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"It's like giving us a car, only without the wheels": Performance of Latina Students at an Early College High School

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"IT'S LIKE GIVING US A CAR, ONLY WITHOUT THE WHEELS": PERFORMANCE

OF LATINA STUDENTS AT AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation

by

LESLIE ANN LOCKE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2011

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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ABSTRACT

"It's Like Giving Us a Car, Only Without the Wheels": Performance of Latina Students

at an Early College High School. (December 2011)

Leslie Ann Locke, B.S.; M.L.S, University of Minnesota—Twin Cities

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Kathryn McKenzie

This dissertation presents the results from an empirical study of the perspectives

of Latina students who were underperforming in an early college high school (ECHS),

regarding their academic performance and school experiences. These students'

perceptions were used to assess the viability of the ECHS as a policy intervention to

prepare first generation and students of color for college. Qualitative methods were

employed specifically interviews, prolonged engagement, document analysis,

observations and student journals. Freedoms to achieve, unfreedoms, and deformed

choices were used as the conceptual frameworks guiding the analyses of the study.

Analyses revealed a school which promoted meritocratic notions of achievement,

despite social justice foundations. These meritocratic ideals suggest that students are

largely responsible for their academic performance and achievement. That is, the school

discourse promotes a stance of a level playing field—such that opportunity to achieve is

available and all students should be free and able to take advantage of these

opportunities. However, interviews with the students and prolonged engagement in the

setting revealed elements of the students' lives (such as outside employment and/or

responsibilities) which work to derail student performance, despite individual effort. These unfreedoms often disallow students from taking advantage of freedoms, or opportunities to achieve, that the school provides. Unfreedoms may force students to make deformed choices—that is, choices they would not make if unfreedoms did not exists.

Results suggest without consideration of the real lives of students and families, and without consideration of how students perceive their performance and school experiences, schools can expect little change in student outcomes. Moreover, as a social justice policy intervention, early college high schools have a greater obligation to consider students' authentic lived experience. My findings suggest the early college program was designed with good intentions, however, as a policy intervention it is not as effective as it could be. The program comes from the perspective that opportunities (or freedoms) to achieve—which the school provides—are accessible to all students. Unfortunately, this limited perspective naively ignores the constraints (or unfreedoms) students face in their lives. Unfreedoms are often unavoidable, and tend to undermine students' progress toward high academic performance.

Recommendations include suggestions to increase students' authentic freedoms to achieve through policy, practice and research.

DEDICATION

For my horses. I am continually honored by what you are willing to do for me, and humbled as you are never shy to remind me I have more to learn. Thank you for keeping me grounded and helping me manage the day to day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOMENCLATURE

ECHS   Early College High School

TECHS   Tambryn Early College High School

TEA   Texas Education Agency

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PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

Preface

Being a White scholar who studies issues surrounding race and racism, I understand my scholarship always has the potential to be rejected because I am White. I suspect what will be said about this study and some of the findings is because of my background and White privilege, the results are not accurate. The scholarly community may believe that if I were Latina, the girls would have told me different things and that I would have interpreted them differently. And those scholars might be right, however I doubt it. When I started this project, I knew my work had the potential to be rejected because I am not Latina. But, I did things to counteract this potential prejudice. For example, I spent time at TECHS [prolonged engagement], I had extensively studied issues faced by Latinas/os in schools, I sought a deep understanding of systemic racism and my inherent White privilege, and I worked diligently to develop an equity orientation. Regardless, some people may not consider such effort 'enough.' Why then, one may ask, did I do this study? Let me discuss a bit about myself.

My parents dropped out of high school, got pregnant, and got married. It was the same story for my older sister and brother. My vantage point, being the youngest child by several years, was informed by listening to family anecdotes of 'should have, would

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This dissertation follows the style of *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

have, and could have.' The most common story of this type concerned education. A frequent lamentation was, 'I should have never quit school.'

Since no one in my family had a high school degree, much less a college degree, job opportunities for the family were limited. My father alternated between driving a truck and shoeing horses. My mother contributed to the family income by taking a job as a waitress. Both my siblings followed the same trajectory. The resultant income was never above a subsistence level. Thus, money was always a point of contention as there was never enough of it. The financial strain seemed to contribute to the 'should have, would have, could have' storyline. For example, my family members lamented that if they would have stayed in school, they could have a different and better job, and thus more money and increased options. These stories eventually transformed into a myth, where people with high school degrees or college degrees *would,* definitely, have more of everything, including job opportunities. The underlying moral of the myth was that finishing school would ensure success, options, and opportunity.

The myth kept me in school, and unlike my parents and siblings, I did not quit. However, what I now to realize is that not quitting and being successful in school are not the same. According to the myth that my parents and I held, merely passing my classes made me successful. This was not much of an issue in elementary and middle school, but in high school things became complicated. While I was still passing my classes, I was often truant, distracted by friends, drugs, and having a good time. Yet despite these complications, I was passed along, one grade level to the next, seemingly "successful." In fact, despite my truancy, I was allowed to graduate from high school a semester early.

When it came time to enroll in college I knew essentially nothing about the process other than many of my classmates were enrolling. Not wanting to be left out, I applied to a community college one year after high school graduation. Unaware of college course expectations, I enrolled in 21 credit-hours for my first semester. This seemed logical because seven courses was a normal load in high school. Unfortunately, the highest grade I earned that term was a C. In subsequent semesters I enrolled in fewer courses, but I was still satisfied with average grades. The family myth continued to guide my actions, steering me to think if I just managed to get a degree it would ensure success.

Like in high school, the family myth was fortified in college as I passed basic requirements and advanced in coursework. I eventually transferred to a university, progressing up the academic ladder once again. At the university I was influenced, and ultimately convinced, by science majors that the arts and humanities (even though I found them very interesting) were "soft" degrees and would not make for a marketable graduate. In thinking about a "marketable" major for myself, I tried to imagine what I could do within the "hard" sciences. I was raised in a rural area and had always liked animals. The local vet seemed to be "successful," according to the family myth. Using this logic, I decided to major in Science in Agriculture, the pre-vet major. I told myself after I graduated I would apply to vet school. I fumbled through the major, spent a couple of stints on academic probation, and finally graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree and a GPA of 2.3. My hopes of vet school vanished somewhere between organic chemistry and calculus. However, despite the fumbling and lost hopes of vet school, I

had done it again; that is, I graduated, had a degree, and therefore, I should be successful. According to the family myth, I could expect the doors of opportunity to be wide open for my entrance into the college-educated-workforce.

Once in the field, however, the jobs open to me were in laboratories and in low-level scientific research. To the shock of both me and my family, none of the employment I found paid well. It was increasingly boring and tedious, yet it had one significant benefit. As an employee of a university, I was eligible for a scholarship which allowed me to take courses in any discipline, tuition free. I grabbed this opportunity and enrolled in coursework I found interesting (arts and humanities). My GPA climbed upward. My study habits improved greatly, because I was genuinely interested in the course material. I was no longer satisfied with C's. Along with boosting my grades and study habits, this post-baccalaureate coursework spurred my involvement in community service, social justice, and education. I took two-years of Spanish language courses which not only provided me with basic language skills, but exposed me to many non-profit agencies that worked directly with marginalized and disenfranchised populations, primarily low income and people of color. As a result of the content covered in these courses and the exposure to non-profits, I gained an understanding of my own marginalization as a low income female and began to see the systemic order of exclusion for other groups. I also began to feel, grounded in my own personal history, the need to participate, to actively do something for communities most in need.

Starting in 1997, I became increasingly focused on the issues of bias, exclusion, and prejudice against students of color and low income homes, especially teens and women of color. I began performing community service working with victims of domestic abuse. I joined the Board of Governors at a teen clinic, working on issues of reproductive health and reproductive rights for low income teens from my hometown. After gaining some language skills and increased exposure to local Latina/o organizations, I began volunteering as an English and computer instructor for recent Latina/o immigrants, and tutoring children from low income homes. Through my work with these marginalized groups, I was privy to their personal stories and goals for the future. Many of the adults had quit school, yet each wished they had stuck it out until graduation. They all wanted their kids to stay in school. Their stories reminded me of the stories my parents and siblings shared and the family myth. Clearly they all had wanted an education and understood it would bring opportunity, but something happened along the way that drove them to drop out. What was it? I remembered the accounts my family told of the structural constraints of our education system, such as uncaring teachers who held unsympathetic opinions of the poor. My parents and siblings reported boredom, a socially irrelevant curriculum, and feelings of devaluation. It seemed these things silenced and disempowered them. When they could legally exit school, they did. I wondered if other groups felt the same and had similar experiences. Eventually, I brought these questions and concerns to a master's program where I investigated the barriers to academic achievement Latinas/os face in K-12 public schools. This experience provided me with a solid foundation of the systemic and

historic roots of educational disparities, not just for Latinas/os, but also for other marginalized groups. It became clear there is a tacit, institutionalized oppression lingering in our education systems which results in under-schooling and exclusion of the poor and people of color.

Eventually, findings and questions raised by my master's research led to me to Texas A&M University to pursue a Ph.D. and continue my work with Latina teenagers at Tambryn Early College High School. This program principally serves Latina/o and African American students from low income homes. The majority of these youth will be the first in their families to attend college. My personal experience, understanding of marginalization, and my strong commitment to removing barriers as demonstrated by my varied experience working with disenfranchised groups, has fortified my commitment to education for social justice. I believe that constructive critique from within the system can change systemic and historic codes of exclusion. I chose to focus on the K-12 system because I believe most of the responsibility for change lies there as it is the foundation for future educational attainment. I believe from the professorate, I will have the power to influence and implement, and teach the codes of hegemony, so students learn to speak for change without compromising their commitment to it.

Now, hopefully I have demonstrated that, as an authentic social justice researcher and educator, I am committed to being continuously aware of how my race and the concomitant White privilege, affect my views and behaviors—and to work to respond to them in an appropriate, socially just manner. Clearly, this project with underperforming Latina students was a perfect match with my interests and background.

The results from this study make an interesting contribution to the scholarship which distributes the responsibility for improved school outcomes to the schools *and* policymakers. Moreover, researchers, school leaders, teachers, and policymakers who work to create social justice interventions in education, realizing that their efforts are thwarted by a lack of knowledge about student lives and student desires will increase authentic and appropriate policy creation. The realization that in order to be effective, any policy or reform must include the perspectives of those who will be served by the policy or reform. That is, what they believe they need in order to have authentic freedom to achieve, inclusive of unfreedoms. This then, is social justice. For the early college high school, it must provide both the car *and* the wheels.

It is my sincere hope that the results of this inquiry will serve to institutionalize authentic freedoms to expand educational opportunity and focus on academic achievement—not just for Latinas, but for all traditionally underserved student groups. The results presented here, my reaction, and my interpretations are reflections of my own truth, and the girls' truths, as I understand them. I can stand by these "truths" because I know they were attained earnestly, even though they may be unpopular with my colleagues. About truth and writing, Lamott (1994) said, "Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you're a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this" (p. 226). If this is so, then my moral obligation for this project has been fulfilled. In closing, regarding truth and writing Lamott (1995) said "… good writing is about telling the truth…and telling the truth in an interesting way turns out to be as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat" (p. 3). At this point, I feel as though I have successfully

bathed the cat. I hope you find my telling of the girls' truths meaningful and the results

to be surprising and intriguing.

Introduction

Early College High School (ECHS) programs have been instituted as a social

justice remedy to serve students who have been historically, and continue to be,

underserved by traditional high schools. These rigorous programs combine high school

and college curricula, providing students with the opportunity to earn a high school

diploma plus up to 60 (and sometimes more) college credits, tuition-free, within four

years. As ECHSs have existed only since 2002, there has not been extensive research on

their effectiveness. Moreover, there has not been considerable research published

regarding how the students participating in such programs perceive the effectiveness of

the school and their performance within it.

This dissertation highlights the results of a study I conducted with eight Latina

students who were underperforming at Tambryn[1] Early College High School, an early

college high school in partnership with a major university and a local community

college. The study reveals the girls' perceptions regarding their academic performance

and school experiences, and what this means for ECHSs as a viable policy intervention

for preparing first generation and students of color for college. Moreover, the fact that

the girls consciously and purposefully enrolled in a rigorous program designed to

prepare them for college, yet were underperforming, was an additional impetus for this

particular inquiry.

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[1] Tambryn Early College High School (TECHS) is a pseudonym as are the names of the school districts, school personnel, cities, students, and other participants.

The following dissertation begins with an introductory section followed by a review of literature that lends historical and empirical support for educational programs which seek a social justice imperative. In the text I explain the methodology and methods employed, followed by analyses and interpretation of the data. Recommendations for interventions based on the data are then presented followed by suggestions for future research. Also included in the final chapter is a statement of my reaction to the study and its results. The interview protocols are included as appendices.

Background

Schools, when looking to find a source for low student achievement, often point to a lack of motivation, initiative, ability and family support among students. That is, schools often blame students for their underperformance. The placing of blame on the students has been described by various theorists and labeled as cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 1981) and culture of poverty (Lewis, 1975). These theories perpetuate the notion that schools have done everything they could, but ultimately it is the student who just could not or would not do the work necessary to progress in school, for any number of reasons. The finger of blame points from the school toward the student.

Some studies have tried to examine the student perspective on why they may not be doing well in school. Here, the students, in turn, point the finger toward the schools. The students often identify teachers who don't seem to care or lack interest in student learning, who do not teach well, or who hold low expectations. Students might say they have been placed in courses which are below their ability, and therefore, they are bored, or have been placed with teachers who don't expect much from them. Sometimes

students suggest that teachers hold racist beliefs about the students and their cultural membership. Students will say teacher perceptions, expectations, and behaviors hinder student achievement. These phenomena have been described by theorists as cultural deficit theory (Coleman, et al, 1966; Valencia, 2010), subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), and systemic racism (Feagin, 2006). In essence, then, schools and students are blaming each other for low student achievement.

Rather than trying to identify the agent as the individual student or individual school, recent scholarship has focused on the institutional structure of the school. Many scholars suggest the overall system is contributing to some students doing well academically, while others comparatively underperform. Scholars have suggested factors from poorly funded schools (Lee & Burkham, 2002), within school segregation or tracking (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2006), a lack of programs to meet linguistic and/or cultural needs of students (Callahan, 2005), inadequate staffs (Joyce & Showers, 2002), a lack of programs which connect with student families (Griffith, 1996; Henderson, 1987), and reliance on standardized testing (Good, Aronson & Inzlicht, 2003). Some scholars suggest teachers—and even entire schools—may be stuck in an "equity trap" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), where educators are immobilized in a thicket of deficit thinking which prevents them from believing all their students can attain high academic achievement. These patterns of thinking and linked behaviors trap teachers; that is, they stop or hinder the teachers such that possibilities for improved academic performance for students of color are diminished (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

Another common bemoan from teachers and administrators in schools is that they live in a constant state of change (Fullan, 1993; Ritter & Skiba, 2006). Almost yearly, there is a new program or policy the state or district seeks to implement. The fact that things are always changing in schools is not new. Most teachers know not to get overly attached to the latest curriculum craze or program fad, because it is unlikely to last long. For example, some recent reforms, policies and programs include: Comprehensive School Reform, where individual schools use monies obtained through government agencies and private donations to contract with organizations which provide some sort of defined service—usually professional development or support for teachers (Resnick, 2010); No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on school, teacher, and student accountability, is a more recent course of action; CSCOPE (used primarily in Texas), is a curriculum support system with resources for how to implement specific curricula and monitor it; Project Based Learning is also a recent program where students and teachers focus on a complex issue or question, and attempt to answer it through group investigation and collaboration; coaching and mentoring for teachers are also popular interventions in schools, and are seen as means of increasing teacher knowledge and competency in the classroom. Because of the constant state of change, it is common to find schools housed with teachers, who, rather than implement change, will simply stick to the methods they are comfortable with and have traditionally used (Hargreaves, 2005; Richards, 2002). Choosing to let the passing fad go by, rather than institute it, is a common form of teacher resistance (Duke, 1993). However, the traditional methods used by teachers often are not effective with every student. Factors

underlying school change are usually motivated by academic, institutional, or financial needs. However, education policymakers will say that these constant changes are implemented in order to keep up with student needs and to help students succeed academically (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Timar, Biag & Lawson, 2007). Whatever the motivation, changes will have little effect if teachers do not institute them in their classes.

There is also a significant amount of scholarship on why some students perform better than others. For example, White children tend to do better in schools because the system was set up with their interests in mind (Kozol, 1991). White teachers (consciously or not) tend to teach White students better than students of color because they are familiar and feel comfortable with this culture (Delpit, 2011; Sleeter, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). In fact, schools are said to be driven by the culture of dominance; that is, the White culture (Elmore, 1987; Giroux, 1981; Schneider, 1993). Today, White students still tend to academically outperform most students of color—with the exception of Asian students who tend to score higher than Whites on standardized tests (Gibbs & Skiba, 2008; Jiménez, 2010; Romney, 2003). This difference in performance is known as an "achievement gap" or the disparity (on any number of measures) between the performances of groups of students. These gaps may be between racial/ethnic groups, gender, or socioeconomic status, for example. Gaps have been used to describe social injustices in the education system and to justify policies aimed at reducing and eradicating these gaps (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Hill & Torres, 2010; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). So far, despite the acknowledgement of problems, radically

divergent student outcomes, and a variety of changes and implementations, significant numbers of students continue to underperform. That is, despite decades of efforts to reduce and eliminate achievement gaps, educational inequalities still exist.

The squabble over who is to blame for student failure or poor student performance is nothing new. However, because we have so many different theories, notions and beliefs about why kids fail in schools—and similarly why schools fail kids—it has been difficult to come up with appropriate interventions, adaptations or corrections to improve achievement for all students. The problems are complicated and have not been easy to solve. As Romney (2003) explains, "Research on academic achievement is complex, and no single theory of achievement entirely explains why some students succeed in school while others do not" (p. 8).

The most drastic result of these collective troubles is that some students respond by quitting school. Leaving school before graduation is a problem because education is a tool used for personal, economic and social advancement. Schooling has become almost the only path to a job that pays a living wage, and such jobs, in turn, are often the only path to social respect and any measure of economic security (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004). Moreover, the past century has seen a huge shift in the median education level needed to compete in the U.S. job market. In 1900, only six percent of America's children finished high school, and most job seekers were able to obtain manual-labor positions that required little schooling (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Goldin, 1998). Today, four-out-of-five jobs require a high school diploma, and those individuals without a high school education have limited kinds of work available

to them (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004). Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, said in a recent interview "…there are no jobs in today's economy for a high school dropout" (King, 2010). Job trends in the United States continue to show that the attainment of a college degree, at minimum, will be required for people who aspire to enjoy more than a subsistence lifestyle. Ultimately, dropouts will be unprepared for employment in a flat (Friedman, 2005), globalized, high-tech world, and thus, underprepared to engage civically. Academic preparation for post-secondary enrollment, for all students, has become necessary.

While some states in the nation have higher dropout rates than others, a lack of education is a matter of national concern. According to the National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES; 2010), today the comprehensive national dropout rate is 25%, indicating our leaky educational pipeline. The dropout rate increases with grade levels, meaning more students drop out when they are upper classmen, versus when they are freshmen or sophomores (NCES, 2010). That is, leakage is more severe with the more time spent in school.

NCES (2010) reported the national status dropout rate[2] for Whites is 4.8%, for Blacks is 9.9%, for Asians is 4.4%, for Native Americans is 14.6%, and for Hispanics is 18.3%. The national status dropout rate for Hispanics has been the highest among all ethnic groups over the past 30 years (although dropout rates for all groups have declined over this time period). In many regions of the United States, the local dropout rate for

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[2] The national status dropout rate is the percentage of 16-24 year olds who are not enrolled in high school and do not have a high school credential such as a high school diploma or a GED.

students of Hispanic descent approaches fifty percent, and in some urban areas, it is as high as seventy percent (NCES, 2010; Pizarro, 2005).

Latina/o children now account for 12.5% of the population in the United States as well as more than 20% of students in schools nationwide (Fry, Gonzalez & Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). The population continues to increase through a variety of factors including migration and consecutive generations. Despite their continued increase in numbers, figures for Latinas/os completing high school have decreased (Books, 2004; Hill & Torres, 2010; Pizarro, 2005), and they have done so for some time.

At the most basic level, students must attend school in order to receive the academic preparation they will need to use not only in college, but in life in general. Given the data showing many Latinas/os are not completing high school, it is not surprising that more Latinas/os tend to be poorly prepared for college (Ascher et al., 1984). For those Latinas/os who do finish high school and go on to college, many enroll in remedial coursework because they were not prepared for higher education by their high schools (Ascher et al., 1984).

Latinas/os, as a population group, are showing—and are projected to show—the most impressive population increases this century (Fry, Gonzalez & Pew Hispanic Center, 2008: Giniorio & Huston, 2001). Moreover, this population is younger than other racial/ethnic groups. For these reasons, it is estimated by 2030, Latinas/os will compromise approximately 25% of all public school students nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 as cited in Rodríguez, 2008). It is obvious from the above dropout rates, public schools are not meeting the needs of this growing population. Moreover, since

demographers agree the growth in the United States' population will mainly occur among Latinas/os (Fry, Gonzalez & Pew Hispanic Center, 2008; Suro & Passel, 2003), a good part of the future welfare of the nation depends on how well such students are educated today and in the future. Attempting to provide a quality education for Latina/o students is likely the most challenging issue for many educators of the twenty-first century. Demographic projections suggest that if we do not repair the education systems now in place, not only Latinas/os but all Americans, will share a lower quality of life in future generations (Portales & Portales, 2005).

One of the reasons I have focused my research efforts on Latinas/os is because demographic statistics since the 2000 census show that Latina/o students now comprise the largest population of color in U.S. schools (Fry, Gonzalez & Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). I believe—as do Portales & Portales (2005), Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (1995), and many other scholars—that Latinas/os should be at the center of new educational ideas and reforms because this is the largest population that will be attending the schools in the coming decades. Unless we take strong measures to reverse the current educational trajectories, the costs which Latina/o students and society as a whole will pay as a result of educational underachievement will be enormous. That is, Latinas/os constitute the engine of U.S. population growth for the foreseeable future. In coming decades, the social, political, and economic future of the nation will find itself increasingly dependent on Latinas/os. Therefore, speaking in practical terms, with so many Latina/o students dropping out of school, the aggregate drain on the national

economy will be significant. There will be considerable losses in income tax revenue as well as public spending; there will also be coinciding social and political costs.

Girls

According to the National Women's Law Center (NWLC; 2007), girls, compared to boys, drop out of school in dangerously high numbers. The NWLC shows one-in-four girls nationwide fail to graduate and the numbers are even more severe for girls of color. For example, two-in-ten White girls (20%), half of Native American girls (50%) and four-in-ten Black and Hispanic girls (40%), respectively, drop out of school each year (NWLC, 2007).

As noted previously, all high school drop outs face significantly daunting challenges to obtaining family-supporting employment and achieving financial security. Girls, however, are at particular risk. The NWLC (2007) suggests that, compared to their male counterparts, females who do not graduate from high school are particularly economically vulnerable. Female drop outs have higher rates of unemployment, lower earning potential, poor health status and are more likely to have to rely on public support mechanisms to provide for their families. Thus, there are particular societal benefits when girls stay in school.

Latinas

The NWLC (2007) reported Latinas with a high school diploma were 16% more likely to be able to improve their rate of employment over Latinas who did not hold a high school degree. However, Latinas drop out of high school at rates higher than girls

of other racial and ethnic groups (Gonzalez, 2007; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). In fact,

Gonzalez (2007) reported,

> [Latinas] are less educated than non-Hispanic women. Some 36% have less than
> a high school education, compared with 10% of non-Hispanic women. Nearly
> half (49%) of all [Latina] immigrants have less than a high school education; a
> similar share (46%) of native-born [Latinas have] at least some college education
> (p. 2).

Therefore, we should be concerned about Latinas because they are dropping out of

schooling at alarming rates. This pattern has serious and damaging repercussions for

their future prospects and economic security (NWLC, 2009).

Typically, the reasons given for poor academic performance of Latina students

are pregnancy, family responsibilities, poverty, immigration status, limited proficiency

in English, lack of parental involvement, poor integration into the school environment,

and a lack of attachment to school (Canedy, 2001; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; NWLC &

MALDEF, 2009). However, Latinas may also more openly confront gender

stereotyping and outright discrimination which heightens the risk they may drop out of

school (NWLC & MALDEF, 2009). In other words, Latinas may experience a unique

intersection of ethnicity and gender which could create obstacles to their academic

achievement.

Yet, compared to Latinos, Latinas are nearly three-times-less likely to experience

school suspension and are also less likely to be referred to, or funneled toward, special

education tracks (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). However, while Latinas out-compete and

persist longer in school than Latinos, Latinas have the lowest graduation rates compared

to girls from other racial and ethnic groups (Fernandez, 2002; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Lynn,

2006; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). Interestingly, despite their education levels being comparatively low, aspirations of Latinas have not followed the same trajectory. NWLC (2009) found that Latinas have very high aspirations for their future—including professional careers such as doctors, lawyers, nurses and scientists. This study by the NWLC (2009) also showed that Latinas clearly understood that they would not fulfill these aspirations without an education. In fact, 98% of the Latinas surveyed reported that they wanted to graduate from high school, and 80% reported that they wanted to graduate from college and perhaps go further in their educational attainment, into professional or graduate schools (NWLC, 2009).

There has been considerable research on helping Latinas/os achieve in schools—some of the most prevalent research calls schools to consider the home and varied histories, to move beyond stereotypes, and to build effective instructional practices based on these criteria (Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Romo, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). However, much of the research that addresses Latinas does so within the larger context of Latina/o populations (Conchas, 2001; Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres & Talbot, 2000; Romo & ERIC, 1998). That is, less research disaggregates Latinas from Latinos. Thus, the best way to discover why Latinas are not performing well in school is to go straight to the source—that is—talk to Latina students. Little research has been done which investigates the perceptions of Latina students regarding their school performance and school experiences.

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of scholarship regarding Latina student underachievement in high school, their progression to college, and the contribution of social justice interventions—such as early college high schools—as appropriate policy responses to Latina underachievement.

