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College for All: Chicana/o and Latina/o Empowerment Agents Working to Increase Latina/o Students' College-Going Opportunities

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Abstract

This one-year qualitative study examined the ways in which five Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers committed to social justice perceived their roles in their college-going work with Latina/o students, as well as the challenges threatening their efforts with students. Building on Stanton-Salazar's (2011) concept of *empowerment social capital*, the findings showed that these teachers perceived college access as an equity issue, challenging dominant narratives of tracking and deficit-thinking in their college-going practices. Despite their ongoing and persistent commitments, the findings also revealed various challenges to these teachers' work with students, such as the lack of schooling funding and college-going resources and a struggle to maintain a work-life balance. The results of this study have implications for school leadership and the reconceptualization of the teacher role in Latina/o students' college-going processes.

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Introduction

For many working-class Latina/o youth and their families, a college education is viewed as essential to socio-economic mobility and increased life opportunities (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Marina & Holmes, 2009). Latinas/os have also used their education to organize and generate social movements, as they did through the student walkouts of the Chicana/o Movement in the late 1960's, which was largely organized by college students and centered around social and educational justice (Muñoz, 1989; Urrieta, 2004). This type of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), or the belief and hope in future possibilities, however, is often challenged by the negative social and schooling realities facing Latina/o students' access to higher education. Despite recent gains, Latina/o students' college attainment rates remain some of the lowest for all ethnic groups in the United States (Gándara, 2010; Pérez Huber, Huidor, Malagón, Sánchez, & Solórzano, 2006; Nuñez & Kim, 2012). While raising the college attainment of Latina/o students is of utmost importance, due to them becoming over half of the overall college-age population over the next decade (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Nuñez & Kim, 2012; Pérez Huber et al., 2006) and that a college degree has increasingly become a necessary credential in a changing workforce (Pearl, 2011), many working-class Latina/o youth attend schools that socially reproduce larger social and economic disparities (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For example, Latina/o students often attend under-resourced, overcrowded schools that limit their college-going resources and opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McDonough, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

One major obstacle to working-class Latina/o students' college-going opportunities are the lowered expectations they often face from adults in schools and classrooms. Indeed, Latina/o students are more likely to have teachers who hold lowered academic expectations and limited perceptions of their academic potential than do White students (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Landsman, 2004; Yosso, 2005). These types of cultural deficit frameworks, that place the blame of underperformance on families and students of color, rather than on larger systemic inequities and racism, result in teachers' deficit perceptions and lowered expectations of students of color and can have negative effects on student-teacher relationships, students' self-perceptions regarding their own academic potential, and academic outcomes (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016; Pérez Huber et al., 2006). A teacher's expectations of students can also influence what types of college-going information or resources teachers expose their students to (Monkman, Ronald &

Theramene, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), as well as the type of curriculum and rigor introduced in the classroom (Liou & Rojas, 2016).

Indeed, research points to the potential benefits of teachers acting as support systems for Latina/o students' college-going possibilities, particularly in students' development of resources and networks, or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011; Woolley, 2009; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). School-based resources and networks focused on college-going can be especially beneficial for working-class Latina/o students who rely heavily on the adults at their school sites as major sources of college-going information (Enriquez, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). However, while social capital has been found to have a positive impact on Latina/o students' college-going opportunities, it has often been framed as a form of status attainment, void of a larger discussion on race and racism and critique of social and educational inequity (Welton & Martinez, 2014; Yosso, 2005). An exploration of social capital development through a critical framework that is anti-racist and aligned to social justice ideologies is warranted. Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that by extending their efforts beyond the provision of college support or resources to simultaneously support students' challenging of racist structures impeding their success, educators can help students develop *empowerment social capital*, or "those resources and forms of institutional support which are embedded in 'connections' or relationships with high-status, resourceful, institutional agents oriented to go counter to the system" (p. 1086). In these efforts, teachers can challenge deficit-ridden dominant narratives of Latina/o student underachievement (Gándara, 2010; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and support the development of their students' agency in countering larger societal and educational inequities (Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Monkman et al., 2005; Nieto, 2005; Rodriguez, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Despite the potential role and impact of the classroom teacher in Latina/o students' college-going opportunities, especially those committed to social justice, this remains an area that has been largely under-researched (Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). More specifically, there is also a lack of research on Latina/o teachers engaged in this type of work with Latina/o students, which is important as teachers of color can potentially serve as role-models and have been shown to hold high expectations of students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). This study, then, hopes to explore the dispositions, perceived practices, and experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o educators working to support Latina/o students' college

aspirations in anti-deficit ways, from their own voices. To this end, the study is guided by the following two questions:

