assist them both academically and social-emotionally. Although the students wanted genuine care, they did not trust the adults at the school to provide it. Some Latinx students felt shame, anger, or both, and most did not want to reveal their personal home life to their teachers or counselors, especially since they did not believe their teachers and counselors were interested in and cared about them. Angel explained “They [teachers should] have to care about our grades and like pull us aside and talk to us. See what’s happening. Why aren’t [you] doing your homework? If you are, then congratulations. They [should] encourage you.” Pilar echoed his sentiment. She explained,

Yeah, willing to stay with us. Like if I need help on them [schoolwork]. If I need help on something, you [the teacher] would stay with us. Like study with us for like a little bit, or talk to us about what's wrong with our grades [Explain it].

Nine out of fifteen Latinx students cited differential treatment from their teacher as an indication of a lack of authentic caring and understanding. Examples of differential treatment ranged from inappropriate attention, such as teachers belittling and embarrassing their students in front of their classmates, to inattention such as overlooking Latinx students who requested assistance.

Lupe described inappropriate attention by teachers towards Latinx students when she explained that eighth grade teachers routinely made negative judgments, assumptions, or both about Latinx students. Lupe described an interaction between herself and one of her teachers. She was not able to complete the previous night's homework assignment, and according to Lupe, her teacher reacted sarcastically to her missing assignment. Lupe wanted her teacher to understand that there was a problem at home. "Like ask, 'are you doing good?' Like at home, 'is it okay?' They just like don't even ask. They're just like, 'Ah, she didn't turn it in,' they just assume that you don't care."

Diego was not comfortable with the teachers or counselors. He felt isolated, alone, and lonely because he did not believe that the white teachers understood what it was like being Latinx or being an English learner. Diego was afraid to participate in class because he did not want to be embarrassed. When asked what he wished for he stated that he,

Wanted them to understand just the way we are, the way we act, and how we feel about something. Just like the way we feel, sometimes we just like, how we feel, just like we're scared to say something. That somebody will make fun.

Diego's expressions of fear, perceived lack of care, and overall feeling of shame was not unique. It was prevalent in all student responses.

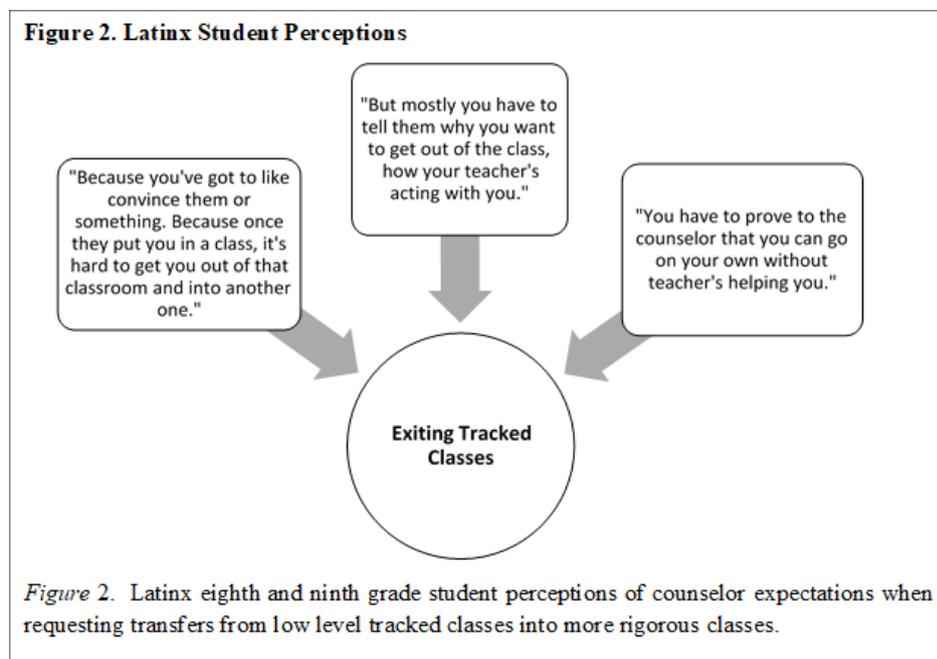
### **Anguish due to organizational structure**

Many of the Latinx students in the study believed that they were "locked" into low-level tracked courses. Eighth grade Neva, explained that, "It's just sad sometimes, they [teachers] make me feel like I am not good enough." When asked if the teachers believe Latinx students can be successful, Javier stated, "they might say it, but I don't think some people mean it. Certain people think that we're going to get far. But some don't."

Nieto (2006) reported tracking as an example of bias and a barrier to equitable access of educational resources and opportunities for students of color. As an organizational structure, 11 out of 15 Latinx students perceived tracking as a cause for personal anxiety, and were distressed about their potential placement in low-level ninth grade courses. Moreover, they had a continual unease that if placed in low-level courses they would have difficulty moving into more rigorous courses. Figure 2 illustrates students' perceptions of their ability to exit tracked classes.