The Purpose of the Current Study

This dissertation examines how eight underperforming Latina students enrolled in an ECHS in central Texas perceived their academic performance and school experiences. ECHSs have come about as a policy response to the overall low achievement levels of students who have been historically underserved by traditional public schools (students of color, students of low socio-economic backgrounds, first generation college-bound and students considered "at risk"[3]). ECHSs were designed not only to prepare historically underserved and underrepresented students for college, but also to reduce the time to degree completion by enrolling students in high school and college simultaneously. Latinas/os are a target ECHS student population.

This study presents analysis of discourse and dialogue formed around Latina students at Tambryn Early College High School (TECHS); that is, it describes how the girls perceived and reflected on their school, school experiences and school performance. Moreover, it describes how the school, in terms of a policy intervention,

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[3] "At-risk" according to the Texas Education Code 29.081 are students who are under 21 years of age and are any of the following: have failed at least one grade level; show low performance; show low assessment; are classified as an English Language Learner; is a ward of the State; is pregnant or a parent; is homeless; or is hospitalized.

attempts to provide opportunities for these students to achieve from both the institutional perspective and the student perspective.

TECHS has received high academic accolades from the state education agency since its inception in 2007, based on overall student performance on state mandated exams (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). However, Latinas have been labeled the lowest performers within the school, compared to other population and gender groups. To demonstrate how these eight Latinas, who were underperforming, perceived their academic performance and school experiences, I used school-based qualitative approaches to explore discourse and practices in a school, in which college preparation is the norm, and in which some Latinas were comparatively—and paradoxically to the current scholarship—underperforming.

Understanding student perceptions of their underperformance and school experiences is significant in understanding academic outcomes. It seems the best way to discover appropriate solutions to problems of student achievement is to talk with the students—those upon whom the majority of the responsibility of achievement rests. When we find out how students perceive their performance and their school experiences we are better able to attend to particular problems and understand how students would like to see programs modified. Thus, students themselves are the best indicator of their own academic struggles and successes.

The perspectives of this unique student population (Latinas at TECHS) were essential to learn more about the commonalities and differences among the group in an effort to provide TECHS, other ECHSs, school and university administrators,

policymakers and other interested people who serve large populations of Latina students, with information that could enhance this group's academic achievement. Knowing how students think about their performance and experiences in school—and understanding how they are able (or unable) to maximize on policy interventions such as the ECHS— will help to develop effective and appropriate solutions.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of Latina students, who are underperforming, regarding their school performance and experiences, at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college?

Study Significance

As "…mainstream literature rarely takes into account the point of view of students and their experiences within programs designed to help them achieve" (Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 79), data revealed in this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of an educationally underrepresented group, Latinas, and their perceptions regarding their performance and experiences in the ECHS program. Findings suggest the Latinas mostly perceived a school environment that provided them many unique opportunities to achieve and perform well. However, further analyses of TECHS documents, as well as interview data, suggest that the school maintains a meritocratic standpoint of achievement. This standpoint inhibits necessary attention to the realities of student lives outside of school. Results, and interpretation of the results, are explained in extensive detail in Chapters IV and V.

As this study involves members of the largest ethnic group of color in the United States and the largest group of girls of color in schools, the significance of this study is it contributes to the literature regarding the lack of Latina student success in high school, progression to college, and the contribution of ECHSs as policy interventions. Potentially, results may increase the number of Latinas who graduate from ECHS programs and who enroll and are successful in four year colleges. Generally, these narratives will be important to anyone who is interested in meeting the varied educational needs of Latina students and making the ECHS environment as authentically tailored to its target student populations as possible. Specifically, these firsthand narratives will prove useful to social justice oriented educators, guidance counselors, school and university administrators, and policymakers interested in increasing the number of Latinas at the post-secondary level.

Furthermore, from a national, even global, perspective this study is critical. By 2020 President Obama wants the United States to claim the highest proportion of college graduates worldwide. Race to the Top, a federal grant for which states can compete, was recently announced by the White House. The grant is for state-level departments of education that are committed to closing historic achievement gaps, and preparing and enrolling more traditionally underserved students in college. ECHSs offer a path to President Obama's ambitious goal. Clearly, a study such as this is valuable and timely.

Methodological Considerations

I used the interpretivist paradigm and critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002) to guide my thinking regarding the design of the study and

interpretation of the results, as well as bring out a story. Furthermore, the conceptual

frameworks of freedom to achieve (Sen), unfreedoms (Sen) and deformed choices

(Nussbaum) were employed to better understand the girls' perceptions, and TECHS in

terms of an appropriate policy intervention.

The findings of this research cannot be generalized to all Latinas or all ECHSs,

or even to all Latina students at TECHS. The results of this research are specific to the

underperforming Latinas interviewed at TECHS. However, the methods and

methodology are finely articulated in Chapter III should another scholar like to conduct a

similar study with a similar sample.

Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain the data I applied purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to

choose the eight Latina (self-identified) students. I interviewed each student

individually for 1-1.5 hours. Additionally, each student participated in one of two focus

groups (Fontana & Frey, 2000) which lasted approximately two hours. Interviewing

eight Latina students brought the data to the point of 'saturation' where I no longer

'discovered' new information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All data were collected at

TECHS.

Student journals, field notes, and observations were analyzed for additional data

which were not produced in the interviews. These additional data sources were used to

confirm information gathered from the interviews. All data were analyzed for emerging

themes and coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Furthermore, several TECHS institutional documents (the mission statement, the core values, the scholar's oath, and the student/parent/staff contract) were analyzed. Analyses of these documents were used in conjunction with the interview data in order to understand the school as an appropriate policy intervention.

This qualitative study design allowed for comparison of perspectives across participants. The study was not designed to provide conclusive answers for Latina underperformance, but rather, to better understand the processes involved in underperformance and those factors which contribute to it, in this particular early college environment. Therefore, a qualitative approach was best suited for this inquiry.

School Site Selection

Local research efforts are important because they can provide useful information for the development of relevant and appropriate local interventions (Hernandez & Nesman, 2004). Additionally, local research has the potential to increase community awareness, interest and commitment, as well as provide specific recommendations for action that fit the unique local context. Therefore, TECHS was selected as the study site due to its partnership with a major university, its status as an ECHS, and the identification of an underperforming Latina student group. Given these criteria, it was an ideal site to conduct the study.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, or internal validity of the project, was maintained through several means. Triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of data occurred by instituting various data collection measures. Moreover, prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) at

TECHS allowed me to personalize the data collection, and increase trust and cooperation between myself (the researcher) and the school staff and study participants. Additionally, prolonged engagement increased my understanding of the school context and facilitated collaborative relationships.

I also conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with interviewees throughout the interview process. And finally, peer debriefing (Schwandt, 2007) occurred in meetings with my advisor, and in dialogues with other committee members.

Main Themes

Based on the research question guiding this study, and the conceptual frameworks applied, data analyses revealed a school environment which was perceived by the Latinas as one that provided many unique opportunities for academic and future success. That is, the girls perceived the school to provide many "freedoms" to achieve and be academically successful. However, the girls also perceived challenges at TECHS which according to Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (1999) constitute "unfreedoms" or attributes which did not take fully into account their lives outside of school. These "unfreedoms" were perceived to inhibit their progress toward academic success. Resultantly, the girls made deformed choices—ones they would not had made in the absence of the "unfreedom"—which further negatively affected their performance. Additionally, analysis of interviews and analysis of TECHS institutional documents revealed a meritocratic philosophy which tended to place the responsibility for academic success solely on the students. These frameworks and findings are presented and discussed in extensive detail in Chapters IV and V.

Overall Conclusions

The discourse of meritocracy—or the belief that the academic playing field is equal, and students simply need to seize opportunity—was found to be "built in" to the TECHS guiding philosophies, despite its social justice foundations. These meritocratic notions were often internalized by the girls in this study. That is, they took responsibility for their underperformance, despite obstacles to their achievement. Often these obstacles were out of the girls' control.

Why This Study for This Researcher?

Even though I differ from the Latina students in this study by ethnicity, I do share commonalities in gender, socio-economic background, first-generation student status, and a history of academic struggle. Moreover, I was the ideal person to conduct research at TECHS and specifically with Latinas in this school for two primary reasons. First, I have been the Community Liaison at TECHS working as a Graduate Assistant on the Early College Grant through the College of Education and the Dean of Undergraduate Office at a major university since 2008. Therefore, 20 hours a week I worked directly with students, their families, and the staff at TECHS. In my work there, I noticed the interesting phenomenon with regard to many of the Latina students: they were choosing to attend a school with a clearly articulated and enacted goal of preparing students for college, while simultaneously underperforming. This led me to want to investigate the experiences these students were having at the school, and specifically, how they perceived their academic performance.

Second, I have been interested in the issues Latina/o students experience in public schools for several years. I designed my master's degree and thesis around understanding these issues on a broad scale. Furthermore, essentially all assignments and other research projects I have been involved in during my time as a graduate student, at both the master's and doctoral levels, have been inclusive of Latinas/os in K-12 education. Therefore, with my combined interest, broad knowledge base of the field, and personal experience, this project was an obvious choice for me.

Summary and Guide for the Reader

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter provides information about the historical roots of schooling for Latinas/os; a short discussion of modern education and social justice interventions including ECHSs; the scholarship regarding education for Latinas/os; and, finally, a discussion of ECHSs in Texas and Latinas at TECHS. Statements of importance of the study and for the field are also included.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter presents the qualitative research methodology and methods used to both gather and analyze the data as it relates to the research question guiding this inquiry. The research question guiding this inquiry was: What are the perceptions of Latina students, who are underperforming, regarding their school performance and experiences, at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college?

Chapter IV: Data Results and Interpretation

This chapter illustrates the results of data collected from primary sources. A detailed description of the conceptual frameworks used for data analyses is included, as well as analyses of TECHS institutional documents and statements from the Latina student interviewees.

Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter focuses on the meanings of the results and interpretations of the data, as well as recommended interventions based on the findings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Question and Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand Latina student underperformance at an early college high school, from the student perspective. The research question I used to pursue this purpose was: What are the perceptions of Latina students, who are underperforming, regarding their school performance and experiences, at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college?

A review of current and pertinent literature reveals current thinking in the field (Moghaddam, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an overview of the existing current and pertinent literature as it relates to the research question guiding this study. I examine the literature in three parts. Part I begins with a short history of schooling, a short history of schooling for Latinas/os, followed by a discussion of social justice interventions in schools, and a discussion of ECHSs as a social justice intervention. Part II includes a discussion of what we already know about Latina/o students regarding their academic performance and school experiences. Part III provides a discussion of the unique position Latinas inhabit in schools, as well as statements regarding the importance of this study.

Part I: History and Social Justice Approaches to Education

Many in the United States subscribe to the idea that America provides children from all cultural and economic backgrounds with an equitable opportunity to succeed in

school and ultimately society. The following review of literature will show that this notion is simply untrue.

History

Anderson (1988) noted "…both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education" (p.1). In fact, the Supreme Court legitimated second-class citizenship through rules which penalized individuals of color (through, for example, the use of immigration quotas, inter-racial marriage laws, housing covenants, citizenship rules, and blood quantum rules, as evidenced in cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)*, Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927)*, Independent School District v. Salvatierra* (1930). Such laws relayed messages to people of color that Whites were the master race (Loewen, 1995; Spring, 2008) and the education system would specifically prepare people of color for limited positions as common laborers and domestic servants (Adams, 1995).

Not only was the education system relegating people of color to low positions in society, as Valencia (1997) and others (Feagin, 2000; Moll, 2010) have noted, segregationist laws and practices constituted oppression. Moreover, Valencia (1997) suggested there is considerable evidence the ideological foundations of school segregation date back to racist beliefs that White groups should not socially interact with people of color. That is, the forced segregation of students of color was based on deficit views that children of color were intellectually inferior, limited linguistically in English, unmotivated, and immoral, or otherwise, inherently "bad." These false characteristics

were purported to hold back the progress of White students if racial/ethnic mixing in schools was allowed (Thermstrom & Thermstrom, 2003).

However, it should be noted that prior to desegregation, many segregated schools which served only African American or only Latina/o students, served their students well, despite having to do so with less overall resources than schools reserved for White students (Anderson, 1988; Bell, 2004; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008). Nonetheless, deficit thinking in the formation and unification of public schools was foundational and contributed to inferior schooling for groups of color (Moll, 2010; Valencia, 1997). Consequently, power, politics and racist ideologies in schools historically have negatively shaped the framework and opportunity structure of educational institutions for people of color.

History of Education for Latinas/os

Traditionally, American schools have had the job of assimilating the children of immigrants into the American mainstream. Major goals of institutionalized education were to rid ethnic groups of their "ethnic" traits and to force them to acquire White-normed values and behavior. Schools tried to make immigrants and children of immigrants, one-hundred percent "American" and exclude all elements of "foreignness" from the curriculum. These methods were very effective. In general, sociologists have found that many European-origin (i.e.: White) immigrant groups to the United States have become more assimilated into the American mainstream with each generation (Banks, 1998). For example, second and third generation Russians, Italians, Poles and Irish were not considered "immigrants" (Dávila, 2008; Katznelson, 2005). However,

not all groups assimilate in the same fashion or are accepted into American society at similar rates. Immigrants, and children of immigrants, from Mexico are sometimes examples of this divergent pattern of assimilation.

Historically, the relationship between the United States and Mexico established an environment which made assimilation for individuals of Mexican descent difficult. For example, after 1900, newly implemented linguistic and cultural policies within schools increasingly segregated Mexican American children from White students and deprived the former of equal educational opportunities (MacDonald, 2004). Several factors contributed to this increased segregation such as: White fear of the rapid influx of Mexican Americans into some communities, residential segregation, racism, and a political economy unwilling to provide more than a rudimentary level of schooling for an almost wholly agricultural workforce (Dávila, 2008; MacDonald, 2004). We must remember that the United States rationalized its policies of expansion into Mexico and the exploitation of its resources by propagating notions of Mexican inferiority (that is, deficit views of Mexicans). Prior to the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, in which Mexico conceded a large section of the country (what we now know as California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona), the United States had an historic relationship of domination over Mexico (Jiménez, 2010; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Vélez, 2008). Mexico became a conquered country; therefore, in the minds of many, so were its people, even if those people were now by default new "Americans" (Jiménez, 2010).

By the time public schooling in these southern and western states became fairly common practice in the latter part of the nineteenth century, children of Mexican heritage were already both informally and formally excluded from attending public schools on the grounds of their assumed intellectual and cultural inferiority, and supposed desire to stay in the fields (Moll, 2010; Pizarro, 2005; San Miguel, 2001; Vélez, 2008). For example, in Texas in 1870, a law was passed which mandated English to be the language of instruction in schools. This mandate made Spanish a "pariah language" (Jiménez, 2010; Moll, 2010)—a language associated with foreignness. The banning of Spanish in schools, along with widespread poverty and substandard school facilities, severely limited schooling for many Latina/o students (Vélez, 2008).

When Latina/o children began entering public schools with regularity and in significant numbers during the early part of the twentieth century, their school participation was fundamentally different from that of "American" (i.e. White) children. While there were no federal[4] segregation statues pertaining to Hispanics specifically, White school administrators utilized vague and often unwritten justifications to place Hispanic children into separate classrooms or schools. School administrators based their justifications on the perception that Latina/o children possessed deficient English language skills, scored lower on intelligence tests, and practiced poor personal hygiene (MacDonald, 2004)—not unlike those deficit-laden justifications used to segregate African American children. Moll and Ruiz (2002) argued officials wanted Latina/o

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[4] While there were no federal statutes upholding school segregation for Latinas/os, rigid social code, as well as state and local statues, did separate Latina/o children from white children in schools. For further reading see *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) and *Alvarez v. Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District* (1931).

children in schools, but segregated, so that they could be controlled and indoctrinated—

so they could be "Americanized," that is, learn English and rid themselves of their native

(ethnic) language and customs. Such were deemed detrimental to assimilation and to the

maintenance of a unified nation, and used as justification to differentiate children (Telles

& Ortiz, 2008). Therefore, it is our schools, the U.S. public education system, which has

been perhaps the single most influential acculturating institution for youth in the country

(MacDonald & Carrillo, 2010).

Menanteau-Horta (2005) pointed out the education of Latinas/os in the United

States "…is characterized by a history of neglect, oppression, and periods of wanton

denial of opportunity" (p.37). Characterized as inferior, and their ability to fully

assimilate always in question (a point I will return to later in this review), a limited

amount of schooling for Latinas/os, however, was deemed an important tool in their

integration into society. This limited schooling was preparation for eventual

contributions through manual labor. Pizarro (2005) argued Latina/o children were

prepared for manual labor and subservience both by the nature and the content of their

schooling, which was inferior and segregated. Their education, noted San Miguel, Jr.

and Donato (2010), "…served to reproduce a highly stratified society aimed at ensuring

the political and cultural hegemony of the dominant Anglo group in the society and the

socioeconomic subordination of Latinos" (p. 27).

Returning to the discussion regarding assimilation, Valenzuela (1999) argued

research on generational educational attainments points to a glass ceiling of blocked

opportunity for Latinas/os. Although improvement in educational outcomes from the

first generation to the second generation is substantial, it is not sustained in future generations as is seen with many other immigrant groups (i.e.: Irish, Russians, Italians) (Portes & Zhou, 1993). For Latinas/os, by the third generation progress stalls, and there is not significant wage or educational improvement. This defies the historic pattern of multigenerational immigrant mobility and, as Valenzuela (1999) suggested, points to the schools themselves as a crucial variable in changing educational outcomes for Latinas/os. Scholars such as Portes and Rumbault (2006) and Telles and Ortiz (2008) have referred to this phenomenon as the 'third generation decline', and also point to the schools as the primary support of this unusual pattern of assimilation.

History indicates schools served a reproductive function and sought to ensure that Latinas/os remained a subordinate group by providing them with limited access to separate, inferior and vocational-types of instruction (San Miguel, Jr. & Donato, 2010). This pattern of systemic exclusion from the greater benefits of schools and schooling, continued through the post-World War II era. It was not until the 1960s[5] that greater representation of Latinas/os in education was seen (López, 2003; Montejano, 2010; San Miguel, Jr. & Donato, 2010). Researchers, schools, and politicians too often fail to acknowledge the history upon which the schooling experiences of Latinas/os have been built. This lack of vision (or hindsight) has tremendously limited efforts to address academic attainment for this group. This history has not evaporated.

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[5] In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was signed into law which allots federal funds to public schools nationwide to support educational programming. Additionally, the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Movement campaigned for better educational opportunities for Latina/o students and other traditionally underserved students.

San Miguel, Jr. and Donato (2010) noted "…although there has been an improvement in their social, economic, and political status over time [Latinas/os] are and continue to be a subordinate and marginalized population in the United States and are treated as such by mainstream institutions, including public schools" (p. 37). Currently, Latinas/os are the most undereducated ethnic group in the United States. Moreover, Latinas/os spend less time in school than do Asian Americans, Whites, or Blacks (Davison Avilés, Guerrero, Barajas Howarth & Thomas, 1999).

Modern Education

Because American educational institutions were not built with the interests of non-White and non-English speaking students in mind, many students of color and English language learners continue to find schools to be racially hostile terrain (Carter, 2005; Kohl, 1994; Pizarro, 2005). Contemporary evidence of unequal schooling, such as disproportionate dropout rates, failure rates, retention rates, and tracking systems, are lingering effects of institutional discrimination. Not surprisingly, gaps in achievement still exist for students of color and students from low income households, when compared to affluent, White, middle class students.

Today, for every 100 low-income students who start high school, 65 will get a high school diploma, 45 will enroll in college, and 11 will complete a postsecondary degree (The Early College High School Initiative, 2007). Nearly half of African American students and nearly 40% of Latina/o students in the United States attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm (The Early College High School Initiative, 2007). Many schools have been labeled 'urban dropout factories' because completing

high school is a 50:50 proposition at best (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). For those who do graduate, and go on to postsecondary institutions, the first two years of college are by far the most tenuous. It has been reported that 30% of college and university students drop out after their first year, half never graduate, and college completion rates in the United States have been stalled for more than three decades (Bowler, 2009). Considering students of color alone, the record is even more severe.

Kirwan & Ward (2008) suggested well-educated citizens are essential for securing a prominent role for the future of the country. Practically speaking, the disparities in educational outcomes translates into high costs for U.S. society in terms of increased social service expenditures, reduced consumer spending, and decreased tax revenue. Many researchers have confirmed that a college degree translates into higher incomes and social mobility (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney, 2002). Higher incomes translate into decreased reliance on social services, as well as increased spending and tax revenue. Clearly, low education levels bar many Latinas/os from higher incomes. In fact, Telles and Ortiz (2008) argued "…education is the only variable to consistently explain variation in the socio-economic status of Mexican-Americans" (p. 156). Moreover, the cycle of poverty (Mayer, 1997) supported by low levels of education, disallows the creation of generational wealth (Shapiro, 2004). That is, without education and income (valuable

sources of human capital[6]), many Latinas/os are unable to accumulate wealth (i.e.: equity in homes, property, savings) to pass on to their children. Thus, many Latina/o parents are left with little capital for future generations to inherit (Jiménez, 2010). Some scholars have ascribed this phenomenon to educational practices which deny opportunities for amassing assets and experiencing upward social and economic mobility (Jiménez, 2010, Lipsitz, 2006; Shapiro, 2004).

Despite disparities in school outcomes, many in the United States continue to see education as a foundation for democracy. In diverse societies such as ours, it is particularly important that schools serve students from all communities well in order to provide everyone with opportunity, equip them for employment, and prepare them for democratic participation (Sleeter, 2007). Thus, the hallmark of a thorough, efficient, and socially just form of public education is that it works as well for the least advantaged as it does for the most advantaged. This is not new information. In fact, Wolk and Jobs For the Future (2005) noted alarms over the decline of the American high school have been sounded periodically over the past fifty years. But recently, the issue has risen to the top of the school-reform priority list. The legislation of No Child Left Behind—with its built-in accountability measures—has focused national attention on achievement disparities between student groups. Remedies inclusive of social justice aims have been called for.

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[6] Human capital consists of the knowledge, education, experience, skill, and capability of an individual based on their investments in self through schooling and healthcare.

Social Justice

Notions of social justice are varied, complex, and contested (McKenzie, et al, 2008). Discussions about social justice in education are generally framed around issues of democracy, diversity, marginalization, gender, and spirituality or religion (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Marshall & Olivia, 2006). While there is no fixed definition of the term "social justice," that is, there is no single definition that can be applied to every situation or every student (McKenzie, et al, 2008), Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson & Koschoreck (2001) broadly defined social justice as both a process and a goal. For these authors, social justice means full and equal participation of all groups in a society which is mutually shaped to meet their needs. It includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Furthermore, these authors suggest a socially just society would be one in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop to their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). When applied in an educational setting, the term social justice surely encompasses the idea that all children, regardless of difference would benefit academically at uniformly high levels in school environments in which they are safe and secure. Thus, social justice would ensure school success to be equitable across socioeconomic status, race, and gender.

The terms social justice and equity are often used together. Equity in education means giving individuals what they need to succeed. This is not the same as equality, or giving every individual the same treatment. Equity necessitates a "…humanizing and rigorous pedagogy for all" (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002, p. 49). An excellent definition of

educational equity was provided by the Wisconsin Department of Instruction (as cited in

Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, p. 3-4):

> Educational equity: the educational policies, practices and programs necessary to (a) eliminate educational barriers based on gender, race/ethnicity, national origin, color, disability, age or other protected group status; and (b) provide equal educational opportunities and ensure that historically underserved or underrepresented populations meet the same rigorous standards for academic performance expected of all children and youth. Educational equity knowledge and practices in public schools have evolved over time and require a comprehensive approach. Equity strategies are planned, systemic, and focus on the core of the teaching and learning processes (curriculum, instruction, and school environment/culture). Educational equity activities promote the real possibility of equality of educational results for each student and between diverse groups of students.

As is evident from this definition, social justice interventions in education

attempt to bring equity to scale; that is, they are attempts to distribute gains from

education across the population in a more fair and equitable fashion. If we had social

justice in education, nearly all students would have identical educational outcomes. We

do not currently, nor have we as a nation, ever enjoyed educational equity across all

population groups. Our governmental and social systems have been structured in ways

which perpetuate inequality rather than equality. As is clear from the above definition,

social justice interventions, which actively address difference, attempt to first shift the

focus from the student to the institution, and then to increase educational equity for

students who have been traditionally marginalized by these systems.

There have been many social justice interventions, or attempts at achieving

equity in education in the past, some quite famous. For example, the desegregation of

schools via the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*

could be considered a social justice intervention. The ruling found segregation of

schools to have detrimental effects on students and was therefore, ordered to be dismantled. Another example of a social justice intervention in education is affirmative action. These were policies designed to affirmatively redress past discrimination against women and people of color through measures to improve their economic and educational opportunity. For education these affirmative action policies were manifested in postsecondary admissions decisions (race, ethnicity, gender, and income group became important factors for admission) at colleges and universities. Another example is involuntary bussing, where students who were underrepresented in certain schools were transported (sometimes across district lines) in order to create equity in representation. Magnet schools were also tried as a social justice intervention. These are public schools with specialized courses and curricula, instituted to attract students with unique interests and skills from across the normal school district boundaries. These examples are all attempts at social justice and equity through policy. However, schools have not yet achieved equitable outcomes for all students (Venzant-Chambers, Huggins, Locke & Fowler, 2011). Moreover, these policies had little effect on the number of traditionally underserved students enrolling in colleges and universities.

Recent Interventions to Increase the Number of College Graduates

As the economy and labor markets have changed, policymakers and educators have become increasingly concerned because our needs as a nation have also evolved. In the past, the social justice programs used in education were not being successful, and not producing the type of citizens needed for an increasingly global and technical world. That is, despite interventions, simply not enough people were going to and graduating

from college to keep up with our changing needs. In fact, the need for improved higher education access and increased numbers of college graduates has been well documented. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor (2008) suggested within the next decade, the fastest growth in jobs will be those that require a college degree. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (as cited in Weldon, 2009) estimated that 55% of the population will need college degrees by 2025 in order to equal the degree attainment in the top-performing countries. According to the Stoops and the U.S. Census Bureau (2004) only 27% of the U.S. population holds a college degree (30% Whites, 17% African Americans, and 11% Latinas/os). This low percentage of college-degreed people has troubling implications because most jobs which provide a living wage require at minimum, some postsecondary education. Previous scholarship has highlighted that the climb from high school to college is particularly steep for students who have been traditionally underserved by the long-established school model. Therefore, some recent interventions attempt to make the transition from high school to college less abrupt.