1. How do Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers committed to social justice perceive their college-going roles, expectations, and commitments with their Latina/o students?
2. What do Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers committed to social justice perceive to be the challenges to their college-going work with Latina/o students?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Latina/o Students and their College-Going Opportunities

The schooling disparities of Latina/o youth have been largely influenced by racist educational policies and practices, such as school segregation (both de jure and de facto), anti-immigrant policies, and anti-bilingual education initiatives (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Valencia, 2011). These and other oppressive societal and schooling inequities have limited students' opportunities for higher education, what Darling-Hammond (2010) refers to as the "educational opportunity gap." Indeed, Latina/o students are more likely to attend overcrowded schools with high student-to-counselor ratios (McDonough, 2005), have less access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and be encouraged to take the SAT exam at lower rates (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002) than White students, all of which limit their opportunities for four-year college access. In addition, academic tracking that often stratifies students by ability and educational goals delineates college-going opportunities and has been found to have a negative impact on Latina/o students' educational opportunities (Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013). Despite these realities, the research shows that college-going resources and knowledge remain critical for students of color, as it not only prepares them for college but can also play a factor in the development of their college-going identity (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Welton & Martinez, 2013). The role of the classroom teacher as a support system for students' college-going process, then, is of importance to study (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

Chicana/o and Latina/o Teachers

With the majority of teachers in the country being English-monolingual White middle-class females (Berta-Avila 2004; Landsman & Lewis 2006; Matias & Liou, 2015), Latina/o students

are seldom privy to having teachers who look like them or who may have an intricate understanding of their lives and communities (Irizarry, 2007). The lack of Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers, in contrast to the growing percentage of Latina/o students in the country, can be attributed to the various systemic challenges to Latina/o college access and post-Bachelor's education pipeline (Ocasio, 2014). For those Chicana/o and Latina/o who do become teachers, poor working conditions can contribute to their struggle for sustainability. A recent report by the Education Trust (2018) reported that only 8% of the entire teaching workforce in the U.S. are Latina/o, with Latina/o educators leaving the profession at higher rates than others due to stereotyping, discrimination, and their additional labor, such as acting as translators, not being valued when considered for promotion opportunities.

Despite these realities, research points to the positive impact that Latina/o teachers can have on their Latina/o students, one of which includes the potential of acting as role-models of Latina/o college attainment for their students (Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villareal, 2007). Latina/o teachers have also been found to have a positive influence on Latina/o students' academic achievement by holding students to higher academic expectations (Busto et al., 2007; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012), and possessing anti-deficit views that value students' communities and funds of knowledge (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). In addition, Latina/o teachers have been found to perceive a shared responsibility for the social and academic success of their Latina/o students and a willingness to integrate students' histories and lived experiences in the curriculum (Berta-Avila, 2004). In fact, the research on teachers of color underscores that they may often list their connections to communities of color and their commitment to social justice as key motivators for becoming educators and working with students in anti-racist ways (Kohli & Pizzarro, 2016; Olsen, 2008; Rojas, 2014).

Social Justice Teaching

While there are numerous benefits to increasing the number of Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers, as well as to working with Latina/o students to increase their college-going opportunities, the various social and educational inequities that limit Latina/o students' overall academic and life outcomes warrant teachers who also hold social justice commitments and view education as an equity issue. A study by Urrieta (2004) on activist Chicana/o teachers found them to be committed to working alongside Latina/o students and their communities in counter-

hegemonic ways to advance social justice, largely in part due to their own histories and political identities. Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers committed to social justice can enact the roles of “change agents,” and work alongside Latina/o students and families to challenge educational injustices and increase students’ academic outcomes (Berta-Avila, 2004).

