

Achieving Goals: The Role of Support and Structure for Latina/o Student Post High-School Goals

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April, 2016

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association,
Washington DC.

Citation:

Guzmán Ayala, R., Rodriguez, M.C., Palma, J. (2016, April). Achieving goals: The role of support and structure for Latina/o student post high-school goals. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington DC.

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Abstract

The number of Latina/o students in k-12 schools is increasing every year. However, high school graduation rates for Latina/o students are very low. A review of Latina/o responses for the Minnesota Student Survey shows important trends in the role of support and structure in OST activities and their plans to go to a 4 year college. We argue that Latina/o students who report higher levels of support and participate in structured OST activities are more likely to accomplish their goals. Latina/o students with plans to attend a 4 year college or university engage in more structured activities than those in other groups, and less unstructured OST activities than groups of students with different goals.

SIGNIFICANCE

Latina/os are the fastest growing demographic in the United States. Consequently, Latina/os are occupying a growing number of seats in American schools, with 24% of students enrolled in k-12 identifying as Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). These students, however, are not graduating at the same rate they are filling schools' ranks. Only about half of Latina/o students are graduating on time or earning a GED (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) researchers suggest that the lack of Latina/o educators and cultural capital are impeding Latina/o learners, especially at the high school level (Parker, 2015). In addition, LatCrit has allowed researchers to debunk meritocracy and neutral methods of educating Latina/o students by revealing the systemic disadvantages of American school systems against Latina/os and other people of color (Irizarry, 2012). Exploring the dynamic between LATina/o students and the education systems that are disproportionately failing them is possible with the proper historical context and theoretical lenses.

Latina/o students who report having a supportive learning environment, as well as productive use of out-of-school time (OST) are the students most likely to accomplish their post-secondary goals (Erberber et al., 2015; Rodriguez, Morrobel, & Villaruel, 2003).

We investigate how high school Latina/o students utilize out-of-school time and how its use is associated with their post-secondary goals as well as their perceptions of the support that educators and schools provide them. We discuss critical insight into the status of educational equity for Latina/o students and offer implications for how to better understand their needs and preferences to better support their goals.

Latina/o School Experiences

The school experiences of Latina/o students vary greatly, but most face similar obstacles. Changing the discourse of deficits requires educators to stop blaming individual students while noting external environment factors that have a high impact on learning. These include, but are not limited to, teacher quality/training, school funding, access, opportunity, and expectations (Carey, 2013). Applying universal policies to close achievement gaps within a learning environment is counterproductive, because the students who are achieving at already higher rates will continue to maintain if not increase the achievement gap. Therefore, targeted policies and interventions addressing students with greatest needs will be more effective (Murphy, 2009). Schools that are considered to be failing continue to perpetuate barriers to the access of information and equity for families. School administrative policy and institutional power restricts family access to school information and physical school space. Contrary to what we might expect, schools are not meeting unique family needs and preferences nor are they making an active effort to incorporate them into students' academic experiences (Jefferson, 2014).

Outside of School Time (OST)

To explain high school student OST program participation, researchers have explored contextual risk factors. These risk factors include child, family, school, and neighborhood characteristics (Slavin & Calderón, 2001; Wimer et al, 2008). Wimer found that high school students participate in after school activities less than younger students. However, Latina/o students participate at a much lower rate and tend to live in higher risk environments, further reducing their likelihood of participating in structured OST activities, particularly for low-socioeconomic communities (Wimer et al., 2008). Furthermore, federal funding for better access to structured OST activities is only effective if the funds are specifically allocated to low-income neighborhoods (Dearing et al., 2009). Recently, an international study on disadvantaged students who have high academic resilience found “students’ high educational aspirations appear to be the strongest and most consistent predictor of academic resilience” (Erberber et al., 2015, p. 9). Thus the role of high educational goals is a promising target for study in Latina/o communities.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Critical Race and Latina/o Critical Theories

LatCrit is important to Latina/o education because Latina/o students have been consistently undermined and unacknowledged as intellectual learners by policy makers and youth development researchers (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). Many Latina/o students are wrongly placed in remedial level courses or special education classrooms, often because of very low expectations, inadequate assessment tools and lack of cultural insight by educators (Shelton, 2009). Furthermore, research on Latina/o youth is overwhelmingly deficit based regarding drug use, gang violence, delinquency, dropout rates, teen pregnancy, etc., rather than addressing assets such as academic achievement, positive youth development, and likelihood to succeed (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004).

