

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINA/O STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY FOR CHANGE

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The authors would like to dedicate this study to elementary students at Ben Milam Elementary in Harlingen, Texas.

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study with nine Latina/o college students was conducted to determine their experiences with their high school teachers. After careful data analysis, the following themes emerged: (a) some Latina/o students receive high expectations and others receive low expectations, (b) low expectations for non-AP students exist, and (c) some Latina/o students receive mentoring and others do not. Recommendations for research and practice are presented in order to further learn from the experiences of Latina/o students and enact the necessary changes that will enable more Latina/o students to continue with higher education.

Latina/o students are not only the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; U. S. Census Bureau, 2005; Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007; Zalaquett, 2005), but they also have the highest high school dropout rates (American Council on Education, 2008; The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute and National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, 2003) and only 8% complete a graduate degree (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Given the importance of pursuing a college degree, it is vital that research examines the high school experiences of Latina/o students and therefore provide teachers and researchers with insight to ensure that more Latina/o students graduate from high school and attend an institution of higher education. We contend that the current study accomplishes this objective in the following ways: first, we provide a literature review that focuses on challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in higher education; second, we present findings from interviews with nine Latina/o college students regarding their experiences with their high school teachers; and finally, we provide implications for practice and research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Tracking away from higher education (Cavazos, Cavazos, Hinojosa, & Silva, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Nora, 2003), low educational expectations (Immerwahr, 2003; Martinez, 2003; Zalaquett & Feliciano, 2004), and minimal information about higher education (Garza, 2006; Immerwahr, 2003; Vela Gude et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005) are found and proven challenges that impede Latina/o students from pursuing higher education and beyond. Though these are well-documented challenges, we believe they have not been significantly explored or considered in the education system as potential reasons why many Latina/o students drop out of high school or decide not to continue with their education upon high school graduation. Therefore, they need to be carefully examined in order to provide insight into the experiences of Latina/o students, thereby enabling the possibility of change to encourage all Latina/o students to succeed academically.

Tracking is a process in which students are placed in different academic tracks, and some of these tracks discourage them from pursuing higher education. For example, in a study of 50 Latina/os who attained advanced degrees, Gandara (1995) highlighted the detrimental effects of tracking. Gandara illustrated the distinction between two academic tracks: (a) college-preparatory track and (b) non-college-preparatory track. One student, who eventually attained an advanced degree, provided the following perspective about placement in the non-college track:

When I went to the tenth grade, I took that special stupid test they give you and it came out that I would have been a fantastic mechanic...so they tracked me average [again] which precluded me from taking college prep classes, and I had already taken geometry and Spanish and biology and some other courses in junior high. (p. 61)

In the above example, the student was tracked into a non-college preparatory track based on the results of one test, which we know should never be an indication of a student's current or future academic potential. Given the importance of Gandara's findings, it is surprising that some Latina/o students are still discouraged from pursuing higher education (Cavazos et al., 2009). For example, Davison-Aviles, Guerrero, Barajas-Howarth, and Thomas (1999) also discovered that Latina/o students believed they were guided away from education.

The cause and result of a non-college track is low educational expectations and the negative impact on Latina/o students' self-esteem and academic endeavors. In a study with Latina/o college students, Martinez (2003) found that some students were subjected to low expectations from their high school teachers. The following is a statement from a participant in Martinez's study:

On my own I decided to apply for college late in my senior year sort of like a shot in the dark because I didn't have any options after high school. I did the work myself and hoped for the best. (p. 17)

Because this student did not receive guidance and support from her high school teachers and counselors, she was forced to explore the extensive college application process on her own. Based on her statement, it is important to question why this particular student was left in "the dark;" low educational expectations on her academic potential could have been one of these reasons. Moreover, in a study of two Latina/o community based high schools, De Jesus and Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) found that some Latina/o students faced low expectations. Before entering a Latina/o community high school, one participant provided the following perspective about her primarily Anglo teachers at her previous school:

The teachers in my other high school were mean. They would speak down to you. I had no Latino teachers. My teachers didn't even know my name. If they wanted to get my attention, they would poke at me or yell at me. (p. 291)

It is vital to recognize from the above quote that the student noticed the negative treatment she received from her teachers, and once again, the question of why this behavior exists leads to potential low academic expectations these teachers possessed for Latina/o students. Research has found that low expectations can have the following detrimental effects on the experiences of Latina/o students: internalization of failure, resignation on potential success, and fulfillment of a negative self-fulfilling prophecy (Martinez, 2003; Vela Gude et al., 2009).