## Loss of Educational Opportunity

Seven out of eleven ninth grade Latinx students participating in focus groups wished they could go back and change their eighth grade priorities. They categorized any personal experiences with low achievement with a personal lack of focus or effort and a remorse that they acted in fear of asking for help. This was expressed by Manolo when he said, “I wish I would have focused more on teachers, when teachers told us ‘do you have any questions?’ I wish I would have raised my hand and asked.” Moreover, they revealed a deep regret due to their perceived lack of understanding of the transitional learning environment, such as the connection between middle school grades and high school course options. This was conveyed by Mercedes who thought deeply for a moment, then shared how she wished she had taken advantage of all the extra help that the teachers provided when she stated “because I regret now not promoting from middle school. I wish I could go back.” Now in ninth grade, both the experiences of Manolo and Mercedes illustrate how their perception of adult agency were linked to their apprehension within the transitional learning environment during eighth grade. Their perceptions resulted in a loss of educational opportunity.



## Adult Perceptions

While Latinx students yearned for authentic care by the teachers and counselors within their transitional learning environment, the teachers and counselors professed frustration with their Latinx students. Our analysis of adult perceptions based on transcripts from the focus group reveal that teachers and counselors associated with the transitional learning environment expected eighth and ninth grade Latinx students to assimilate within the transitional learning environment in order to access resources and educational opportunity. Moreover, the teachers

and counselors within the transitional learning environment believe that for a relationship to occur with their Latinx students, the students must be self-advocating and initiate assistance when struggling. The adults perceived self-reliance and self-advocacy as an integral component for transitional competence but did not discuss providing skills-training for Latinx or any other students. For example, a ninth grade counselor described a conversation she had with a mother of a Latinx student that was going to be involuntarily transferred to a continuation high school due to credit deficiency:

I say, ‘well you know, Johnny has failed this class and this class, and unfortunately he’s a semester behind. We have to look into transferring to a continuation school.’ [The parent will respond ‘Well, you know, he told me he was fine. He’s doing his work.’] There has been no communication with the counselor; there has been no communication with the teachers. They just kind of trusted the kid that they were doing what they were supposed to do.

The findings reveal that the Latinx students and their parents were not aware of the protocol for removal from the comprehensive high school after an unspecified number of failed classes. Yet, most teachers and counselors expected students and their parents to have knowledge of the protocol. While counselors were frustrated by students' lack of awareness of the specific organizational structure within the transitional learning environment, it was not clear if they provided information regarding the protocol during any of the eighth or ninth grade transitional activities. The lack of communication from the counselors to the students in addition to the lack of awareness of their role in the confusion likely contributed to students' lack of knowledge and perceptions of counselors' lack for them.

## Conclusion

The occurrence of ideological incongruity within the contextualization of the components of structure, culture, and agency reveals an ideological chasm between Latinx student perceptions and adult perceptions within the transitional learning environment. Findings revealed that the Latinx students' learning experience linked to the transitional learning environment exposed:

- (1) Deep and personal internal conflicts and confusion which affect *access to social capital or resources and educational opportunity*; (CULTURE)
- (2) Feelings of unease and distress due to a *perceived lack of care by teachers and counselors*; (AGENCY) and
- (3) Personal anguish due to *varying organizational systems* of tracking. (STRUCTURE)

These findings have implications for practice.

We provide four recommendations for educational leaders. 1) Offer professional development targeting the value, utility, and voice of students who are calling for a more clear understanding of their identity (culture) within the school context, 2) Offer opportunities for students, teachers, and counselors to create context-specific practices that address social scripts (demonstrating care), and cultural understanding so that students can (re)claim their

agency, 3) Offer explicit trainings for students on how the school system/structure operates to make practices transparent and avoid unintentional consequences, and 4) Offer teachers and counselors data analysis training targeting the structural (structure and agency) and institutional (culture and agency) causal factors within the transitional learning environment with a focus on the impact on Latinx students. Additionally, institutions of higher education that provide administrative credential programs should educate their candidates about the perception of educator bias. Such preparation would enable educational leaders to effectively respond to the institutional and structural factors that obstruct the achievement of Latinx students in their transitional learning environment. An important element of their preparation would include data informed leadership such as conducting equity gap analyses at their school sites to inform a plan for school improvement, and equity (especially for their Latinx students) in the transitional learning environment.

The dissonance between Latinx student perceptions and adult perceptions regarding the structure and culture in the transitional learning environment must be resolved. This will not only improve the overall effectiveness of teachers and counselors when serving their Latinx students but will also increase the social capital of Latinx students and promote equitable educational opportunity. Fine and Weis (2003) state that a barrier exists within the learning environment regarding the social network exchanges between students and teachers, which they call silencing. The lack of explicit communication regarding protocols leads to institutional power (Nieto, 2006) and what Yosso (2006) claims as an example of institutional neglect. Educational leaders are integral to the process of change (Fullan, 2014; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Educational leaders have the power to effectively change the transitional learning environment of eighth and ninth grade Latinx students. It is time to develop a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1998) and act upon it.

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