Others have also written about the role of teachers, whether they be Latina/o or not, in working with students of color to counter racism and inequity in and out of the classroom. Matias and Liou (2015) examined the potential role of teachers as *critical race teacher activists* and described a teaching pedagogy that centers countering racism in pedagogical practice, as well as students’ experiences and lived histories. Other researchers have also linked effective social justice teaching practices to holding high academic expectations of students (Nieto, 2005; Rojas & Liou, 2017), demonstrating caring for youth (Antrop-González & De Jesus, 2006; Rojas & Liou, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999), being unafraid to break rules and question systems at the school and policy level (Nieto, 2005; Rojas, 2014; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), and countering dominant deficit narratives of communities of color (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). Teachers with a social justice disposition have also been found to enact high expectations of Latina/o students through caring teacher-student relationships, incorporating students’ knowledge-bases, redefining rigor as including critical consciousness, and emphasizing empowering curriculum that centers the voices and experiences of Latina/o youth (Liou & Rojas, 2016).

Empowerment Social Capital and the Role of Empowerment Agents in Latina/o Students’ College-Going Opportunities

The existence of resource-generating networks and social capital focused on college-going has been found to have a significant positive effect on students of color’ college enrollment (McDonough, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Woolley, 2009). Within the schooling context, educators can act as *institutional agents* and take on many roles in their work with Latina/o students for college attainment, such as exposing students to important college-going information, expanding students’ access to other resource-generating adults and networks, and coordinating services to meet the needs of their students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). In addition to working directly with Latina/o students on college-specific items, such as personal statements or college and scholarship applications, teachers can also act as advocates for their Latina/o students and work alongside students for social justice and educational equity, taking on

the role of *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In the empowerment social capital framework, Stanton-Salazar (2011) highlights the importance of expanding students' resources and networks required for institutional access and opportunity, while simultaneously working with students and communities to counter and dismantle the oppressive structures preventing Latina/o students' academic and personal success. These types of teachers move to counter-stratify schooling spaces and help students 'decode the system' (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) by working to develop their students' critical consciousness and agency within educational systems.

These types of equity-focused student-teacher relationships can provide "countervailing forces and interventions" against the social reproduction that permeates the schooling system (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). Students can work with empowerment agents, then, to continuously challenge educational and social injustices (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), whether a teacher can be determined to act as an empowerment agent is dependent on the following descriptors: (1) The extent to which they are aware of the societal and schooling structural forces that challenge the success of working-class students; (2) The extent of their critical awareness in understanding that their students' success is dependent on them receiving institutional support; (3) Their willingness to advocate for all students and challenge the established rules of social structure; (4) Their identity and their ideological commitment to advocating for their students and in providing them with institutional support; and (5) Their willingness to be recognized as student advocates by the larger community.

Methodology

Context and Participants

The data for this study was drawn from a larger qualitative interview study examining the roles and practices of high school classroom teachers working with Latina/o students for college access in a large urban school district in Southern California. This article discusses the roles and practices of five of those teachers, all self-identified as either Chicana/o or Latina/o and exhibiting characteristics of empowerment agents, as determined by the literature (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). To participate in the study, the teachers had to be: (1) Self-identified as either Chicana/o or Latina/o; (2) Working primarily with Latina/o students; (3) Having taught for a minimum of three years; (4) Holding a reputation for having positive relationships with their students and integrating

college-focused curriculum and practices, as determined by either the principal and/or counselor at their school; and (5) Exhibiting characteristics of empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

At the time of the study, all five teachers (Atticus, Tonatiuh, Maricela, Indiana, and Ana) taught in hyper-segregated high schools (with over 90% of the student population being working-class Latina/o youth) and were working in a similar geographical area that, despite facing serious socio-economic struggles, had a strong sense of community and a deep history of political resistance against social and educational inequities. All five of the teachers incorporated a college-going focus in their teaching, with their skillsets including (but not limited to): providing direct support to students in completing their college and scholarship applications, developing and implementing narrative writing assignments aligned to students' college personal statements, and other college-focused activities. For example, the teachers in the study created opportunities for their Latina/o students to conduct college-research projects, attend college field trips, and listen to panels of Latina/o college students discuss their experiences in higher education.

In addition to their college-focused work, all five of the teachers expressed a strong commitment to social justice in their work with students. Some of their pedagogical practices included centering people' of color experiences and voices in the curriculum through examining issues of race, class, gender, and other intersectionalities across readings, films, art and other mediums. Several of the teachers also engaged in pedagogical practices such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), where students worked together to find solutions to societal and schooling problems, or sponsoring student clubs that had explicit political focus. For example, one of the teachers worked with students around the issues of policing and criminalization of students at their campus. Table 1 highlights some general information of the participating teachers.

