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Understanding Latina/o School Pushout: Experiences of Students Who Left School Before Graduating

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In this qualitative study, the authors describe narratives of school experiences of Latina/o early school leavers, examine their reasons for leaving school before graduating, and analyze their responses using the resistance model. In addition, the authors compare the participants' reasons for leaving school with data from the Clark County School District's 2007 Dropout Survey Report. They conclude that the most salient issues discussed by Latina/o early school leavers are discrimination and racial microaggressions.

Key words: pushout, dropout, achievement gap, critical pedagogy, social oppression, subtractive schooling

Currently, the state of educational attainment for most Latina/o students is in crisis. (The term *Latina/o* is used here to respect both genders and more accurately reflect the political, geographical, and historical links among Latin American countries.) Compared with other groups, Latina/o students are more likely to be enrolled below grade level, are less likely to participate in preschool and after-school programs, drop out earlier and at higher rates, and have lower literacy rates (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Latina/o students are less likely than their non-Latina/o peers to complete high school, and recent Latina/o immigrants are even more likely to drop out (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007). The Latina/o population aged 25 and older is less likely than non-Latina/o Whites to have at least graduated from high school (57.0% and 88.4%, respectively). In addition, more than one quarter of Latinas/os have less than a ninth-grade education (27.3%) compared with only 4.2% of non-Latina/o Whites. The proportion of those with a bachelor's degree or more is much lower for Latinas/os than for non-Latina/o Whites. Less than one quarter of Latina/o students aged 18 through 24 are enrolled in postsecondary degree-granting institutions. In addition, Latinas/os represent only 5% of graduate students in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Using Census data and information from the National Center for Education Statistics, Yosso (2006) summarized it in the following manner:

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> We begin with 100 Chicana and Chicano students at the elementary school level, noting that 56 drop out of high school and 44 continue on to graduate. (The term Chicana/Chicano is used to mean students of Mexican ancestry.) In Nevada, 72% of the Latina/o population is of Mexican descent. In addition, educational attainment and other statistics vary by nationality group. Of the 44 who graduate from high school, about 26 continue on toward some form of postsecondary education. Of those 26, approximately 17 enroll in community college and nine enroll in a 4-year institution. Of those 17 in community colleges, only one will transfer to a 4-year institution. Of the nine Chicanas/os attending a 4-year college and the one community college transfer student, seven will graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Finally, two Chicana/o students will continue on to earn a graduate or professional school degree and less than one will receive a doctorate. (p. 4)

Understanding Latina/o students' school experiences is one way to develop and implement strategies to support increased educational achievement. There is not one simple solution. This study provides a view into a window of possible solutions for the educational crisis faced by Latinas/os.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe narratives of school experiences of Latina/o early school leavers, examine their reasons for leaving school before graduating, and analyze their responses using the resistance model laid out by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001). In addition, the authors compare the participants' reasons for leaving school with data from the Clark County School District's (CCSD) 2007 Dropout Survey Report. The following research questions served as a guide for the study: Why do Latina/o students leave high school before graduating? What are the school experiences of Latina/o early school leavers? What are the perceptions of Latina/o early school leavers regarding the differences between them and students of other ethnic groups? How do participants' behaviors fit into the categories of resistance or oppositional behavior? Finally, how do the participants' reasons for leaving school early compare to the results of the school district's dropout survey report?

The term *pushout* is used as opposed to *dropout* because the data reveal that students' decisions to leave school are not solely an individual choice but rather a result of various factors, including institutional practices/policies and social forces that push students out. For example, some school staff may counsel students out in order to help meet academic goals. Other students are counseled out because they present discipline problems with which the school does not want to deal. In other instances, teacher and school personnel attitudes push students out by creating an unwelcoming and hostile environment.

