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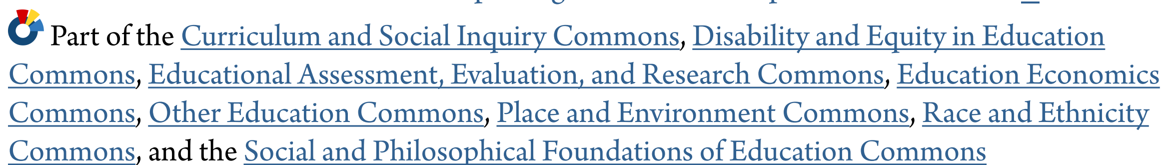
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Cultivating Democracy at One High School Intervention Program for Latinos At Risk of Dropping Out

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Abstract

In California, where this study takes place, it is estimated that 85,000 students drop out of high school annually. Consequences are often linked to economic and social issues including long term economic costs to the state and the likelihood of lesser participation in voting and civic engagement (Rumberger, 2012). This account documents one high school's alternative intervention program that includes online academic credit recovery and socio-emotional guidance leading to graduation for Latino students who are at risk of dropping out. Findings highlight the program's support for these students in gaining confidence in self, envisioning themselves in the community and, for some, finding validation of their role in society through a neighborhood civic engagement project.

Introduction

"You are rising from the ashes," school counselor Steve (pseudonym) encourages a group of high school students during one of their monthly assemblies. He is comparing the potential of these students enrolled in one high school's dropout recovery program with the mythical phoenix bird's rise from destruction towards renewal. The metaphor serves as a rallying reminder to the students enrolled in the Academic Credit Recovery Program who are academically at risk of dropping out of their regular high school that, "regardless of your past, we will rise." Steve is the on-site counselor and is speaking to the approximately 40 young students in attendance one fall morning. Located in a Southern

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California low socio-economic neighborhood, the Academic Credit Recovery Program (ACRP) is a unique intervention program combining an academic focus with socio-emotional supports and serves primarily Latino teens. Some are former dropouts who had to be coaxed into giving high school one more try and others, as one teacher comments, "are on the brink." At today's assembly, Steve unabashedly dons a graduation gown and mortarboard to remind these teens of their singular purpose in the months ahead: a high school diploma and re-imagining their post-graduation plans.

The space allotted for the assembly is small but easily accommodates one-third of the program's enrolled students here this morning. Alongside other invited guests including educators, administrators, and community members, our university research team members wedge ourselves among desks and chairs and crane our necks to keep an eye on Steve as he moves back and forth in front of the room gesturing to emphasize a point and recognizing individual student accomplishments. Typically throughout the year, the room serves as part classroom, part tutoring center, but this morning it is transformed into an assembly hall. The teens, clad in jeans, T-shirts, and sweatshirts sit in long rows on plastic chairs. It is October 31st and some of the students have arrived in costume. All listen attentively and respectfully this morning to today's varied speakers about the importance of staying in school. Community officials share their personal stories of encouragement and perseverance. The adults in the room know the high stake consequences that dropping out has for these youths' long-range academic and social trajectory. They know higher education is a potential route to greater economic stability. One or two students raise a hand to ask a question or offer a comment. Over the next two hours there is a steady talk of dreams, stories of hope, and reasons to believe.

The ACRP dropout recovery program's goal of helping students earn their high school diploma and gain an understanding of college and career options is crucial. Latinos/as are among the fastest-growing groups in the United States (Alemán, 2006). Yet, they have been identified as "…by far the least successful group of students to finish high school and their access to college is declining" (Orfield, 2002, p. 380). It is in trying to overcome these dismal projections that a band of educational professionals have created and implemented the ACRP, a novel intervention program, to stem the tide at their urban high school. This account documents how this group of educators in developing an alternative path towards high school graduation for students at risk of dropping out are simultaneously creating individuals who demonstrate the ability to affect change in their immediate social circles with a few initiating their own democratic project in their community. When Saltmarsh and Hartley contend that higher education institutions' purpose must "link the pursuit of knowledge with the pursuit of a healthier society and a stronger more robust society" (2012, p. 4), a university-community partnership, such as the one between our university and the ACRP, is instrumental in helping these Latino youths living in poverty and with a history of academic challenges in a traditional institutional school setting regain academic momentum so they may become contributory members in a democratic society.