Minimal information about higher education is another challenge that Latina/o high school students encounter (Cavazos et al., 2009; Garza, 2006; Immerwahr, 2003; Zalaquett, 2005). Such effects include lack of awareness of application deadlines (Immerwahr), delayed entrance into college (Zalaquett), failure to consider college as an option, and utilization of college time to make up for lost information (Vela Gude et al.). For example, a participant from Zalaquett's study with Latina/o college students provided the following story:

I wish I would have been educated about the intricacies of college admissions and preparation. I ended up not attending the 1st year because I couldn't complete all the required paperwork and didn't know that I qualify for a scholarship. (p. 39)

This student missed the opportunity to attend college after high school due to lack of information and guidance from school faculty and staff. Also, in a study of Latina/o high school students, Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, and Allen (2009) found that many students did not receive sufficient college information from high school personnel. One student provided the following perspective: "...for some of my friends...they wanted applications, but they were denied applications because they weren't ranked [in the top 10%]" (pgs. 11-12). The authors concluded that while some Latina/o students had access to college information, other students (e.g., non-high achieving) did not have access to this information. As the above example clearly conveys, the action of denying some students college applications due to rank is a form of discrimination, which is a primary reason why more attention should be given to the experiences of Latina/o high school students in order to implement change in our school system.

Although research has discovered minimal information about higher education, low expectations, and tracking as challenges for Latina/o students, less attention has focused on the experiences of Latina/o students in predominantly Latina/o schools (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). In addition,

while research has concentrated on the experiences of Latina/o students with their school counselors, it is our belief that students' experiences with high school teachers are different and could potentially have a stronger effect on students' academic futures; therefore, it is important to isolate and learn from students' experiences with their high school teachers.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

We recruited nine Latina/o college students to participate in the current study; seven were female and two were male. Based on the findings from the above literature review, it was important that each participant met the following criteria in order to provide insight into the experiences of successful Latina/o students: (a) self-identified as Hispanic or Latina/o, (b) a grade point average of 2.9 or higher, (c) enrolled as an undergraduate student at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), and (d) attended a predominantly Latina/o high school. To facilitate participant recruitment for the current study, we sent an email with the above criteria to several student-organizations at this particular HSI. Several students responded to the email message and were encouraged to recommend other students, thereby creating a snowball sampling procedure (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). Finally, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to participant recruitment.

PROCEDURE

In this study, we included nine interviews with Latina/o college students. Initially, each interview initiated with the following question: Do you believe your high school teachers had high or low expectations of your academic abilities? We designed this question to allow participants to elaborate on their positive and/or negative experiences with their high school teachers. In order to encourage elaboration of described experiences, follow-up questions were presented, and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with participant consent to obtain the most accurate details of experiences.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data analysis proceeded via the following steps: first, we used open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify sentences in each interview transcript that had specific and significant meaning. Following this process, we each used grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss) in order to compare themes from one interview transcript with themes from subsequent transcripts. This method was implemented to allow each reviewer to create a thematic hierarchy

of meaningful discoveries. And finally, we held multiple meetings to discuss each reviewer's thematic presentation (Corbin & Strauss). At this point, we agreed upon the following themes: (a) high expectations, (b) low expectations for non-AP students, (c) mentoring, and (d) lack of mentoring.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Special attention was given to this qualitative study's trustworthiness. First, because there is minimal research regarding predominantly Latina/o high schools (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009), this study's participants may provide valuable information regarding within group differences in the Latina/o community as they attended predominantly Latina/o high schools. Second, because we have salient experience in analyzing and coding interview data, we verified and agreed upon the themes that emerged in the current study. Finally, the interviewer's prior experiences as a Latino student and his counseling background created a safe interview atmosphere by conveying empathy with the interviewees. This appeared to facilitate each participant's ability to provide personal insight into the purpose of this study (Vela Gude et al., 2009).