Within US education systems, there are five key aspects of critical race theory (CRT) that are necessary for understanding how these systems are failing underrepresented groups: centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, challenging the dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary perspectives (Solorzano, 1998). Consequently, LatCrit serves to place the distinct cultural properties of different Latina/o communities at the center of analysis for the problem in question.

Latina/o Education and Educators

Moreover, the growing number of Latina/o students is not matched by growth in the numbers of Latina/o educators, teacher training in cultural pedagogy, or improved equity in access to high quality educators nor equity in educational outcomes. Latina/o students are held to lower academic standards and neglected in schools, leading them to pursue activities they feel are more productive such as employment and social gatherings, despite having exceptional academic skills (Fernandez, 2002). For Latina/os who become educators, they possess a very specific motivation to join the educator workforce and dismantle the obstacles that were in their way during their k-12 experience (Irizarry, 2012).

Culturally Relevant Opportunities for Youth

Many researchers have identified curricula and programs that are effective for Latina/o students. For example, “heritage language instruction” works very well for Latina/os because it attends to Spanish-English biliteracy, supports and facilitates learning across a curriculum, socializes students and parents into the American education system, and arranges the resources of students’ home cultures to advance educational and social needs (Carreira, 2007). Implementation of these methods is effective because many Latina/o students experience erasure of their home culture and language and a disconnection between schools and families (Valenzuela, 1999; Velez & Saenz, 2001).

Teacher training on CRT and LatCrit provides educators with the analytical tools necessary to identify subtle oppressive aspects of United States education systems and thus dismantle them. This can be done by allowing Latina/o students to reflect upon their own experiences through different academic exercises, which would result in challenges to dominant meritocracy and neutrality ideologies (Franquiz, 2011). A learning model that is culturally and linguistically sensitive to Latina/os, with an intimate student support system and high academic expectations increases student retention and passing rates (Benson et al., 2006; Gonzales, 2015; Sesma & Roehlkepartain, 2003).

Research Objectives

From this review, we believe post high-school goals are important. We have decades of research supporting the importance of OST time, that engagement in structured activities with high levels of support are critical for positive youth development, particularly Latina/o youth. LatCrit offers a larger structural context for the challenges facing Latina/o students, relative to educational inequity in opportunity and outcomes. Here, we relate teacher/school support to

grades and post high-school goals. We then relate goals to the kinds of OST activities in which Latina/o students participate. Our primary question is multifaceted:

Do Latina/o student post high-school goals vary as a function of support and the characteristics of OST activity engagement?

METHODS

Data Source

The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) is designed by an interagency team from the MN Departments of Education, Health & Human Services, Public Safety, and Corrections to monitor important trends and support planning efforts of the collaborating state agencies and local public school districts, as well as youth serving agencies and organizations. The MSS is administered every three years to students in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11. All operating public school districts are invited to participate. In 2013, the survey was administered to 162,034 students in 312 school districts.

Characteristics of OST activities were measured in the MSS. Places Latina/o students go after school were defined as supervised (e.g., library, job) or unsupervised (e.g., a park, the mall). OST activities that Latina/o students participate in were defined as structured (e.g., studying, music lessons) or unstructured (e.g., watching TV, texting). Then, structured OST activities were defined as academic (e.g., tutoring, science club) or nonacademic (e.g., sports teams, Y-clubs). Additionally, the MSS provides a strong measure of Teacher-School Support (TSS), self-reported grades, and post high-school goals (specified below).

