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Experiences, Perceived Challenges, and Support Systems of Early College High School Students

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, the prior experiences, perceived challenges, and support systems of 17 Grade 12 Hispanic students at an early college high school were explored using the framework of social capital theory. Utilizing Moustakas's phenomenological design, data were collected using focus group and individuals interviews. Several themes emerged and were related to the conceptual framework of social capital, such as the school environment, support from family and teachers, and the students' identify and values. Understanding the experiences of the Grade 12 students can provide valuable information for high school and college administrators in an ECHS setting.

Keywords: early college high school, phenomenology, economically disadvantaged students, first-generation college students, Hispanics

In the current knowledge-driven economy, postsecondary education is crucial for a viable workforce in the United States (College Board, 2013). Several challenges relevant to higher education administrators have been documented, however: (a) a decrease in the number of students completing college degrees (O'Banion, 2011); (b) access and equity issues relevant to student success (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012); (c) a deficiency in college preparedness among high school graduates (Barnes & Slate, 2010); and (d) a school dropout rate that decreases the likelihood of educational success of economically disadvantaged students, Black, Hispanic, and first-generation college students (Texas Education Agency, 2011). One possible solution to diminish the impact of the challenges faced by postsecondary institutions is the early college high school (ECHS) initiative.

Inaugurated in 2002 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the goal of the ECHS initiative was to provide students traditionally underrepresented in the college population with the opportunity to earn an associate's degree while attending high school (Fleishman & Heppan, 2009; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009). The process of decreasing the educational challenges came with potential costs to the

students, including the additional stress of completing coursework for high school as well as college classes. Central to the design of ECHSs was the belief that these schools were “the most ambitious attempt yet to integrate high school and community college” (Kisker, 2006, p. 81), and, therefore, many of the high schools were located on the campus of a community college.

The ECHS initiative has served low-income teens, typically ones who are first generation-college goers, English language learners, and students of color (Seltzer, 2010). Additionally, low-income students comprised at least 60% of all ECHS students (Hoffman et al., 2009). Vargas and Quiara (2010) listed advantages of ECHSs as decreased dropout rates, increased scores on end-of-course exams, and increased college courses completed. Moreover, Adams (2010) reported higher graduation rates for students in ECHSs than in traditional high school and a higher percentage of students attending college immediately after high school than students attending traditional high schools. Attendance in high school was commonly associated with students remaining in school (Edmunds et al., 2012). Moreover, Nodine (2008) declared that ECHSs increased high school graduation rates, improved college readiness, increased the college-going rates, and boosted the college-completion rates. Ongaga (2010) added, “The promise of ECHS is indisputable: It has raised expectations for all students, especially for minority students; embodies caring relationships; and enjoys a continuous involvement of parents and the community” (p. 386).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the prior experiences, perceived challenges, and support systems of Grade 12 students at an ECHS. The study is important because the success of ECHSs provided a possible remedy for the challenges of decreased college degrees, training for the workforce, college preparedness, and the school dropout rate. Insights gained by high school and college administrators about the perceptions of ECHS students from this study assisted in creating solutions to the challenges encountered by the educational community.

METHOD

We selected the phenomenological method, a common type of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), to develop an increased understanding of the perceptions of support of Grade 12 students in an ECHS. By using the approach, we were able to gain insight into the students’ experiences, perceived challenges, and sources of support. Among the various methods of data collection in phenomenological inquiry, interviews are the most common (Creswell, 2007). Because the students in the ECHS were available in person, we employed both face-to-face individual interviews and focus-group interviews.

Context of the Study

The location of the ECHS in the study was in an urban city in an area considered to be one of the lower socio-economic parts of the city. The high school and the community college were built in 2009 on property purchased by the college from the city. Although the college owns the land, the school district owns the high school building.

Students at ECHSs typically are low socioeconomic urban students, English language learners, and first-generation college goers (Alvarado & Peebles-Wilkins, 2003). The number of students at the ECHS

spotlighted in this research was 460. The demographics were as follows: (a) 86% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch; (b) 85% were English language learners; (c) 87% were from families who are first-generation college goers; and (d) 90% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian, 2% were Black, 2% were Caucasian, and 3% were not self-identified by race or ethnicity. As first-generation college goers, these students were from populations at high risk for not entering college.