Table 1

Participating Teachers' General Information

Teacher Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity (self-reported)	Years Teaching	School Name	Content Area
Atticus	M	Mexican-American/White	8	Esperanza High School	English
Tonatiuh	M	Chicano	15	Esperanza High School	History
Maricela	F	Latina	9	Emiliano Zapata High School	History
Indiana	M	Latino	15	Esperanza High School	English
Ana	F	Chicana	13	Frida Kahlo High School	English

Methods

The teachers in this study were purposefully recruited (Clark & Creswell, 2010) and screened using a *two-phase approach* (Yin, 2014), which consisted of: (1) Having the participants be recommended by a principal or counselor at their school based on set criteria (previous outlined); and (2) Screened by the researcher through phone or email to confirm that they met the set criteria. The data collection spanned one academic year and consisted of a questionnaire, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each participant, document collection (i.e., teachers' syllabi, photographs of classroom, samples of student work, log of activities with students, etc.), and teacher journaling (three journal prompts per teacher) where the teachers were provided additional space for self-reflection pertaining to their pedagogical practices.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process consisted of: (1) preparing the data; (2) exploring and coding the data; (3) developing description and themes; and (4) validating the findings (Clark & Creswell,

2010). After all the data were transcribed, the data was analyzed for emerging codes, patterns, and themes (Clark & Creswell, 2010). The process was both inductive and deductive, using Stanton-Salazar's (2011) *empowerment social capital* construct as an analytical lens. Several measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, including engaging participants in member-checking of their transcripts and conducting peer-review with a doctoral inquiry group to check for the reliability of emergent patterns and themes (Shenton, 2004).

Findings

College-Going Expectations of Latina/o Students as an Equity Issue

The findings suggest that teachers in this study had a strong commitment to working with Latina/o students in anti-racist ways that challenged deficit perceptions of students' academic potential, citing their college-going efforts as central to their perceived roles. For the teachers in this study, working to increase students' college-going opportunities proved to be an equity issue and part of their social justice commitments. For example, Tonatiuh, a Chicano history teacher in his 15th year of teaching, described his desire to increase the number of Latina/o students going to college as aligned to educational justice and equity. He shared,

I always tell people that I got into teaching, not necessarily because I felt like, 'Wow, I'm going to love developing lessons and that I fell in love with pedagogical theories' or anything like that. I came to it more as kind of part of that desire to...I need to go where I see that the problem is. For me, educational and social injustice was a big thing. So, I saw it as a way where I could maybe hopefully directly have some impact, like firsthand impact...I'm going to be a model of success for my students. I'm from where they're from. I come from the same family. My parents are identical to their parents. I saw that as a solution. If we could just convince a bunch of young Chicanos and Chicanas to come to the barrio and teach, things would change.

For Tonatiuh, education was a possible medium for freedom, viewing his teacher role as one responsible for working with students for social justice. He shared that his commitment to educational equity, and to holding students to higher expectations, was a motivating factor in his decision to enter the teaching profession and to work with primarily Latina/o youth. In addition,

Tonatiuh believed that his experiences having grown up in the same community as his students, from the 'same family,' would have a positive impact on them and his willingness to act as a Chicano college-going role model for his Latina/o students was evident. As an empowerment agent, Tonatiuh emphasized pedagogical practices that included integrating college-focused assignments into his curriculum, having community professionals and college students speak to his students, sponsoring a student activist group on campus, and centering the experiences and voices of marginalized groups in his curriculum. According to his 12th grade Economics syllabus, he also required his 12th grade students to complete a college application and apply for financial aid and internships as part of their Economics grade.