LIMITATIONS

Because nine Latina/o college students were interviewed for the current study, generalizability is highly limited. In addition, participants from the current study attended predominantly Latina/o high schools; therefore, results may not be applicable to Latina/o students who attend schools in which they are the minority (Vela Gude et al., 2009). Also, the qualitative methods that were implemented in the current study relied on students' perceptions of their high school experiences, thus perhaps biasing the data (Zalaquett, 2005).

RESULTS

The discoveries from this qualitative study are presented within the following themes which emerged during data analysis: (a) high expectations, (b) low expectations for non-AP students, (c) mentoring, and (d) lack of mentoring. Some of the participants' stories and statements are utilized to support and validate each theme, and therefore, provide valuable first-hand experiences.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Most participants reported that their high school teachers provided high expectations regarding their academic potential, and it is important to note that most of the participants were enrolled in high-achieving academic tracks in

high school. High academic expectations appeared to play an important role in helping these participants pursue higher education. For example, Tomas described high expectations when he shared the following:

Yeah, I had very good teachers, I'll admit that. But some teachers like my College Algebra teacher; he was one of the hardest professors I've ever had. I used to love math, but after him, I hate math. He had very high expectations of everybody. I'm not going to lie; he's one of those teachers where you will learn your stuff with...

Additionally, Jessica had a teacher who encouraged her to do well academically. Jessica conveyed the following experience:

There's this one teacher, she's my English teacher; she was amazing. Even though she had a weird way of showing it, she cared for us and she always pushed us to our limit. And even our limit was never good enough.

Betty also reported that her teachers had high expectations of her academic abilities. Her comment proceeded as follows:

I was accepted into what is called the International Baccalaureate [school with specific admission requirements] my junior year and I must say those teachers are excellent. They are probably some of the best high school teachers I've ever seen. It's a very rigorous program and I didn't know about it until one of my teachers encouraged me to apply.

Finally, Letty reported a story about differential expectations:

I think I would say that they did have high expectations of me. I was an AP student, so I don't think that they have high expectations of students that aren't in their AP classes. I remember my Spanish teacher, and I think she always did have high expectations because I think she had a 90% passage rate on AP exams. She was always real pushy with us. She expected a lot from everybody, all of her AP classes, but not much from her regular classes based on the comments that she said before.

Although Letty experienced high expectations from her AP teachers, she mentioned that her teacher conveyed certain comments about her other students (i.e., non-AP), which led Letty to believe that non-AP students were not provided with high expectations.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR NON-AP STUDENTS

Some of the current study's participants recalled experiences in which their teachers did not provide non-AP students with high expectations. It is important to highlight that these students perceived that their non-AP counterparts were not expected to do well academically based on comments made by their teachers. Cindy provided the following perspective: "My teachers did have high expectations, but only because I was in those Pre-AP classes. I don't think if I would have been in regular classes, they would have paid much attention to me." Moreover, Jessica described how members of the top 10 percent were pulled from class to attend an assembly. At this assembly, Monica reported that they were told: "You are the students who are going to do well. You are the students who are going to attend college." And finally, although Letty, Cindy, and Jessica were in AP classes during high school, Luis was in non-AP classes and described his experience as follows:

My teachers would judge me on GPA and that would hurt me. "You're not in AP. You're not in an AP class, so therefore you're not smart." I think districts become obsessed with this mentality of AP only and AP is the best. I heard through my brother in [school district] when he was there. He was upset because the AP classes in the Science classes were given lab equipment, but the ones that were not in AP were not given lab equipments. I didn't like that.

Luis's experience illustrates the effects of low expectations on students' academic potential. As evidenced by the aforementioned Latina/o students' experiences with their high school teachers, high and low academic expectations varied and depended on students' academic placement, and their experiences provide valuable information regarding how students perceive differential expectations from their teachers toward non-AP students.

MENTORING

Some participants from the current study received mentoring and guidance from teachers. Moreover, it appeared that mentoring played an important role in their eventual high academic achievement. For example, Jessica mentioned an English teacher who helped her pursue higher education:

My English teacher would always say, "This is for [university] or this is for University of whatever. You need to apply to this. Take this." I know there was this one time because you have AP exams at the end of the year that you can take to get credit for college courses here depending

on your score. I remember one time, she signed me up and I didn't even know. And then she pulled me out and said, "Well, I signed you up for this test and I already paid for it. You can go ahead and take it." So she was great because she really pushed a lot.