Before moving on to a discussion of interventions which directly address increasing the numbers of students of color at the postsecondary level, first I feel it is necessary to speak to student aspirations. While gaps in educational attainment remain, and despite many social justice oriented interventions, students have not demonstrated gaps in educational aspiration (Hill & Torres, 2010). Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003), in a study with K-12 students in six states, found that over 80% of students of color planned to attend some form of postsecondary education. Other scholars have

found similar results (Marlino & Wilson, 2006; Portes & Rumbault, 1996; Rivera & Gallimore, 2006). And, Fine, Roberts and Weiss (2000) suggested in their study with Latinas in the U.S. northeast, that Latinas were the most optimistic about the possibilities educational achievement could provide. Yet, in reality, only 28% of all postsecondary students are students of color (Edmonds & McDonough, 2006). The above authors contend that such discrepancies exist because states have created unnecessary and detrimental barriers between high school and college, barriers that undermine some students' aspirations. Edmonds and McDonough (2006) suggested the current fractured educational systems send students, parents, and K-12 educators conflicting and vague messages about what students need to know to gain admission and succeed in college. Edmonds and McDonough (2006) noted the focus of local, state, and federal programs should be expanded from access to college to include access to success in college—that is, access to the resources and information students need to prepare for college and to make informed decisions.

Returning to a discussion of interventions, in the 1960s advanced placement (AP) and dual enrollment programs were instituted in many schools across the country. These programs provided high school students the opportunity to earn college credit, tuition free, while still in high school, thereby shortening the time it would take to complete a degree. These programs were considered attempts at social justice not only because college courses were offered at no cost, but because, as Wolk (2005) noted, dual enrollment and AP students earned higher grades than those who had not previously taken college courses, and these students were more likely to graduate. According to the

College Board (2010), more than a million students take AP and dual credit classes each year. These programs are often open to specific grade levels (11th and 12th grades), and students in these programs are typically steered toward them from higher academic tracks. So, while these programs do well at exposing students to college level coursework and compressing the time to degree completion, they do not reach a broad set of students. It has been documented that most AP and dual credit courses are populated by a majority of White students (College Board, 2010; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999).

Vélez (2008) noted student orientations toward the future and their expectations for college are often cited in the scholarship as being related to school persistence. That is, students who plan to go on to college finish high school at higher rates than those who do not. Programs such as those described above (AP, dual credit) may have intended to reach students who were not prepared or who had not adequately planned to go to college. However, these programs have been largely unsuccessful in practice with students of color in either keeping students in school or preparing them for college. There are more recent programs, however, which have enjoyed more success.

Examples of More Recent Intervention Programs (with Traditionally Underserved Students in Mind)

In this section I describe several in-school programs—with a social justice focus—which have been interjected into the traditional school format with the intention of raising achievement levels for students of color and of low income households. Following these in-school initiatives, I discuss several reforms which have been

attempted in holistic fashion, meaning entire schools which have been formed and dedicated to increasing educational equity for traditionally underserved student groups. Some of these programs have been successful in their missions to assist students. It is important to understand these programs first, in order to understand later, how early college high schools—with their social justice standpoint—developed into being.

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federally funded grant program designed to serve low income middle and high school students. GEAR UP is designed to help these students prepare for and succeed in college by providing early college awareness activities, academic support, and information about post-secondary options. Additionally, this program attempts to raise student achievement by assisting teachers in raising their expectations for academic success of their students. Grantees serve an entire cohort of students from high poverty schools beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. Funds may also be used to provide scholarships to low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a).

TRIO is a federally funded program that started in 1965 under the Higher Education Act. The program provides a broad gamut of services to students from low income homes, who are first generation college, or who may have disabilities. TRIO consists of the programs Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students. This triad of programs provides educational support to youth between 13 and 19 years of age. The program helps students all the way along the

educational pipeline from middle school through post-baccalaureate (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b).

A California based initiative, the *Puente* Project (*puente* translates to "bridge" from Spanish) began in 1981 to assist students envision success and equip them with tools to make that vision a reality. The program was launched as a grassroots initiative to address the low rate of academic achievement among Latina/o students. In an effort to understand the possible causes of high dropout rates, the program identified three key patterns among Latina/o students: students were avoiding academic counseling; students were not enrolling in college-level writing courses; and, students were the first in their families to attend college. The focus of the *Puente* Project is to disrupt these patterns and increase college enrollment and ultimately degree attainment for Latinas/os and other traditionally underserved students. Once successful, these students are then to return to their original communities as leaders and mentors for younger generations (Puente, 2011). A similar program has been instituted in New York called El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, where the central emphasis is on development of both students and their communities (Moll, 2010).

AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) was designed for first generation college bound students of mid-range academic achievement—those who were capable of achieving academic success but were underperforming in their classes (Swanson, 2004). This program, funded by individual schools, equips students with

social capital[7] by enrolling them in college preparatory courses (with the assistance of

school staff) and "AVID" classes. AVID classes help the students develop positive

study habits and academic skills necessary to compete with students who are already

enrolled in advanced coursework. The AVID program teaches the students how to

study, read for content, take notes, and manage time. Students participate in

collaborative study groups or tutorials led by tutors to bring them to a higher level of

understanding of key concepts (Dodea Pacific, 2011).

Beyond these interjection programs, entire schools have been formed with a

social justice imperative. In general, these schools aspire to improve high school

graduation rates and better prepare students—specifically those for whom a smooth

transition into college may be challenging—for family-supporting careers. They do so

by changing the structure of the high school, compressing the number of years to a

college degree, and by removing financial barriers to college. Below are a few examples

of schools which attempt to educate wholly from a social justice standpoint.

KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools started in 1994 by former

educators David Levin and Mike Feinberg. These schools are public (charter) college

preparatory programs which target students from traditionally underserved populations.

The curriculum is college preparatory, with quality teachers, and an emphasis on more

time spent in school. KIPP schools exist at both the primary and secondary levels.

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[7] Boudieu (1986) defined social capital as: "…the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (p. 52). Putnam (2000) suggested that social capital refers to the "…network of reciprocal social relations" that enable individuals and society to accomplish their goals and to make their lives more productive (p.19).

Currently, there are 99 KIPP schools across the United States, serving approximately 26,000 students (KIPP, 2011). In their 2010 study, Angrist, et al. suggested "…the major elements in [the KIPP] model combine to produce noteworthy achievement gains, at least as measured on statewide standardized tests" (p. 5).

IDEA Schools (located in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas) were founded in 1998 by former Teach for America members Tom Torkelson and JoAnn Gama. IDEA started as an after school program to address academic gaps and to focus on academic achievement and college preparation. Due to the success of the after school program, in 2000, an IDEA charter school opened serving 4th-8th grades. Since then 18 more schools across the region have been opened, inclusive of those at the secondary level. Similar to KIPP schools, IDEA schools focus on curriculum designed to increase student achievement and college readiness. All students are placed on a college track, participating in the International Baccalaureate and AP curriculum (IDEA, 2011).

As noted previously, despite numerous reform efforts schools have not achieved equitable outcomes for all students (Venzant-Chambers, Huggins, Locke & Fowler, 2011). Many of the in-school programs and whole-school programs are either not effective with a broad set of students, or they are unable to reach broad set of students. Early College High Schools (ECHS), while having similar foundational principles as the previously mentioned programs, differ in significant ways. ECHSs attempt to increase the number of traditionally underserved students in colleges and universities by creating unique *partnerships* with community colleges and 4-year universities.

Early College High Schools

ECHSs, as innovative and recent educational reforms, embody a thoughtful step toward a socially just goal. ECHSs represent a reform aimed at developing a more equitable educational experience for *all* students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009). They attempt to do so by striving to provide all students with the preparation they need to succeed in college, as well as decreasing time to attainment of a degree. Through the creation of partnerships with post-secondary institutions, the overall goal of the ECHS is to substantially increase the number of low-income and first-generation-college-bound students who will pursue advanced studies.

ECHSs are unique environments. They are configured as small schools which include a high proportion of dual credit courses (high school and college credit) at no out-of-pocket costs to the student or family. ECHSs specifically enroll "… students who have not had access to the academic preparation needed to meet college readiness standards, students for who the cost of college is prohibitive, students of color, and English language learners" (AMI, 2005; JFF, 2004) as well as those who are first-generation college bound. The ECHS concept was formed around the notion of 'challenge, not remediation' for "average" students. ECHSs were designed to help these "average" students realize their potential for academic success, in the very system that did not expect them to succeed (Avilés & Garza, 2010). The goals of ECHS programs are to 'synthesize' high school and college by allowing students (for those who may not go on to college) to either complete a two-year degree at the conclusion of high school or transfer completed coursework to four-year colleges and universities (Cravey, 2007).

Part of the P-16 (preschool through post-secondary) mission is to align expectations and student support services between schools and colleges as well as maximize student progression and success from high school through college. As a key P-16 demonstration project, the ECHS is an intervention strategy for students who have not been well served by traditional high schools. One of the goals of these new schools is to "claim" higher education for students of color and students from low income households or those that will be the first in their family to attend college (Newton, 2008). ECHSs attend to this mission by blurring the boundary between high school and college, integrating students into regular college classes, and compressing the years to a college degree diploma (American Institute for Research, 2005; Avilés & Garza, 2010; Palaich, Augenblick, Foster, Anderson & Rose, 2006).

The ECHS initiative was designed to form collaborative alliances or partnerships between independent school districts and colleges in order to create unique high schools. ECHSs can be considered symbolic of what Murguia (1995) suggested is a counteracting tendency which allows for traditionally marginalized students to succeed, thus, a social justice approach. That is, from a social justice perspective, the traditional school system, as it is set up, perpetuates the status quo. Murguia (1995) continued that such opportunities—like the ECHS—are occasionally allowed to operate whereby systemic rules are modified to keep some lines of upward mobility open and to fight the tendency of the poor to become a permanent underclass. ECHSs reject the meritocratic admission systems (grades and test scores are not considered for admission to ECHSs) which tend to keep many traditionally underserved students from access to higher education.

Moreover, the partnerships with colleges and universities is purported to help ECHS students learn how to successfully navigate a post-secondary campus well before their traditional school counterparts (Avilés & Garza, 2010).

The founders and partners[8] of ECHSs believe that by changing the composition of the high school years and compressing the number of years to a college degree, ECHSs have the potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into highly skilled careers (Glick, Ruf, White & Goldscheider, 2006). These partners work directly with selected ECHSs, school districts, and postsecondary institutions. They provide start-up and ongoing technical support, guidance, and professional development for their networks of schools (Texas Early College High School Resource Guide, 2008). New ECHSs receive startup funds from foundations and may continue to seek gifts and grants. However, once they are up and running, ECHSs generally receive the same public funding as traditional public schools based on per pupil average daily attendance (Wolk, 2005).

The first ECHS opened in 2002. Currently there are some 200 ECHSs in the United States, serving 42,000 students (JFF, 2004; Weldon, 2009). Although the initiative is relatively young, early data from ECHSs are promising. Nationally, the schools are reaching their target populations. Roughly three-fourths of those attending ECHSs are students of color, while nearly 60% report eligibility for free or reduced-

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[8] The 13 partners are: the Center for Native Education, the City University of New York, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, the Georgia Department of Education/University System of Georgia, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Middle College National Consortium, the National Council of La Raza, the North Carolina New Schools Project, the Portland Community College's Gateway to College, SECME, Inc., Communities Foundation of Texas (Texas High School Project), the Utah Partnership Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

priced lunch (Weldon, 2009). In 2007, more than 900 students graduated from 17

ECHSs around the country. Their achievements far surpass those of their peers from

traditional high schools serving similar populations. Preliminary data show: over 65% of

the graduates were accepted to four-year colleges; more than 85% graduated with

substantial college credit; and more than 30% of the graduates earned merit-based

college scholarships, while four students earned the coveted and prestigious Gates

Millennium Scholarship. It is reported that most of these graduates plan to use the

ECHS experience as a stepping-stone to a bachelor's degree (Early College High School

Initiative, n.d.; JFF, 2004). Avilés and Garza (2010) believe ECHSs have the potential

to increase college graduation rates and prepare students for highly-skilled careers.

Moreover, the success of these so-called "average" students in ECHS programs has

discredited and challenged the tracking systems inherent in Advanced Placement and

Gifted and Talented programs.

Texas

ECHSs hold promise for states across the nation, but for Texas in particular. The

U.S. Census Bureau (2008) indicated the 2006 population of Texas consisted of nearly

three times as many Hispanics than the nation as a whole. Behind California, Texas is

home for the nation's second largest Hispanic population. The Texas Data Center

(2008) suggested in another decade, by 2020, Hispanics will make up the majority

population of Texas. However, the Education Commission of the United States released

a report in 2003 which stated among the adult Hispanic population in the nation nearly

half had less than a high school degree, and less than fifteen percent had an associate's

degree or higher. These percentages represent the highest and lowest respectively, compared to other ethnic groups.

Clearly, issues of student performance are particularly important for Texas, a state where demographic projections show that student groups (i.e.: Latinas/os) who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education will grow faster than traditionally well-represented groups (i.e.: Whites). In particular, Texas faces a challenge to ensure that its population does not become more stratified because of unequal access to postsecondary education and the increased earning power it promises.

The first ECHS in Texas opened in 2004 in Houston. Currently, there are 32 ECHSs spread across the state serving more than 7,000 students. The majority of these Texas students, 85%, are students of color, and nearly 75% are from low income households (Texas Education Agency, 2010). Recall from the previous section, these percentages are higher for Texas than those for ECHSs nationally.

In sum, Part I provided a short history of schooling, a short history of schooling for Latinas/os, followed by a discussion of social justice interventions in schools, and a discussion of ECHSs as a social justice intervention. This qualitative study takes a close look at the performance of eight Latina students at one ECHS in Texas. Such an inquiry requires an understanding of what we already know about Latinas/os in schools, and their perceptions of schooling. The following section, Part II, provides a review of the scholarship regarding Latinas/os, schools, and schooling.

Part II: Educational Experiences of Latinas/os

This section highlights the work of scholars who have researched and reported on Latina/o student perceptions of schooling. This section is comprehensive, including brief discussions on the following topics surrounding the achievement of Latinas/os in schools: perceptions of belonging; perceived cultural distance from schooling; cultural supports for education; perceptions of curriculum; teachers and perceptions of low expectations; testing and tracking; lack of access to social capital; race and identity; perceived lack of power; perceptions of a loss of identity; perceptions of failure; moving from lacking power to attaining power; and supposed lack of parental support.

Perceptions of Belonging

The degree to which students perceive they are a part of the school has an impact on their academic behavior. 'Belonging' comes about largely by having friends who feel connected to the school, and by feeling accepted by others such as teachers and administrators (Conchas, 2001; Osterman, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Certainly, strong friendships and relationships within school, based on shared values, lead to a greater sense of belonging (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004; Noddings, 1992). Latina/o students in general are more likely than other students to report they lack a sense of belonging in schools in which they are a minority (Conchas, 2001; Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004). Students who experience a sense of belonging and peer acceptance in school are more likely to enjoy school, to be engaged academically, to participate in school activities, and to persist toward graduation and college (Conchas, 2001; Osterman, 2000). Conversely, students who feel excluded or estranged are far more

likely to disengage academically and to act out in class. They are also at much higher risk of dropping out of school altogether (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004; Huber et al, 2006; Romo & Falbo, 1996). Lacking a sense of belonging may be related to some students' lower aspirations. This is a critical finding because the literature suggests a strong relationship between feeling connected to school or belonging to a school community on the one hand, and academic motivation, participation, and achievement on the other (Gibson, et al, 2004; Huber et al, 2006; National Women's Law Center [NWLC] & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund [MALDEF], 2009).

Perceived Cultural Distance from Schooling

The racial-cultural climate in which Latina/o students live and attend school is critical primarily as it affects the nature of the other forces underlying their school performance. This context defines how Latina/o students fit in, or do not fit in, at school. The demographics within the school and the degree of distance (or the cultural mismatch) between the authority figures and that of the students are of utmost importance (Davison Avilés, Guerrero, Barajas Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Ochoa, 2010). When Latina/o students attend school in a context in which it is clear to them that they are distinguished from the authority figures by class, race, or both, this situation can have a significant impact on the connection that they make to school. If a Latina/o student is made aware that s/he is racially and socio-economically distinct (and presumably inferior) from the authority figures, "… this racial-[cultural] climate can be

linked to feeling a lack of ownership of the schooling process and to feeling distance

between oneself and school" (Pizarro, 2005, p. 61).

However, cultural differences do not form naturally to create barriers to learning

in school. Such barriers come about inorganically. Socio-cultural and socio-economic

borders between predominantly White, middle-class teachers/staff and largely working-

class Latina/o youth, often gives rise to subtle prejudices, creating miscommunication in

student-teacher or student-staff interactions. At times, these interactions may lead to

lowered academic expectations (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004; NWLC &

MALDEF, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). Students are not blind to the subtle and sometimes

overt messages that are conveyed when their home lives, culture, language, and

experiences are deemed different, irrelevant, and even detrimental to school success and

success in society at large (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004).

Cultural Supports for Education: Educación and Funds of Knowledge

Educación: Valenzuela (1999), in her seminal work *Subtractive Schooling*

argued that instead of adding to the knowledge and skill sets of Latina/o youth, schools

subtract resources from them. Schools accomplish this by dismissing the definition of

education many Latinas/os subscribe to (*educación*, defined later), as well as by

instituting assimilationist practices that marginalize non-mainstream culture and

language. Valenzuela (1999) highlighted the schools—more accurately, the schooling

process—as a powerful, state-sanctioned instrument of cultural de-identification, or de-

Mexicanization. The consequences of subtractive schooling are many, the most obvious

by-product being the high school dropout. Valenzuela (1999) went on to assert that the

operant model of schooling for Latina/o youth structurally deprives them of social

capital that they would otherwise enjoy were the school not so aggressively

(subtractively) assimilationist. Valenzuela (1999) stated,

> Rather than students failing schools, schools fail students with a pedagogical
> logic that not only assures the ascendancy of a few, but also jeopardizes their
> access to those among them who are either academically strong or who belong to
> academically supportive networks (p. 30).

Educación, a conceptually broader term than its English language cognate, refers

to the family's role of instilling in children a sense of moral, social, and personal

responsibility, and serves as the foundation for all other learning. Latina/o parents'

expectations tend to focus strongly on the notions of respect, discipline, and social

responsibility (Valdés, 1996). Moreover, teachers are respected professionals who are

encouraged and expected to discuss a wide variety of issues with their students.

Educación thus "… represents both means and end, such that the end-state of being *bien*

educada/o is accomplished through a process characterized by respectful relations.

Conversely, a person who is *mal educada/o* is deemed disrespectful and inadequately

oriented toward others" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23).

Although *educación* has implications for schooling it is first a foundational

cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should behave in society, "With

[an] emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality, it provides a benchmark against

which all humans are to be judged, formally educated or not" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21).

In the absence of such connectedness, students are not only reduced to the level of

objects, they may also be diverted from learning the skills necessary for mastering their

academic and social environment. Thus, the difference in the way students and teachers

perceive school-based relationships can directly impact students' potential to achieve.

Furthermore, Valenzuela (1999) noted that non-Latina/o teachers' characteristic lack of

knowledge of the Spanish language and dismissive attitude toward Latina/o culture

makes them unlikely to be familiar with this cultural definition of *educación*. When

teachers deny their students the opportunity to engage in reciprocal relationships, that is

a caring-cared for dynamic (Noddings, 1992), they simultaneously invalidate the

definition of education that most Latina/o youth embrace. Since that definition is

thoroughly grounded in culture, its rejection constitutes a dismissal of students' culture

as well.

   Funds of Knowledge: Similar to the concept of *educación*, Moll, Amanti, Neff,

and Gonzalez (1992) suggested that Latina/o households contain "funds of knowledge"

which house "ample cultural and cognitive resources" (p. 133) to assist children in

learning how to make their way in the world. Different from the concept of *educación*,

"funds of knowledge" have an emphasis on strategic learning and related activities

essential in households' functioning, development, and well-being based on families'

lived experiences (Moll, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992; Moll & Ruiz,

2002). A fundamental aspect of these "funds" is learned reciprocity which establishes

"*confienza*" or mutual trust between the child and someone whom they are learning from

(a family member, a church member, neighbor, etc.). Resultantly, through these

relationships the child is building social and cultural capital, as well as supportive

networks (Avilés & Garza, 2010). Moreover, these "funds" often incite action. That is,

the child is an active participant in the family (or community) doing their part as a

component of the family (or community) unit. Through action, knowledge is obtained by the child, rather than it being imposed on them. Yet, as with the cultural concept of *educación*, schools rarely tap into these cultural "funds of knowledge."

A short interjection here regarding language is important. A critical element of culture is language. Many Latina/o students, while likely fluent in English, also retain fluency or proficiency in Spanish (Arrigada, 2005). The preservation of Spanish serves many purposes. Being able to communicate and connect with family, especially older generations and relatives who may live outside the United States, is one example (Weisman, 2001). Moreover, keeping the home language alive promotes intimacy and closeness within the family as well as the larger Latina/o community (Arrigada, 2005; Rodriguez, 1982). Additionally, as Schmid (2001) found, retaining Spanish may serve a means of resisting mainstream pressures to assimilate, as well as promoting connections with certain systems of support. Thus, retaining of fluency in Spanish is a way to maintain linguistic capital, connect with ethnic identity, and reinforce cultural and familial solidarity. Schools rarely understand the importance of maintaining language for many of their Latina/o students.

Perceptions of Curriculum

Solorzano (1997) noted that in many schools across the United States, Latinas/os are subjected to a White-middle class-normed curriculum where there is little mention of contributions by Mexicans, and others of Hispanic-descent, to the history of the nation. Moreover, little of Mexican origin is cherished, and negative stereotypes associated with Latinas/os are often reinforced in the curricula and textbooks (Jiménez, 2010;

Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, there is little in the regular, everyday school environment that makes Latina/o students feel that they are important to the future of the nation. Resultantly, as Portales and Portales (2005) suggested, what may be absorbed very clearly by many Latina/o students is that their culture and ancestral backgrounds are expendable and can be (and are) left out of the curriculum. A modern example of this elimination of Latina/o culture is a recent consideration by the Texas Board of Education. The Texas Board of Education is currently contemplating the removal of César Chávez and Thurgood Marshall from the social studies curriculum in all public schools. Chávez and Marshall have been called 'insufficient' characters in history by some "experts" advising the Texas Board of Education on curriculum reform (Stutz, 2009). However, here the question must be asked, insufficient for whom? These individuals may not be important for some people, but they are surely prominent historical figures for others.

Another example of devaluation of Latina/o culture is the debate over bilingual education in schools. As noted above, language is a salient component of culture. English-only movements and resistance to bilingual and culturally inclusive curricula is based partly on the belief that schools should serve to establish and maintain national unity among students of diverse backgrounds (Lucas & Katz, 1994). However, by promoting assimilation and diminishing multilingualism and multiculturalism—as well as limiting learning and academic achievement—some authors have described the quarrel over bilingual education as a covert racist attack against specific student cultures (Macedo, 2000; Villanueva, 1993).

The lack of representation in the curriculum is a component of a 'hidden curriculum' (Apple, 1996). A hidden curriculum consists of norms, values, and beliefs which are tacit and underlying yet implied and transmitted by the very structure and nature of schools, much of what revolves around daily or established routines (Giroux, 1982). Longstreet and Shane (1993) offered a commonly accepted definition for the term 'hidden curriculum.' They stated ". . . the "hidden curriculum," refers to the kinds of learning children derive from the very nature and organizational design of the public school, as well as from the behaviors and attitudes of teachers and administrators...." (p. 46). Deliberate lack of inclusion of language, as well as prominent historical figures, is in line with this definition of a hidden curriculum.

Pizarro (2005) suggested "… the hidden subtexts of race and inferiority dominate the consciousness of some students through the curriculum" (Pizarro, 2005, p. 69) and other school practices. Learning that certain cultures, languages, and histories are important, while others are not, can be harmful to students on many levels (Valenzuela, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2005).

Teachers and Perceptions of Low Expectations

In many schools in which large numbers of Latina/o students attend, teaching and administrative staffs are overwhelming White and non-Spanish speaking (Howard, 1999; Landsman, 2001, Peterek-Bonner, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). This lack of diversity could leave many Latina/o students without access to crucial information and sources of support (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004). Garcia-Reed (2007) found that teacher support was directly related to school performance for the Latinas she studied.

Moreover, in many schools with large percentages of Latina/o students, there is high turnover in the teaching and administrative corps (Ingersoll & Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, 2001). With high turnover, teacher support may be difficult for students to obtain. Furthermore, due to continual change in staffs in such schools, the teachers who are in the classrooms at any given moment are likely those with the least amount of experience (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Moreover, Valenzuela (1999) noted that, like many adults, "… teachers may misremember the past as a golden era; they recall a time when everyone was "honest," "worked hard," and when school was "important" and when students were "respectful"" (p. 66). Today's students in failing to conform to this storybook image of their teachers' "good ole days" may seem deficient. Resultantly, teachers may have diminished expectations for Latina/o students (Kozol, 1991; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Moreover, concomitantly, teachers may find it difficult to see some students in "an appreciative, culture-affirming way" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 66). Perhaps, as Romo and Falbo (1996) suggested, relying on historical notions of inferiority, many teachers' culturally deficit views result in disbelief that all students can learn. In particular, teachers may be quick to conclude Latina/o students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are unable to meet certain necessary criteria (Payne, 2005). Similarly, they may simply see such students as not caring, or having a *laissez faire* attitude toward school. Valenzuela (1999) adequately described this phenomenon in the following quote:

> Many students hear in the demand to "care about" school an implicit threat to
> their ethnic identity, and may withdraw or rebel. The overt request to care

overlies a covert demand that students embrace a curriculum and administration that either dismisses or derogates their ethnicity and that they respond caringly to school officials who often hold their culture and community in contempt (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 25).

Relations with school personnel, especially with teachers, play a decisive role in determining the extent to which youth find the school to be a welcoming or an alienating place. In the absence of such constructive relationships, students may find it difficult to learn the skills necessary for mastering their academic and social environments. Thus, the difference in the way students and teachers perceive school-based relationships can bear directly on students' potential to achieve (Valenzuela, 1999).