Poverty

While poverty is an issue that cuts a swath in the educational attainment of all individuals without regard to race or language

(Dillon, 2003; Perez & de la Rosa Salazar, 1997), minorities are disproportionately economically disadvantaged (Gimenez, 1997). Rist contends that the academic challenges for poor children are exacerbated when children are also from a minority background (2000). Latino children are weighted by the greatest share of 37%, compared to their White (30.5%), and African American (26.6%) counterparts (Jordan, 2011). The strong correlation between poverty and low academic achievement (Hout, 2011) perpetuates a cycle of poverty that Ladson-Billings (2006) attributes to this group's historic academic achievement gap. Gutiérrez, et al. (2002) contend schools fail poor children through a "backlash pedagogy" (p. 329) by engaging in academically harmful practices such as reductionist reading programs, assignment of least trained teachers, and focus on high stakes standardized test scores. Educational scholars contend standardized test scores are less likely to measure students' learning than they are reflections of a family's cultural capital, that is, resources and income (Au & Raphael, 2000). Furthermore, the current national focus on high-stakes testing distracts meaningful educational reform policies from the significant effects of economic disparity and social class differences (Darder & Torres, 2004; Dillon, 2003).

Latinos comprise nearly one-half of the overall student population in California where this study takes place. As part of an historically underachieving population, Latino students' academic success is in jeopardy (Orfield, 2002; Rist, 2001). Children growing up in poverty tend to attend schools that have lost funding, such as in California, which dropped 11.1% in funding between 2007 and 2011 (California Budget Project, 2012).

Latinos' Historical Underachievement

Accounts of Latinos' historic academic underachievement are distressing and current dropout statistics are alarming. According to a 2010 report of the Pew Hispanic Center, of adults ages 20 or older without a high school diploma, Latinos accounted for a startling 37% compared to other demographic groups of Blacks (18%), Asian (14%) and Whites (10%) (Fry, 2010). The ongoing dismal economic and academic projections for third-generation Latinos are troubling. In California, an estimated 85,000 students drop out each year (Rumberger, 2011) with significan t consequences. Individuals who drop out often suffer economically. Reduced earnings over a lifetime result in a greater likelihood of remaining poor and depending upon social programs, resulting in long-term economic expense to the state (Rumberger, 2011). Other ramifications of a high rate of students who drop out are the likelihood of their lesser participation in voting and civic engagement than those who earn a diploma (Rumberger, 2012). While explanatory factors for Latinos' academic underachievement might include the continual waves of Latino immigration and language barriers, these historical reasons fall short of explaining the current persistent academic gap. Inadequate explanatory factors are troubling particularly when research indicates that those born in the U.S. continue to struggle and fare disproportionately worse (Nieto, 2001). Research indicates that for Latino/a immigrants of Mexican origin, the educational and economic gains made by first and second generations come to a standstill by the third generation (Grogger & Trejo, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Clearly, this halt in the academic progress of a growing segment of the nation's population has serious ramifications for American society's competitiveness in a global market driven by

literate and technological skills (Luke, 2003; Orfield, 2002) and the sustaining of a democratic robust society (Saltmarsh & Harvey, 2012).

Developing Democratically Engaged Members of Society

Ameliorating pervasive and complex societal problems such as poverty and inequity in educational attainment requires a range of perspectives to sort through and understand. In seeking to provide an explanatory framework for one high school's intervention program, one useful perspective is to consider the long-range national goals of an informed population. In 2009, President Obama cited his administration's goal for "a complete and competitive education from the cradle up through a career" (Obama, 2009, ¶ 14). His words resonate with the John Dewey Project on Progressive Organization's call for a society characterized as a "critically, socially engaged intelligence" (2002). Clearly this contemporary argument is rooted in the intertwining of democracy and education advanced by John Dewey nearly a century ago. More recently, these ideals have been taken up and recast in a call for attention to the potential human capital resources within the nation's strategic subsystem of K-12 education (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2011) and the call for an increased role of higher education in civic and community endeavors (Peters, 2010; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2012).