Similarly, Maricela, a history teacher in her ninth year of teaching, viewed holding college-going expectations of Latina/o students as an equity issue. In her interview, Maricela shared that she would speak to her Latina/o students about the structural barriers to their college-going opportunities when reviewing the Latina/o educational pipeline statistics, such as oppressive educational policies and discriminatory practices, and emphasize the importance of countering deficit perspectives that held Latina/o students to lowered expectations. Her students then engaged in critical dialogue where they explored their own educational goals and aspirations, prior to her having the college counselor come in with additional information. It was important, as Maricela stated, to “[Make] kids understand that college is a possibility and that they could definitely go to college no matter their legal status, no matter their socioeconomic status, no matter their race.” Like Tonatiuh, Maricela also believed in the importance of having a shared background to that of her Latina/o students. She shared,

When I was in college and I started to take classes in education, I think that definitely opened my eyes of the need of teachers of color, especially in communities of need. I grew up in [community of color] and I remember having teachers that did not look like me and definitely the few that I did have, I felt had a big impact in my life...The impact that they had...I wanted to do something to that extent. Like, I wanted to make an impact to students and see the importance of finishing high school and pursuing college or anything else of their choice, but giving kids the options.

Maricela reflected on the important role that teachers of color had on her own schooling experiences and cited them as influential in her own college-going aspirations. In turn, she perceived her own college-focused efforts as central to her teacher role. Like Tonatiuh, she held high educational expectations of her Latina/o students, debunking the dominant deficit narratives that often plague Latina/o students.

Interestingly, in their discussions regarding their college-going commitments with Latina/o students, several of the teachers included language that likened their work as aligned to a larger fight for social justice, thus demonstrating their roles as empowerment agents in their efforts to both increase students' college resources and critical consciousness and agency. For example, when describing why he integrated a college-going environment in his pedagogy, Atticus, an English teacher, shared,

I'm going to quote a line from *Battletech*, 'information is ammunition'. So you can't be duped if you understand the way things are going on. You can't be tricked. You can't be lied to. You can't be used. You can't be exploited, and I think that's the point of education, at least for my people, and when I say my people I mean both my class and my race and the different parts.

Atticus perceived the role of education as part of a larger battle for class and racial equity. In addition to preparing his students for college by having them conduct research on colleges and visit several universities, as reported in his journals, he also emphasized curriculum that focused on challenging socio-economic injustice and developing students' critical consciousness. His curricular units focused on examining issues of privilege through literature, with one unit culminating in having students perform original poetry sharing counter-stories, as well as their aspirations for their future in a community space.

Other teachers also used war-like terminology in their descriptions of their teacher roles and commitments. Indiana, an English teacher, shared that his decision to teach in his community was due in large part because he felt his students needed a Latino male role model of college attainment, adding, "If this was a war, I want to be right there at the frontline." Tonatiuh described his motivation to work to empower youth as "fe[eling] like a soldier, with boots on the ground."

Countering Narratives of Deficit Thinking and Tracking and Re[conceptualizing] College-Going

The teachers in this study demonstrated an awareness of the ways in which schooling structures and teachers' expectations reproduced deficit conceptions of Latina/o students based on deterministic systems such as tracking. According to the data from the interviews and journals, they perceived themselves as challenging these dominant deficit narratives that limited many of their Latina/o students' academic possibilities. Ana, a Chicana English teacher in the study who had attended a private Catholic high school in her community emphasizing college for all students, reflected on realizing early on that many of her Latina/o friends in her neighborhood who attended the public high school had not received the same college-going information, resources, and opportunities and were labeled as non-college going:

I remember in the ninth and tenth grade when I was taking confirmation classes, I met a lot of kids in my neighborhood who were going to the public school in the area, and a lot of them didn't graduate. They didn't talk about college. I felt like it wasn't fair. I knew that they were intelligent. I knew that would be a road that would lead them to more opportunities. Being a tenth grader and seeing, oh, like your teachers suck. They are not giving you that option. I felt like if I taught in public schools I could do that for kids. I could show them that they could have more doors open to them if they chose like the path of education like my family had, like I had.

Rather than succumbing to deficit narratives, Ana demonstrated an awareness of the stratifying systematic racism that Latina/o students faced in schooling and the lowering of academic expectations that limited their educational pathways and life opportunities. For Ana, witnessing these types of educational injustices was influential in her decision-making in becoming a teacher, and she worked with students to create counter-narratives of high expectations. In her practice, Ana emphasized narrative writing that validated and centered on students' lived experiences and knowledge, as well as integrated activities that had all of her students reflecting and planning for their plans after high school.