Teachers represent both authority figures and the gatekeepers into the realm of knowledge and success. Pizarro (2005) suggested when these authority figures base their actions on historic stereotypes, the impact of those actions is overwhelming for many students. By contrast, when positive, proactive, and authentic bonding between teacher/administrator and student becomes a defining characteristic of the school community as whole, students experience a certain sense of community, a collective identity that is highly consistent with increased engagement and academic achievement (Kessler, 2000; Libby, 2004; Perreira, Fuligini, Potochinick, 2010). As Stanton-Salazar (as cited in Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004) suggested, when school personnel treat students in a caring manner, creating the conditions for bonding, in turn, students come to identify with and conform to, the established order. Once integrated, students experience a heightened degree of motivation and often make the necessary efforts to meet academic demands.

For Latinas/os, academic performance as demonstrated by grades and test scores is negatively associated with the potential to drop out of high school (Vélez, 2008). That is, students with higher grades are more likely to stay in school than those with lower grades. Vélez (2008) argued "… good grades can be a boost to the academic self-concept of high achieving Latin[a/o] students and makes future learning easier or less costly than for their less successful counterparts" (p. 139). However, if the definition of what it means to be educated in U.S. society systematically excludes the Mexican culture, the Spanish language, the prescription that students "care about", "perform well", and "stay in" school can be hard lessons to follow (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 258).

Testing and Tracking

Placement in courses is often based on test scores. Scores on standardized tests often appear meritocratic, impartial and neutral. Portales and Portales (2005) suggested, based on test scores, students are either classified as bright or not, and once they are placed in one cohort or the other, it is difficult for students to change tracks since their grades and school records follow them. Because Latina/o students overall tend to score lower than Whites on most norm-referenced tests (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Fischer, 1996; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Oakes, 1995), they are overrepresented in the lower tracks and underrepresented in the higher tracks (Hill & Torres, 2010). For example, according to College Board (2010), Latina/o enrollment in AP coursework averages 14% nationally, as compared to Whites whose average enrollment is 62%. While only students in the highest tracks are educated to do college-level work, the overwhelming majority of Latina/o youth are not trained to the standard required for

success in college (Hill & Torres, 2010; Vélez, 2008). Instead, their lower scores have channeled them into lower-level coursework which, according to Romo and Falbo (1996), is known to produce apathy, feelings of exclusion, and disregard about completing classroom tasks and doing assigned work. Clearly, test scores are not neutral or impartial. In the name of fairness and objectivity, these test scores and class placement are able to justify educational inequity (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

Many underperforming high school students, including Latinas/os, drop out because they correctly perceive the education the schools are providing is at such a low level they would not be able to achieve a good life even after graduation (Fine, 1986; Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004). Romo and Falbo (1996) have suggested the content of the courses and the low levels at which they are aimed, prepare students for a lifetime of minimum wage jobs.

Lack of Access to Social Capital

Latinas/os experience more within school segregation than any other student group (Hill & Torres, 2010; Moll, 2010; Orfield, 2009). The fact that students remain especially ethnically segregated, even within diverse schools, means they are not often privy to the support and information networks (social capital) that other students, who are headed for college in much greater numbers, share (Yosso, 2006). Thus, because of this segregated structure there is little opportunity to counter low achievement through day-to-day contact with other more knowledgeable and academically motivated students, as well as influential school staff (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004). By being

separated, the disadvantaged never have equal access to the greater benefits schooling can provide.

Here is it important to re-state that Latina/o students experience the most within school segregation compared to all other student groups. Moreover, Latinas/os also experience more residential segregation than any other student group (Hill & Torres, 2010; Orfield, 2009; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Thus, Gándara and Hopkins (2010) suggest that Latinas/os are triple-segregated, based on race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and language.

Race and Identity

Identity is often formed in dynamic relationship to a complex process of racialization. Racialization, as defined by Telles and Ortiz (2008), is "… the process of naturalizing social distinctions and creating stereotypes that guide individuals in how they interact with or value others" (p. 36). Racialization is applied to students when they are categorized and classified based on perceived or stereotypical notions of how specific racial groups perform in school (Omi & Winant, 1994). The identity struggles which Latina/o youth face in schools are often related to their experiences not only as members of an ethnic group but also as members of a racialized group (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Pizarro, 2005).

The identity of Latina/o students is often a central force which shapes their school experiences and performance, as it is a critical factor involved in the way in which school staff interact with students and vice versa (Conchas, 2001; Flores-González, 2002; Pizarro, 2005). Furthermore, these limitations are often constructed

around the meanings attached to Latina/o identity by teachers, counselors, and in turn,

Latinas/os themselves (Pizarro, 2005). It is likely that Latina/o students could define (or

limit) their trajectory in schools that concomitantly limit their exposure to multiple

possibilities. This phenomenon is known as "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997), and is

discussed later in this chapter.

Perceived Lack of Power

For the majority of Latina/o students, the awareness of their lack of power as

racialized people becomes critical to their understanding of their place in the world

(Bowles & Gintis, 2002). This realization then, is the means by which many students

define their own identities (Pizarro, 2005). In many school environments, the blatant

differences between the power held by Whites and that held by Latinas/os creates a

climate in which comparisons are unavoidable (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Pizarro (2005) argued racism, discrimination, and racial hegemony often shape

life for Latinas/os in and out of school. The most powerful and potentially damaging

manifestations of this reality are the multiple ways in which the self-esteem and

confidence of Latina/o students may be attacked. This sort of attack often happens

tacitly. However, the impact of living in a community in which the powerful have

organized daily life on the understanding that Latinas/os cannot succeed can be

overwhelming for youth (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Pizarro (2005)

suggested, resultantly, students become withdrawn and insecure about their abilities in

school. Moreover, Graham and Taylor (2002) suggested the degree to which youth

anticipate factors outside of their control to negatively influence their education, the less

likely they may be to value effort and success in school. That is, the less power they perceive to have, the less likely they are to "buy in" to schooling.

Perceptions of a Loss of Identity

School systems can force students to consider the importance of their race and identities through schooling itself. Ogbu's (1981) cultural-ecological framework emphasizes the role of historical racism and institutional oppression in shaping ethnic groups' opposition to the conventional routes to success available to the dominant (White) group. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued youth of color adapt strategically to these forces of exclusion in ways which preserve their cultural identities. A chief strategy involves youth rejecting schooling and underachieving because they correlate academic achievement with 'acting White' and because they see minimal payoffs to applying effort in schooling. In other words, students deny or repress parts of their racial or ethnic identity in order to coordinate with school norms. This "disidentifying" (Hurtado, Cervantez & Eccleston, 2010) with educational achievement creates stereotype threat (Steele, 1992; 1997): the fear that a student will be evaluated based on a stereotype), and impairs performance as well as positive self-esteem. Some students may actively resist this 'assimilation or nothing' approach by underperforming in school (Gibson, Gándara & Koyotama, 2004). These students then may be assigned the typical stereotypes and seen by school staffs as fundamentally lacking in drive and enthusiasm. Such forms of resistance have come to be viewed by some as an inherent characteristic of being Latina/o (or Black or Native American or low income)—that is, uninterested in education (Dávila, 2008).

Perceptions of Failure

Latina/o identity is often associated with school failure (Feagin & Cobas, 2008; Pizarro, 2005). This is a systemic racialization that places Latinas/os on the margins of the school and the larger community (Feagin, 2006; Feagin & Cobas, 2008; Pizarro, 2005). The system forces students to consider the importance of their race in their identities through schooling itself, and race becomes a critical part of identity linked to educational goals. In this way racial identity plays a critical role within schools. Students often have no other choice but to deal with the ways in which the racial organization of school limits their abilities to achieve their goals (Pizarro, 2005). Many, rather than putting up with these limitations, simply 'deal with it' by leaving the system (Fine, 1986; Rumberger, 1995).

Moving From Lacking Power to Attaining Power

Pizarro (2005) stated "In many instances, conflict influences identity formation. Conflicts related to [student] disempowerment shape not only how students see themselves but also how they understand their schooling and their educational futures" (Pizarro, 2005, p. 58). Given that the encouragement and support Latina/o students receive tends to be limited, it is the degree of conflict they face which often becomes fundamental to their school success or failure (Kasen, Cohen, & Brook, 1988; Pizarro, 2005; Wehlage, Rutter, Wisconsin Center for Education Research & National Institute of Education, 1985). When Latina/o students experience some form of racial conflict in school, it often initiates or solidifies their understanding of limits on their opportunities for academic success.

Students are not blind to the subtle and sometimes overt messages that are conveyed when their home lives, culture, language, and experiences are deemed irrelevant and even detrimental to school success and success in society writ large (Davison Avilés, Guerrero, Barajas Howarth & Thomas, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Early on, many students understand they are being devalued in the schools through segregation via testing and tracking, through policies directed at them, through their own isolation (for some), and through direct conflicts and confrontations with authority figures (for others). Students are forced to deal with their placement at the low end of the school hierarchy as a function of their race/ethnicity (Pizarro, 2005). Students may respond to this negative environment by challenging it with negative actions. When students believe their identities are being devalued or misunderstood, they are more likely to resist school authority, misbehave in class, and perform poorly (Conchas, 2001; Fernández, 2002). These are forms of student power. That is, in calling attention to the part the school plays in creating divergent student outcomes—some students *decide* to underperform as a stance against a school culture they perceive to be unfair (Venzant-Chambers, Huggins, Locke & Fowler, 2011).

Some students are unwilling to buy into limited conceptions of success, that is, some students reject that they have to whole heartedly accept the White-normed nature of schools. Carter (2005) confirms that some students have no interest in aligning themselves with what they perceive as limited ways of self expression. Often when students perceive they do not belong in schools because of who they are, they will create alternative ways of belonging (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Gibson, Gándara & Koyama,

2004; Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). These alternative pathways may allow for increased academic performance (Barajas & Pierce, 2001) or they may allow for increased distance from schools, the most extreme examples being dropping out, gang membership, or potentially early parenthood (Thornberry, More, & Christenson, 1985). However, these are also forms of student power.

Parental Support

In line with cultural deficit theory or deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997; 2010) and the culture of poverty hypothesis (Lewis & La Farge, 1975), Pizarro (2005), as well as Hill and Torres (2010) suggested that quite often teachers and administrators contend their efforts to educate Latinas/os are severely limited because Latina/o parents are uninterested in education and the educational achievement of their children.

Schools often assume parents can or will provide the guidance students need academically. Certainly there are parents out there who refuse to guide their children in helpful ways. However, more often parents who lack education themselves are simply unable to provide useful academic assistance to their children (Hill & Torres, 2010). When teachers and administrators misunderstand Latina/o families' inability to advocate for their children as being uninterested in education, this bias may contribute to academic failure. Parental inability to advocate likely has multiple sources and contributes to parents' overall lack of power in the system.

Furthermore, parents with little education themselves may be slow to recognize that their child is having academic difficulties or problems within the school. They may not know how to solve academic problems. Concomitantly, parents may rely on the

school to make educationally sound decisions for the student (Hill & Torres, 2010;

López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Parents may assume that

if they do not hear anything from the school—everything must be alright. Parents may

also be reluctant to enter the school to meet with teachers or administrators, for a number

of potential reasons. Intimidation of the system based on their own marginalization in

the system, work schedule conflicts, lack of translation services or lack of

transportation—may be just a few reasons.

      According to Portales and Portales (2005) and Hill and Torres (2010), education

is considered very important in most Latina/o homes, next in importance only to

religion. Latina/o youth are commonly instructed by their parents and relatives to

respect teachers, as much as and sometimes more, than their own parents. Moreover,

education is so highly valued that immigrants are often willing to undergo perilous

journeys to enter the United States not only to work, but to provide their children with

better educational opportunities (Portales & Portales, 2005).   Parents with little

schooling are often frightened by the possibility that their children will suffer and

struggle as they have (Pizarro, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). However, Latina/o

families have what many schools may consider non-conventional ways of supporting

education (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Moll, et al, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Many scholars have

highlighted family support as a key component to the academic success of Latinas/os

(Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Sy, 2006; Sy & Romero, 2008).

      As is clear from the scholarship presented here, Latinas/os are not perceived in

schools to be as academically adept as other student groups may be (Avilés & Garza,

2010). Moreover, this literature makes it easy to understand how and why many Latina/o students see schools as loci of tension and conflict (Montejano, 2010).

In sum, in Part II, I demonstrated the works of scholars who reported on Latina/o student perceptions of schools and schooling. As this study focused on the perceptions of Latinas in an ECHS, it is important to know the scholarship regarding Latinas in schools. In the following section, Part III, I focus on the work of scholars who have written exclusively on Latinas in schools.

Part III: Educational Experiences Specific to Latinas

Gender is an important factor in the school success of many Latinas/os (Schmid, 2001). Many scholars have found that overall, Latinas tend to have higher grades and are more likely to graduate from high school than Latinos (Cammarota, 2004, 2007; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Gibson, 1998; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Rumbeger & Larson, 1998).

Latinas

What is known about Latinas? Sadly, the common stereotype of a Latina adolescent is a submissive girl who makes poor choices, will get pregnant and drop out of school. If not pregnancy, then gang membership (Cammarota, 2004; Denner & Guzmán, 2006; Romo, 1998). High school graduation and college are not housed within this typical stereotype. As a consequence, much research that focuses on Latinas does so in terms of teen motherhood, depression and violence (Denner & Guzmán, 2006). Since what we tend to hear about Latinas is focused on negative behavior, little is known about the majority of Latinas who do not engage in such behaviors and strive to be successful adults (Dávila, 2008).

Latinas now outperform Latinos in terms of educational outcomes (Cammarota, 2004; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Ginorio & Huston, 2001). This shift in achievement suggests Latinas are seeking more education as a means of resisting historic gender norms and obtaining freedom and opportunity.

However, for many Latinas, it is probable that gender oppression and family obligations may impede their academic success (Cammarota, 2004; Sy & Romero, 2008). Cammarota (2004) noted that Latina mothers sometimes give their daughters mixed messages regarding achievement in school, self-reliance, and the preservation of gendered cultural norms (the importance of *domestica Latina* or *mujeres de la casa*—women of the home). Latinas do indeed occupy unique social and political spaces.

Borderlands

Latinas living in the United States are equipped with a unique set of challenges and strengths which result from living in a unique space, what Andalzúa (1999) called the "borderlands" or the "*neplanta*." Andalzúa (1999) noted borders are set up to define and distinguish the places that are safe and unsafe. A border is a dividing line, a vague and undetermined place created by an unnatural boundary. Borders are in a constant state of transition, inhabited by the prohibited and the forbidden. Living in the borderlands for Latinas then means, Latinas are both *Americanas* and *Latinas*; hold high aspirations while being expected to conform to traditional gender roles; and are often native speakers of both English and Spanish. Thus, they straddle borders between the two cultures, the two worlds—living in both at the same time. Latinas have the unique opportunity to incorporate their Latina/o cultural traditions with mainstream (White)

culture. They are able to create themselves as transcultural, simultaneously incorporating customs and behaviors from the different cultures (Denner & Guzmán, 2006). Moreover, Latinas, through education, are forging new roles and identities for themselves, crossing borders once again.

One could say that TECHS (and all ECHSs) exist in the "*neplanta*" or on a "border." These are institutions which are often tenuous, transitional worlds, which sit on the border between high school and college. The students are those who are often first-generation-college-bound and students of color, coming from homes where they may be the first able to cross the "border" from high school to college.

In the next section, I briefly explore Latinas at TECHS in their border-spanning roles, as well as the importance of the current study.

Latinas at TECHS

Consistent with border crossing, TECHS Latinas are building new cultures and new ways of being (Cruz, 2006). They are constantly in transition between worlds (high schooler, college student, Latina, female, first-generation-college-bound). But this is likely nothing new for them because straddling cultures and negotiating boundaries is a part of everyday living for Latinas—they are familiar in the "in between."

Before analyzing the data collected for this study, I had the following thoughts regarding the participants. Perhaps coming to TECHS is the recognition of Latina agency—they do not perceive themselves to be powerless victims (Bañuelos, 2006). Since the Latinas who participated in this study were underperforming, perhaps underperforming was a form of a libratory opposition to oppressive structures. That is,

perhaps the Latinas were taking a powerful stance against the structure of the school. Or, maybe they came to TECHS to experience the freedom a college environment could provide, and found it to be just as restrictive as a traditional high school. Finding supportive spaces that allow a sense of belonging is likely critical to Latina academic success (Bañuelos, 2006). Maybe TECHS was not a supportive space for some Latinas.

Importance of the Study

Latina youth continue to suffer from a lack of attention about their experiences in educational settings (Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal & Elenas, 2006). Very little research paints a nuanced and complex portrait of Latina lives from which we consider their cultural/gendered perspectives, resources, and resilience in interactions with institutions of power (i.e.: schools) (Habell-Pallán, 2005). Regarding this absence of knowledge, Rodriguez, Guido-DiGrito, Torres and Talbot (2000) noted "… Latinas have been largely ignored by [the educational community], a slight that has led to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Latinas' needs and concerns" (p. 152).

The ECHS project is a relatively recent program within the nation's secondary and postsecondary education programs. Accordingly, there is little data relative to these schools, and even less research exists which focuses on the ECHS students themselves, their reasons for choosing to attend an ECHS, their perceptions of gains and losses by doing so, and their overall demeanor within the ECHS structure itself (Cravey, 2007). In the literature review process, I discovered reports and evaluations such as those published by Jobs for the Future and the American Institutes for Research on ECHSs, however, none of these publications contained data similar to what is presented in this

study. A good share of these publications were simply reporting quantitative data regarding ECHSs inclusive of graduation rates, college credits earned, location of schools, and the like. There exists no research that I am aware of on Latinas in ECHS programs. Thus, this project is an attempt to contribute to these gaps in the current literature.

Moreover, this qualitative project is important and unique because it addresses gaps in research fundamental to the ability of ECHSs to effectively prepare Latinas for college, as well as documenting student perceptions of academic performance and school experiences. There is an overall lack of data from Latina students' perspectives. Results may lead to deeper understanding of the perceptions Latina students hold regarding their school experiences and performance, and contribute to a transformation of normed views of academic performance. Furthermore, this inquiry may inspire improved schooling practices which embrace and uphold the tenets of diversity, equity, and social justice. The resulting information will be useful for education leaders, leadership programs, and teacher education programs.

This is an especially prudent study because the Latina/o population continues to increase through a variety of factors including migration and consecutive generations, yet is not experiencing improvements in educational outcomes as compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Books, 2004; Hernandez & Nesman, 2004; Nieto, 1996). Latina/o children now account for 12.5% of the population in the United States as well as more than 20% of students in schools nationwide (Fry, Gonzalez & Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). Demographers estimate by 2020 Latinas/os will be the largest population group

in Texas (U.S. Census, 2007). Latinas are currently the largest group of girls of color (Garcia-Reid, 2007; Ginorio & Huston, 2001), however, as Gonzalez (2007) reported, Latinas are less educated than women of other racial/ethnic groups. Thus, understanding Latinas' perceptions of their academic performance and school experiences is imperative if we aim to understand how to best address their educational needs. Information on what Latinas require of their school systems should be an obvious priority for effective leaders in education, as well as for those at both the national and local levels.

Furthermore, learning about Latinas who stay in school is important as Romo (1998) noted, "… leaving school early has a dramatic impact on Hispanic girls, because Latinas face greater barriers than males when seeking high-wage jobs and opportunities in postsecondary education" (Romo, 1998, p. 1). Thus, leaving school early has an inflated effect on Latinas in particular. Concomitantly, as "… stereotypes of Hispanic girls as submissive underachievers are often reinforced by family, school, and media" (De Leon, as cited in Romo, 1998, p. 2), a study with Latinas who are actively engaging in an activity to defy these stereotypes (attending an ECHS and intending to go to college) is important.

In sum, there is a lack of data generally from the Latina/o students' perspective, and more specifically from the Latina students' perspective. Information from student participants in the ECHS program can reveal more detailed and candid responses, and may provide critical data for future research on increasing academic performance among Latina students. Furthermore, heightened awareness of the needs of Latinas/os is imperative to the successful planning of the nation's education system.

Summary

A review of current and pertinent literature reveals current thinking in the field (Moghaddam, 2006). As noted earlier, the purpose of this chapter was to provide the reader with an overview of the existing literature as it relates to the research question guiding this study. That is, to provide background for the reader in order to understand where this study is situated in the existing scholarship. In order to present this overview, it was important to begin with a short history of schooling as well as a history of schooling for Latinas/os, followed by a short discussion of social justice interventions in school and why they were needed, followed by a discussion of ECHSs as a social justice intervention, and finally ending with a discussion of what we already know about Latinas/os in schools.

Prior to 2007, students in the Tambryn Independent School district did not have the option of attending an ECHS where they could enroll in both high school and college simultaneously. Their only choice was the traditional one where they would first finish high school and then perhaps move on to college. Therefore Latinas, like many other students at TECHS, are making new relationships with education that have not been seen previously by this particular age and ethnic group in Tambryn, Texas. This dissertation, broadly, addresses gaps in the existing scholarship on Latinas in education. More specifically, it extends the literature by including and examining the voices of Latina high school students within this relatively new early-college-structured educational environment. Furthermore, this project is an effort to fill gaps in the literature regarding

ECHSs, ECHSs as a viable social justice policy, as well as an effort to expand the cultivating of equity-oriented school leaders, and leaders for social justice.

      The following chapter presents the research methodology and methods used to both gather and analyze the data as it related to the perceptions of Latina students who were underperforming at TECHS, regarding their academic performance and school experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the purpose and research question, the methodology, as well as the epistemological and conceptual frameworks, which guided this study. I also articulate the methods employed in data collection and data analyses. I then describe, in detail, the context of the study site and participants. And lastly, in the final pages of this chapter, I discuss how I worked to establish trustworthiness and ensure ethical standards of research.

Purpose and Research Question

This study can be understood as a critical look into an early college program designed to improve the percentages of traditionally underserved students on college campuses through the eyes of Latina students, who were both enrolled and underperforming in the program. This study sought to understand the girls' experiences in the program, as well as understand what their experiences say about the ECHS as a policy solution designed to address the educational needs of traditionally underserved students. There is a marked absence of research regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of programs designed to improve the propensity of such students to be college-bound, particularly from the student perspective. Moreover, there is a lack of scholarship regarding Latina students in schools in general. As this study is intended to contribute to the scholarly gaps in these areas, the research question guiding this inquiry was: What are the perceptions of Latina students, who are underperforming, regarding

their school performance and experiences, at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college?

It is my sincere hope that the findings of this study live up to this intention. Understanding how policies aimed at increasing the educational opportunity for a traditionally underserved student group, as experienced and perceived by students, may provide insight into how we might create better interventions while increasing educational opportunity.

Methodology

In order to respond to the purpose and research question guiding this study, I used qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Merriam (2002) explains that qualitative inquiry and its methodology strive to "… understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences" (p. 4). Patton (1990) suggests that qualitative research "… is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there" (p. 1). Moreover, in qualitative inquiry, the researcher (as the human instrument) serves as the primary means of data collection. This is so because the human instrument is capable of grasping and making meaning of human interaction. Much of this meaning making occurs through observation and active engagement in the study setting. In fact, participant observation, which "…assumes immersion in a setting… [as] the best way to develop knowledge of others' ways of thinking and acting" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 219), is a primary methodology for many types of qualitative inquiries.

Participant observation is a way of generating the understanding of others and their interactions in the natural environment. Understanding the natural setting often comes in the form of tacit knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the study of participant(s) in their natural environment, is one of the best modes of research to get at tacit knowledge. Lincoln and Guba (1985) go on to state "Tacit knowledge becomes the base on which the human instrument builds many of the insights and hypotheses that will eventually develop…" (p. 198). In terms of this study, this means to best understand the Latina students' perceptions of their academic performance and school experiences, within the TECHS setting, I had to gain tacit understanding of not only their perceptions, but the context as well. Thus, as the participant observer, I was able to gain tacit understanding and exposure to the context, which according to Lewis (1992) allows "… the researcher [to be] more into the day-to-day context of subjects and helps the researcher avoid relying merely on the self-reports of subjects through interviews" (p. 286). I relied heavily on these particular qualitative methodologies throughout this inquiry. That is, for this study I served as the researcher or primary instrument of data collection and analysis. I employed participant observation and was actively engaged in the study setting.

Epistemological and Conceptual Frameworks

This interpretivist study drew from critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002), which I will discuss later in this chapter. First, I will explain the interpretivist paradigm and its usefulness to guide the study.

The interpretivist paradigm places value on how individuals interpret their world and experiences. Moreover, using an interpretivist approach, the researcher respects that individuals have multiple truths, that is, people live in multiple, fluid realities (Rosaldo, 1993). More precisely, as Schwandt (2007) stated interpretivism,

> … denotes those approaches to study social life that accord a central place to *Verstehen* [a German term for understanding] as a method of the human sciences, that assume that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action, as that the task of the inquirer is to unearth that meaning (p.160).

Accordingly, when working within the interpretivist frame, the researcher recognizes there are multiple realities, perspectives, and truths regarding phenomena. Furthermore, the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation (Merriam, 2002). That is, researchers intend to understand how participants interpret meaning, and form perspectives and worldviews, based on their experiences. Thus, I used interpretivism to gain insights on the experiences of underperforming Latina students at TECHS.

In addition to interpretivism, and as noted previously, I drew on critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002) to guide the study. Critical raced-gendered epistemologies fall within the critical paradigm. Inherent within the critical paradigm is critique. Critical studies critique and interrogate structures and processes, which are often taken for granted, to reveal potential inherent contractions and shortcomings (Schwandt, 2007). Critical raced-gendered epistemologies, according to Delgado Bernal (2002) attend to critique because they "… offer unique ways of knowing and understanding based on the various raced and gendered experiences of people of color" (p. 107). That is, "… critical race-gendered epistemologies emerge from the

experiences a person of color might have at the intersection of racism, sexism, and other oppressions" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). I initially chose this framework because I not only wanted to understand academic performance from the Latinas' personal and multidimensional perspectives (based on both race and gender), but also to examine their stories for the ways in which they interpreted, critiqued, and possibly resisted, the structure of the school. Moreover, a critical raced-gendered epistemology framework was especially suitable because it values participants as the best informants of their own situations, behaviors, and feelings, based on both race *and* gender. However, within the analyses of the girls' individual and collective experiences and perceptions of their performance, it became apparent that the phenomena of underperformance would be most appropriately considered from a policy point-of-view. That is, their experiences and performance had to be considered within a policy context. Thus, I turned to the work of Anderson and Larson (2009) who conducted a similar inquiry.