As a leader of the progressive movement of the early 20th century and one of the founders of American pragmatism, John Dewey believed that education was an integral way for society to renew itself by instilling the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary for its ongoing welfare (1909; 1916). As a pragmatist, his first guiding principle was anchored in individuals' experiences and common events of daily life. His second guiding principle was the notion of a melioristic motive which is "efforts to create and preserve value" through required action for beneficial change (Hildebrand, 2008, p. 5). Dewey expected each individual must "be a member of some particular neighborhood and community and must contribute to the values of life, add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he [*sic*] is." (1919, p. 5). These repeating responsibilities identified by Dewey to problem-solve issues for the advancement of public good are cited in Hildebrand (2008) as:

> Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; that its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems, and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part, a social life that is changing with extreme rapidity from year to year. (Later Works, vol. 13, p. 299)

This attention to democratic ideals has been taken up in more current discussions of democracy viewed as a necessity in sustaining a healthy and dynamic society (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2012) and in constant construction through ongoing human interaction and relations (Peters, 2010). The democratic process has to be continually re-examined, questioned, and reflected upon to ensure that the process has been inclusive but not dominated by narrow group interests. The fullness of democratic engagement requires individuals' engagement in critical thinking, handling multiple perspectives and imaginative solutions, and seeming contradictions. Such demanding requisites are tamed by the conviction that advocates for the public interests will overshadow narrowed interests of any

individual or group. A shared problem-solving process helps to meet common goals (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2012). Therefore, the strength of democracy depends on the leadership and capabilities of individuals and it is in our national interest to develop knowledgeable "citizens who become self-conscious democratic agents" (Hildebrand, 2008, p. 120), participate in ongoing discussions, and contribute to policy decisions that serve the economic, social, educational, and local concerns linked to national and global systems (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2011).

Therefore, the assertion that "education is the basis of all democratic progress" (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2011) spurs new questions about the social, historical, political, and economic implications of a persistent academic achievement gap between groups. While these questions are too broad to address in a single report, this current study sought to understand staff and students' perceptions of their experience in one high school's alternative academic intervention program. The program's online learning is supported by a socio-emotional component of educator guidance as a pathway for student success. Our research team sought insight from educators and students at risk of dropping out about addressing school structures, teaching practices, curriculum development, and learning styles that need to take place. Such insights might ensure Latino youths are on a trajectory to participate and contribute to a healthy democratic society.

Methods

This ongoing case study (Stake, 2000) of the ACRP intervention program uses a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The staff is comprised of three classroom teachers and one counselor all with a range of experience in traditional and alternative school settings with students. There are 120 students enrolled in the ACRP at any one time. Participation in the research is voluntary. The quantitative data includes administering student surveys two times during the school year. The purpose was to gather students' attitudes of persistence, hope, self-efficacy, and motivation as well as their perspectives of their participation of the online curriculum and other program components. Qualitative data include formal individual interviews with 30 students in two waves, and one interview with ACRP staff each year. The student interviews centered on students' perspectives regarding circumstances leading to their dropout, their return to school, and their experience participating in the alternative intervention program. The ACRP staff interviews revolved around their perspectives as experienced educators working in a non-traditional setting. Other qualitative data collection included observation data from attending ACRP events, such as assemblies described in the beginning of this account, informal interviews with students and staff, joint research team meetings with university researchers and ACRP staff, field observations, and collection of artifacts. The research started in the second year of the ACRP's inception to assist in a program evaluation for the school district as well as to gain meaning and significance of the innovative program to all participants.

In monthly joint research meetings over two years, the three-member university team, all former classroom teachers, have shared our ongoing findings with the ACRP staff. Based on these collaborations, we have revised subsequent survey instruments, such as the student interviews protocols, to capture additional information. We have attended ACRP-sponsored events to observe both key

(e.g., guest speaker visits) and common every day events (e.g., tutoring) that takes place in the program. We found that by doing so, it is possible to "genuinely work *with* the community, not *in* it or *on* it" (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2011).

Context and Background

The regular school site, Memorial High School (pseudonym) that houses the alternative ACRP program, is located in a Southern California urban neighborhood. Nearly all of its 3,103 students are Hispanic (92%) with White (3%), Asian (2%), Black (1%) and students of Pacific Islander, Native American and multiple race comprising the balance. A large percentage (86.6%) of the students are eligible for the federal school lunch program. In 2012, the school's API score was 742. Memorial High School administrators sought to ameliorate the problem of a persistent drop out rate which is a chronic problem exacerbated by recent state budget cuts of 11% between 2009 and 2011 (California Budget Project, 2012). Among other program cuts, two recent ones were summer school and the adult education program where students previously might have regained high school credits. The administrative coordinator charged with developing an intervention program had considered several intervention possibilities but dismissed each in turn because of documented failures in other sites. As a result, the creation of the ACRP program was novel. It linked students to their regular high school by allowing them to take classes on site at the traditional school and participate in extracurricular activities such as band and sports.