Other teachers in the study also emphasized the importance of a college-going environment for all students, not just those with the highest grades or tests scores, challenging

traditional and narrowed conceptions of college-readiness which is often measured by test scores like the SAT or ACT (Maruyama, 2012). In her journal, Maricela reflected, “I have really high expectations for all of my students. Really high, and not just for the [Advanced Placement] AP classes, but my regular classes too. I think that my number one job is to be a teacher and to get them ready for college or whatever they’re going to do after high school.” Similarly, in his interview, Tonatiuh critiqued tracking Latina/o students along the lines of those who took Advanced Placement courses and those who did not, citing the problematic nature of teachers’ lowered expectations limiting students’ opportunities for the future. Tonatiuh shared,

I think it's still the case where teachers are looking at certain kids and they're saying, 'Well, let me take my class [to college field trips] that has a lot of honors kids in it' or 'Let me take my AP students, but I'm not going to take this other class because it'll probably be a waste of money or a waste of time.' Again, we need to change the institution behind that and our thinking process behind that and re-educate ourselves about the potential positive effects on a student who maybe is not where they should be academically. Because I always believe again that students, they could be late bloomers.

Tonatiuh spoke on the ways that teachers’ deficit notions and perspectives on college readiness harmed struggling students and manifested themselves into opportunities, or lack thereof, for college-going. He countered these types of practices by taking all of his students on college field trips, regardless of their academic standing.

In addition to challenging deficit perceptions of Latina/o students’ college-going potential, the teachers in the study also discussed teaching and learning in terms of working with students to develop critical consciousness and thinking, skills they believed to be essential in not only being college-ready, but necessary for Latina/o students who existed in a system that reproduced inequity. As mentioned earlier, Atticus emphasized the development of critical thinking in his English classroom as a means to arm students with the tools against exploitation and oppression. Similarly, Tonatiuh also redefined traditional narratives around college-readiness and academic rigor and highlighted the importance of working with Latina/o students to develop critical thinking and sense of agency to prepare them for the future:

I try as best as I can to model my lessons and have students think critically in the

way that they're going to be asked to do in college. And to be creative in their expression and arguments. I think that a lot of times with our students we know what they're up against. We know the obstacles and we could potentially be sheltering them a little bit too much...I also think we should be measured on the kind of work that we give and not just the amount of work.

The Challenges Facing Empowerment Agents

Despite their commitment to their students, the Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers in this study discussed the various difficulties threatening their work with Latina/o students to increase their college-going opportunities, one of which was the lack of college-going resources due to declining school budgets and funding. Maricela shared her frustration about the lack of funding and resources afforded to her school and the overall educational system, which challenged her efforts to have all students be college-ready and eligible. When discussing her school district's goal of having all students be college-ready, something seemingly aligned to her efforts with Latina/o students, Maricela shared,

Like I said, I really love the fact that they envision every kid [going to college]...When we're lacking resources and we're lacking stuff in the schools, it's very hard to meet those expectations when we don't have the money. We don't have money to provide our kids with an SAT prep course or to provide our kids additional AP classes or field trips...There's no money available.

Maricela highlighted the problematic reality of school districts having the goal of all students being college-ready without addressing the systematic social, economic, and educational inequities and realities facing her students. She believed that the lack of money for activities like college-field trips were barriers to the district's and her school's efforts to support students. To counter-act some of these challenges, Maricela worked alongside her school's college counselor to bring colleges to her high school campus, co-organizing a large college fair for all of her students. Other teachers also spoke of financial restraints challenging students' academic outcomes and how teachers and schools were increasingly forced to make difficult decisions based on declining school budgets. For example, Tonatiuh journaled about the lack of funding forcing the teachers at his school to choose between a librarian or college counselor position.

Several teachers also shared the challenges in maintaining a work-life balance given that they were extending their roles well beyond content-area instruction. The teachers spoke of an ever-changing stressful educational climate, which they believed was impacted by the various reforms taking place, such as: growing small school movement, increasing competition between their schools and nearby charter schools, declining student attendance leading to declining funding, pressure to increase test scores, new content-area standards, and the threat of school reconstitution. One of the teachers, Ana, who had come back to the classroom after a year sabbatical/hiatus, shared,

Something I used to do early on [at former school] was that I gave my heart and soul and I would volunteer for everything and be on every committee. Around the time that grades were due, I would be at work until midnight a few nights. I felt like I burned myself out. That's part of the reason why I think I needed that break [referring to the one year she left the profession]. I was like the classic case of the teacher who gave too much and couldn't give anymore.

