

“Proving People Wrong”: The Role of Peers and Resistance in Shaping Latinx Students’ Educational Aspirations

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1. Introduction

The decision to graduate high school and pursue a college degree for a better future is shared by thousands of Latinx youth. The reasons for staying in high school and planning to attend college are very complex and often involve socio-cultural expectations that may sometimes be a burden to them. However, many first generation immigrant students use these expectations to motivate them through the harsh realities of higher education. Even though Latinxs currently have more opportunities to attend four-year educational institutions and enrollment is increasing, Latinxs still lag behind other groups in attaining a four-year degree (Krogstad, 2016). It is important to understand the specific obstacles faced by Latinx high school students and to equally emphasize motivators in order to develop mechanisms within the high school setting to help students apply to college, stay in school, and ultimately graduate.

Higher levels of high school graduation, persistence through college, and earning a bachelor’s degree are key milestones which greatly influence future labor market outcomes (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Nevertheless, educational inequality persists and even increases at the post-secondary level and gaps in college attendance have continuously increased for over two decades (Charles, Roscigno & Torres, 2007). According to Census data, Latinxs make up 18% of the total U.S. population making them the largest and fastest growing minority group in the nation (“Hispanic Heritage Month,” 2018). Not surprisingly, Latinxs represent the fastest-growing student population in U.S. public schools.

One of the most important ways in which access to college for first generation students of color can be achieved is by increasing college aspirations. Yet, there are significant racial differences on the factors that influence educational aspirations. For example, Latinx students are less likely to aspire to attend a four-year institution compared to Asian American, African American, and White students (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997). Students also face a number of obstacles such as lack of information on the college process, being less prepared academically for college and being less informed about financial costs and opportunities (Rogers, 2011). Fortunately, scholars have found that students who are academically underserved benefit greatly from supplementary educational programs, extra family mentors and positive support networks (Fernandez, 2002; Gonzales, 2011). Even though there are many mediators, such as parents, peers, and teachers who have high academic expectations for students, these efforts are often amplified by after school programming that focuses exclusively on first-generation college students (Karen & Dougherty, 2005). While previous scholarship evaluates the success of academic support programs for first generation and low-income students (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2004; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2004), little is known about how these programs work and how they expose students of color to different strategies that help to empower them in their transition from high school to college. This study aims to fill that gap.

In an effort to better understand the social processes experienced by Latinx students in academic support and college readiness programs, the current study draws from 26 in-depth interviews with students who are part of Academic Success Program (ASP). This program is a federally funded after school and college readiness program in an underserved high school located in La Esperanza¹, a city where 79% of the city’s population is Hispanic/Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Using the Community Cultural Wealth paradigm (Yosso, 2005), I examine students’ experience within ASP and describe how they created motivators and relied on peer support to academically succeed.

¹ Pseudonym

2. Literature Review

Although there are many reasons as to why many Latinx students do not persist, it is also important to look at the factors that help a segment of Latinxs to graduate from high school and go on to college. The following section reviews some of the important aspects of Community Cultural Wealth, mainly resistant and social capital that is relevant to studying how Latinx students develop motivators to help them succeed. Yosso (2005) theorizes Community Cultural Wealth as a Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenge to Bourdieu's cultural capital interpretation. Rather than viewing cultural capital as controlled by the dominant class, it is viewed as the accumulation of various forms of capital that may not necessarily be valued by the privileged. These different forms of capital (navigational, social, familial, aspirational, linguistic and resistant) are part of a "dynamic process that build [s] on one another as part of community cultural wealth" (p. 77).

Using this theory, scholars are able to shift the focus away from a deficit view of communities of color and place importance on the cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by these groups. As part of the Community Cultural Wealth model, resistant capital deals with knowledge and skills learned through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality in some form or another (Yosso, 2005). The concept of resistance emphasizes that individuals in society negotiate and create meaning of their interactions with social structures. Resistance is a form of acknowledging human agency (Solórzano & Delgado 2001). Scholars agree that in the social sciences resistance strategies and actions tend to be focused mostly around working-class males and others have often been ignored. Solórzano and Delgado (2001) state that the majority of studies dealing with resistance focus on how youth engage in oppositional behavior that may reinforce inequality rather than social justice. The authors describe four forms of resistance including transformational resistance, which refers to student behavior that shows awareness of experienced oppression and a desire for social justice.