MSS Participants

The participants of this study consist of 2763 9th grade and 2090 11th grade Latina/o students from the 2013 Minnesota Student Survey. About 50% are female, 43% are in grade 11, 84% live with their biological mother and 57% live with biological father, 12% are in special education, and 57% receive free/reduced lunch.

Analysis

Data from the MSS were analyzed using SPSS, including summary statistics and graphical displays.

Interview Procedures

We interviewed four students from an urban Latina/o secondary charter school. The interviews served as the qualitative component that provided inside information about student experiences. Approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained for the consent procedures and interview protocol. The student interview protocol consisted of nine questions, divided into four subsections, which lasted about 30 minutes. The first section was a series of three questions investigating the role of the student within the school. The second section included two

questions about the students' experiences in high school. The third section was about out of school time on school days. Finally, the last section inquired about the student's' postsecondary goals.

We also interviewed three teachers and one counselor from the same urban secondary charter school asking about their experiences with students and their expectations of them. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain a nuanced perspective about several themes in their educational experience. These included, Latina/o Critical Theory in education, relationships with teachers and other students, personal interests and hobbies, as well as personal interests, jobs and/or extracurricular activities. The interview consisted of 11 questions, and lasted about 30 minutes. We divided the questions into 4 sections. The first section consisted of two basic introductory background questions. The second section was a series of three questions regarding student expectations and support systems for the students. The third section consisted of four questions that inquire about student-teacher relationships. The final section was composed of two questions about student goals and the support systems available to students that would help them achieve those goals.

We used a digital voice recorder to record and later transcribed the interview material for analysis.

RESULTS

Results are reported for the role of support and the characteristics of OST activities by the post high-school goals Latina/o students report.

Support

Students who report higher TSS report higher grades (see Figure 1). Students who are reporting Ds and Fs are reporting lower TSS.

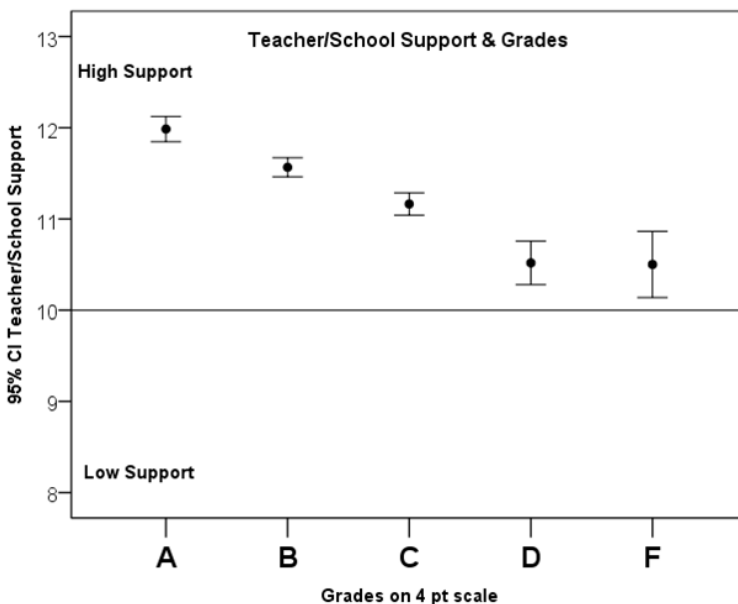


Figure 1. Average level of teacher/school support (with 95% confidence interval) by school grades (greater than 10 is positive support).

The post high-school goals reported by students are associated with different levels of perceived TSS (see Figure 2). Students with plans to attend a 4 year college are reporting higher levels of TSS than all other goal groups. Those who plan to go to a 2 year college are reporting lower TSS than students who plan to go to a 4 year college. Students who do not intend to graduate or want to get a GED are reporting much lower levels of TSS than all other goal groups (in fact, it is relatively negative levels of teacher/school support overall, since the average is below the scale score of 10). The group of students reporting plans to attend a 4 year college or university also reports the highest level of TSS. Perceived levels of support are associated positively with school grades and generally with higher post high-school academic goals.