Anderson and Larson (2009) studied the perspectives and experiences of students participating in an Upward Bound program in order to understand how this education policy attempted to increase educational opportunity for students it was designed to serve. To inform their study, Anderson and Larson (2009) interviewed students, as well as the director of the Upward Bound program. These authors analyzed their data guided by the conceptual frameworks of freedom to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999). These frameworks allowed for divergent and dynamic perspectives regarding achievement to be illuminated. By interrogating a policy designed to increase educational opportunity, Anderson and

Larson (2009), 'vetted' the discrepancies in how the director perceived this 'opportunity' and how the students perceived it.

As a compatible study, the work of Anderson and Larson (2009) led me to look more broadly at the TECHS policies articulated in institutional doctrine and documents such as: the mission statement; core values; scholar's oath; and the student/parent/staff contract. Doing so allowed me to understand how these policies may be influencing or interacting with the girls' perceptions of their experiences and performance. Thus, similarly to Anderson and Larson (2009), I applied the frameworks of freedoms to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999) to TECHS institutional doctrine and documents, as well as the interview data, in order to better understand TECHS as a policy intervention.

Extensive detailed discussion of these frameworks, as well as the study conducted by Anderson and Larson (2009), are presented in Chapter IV. I present these frameworks in Chapter IV because they are most easily displayed, explained, and understood there in terms of comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences in the current work and that of Anderson and Larson (2009).

In conclusion, this was a qualitative study, guided by the interpretivist paradigm and critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Methodologies employed allowed me to gain a thorough understanding of the study context and participants. In order to better understand TECHS in terms of a policy intervention, the conceptual frameworks of freedoms to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999) were utilized.

Methods

In qualitative inquiry, methods, or the set of investigative procedures, techniques and tools used to generate and analyze data (Schwandt, 2007), such as observing, interviewing, and document analysis, are elected over quantitative methods because they are "… are more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). Moreover, the researcher acts as the human instrument through which most data are collected and analyzed.

My role at TECHS allowed me a unique vantage point as an observer. Before and during data collection I served as the Community Liaison at TECHS, working in the natural setting 20 hours per week. Being immersed in the context, and serving in an official role at TECHS, I was able to both conduct observations, and gain the trust of my participants, as well as other students, teachers, and administrators.

Beyond observations, data for this study were collected through other qualitative means such as field notes, document reviews, interviews, student journals, and a researcher's personal journal. Used in addition to observation, these "multiple modes of inquiry" (Schultz, 2005) allowed me to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study, as well as a holistic portrait of the context.

Context/The Study Site: Tambryn Early College High School

TECHS was chosen for this study based on both theoretical and practical considerations. First, in terms of theoretical concerns, the unusual phenomenon of Latina student underperformance was occurring in this early college environment.

Because scholarship is sparse regarding this phenomenon, I selected TECHS as a site from which a great deal could be learned. Second, in terms of practical concerns, TECHS was chosen because of its partnership with a major university.

Since the fall of 2007, a major university and a community college in Tambryn, Texas have partnered with TECHS. The shared partnership permits TECHS students to attend classes at the community college free of all costs and permits instructors employed by the community college to teach at the TECHS campus. The major university provides a graduate assistant to work with TECHS (in this particular case, I was the graduate assistant from 2007-2011), a team of undergraduates who serve as tutors, and some classroom equipment.

TECHS is categorized as both a public charter school and an early college high school. At the time of data collection, TECHS shared a small campus of the Tambryn Independent School District with two other district educational programs (an alternative program and a disciplinary program).

As a unique program for the district, TECHS is guided by its own set of institutional doctrine. TECHS promotes the following mission statement and core values (Tambryn Early College High School, 2010):

Mission: We are a community of learners engaged in a quest for academic excellence and committed to civil and social responsibility. We are unwavering in our belief that we must act with integrity and treat each other with respect.

Core Values:

1. All students will be prepared to succeed in college.

2. We will create and sustain a learning centered culture.

3. Parent and community members will be active participants.

4. We will be vigilant in instructional practice and behavior management.

5. The faculty is committed to high student achievement through collaboration, continuous support, and collegiality.

Students at TECHS also pledge the following 'Scholar's Oath':

We will show respect for ourselves and others at all times.

We are a team of scholars discovering, discussing, and learning together.

We will regard "can't" as a swear word. We *can* achieve anything; we just may need a different approach or a little guidance.

We will never say "I am done," because there is always something more to learn or someone else to help.

TECHS recruits and enrolls approximately 100 students per grade level (9-12), through application and interview processes. New students may begin as freshmen or transfer during their sophomore year, and must live within the Tambryn district. TECHS has a 'soft' selection process for admitting new students, meaning there is no requirement that the student applicants demonstrate past exceptional academic performance. TECHS does not, however, admit students who have had serious disciplinary issues at school in the past. Accepted students must show a commitment to fully participate in TECHS's academically rigorous program. To this end, both the student and their parent/guardian must sign a statement of commitment, the

Student/Parent/Staff Contract (see Appendix A), demonstrating they are aware of the rigor and expectations at TECHS and committed to high academic achievement.

TECHS, like all other public schools, must comply with accountability measures outlined in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. According to the accountability ratings of NCLB, TECHS was a "recognized" campus in 2007, meaning at least 80% of its students in all population groups passed all portions of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state mandated exam. In 2008 and 2009, TECHS was an "exemplary" campus, where at least 90% of the students in all population groups passed all portions of the TAKS exam.

While these TAKS scores demonstrate the students are performing at above average rates for their high school grade level, college preparation is a primary focus of TECHS. Students who attend, like all ECHS students, will have the opportunity to earn up to 60, and sometimes beyond, transferrable college credit hours in addition to their high school diploma if they are continuously enrolled from the 9th grade to the 12th grade. College courses are offered tuition-free to all TECHS students. Students also receive free textbooks for these courses.

As an early college program, TECHS attempts to recruit and enroll traditionally underserved students. The student demographics at TECHS at the time of data collection (May, 2010-July, 2010), and as described by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2008), were as follows:

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity of Students at TECHS

Ethnicity of Students at TECHS	Percentage
African American	19%
Asian	<1%
Hispanic	**58%**
White	**22%**

Table 2: Special Populations of Students at TECHS

Special Populations of Students at TECHS	Percentage
Low income	**68%**
At-risk	33%
Special education	<1%
Limited English Proficient	1.6%
Gifted & Talented	19%
First generation college bound	85%

Table 3: Gender of Students at TECHS

Gender of Students at TECHS	Percentage
Female	67%
Male	33%

The staff demographics at TECHS during the time of data collection were drastically different that those of the student population. The staff at TECHS was comprised of one Principal (White female); one Dean of Students (White female); two

paraprofessionals (both Latina and bilingual Spanish-English); 12 teachers (four White males, one Latina, seven White females); and one graduate assistant (White female). The Principal at TECHS was a former teacher from Central High School, a traditional high school. Many members of the teaching staff at TECHS were also former employees of this traditional high school.

While the staff differed drastically from the students in terms of race/ethnicity, as demonstrated by demographic statistics highlighted in Tables 1 through 3 above, TECHS—serving predominantly students of color and students from low income homes—was targeting students ECHSs were designed to serve. Because many of such students may not have had the necessary preparation for advanced work, and due to the high level of rigor at TECHS, the school offered academic assistance to its students in two primary ways. First, the major university supported undergraduate students to work as tutors and mentors at TECHS (these were work-study positions, paid through the Office of Financial Aid). During the time of data collection, tutors were present on campus and available to assist students during most of the school day, as well as before and after school. Another way the students accessed extra academic assistance was through teacher tutorials. Beyond requiring teachers to be available before and after school for student assistance, TECHS also offered "Saturday Tutorials" for all students from 9:00am-12:00pm for most Saturdays during the academic year. Several teachers were present at the Saturday Tutorials, as well as a few tutors.

While it is important to understand the context of TECHS itself, it is also important to understand the larger context of where the school is situated. For

comparative purposes, the demographics (rounded to the nearest whole number) of

Tambryn, Texas (at the time of data collection, May, 2010-July, 2010) according to the

U.S. Census Bureau Factfinder (2010a) and Quickfact webpages (2010b) were:

Table 4: Demographics for Tambryn, Texas

Demographics for Tambryn, Texas	Percentage
Asian	2%
African American	18%
Hispanic	**28%**
White	**65%**
Uses language other than English at home	26%
High School Graduates	73%
College Graduates	26%
Percent living below poverty level	**22%**

Additionally, according to the 2006-2008 American Community Survey, the total

population for Tambryn, Texas was 67,000 and the median household income was

approximately $37,000. The larger Tambryn area had a population of approximately

190,000 residents, at the time of data collection. A major research university, a

community college, two school districts and two large hospitals were the major

employers of the area.

The independent school district where TECHS is located served a total of

approximately 15,000 students in 2010. At the time of data collection, the demographics

of the district student population were: 24% African American; 46% Hispanic; 30%

White; and 69% economically disadvantaged. The district had three high schools

(TECHS, plus two traditional high schools) serving grades 9-12, four middle schools and

16 elementary schools. The TEA accountability ratings for the two traditional high schools in Tambryn were as follows: Central High School was rated "academically acceptable" in 2007, 2008, and 2009, meaning that a minimum of 70% of the students in all population groups passed the reading, writing, and social studies portions of the TAKS exam, 65% of students in all population groups passed the math portion, and 60% in all population groups passed the science portion. In 2010, Central High School was rated "academically unacceptable" meaning that the minimum percentages of students passing the above portions of the TAKS exam were not reached. During the time of data collection, Central High School had an average enrollment of 2,700 students. Rockford High School was opened in 2008. Therefore the first available scores for the TAKS exam were from 2010. Rockford High School was rated "academically acceptable" in 2010. Rockford High School had an average enrollment of 1,250 students.

Describing the context of the study site, TECHS, as well as the larger contexts of Tambryn and Tambryn Independent School District, were useful in gaining a deeper appreciation of the whole. For example, demographic data such as those illustrated in tables 1 through 4 show TECHS was serving student populations that align with the intentions of early college programs. Additionally, it was clear that TECHS students were outperforming students from other Central High Schools on state mandated tests. However, also illuminated was the fact that the student population at TECHS was majority Latina/o, while the population of Tambryn was majority White, as well as the staff at TECHS.

Participants and Data Sources

In regard to the participants, I wanted to study only those Latinas who were *underperforming*. These students represented a subset of the Latina student population, in that other Latinas at TECHS were performing well academically. I focused on this subset group because their academic behavior seemed unusual for students who consciously and purposefully chose to enroll in an educational program designed to prepare them for college. I wanted to understand this dynamic phenomenon, specifically.

Underperformance was defined by failing three or more classes based on six-week semester grades. I was concerned that relying solely on teacher recommendations might be too subjective, therefore I relied on failure rates. Moreover, I wanted to study students who were reflective of most of the students at TECHS, therefore I selected students who were also eligible for free-reduced lunch.

In order to identify participants fitting these criteria, purposive sampling techniques were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Purposive sampling allows subjects to be chosen based on particular characteristics (Patton, 1990). For this study, the particular characteristics I was interested in were gender, ethnicity, underperformance, and eligibility for free-reduced lunch. I asked the TECHS administration to identify students based on these criteria. After I received a list of potential participants, I contacted 14 students by TECHS email, inviting them to participate in the study. Ten responded to the email, stating that they would like to participate. I sent all ten information sheets describing the study, as well

as consent forms. One of the ten never returned the study consent forms. Another could

not participate because she was unable to obtain her parents' consent. The remaining

eight, agreed to participate in the study.

Before any data collection began, I had direct person-to-person contact with

these eight students in order to discuss the purpose of the study. At that time, I presented

them with an additional written information sheet outlining the study and the

requirements of their participation. Because all of the girls were under 18 years of age, I

asked them to also obtain their parent(s)/guardian(s) permission. In order to participate,

each Latina student had to give her own consent, as well as obtain permission from her

parent/guardian and return the signed forms to me.

At the time of data collection, the participants ranged from ages 14 to 17 and

were in the 9th, 10th or 11th grades. Six of the girls were born in the United States, while

two were born in Mexico. Those who were born in Mexico reported having entered the

country as pre-school-aged children. Thus, all of the girls' educational experiences,

prior to TECHS, had been in the United States. The majority of the girls were bilingual,

English-Spanish. Table 5 (below) provides an overview of pertinent information

regarding the study participants.

Table 5: Portrait of the Participants

Name (pseudonym[9])	Grade	Born in the Unites States	Age at time of interview	Desired Profession
Ariel	10	Yes	15	Marine Biologist
Victoria	10	No	15	Lawyer
Pooh	11	Yes	15	Registered Nurse
Jamila	10	Yes	15	Bilingual Teacher
Saraih	9	Yes	14	Teacher
Carmen	10	Yes	15	Singer
Berenize	10	Yes	15	Psychiatrist or Psychologist
Leah	11	No	17	Undecided

Data Collection

As qualitative researchers have argued, adolescents are the best informants of their own situations, behaviors and feelings (Hill & Torres, 2010). Therefore the primary technique used for data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the adolescent participants. However, other methods of data collection were also used. These included journaling by the students and the researcher, and reviewing and analyzing institutional documents.

In regards to the interviews, they were conducted using a set of pre-established questions which focused on allowing the participants to freely discuss their perceptions of their academic performance and experiences in school. The eight participants were interviewed individually and in two sets of focus groups (Fontana & Frey, 2000). All the girls spoke English fluently, therefore interviews and focus groups were conducted in

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[9] All participants chose their own pseudonyms.

English. Individual interviews were conducted first and averaged 1.25 hours. The focus group interviews were conducted after all individual interviews were complete and averaged 2.25 hours each. In each focus group, there were four participants. All interview data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. While these interviews served as a formal means of data collection, I also collected data via informal discussions. That is, due to my official role at TECHS as the Community Liaison, the girls felt comfortable frequently stopping by my office to discuss personal aspects of their lives, including the focus areas of this study. As an informal means of data collection, these impromptu discussions were not audio recorded. However, these informal conversations helped me to further understand the girls' experiences and academic performance.

Through these formal and informal means 'saturation' was achieved. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note saturation as the point where the researcher no longer 'discovers' new information. However, as noted previously, in addition to interviewing, 'multiple modes of inquiry' were employed such as: student journals; field notes; a record of critical incidents; a researcher reflective journal; review of institutional doctrine and documents; and observation of participants in the natural setting, TECHS. These additional methods helped to support the findings obtained through the interviews.

Concerning these other data collection methods, student journals allowed an alternative safe space for the girls to record thoughts and ideas regarding their school performance and experience—potentially aspects of their lives and experiences they may not have felt comfortable sharing in an interview setting. Keeping a personal, researcher

reflective journal allowed me a space to record incidents and reflect on my experiences

and observations in the setting. And finally, taking a critical look at the school's

institutional documents gave me an opportunity to better understand the program from a

policy perspective. Overall, by utilizing and combining these various methods, I was

able to gain a deeper, more precise understanding of the phenomenon of Latina student

underperformance at TECHS.

Data Analysis

As is protocol in qualitative inquiry, data analysis occurred simultaneously with

data collection. As full transcriptions of the interviews became available, I began to

analyze the data by reading through the documents, looking for major topics and ideas.

Early analyses of the transcripts worked to induce the development of 'working

hypotheses' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and to identify initial, emerging themes. Once all

the transcripts were available, I employed the constant comparative method (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967). This method "… requires constantly comparing and contrasting

successive segments of the data and subsequently categorizing them" (Schwandt, 2007,

p. 32). Data from the student journals, field notes, and my personal researcher journal

were subjected to the same analytical procedures as the interview data. TECHS

institutional documents (mission statement, core values, scholar's oath, and the

student/parent/staff contract) were also coded and analyzed as related policy

intervention. These analyses are discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

For this study, the constant comparative method allowed for two types of coding.

Schwandt (2007) describes coding as the "… procedure that disaggregates the data,

breaks them down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments"

(p. 32). First, open coding (Cresswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied to the

data. Open coding consisted of segmenting information which led to the formation of

initial categories of "units." These "units" were then sorted based on coherent ideas

corresponding to the research question—for example, for each unit, I asked myself

whether or not this unit was identifying a perception of school performance or a school

experience. Units were then sorted into categories based on main topics or themes.

Within each category, subcategories were formed and data were analyzed for

dimensionality to show the extreme possibilities on a continuum (Cresswell, 1998); this

is to say, the large theme or category such as "Structure of School" had smaller

subcategories within it. After the open coding process was complete, axial (or

crossover) coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010) was applied to

the data. Axial (or crossover) coding attempts to frame the story in terms of its

explanatory logic by connecting concepts and categories. Thus, once the categories and

subcategories were identified, I looked at them holistically to identify how they may

have been or may not have been related.

In sum, these analytic methods allowed me to compare perceptions across

participants in this study. Through the interview and journaling processes, the

participants described their perceptions of their academic performance and school

experiences in the context of their lives. The study, however, was not designed to

provide conclusive answers to the issue of Latina underperformance. Rather, the study

was designed to better understand the processes involved in underperformance and those

elements which contribute to it in this particular early college environment. Other researchers reviewing the same data could well develop a different understanding of the data as well as different themes and categories.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the ways a researcher persuades herself and her audiences that the findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). In this study, several measures or techniques were used to ensure trustworthiness. These included triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

Triangulation is the measures used to increase the validity of a study, thus confirming trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted triangulation is the "…steps taken to validate [each piece of information] against [another]…" and it is "crucially important" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 283). For this study measures of triangulation included prolonged engagement in the setting, persistent observation, recorded interviews, document analyses, student journals, and my personal/researcher reflective journal. Collectively these diverse data sources allowed me to verify my findings against one another and understand them at a holistic level.

Member checking, another technique to ensure validity, was also used. Member checks allowed me to assess the clarity and accuracy of my findings with the participant and was accomplished by repeating my interpretation of what the participant said in the interview. For example, I would say "So, what I think you said was 'x', is that correct?" And the participant would either respond by saying 'yes' or by correcting me.

Additionally, I had frequent meetings with my advisor and a member of my committee to peer debrief. These peer debriefing sessions allowed me to "… confide in trusted and knowledgeable colleagues… [and to use them] as a sounding board…" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 222) regarding the data and its interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

I attended to multiple ethical responsibilities while conducting this study. First, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university to conduct this inquiry. Permission was also granted by the Tambryn Independent School District, TECHS administration, each participant, as well as each participant's parent/guardian. I secured informed consent from all the girls in the study as well as their parents/guardians before any data collection began. Moreover, I ensured that all participation in this study was absolutely voluntary.

Furthermore, I assured privacy, confidentiality, and inclusiveness with each respondent by coding/substituting their given names with pseudonyms in all study records and notes. I also used pseudonyms for the school and city where the data collection took place, the major partner university and community college and the names of the two traditional high schools in Tambryn. And finally, all data relating to the study were securely stored.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed the paradigms and frameworks which I used to design and guide this inquiry. I also articulated the qualitative methodology and methods I employed. I provided a comprehensive description of the study context and the

participants, and detailed the data collection and analytical procedures used. And lastly,

I delineated how I worked to establish trustworthiness and ensure high ethical standards

were maintained. In the next chapter I will discuss the current study in relation to that of

Anderson and Larson (2009). This chapter also illustrates my findings in terms of the

conceptual frameworks of freedoms to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992),

and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999).

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS: FREEDOMS TO ACHIEVE, UNFREEDOMS, AND DEFORMED

CHOICES

In this chapter, I discuss the analysis of the study, illustrating my findings in terms of the conceptual frameworks of freedoms to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999). I also discuss the tensions between the freedoms and unfreedoms of achievement, as they were experienced by the participants. And finally I provide my perspective of TECHS, as a social justice policy intervention.

Introduction

Early College High Schools (ECHS) came about as a social justice policy intervention specifically designed for students who have been historically underserved by the traditional school model. ECHSs, like many of the intervention programs (TRIO, AVID, GEAR UP, etc., see Chapter II) that have been instituted in schools, were designed to create greater educational opportunity and equity for traditionally underserved students. As noted earlier in this dissertation, the founders and partners of ECHSs believe that by changing the structure of the high school and compressing the number of years to a college degree, ECHSs have the potential to improve college graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into highly skilled careers (Glick, Ruf, White & Goldscheider, 2006).

It is these structural changes that advocates for ECHSs suggest provide a vital safety net for thousands of low income students and students of color, who may be inadequately supported by conventional high schools (Avilés & Garza, 2010). However, based on my experience working in an ECHS, some students do not succeed in the ECHS environment. Some drop out and some re-enroll in less rigorous programs. If ECHS programs are designed to catch those students who would normally slip through the proverbial net, then why do some of these students leave?

Attrition could be the result of a mismatch of goals and needs. Social justice researchers and educators have argued that the goal of an education should be to increase and *expand human capability* (emphasis mine) so students can move beyond the constraints of poverty (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Often, and expectedly, gains in education equate to gains in income. But upward mobility is not always the case. Moreover, "… researchers and policymakers do not agree on how this goal can be attained" (Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 73). Some researchers and policymakers argue that change should occur through teaching and/or curriculum practices (Ritter & Skiba, 2006). Others argue that change should occur through "improved" family and cultural practices (Payne, 2005). However, if students continue to escape the vital safety net the policymakers and advocates cast, then it is logical to assume there must be some discrepancies between what is being provided by schools, and what is needed by students.

Concerning these discrepancies, Anderson and Larson (2009) note,

> …a growing body of research encourages researchers and policymakers to examine the prevailing assumptions underpinning current approaches to

increasing educational opportunity for children of poverty and to see how these approaches are playing out in the lived experiences of economically impoverished children and youth (p. 74).

Few studies, however, have examined these prevailing assumptions inherent in programs designed for such purposes.

To identify these assumptions and sources of the disparities in educational outcomes, Anderson and Larson (2009) suggest researchers ask the following questions:

How do policymakers and educators believe they can create greater educational opportunity for impoverished children and youth? What do they believe must be done to reduce the achievement gap between poor and privileged children in this country? How are these beliefs playing out in the programs that are, specifically, designed to serve children of poverty? And finally, how do the students engaged in these programs experience these efforts to increase their educational opportunity? (p. 74).

This research draws from and is informed by Anderson and Larson's 2009 article, *"Sinking Like Quicksand" Expanding Educational Opportunity for Young Men of Color"* which investigated the underlying assumptions of a program, the College Access Initiative, within Upward Bound, a component of TRIO (see Chapter II for more detailed description of TRIO). Similar to the ECHS, the College Access Initiative is a program which allows traditionally underserved high school students the opportunity to take classes (tuition-free) on a college or university campus. It is assumed that by being present on a college/university campus and obtaining college credits at no cost, will not only allow students to gain first-hand knowledge of how to maneuver on a college campus, but will also inspire students to be (and stay) college-bound.

Anderson and Larson (2009) looked at one College Access Initiative program in terms of its utility (how it attempted to increase educational opportunity) for the students

it intended to serve. Furthermore, they inquired as to how this approach considered the real, holistic lives of the students—including their lives outside of school. To do so, Anderson and Larson (2009) examined the assumptions within the College Access Initiative within Upward Bound (referred to from now on as UB/CAI) in terms of the conceptual frameworks of freedoms (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992) and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999). That is, they interrogated this policy solution, the College Access Initiative, asking if and how the program allowed the students the resources to increase their educational opportunity (or the necessary freedoms) to reach high academic achievement, in terms of their real lives inclusive of school and non-school related responsibilities. Additionally, they explored the constraints or restrictions (unfreedoms) present in the students' lives both at school and outside of school which resulted in the students making choices, albeit deformed choices, they would not have made in the absence of such constraints.

As a compatible inquiry, for this project, I studied the policy of an early college high school to address the needs of eight Latina students who were participating and underperforming in the TECHS program. In order to understand TECHS as a policy intervention and the students' performance, I used similar techniques as Anderson and Larson (2009). Much like the participants in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, the girls' in this inquiry revealed the freedoms to achieve, unfreedoms, and deformed choices they encountered.

Freedoms and Unfreedoms

Amartya Sen (1992) noted,

> A person's position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives, viz. (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve. Achievement is concerned with what we *manage* to accomplish, and freedom with the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value (p. 31, emphasis original).

It appears Sen would argue that each perspective, the actual achievement and the freedom to achieve, must be considered interdependently, highlighting that a student's real opportunities do not occur in a vacuum.

Real opportunity is indeed relative. However, the traditional institutional, meritocratic discourse (or what we may be familiar with as the 'bootstrap' mentality) suggests each of us has access to opportunities that ensure upward mobility. That is, the proverbial playing field is essentially level, providing the great majority of us with the freedom to take advantage of existent opportunities. However, as Sen (1992) noted,

> The resources a person has...may be very imperfect indicators of the freedom that the person really enjoys to do this or that…the personal and social characteristics of different persons, which can differ greatly, can lead to substantial interpersonal variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into *achievements* (emphasis original). For exactly the same reason, interpersonal differences in these personal and social characteristics can make the….freedom to achieve similarly variable (p. 38).

Sen argues, then, to believe that we are all able to achieve at the same level and pace is naïve. Moreover, Larson and Murtadha (2002) suggest Sen would,

> …question the current belief that all children of a certain age ought to achieve at the same level and pace despite vast disparities in students' freedom or ability to achieve. To Sen, such universal policies may serve a practical and political demand, but not a logical one (p. 152).

That is, it is not logical to assume that just because there is "opportunity" that all children are *free* to grab it. There are limits on freedom (Overall, 1995).

Having the freedom to do something and the capacity to do it, do not always coincide. Sen argues that an individual's choice and an individual's resources work collectively. According to Sen (1992),

> If we are interested in the freedom of choice, then we have to look at the *choices* that the person does in fact have, and we must not assume that the same results would be obtained by looking at the *resources* that he or she commands (p.38, emphases original).