Transformational resistance can take place using many forms, including "proving people wrong" (Solórzano & Delgado, 2001; Yosso, 2000). This is explained as a process in which students "(a) confront the negative portrayals and ideas about [group], (b) are motivated by these negative images and ideas, and (c) are driven to navigate through the educational system for themselves and other [s]" (Yosso, 2000 p.109). In addition, students may be actively socialized and guided by transformational role models and mentors who provide support and inspiration. Solórzano and Delgado (2001) provide examples of transformational mentorship among students involved in extracurricular activities. In their example, students were exposed to influential adults who were crucial in raising their class, social, and cultural consciousness. This shows that social networks can be significant in exposing students to different types of resistance strategies.

Scholars call for more investigation on how minority students' relationships in academic settings, with school personnel and peers, facilitate the accumulation and transmission of resources (Ream, 2005). Adolescence marks a time when peer interaction is very important in the formation of life trajectories since young people spend nearly twice as much time with same-age peers than with family members. Peer relationships have been found to influence a student's day-to-day school behavior including how much time they spend on homework and their attitudes toward education (Ream, 2005). Peers and close friends are helpful in defining which behaviors, values and attitudes are to be embraced or rejected (Vaquera, 2009).

Those interested in studying the underachievement of racial and ethnic groups have often used the theory of social capital as an explanation (Ream, 2005; Kao & Thompson, 2003). This view suggests that some groups may lack potential resources embedded in social networks, which can then be converted into other forms of capital, such as human and material capital (Ream, 2005). For example, peer networks and access to community resources may be an important form of social capital that helps explain educational outcomes including school completion and pursuing a college degree (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Yosso, 2005). In addition, it is argued that previous studies dealing with social capital emphasize inequality and have not offered insight on ways individuals actually use social capital and convert it to educational advantages (Harper, 2008). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) provide an example in their study of African American college students who created *counterspaces* which served to foster learning, challenge deficit notions, and develop a supportive environment among peers and faculty. There are a number of places where students may be able to tap into resources, however this present study will focus mainly on the ways in which ASP allows students to access, develop, and experience social support through peers in the program.

My research contributes to the findings above in three ways. First, I am focusing on students who belong to an academic support group as a way to better comprehend how their aspirations are shaped in those specific types of public spaces, specifically students of color who are often marginalized in academic institutional settings. Even though there have been numerous studies done in school settings, scholars call for deeper understanding of how these social processes are used in other public spaces such as community groups and college preparation programs (Villalpando & Solórzano,

2004; Lopez, 2003). Second, instead of attempting to explain whether or not these programs work, I'm interested in studying how this specific model of academic support shapes the experiences of students. Third, I'll show how ASP is an example of a counterspace where Latinx high school students learn and employ two forms of capital, resistant and social, by transforming often seen "negative" experiences into positive motivators and relying on their peers for support. These findings are important because they reinforce the fact that young people's aspirations towards higher education are shaped and transformed not only at home and at school, but also at a community level.

3. Method

This study used participant observation and 26 in-depth interviews with high school and college students as a way of collecting data. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe that participant observation is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings. The primary research site where over 150 hours of observation were conducted was Academic Success Program (ASP) which is one of many federally funded programs in a large metropolitan area in the Northeast United States. I was referred to the program at La Esperanza by a former colleague and met with the program director to establish my role as a graduate student volunteer. I submitted a research proposal along with parental permission forms, references, and information regarding my IRB approval. I also offered information sessions with parents and caregivers to inform them of the study's goals and my role in the program. The program staff was essential to my being able to meet students and parents, attend different classes, workshops, share meals with students and staff in the cafeteria, and even attend their annual awards ceremony. By using participant observation in addition to interviewing, I was able to become familiar with daily student routines and interactions with teachers, peer mentors, and other program participants.

All students in the program attended a large urban high school in La Esperanza, a city where only about 10% of residents over 25 have a Bachelor's degree and around 60% have completed high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). La Esperanza has the lowest per capita income (\$18,069) in a state where the average reported per capita income is about \$39,913 (US Census, 2018). To apply to the program, students must show that they are low income or/and first generation students between thirteen and nineteen years of age. Overall, the program has served around 300 high school students in the community since 1999 and has an 80% retention rate. Around 99% of the program graduates earn their high school diploma. During the last 10-year period the program has had a 95% college matriculation rate for program graduates.

During a few weeks in the summer, ASP participants live in a predominantly white university campus where they are able to experience being a college student. They eat in the university cafeteria, take college courses, and are expected to adhere by University rules and regulations. It is expected that students participate in over one hundred hours of formal instruction in mathematics, literature and composition, foreign language, science and English as a Second Language instruction (if needed). There are also weekly workshops that cover different topics such as goal setting, college planning, public speaking, social etiquette, time management, and leadership.

