Catching them Early: An Examination of Chicano/Latino Middle School Boys' Early Career Aspirations

Eligio Martinez, Jr., Ph.D.

Chicana/o Latina/o students represent the fastest growing population in the U.S., yet, matriculate in college at lower rates than other racial and ethnic groups. In 2011, Chicana/o/ Latina/o students comprised 24% of the national pre-K through 12th grade public school enrollment, but only 15% of the college enrollment for students age 18-24 (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2012). Furthermore, Chicano/Latino males experience lower college enrollment rates when compared to their female counterparts (Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Research suggest that Chicano/Latino males are becoming disengaged from school at early ages and "vanishing" from the educational pipeline (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Lower college enrollment patterns for Chicano/ Latino males, when compared to Chicana/ Latina females, may be explained, in part, by the differential treatment that males encounter in the educational system. For instance, Chicano/Latino males are more likely to be tracked into lower performing paths, special education programs, and face severe disciplinary practices that lead to their disengagement (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

Unfortunately, the literature on Chicano/Latino students focuses primarily on Latinos' high school experiences and neglects the critical middle school years (Valenzuela, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Conchas, 2006). Early adolescence has been known to be an important period in which students begin to consider their future aspirations more seriously, yet little is known about Chicano/ Latino middle school boys' early career and postsecondary aspirations (Lent et al., 2000; Patton & McMahon, 1999; Seligman, Weinstock, & Heflin, 1991). Students who posses greater expectations for the future are likely to attain greater levels of educational and occupational success (Akos et al., 2007, Trusty & Niles, 2004).

In response to this crisis, Dr. Eligio Martinez and Dr. Michelle Castellano's research focuses on acknowledging the unique experiences of Chicano/ Latino boys and examining the formulation of their post-secondary aspirations. This study uses four interrelated theoretical perspectives to guide the understanding of how Chicano/Latino middle school boys may formulate their post-secondary aspirations: Bandura's (1977 social cognitive theory, Bourdieu's (1983) social and cultural capital theory, and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives describe the multi-faceted nature of Chicano/Latino middle school boy's post-secondary aspirations development. The qualitative study referenced in this briefs takes place at Dolores Middle School (DMS, pseudonym), located in a historically white community with a recent influx of Latino immigrants in the Pacific Northwest. The study examined the aspirational development of 11 Chicano/Latino boys derived from a representative sample of DMS 8th grade Chicano/Latino students who participated in a larger year and a half ethnographic study regarding their socialization. The following research questions are what guided this study: 1) How do Latino middle school students formulate their college and career aspirations? What obstacles or resources, if any, do they perceive as potentially limiting or supporting their success? 2) What individuals and experiences influence their early aspirations? How do these individuals shape students' aspirations?

FINDINGS

Three main findings emerged regarding Chicano/ Latino middle school males' early career and college aspirational development. First, students received different type of academic support from family members and institutional agents (e.g., advice versus encouragement). Second, students' who engaged with mentors, academic programs, and peers had greater familiarity with the requirements needed to gain college admissions. Third, students with greater exposure to information about college developed more concrete aspirations and were better informed about how to plan for the future.

Advice versus Encouragement

Throughout the course of the study, participants indicated that their parents, teachers, and peers were supportive of their educational outcomes and future career plans; however, they reported differences in the type of support they received from these individuals. Teachers, older siblings, and extended family members who attended college provided students with detailed advice and information regarding requirements needed to gain college admissions. While parents and peers provided academic and career encouragement, they did not posses the knowledge necessary to guide students' academic pursuits. The encouragement parents provided, however, served as a source of motivation for students. In most cases, parents emphasized the importance of getting good grades: education as they key to a better life. The encouragement participants received from their parents often encouraged them to reflect on the sacrifices their parents made in order to provide them with opportunities to succeed academically, which in turn allowed them to maintain motivated when faced with challenging course work. Likewise, advice from teachers often allowed students to navigate through difficult tasks and receive the information necessary to begin to prepare for college. Encouragement and advice complimented each other and was instrumental in motivating students to keep pushing themselves academically.

Engagement and Social Capital

One of the clear differences among participants was how increased school engagement lead to stronger and more developed future plans regarding a career and the college they wanted to attend. Higher levels of engagement meant clear and deep understanding

of the necessary steps to pursue a higher education. Most importantly, the more engaged students were in school, the more confident they were about being able to go to college and have a successful future. Increased levels of engagement also meant that students had more teachers and adults to go to for support. Participants who were active in athletics, student clubs, and in programs such as AVID had a better understanding of how to begin to plan and prepare for college. For students with limited engagement, their aspirations for the future strongly depended on athletics, while students who were more engaged, still dreamed of being professional athletes, but had explored and wanted to pursue other careers instead.

Benefits of Early College Preparation

Increased exposure to college culture enhanced the knowledge that participants had about higher education and the opportunities available to them. While DMS promoted college to all of its students through its belief of a college preparatory school, participants who were involved in programs such as AVID further benefited from the information they received from guest speakers, campus visits, and a college readiness curriculum. Such participants developed a good understanding of the different types of universities that existed. While most students identified college as the next step after high school, AVID students knew specific information about different types of colleges and universities. Students in regular classes also aspired to go to college and pursue careers that would have great financial reward, however, their career aspirations were not as clearly defined as students who were in AVID.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this paper highlight the need to focus on how students formulate their career plans in earlier stages of the pipeline and the significance that having sources of information can have on the development of future aspirations. In examining these early career decisions and factors that relate to choice can provide insight for school counselors who seek to promote the academic and career development of all students (Akos, Lambie, Milsom & Gilbert, 2007). As practitioners continue to search for ways to keep students engaged through different segments, exposing students to college culture and providing them with information can make the path to college and careers more clear and allow them to remain hopeful about their futures. Providing students with information about college and different careers early, can allow students to see the feasibility of pursuing certain careers and allow them to maintain high aspirations for the future.

As demonstrated in this paper, pre-college programs such as AVID can have a tremendous impact on the development of career aspirations of middle school students. Through a defined college preparatory curriculum, students can be made aware of the different systems of higher education, how to finance their education and the requirements necessary to enter college. Providing students with this information allows them to be more prepared to enter high school and begin to earn the necessary credential for college admission. Finally, exposing students to college information early, along with different career choices they can pursue can allow students to start to visualize their future selves. Most importantly, as this study demonstrates, exposing students early can take away the dependence on athletics as a way of upward social mobility that many urban males, in particular Latino and African American males, have and demonstrate to them other feasible career trajectories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eligio Martinez, Jr., Ph.D., is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at California State Polytechnic University. This research brief is based on select findings of a collaborative research project with Michelle Castellanos, Ph.D., Institutional Research Associate at Loyola Marymount University. Their article is titled: "Catching them Early: An Examination of Chicano/Latino Boys' Early Career Aspirations." For more information, you can contact Dr. Martinez, Jr., by email at: eligiom@cpp.edu.

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