Sen's thesis is essentially, if we want to understand inequality, then we need to understand the real choices individuals are able to make (inclusive and respectful of real social, political, economic liberties and/or constraints). These constraints or limitations on freedom are what Sen (1992) calls unfreedoms.

Unfreedoms are the aspects of our lives which bar us from taking advantage of certain resources or opportunities that may present themselves. While unfreedoms are common to us all, the poor are particularly vulnerable to the harsh effects of unfreedoms. Anderson and Larson (2009) note that to Sen, an unfreedom is something "that prevent[s] impoverished people from doing what they would choose to *do if they had the freedom to do so*" (p. 76). For example, an unfreedom in a student's life may arise from a family illness—the student may have to skip school in order to take care of the sick family member. This constitutes a deformed choice, which will be discussed in the next section.

However looking at achievement in the manner of freedoms and unfreedoms is uncommon. Larson and Murtadha (1992) note "Sen's focus on freedoms to achieve,

rather than on achievement or outcomes alone, marks a significant departure from standard utilitarian approaches to achieving equity" (p. 152), that being the 'bootstrap' discourse of equality of opportunity. More common, as Larson and Murtadha (2002) suggest, are:

> …school leaders who believe that their schools are equitable for all children regularly [and] enact programs and policies that they assume are fair and serve the academic and social interests of all students. But many are misguided, in part, because they are not sufficiently aware of the differences that limit children's and their families' freedoms to achieve (p. 156).

Freedoms, that is, the actual freedom students have to achieve housed within their larger lives inclusive of potential unfreedoms arising from family/household responsibilities, socio-economic status, safety/security concerns, and the like, provide an analytic lens with which to view student achievement. This framework allows researchers to ask 'What is a student, given their current circumstances, actually able to achieve?'; 'Is achievement a *real choice* for this student?'; 'Given the situation and circumstance, is this student forced to make decisions which bar them from academic achievement?' (Anderson & Larson, 2009).

Deformed Choices

Complimentary to Sen's notions of freedoms and unfreedoms, Anderson and Larson (2009) remark,

> …deformed choices arise when people feel as if they have no real choice [i.e. no freedom to choose] in matters that concern them. When people are trapped in a "deformed choice," they are not free to pursue a path that they value and typically, they feel forced into taking a path they would not choose if they had a *real* choice (emphasis original, p. 77).

Deformed choices, a concept originally formed by Nussbaum (1992) then, arise from the constraints, restrictions or limitations (or unfreedoms) which disallow individuals to take advantage of presented opportunities. These constraints often result from social, economic and/or political hardships, which people have no choice but to experience. Larson and Murtadha (2002) note "Nussbaum argues that insufficient attention to cultural variety and the particular features of individual lives often leads to unjust and harmful policies and practices" (p.154). In the case of students in schools, it also may result in students experiencing constraints (or unfreedoms) and making unavoidable deformed choices, which may negatively affect their performance and achievement.

Certainly constraints may result from the individual/familial level, *as well as* the institutional level. Thus, while I use the term 'deformed choice' here, I feel it does not accurately reflect the resultant and often *absolute lack of choice* some unfreedoms produce. Perhaps a better term may be a 'negotiated choice' or a 'competing choice.' However, to follow Nussbaum's logic regarding deformed choices, some examples may be a student choosing to work to support the family rather than study or electing to help siblings with their homework over completing their own.

Freedoms, Unfreedoms, Deformed Choices and This Study

Similar to the ways in which Anderson and Larson (2009) examined,

> …the assumptions underpinning [the UB/CAI] program to understand how the program attempt[ed] to increase the educational opportunity for poor urban youth and how this approach play[ed] out in the lived experiences of three young men who participate[d] in the program... (p. 71),

through the lenses of freedoms to achieve, unfreedoms, and deformed choices, I examined the girls' perceptions of and experiences at Tambryn Early College High

School (TECHS). I wanted to understand the girls' perceptions and experiences, however it was also important to understand this phenomena within a policy context—as the school was designed as a policy intervention to increase the educational opportunity of historically marginalized students. Therefore, one major difference exists between my analysis and that of Anderson and Larson (2009). Anderson and Larson (2009) interviewed the director of the UB/CAI program regarding his perceptions of the program, and interviewed students participating in the program, to gain not only an understanding the students' experiences in the program, but a broader perspective regarding UB/CAI as a policy initiative. Alternatively, I used institutional documents (including the TECHS mission statement, the TECHS core values, the TECHS scholar's oath and the student/parent/staff contract) in addition to data collected from interviews with the girls and my prolonged engagement at TECHS, to inform the analysis. First, I looked for the underpinning assumptions of the TECHS policy—regarding the purpose, goals, and intentions—through the institutional documents. Doing so was an important part of understanding the school context. Moreover, each of the institutional pieces (the mission statement, the core values, and the student/parent/staff contract) is familiar to all current students at TECHS, and is used when recruiting and enrolling new students. Thus, it is clear through the analysis of the documents how certain assumptions and institutional rhetoric are implemented in the design of the program. That is, they are foundational ideas and communicate the assumptions and intentions of TECHS to the students and the community.

Many of my findings complement those found by Anderson and Larson (2009). As in Anderson and Larson's 2009 study, the frameworks of freedoms, unfreedoms, and deformed choices reveal the logic, as well as the limits, of focusing on meritocratic notions and achievement alone to increase educational opportunity for students, specifically in this study, Latinas—a target student population for ECHSs.

Furthermore, as Anderson and Larson (2009) "… examined how [a meritocratic] approach played out in the lived experiences of three young men who participated in [their] study" (p.74), I used the data from interviews to examine how the messages inherent in the TECHS institutional documents played out in the lived experiences of the eight Latina students in this study. That is, I looked at the girls' experiences and perceptions of these underpinning assumptions through the interview data.

What follows first, is an examination of the assumptions underpinning the design of TECHS through the rhetoric (institutional discourse) of the mission statement and other official school documents, and second the perceptions of the experiences of the Latina students I interviewed. By using the institutional documents and the interviews with the girls, I was able to make connections regarding the guiding mission and design of TECHS to how the assumptions inherent in the policy played out in the experiences of the girls.

TECHS Institutional Documents

Anderson and Larson (2009) note "…students of color, particularly those from poor and working-class backgrounds are often unprepared to compete against more advantaged peers who benefit by having stronger academic preparation in better high

schools" (p. 86). Some of the ways TECHS believes that it offers freedoms to achieve,

that is increased educational opportunity, for its student population is by providing

students with specific resources such as rigor, small classes and increased

communication, college courses and academic immersion, and student commitment.   As

the majority of students at TECHS are from traditionally underserved groups, these

resources are meant to make up for the underpreparation they have previously

experienced throughout the educational pipeline. The TECHS institutional documents I

reviewed which, included the mission statement, core values, and scholar's oath, are

presented in Chapter III. The Student, Parent, Staff (S/P/S) Contract appears in

Appendix A. Analyses of these documents show that TECHS is promoting what they

believe are the resources necessary to increase educational opportunity—freedoms to

achieve. These resources are detailed in the next section.

Rigor

Inherent in the TECHS documents is a belief that it provides a freedom to

achieve—greater educational opportunity for its student population through exposure to

rigorous coursework. This is conveyed in the mission statement and core values

documents.

> Mission: We are a community of learners engaged in a quest for **academic excellence**….

> Core value number one: All students will be **prepared to succeed in college**.

Additionally, the S/P/S Contract often alludes to rigor through advanced coursework:

> [TECHS] offers a **rigorous** academic program…..students attending TECHS will be successful in **pre-AP/AP and dual credit courses**, complete the

distinguished achievement high school graduation plan…**enroll in a four-year college or university** after high school graduation…

Students will…take **all Pre-AP, AP and Dual Credit courses** as appropriate… Parents will…provide time and space for their student to **complete school work at home**, knowing that their **student will have homework every night**.

Another way rigor is perceived to create greater freedom to achieve is that all students at TECHS are placed on the high achievement or distinguished academic track.

Small Classes and Increased Communication

There is also the belief as evidenced by the TECHS documents that freedom to achieve is expanded by providing small classes which facilitates increased communication with teachers and staff for both students and parents. The small setting at TECHS is implied in the mission statement and the scholar's oath:

Mission: **We** are a **community** of learners….

Scholar's Oath: **We** are a **team** of scholars discovering, discussing, and learning **together**…

The term "we" is used repeatedly in the mission statement, core values, and scholar's oath, seemingly promoting a community-discourse.

The S/P/S Contract also alludes to a small environment where communication is not only available, but is necessary:

[TECHS] offers a….**small personalized setting**.

Students will communicate with parents and staff regularly regarding progress, goals, questions, comments, and concerns.

Parents will communicate with students and staff regularly regarding progress, goals, questions, comments, and concerns.

Creating Future College Students via College Coursework and Academic Immersion

Much akin to the program that was studied by Anderson and Larson (2009) is the belief that because high school students are on a college campus taking courses, the students would be motivated to achieve. The students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, like the Latinas in this study, were immersed in a college community holding ID cards and attending classes at the community college.

Academic immersion on a college campus is alluded to in the TECHS institutional documents. In the S/P/S Contract it states:

> Students will be successful in…**dual credit courses**…and **enroll in a four-year university** after high school graduation.

> Students will follow…the **community college** code of conduct.

> Staff members will follow…the **community college** code of conduct.

Student Commitment

In addition to rigor, small classes, and immersion in a college atmosphere, student commitment to doing the necessary work to succeed was held up as expanding the freedom to achieve. This is evidenced in the following examples.

The S/P/S Contract it states:

> Students **will** …**set aside time for homework every night** to help ensure **assignments are completed on time**…**come prepared for every class every day** and **turn in all assignments** on time.

The S/P/S Contract also states:

> Students will conduct self in an **academically professional manner** by following all the rules of common courtesy and **demonstrating best work ethic at all times**.

And finally, at the end of the S/P/S Contract, under 'Student Agreement' it states:

I understand that **I am responsible for my own success** and that **I must fully commit myself in order to be successful** at [TECHS].

Putting It All Together

The resources TECHS provides—rigor, small classes and increased communication, providing college courses and college immersion, and mandating student commitment—are the ways TECHS attempts to increase students' educational opportunity or "freedoms" to achieve. However, collectively these resources form a simplistic narrative of what students in the program actually need to achieve. Such a narrative does not problematize the disadvantages or unfreedoms present in students' lives. Rather than offering authentic freedoms to achieve, these resources reflect the components of a meritocratic, individualistic discourse toward achievement. Hochschild (1996) suggested such discourse,

> … is rooted in rugged individualism, a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" ethic that was prevalent in our nation's early history and appeared in the writings of Ben Franklin. Rugged individualism [is perceived as] a form of self-discipline that enables people to overcome obstacles and get what they need in life (as cited in Anderson & Larson, 2009, p.88).

Thus, this discourse perpetuates the notion of an equal playing field. From this individualistic, 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' ethic, if students are performing poorly in school, it is a personal problem. Moreover, within this discourses policies and practices of programs, as well as socio-economic constraints, or unfreedoms, are not scrutinized (Anderson & Larson, 2009). This was certainly the case at TECHS, and likely other ECHSs—despite the fact that these schools were developed as a social justice intervention. One only needs to look at the S/P/S Contract, which states: "I

understand that **I am responsible for my own success** and that **I must fully commit myself in order to be successful** at [TECHS]" to see evidence of this individualistic, meritocratic discourse. Although, the ECHS policy recognizes the students they target have not been served well by the traditional, individualistic model, many elements of that model are inherent in the design of the ECHS. It is not difficult to understand why such a pattern has occurred. This American ethic is pervasive, and certainly not off-limits to ECHS policymakers' beliefs and worldviews. Perhaps their beliefs reflect an ethic such as—'we are providing opportunity, now it is up to you to seize it.' Perhaps policymakers—like many Americans—have been socialized to believe this ethic.

In sum, my examination of the TECHS institutional documents demonstrates that the meritocratic, individualistic discourse at the school was being implemented and enacted unproblematically. However, student achievement does not occur in a vacuum and is not devoid of problems. There are unfreedoms present in students' lives which cause them to make deformed choices. In the following sections I discuss the Latinas' perceptions of the freedoms at TECHS, the unfreedoms they experienced, the deformed choices they made, and the ways these played out in relation to the girls' academic performance at TECHS.

Latinas' Perceptions of Freedoms at TECHS

This section highlights what the girls perceived as the resources provided at TECHS that allowed them the chance to expand their educational opportunity, in other words the "freedom" to focus on and obtain academic achievement. These resources were: free college, access to help, college preparation, presence on a college campus,

prestige, and an alternative high school option. It is important to note that these were similar to those the TECHS institutional documents promote as resources to expand educational opportunity and "freedom" to focus on academic achievement. Moreover, there was an overarching resource, education itself. ECHS as a policy initiative was enacted as a means to provide a pathway to a college education and ultimately to social mobility. The girls also believed in this central overarching resource—that a college education was a pathway to social mobility. For example, regarding a college degree Jamila remarked:

> [A college degree will] give us a better life in the economy today or in the United States. Because like I have seen it with my family, they have to be worried about like, 'oh am I gonna [sic] get [laid] off.' They have to worry about getting laid off. And when you have a bachelor's degree and everything, a degree actually, you know you've got something.

Leah agreed with Jamila, noting that with a college degree that there would be, "…well, less stuff to worry about, focus more on you I guess and not…and not like worried about getting a job or how much I'm getting paid and stuff."

It is clear from these quotes, the girls believe that obtaining an education is a way out of poverty, a path to a better and more secure life. Perhaps it is safe to assume the girls believe this resource, the 'jumpstart' to a college education that TECHS offers and promotes, will help them to secure upward mobility.

Free College

One of the elements of TECHS the girls perceived to be a resource to expand their educational opportunity was the possibility to obtain college credit, tuition-free. For example, Ariel noted that TECHS provided an opportunity for "a brighter future" by

providing a "fifty percent discount on college." Similarly, Jamila also noted "… after my freshman year I saw the whole thing, the meaning [of TECHS]...It's free college. So I'm saving thousands of dollars." Thus, "free college" was the primary objective of TECHS, according to Jamila. Later in the interview, Jamila also noted that what kept her at TECHS was "The fact that you're gonna get hours here for college. The fact that I can go in to university when I graduate and into a college."

> Free college was also a draw to TECHS for Victoria who remarked:

> Well, I decided to come [to TECHS] because I wanted to graduate and … not like [have] my mom and my dad spend that much money on college, and I wanted to get like good, something good to tell the college that I went to an early college and [got] free credits.

It is clear from these quotes that the girls perceived the "free college" that TECHS provided as a resource which could increase their educational opportunity and freedom to focus on and obtain academic achievement.

Access to Help

Another resource offered at TECHS that the girls perceived to be providing them with freedom to focus on achievement was the individualized attention they received from their teachers, and their quick access to the teachers when they needed help with their schoolwork. For example, Saraih noted:

> When [the teachers] start explaining or giving a lecture and you don't understand and the teacher looks at you and sees that you look puzzled or lost, she starts explaining [in a way you can understand]. And I'm like, okay, that's really cool.

Pooh had a similar remark. Interestingly she drew a comparison between the teachers at TECHS and those from her middle school years. She said:

Teachers [at TECHS] are really cool and they really help you out. And in middle school the teachers would be like, oh just come to tutorial and you will be fine. But here it's like meet me after class and we'll talk about it, instead of waiting til [sic] tutorial time. That's what I like. You can get [help] right then. You don't have to go home and be like, well, I have this and I don't know what to do. So that's what I like.

When asked what she liked about TECHS, Victoria also discussed the teachers at

TECHS and their willingness to help students. Interestingly, Victoria compares teachers

at TECHS to those that may be at other high schools. She noted:

…the teachers [at TECHS], if you need to, like they tutor you, like they sit down with you. I think at some other high schools they don't do that. They only pay attention to some students that are more likely to succeed…but here all the teachers treat [students] the same.

Saraih also commented about the teachers at TECHS, and their willingness to help—and

also about how she felt the teachers cared for the students. She said:

The really good thing is that you can actually get the opportunity to stay after school with the teachers so they can help you out….And being here they're just really, really fun teachers. And sometimes they can be really, really pushy on doing your work, but it's for your own good. So you know, you won't fall behind. Like just [not] for no reason, actually pushing you to the limit. But not only that, but you have to push yourself to it. So even though they're pushy and can be mean sometimes, they just do it because they care, care about you and want you to do good, so you won't make a mess of your life.

Clearly, having close and quick access to quality teachers at TECHS was perceived by

the girls as providing increased educational opportunity and freedom to focus on

achievement.

Preparation for College

An additional resource to increase educational opportunity the girls perceived

TECHS to provide was college preparation. In many ways, the girls perceived that

TECHS was indeed helping them get ready for a post-secondary experience. For

example, Saraih noted:

> [TECHS] was a very good experience for me because I got to see what it is going to be [like] in the future once you go to college. You have to know that going into college that we have to be prepared for anything, take notes, you know even though the teachers don't ask us to.

Victoria wanted to go into a legal profession one day. She also felt that TECHS

was setting her up for future success. She noted the following with regard to being

prepared for college, and eventually law school, at TECHS:

> I think [I am being prepared] with the whole environment, like studying, because law is like hard. There's a lot of laws, a lot of things. And I think with them persuading us to like study, study and get your head in the game and stuff, I think it's helping. Because when I get into law and into all that stuff, I'll need to like pay attention.

Later Victoria continued, "If you want to succeed, this is a good school, because

it prepares you for the college experience."

Interestingly, Leah remarked about the difference between TECHS and

traditional high schools in terms of college preparation: "[At the other high schools in

town] they're just teaching you lessons, they're not telling you how college is gonna be."

And finally, the importance of college preparation is also evident in the following

exchange between Pooh and me:

> Leslie: [You want to go into a nursing program]…do you think [TECHS] is preparing you, how or why?

> Pooh: Because that's their job. That's the purpose of going here is to prepare you for college and prepare you for what you want to be not what they want you to be. Other than just graduate from high school and then you're on your own. No, they're like, we're worried about your future and what you want to be, and we actually want to know and stuff.

> Leslie: And so that's the purpose you think? The purpose of early college high school is to prepare you for college?
>
> Pooh: For college.

It is clear from this exchange between Pooh and me that college preparation is not only important, but is the "job" of the staff at TECHS. Thus, the girls overwhelmingly perceive the college preparation they are receiving as a resource which increased their educational opportunity and freedom to focus on achievement.

College Classes and Prestige

A further resource that the girls perceived to provide increased educational opportunity was the access TECHS provided to college credit and classes. Moreover, for many of the girls, their presence on a college campus made them feel proud. Illustrating these points, Jamila noted "… [Here at TECHS] everyone goes to a high school where they can go to college at the same time. You're getting 60 college credits." Similarly, Victoria remarked "The really good thing [about TECHS] is the credits that they give you for college classes, so that's really good."

Obtaining college credits, that is, being *college students*, was important to the girls. Noting the pride of being a college student at such a young age, Jamila recalled an experience she had while attending class at the community college:

> … I thought to myself, I was like, I saw this girl in front of me and she had her [Central] High hoodie on – I guess she had just graduated. And I thought to myself, 'cool, I'm only gonna be a junior and she's a senior. Already I'm gonna be a college person. And I already like have more hours.' And I was just like, 'ah', I just grinned in her face.

Being a 'college person' as Jamila remarked, was perceived as something good, something prestigious, and something to take pride in. Similarly Pooh also noted that

she was proud to be considered a college student. In the following exchange, Pooh

discusses how she describes herself as a student to others in the community.

> Pooh: Like really when you be like, 'Oh I go to [TECHS]', they're like 'oh'.
> [However], if I say, 'I go to [Central] – [they will say] 'Oh you go to [Central],
> oh how is it?' When you say [TECHS], they're like, 'Oh', like they don't know
> what it is. Like, [then I say] okay early college. I do college classes. So now I
> be like, 'I go to [community college]'. Just to make you happy. 'You know
> where that is? I go to [community college]'.
>
> Leslie: So do you feel kind of like proud?
>
> Pooh: Yeah.

Also noting her pride as being an actual college student, in her interview Jamila

recalled a conversation she had with a student from one of the other high schools in

town:

> … she was like 'Oh yeah we have [college] classes and I've taken them.' And I
> was like, 'What?' And she said 'Yeah our professors come over [to Central
> High], too.' And I was like 'Well it's not the same.' And she was like, 'Yes it
> is, professors come over here.' And I was like, 'No, I'm an actual [college]
> student.' She was like, 'Whatever.'

Clearly, attending college courses and being a 'real' college student were

important aspects of TECHS. Collectively, the girls were proud to be college students,

and perceived these elements of the school as providing them with opportunity and

freedom to focus on achievement.

Other High School Options

Many of the girls held negative perceptions of their other public high school

alternatives. If they had not chosen to attend TECHS, their other options were one of

two traditional high schools in Tambryn, Central High and Rockford High. It was

particularly Central High that the girls felt was too big, and that the kids who went to

Central High were not really focused on academics. They also felt that the teachers at

Central High were not as good as those at TECHS. For example, Pooh remarked

specifically that she chose TECHS "Because I don't like [Central] High." Similarly,

Jamila also commented regarding her dislike for her other school options. She said:

> Since I'm going to summer school at [Rockford High], I kind of see like the
> environment over there, and I went last year to summer school at [Central] High,
> and I kind of see the environment. I like it here [at TECHS].

Agreeing, Ariel also noted:

> And over [at Central High] – and I have some other friends, too, that told me like
> 'oh, a student can be all like texting me and the teacher won't say anything.' He
> can be doing, smoking weed or whatever and they like not say anything. And I
> was just like, wow, I don't want to go there.

The girls overwhelmingly confirmed that they felt TECHS was their best high

school option. Moreover, in terms of their feelings regarding TECHS as a whole, all the

girls reported positive perceptions. For example, Leah said "Everybody [at TECHS] is

just really cool. I like how everybody gets along, teachers and students, how they just all

get along and, I don't know, I like it here." Saraih remarked, "I love coming to this

school." And Ariel noted, "This is the best school." As such comments reflect, it can be

assumed the girls perceived TECHS to be comparatively, and holistically, providing

them with the most educational opportunity and freedom to focus on achievement.

Putting It All Together

It is clear from the above analysis that the girls perceived TECHS to offer many

resources to increase their educational opportunity or "freedom" to achieve. Rigorous

classes, extra help when needed, college preparation, and free college credits were all

perceived positively by the girls and as components of the school which would help

them achieve their educational goals. Interestingly, many of these "freedoms" as perceived by the girls were identical or similar to those that are promoted in the TECHS institutional documents. As noted earlier, these documents emphasize a rugged individualism—or a meritocratic, 'bootstrap-type' of ethic. Because of the similarities between the discourse of the documents and the perceptions held by the girls, it may be safe to assume that this meritocratic discourse is so pervasive the girls did not question or problematize it in terms of their low academic performance. That is, the girls were seeing these "freedoms" as helpful to obtaining their immediate and long-range goals, yet they were consistently underperforming. Therefore, these "freedoms" were not effectively working for them.

Perhaps these "freedoms" are not as effective as they could be because they insist that students focus on the future (through immersion in a rigorous academic program that prepares them for college), while ignoring potentially distracting events in their home, school, and/or community. These distractions may be considered "unfreedoms" which derail students' momentum toward academic achievement.

Certainly, unfreedoms may arise from the individual level—that is, students' lives—however, unfreedoms may also arise from the institutional level. While it would not make sense for the TECHS institutional documents to detail unfreedoms which could be found within the school, one only needs to return to the literature focused on why some students succeed in school while others do not to identify institutional unfreedoms. For example, based on previous scholarship we know that schools are often not rigorous (Kozol, 1991; MacDonald, 2004), and that some teachers hold low expectations for

students of diverse cultural and/or language groups (Delpit, 1998; Pizarro, 2005; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Moreover, we know that small classes do not necessarily equate to high quality instruction (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Johnson, 2000). Additionally, early exposure to college classes does little to advance student achievement if the students have not been properly prepared earlier in the educational pipeline (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004; Hill & Torres, 2010). And finally, while free tuition for students who take college courses while still in high school certainly eases some potential financial strain for students and families, but it does little if the student cannot afford to finish the necessary remaining credits to complete their degree.

Regardless of whether they arise from the individual or institutional level, unfreedoms (or the constraints that take away choice) may result in students being channeled into making deformed choices—choices they would not necessarily make in the absence of an unfreedom—which tend to further negatively affect students' academic achievement. Unfreedoms and deformed choices undermine resources perceived to enhance educational opportunity and freedom to achieve. The following section highlights what the girls' perceived as unfreedoms, or aspects of their lives which tended to draw their attention away from academic achievement.

Latinas' Perceptions of Unfreedoms at TECHS

Despite liking TECHS as a whole and perceiving it to offer many opportunities and freedoms to obtain and focus on achievement, the girls also discussed some aspects of TECHS—or their attendance at TECHS—which could be considered unfreedoms, or aspects of their schooling which undermined (limited, restricted or constrained) their

freedom to focus on academic achievement. These unfreedoms were verbalized as a perceived lack of ability, underpreparation, stress from constant assignments and heavy testing schedules, lack of organizational skills, confusion over syllabi, outside responsibilities, and lack of a college narrative at home.

Perceived Lack of Ability and Underpreparation

Sometimes the girls perceived themselves to lack ability in certain subjects. For example, Ariel said, "I don't like math at all…I've never learned how to do math, like grasp it." And similarly Victoria remarked, "I'm not good in history… [and]…I hate math. I can't wrap my head around it. It's like where do I pull up all those numbers from or all the formulas. Should I add or subtract?"

The girls suggested that some subjects were more difficult than others. Many of the girls remarked that their perception of inability sprouted from being underprepared for the rigor and increased expectations at TECHS. Many of the girls noted their previous school experiences did not prime them for the increased demands and expectations in the early college environment. For example, a perceived lack of preparation is evident in the following exchange between me and Jamila:

> Leslie: Did the schools that you went to before, did they promote – did they tell you about AP classes?
>
> Jamila: Not really. It was just either you do it or you don't.

Similarly, Victoria noted that her previous school experiences were not like those at TECHS. When I asked her if she was prepared to come to TECHS, she said: "Some teachers would [give us work that would prepare us], but then others would just like give us the work so we would finish it…busy work."