BACKGROUND: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CCSD DROPOUT SURVEY REPORT

In an effort to examine the reasons why students leave school, personnel in the CCSD in Las Vegas, Nevada, contacted non-return students every year via the telephone. In November 2007, they collected some self-report data regarding the reasons students did not return to school (CCSD, n.d.). Counselors reached 1,020 of the 3,791 ninth- through twelfth-grade students listed on the non-return report. The remainder (2,771 students) were unreachable because of disconnected phone lines and/or invalid emergency contact information. According to survey

results, the top reasons students who were reached gave for having left school were as follows: did not like school, found a job, or were credit deficient. Of the non-return students, 37.5% were White, 15.4% were Black, 6.2% were Asian, 1.1% were American Indian, and 39.8% were Hispanic. However, responses were not reported by race/ethnicity; therefore, it is not possible to know whether reasons for not returning to school varied by ethnic group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have examined the possible contributing causes to the Latina/o education crisis; some issues cited in the research as contributing factors include unequal funding for schools located in low-income areas (Kozol, 1991); the absence of qualified and caring teachers (Valenzuela, 1999); the dismantling of bilingual education programs (Crawford, 2004); and the imposition of disciplinary actions that reproduce conditions of dominance, subordination and institutional racism (e.g., low expectations; Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Other factors identified in the literature include the absence of meaningful participation by teachers in school reform efforts (Orfield, 2004); the tracking of students of color into vocational and special education classes; racial segregation; overcrowded schools; poorly maintained schools; untrained or uncredentialed teachers; a shortage of school supplies and textbooks; minimal access to college preparatory, Advanced Placement, and honors courses; an overreliance on biased standardized tests; and the dismissive treatment of Latina/o cultural strengths (Yosso, 2006).

Although little empirical evidence supports cultural deficit models (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), these models are most often used to explain school failure among Latinas/os. Cultural deficit models blame Latina/o students, parents, and communities for lacking specific attributes, which in turn leads to academic failure. This model finds dysfunction in Latina/o cultural values and proposes that these values are to blame for low educational and occupational attainment (Ogbu, 1990). Some of the alleged deficient cultural values include immediate gratification, an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition, a present versus future time orientation, and a tendency to minimize the importance of education and upward mobility (Valencia, 1997). Furthermore, supporters of this model assert that Latina/o families (mainly Mexican or Chicana/o families) exhibit dysfunctional social structures: large, disorganized, female-headed, Spanish- or nonstandard-English-speaking, and patriarchal or matriarchal family hierarchies that cause and perpetuate a culture of poverty (Sowell, 1981). In addition, the model argues that Latina/o parents fail to assimilate and embrace the educational values of the dominant group and socialize their children with values that do not support educational achievement (Banfield, 1974).

Deficit thinking permeates society today. Both schools and those who work in schools reflect this belief. Professional meetings, school personnel meetings, teacher training, and most places where people discuss the issue of Latina/o education or dropout include words such as *underclass, at risk,* and *disadvantaged* (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). According to García and Guerra (2004), this reality calls for a critical review of the factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and in fact reproduce "educational inequalities for students from nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds" (p. 155).

Recently, researchers examining Mexican identity, such as Valenzuela (1999), have steadily shown that mainstream institutions continue to strip away the identities of Mexican children

through educational systems that show a lack of caring for them and through subtractive assimilation practices. According to Valenzuela, this loss of Mexican identity, plus a continuous loss of social capital available to later generation Mexicans, negatively impacts the academic achievement and school success rates of many Mexican students.

Valenzuela (1999) asserted that schools subtract resources from U.S. Mexican youth. She argued that students do not fail school; schools fail students. Schools dismiss the definition of *educación* in the Mexican culture that assumes that an individual student's "progress" is lodged in the caring relationship developed between teacher and student.

> Although *educación* has implications for pedagogy, it is first a foundational cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should live in the world. With its emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality, it provides a benchmark against by which all humans are to be judged, formally educated or not. (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21)

Valenzuela also argued that "subtractive schooling encompasses subtractive assimilation policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language" (p. 20). Schools are organized to perpetuate inequality through academic tracking, a cultural bias against Mexican culture and the Spanish language, and a legacy of ambiguous relations between themselves and the communities they serve.