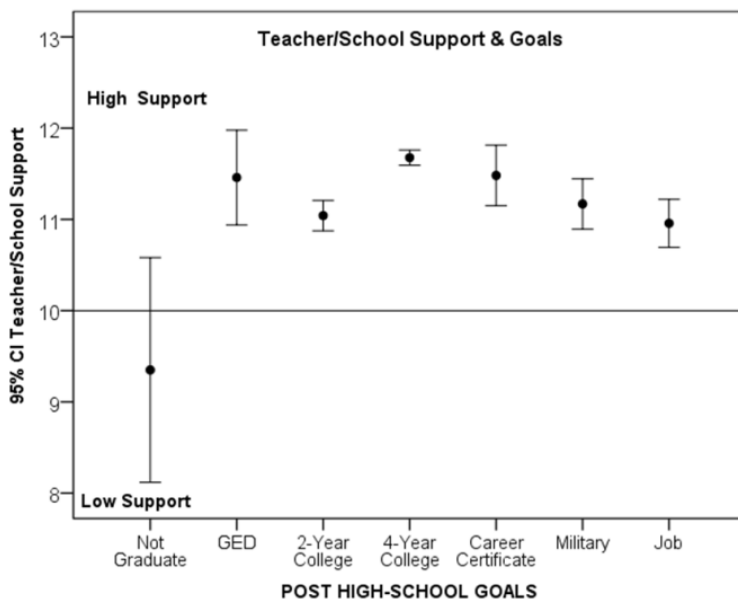


Figure 2: Average level of teacher/school support (with 95% confidence interval) by post high-school goals (greater than 10 is positive support).

Characteristics of OST Activities

First, a slightly higher percentage of female students reported plans to attend a 4 year college or university, whereas slightly more males reported to plan to join the military (see Figure 3). An interesting trend to note is that less than 1% of both males and females plan on not graduating whereas the actual percentage of students graduating from Minnesota public high schools is only 53% as noted earlier.

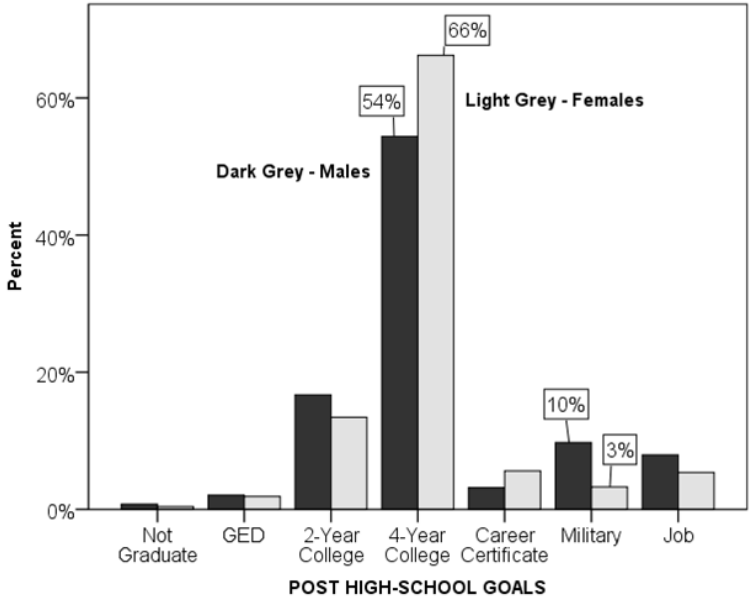


Figure 3: Percentage of students reporting post high-school goals by gender.

OST activities were classified in three ways, including the supervised nature of the setting, the structured nature of the activity, and whether the structured activities were academic. For OST, as expected, students go to more unsupervised than supervised settings (twice the rate or more); and within each type of setting, there are minimal differences across the different goal groups (see Figure 4). For students who want to go to a 4 year college, they are going to supervised after-school settings more often than most other goal groups and going to unsupervised settings about as frequently as other goal groups.