Pooh had similar contentions as Victoria. Pooh noted her previous schools,

> …could have prepared me better, because I know my eighth grade year it was like I don't know, it was really easy. And you got here and I'm like, oh my gosh, I didn't realize—[teachers would say] oh you should have learned this in eighth grade. [And I'm like] I didn't learn that.

Perceiving to have a lack of ability and feeling underprepared were constraints on their freedom to achieve at TECHS. In other words these were unfreedoms.

Heavy Homework and Testing Schedule

The girls suggested that they often felt stressed, frustrated and angry by what seemed like a constant barrage of homework and tests at TECHS. Having a lot of homework and exams, and having to continually keep up with studying, became too much sometimes. For example, Victoria stated students got stressed because there was:

> … too much homework or the homework is too hard. Or just the teachers, like giving you a lot of work and then not understanding it and like all the homework piling up on them for people that procrastinate or that don't get the subject.

Saraih also discussed being stressed by the workload. She said:

> When I start stressing out, I start panicking. Like I do one thing that I start on and then I say, oh my God, I've got to do this, too. I put that away and do that. And then it just keeps going on and on and on, and it's really stressful, and it's hard to deal with a bunch of things like for school, home, your siblings. You have to help them with their homework, too, and all that. It's just really, really hard, you know.

Managing the heavy work and test load was perceived to be a struggle, and a source of stress. As such it can be considered to be a limitation on the girls' freedom to focus on achievement, an unfreedom. In the example above, Saraih acknowledges that other components of her life "…a bunch of things like school, home…siblings…" also

combine to constrict her access to resources to increase educational opportunity or freedom to focus on achievement.

Lack of Organizational Skills

Many of the girls commented that they did not know how to effectively organize their time and study habits. As a result, their academic performance suffered. For example, Berenize noted: "… I spend a lot of time doing one homework, I leave the other one and it's not complete. And whenever there's a lot of things to do you don't give it your hundred percent."

Similarly Saraih stated:

…sometimes it was actually hard to do my homework. I didn't turn them in because you know, with the other four classes, I had to do major projects and homework and the major grades, and you just can't keep track of each one.

Lacking organizational skills, especially in light of the intense workload and high expectations, limited the girls' ability to achieve, in other words, an unfreedom. The girls did not seem to be able to effectively manage the demands of their assignment and exam responsibilities.

Confusion over Syllabi

Another source of frustration was that the girls felt as though the teachers at TECHS did not consistently rely on their syllabi. They perceived the teachers to constantly change the due dates for papers and assignments. These frequent changes confused and annoyed the girls. For example, Pooh stated:

Like [the teacher] says it's on the syllabus. And everybody's like, 'That's on the syllabus?' And the syllabus like they'll change it, cause they'll be like 'oh we're gonna change this to this day and this to this day.' And I'm like it's not gonna work. And they'll make something later, but they'll make something earlier.

And I'm like okay, that's why I don't use my syllabus, cause you are always changing stuff.

Victoria also commented on the frequent changes in syllabi made by the

teachers:

Yeah, like one teacher, it was like [she said] 'Oh I changed your final to like closer.' … [Sometimes] I haven't even started studying because of my other classes. Because like in some classes you might need more help, and you're studying for that one, and you're not studying for the other one, because it's easy but you've still got to study. And then you're spending time on that one, then the other class that you weren't studying for, they put it all on and say, 'Oh we switched it'. [Teachers need] more organization.

Frequent changes in due dates was a source of confusion for the girls. This

continual rearrangement of assignments limited the girls' ability to achieve, thus

constituted an unfreedom. .

Non-school Responsibilities

Many of the girls reported that they held jobs outside school, or had

responsibilities at home which competed for time they could devote to studying. For

example, Pooh said her responsibilities at home were:

Like chores. [My mom will tell me] 'go clean your room, go fold up these clothes, go wash the clothes, go do the dishes, mop the floor, sweep the floor, go to the store and get me something. Like we'll be back, go watch the kids.' And she won't be back for like three hours. I'm like 'where have you been?' [Then she will say] 'I'm grown, I can do whatever I want.' [And I'm] like, 'I asked you where you been at?' She'll get all mad cause I do that. But I mean, I don't really go out. Like I'm a stay at home person, so mom will be like, 'you want to go here?' And I'm like, 'no I'd rather stay at home.' I'm usually all the help that she gets.

Similarly, Jamila also discussed outside responsibilities:

'Cause [sic] when I'm here at school, I'm just like, oh I've got to turn in this essay and do this and do this. And then when I go to [work], I'm like, oh yes, we

have confirmations coming up and we need to start typing up the certificates, we need to do this, we need to do that. And it's just like, ehhhhhh [sic].

Jamila later admitted that once she left TECHS, her homework only had a "50:50 shot" at getting completed.

Regarding responsibilities at home, recall Saraih who noted: "…it's hard to deal with a bunch of things like for school, home, your siblings. You have to help them with their homework, too, and all that. It's just really, really hard, you know."

Whether they were inside or outside the home, these non-school responsibilities constrained their time, creating an unfreedom. These non-school responsibilities took away time they could have devoted to studying.

Lack of a College Narrative

Like the students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, the Latinas in this study reported that they had the love and support of their parents and other family members to be college-bound and enrolled in the early college program. However, as all of the girls would be the first in their families to go to college, there was no college narrative at home. Therefore, any advice regarding what to expect in college, how to thrive at college, and how to be successful there was not going to be obtained at home. While love and support go a long way, without a college narrative at home—advice from someone who has lived through the college experience and understands how to navigate the college system—being successful on a college campus can often prove to be a struggle (I know this from personal experience). For example, Jamila told me her dad often repeated a story to her in Spanish that translated something similar to "… if you don't want to have hard hands, stay in school." Meaning, clearly, if she didn't want to

do manual labor or work in the outdoors, she needed an education. However, Jamila

also reported that when she talked to her parents about her goals of one day becoming a

teacher, she said their response was "…you should be whatever you want to be." While

supportive in a general sense, this advice lacks a practical perspective. Her parents

could not or did not know how to engage with Jamila in a way that would articulate the

necessary steps toward becoming a teacher. For all the girls, the lack of a college

narrative created an unfreedom. Although their parents were supportive, they were

unable to give the girls the blueprint to obtain a college education.

These unfreedoms pushed the girls toward making deformed choices—choices

they would not necessarily make if there were alternatives. Recall, deformed choices, a

concept originally formed by Nussbaum (1992), arise

> … when people feel as if they have no real choice [i.e. no freedom to choose] in
> matters that concern them. When people are trapped in a "deformed choice,"
> they are not free to pursue a path that they value and typically, they feel forced
> into taking a path they would not choose if they had a *real* choice (emphasis
> original, Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 77).

Thus deformed choices emanate from the constraints, restrictions or limitations

(unfreedoms) which disallow individuals to take advantage of presented opportunities.

The following section highlights these deformed choices.

Deformed Choices

Due to the unfreedoms the girls experienced, collectively and individually, the

girls reported that they often became frustrated, confused, or overwhelmed. Indeed,

because the girls were underprepared for the rigor of college preparation and

overwhelmed by in- and out-of-school responsibilities (unfreedoms), the freedom to achieve was really unavailable to them. When this occurred, they often made choices, deformed choices, which did not make school their top priority. These deformed choices limited their opportunity to be successful the in early college environment. The most common deformed choice they made was to procrastinate, giving in to distractions such as watching television and playing on the computer, which resulted in not turning in schoolwork or turning it in late. Another deformed choice they often discussed was not accessing help on a regular basis, which would have resulted in more school success.

Procrastination

Concerning her homework, Victoria noted that her less-than-stellar grades often were a result of just not turning in her work due to procrastination. She noted:

> I'd finish the assignments, and then the day that it was due I would forget it at home. I'd leave it just lying around because the day before I'd fall asleep doing the work. And I'd leave it like on the couch or on the floor, and then after that I'd pick it up in the morning because I was like half asleep. And then the next day I'd get lazy to turn it in, and I wouldn't turn it in at all…I do the assignments and then I wouldn't turn them in…And I am very bad at turning things in and stuff...

Here, Victoria suggested she is sometimes lazy and does not turn in her assignments. It appears that she intended to turn in her work, but just did not get around to it. However previously Victoria noted that she is often overwhelmed by the amount of assigned work and multiple assignments being due on the same day. Moreover, she also suggested that she works on assignments late into the evening, causing her to become too sleepy in the morning to remember to bring her homework to school. Rather than being able to

organize her time and school work, her deformed choice is to procrastinate and not turn

in her assignments.

Jamila also told me she struggled with procrastination. She discussed

procrastination in the following exchange.

Leslie: So is [TECHS] everything that you thought it would be? Is there anything that you are like, 'Oh I wish it was like this or I wish it wasn't like this' or, you know?

Jamila: I wish that we didn't have – that comes all back to me.

Leslie: What [comes back to you]?

Jamila: Procrastinating.

Leslie: Procrastinating. What do you mean?

Jamila: 'Cause [sic] [here at TECHS] you really have all of your works [due] at the same time.

Leslie: Close to the same due date? So you wish that you didn't do that, or you wish you didn't have so many assignments?

Jamila: Maybe so many assignments.

Recall Jamila was also concerned about how much she had to work outside of school.

Here though, she was concerned about the number of assignments she needed to

complete within a similar timeframe. It appeared that Jamila was overwhelmed with her

in- and out-of –school responsibilities, and trying to complete her many assignments.

Rather than being able to organize her work and tackle those assignments, she made a

deformed choice to procrastinate.

Procrastination is also evident in the following example from Berenize. When I

asked her what she thought distracted her from her school work, she replied:

> … I got a job this year, and then I get home and I'm kind of tired and then I eat and maybe watch some TV and then I do my homework….and I know it shouldn't be that way.

Here it is clear Berenize knows she should not leave her homework until the end of her evening, but due to the circumstances of her life, and perhaps fatigue, she made the deformed choice to procrastinate.

Additionally, Pooh noted she struggled with procrastination. She suggested that the following would help her stop procrastinating:

> Actually … doing the work and stop thinking that I have extra time when I really don't, because you always have something else to do. So that's what I've got to think about, procrastination. It's not just that you have to do this, it's this, this and that.

Here, Pooh seems overwhelmed with many assignments, while also lacking the necessary study skills to successfully organize her time and complete her assignments. She suggests that she often thinks she has more time than she really does to complete her assignments. It appears she knows what she needs to do, but has difficulty doing it.

Procrastination (a deformed choice) then, was opted for by the girls because they were often sufficiently fatigued, overwhelmed, or frustrated by the amount of schoolwork. Moreover, they often suggested they did not know how to organize their time or could not find time to complete their assignments around their non-school related responsibilities.

Inability to Access Help

Another deformed choice the girls' discussed was their lack of being able to take advantage of the help offered by TECHS. They knew assistance was available, and

agreed that the assistance was useful, but they often could not access it due to other obligations.

For example, when I asked Pooh if she took advantage of the academic help offered by TECHS teachers, she said:

> I usually go whenever I can. [I went to Saturday tutorials] once. Other than that I have to work. It was good, because I had – I need a lot of physics help, so I went and Mr. [Travis] was here, so I got all my physics done. And I was getting it, and I was like, 'yes!' I didn't know what I was doing in that class.

Here it is clear that Pooh benefitted from the assistance, but usually had to work (a deformed choice) when it was offered.

Jamila, whose homework had only a "50:50 shot" at getting completed once she left TECHS., commented that "… when [she's] caught up and doing [her] work, [she's] like 'go me!'" But she also acknowledged that she does not get caught up often, and "… can't always make it to tutorials because [she is so often] at work." Because Jamila noted that she was happy with herself when she was caught up on her schoolwork, we can assume that she wanted to do well in school, but because of her work schedule she was unable to put schoolwork first. Choosing work, rather than studying, constituted a deformed choice.

Putting It All Together

The girls perceived TECHS to provide many resources to increase their educational opportunity and freedom to focus on academic achievement. Interestingly, many of the resources that the girls perceived as "freedoms" were similar to those that the TECHS institutional documents promoted as "freedoms." However, as was clear from the interview data, the girls experienced unfreedoms, or limitations, constraints,

restrictions, in their lives which worked to undermine those resources or "freedoms to achieve." Due to the unfreedoms present in the girls' lives, they often made deformed choices which tended to solidify their low academic performance and underachievement.

The following chapter presents a deeper interpretation of the findings and what these results mean for policy, practice, and research. Additionally, I include my personal response to the study and final thoughts regarding the inquiry.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"It's like giving us a car, only without the wheels." TECHS student

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study, respond to the 'so what' question, and discuss the implications for policy, practice and research. The end of the chapter includes my personal response and reflection, as well as my final thoughts regarding the inquiry.

The purpose of this study was to understand Latina student underperformance at an early college high school from the student perspective. The research question was: What are the perceptions of Latina students who are underperforming, regarding their school performance and experiences, at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college?

I wanted to study Latina students who were *underperforming*[10], exclusively. Prior to, and at the time of data collection, other groups of Latinas at TECHS were performing well academically. My focus however, was on those who were seen by the administration as *underperforming*. Furthermore, the fact the girls voluntarily enrolled in a program designed to prepare them for college, yet were consistently underperforming, served as an important impetus for this inquiry. Interviews with eight Latina students, who were underperforming, reflected how the girls perceived their performance and experiences within TECHS.

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[10] Criteria for underperformance were failing three or more classes at six weeks into the term.

As qualitative researchers have argued, adolescents are the best informants of their own situations, behaviors and feelings (Hill & Torres, 2010). Because this inquiry aimed to understand performance and school experiences from the student perspective, a qualitative approach was best suited. Qualitative methods employed were observations, interviews, student journals, a researcher journal, field notes, document analyses, and prolonged engagement in the setting.

An interpretive approach to the data was chosen because there is scant research relating to the perceptions of Latina students regarding their academic performance and school experiences. Moreover, there is scant research relating to ECHSs, and no research that I am aware of concerning Latinas at ECHSs. This approach for research on a phenomenon such as Latina underperformance in an ECHS provided an important lens to understand the phenomenon in its entirety.

Interpretivism, a paradigm within qualitative research, requires researchers to recognize there are multiple realities or multiple truths regarding social phenomena. Moreover, interpretivist researchers also recognize these realities can differ across time and location, meaning that truth is subjective and relative. Furthermore, within this paradigm, researchers are interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation (Merriam, 2002). That is, how participants interpret meaning, and form perspectives and worldviews, based on their experiences. I used interpretivism to gain insights on the specific phenomenon of academic underperfomance of Latina students at TECHS, by focusing on as many dimensions of the whole phenomenon, in context, as possible. Moreover, I used critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal,

2002) to inform my thinking regarding the design of the study and interpretation of the results. I chose this epistemological framework as I wanted to understand the girls' perceptions and experiences in terms of both race *and* gender. And finally, the frameworks of freedom to achieve (Sen, 1992), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999), based on the work of Anderson and Larson (2009), were applied to TECHS institutional documents, as well as the interview data. These frameworks provided valuable insight into TECHS as an appropriate policy intervention for Latinas, a target ECHS student population.

The findings from this study reflect that the Latinas interviewed perceived the ECHS they attended to be an effective and authentic school environment providing them the freedoms to achieve. That is, they believed TECHS would enable them to meet the expectations of high school graduation, complete at least 60 college credit hours, and be prepared for college, *if they worked for it*. Moreover, the data provided evidence that the girls perceived a quality teaching and administrative staff, as well as effective instructional practices to meet their needs as hybrid—high school and college—students.

These perceptions, however, were not static. Analyzing the data in terms of freedoms to achieve, unfreedoms, and deformed choices revealed that the social and institutional structure of TECHS works in ways unconscious to all the stakeholders of the school including the girls. That is, while the girls identified specific aspects of TECHS as helping them to achieve their goals, they also identified some of the same elements as constricting or limiting their freedom to achieve their aims. For example, at times they appreciated the increased rigor at TECHS, and at other times, they felt it was

overwhelming, frustrating and detrimental to their achievement. Furthermore, they discussed specific aspects of their lives outside of school, such as having to work in order to contribute to the family well-being, which tended to derail their momentum toward academic achievement. Another unfreedom included feeling underprepared for the rigor at TECHS by their earlier schooling experiences. These unfreedoms often paved the way for the girls to make deformed choices such as working rather than studying, helping their siblings with homework before their own, and frustration which culminated in procrastination regarding their school work. The intersection of perceived freedoms, unfreedoms and deformed choices calls into question the viability of ECHSs as policy solutions to improve opportunities for the Latina students. Resultantly, the reality of the girls' perceiving to have "freedoms" or opportunities to achieve, but not being able to fully access those freedoms, created some tension. This tension is discussed later in this chapter.

Discussion

'So what?' is the question at the heart of any good research project or theory. Why are student perspectives important? Understanding student perspectives regarding their school performance and experiences is important because policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can use them to improve teaching, increase student achievement and adjust policy interventions to best serve students and families.

Figure 1 illustrates graphically what I believe is occurring at TECHS, both in terms of policy and the enactment of the policy as it relates to freedoms, unfreedoms, and deformed choices.

Beginning with the problem ECHSs were designed to address: too many students of color and first generation students are not achieving at high levels, we move to the top of the graphic, which represents the policy realm. I begin with the American ethic of individualism or the 'bootstrap' mentality. As discussed earlier, this meritocratic ethic is pervasive in American society and has roots going back to the writings of Ben Franklin (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Our society's notions of academic achievement are not spared from the ethic of individualism. That is, schools reward students who 'work hard' and perform well. Resultantly then, schools tend to perpetuate the notion that all students not only have freedoms to achieve, but are able to take advantage of opportunities these freedoms provide. These meritocratic, individualistic ideals surrounding achievement are certainly not off limits to policymakers. However, as this and other studies have demonstrated, all students do not enjoy equal opportunity to achieve. There are some student groups—students of color, students considered low income, students who are first generation college bound, in particular—who have historically not been served well by the American education system.

Following the graphic, one can see the American ethic of individualism then, and meritocratic notions of achievement and opportunity, influence what policymakers and policy implementers think about historically underserved students and what they need in order to experience increased freedoms to achieve and academic success. Given the task of designing an intervention to increase educational opportunity for such students, policymakers created the early college high school. As a policy intervention, the early college high school is based on the notion that in order to succeed and progress to an

institution of higher learning, historically underserved students need increased rigor, small classes, and access to college credit at the high school level.

However, as is demonstrated in the lower half of the graphic, which represents the enacted policy, we see that ECHSs are not without significant problems. For example, unfreedoms in students' lives effect the extent to which they are able to achieve. Deformed choices may be made. Unfreedoms, deformed choices, and sustained underachievement may combine and lead to students internalizing failure and holding deficit notions about their abilities to be successful. Moreover, students' lack of academic success may lead to teachers holding deficit views about their students' abilities and motivation to achieve. Then, interestingly, these student and teacher deficit views may work to reinforce unfreedoms experienced by students. Students, teachers, and even entire schools may get trapped in a 'feedback loop'—which contributes to additional and/or sustained unfreedoms. Resultantly, the original problem of too few students of color, low socioeconomic status, or first generation students being absent from post-secondary campuses, remains unresolved.

Policy Realm

American foundational ethic of individualism
↓

Meritocratic notions of achievement (opportunity is available, freedoms to achieve)
↓

Policy makers making judgments about what students of color and first generation students need (freedoms) to succeed in high school and move on to college (rigor, small classes, early college exposure)
↓

ECHS

Enactment

ECHS
↓

Unfreedoms experienced by students (family/work responsibilities, underpreparation) resulting in lack of success
↓

Internalization of underachievement and self-deficit thinking resulting in deformed choices and sustained lack of success
↓

Teacher deficit thinking regarding students

Problem: Too many students of color and too many first generation students are not completing high school and going on to college.
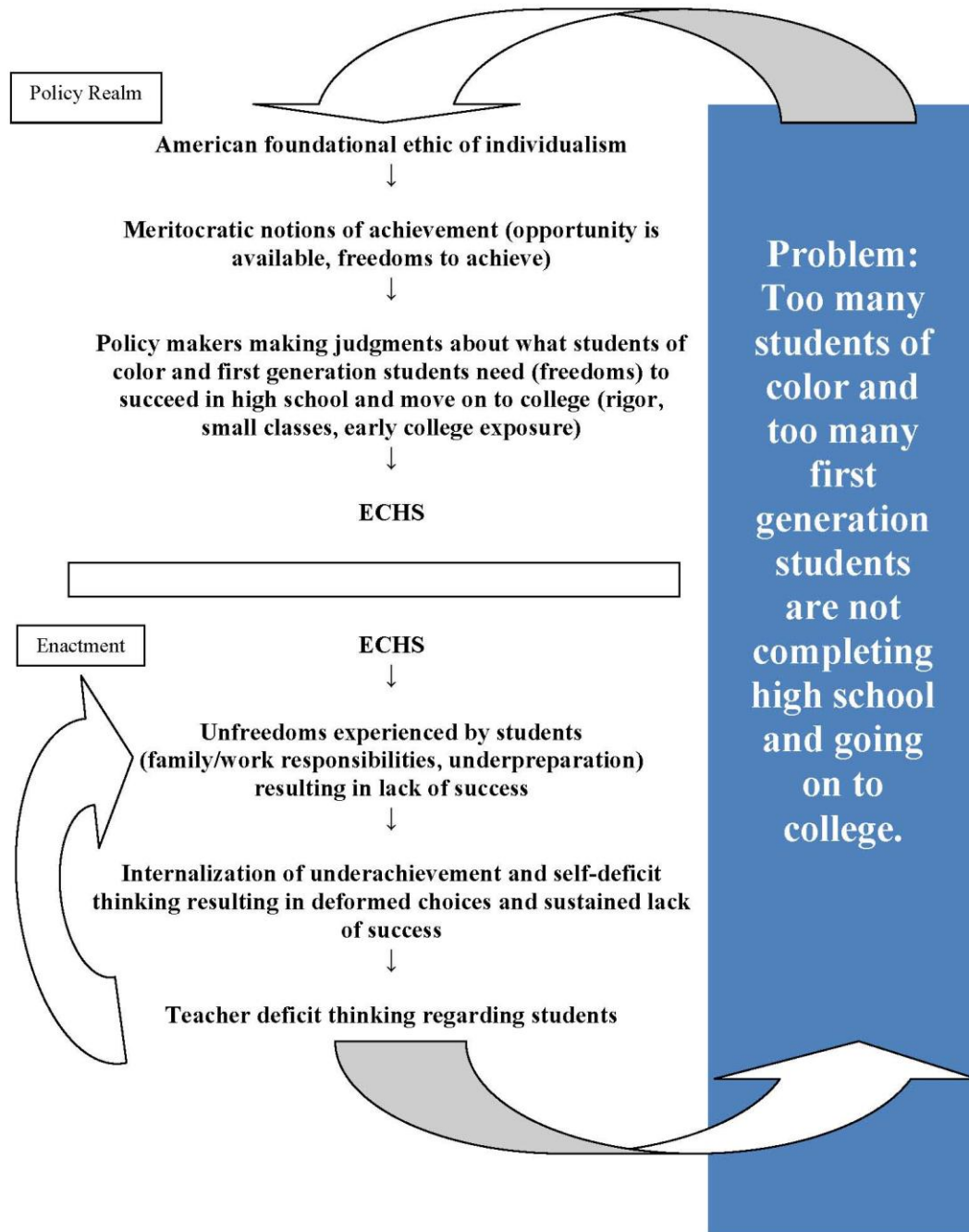
Figure 1: Feedback Loop

Perhaps students get caught in a theoretical 'feedback loop' as demonstrated in Figure 1. Potentially such a phenomenon may have contributed to the significant rate of student departure from TECHS. In 2007, TECHS started with 112 freshmen. In 2011, only 67 students remained and graduated in May. In 2008, TECHS started with 95 freshmen, and only 51 returned in the fall of 2011 as seniors. Furthermore, of the eight girls I interviewed for this study, only four remain as students of TECHS (as of October, 2011). Clearly, as it stands, this particular early college program is not preparing as many students as it could.

Reasons for losing forty percent of the "legacy" or the initial incoming class of students at TECHS likely has multiple sources. However, a primary source of such loss may stem from a reliance on meritocratic notions of what students at TECHS need in order to be successful.

Unaware of and immersed in the meritocratic discourse underpinning the policy and its enactment, the girls in this study understandably did not blame an educational, economic, and political system that has historically underserved them and their families. That is, they did not blame the system or the unfreedoms they experience, but themselves—internalizing and owning their underachievement. Their perceptions showed they believe their comparative underachievement was their fault, a result of their own lack of effort, aligning with the meritocratic discourse. As noted previously, the reality of the girls' perceiving to have "freedoms" to achieve, but not being able to access many of those freedoms, created some tension. I believe this tension manifests itself in internalization and deficit thinking.

Internalization and Deficit Thinking

Recall Victoria who said she was "lazy," and Jamila who thought that her inability to complete her work or "procrastinating…all [came] back to [her]," and Berenize who had to wait until she got home from work to start her homework said "…[she knew] it shouldn't be that way." These quotes highlight an internalization of underperformance—or feeling as though their underachievement is their fault. They may also point to self-deficit thinking.

According to Richard Valencia (2010), deficit thinking or the belief that there is something inherently lacking in a person or a culture, "… is tantamount to the process of "blaming the victim" (p. xiv). Valencia (2010) suggests that educators and policymakers have used a model of deficit thinking to explain why some students, particularly students of color and from low-income households, experience lower overall achievement. This model, Valencia (2010) notes:

> …posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster—such as putative familial deficits and dysfunctions. …deficit thinkers hold blameless systemic factors (e.g., school segregation; inequalities in school financing; curriculum differentiation) in explaining why some students fail in school (p. xiv).

Without much difficulty, it is easy to see how deficit thinking, existent (and structurally inherent) in school policies could be internalized by students. The institutional rhetoric present in the "rugged individualism" construct at Anderson and Larson's (2009) UB/CAI program, and the meritocratic message communicated at TECHS, may have been internalized by the students who were exposed to them. As it was for the students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, these messages were

unconscious for the Latinas in this study. For instance, many of the girls perceived

procrastination (a deformed choice) to be their fault, even though many also admitted to

lacking sufficient time (due to non-negotiable outside or non-school responsibilities) to

devote to their school work.

Interestingly, even though they were not performing well and did not have much

time to devote to schoolwork, the girls liked attending TECHS. In the interviews, I

asked all of the girls if they thought they were going to graduate from TECHS.