In addition, Melanie mentioned two teachers who served as motivation and support of her academic career. Melanie said:

One of them taught Physics and Chemistry. And the other teacher that offered to write a recommendation letter was an English teacher. I actually keep in touch with her. For example, the English teacher was my Freshmen English teacher, and we just kept in touch. I would go and visit her during breaks.

Finally, Cathy mentioned several teachers as important mentors:

She was my dance teacher for maybe 6 or 7 years. The other was an English teacher for 2 years. And the third one was a Spanish teacher for 2 years. My dance teacher would always tell me that college was going to be a breeze for me. And I never believed her because I'm a first generation college student and I would always freak out about it. And she kind of gave me a comfort because she didn't only believe that I could go to college, but she believed it was going to be a breeze for me. That I wasn't going to have a hard time with it. That I wasn't going to drop out. She was 110 percent confident of that, a confidence I didn't have at the moment. I think both my English and Spanish teacher, my language teachers, helped me with my struggle.

Based on these experiences, we can conclude that mentoring from high school teachers played an important role in the academic life of these high school students as they prepared to enter an institution of higher education

LACK OF MENTORING

Although Jessica, Melanie, and Cathy recalled positive experiences with mentoring, other participants had different experiences. For example, although Cindy was enrolled in AP classes and received high expectations from her teachers, she reported that many of her teachers were not mentors. She stated, "My teachers...they really never said go to college or don't go to college because they were just there teaching me the subject." In addition, Cindy recalled how she obtained information about higher education: "But

it wasn't my high school, it wasn't my teachers or my counselors. It was outside people that had to come in." Apparently, the local university sent officials to her high school to distribute information about scholarships, admission procedures, and financial aid. Also, although Cathy had a plethora of teachers in high school, she reported that she only viewed three as mentors. She shared the following about her other teachers:

As for the rest of the teachers, they didn't encourage me, and I don't think they really believed in me. They really didn't care or at least that's how I felt. And I think out of all those teachers, only 3 stood out.

Finally, Luis, who was not enrolled in AP classes, reported that his teachers did not help him in preparation for higher education. Luis described the following experience:

In terms of the teachers, I didn't really get the support that I wanted because again I was not in AP...The motivation wasn't there. I was treated like any ordinary student. But I did see how they treated other students. They treated them very well. They gave them letters of recommendation without even asking, but I had to ask for mine...

As illustrated by stories from these high school students, lack of mentoring from high school teachers is a troubling finding and one that warrants attention. It is also important to highlight that one reason why teachers mentor some students and not others (i.e., Luis from the current study) may be due to teachers' own expectations and beliefs of their students' academic potential (Warren, 2002); however, it is also vital to discover other reasons why some students (i.e., Cindy from the current study) are not mentored yet receive high expectations.

DISCUSSION

The current study included interviews with nine Latina/o college students in order to gain insight into their experiences with their high school teachers. The following significant findings emerged: first, some Latina/o students were subjected to high expectations while others reported and experienced low expectations. Although research has found that expectations should be high and the same for all Latina/o students (e.g., Cavazos, 2009; Cavazos et al., 2009), results from the current study reveal that different expectations exist in the Latina/o community. Second, findings from the current study illustrate that some Latina/o students continue to leave high school with in-

sufficient mentoring. This finding is disconcerting as mentoring from school personnel is an important factor in helping Latina/o students pursue and succeed in higher education (e.g., Martinez, 2003; Vela Gude et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005; Zalaquett, Alvarez-McHatton, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Third, based on current research and findings from this study, it appears there is not one set path toward higher education and high academic achievement. Although Luis was not enrolled in AP courses during high school, he maintained a 3.5 grade point average during his undergraduate studies and participated in a prestigious fellowship program in Washington D.C. Unfortunately, his high school teachers underestimated his academic potential, which he believes was based on placement in non-AP courses.