Although Ana shared that the year off had been beneficial in her ongoing sustainability in the profession and her commitment to her students, she expressed the reality that many Latina/o teachers face in terms of being overworked and leaving the profession (Education Trust, 2018; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016).

While all of the five teachers discussed the hardship of feeling overworked, some also expressed sentiments of persistence despite the challenges they faced. Interestingly, both Tonatiuh and Indiana shared similar accounts of continuing to their work despite strenuous conditions. For example, Indiana shared,

There was this one [poem], the thing about burning both ends of a candle. I remember hearing that expression as a kid. I heard my mom telling me about the expression when I read the poem, 'But ah, what a wonderful light...'. So, the whole burning out thing. I think I thrive on that. I don't know if that's being a raised Catholic thing, a Latino thing, or just a blue-collar background, working yourself to the bitter end.

Indiana cited his own background as playing a role in his ongoing efforts to work with students in ways that were committed to social justice. Still, despite sharing that he ‘thrived’ on large amounts of work, he also feared a struggle for sustainability. Tonatiuh also expressed similar notions of his work with students against educational injustice:

The beauty is in the struggle.’ As a matter of fact, I don’t know if I would have made sense if there was no struggle...I feel like this. Maybe again, maybe that’s something I just created in my mind to kind of also make myself feel good about it, but a lot of times that’s the way I feel.

The teachers’ voices expressed a resiliency and persistence in the face of amounting schooling challenges, with less and less support every year. Despite their persistence, however, it is important to highlight that they still felt exhausted in their work, with a struggle to maintain a work-life balance.

Conclusion

This study sheds light as to how Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers committed to social justice perceived their roles, expectations, and commitments in their efforts to increase the college-going opportunities of Latina/o students. The findings suggest that the teachers in the study challenged deficit perceptions of Latina/o students’ academic potential, as well as redefined traditional narratives of academic rigor and college-readiness. In addition, the teachers cited their college-going expectations of Latina/o students, as well as their college-focused commitments, as central tenets in both their decisions to become educators and the ways in which they defined their roles. For several of the teachers, their work and sense of responsibility to increase the college access of Latina/o students was also largely tied to their own identities as Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers and their connections to Latina/o communities. Studies on educators of color have indeed demonstrated the importance of personal connections to students or to the community of practice in the development of teacher identity or in efforts to empower students (Berta-Avila, 2004; Irizarry, 2007; Nieto, 2005).

This study also demonstrated that despite a strong commitment to social justice and student’ college attainment, the Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers faced various challenges that threatened their well-being and sustainability. Their stories spoke of the inequitable funding of

public education and its impact on college-going resources, mirroring the literature on how working-class youth of color are often afforded less college and academic resources than middle and upper-class youth (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; McDonough, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). The findings demonstrate the existing struggles that teachers face as they try to counter the mechanisms of social reproduction in schooling, which often works to maintain the status quo.

While there is much written about the conditions of schools with large populations of students of color, there is little in the literature capturing the experiences of schooling agents, like teachers, working to provide college support to students within the confines of these funding and resource shortages (Yamamura et al., 2010; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). The findings point to the fact that inequitable schooling conditions not only pose a threat to working-class Latina/o youth, but also pose great challenges for the educators working diligently to support students' college aspirations. Despite these challenges, the Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers in this study continued to work with Latina/o students for college-going while simultaneously having a strong social justice commitment. The study provided empirical evidence of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) empowerment agent construct, and the ways in which teachers can play a central role in the college attainment of Latina/o students in anti-deficit, counter-stratifying ways.

Several of the implications of this study include increasing the number of programs like *Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID)* or the *Puente Program*, which have been shown to increase the college-going rates of Latina/o youth and have classroom teachers playing a critical role (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The findings of this study also add to the larger argument that calls for the increased training and recruitment of Latina/o, who have the potential for intimate knowledge of the communities they serve (Berta-Avila, 2004; Irizarry, 2007; Nieto, 2005). Lastly, expanding our notions of the teacher role in Latina/o students' college-going, as well as truly addressing the systematic educational and racial inequities that face students of color, such as lowered teacher expectations and lack of funding in our schools, are critical if we hope to increase the college access and attainment of all Latina/o students

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