Interviews, lasting between one to two hours, were conducted with 41 participants as part of a larger study. This paper focuses on a total of 26 participants, of which 23 were 11th and 12th graders enrolled in ASP. One additional interview was completed with a college bound high school graduate and two with college students. Ten participants were men and sixteen were women. Participants ranged in age between sixteen to twenty-one years old. In terms of ethnicity, all of them except for four women (two whose parents were from Puerto Rico, one from Venezuela and one Guatemalan) and two men (one from St. Lucia and the other from Puerto Rico) were either second generation Dominican or immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Twenty-three participants identified as first-generation college students. All the students were asked to talk about their academic and career goals, their definition of success, academic motivations, and their experiences in high school and in the program. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and reviewed in three different rounds. Transcripts were coded first using a descriptive two to three-word phrase, which developed into analytic codes by the third round. Analytical memos were drafted to describe, explain, and connect patterns in the data.

4. Findings

In order to find examples of how students learn to use resistant and social capital at ASP and how they see this process as beneficial, I focused on questions dealing with what motivates students to attend college, why they believe ASP is important, and how they cope with challenges. Two themes evolved: *defying expectations and peers as motivators*. Participants discussed constantly having to "prove people wrong", which I refer to as defying expectations. They also shared ways in which their friends, and at times ASP staff, serve as a constant support network to help them cope and also access resources. These themes, discussed in more detail in this section, help to better comprehend how this segment of Latinx high school students become inspired and remain determined to attend college.

4.1 Defying Expectations

While all participants had similar reasons why they believed college was important and remained motivated through their family and peers to keep their eyes on the goal, thirteen of the respondents mentioned that one of the motivations to remain in high school, graduate, and attend college in the future was to “prove people wrong.” Students provided examples of this theme when interacting with authority figures in their high schools, such as teachers, and also their peers. For example, Kiki a Dominican immigrant who had just completed her junior year mentions: One of my teachers... said ‘you aren’t going to make it’. I said ‘listen, please, I will make it. I just don’t feel like doing your work, that’s it’. But I told him, I will do it and that I will make it, I proved it to him...I saw him the next year and he asked ‘how are you doing?’ and I said ‘I’m doing my work Mr., I’m proving you wrong!’

Expressing that she just didn’t “feel” like doing the teacher’s assigned work is an example of oppositional behavior. This type of oppositional behavior which can spark resistant behavior has been found to have a positive effect on student persistence (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). For example, when asked about why college was important, Jenny, a sixteen-year old junior, shares: “I think it’s important because ...to me it’s a chance to prove everybody wrong, make it somewhere in life and make people proud, especially my mom... I like to be a good student. I am friendly, I like to get to know my teachers and stuff like that...but there are some teachers that doubt my abilities due to the fact that I had other disabled brothers and stuff like that.”

Jenny acknowledges that she has qualities that would classify her as a “good student” but that there are some teachers that doubt her abilities and points out that those are the ones she wants to prove wrong. Opportunities to engage in resistant behavior by way of interacting with teachers and other students were common. Barbara, a 2nd generation Dominican and Puerto Rican college student, attended a predominantly white Catholic high school for one academic year. Due to the number of micro aggressions she experienced during her time there, her mom decided to pull her out of the school and enroll her in public school. She shares one of the negative interactions between her and a teacher: “I was sitting next to a girl who was actually doing well in that math class and she was helping me with a problem and for some reason she cracked a joke and I started laughing. The teacher comes right there and blames it on me and says ‘I have one student who’s not going to do anything with [her] life; I don’t want you to be a part of that.’ Talking to the girl about me, I know it was about me. Trying to say she’s not going anywhere so do not follow her footsteps.”

This particular incident, although it happened more than four years ago, was still fresh in Barbara’s mind as she became visibly upset when she described it. Sadly, there were many other stories similar to hers. For others, like Juli, these interactions also happened outside of school with peers. Juli, a recent high school graduate, describes one of her dealings with a White student at an engineering conference: “We were the only Hispanics in the room and we were just looked at and stared down... I guess they have their impressions like ‘kids from [La Esperanza] oh, okay?!’ This [white] girl, actually, I was walking by... Her purse was behind because it was one of those shoulder sling backs, and when I walked by, she took that thing and hugged it. I was like ‘oh, calm down! I have my own purse,’ I’m not that type.”