Procedures

Qualitative researchers typically include a variety of data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). We incorporated a three-stage approach for the collection of data about the experiences and perceptions of the ECHS students. Phase 1 utilized focus group interviews; Phase 2 was the collection of demographic data; and Phase 3 was the interviews with individual students. The criteria for the participants in this study were as follows: each student was (a) enrolled in the ECHS, (b) working to complete his or her associate's degree from the community college associated with the high school in May 2013, (c) and was completing high school in May 2013 (i.e., students in Grade 12). Additionally, each co-researcher (i.e., student) was willing to participate in the interview process, and parental permission was gained for each student under age 18.

We organized three focus groups for a total of 17 individuals in group interviews: seven students in Group 1, three in Group 2, and seven in Group 3. For Phase 2, each of the 17 participants completed the Demographic Data Questionnaire at the conclusion of the group interview. For the individual interviews, we selected five individuals using the criterion-based sampling technique (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Data Analysis

An important characteristic of qualitative research is that the researchers are a key aspect of data analysis (Creswell, 2009). The goal of qualitative data analysis is for the researchers to understand and accurately interpret the data. We adapted Moustakas's (1994) procedure to include the focus group interviews as well as the individual interviews used in the study. The following are the steps we used to analyze the data.

1. Describe our perceptions of the phenomenon, the Epoche.
2. Use the verbatim transcripts of the focus group interviews and the individual interviews to record the significant statements made by the co-researchers (i.e., students). Include verbatim examples.
3. Specify the invariant meaning units of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
4. "Cluster the invariant meaning units into themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Include verbatim examples.
5. "Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into *a description of the textures of the experience* [emphasis in original]" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

FINDINGS

Five major clusters emerged from the collected and analyzed data. The themes were (a) the significance of an associate’s degree, (b) the importance of a positive school environment, (c) the establishment of co-researchers’ identity and values, (d) the impact of the co-researcher’s family members, and (e) the necessity of support from the co-researcher’s peers and the ECHS teachers and administrators. A summary of emergent themes is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Emergent Themes

Emergent Themes	Description of Themes	Examples of Significant Statements
Significance of an Associate’s Degree	Associate’s degree during high school could only be obtained at an ECHS	“It’s a great opportunity to advance a little bit, one step closer to your jobs and goals.” “I couldn’t get these opportunities at my zoned school.”
Importance of a Positive School Environment	Friendly, happy, and safe small school	“You build up this whole environment that’s like friendly. It’s like a huge family.” “Here there are no fights, no bullying, no graffiti, none of that.”
Establishment of Identity and Values	Increasing self-awareness, clarifying values, and developing adult skills for success	“It [the ECHS experience] gave me the confidence to know that I can do something. It showed me that anything is in my reach if I just try.” “[Attending this school] has changed me as a person. It’s made me a better person, and it’s actually given me a future.”
Impact of Family Members	Positive and negative influence on the students’ participation at the ECHS	“My parents told me ‘It’s going to help you in the long run and it’s basically 2 free years of college that you can use the money for something else.’ They were just thinking of the future.”
Necessity of Support From Peers and Teachers	Practical guidance and emotional comfort	“They are there whenever I’m not feeling good or something. Somebody shows up to help me.” “Being in a small school gives you like a second family of friends and teachers.”

The Significance of an Associate's Degree

Taking college classes during high school was a thrill for the co-researchers. Saul explained, "I was 13 when I got my first college credit. I was excited!" Each of the co-researchers acknowledged the value of the opportunity provided by an ECHS to earn an associate's degree from the community college while earning a high school diploma. For many of the participants' who were first-generation college students, the notion of earning any college credit was, according to Marisol, "dreaming big." Completing the degree fulfilled that dream. Moreover, the students gained a 2-year head start toward a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the economic advantage provided a great incentive for the co-researchers to remain at the ECHS. Tuition and fees were waived by the college, and the high school paid for the textbooks. The resulting scholarships for the students were very appealing to the students' parents.