The innovative intervention program at the Academic Credit Recovery Program (ACRP) was initially designed for the recovery of students who had already dropped out of the regular high school, Memorial High School, to bring them back for a second chance at earning a high school diploma. The program's staff includes three teachers and one school counselor. All are bilingual in English and Spanish although they rarely use Spanish in interacting with students but frequently do so when communicating with families.

The ACRP intervention program is housed in a non-descript cinderblock building physically located on the Memorial High School campus. While the ACRP building blends into the regular institutional school buildings, the interior decor reflects the hopeful energy of the ACRP staff and students. Students' civil rights collage projects border the room. Multi-colored *papel picados*, the traditional Mexican paper decorative cutouts, are strung from the ceiling. Along one wall, the bulletin boards are packed with photographs of beaming students in graduation gowns. Another wall features artistic renderings of the symbolic phoenix rising from the ashes alongside an image of a graduate walking towards the distance. Along both sides of the mural, the graduates' names from the first two years have been meticulously painted in blue cursive lettering. One morning in mid-May, the desks are crowded with students eagerly trying to earn requisite credits as they strive for a rapidly approaching June graduation.

In the first year, re-enrolling dropouts had its own challenges. The ACRP staff generated a list of 266 students who had dropped out of the regular high school. A pamphlet touting its flexibility, personalized learning, self-paced learning, and assuring "instructional support...provided by caring teacher experts on a daily basis" was created. Then the staff started walking the neighborhood, knocking on doors in an effort to recruit youths. Eventually, they persuaded enough students. How-

ever, there were some barriers that prevented successful recruitment of some of the former students. Some students had become comfortable with the packet-driven approach at a local continuation school and viewed it as an easier route than what the ACRP was proposing. Some felt restricted by economic hardships in their homes which limited access to the Internet or trips to the library. Some felt that other family problems limited their ability to work independently, especially in their home environments, to meet the requirements of the ACRP. Still others were mandated by court order to attend a certain school, which prevented them from transferring to the ACRP.

Findings

Poverty Impeding Education Access

In the surrounding neighborhood of Memorial High School, poverty is an issue and affects the students' school attendance in numerous ways. The ongoing economic demands or an unexpected family crisis can often push attending school to a lower rung of priority. The computer program has capabilities to allow student access 24 hours a day and seven days a week and some students are able to capitalize on this accessibility and in fact, cite opportunities when they do so while at a friend's house or at a coffee shop. However, one teacher noted other students are hampered by a lack of household financial resources and "cannot afford Internet." Access to free community resources such as the local library is constrained by meager "one-hour slots" of computer usage and further limits youths' options.

One student's poignant story is indicative of how the pulls of family life intervened with his school attendance while in the regular high school setting and eventually led to his dropping out. His account points to the economic stress that some youths in this neighborhood feel when a family is forced to depend on every member to keep the household afloat.

> My parents, they would go to work - my little brother, let's say he would be sick. They would ask me if it was possible for me to stay home with him, so I can take care of him. And well, I'd be like, I will say yes…. They didn't speak English and with their job, they have to interact with a lot of people and from different languages. I would be the one who [would] have to like, I'll let them know I'll go with you, and I would miss school. My dad like, he installs carpet and all that, so the first [thing] he does is go talk to his client…I would be there to translate - sometimes the clients ask for specific things to get done, and I have to explain that to my dad.

For those students who had actually dropped out, there were various reasons given for why they decided to give it another try at getting their diplomas. Some mentioned wanting to make their family proud and not wanting to repeat the path of older siblings. One student commented:

> I just, I also didn't want to be the only, like a failure to my family. Because everybody – nobody in my family has gotten a diploma, I have three older brothers and none of them got diplomas. And then like I realize that I don't want my parents feeling that none of their sons had a diploma. I just, I want to do it for them.

Living arrangements in some households capture the financial hardships of the recent national recession with families doubling up to make ends meet. As one teacher reflects on home environments described by students and observed during outreach visits:

> There are 10 people living in a one-bedroom house or two families living in a one-bedroom apartment. Not enough money to pay rent or groceries. Parents tell children to get to work…. It's not that Latinos don't value education; they have to worry about food on the table…. If your mom is sick and can't go to work then what would you do?…If you grandma is dying and you have to move around [what would you do?]