These are examples of a racial(izing) interactions that shape students’ perspectives not only on their ethnicity but also on their higher education outlooks (Lopez, 2003). Barbara felt labeled as a deviant due to her race and would “act out” as a form of oppositional behavior. Juli had academically earned her right to be present at a well-regarded student engineering conference, and yet this lived experience reminded her of the way in which outsiders see Latinxs from her city. While these negative interactions between teachers and students limit mobility for the majority of students, the revealing part about using these incidents as an example of defying expectations is that Barbara, along with other students, provided these negative (often racially discriminatory) episodes as reasons and motivations to attend college rather than obstacles or challenges. These situations provided the opportunity for each student to acknowledge their own status as Latinx students from La Esperanza.

As mentioned, “proving people wrong” as a transformational resistance mechanism is a process that entails confronting negative ideas about their ethnic and/or racial portrayal, becoming motivated by it and learning to navigate through it (Yosso, 2000). Many participants had negative interactions with teachers, staff, and other peers but did not know how to make sense of them. Academic Support Program helped to facilitate that process since program staff and administrators were well aware of the perception that outsiders have regarding the public school system in La Esperanza and the stereotypes that follow it. They acknowledge and play into the role of reminding students that they have to “prove people wrong.” This phrase represented a resistance strategy which twenty-one respondents used repeatedly throughout interviews. My findings show that one way in which students were taught and encouraged to “prove people wrong” was through the speaker series which featured alums and people from the community who graduated from La Esperanza, obtained a college degree, and were employed. Speakers validated many of the frustrations and hurdles that students faced as part of that high school and shared anecdotes of negative interactions with teachers and other staff.

For example, Darius an ASP alum and an Ivy League university graduate shared that he wanted to give up every day but remembered that he needed to “prove people wrong.” He is considered a successful teacher and role model who volunteers routinely with the program and would be considered an example of a transformational role model (Solórzano & Delgado, 2001).

4.2 Peers as Motivators

Eighteen of the respondents mentioned their friends as one of the motivations to not only continue taking part in ASP but to also go on to college. Students recalled hanging out with the “wrong” crowd usually during the 9th and 10th grade and then making friends with other Latinx students who had the same goals as they did. These goals included doing better in school, not getting into trouble, and attending college. While parents vocalize their expectations and are helpful in shaping students’ future goals, it is the shared experience among friends that provides the everyday support, motivation, guidance, and encouragement. ASP plays a crucial role in fostering these shared experiences in a safe place away from home.

Stanton-Salazar (2004) notes that connections to school administrators, faculty, and peers help shape desired outcomes. While some school staff (such as teachers and guidance counselors) may serve as gatekeepers, peers are key in mediating access to resources such as information networks and social relationships that lead to success (Stanton-Salazar, 2004; Harper, 2008). About one in three participants indicated having their best friend (s) in the program and credited them for helping them join the program. Nicole, a senior born in New York to Dominican parents, shares how she found out about ASP: “My best friend was in ASP since the 8th grade... we would constantly be like ‘C’mon let’s go hang out!’ and she’d be like ‘no, I have to go to my program’. She would constantly dedicate herself to her program. So I was like, I wonder about this program... This was the middle of my freshmen year. She got me an application, I filled it out, I came and talked to [program director] and I fell in love with it. I’m here to this day.”

Nicole’s best friend encouraged her to apply to ASP and they motivated each other to do well in school. This theme carried through college as well, Teresa a twenty-one-year-old college junior says: “That person you interviewed she’s my best friend. I don’t know we just want to have a better future, like all of us because if you go to college it’s for that most of the time. Yeah we motivate each other; sometimes we take like the same classes because we are the same year. Sometimes we compete with each other to see who has the highest grade; we always get the same grade. It’s good to do competition.”

Teresa and her best friend Chantel attended the same high school and college. Chantel also helped Teresa get a peer mentor position at ASP during one summer. Many of the friendships that are formed and fostered at ASP extend beyond high school, this is important in the building and reproduction of social networks and other forms of capital. Other students also noted the different types of friendships present at school versus at ASP, Smyrten notes “My friends they don’t push me to do anything, I do actually have friends that motivate me because I am a procrastinator you know like most students are. They push me like ‘oh do your homework!’... Well usually the friends that would tell me that are from ASP, there are two or three that are just from school that tell me to do well.” Anabel distinguishes her friendships before joining ASP: “Well my friends before, I mean I could relate to them because they all came from a home that was going through a lot of things and we all kind of connected. They were just like me they didn’t want an education they just did bad things. Actually one of my friends [who was] with me since eighth grade [and I] decided that we need to change our lives. The friends that I have *now* are different, they are all going to college, they are all doing something in their life.”