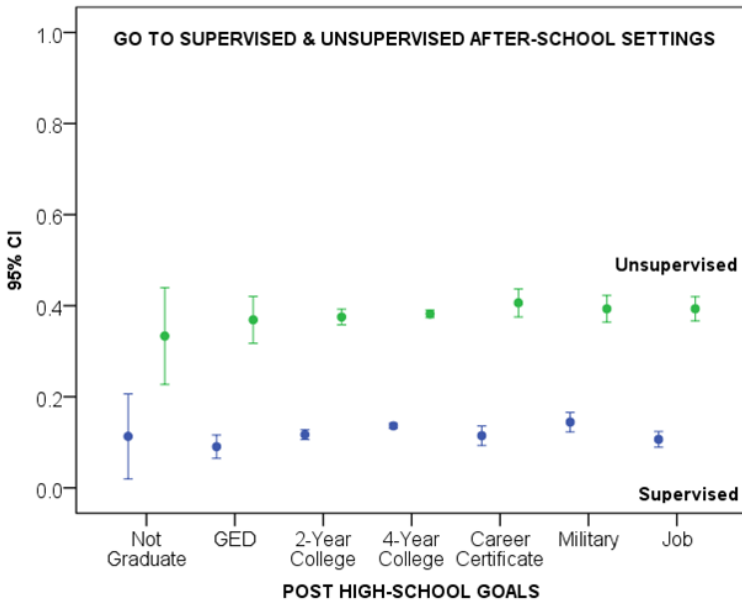


Figure 4. Rate of going to supervised and unsupervised after-school settings by post high-school goals.

Similarly, students in all goal groups participate in more unstructured than structured activities (see Figure 5). There are, however, larger differences between whether students participate in structured and unstructured OST activities by goal group. Students with 4 year college and career-certificate goals are participating in more structured OST activities and less unstructured activities than students with other goals. The differences between participating in structured versus unstructured activities is smallest for these two goal groups.

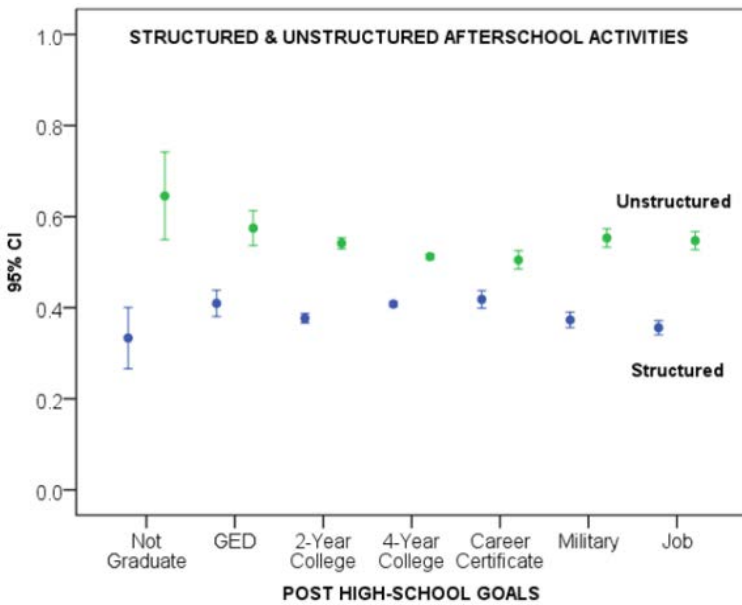


Figure 5. Rate of participation in structured and unstructured after-school activities by post high-school goals.

Finally, students in all goal groups participate in slightly more nonacademic than academic structured activities. However, there are minimal differences between whether students participate in academic or nonacademic structured OST activities across goal groups (see Figure 6). Although students with 4 year college and career-certificate goals participate in more structured activities, it is unrelated to whether they are academic or nonacademic activities.