Even with the flexibility of a self-paced academic program, these students' lived experiences demand their attention and the realities of day to day living distract from the seemingly lack of relevance to high school curriculum lessons. It is in these understandings of students' experiences that the ACRP educators adapt themselves to serving as resources for students as they navigate their pursuit of a high school diploma.

Combining Academic and Socio-emotional Supports

Academic supports: Ensuring access. Initially in the first year of the program, the emphasis was on recovery of students who had already dropped out. As might be expected, a high percentage (93%) of the student survey respondents indicated that they had difficulty maintaining their grades, and 20% revealed that they had received mostly Ds and Fs prior to coming to the ACRP. Interviews with students revealed some distractions had been the lure of friends cutting class or some simply dropping out when keeping up with the courses became too challenging. In its subsequent two years, the ACRP program has been targeting youths who, for a variety of reasons, are in danger of losing their footing in their regular public high school setting. Special cases include an honor student from the regular high school who recently had a baby, or the AVID student in need of additional support.

The ACRP program is centered on a computer online academic program. Its advantages include its 24-7 accessibility promoting an independently determined pace. In order to earn academic credits, students considered the online program as most helpful. Youths noted how the flexibility of the program gives them new temporal and geographical possibilities for keeping up with their school work that they didn't have in their traditional high school setting: "It helps students get their credits up, like if they have a job, they can come to school (Magdalena)"; "You can go to Mexico and [still] do your homework" (Edgar); "This place stays open 'til 4 or 5. School closes at 2:30. So I come here instead" (Nazario). Students acquired strategic knowledge in using options to meet their academic goals.

Weekly meetings with teachers help monitor progress. Each teacher has a caseload of approximately 40 students whom they meet with weekly to assess academic progress, determing credit accrual, and assign new goals. This type of individualized education means the ACRP teachers can adopt projects relevant to student interest. One teacher described the "freedom" in providing assignment opportunities for students to "explore their culture," yet always attuned to the overarching state educational goals adding, "We're tapping into the [state] standards—but differently." These individual academic progress meetings mean that students are under the close guidance of a teacher and counselor instead of being swallowed up in a large class environment typical of their traditional high school setting.

Free tutoring is provided by college students from a local university. Teachers note the value of these tutoring sessions in that the

youths often use the occasions to ask the college-age adult about their experiences. It allows students to hear first-hand accounts of what it takes to apply oneself in higher education.

Dropout and attrition rates for the ACRP are somewhat difficult to measure given that the students may enroll, transfer, or graduate at any time during the traditional school year. However of the 90 students who participated in the study, 27.8% had transferred to another school setting, 27.8% were still active in the ACRP, 41.1% have graduated, and another 3.3% have completed their high school work without receiving a full diploma due to not passing the California High School Exit Exam. For those ACRP students who graduated it meant they would earn a coveted Memorial High School diploma—not a GED or certificate from a continuation school—as well as career certification, and according to one staff member, the "privilege of walking in regular high school graduation with their peers." It might take some students five years, maybe six, to exit the program but according to one educator, some may not "have ever made it" otherwise.

Socio-emotional supports: Instilling hope.

"It is relational," one educator shared when identifying the aspect of ACRP that makes the program vital. Unlike traditional high schools where the ratio can climb to 120 students to one teacher, the lower ratio in the ACRP provides more time for a teacher to get to know a youth's individual concerns, successes, and needs. This understanding of a youth's out-of-school experiences is key because, "when issues of death, disease, divorce [and] abuse [and]…it affects their production." The one-on-one conferences with students make a difference. All three teachers valued these moments to monitor students' progress, suggest school projects that tap into students' unique interests, or provide a compassionate ear to students' stories of a troubled home life or past experience with drugs and alcohol that can't be shaken from memory. In these weekly meetings, students sort through the haze of self-doubt and low self-esteem accrued over years of academic failure in their regular school setting. Like many students who drop out, they had "lost hope." The ACRP teachers encourage the teens to apply themselves, occasionally tapping into the familial ring of the language spoken by their parents, "Do you have the *ganas* (desire) to work hard?" During one assembly after a guest speaker shares college-attendance goals, Steve, the counselor, reassures the students, "Because of this program, the ability to self-regulate, you learn to do this [go to college]. So no one else can do this. You will do it independently in college."