Based on this study's discoveries, it is difficult to determine why Latina/o students (a) perceived different expectations from their high school teachers and (b) had different experiences with mentoring. However, there are several possibilities for these findings: first, *some* high school teachers may believe that non-AP Latina/o students do not have potential to pursue an education in an institution of higher education. Research illustrates that some teachers believe that some Latina/o students do not possess the ability to succeed in higher education (Cavazos, 2009; Martinez, 2003; Vela Gude et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005; Zalaquett & Feliciano, 2004), and it is possible that some of our participants' high school teachers had similar views of non-AP Latina/o students. Second, it is probable that teacher education programs do not prepare prospective teachers to help Latina/o students overcome challenges in K-12 schools. In other words, maybe teachers do not understand how systemic challenges (e.g., tracking and low expectations) impede Latina/o students from pursuing higher education. And finally, many Latina/o students attend overcrowded high schools with minimal resources, thereby limiting teachers' ability to provide sufficient mentoring and guidance to all students (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are a number of implications for high school teachers. First, there is a plethora of evidence of successful Latina/o students who were not expected to attend college due to grades in high school, socioeconomic status, or some label that was supposed to predict what a student could or could not achieve academically (Cavazos, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Herrera, 2003; Nora, 2003). Unfortunately, there is also a pattern of low expectations for Latina/o students from 1995 to the present study. Given this disturbing trend, teachers are encouraged to adopt the following practices: (a) introduce Latina/o

students to success stories of other Latina/o students who were tracked away from higher education (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Castellanos, Gloria, & Kamimura, 2006; Cavazos), (b) learn about the importance of high expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005), (c) value and capitalize on students' personal and cultural experiences (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Quijada & Alvarez, 2006), and (d) understand that all Latina/o students need to be given high expectations (Cavazos et al., 2009; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003). In addition, since low expectations continue to prevail about the Latina/o community, extreme measures should be implemented to prevent different expectations. For example, it is feasible to provide teachers with consequences who subject Latina/o students to reduced academic expectations. And finally, prior to hiring teachers in predominantly Latina/o high schools, special attention should be given to teachers' beliefs and expectations for students in those schools (Warren, 2002). It is also important that teachers introduce their students to the literature on the challenges that Latina/o students encounter in order for them to become aware of and know how to counter these challenges (Cavazos, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

After careful analysis of our findings, there appears to be a number of implications for future research. First, future studies should explore teachers' beliefs regarding non-AP and AP Latina/o students' current and future academic potential. There may be a relationship among teachers' beliefs, low expectations, and lack of mentoring to Latina/o students. Second, research must investigate the efficaciousness of undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs. That is, (a) are prospective teachers prepared to help Latina/o students overcome challenges to higher education and; (b) do prospective teachers understand the damaging effects of low expectations, insufficient mentoring, and tracking? Furthermore, because AP Latina/o students from the current study commented on the experiences of non-AP students, it is important to cull input from non-AP Latina/o students (e.g., Luis from the current study) in order to learn firsthand from those who have experienced low expectations and other academic challenges. Additionally, it is important that future studies ask student interviewees why and how they perceived low or high expectations from their high school teachers on their academic potential and share specific and meaningful examples in order to explicitly illustrate how differential expectations are enacted. Finally, researchers must build upon the work of Jeanette Castellanos, Patricia Gandara, Alberta Gloria, John Immerwahr, Carlos Zalaquett, and many others.

Until systemic challenges are eliminated from K-12 schools, research must continue to investigate the experiences of Latina/o students, and school administrators and teachers are encouraged to read this literature in order to execute the necessary changes to eliminate these challenges.

CONCLUSION

Discoveries from the current study augment the existing literature base by examining the high school experiences of Latina/o students in predominantly Latina/o high schools. While some Latina/o students receive sufficient mentoring and high expectations from their high school teachers, it appears that other students are denied similar services. Until systemic challenges, such as lack of college information and low expectations, are eliminated from K-12 schools, some Latina/o students will not attend post-secondary education and succumb to educational failure (Martinez, 2003) or pursue higher education with insufficient mentoring. Therefore, it is our duty, as educators and researchers, to implement significant changes in our classrooms and school-wide practices that will enable more Latina/o students to overcome academic challenges and pursue and succeed in higher education.

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