Subtractive schooling is based on a 3-year ethnographic study at a predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American school in Houston, Texas. Schooling deprives the students at the high school of important social and cultural resources, leaving them more and more vulnerable to academic failure. For example, first- and often second-generation Mexican and Central American students outperform their third- and later generation counterparts (Suarez-Orozco, 1991; Vigil & Long, 1981). Mexican immigrant youth consistently fare better than U.S.-born Mexican students when grades, test scores, and dropout rates are examined (Valenzuela, 1999). Immigrant youth are more likely to be perceived by teachers as respectful, obedient, and deferential (Suarez-Orozco, 1991). Students who display these behaviors are rewarded by their teachers. Furthermore, this behavior is consistent with mainstream teachers' expectations of "Mexican" behavior. For immigrant youth, criticizing the school is seen as inappropriate and impolite. In contrast, the attitudes of U.S.-born youth are seen as "deficient," lacking in drive and motivation. These youth are viewed by school personnel as lacking the linguistic, cultural, moral, and intellectual traits the assimilationist curriculum requires (DeVillar, 1994). Valenzuela (1999) found that youth born in the United States are merely opposed to the "schooling process that disrespects them; they oppose not education, but *schooling*—the content of the education and the way it is offered" (p. 5, emphasis in original). School officials may see disengaged, rebellious, and defiant youth, but Valenzuela found youth who seek unconditional acceptance and caring relationships as the basis for teacher-learning experience. Teachers see students as not *caring,* and students see teachers as not *caring.* As one student said, "If the school doesn't care about my learning why should I care? Answer me that. Just answer me that!" (p. 3).

Furthermore, Valenzuela (1999) has proposed that schools are organized in such a way that fractures students' cultural and ethnic identities that create divisions among students and between students and staff. Teachers fail to make meaningful relationships with students; students are alienated from their teachers, and often first-generation and U.S.-born students are hostile toward one another. In general, the feeling that "no one cares" is pervasive.

In this framework, an authentically caring pedagogy would reverse the effects of subtractive schooling. "Additive" schooling would be about equalizing opportunities and about assimilating Mexicans into larger society. Students can be both Mexican and American. Addictive schooling is about the maintenance of community, including the home–school relationship.

Using critical race theory, Yosso (2006) shifted the view from a deficit perspective of communities of color and focused on community cultural wealth. Community cultural wealth includes an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts of socially marginalized groups that usually go unrecognized, unacknowledged, or uncelebrated. Her approach to understanding student success and barriers brought to the forefront structural barriers and sociopolitical histories and contexts. The framework is based on the concept of social capital that originally appeared in the literature in the early 1900s (Hanifan, 1916). Yosso asserted that various forms of capital fostered through cultural wealth, including aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, familial, and resistance capital, are used by communities of color to survive and resist oppression. These areas of capital are used by Latinos in order to survive the institutional neglect of the U.S. public school system that has consistently failed them. These categories are not static or mutually exclusive; they are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the forefront of critical education research are theories that contest schooling practices that maintain the subordination of "oppressed" people, including but not limited to poor, working-class, female, ethnic-/linguistic-minority, undocumented, disabled, and queer students and many other marginalized and discriminated populations. (The use of the word *queer* is related to the community activist practice of using the term *queer* as a reclaimed and redefined label that acts as an umbrella for many non-heteronormative identifications, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, allied, and fluid. It is a term that holds political significance and is heavily associated with the gay/queer rights movement.) Freire's (1994) work is the foundation for many of the efforts in this area, as he outlined a theoretical model for working with oppressed students many years ago. He focused primarily on those oppressed by their condition as exploited workers, but his theories have been expanded to include many more discriminated and exploited groups. Freire argued that dehumanization is the "result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (p. 26). He also asserted that "sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so" (p. 26). Hence, the oppressed will not be able to tolerate their continued oppression/dehumanization and will eventually have no other recourse but to resist and seek out their own liberation. According to Freire, the oppressed can and should be transformers of their world, and they can do this through a liberatory praxis that includes a critical consciousness/education, or *conscientización,* and action.