The educators at the ACRP are guided by the belief that, "Failure is not an option." One teacher commented on the atmosphere as "the culture is one of support and not punitive" and added, "Students can [achieve] more than they think they can if they have a cheerleader. Here we provide constant positive reinforcement for good things." The educator noted the importance of having the mythical phoenix bird renewal as a symbolic motivator for students:

> I believe it is the story of our students. The [constant grades of] "F" "F" "F" "F". That's the failure. Now they are able to soar, have a better GPA. Course completed. It's their own second birth.

Another educator noted, in traditional school settings, schools' intense focus solely on academics tended to lead educators in "forgetting about the soul of students." Further noting that developmentally, high schools youths, "at that age, students are frag-

ile." Another teacher described the ACRP as a "safety zone" in helping students. After relaying familiar stories of students' hardship, one teacher spoke earnestly of the commitment to students, "We're going to hold their hand until they finish. We love and support them."

The fall morning's assembly described at the beginning of this account captures one component of the ACRP's multi-pronged approach in retaining students. The assemblies provide a common space where guest speakers can share ideas about goal-setting, politics, careers, and community. Recognition of individual achievement is a hallmark. Afterwards, students and staff gather for food that is often available via volunteers. Other ACRP components include university campus field trips, culturally relevant curricular projects, guest speakers, and access to a therapist. While students rated the therapist as one of the least used components, one staff member insisted, "It's saving a life. How do you measure that? I see the difference when a student talks. Mentally healthy. Not thinking of suicide [anymore]." With access to career-oriented guest speakers and field trips, ACRP students could gain a broader understanding of career and higher education options.

Besides graduation rates, success is also measured in students' own words who tell ACRP staff they consider themselves "'Lucky' and if not for the ACRP, they would be dropouts," or by a student's actions such as leaving a note on a teacher's desk that reads, "Thank you for pushing me." In the second wave of interviews when the students were asked to rank the program's most important components, 37% prioritized the teachers in the top 3 with 27% of students listing counselors in the top three. One student drew attention to the family-like connections established with teachers and peers commenting, "What's important to me here? Well mostly I like the people here, because I felt comfortable and like it's a rather big family. So, what's really important is the people around because they motivate me to do good." Another evaluated the purpose behind the constant nudging by teachers, "Because they make me want to graduate - like they push me and that helps, because if they didn't push me, I wouldn't do anything. I would probably just get lazy. They are doing it for my own good, so I can graduate." A third representative comment contrasted the ACRP experience to the regular school setting, "You get like that one-on-one relationship with the teachers instead of like the whole class having one teacher. It's kind of like almost like a friendship." And the feeling seems mutual as one teacher who views the ACRP teacher-student relationship imbued with the responsibility of "instilling hope" in students.

Transforming Hope into Purpose

If schooling is one of our nation's "strategic sub-systems" as Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2011) contend then what takes place in our schools shapes the society we will inherit. ACRP students have discovered an environment in which they are supported in their learning and the effects rebound into their families and in one particular poignant incident, in their community.

ACRP students become academic ambassadors for their friends in providing advice for successful school completion. One student told us, "I tell everyone to stay in school…I tell them that it's bad to ditch school" (Jesus). Although, the ACRP is not a panacea as he later confides, "My sister doesn't come." Several shared advice given to family members and friends, "I tell my nephews not to do it [ditch class]. I don't want them to be behind." "They shouldn't do it; they'll regret

it." (Magdalena). "School is important. You can't just get a job. You start off [with] low wages" (Ricardo). It is a notable change from the youths who once considered ditching school as a common practice. Now, students begin to re-think their potential as high school graduates and some become caretakers for family members and friends.

In a sobering, yet notable way, the ACRP educators fostered a particularly meaningful public democratic project carried out by students. When a peer committed suicide by jumping off a local bridge, six teen girls sought out the ACRP counselor's help in trying to cope. He listened to their questions, sorted through their doubts, and then asked them what they felt needed to be done. They suggested a tall barrier should be erected at the site to prevent further needless deaths. Through the network of relationships cultivated through the ACRP's educators and adult community volunteers, the teens communicated their solution to a local council member and eventually made a presentation to the full city council. A local newspaper provided public recognition of their civic work by featuring their successful plea for teen safety. With the encouragement and support of the program's counselor, these teens were guided in developing a solution to disrupt further suicides in their community. In essence, their own democratic project (Peters, 2010) is an example of how schooling is at the core of a democratic society (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett, 2011). The students identified insufficient fencing at a repeated suicide location, developed a viable solution, and then spoke to appropriate city officials who promised change. When one teen related the impact of participating in this experience, she expressed surprise, "I didn't think anyone would take the time to listen." Her eyes welled with tears as she described how she now wanted to pursue a career that would lead to prevention of teen suicide. These students were empowered to become civically engaged through the ACRP experience.