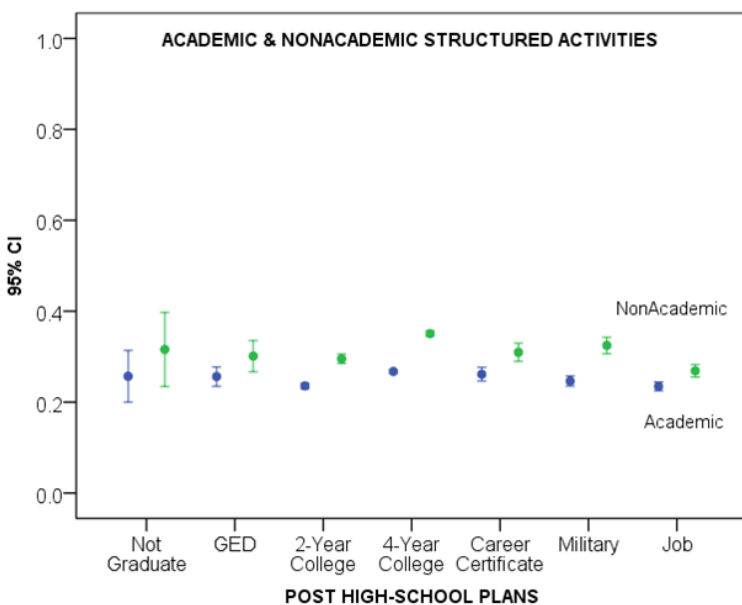


Figure 6: Rate of participation in academic and nonacademic structured after-school activities by post high-school goals.

Student Perspectives

As a reminder, the students invited to participate in the interviews are from a the same urban charter high school – not intended to be represented of a larger community – but are included here to provide examples of personal experiences regarding LatCrit, support, goals, and after-school participation. Some themes consistent with the systemic oppression of Latina/o students (regarding the framework of LatCrit) are present in the student interviews. The students interviewed all reported to be transfer students from a different public high school. To describe their roles and experiences within their school, all four students interviewed mentioned that teachers did not give them enough attention or support during their time as students. One of the students interviewed said:

“I would sit in class and the teacher wouldn’t even look at me.”

The second student described how teachers would pay the most attention to the students that knew the material best. The third student commented how teachers not caring affected him:

“The teachers made me not want to learn.”

The fourth student transferred schools specifically because teachers were not providing the care and attention this student needed. This theme, teachers not acknowledging Latina/o students, is not limited to the students interviewed. These four students have given some critical insight that

helps explain why only about half of Latina/o public school students graduate high school; teachers simply do not give them enough attention in the classroom.

When asked about their outside of school time habits, all four students reported working after school, sometimes more than 40 hours a week. This highlights a common obstacle for students, but when coupled with not being acknowledged by teachers, academic success can be exceedingly difficult. At their current school, all students reported that their teachers knew they work after school and are very cooperative. For example, one student said:

“[My teacher] used to call me in the mornings to wake up before school.”

Another student reported her outside of school time is spent with her daughter when she is not working. When asked how she balances her personal life with school life she responded:

“Having a kid is hard... staying up late with the baby and then getting up early for school.”

All four students reported minimal participation in school sponsored after school programs. This is not surprising considering their work schedules. Despite minimal school sponsored OST activities, all four students reported goals to obtain a 4 year college degree.

Contrarily, all four students reported very positive experiences at the current public charter high school they attend. The most common comment was the effectiveness of smaller classroom sizes. The first student reported that *“teachers are more present”* because there are less students in the classroom, and is able to learn more. Another student said that because classrooms are smaller, teachers actually pay attention to students and help them stay focused. The second student reported that all of his teachers know both Spanish and English thus providing a more effective learning environment. When asked about interactions with teachers, one student responded:

“I feel very comfortable with every teacher... I can talk to them and explain if I’m missing something.... I feel like I actually learn more things and I’m coming to school... I barely even skip anymore. I want to be in school.”