Nicole, Teresa, Smyrten, and Anabel all exhibit ways in which friends have exposed them to new resources including joining ASP and attaining employment. These opportunities have also been provided through connections with the ASP director and a few teachers at the high school. These adults work together to inform students about college visits, extra tutoring, employment opportunities, and scholarships. They also serve as advocates for the students in dealing with enrollment into classes, and other family issues. Similar to students in Harper’s (2008) study, ASP students are routinely “activating social capital” to survive day to day academic and personal struggles which may cause distractions from attaining their goals.

In a study conducted with 112 first semester Latinx college students, Bordes and Arredondo (2005) found that the students’ perception of being mentored and actually having a mentor were directly related to positive outlooks of their college experience and persistence. Academic Success Program highly encourages teamwork and peer mentoring. This is done in two ways: activities that target students in the same grade and the hiring of college peer mentors (role models). One of the common activities which students attended was after school homework time and tutoring. Students are grouped together by whether they are working on the same subject and also by their grade. This is true especially for upperclassmen enrolled in honors or Advanced Placement courses, who always sat together and sometimes would offer to help the younger students.

Participants consider this time as one of the benefits of being in the program, as Jeremy explains: “I tell them [other classmates] it’s fun, you’re basically doing your homework with your friends, and on top of that you are getting paid for that too!” After school time at ASP not only helps students with completing homework but also helps them bond with each other. It is another example of a social and academic counterspace where they can openly talk about their challenges and goals. Most importantly, it provides an opportunity for students to share with each other valued knowledge such as academic struggles, interactions and experiences with teachers/staff, and most importantly strategies for success. Solangelis, a recently arrived Venezuelan high school junior, describes one of the many reasons why she appreciates attending ASP afterschool: “Sometimes when I don’t want to do stuff like that [homework] I feel down and I don’t want to do anything most of the time I talk to my friend because I feel like weird talking to my dad sometimes because he doesn’t know anything about that and he’s going to be like, ‘do it!’ But that’s not going to help me, so my friends are who motivate me-so homework, we do it together.”

For Solangelis, the time she spends in ASP doing homework with her friends is a valued and cherished time away from her adult-like responsibilities and reality at home. She credits ASP with helping her become more independent and allowing her to spend time with young people who have the same goals as she does “I have my father and all, but I spend most of my days with my friends. I get home at six in the evening. I spend my time there [ASP] with my friends and we do our homework and prepare ourselves, a little more every day.”

The college peer mentors who are hired every year are also an important piece to the program. Many of the current high school students openly talk about coming back when they are in college and being hired in that position. One of the mentors’ main responsibilities is to live in the residence halls with the students and help them get a preview of what to expect in college. Exposing high school students to current college students who graduated from the same high school and are ASP alumni is one of the most important ways in which ASP successfully incorporates what Barajas and Pierce (2001) call “cultural translators.” In addition, peer mentors serve as transformational role models (Solórzano & Delgado 2001) in designing activities that allow students to develop different strategies to deal with difficult situations they may encounter in predominantly white higher education institutions.

5. Conclusion

The challenges that Latinx first generation college students face are widely shared by other minority students. However, it is critical to deepen our understanding of how to better serve and provide opportunities to this population given the low college graduation rates among Latinxs. Using participant observation and in depth interviews, I conducted research at an academic support group to better understand the relationship between belonging in ASP and motivations to go to college. My findings provide details as to how this group of Latinx students used resources provided by ASP to develop resistant strategies and social capital to academically succeed in high school and attend college.

I demonstrate how ASP serves as a counterspace where students are able to hear stories from people who have shared backgrounds and where they can feel like their stories are validated. I discuss ways in which they use resistant strategies and peers to shape their academic goals. My findings provide further evidence that peers are an integral part of academic success, goal setting, and overall achievement. One important implication is for higher educational institutions to create cohort models from these programs when recruiting and enrolling prospective students from underserved cities and towns.

The young men and women interviewed in this study are part of a small segment of students who experience some advantages within the high school setting through their social network built through ASP. Another important advantage is that all students were legal residents of the United States. Indeed, the issue of access should be considered in future research with the goal to provide options for programming that could benefit students with different legal status. Although this study focuses on a small segment of high achieving, low income, Latinxs students as part of one program, it sheds light on the value of creating and sustaining community institutions that facilitate educational information. Similar to findings by Zhou and Kim (2006) on educational achievement in Chinese and Korean immigrant communities, organizations like ASP are critical in providing sources of social capital and knowledge that are conducive to educational success. Therefore, investing in college preparatory and afterschool programs in predominantly low income communities is crucial. These programs can provide a lifeline to countless students and families who need the extra support in accessing post-secondary opportunities.

6. References

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