Discussion

The problem of Latino academic underachievement is complex and includes sociohistorical factors and ongoing factors such as condition of schools, resources, quality of teachers, and curriculum. Yet, schools, administrators, and civic leaders have an imperative to foster and initiate reform (Madrid, 2011). The perceptions of educators and students in one high school's innovative intervention program draw attention to distinct ways in which the program's dual academic and socio-emotional aspects support students in gaining confidence in self; envisioning themselves in multiple communities; and validating their role in society through mentoring.

Gaining Confidence in Self

As evidenced by the number of graduates in the first year of the program's implementation, youths were gaining the tools to navigate the online program and complete other required projects and assignments. Once experiencing dismal grades in their traditional high school experience, they were now completing academic credits and advancing towards a high school diploma. Through the individual meetings with educators academic expectations were continually held high and students acquired study skills necessary to work through the program independently either virtually online or coming onto campus. The continual encouragement of the teachers and counselor provided youths access to ready listeners. If necessary, they could be directed to school supports and a network of

community financial, medical, and legal resources. The college tutors not only helped youths master challenging conceptual content, but also served as informal mentors who could answer their questions about the process of navigating higher education. The positive recognition—both formal at assemblies and informally during the individual meetings—reaffirmed students' capability to succeed. The encouraging discourse and "culture of support" by the ACRP staff highlighted individual teen accomplishments as well as their peers' strengths. Explicit language by teachers and educators gave students the impetus to transform their desire into action and achieve immediate academic goals as well as their future life goals.

Envisioning Self in Community

By participating in the various components of the ACRP program, students implicitly gained appreciation in being a member of multiple micro-communities: their ACRP scholarly community, their individual family, and their neighborhood. Students learned they were no longer in isolation but within the ACRP had a ready support system in place to help them address their out-of-school issues that in the past and even currently impeded them in completing their schoolwork. With ACRP sponsored field trips to campus visits and other career sites, they began to identify potential careers for themselves. Through the ACRP, students were continually being exposed to community members and speakers who talked about various career paths. Through their ongoing interactions and connections with community members, ACRP staff and tutors, and closer connection with peers they began to re-conceive of their role and responsibility within their immediate community.

Validating Role in Society

Dewey entreated that it is incumbent for education to cultivate individuals' relationships to a greater society (1909). As students recognized graduation was within reach, they reasserted themselves as experts with the ability to influence and counsel their peers and family. Some anticipated their role as the first person in their family to break through academic struggles that had sometimes been carried through several generations. By earning a high school diploma and considering college plans, they could demystify the process of attending college for their siblings. Having once dropped out or being on the verge and now returning, they had greater authority and credibility to speak to others about the pitfalls in being lured away from school by varied distractions

One vivid example of democratic engagement was by the one group of students who brought about concrete changes in the community to prevent teen suicide. Under the mentorship of the ACRP staff, the group was guided to use the social networks and local government processes to advocate for change. By identifying and solving a local problem, the youths in ACRP were tackling what Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2011) cite as a broader issue with implications for education reform, different curriculum delivery modules, but most of all cultivating and developing thinking individuals poised for participation in our country's democracy.

Conclusion

The work of these educators at ACRP points to the need for educational sites to provide caring and support systems for the whole student. In the case of the ACRP, the students are responding with vigor and taking on the role of participatory citizens. While often the

dropout rate is related to economic consequences for individual and state (Rumberger, 2012), it is also crucial to note the consequences of a high drop out rate to the intellectual vibrancy of a nation and civic community.

Implications

Implications for elementary, middle, and high schools include addressing the needs of students especially those living in poverty about providing alternative structures for making learning accessible. For high school students this may mean flexible learning opportunities through online, summer, evening, and weekend classes to accommodate students' work schedules and family life. For all levels of schooling it means recognizing individual learner needs and providing differentiation with instructional approaches and culturally relevant learning (Howard, 2011). Most of all, the findings point to the need for caring educators who maintain ongoing communication with students in an effort to develop personal relationships with students. Knowing students as unique individuals with particular interests, academic and personal goals, life concerns, and needs provides educators with information to best guide and mentor them in achieving their academic pursuits.

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