In sum, all four students are on track to graduate on time. The interviews revealed the students are highly motivated and are in a highly supportive learning environment since transferring to their current school. We also found that OST for these students is composed of family responsibilities, friends, and work rather than school-sponsored afterschool programming.

Teacher/Support Staff Perspectives

All teachers and support staff interviewed expressed a very precise understanding of their students’ needs. For example, one counselor said,

“For students that have been damaged along the way, from elementary school to middle school to high school... I’ve noticed all of the negativity from all of the experiences they’ve had along the way.”

This understanding coincides with the support students need. Another perspective highlights support as a major part of their students’ learning environment:

“The more supported they feel and the more they contribute to the school, the more they feel like it’s theirs and the more they will grow from it.”

Teachers and support staff also revealed that many of the interactions with the students are opportunities for mutually beneficial learning. For example,

“I need to listen to their experience, learn from it, and then apply that to how our school runs.”

This is a key factor in creating a learning space that is very intentional and directed to the Latina/o demographic.

Teachers and support staff also understand that many of their students are first generation college students. One teacher said,

“I think it’s very difficult for Latina/o students to think of what their goals are... because they haven’t had that example so much in their life. They probably are the first person in their family...”

Though this realization seems intuitive, it is overwhelmingly absent from mainstream public schools, and results in a cultural and social disconnect between educators and Latina/o students. Despite the students’ complex lives, all teachers and staff interviewed have very high expectations for their students and focus on confidence building and undoing the negative self-image that many Latina/o students develop as they navigate mainstream schools.

DISCUSSION

Whether students go to supervised or unsupervised OST settings is not related to their post high-school goals, nor does it matter if structured OST activities are academic or nonacademic. For Latina/o students, what differentiates goal groups is whether the OST activities they participate in are structured or unstructured. Latina/o students with plans to attend a 4 year college or university engage in more structured activities than those in other groups, and less unstructured OST activities than groups of students with different goals.

Similar associations exist with perceived levels of support. Students in the 4-year college goal group report higher levels of TSS. In addition, there are strong associations between levels

of support and grades. This ties together the importance of support and high post high-school goals (as reported in the literature reviewed earlier).

This leads us to argue that it doesn't matter whether Latina/o students go to supervised or unsupervised after-school activities (since there are little to no differences across goals groups), and it doesn't matter whether the structured activities are academic or nonacademic. What makes a difference among Latina/o groups with different post high-school goals is whether those activities are structured or unstructured. Herein is a potentially malleable target for intervention – creating settings with high levels of support, providing structured OST activities, and promoting high post high-school goals.

We found the students we interviewed had a difficult time talking about supports or describing a learning environment that works best for them. In addition, students had a hard time talking about what they do independently to improve their academic skills. Moreover, despite high levels of motivation and well defined post-secondary goals, students knew very little about their chosen career fields. Therefore, we can draw the implication that these students do not verbalize their needs and goals enough, which is problematic for students who plan to incorporate themselves in the professional workforce. One reason Latina/o students are often ignored in the classroom is because teachers cannot effectively communicate with their students. Consequently, providing both teachers and Latina/o students with more effective methods of communication can provide more opportunities for goal planning and support systems to secure those goals.

A couple of the teachers interviewed mentioned they believe in differentiation for learning when working with Latina/o students. This language is very similar to the language used when discussing special education individualized educational plans (IEPs). However, there are very different implications for this phrase when using LatCrit to analyze this feedback from educators. Differentiated learning, when working with Latina/o students, means that teachers and staff are recognizing Latina/o students as autonomous intellectuals and thus have particular needs that mainstream public schools are simply not equipped to address.

There are other important characteristics to consider when conducting research in Latina/o communities. For example, the experience of first generation vs multiple generation Midwestern Latina/os high school students does vary (Rodriguez, Morrobel, 2004). For Latina/os in US schools, language, immigration status, and generational status are key factors (Parker, 2015). These should be considered in future research.

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