Likewise, one of the perquisites associated with earning an associate's degree was the chance to visit public and private universities in Texas. Another opportunity was the focus on applying for scholarships. As Pedro commented, "I got a full ride to the University of Texas at Austin," and he admitted that the scholarship probably would not have materialized without the assistance of the personnel at the ECHS. Taking college electives broadened the students' horizons because of the variety of courses offered, such as anthropology, criminal justice, philosophy, and social psychology. Saul summarized the significance of earning an associate's degree: "I've done things [at this school] I don't think I'd be able to do anywhere else."

The Importance of a Positive School Environment

Several of the students commented about the positive environment at the ECHS. The students felt happy and safe even though the small school presented some challenges as well as some benefits to the students. Although Gloria did not want to enroll at the ECHS, by her junior year she said she had "finally settled down." She expressed her appreciation for the positive atmosphere:

I just remember looking up and seeing everybody, almost everybody, laughing and smiling at their little friends. It melted my heart! I was just like WOW!

Another aspect of the positive setting was the safety factor. Julian remarked, "It gives my mom a sense of peace and calm because she knows we aren't in any gangs or a bad environment." Saul continued, "The worst thing [at this school] was like procrastination, it's not like drugs and all those other things I could have done at other schools."

One downside of a small school is that rumors and gossip traveled quickly, and students missed participating in traditional high school activities such as homecoming. An additional disadvantage of a small school was that the frequent involvement of administrators with the students; the co-researchers perceived that, at a traditional high school, the administrators would be more distant. Alternately, the co-researchers agreed that family-like atmosphere of the school outweighed the annoyances. Monica declared that the biggest advantage of the size of the school was the relationships she had built: "We all know each other by name . . . and we all look out for each other. Going to a small school gives you like a second family."

The Establishment of the Co-Researchers' Identity and Values

According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, solidifying an identity is an essential aspect of adolescence (Wood, Wood, & Boyd., 2011). Marisol proclaimed, "Every day you learn something about yourself." The small-school environment at an ECHS offered a rich training ground for the co-researchers to acquire new knowledge about themselves and the world around them.

Increasing their self-awareness offered personal insight to several of the co-researchers. Marisol declared, "Because it's a different high school experience, it has taught me more." One of the values the co-researchers acquired at the ECHS was having a career rather than just a job to earn money. Angelica affirmed, "I don't want to do it [work] just for the money. I want to work to be someone. I want to make a change." Closely related to acquiring a career was the importance of assisting the family. For example, Julian wanted to be responsible for his own education so he could help his family financially. Serving as a role model for younger siblings and cousins was another aspect of valuing responsibility.

Developing the skills that adults needed to be happy and successful, such as decision-making and goal-setting, were essential to the co-researchers. Mastering time-management skills was also difficult for all of the co-researchers; however, they recognized the importance of conquering procrastination. Moreover, accepting responsibility for their decisions, commitments, and behavior was problematic for the students. Marisol added, "It is my responsibility to do what I said. It's helped me overcome the challenges I've faced."

The Impact of the Co-Researchers' Family Members

Many of the co-researchers' family members urged the students to succeed at the ECHS; however, some family members tried to persuade their students to leave the school. Nevertheless, each of the participants mentioned the influence from their family members related to their involvement in the ECHS. For example, a negative influence occurred because the students' attendance at the school required the parents to commit to arranging transportation for the students each school day. Thus these studented believed that their families members had negative perceptions toward their attendance at the ECHS.

On the other hand, most of the families realized the tremendous financial advantage available for the student who earned the associate's degree, and the families provided encouragement and support to the co-researchers. These families had a positive influence on their students. In addition to the co-researchers' parents, other family members provided encouragement. Pedro commented, "I think my biggest supporter in all of this is my brother for anything, any problems, any situations, whether it was something good, something bad, anything, I would go to him."

The Necessity of Support From the Co-Researchers' Peers and Teachers

Support from the co-researchers' peers and from the ECHS faculty and administrators was an essential aspect of the ECHS experience. Monica commented about her dependence on her friends for advice and help with her studies:

We are literally at each other's houses on the weekends. We're on the phone with each other at all hours of the night getting our homework done to turn in on time. We say, "You need to do that scholarship. You need to do that. Your homework is due tomorrow, is it done?" We look out for each other like if we're siblings.