Surprisingly, they all answered in the conditional regarding graduation. For example

Jamila said "I'm shooting for that goal." Berenize said "Hopefully I would. I want to,

that's my goal." Pooh said, "Yes, maybe." Ariel said "I hope so." And Leah said

"Hopefully I do graduate." I was taken aback that their beliefs concerning graduation

were so tentative. These quotes demonstrate the girls were not convinced that they could

make it all the way to graduation. Yet, they did not want to abandon the early college

experience, despite poor performance.

Perhaps their tentative ties to graduation were related to deeper issues. For

example, as has been demonstrated, the girls continually identified the source of their

underperformance as internal, within themselves. It is possible that the girls in this study

bought into the meritocratic stance that TECHS champions, seeing their lives outside of

school as individual concerns that should be ignored, and not allowed to interrupt their

ability to achieve in school (Anderson & Larson, 2009). However, when they could not

keep up with the homework their academic problems intensified and eventually their

grades dropped. Perhaps when these forces culminated, even though they like the school, it was difficult for the girls to envision themselves as TECHS graduates.

Like the students in the UB/CAI program, the Latinas in this study were motivated to stay at TECHS, however their freedom to focus on school and achievement was often interrupted by the pressing needs of family (Anderson & Larson, 2009). These needs often undermined the freedom the girls had to achieve—instead they had to focus on work inside or outside the home. Taking care of siblings or household chores, or working outside the home for wages, was often not a negotiable choice, but was most probably a deformed choice. We know it is not uncommon for families living in poverty to lean on older children to care for younger siblings or other household requirements in times of need (Rumberger, 2001 as referenced in Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 103). However, when the girls' ability to focus on their achievement was undermined by the needs of family or the need to work, they did not see these needs as competing for their time, rather, they internalized the resultant academic failure.

For the girls in this study, their familial contexts often determined the amount of time they could commit to their studies, and ultimately achieve. To this end, Deneulin, Nebel, and Sagovsky (2006) highlighted, "The social, economic, and political context, can limit or expand human capabilities to achieve" (as cited in Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 99). Feeling constrained by family needs, economic needs, or by perceived social and political boundaries are legitimate concerns. Nussbaum (1999) suggested that when faced with few options, "… people frequently adjust their expectations to the low level of well-being they think they can actually attain" (as cited in Anderson and Larson,

2009, p. 94). Similarly, Sen (2004) "… suggested that certain conditions facilitate people to lower their goals and aspirations to levels which are perceived to be more realistic and attainable given their circumstances" (as cited in Anderson and Larson, 2009, p. 94). Perhaps lowered expectations contributes to why the girls in this study were so loosely tied to graduation, why they internalized their underperformance, and why they made deformed choices.

Despite their underperformance and deformed choices, the girls in this study— just as the students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study—were clinging to the hope of finishing school and going to college. This was apparent in their collective and individual 'hope' to graduate. However, it is probable that their goals and aspirations decreased in response to increased unfreedoms and deformed choices. That is, their motivations and choices may have often been hampered by the reality of their complex lives. This, then, has profound implications for policy, practice and research.

Implications and Recommendations: Ensuring the Sustainability of TECHS

"Awareness is meaningless unless it inspires and is followed by change." Garza, 1998

Implications for Policy

As it was the case for the students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, the Latinas in this study perceived that they needed and benefitted from the educational support and resources TECHS provided, however, as their stories exposed, they need more than academic assistance if they are going to stay and be successful in the program. As it stands currently, TECHS as a social justice intervention, does not address the social side of its students' lives. That is, TECHS does not do much to manage the other side of

underperformance—the social, economic, and political obstacles that may work to weaken students' freedom to stay focused on academic performance and achievement.

It has been demonstrated thus far in this chapter that students are likely unable to take full responsibility for staying motivated. Similarly, they may be unlikely to be able to specifically articulate the forces which constrain their performance. Furthermore, their motivation is probably diminished by continued underperformance. Clearly, if we expect policies to be effective, then the reality of students' whole lives cannot be ignored. Currently, this ignorance is damaging students. Moreover, ignoring the real, whole lives of students and families does not promote social justice. ECHSs, as social justice policy interventions, have a moral obligation to consider students authentic selves and real lives. Expanding students' capabilities in terms of their real lives may be a start toward creating a true social justice intervention.

Focus on Capabilities

Larson and Murtadha (2002) note:

> …no single program or policy can ensure the life success of every child. However, attention to developing capabilities, as Nussbaum indicates, and using policy and practice to create greater freedoms to achieve, as Sen suggests, means supporting and enhancing the lives of children and their families. If leaders take Sen's and Nussbaum's theories seriously, then they will recognize that they cannot educate the mind of a child if the body and spirit are threatened (p. 156).

As it was the case for the students in Anderson and Larson's (2009) study, it seems logical that for the Latinas in this study, once academic failure set in, it immobilized and threatened them. Perhaps they no longer felt confident that they were capable of performing at high levels or retained confidence about their futures.

Larson and Murtadha (2002) suggest "The central question researchers and leaders of schools might ask from a capabilities perspective is, "What is child X actually able to do and be?" (p. 154). They also note "… children and families vary greatly in their needs for resources and in their abilities to convert resources that institutions offer into valuable opportunities" (p. 154). This approach, as Larson and Murtadha (2002) suggest aligns with Paolo Friere (1970) who:

> …argues that developing children's freedoms and *capabilities to achieve* (emphasis mine) must be central to any reform effort that seeks liberation and human development through education. [Friere] contends that serious efforts to increase the academic success of poor minority children will require leaders who are capable of augmenting and developing children's and families' freedoms to achieve (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 152).

This Frierian logic is not new. Furthermore, Anderson and Larson (2009) state "Fordham and Ogbu (1996) [15 years ago] stressed that poor students of color need useful strategies for bridging their home, community, and school contexts as each one is integral to emotional and psychological health and educational accomplishment" (p. 101). Interestingly, we have known such information for over 15 years, yet it has not been effectively implemented. At TECHS, like in the UB/CAI program, there is no space where the students can address their fears or develop their capabilities for negotiating the real "… life worlds [they] must successfully navigate each day" (Anderson & Larson, 2009, p. 97). Clearly then, education leaders and policymakers should focus on capabilities as worthy educational goals. This would promote a greater measure of equality than currently exists among schools (Larson and Murtadha, 2002). As Anderson and Larson (2009) note, Sen and Nussbaum "… argued that the structures and practices of our institutions, such as education, should be chosen with an eye toward

expanding *capabilities to achieve* (emphasis mine) rather than focusing on achievement alone" (p. 77). Creating holistic policies are one way to create authentic capabilities to achieve.

Holistic Policies

Larson and Murtadha (2002) state "Sen argues that if we seek greater equality, we must begin by asking, equality of what?" (p. 152). Our real choices and our real resources are not identical. Larson and Murtadha (2002) note:

> Sen argues that policymakers and the leaders who enforce policy typically deny and ignore these hardships in the belief that they are being "objective." However, Sen suggests that to ignore these hardships in policy and practice is "not so much to be super-objective, but to be super-dense" (as cited in Larson and Murtadha, p. 154).

Policy development, analysis, and implementation then, should aim to be *subjective*. As Larson and Murtadha (2002) continue,

> Sen reminds us that the policy recommendations we choose are typically contingent upon feasibility. However, the recognition of poverty (and its impact on education) has to go beyond that. He suggests that the first step is to diagnose deprivation and determine what we would do if we had the means. Our actual policy choices…must be in line with the deprivations we see. In this sense, the descriptive analysis of poverty or inequality has to precede the policy choice we make (p. 153).

Feasible policies then, require that policymakers must consider a holistic and subjective picture of student life, as well as what we would desire if limitations (unfreedoms) were nonexistent. Furthermore, assessments as to what is needed should be obtained through concerted efforts of schools, human service agencies, local community organizations, as well as incorporation of what students and families perceive that they need.

Communication of Needs: "It's like giving us a car, only without the wheels."

Anderson and Larson (2009) note:

Denzin argued that public institutions exist to serve particular populations. However, public institutions do not serve all populations equally, nor do they serve all people well. [Denzin] asserted the problems that some people encounter in institutions emanate from a gap between what the people designing the policy think people need and what they really need (p. 78).

What are the motivations of the policymakers of social justice-intervention programs? What are the motivations of those who enroll in these programs? Anderson and Larson (2009) suggest we don't know. They state:

… mainstream research has tended to highlight predictors of successful or unsuccessful students as well as remedies to create better schools by setting higher academic standards, improving the quality of schools and teaching, and providing more intensive after-school programs. There has been far less focus on the assumptions about educational equity and opportunity underpinning these initiatives. Moreover, mainstream literature rarely takes into account the point of view of students and their experiences within programs designed to help them achieve (p. 79).

Given the structure of TECHS as an indication of what policymakers believe traditionally underserved students need, one can assume they believe students need, a small school environment, increased rigor, early exposure to college campuses, and financial assistance (as evidenced by free tuition). Left unasked is if the students in these programs believe that they need these specific resources in order to succeed.

Regarding student needs to ensure success, one afternoon, while I was writing this chapter, a Latina student from TECHS stopped by my office. Curious as to what I was working on, a dialogue ensued regarding the purposes of this study and how I was looking at the data. She remarked that at times she thought of TECHS in the following way, "It's like giving us a car, only without the wheels." I thought, 'What an interesting

insight! What good is a car without the wheels? Without wheels, one cannot access the freedoms the car might provide.' In line with this logic, what good is an early college program if students are unable to take full advantage of the "freedoms" or resources available to increase their educational opportunity?

While TECHS provided many resources to increase educational opportunity and freedoms to focus on achievement, the founders and policymakers—while not fully understanding the lives of the target populations—did not attend to the limitations, restrictions or unfreedoms many of the students in the program had no choice but to experience. Future polices must focus on students capabilities, be holistic in nature, and include the needs of all stakeholders. That is, policies must provide both the car *and* the wheels.

Implications for Practice

Because I was actively engaged at the school, I am able to make some practical recommendations based on my experiences. The following practical recommendations may help to create a more authentic schooling environment, providing students with real freedom to achieve (Anderson & Larson, 2009).

Improving the Pipeline

Some of the difficulties TECHS students encountered were a result of these students not being prepared for a high level of rigor earlier in their educational lives. Many of the strategies employed at ECHSs should be employed not just at the secondary level, but at the primary levels as well. College preparation needs to start earlier than the ninth grade. Schools need to institute a college-bound atmosphere as early as

kindergarten. Moreover, they need to have high quality teachers—in every classroom—who will increase expectations and exposure to higher-level concepts early in the education pipeline. High quality teaching and early exposure to higher-level concepts will likely reduce the academic struggles students experience in the early college program, as well as those they may encounter in their post-secondary careers.

Reducing the Confusion over Syllabi

Because many of the girls pointed to confusing syllabi and schedules of due dates for assignments and exams at TECHS, teachers need to create better and more clear syllabi, rely on the syllabi, and stick to a consistent schedule of due dates and exam dates. Making clear syllabi and committing to a schedule within the syllabi will likely create less confusion and frustration among the students. Moreover, it may help students be better managers of the workload and their time.

Creating a College-like Atmosphere

As an 'early college' program, one designed to prepare students for post-secondary, the TECHS environment needs to be more like college. That is, the school needs to ease up on the strictly enforced high school-like rules. If TECHS students are told they are "college students," then the district needs to allow the school to treat their students as such. Making TECHS more like a true college atmosphere will help students successfully prepare for and adapt to a post-secondary environment later on in their educational lives. At a minimum, creating a college-like atmosphere includes access to computer labs and printers in late afternoons and evenings, tutoring available in the evenings, and less-strict dress codes.

Cultural Navigators

Students need to build relationships with 'multicultural navigators' (Carter, 2005), or people who can provide access to the codes related to preparation for college to those who are unfamiliar. The Latinas interviewed for this study seemed to lack a clear understanding of what college would be like. NWLC (2009) noted "… one of the primary challenges facing Latinas in school today is the absence of female role models or inspiring influences" (p. 17). Therefore, Latina students at TECHS may benefit particularly from career and educational professionals (navigators) who are also Latina. First-hand knowledge coming from a Latina source may benefit these girls in many ways.

Connecting with others already at or beyond the post-secondary level is one way to create relationships with cultural navigators. Another obvious step includes working to achieve a faculty that is representative of the students in terms of demographics, including linguistic representation. As it stood at the time of data collection, the staff at TECHS was very different, in terms of race/ethnicity, from the students.

Gender Awareness

According to NWLC and MALDEF (2009) all girls receive tacit (and sometimes blatant) messages about women's "roles" in society. For Latinas however, gender and ethnic stereotypes may negatively affect their academic performance in particular. These stereotypes frequently portray Latinas as submissive underachievers and caretakers. Moreover, such stereotypes are often reinforced by family, schools, and the media. However, according to Valenzuela (1993), more egalitarian views about gender

roles have been found to support high academic achievement for Latinas. Even though the girls I interviewed did not perceive gender bias as something that either hindered or facilitated their performance, I noticed it. Based on the time I spent at TECHS and conversations with the teaching and administrative staffs, I know gender bias exists within the faculty at TECHS. I recommend that staff make a commitment to ongoing gender awareness training. The results from my prolonged engagement clearly show that teachers need to move beyond stereotypical notions of Latinas in schools. My interviews revealed that the Latinas do want to be at TECHS, they want to perform well academically, and they want to move beyond these stereotypes.

Cultural Competency

Unfortunately, according to Hurtado, Cervantez, and Eccleston (2010), there are no national policies or even state policies that address increasing teacher attainment of cultural competencies, that is, having the knowledge and skills to work effectively across cultures. This is surely at odds with the increasing diversity and changing demographics of schools nationwide.

The NWLC (2009) suggests "… when teachers and others in school demonstrate a lack of cultural sensitivity or rely on ethnic, racial, or gender stereotypes, student engagement and learning is hindered, increasing the risk that the students…will do poorly, fall behind, and drop out" (p. 19). Given that I witnessed many instances where I perceived the teachers were speaking in racist terms about the students—showing a lack of cultural sensitivity—I suggest, in addition to gender awareness training, teachers obtain ongoing training in cultural competency and sensitivity.

Teachers should incorporate cultural concepts into their daily teaching that reflect the lives and lifestyles of their students. Furthermore, teachers must be willing to learn, appreciate, accept, and treat as an asset their students' cultural backgrounds. Doing so will enact culturally responsive practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994), which are likely to increase teaching effectiveness and improve student achievement.

Tapping into Cultural Knowledge

As was shown in Chapter II, feelings of alienation and marginalization have been linked to students' underachievement and withdrawal from school. While alienation and marginalization were not identified as salient issues for the Latinas I interviewed, enabling all students to embrace their ethnic identity in a welcoming, multicultural school environment may be integral to boosting the Latinas' academic performance.

Consistent with the concept of cultural competency, curricula needs to recognize and tap into the resources within *educación* and funds of knowledge (see Chapter II for a detailed description of these concepts), as well as bilingual education. Bringing these cultural concepts of education and home languages into schools will be mutually beneficial by building social and cultural capital[11] between schools, families, and students. Teachers who are aware and conscious of these cultural concepts should use them to effectively, equitably and respectfully educate their Latina/o students.

Equity

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[11] Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) consists of cultural and social assets which promote social mobility.

Because one group of students (Latinas) consistently underperformed at TECHS, I recommend the school conduct equity audits (Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). Equity audits, which interrogate reasons leading to consistent achievement gaps by investigating teacher quality, school program enrollment, and assessment data (among other components of schools) exposes inequities in schools and schooling. Moreover, TECHS should work with its current staff to develop their equity consciousness (Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). An equity consciousness ensures: all teachers and staff believe all their students are capable of academic success; the adults in the school understand they are responsible for student success; and all teachers are willing to change teaching approaches if a current practice is not getting desired results (Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). Future hires should be those who show evidence of an equity consciousness. Collectively, conducting frequent equity audits, and developing an equity-conscious-staff, will work to reduce bias in schools and increase student success.

Family Support

It was apparent from many of the conversations I had with teachers at TECHS that some of them assumed the parents of the Latinas in this study simply did not place much importance on education. This belief is common among school staffs and the general public (Guerra, 1970; Nieto, 1996; Pizarro, 2005; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). It is a form of normative, unconscious racism (López, 2003). However, every Latina that I interviewed reported her parents and other family members

to be extremely supportive of her efforts in school, admired her for enrolling in an early college program, and wanted to see her attend college one day.

However, none of the parents of the interviewees were college educated. Therein lays the problem, which is often misinterpreted by school staffs. It is not that parents do not support or encourage education, it is more about the fact that they do not have an education themselves. That is, there is no college narrative at home. This void often leaves parents unable to effectively assist their children with schooling (Hill & Torres, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). For example, parents may not be able to help with advanced homework because they do not have the skills (Tierney, 2002). Or, because of work obligations, they may be unable to come to school meetings. Or, due to a lack of comfort and/or knowledge of the system, they may be unable to effectively advocate for their children within the school (Alatorre Alva & Padilla, 1995; López, 2003; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Pizarro, 2005; Romo & Falbo, 1996).

Based on my time at TECHS, and conversations with the teachers, I believe TECHS could do more to reach out to Latina/o families. Meeting with parents and families on their terms—that is, on the families' schedules, in their homes and neighborhoods. Furthermore, inviting parents into the classrooms and increased frequency of open house evenings with teachers, are just a few suggestions which will build relationships with parents and families, help to create a college narrative, and ultimately increase student freedoms to achieve.

Talk about Race and Racism

I believe, in order for the ECHS to truly live up to its social justice intentions, it needs to institute dialogue about race and racism. We know historically that Latina/o students were victims of group slander, that is, anti-Latina/o stereotypes circulated among school officials (Gonzalez, 1990). These stereotypes operated in the form of general social "knowledge" rather than explicit racism. This covert type of racism was common sense, it was routine (López, 2003). Such normative slander is still operating today. I believe that TECHS and likely other ECHSs, in order to serve their student populations, need to alter the school environment itself by narrowing the gap between the school norms and the students' cultures. It also means helping students' foster healthy racial identities by creating opportunities for all students and all teachers to engage in open conversations about race and racism. Students, as well as teachers, need to have classes on race and racism—they need a space to freely discuss it, understand it, and figure out how to diminish the spread of it. Through dialogue on race and racism, teachers and students will become jointly responsible for the learning process as well as mutual understanding (Freire, 1970).

Most urgent however, is a need for teachers to have professional development on acknowledging and learning about their own racism, how they perpetuate it, how they can reduce it, and how they can moderate discussions about it in their classrooms. Teachers' knowledge regarding institutional/unconscious racism is imperative, especially if they want to work in a school that was designed as a social justice remedy.

Implications for Research in Educational Leadership, Policy and Administration

The goal of educational leadership programs is no longer about providing future school leaders with technical and managerial skills (Levin, 2006). Research suggests we need leaders who have the ability to transform schools into equitable places that are focused on social justice (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008). Leadership programs must strive for equity oriented, and social justice oriented, school leaders and educators. Thus, this study has implications for researchers working in areas of teacher and leadership preparation.

In the context of school reform, researchers argue that the purpose of educational leadership is to improve student learning and to foster equity in educational outcomes (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Tailored reform efforts, such as ECHSs, need to consider how researchers, practitioners *and* students make sense of reforms (Anderson & Larson, 2009; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Stein & Spillane, 2005). Research and leading then, requires leaders and scholars to actively construct interpretations of school improvement that fosters both staff and student learning as well as developing appropriate and supportive conditions to advance equity (Park & Datnow, 2009). Truly understanding their students' lives—inside and outside of school—is tantamount to accomplishing this task.

In sum, these implications for policy, practice and research will ultimately increase student confidence in achievement, as well as increase student freedoms to achieve (Anderson & Larson, 2009). These implications are in line with social justice approaches to education. I believe they will, along with increasing freedoms to achieve,

simultaneously work to reduce the unfreedoms and deformed choices students currently experience, and help ECHS staff understand their students' authentic lives.

Specific to this study, future research may consider further validation through increasing the sample size both in terms of interviewees and number of schools under study. Moreover, future research should consider including diverse gender and ethnic groups, as well as diverse achievement groups, and teacher perspectives.

Recall from Chapter IV, many of the girls revealed that their choice of attending TECHS was highly influenced by their negative perceptions of Central and Rockford High Schools. Future research should include a similar study in a region which houses a traditional school that is seen by the community as a "good" school, in addition to an ECHS.

And lastly, of special concern in many schools across the country are undocumented students. Hurtado, Cervantez and Eccleston (2010) noted U.S. high schools graduate approximately 65,000 undocumented students per year. Surely there are undocumented students attending ECHSs. While enrolled in ECHSs, undocumented students earn college credit just the same as students with legal residency. However, what is the point of gaining college credit if undocumented students can't assume legal employment once they graduate or are unable go on to higher education potentially without the benefit of in-state tuition costs or federal student aid? Future research should investigate the number of undocumented students obtaining college credit through ECHSs. Clearly, the desire for post-secondary education is important to undocumented students. Such data would support U.S. Senate bill S.3992, the

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (the DREAM Act) and social

justice.

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APPENDIX A

TECHS STUDENT, PARENT AND STAFF CONTRACT

This is an original contract. The highlighted areas have been changed to protect the

identity of the schools.

<div align="center">

Tambryn Early College High School
Student, Parent, and Staff Contract

</div>

Tambryn Early College High School offers a rigorous academic program within a small personalized setting. With the goal that all students attending TECHS will be successful in pre-AP/AP and dual credit courses, complete the distinguished achievement high school graduation plan, and enroll in a four-year college or university after high school graduation. To ensure these and any other goals are achieved, all stakeholders must be fully committed to the following responsibilities.

Students will:
- follow the TISD Student Code of Conduct and the community college Student Code of Conduct.
- maintain satisfactory citizenship and attendance in all classes.
- take all Pre-AP, AP and Dual Credit courses as appropriate.
- set aside time for homework every night to help ensure assignments are completed on time.
- come prepared for every class every day and turn in all assignments on time.
- conduct self in an academically professional manner by following all rules of common courtesy and demonstrating best work ethic at all times.
- **communicate with parents and staff regularly** regarding progress, goals, questions, comments, and concerns.

Parents will:
- support the efforts of their student and the efforts of staff members in the educational process.
- provide time and space for their student to complete school work at home, knowing that their student will have homework every night.
- provide or arrange for transportation to and from school when needed.

- review progress reports when they are sent home every three weeks.
- maintain accurate contact information with the school by reporting any changes in address or telephone numbers immediately.
- **communicate with students and staff regularly** regarding progress, goals, questions, comments, and concerns.

Staff members will:
- follow and enforce all TISD and community college policies.
- create school and classroom experiences that foster college readiness.
- hold all students to high standards of achievement.
- provide regular feedback on student progress to both students and parents.
- conduct self in an academically professional manner by following all rules of common courtesy and demonstrating best work ethic at all times.
- continually seek to find the best way to help each student find success at TECHS.
- **communicate with students, parents and other staff members regularly** regarding progress, goals, questions, comments, and concerns.

Student Agreement:
I want to attend TECHS and I want to succeed. I understand that I am responsible for my own success and that I must fully commit myself in order to be successful at TECHS. In order to remain at TECHS I must meet the student responsibilities outlined above.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
I have been made aware of all expectations and responsibilities and agree to comply.

Student Signature_____   **Parent Signature**_____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Individual Interview Protocol

Individual Interview

1. Gathering General Information/Tell me about yourself
    -How old are you? What Grade are you in? Do you have siblings?
    -Are you from Bryan? How long have you lived here? Are you 1st, 2nd 3rd, etc.
    generation (Were you born here? Were your parents born here? Grandparents?)
    -Has anyone else in your family gone to college? Who? Where?
    -How long have you been at TECHS?
    -What schools did you go to before you came to TECHS (large/small, any special
    programs, etc.)?

2. Thoughts about TECHS
    -Why did you decide to come to TECHS over the other high schools?
    -Is TECHS the way you thought it would be? How so?
    -Do you think your previous school experiences prepared you for TECHS? How
    so?
    -What are the really good things about TECHS? What would you like to see
    changed?
    -Do you think you will graduate from TECHS? If no, why or why not?
    -What are your favorite classes? What do you like about them?
    -What are your least favorite classes? What don't you like about them?

3. Thoughts about education and the future
    -How do you think you are doing here at TECHS in terms of grades/academic
    performance?

    -What do you want to do when you graduate?
    -Do you think TECHS is preparing you to do that? Why/why not?
    -How do you envision your life in 10 years?
    -What do you most worry about or what causes you the greatest stress?
    -How does that worry or stress affect your school experience? How do you work
    around/with the stressors?
    -Do you and your family talk about you going to college? What are those
    conversations like?

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus Group 1

Now that we have had some time to reflect on the study and the interviews, I would like to hear your opinions and experiences as a group. I will give you a few questions, but I would in general like to have a discussion with you about these things and hear what you think about them as a group. Please feel free to openly express yourself and jump in the conversation any time.

1. Tell me what it's like for you to go to school here at TECHS.
2. Do you think your experiences are similar or different than those of other kids here? How so?
3. How do you think your gender plays into your experience here?
4. What do you think about the education you are getting at TECHS?
5. Do you think you are being prepared for college? Why/why not?
6. How are you supported here at TECHS to do well in your classes?
7. Are there any differences that you have noticed between TECHS teachers and [the community college] instructors? Like what?
7. How do you think TECHS could be improved?
8. What do you think about the location of TECHS? How do you think it would be different if TECHS were located on the [the community college] or TAMU campus?

Focus Group 2 (tentative as questions may change depending on analysis of data collected from prior interviews)

As before, I will give you a few questions, but I would in general like to have a discussion with you about these things and hear what you think about them as a group. Please feel free to openly express yourself and jump in the conversation any time.

1. Tell me what has been going on since we last met as a group. Anything new? Any new experiences or thoughts on things?
2. Tell me about a positive experience you have had here at TECHS. A negative one. How do you think those experiences affected your academic performance?
3. Tell me about your sense of agency (or how you go about getting things done). How do you get things accomplished here at TECHS? How do you achieve your goals? What helps you achieve your goals? What hinders you? How so?
4. What are your goals for yourselves here at TECHS? Do you feel confident that you can attain those goals? Why/why not?

VITA

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