Similarly, Maritza affirmed the importance of emotional support from her favorite teacher:

When I got kicked out of my house, she [one of my teachers] was one of the first people to help me out. Whenever I have a problem or I have a question, or I need some sort of advice, I always go to her. She did a lot for me. It meant a lot to me.

Likewise, Adriana summarized the importance of friendships at an ECHS: "It's hard, 'it's difficult, it's stressful, but in the end it's worth it. And you get to go to a family environment and have friends, and it's worth it at the end."

DISCUSSION

According to Gee (2013), "the strength of America's future depends on the ingenuity sparked by our college graduates" (p. 5). Gee's (2013) statement emphasized the importance of the four aspects of the challenges to higher education administrators addressed by the ECHS Initiative: (a) access and equity issues, (b) school dropout concerns, (c) college and career readiness challenges, and (d) degree completion issues. Access and equity issues include the need to emphasize postsecondary education for Hispanic and Black students, students who are economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students (Lewin, 2010b). At the same time, the school dropout rate must be decreased specifically for Hispanic and Black students (McMillion, Ramirez, & Lewis, 2010). Furthermore, high school graduates must be academically prepared for postsecondary education (Conley, 2007; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009), and the workforce must be sufficiently trained to use soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, and problem solving (Conley, 2010; Pittman, 2011). The number of students in the United States completing postsecondary education must be increased to keep pace with the global marketplace (Contreras, Flores-Ragade, Lee, & McGuire, 2011).

The significance of an associate's degree theme from this study related to access and equity. With a target population of students who were economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and first-generation college students, receiving the opportunity to earn an associate's degree at an ECHS was like a "dream come true" for the families of the co-researchers. The economic advantage of tuition for 60 semester hours of college classes was an appreciated gift to the families according to the students. Additional benefits, such as scholarships opportunities for a 4-year institution, provided economic assistance to some of the families. As a result, the students and their families were well aware that earning college credit was a privilege rather than an entitlement, and the students behaved appropriately to maintain their eligibility to take college classes.

Four of the five of the emergent themes were linked to the literature about high school dropouts. In this study, the importance of a positive school environment appeared to hearten the students to want to attend classes, and the impact of family members as well as the necessity of support from peers and teachers contributed needed social capital for students at-risk of dropping out of high school.

Additionally, the significance of an associate's degree during high school seemed to some students like a faster track to success in the adult world.

Connected to college readiness challenges documented in the literature was the emergent theme of the significance of earning an associate's degree. Earning college credit, however, required the students first to achieve passing scores for college readiness in reading and writing. All of the Grade 12 students at the ECHS were qualified to take college classes by virtue of their scores on the placement test used at the community college to determine college readiness. About 75% of the seniors were also college ready in mathematics. The achievement of college readiness was a source of social capital in that the students had met the appropriate academic standards for the state.

Directly connected to degree completion issues in our study was the theme of the significance of an associate's degree. Although all of the Grade 12 students earned some college credit during high school, 76.6% of the seniors in the study will graduate from the community college with an associate's degree 3 weeks before they graduate from high school. The co-researchers and their families were proud of their achievements, and they appreciated the opportunities available at an ECHS. In addition to the theme of earning an associate's degree, and as a result of earning their associate's degree, the co-researchers established aspects of their identity and developed their values. Increasing self-awareness and self-esteem allowed the participants to gain confidence and independence as well as skills for success as competent adults.

As the goal of the ECHS initiative, the theme of earning an associate's degree during high school was significant in the study. The economic benefit to the economically disadvantaged families fulfilled the dream of providing their children with a college education. Moreover, the students in this study reported that they developed adult skills such as goal setting, decision making, responsibility, and commitment.

The theme of a positive school environment specifically related to the students' relationships at an ECHS. The small school (i.e., 460 students) was conducive to a family-like atmosphere with caring peers and adults. Likewise, the school family supported each other in their endeavors as well as their challenges.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers could conduct a longitudinal study with beginning ECHS students to review the educational progress in the university setting. A mixed methods design would be useful in that both qualitative and quantitative data could be examined. A second study could examine the experiences of these students not finishing a college degree at the ECHS; researchers might uncover different findings related to students' relationships within the school and their support systems. Replication studies are another suggestion for future research. For example, two other schools in the state began at the same time as the school highlighted in this study. Results of studying the three schools could be compared to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ECHS experience.

We identified several noncognitive factors that students reported as influences on their persistence in the ECHS (e.g., peer relationships, family support, time management). Therefore, more information is

needed about the noncognitive factors of college readiness (Conley, 2010). Another researcher, using the data collected in this study or with another sample of ECHS students, could examine the students' experiences through the lens of the noncognitive factors of college readiness. The students in our study will be entering a university with 60 semester hours of college credit. As such, they will likely be in classes with upperclassmen. Even though these students have demonstrated academic college readiness, what will their experiences be in regards to time management, independent living skills, and social interactions?

CONCLUSION

The success of the ECHS initiative addresses four aspects of the problem—that is,, access and equity issues, school dropout concerns, college and career readiness challenges, and degree completion—and each of the four aspects represents an advantage of ECHSs. For example, the implementation of ECHSs in the United States appears to increase the access and equity for economically disadvantaged students, first-generation college goers, English language learners, and students of color (Seltzer, 2010). More than 75,000 students in 28 states and the District of Columbia attended more than 240 ECHSs, and nearly two thirds of the students enrolled in ECHSs nationwide in 2010 were Black or Hispanic (Early College High School Initiative, 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2012; Seltzer, 2010). Additionally, the majority of students enrolled in ECHSs were first-generation college students, and almost 60% of ECHS students were eligible for free and reduced lunch (Early College High School Initiative, 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2012; Seltzer, 2010).

Another advantage of ECHSs was the decrease in the school dropout rate (Lewin, 2010a; Vargas & Quiara, 2010). According to Steinberg and Allen (2011), high school graduation rates for ECHS students “well exceeded the national average,” with 92% of ECHS students graduating as compared to 69% nationally (p. 21). Moreover, ECHS students scored higher on end-of-course exams (Vargas & Quiara, 2010), state-mandated exams (Rutledge, 2010), and had higher attendance rates and fewer suspensions (Edmunds et al., 2012) than students in traditional high schools.

Increased rates of college readiness was the third advantage of ECHSs (Born, 2006; Goodwin, 2010; Valdez, 2009). Nationwide, as many as 70% of high school graduates did not meet college and career readiness in reading, in writing, or in mathematics (Conley, 2007; Roderick et al., 2009; Spence, 2009). Moore et al. (2010) documented that the college-ready rate in Texas for both reading and mathematics for White high school seniors was less than one half, but the rates were much lower for Black and Hispanic students. Alternately, the addition of strong social capital relationships increased the levels of college and career readiness in ECHSs (Born, 2006; Goodwin, 2010; Valdez, 2009). For example, at the school in this study, 100% of the graduating seniors met the readiness standards for reading and writing, and 75% met the standards for mathematics.

The fourth advantage of ECHSs was college degree completion. In 2010, 23.3% of ECHS graduates also earned an associate's degree or technical certificate, and 77% pursued some form of postsecondary education (Early College High School Initiative, 2012; Jobs for the Future, 2012; Seltzer, 2010). Klasik (2012) identified three steps for enrollment in a 4-year institution. Students first must decide in Grade 10 if they wanted to attain a 4-year degree. In the second step, students had to maintain the aspiration for college into Grade 12 and take the SAT or the ACT to sustain their qualifications for acceptance at a

4-year institution. Applying to a university was the final step in the process (Klasik, 2012). With the focus on degree completion at ECHSs, most students were successful in accomplishing the three steps at many ECHSs (Seltzer, 2010).

Finally, the success of ECHSs as documented in prior studies provides a possible remedy for the challenges of access and equity issues, school dropout concerns, college and career readiness challenges, and degree completion. As an inherent aspect of the design of the ECHS in this study was the significance of social capital, which was a quality that was incorporated into the daily activities and experienced in the form of supportive relationships. Application of social capital at the school enabled these students to complete high school and earn an associate's degree, an outstanding achievement for economically disadvantaged English language learners who were first-generation college students. Consequently, the trajectory of the lives of students at the ECHS was changed as they merged new skills with past experiences to establish a new paradigm for themselves and their families.

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