Critical pedagogue Giroux (1983) also wrote that a radical pedagogy will be achieved only when there is a greater understanding of the relationships between power, resistance, and human agency. That is, power dynamics at play within schools are systematically disenfranchising particular students based on certain aspects of their identities and background. However, there are also many ways in which these students and their educators are strategically resisting oppression and pushout factors. Marginalized students and their allies have human agency, and they

are surviving and thriving using their education and critical consciousness to navigate an unjust system. The majoritarian perspective that posits that all students have an equal opportunity and access to education is heavily contested by the work of critical scholars. The authors recognize the injustices but also realize that there are ways to change the expected outcomes.

Chicana and Chicano critical race education scholars Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) expanded on Giroux's discussion of resistance as they examined the oppositional behavior of students from a critical race perspective. They analyzed the experiences of the students involved in the 1968 East Los Angeles School walkouts and 1993 University of California at Los Angeles Chicana and Chicano studies protests to explore student resistance. According to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, students exhibit four distinct categories of resistance or oppositional behavior in response to social oppression. Reactionary or defiant behavior is not resistance because the students lack both a critique of their oppressive conditions and a motivation toward liberation or social justice. Self-defeating resistance is displayed by students who may have some type of critique of their oppressive social conditions but are not motivated by an interest in liberation or social justice. These students engage in behavior that is not transformational and in fact may help to recreate the oppressive conditions from which it originated. Conformist resistance refers to the oppositional behavior of students who are motivated by a need for liberation and social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of domination. These students are motivated by a desire to create social justice yet engage in activities and behavior within a more liberal tradition. They want things to get better for themselves and others, but they are likely to blame themselves, their families, or their culture for the negative conditions they find themselves in. Transformational resistance is a form of student behavior that is accompanied by a critique of domination and a desire for self- or social liberation. In other words, students must hold an awareness and critique of the oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be motivated by a sense of social justice. With a deeper level of understanding and a social justice orientation, transformational resistance offers the greatest possibility for social change.

METHODS

In an effort to understand the school experiences of Latina/o students and the reasons they drop out in Clark County, the researchers used a qualitative approach. This approach was suitable because it allowed the researchers to gain in-depth information about the participants and their entire school experience. Two focus groups and two in-depth interviews with a total of 17 participants were convened between October 2008 and March 2009. Ten males and 7 females participated. Eight participants were born in Mexico, two were born in El Salvador, and seven were born in the United States (five were of Mexican ancestry and two were of Central American ancestry). Fifteen participants were enrolled at an adult high school at the time of the focus groups and interviews; two participants were neither enrolled in school nor working. The focus groups and interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min each. All of the young adults had dropped out of a CCSD high school. Both focus groups were of mixed gender; one focus group included only immigrants to the United States. All of the participants were Latinas/os between the ages of 18 and 25 who had left high school before graduating.

Students were invited to participate in a focus group or interview through flyers posted around the adult high school, announcements made via the adult high school intercom system, and

referrals made by staff at the adult high school. One focus group was funded by a grant that Nevada Kids Count received from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (students were given $60 in cash for participating). The other focus group and two interviews were funded by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension general operating budget (students were given $15 gift cards for participating). The group facilitators were experienced bilingual Latina professors. The focus group started with general open-ended questions designed to establish rapport and encourage candid conversation. The facilitators guided the discussion around a series of questions. These questions were chosen for their direct relationship to the topic. One focus group was conducted in English, and the focus group with the immigrants was conducted in Spanish and English, as preferred by the participants. The focus groups were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were translated into English where necessary. Institutional review board approval was sought and obtained for the study. All of the names used in this article have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

A coding system was developed and tracked on a tally sheet. The categories and codes were based on the domain or sphere of influence that a particular factor was in. For example, participants mentioned teachers and coursework; therefore, a "school" category was created, then subcategories were created for "teachers" and "coursework." Items that were related to personal choices, decisions, or circumstances were placed in a "personal" category. Comments were never assigned to more than one category. For example, participants mentioned peer pressure to ditch or use drugs; this reason was only placed in the "ditching" category and not in a "peer pressure" category.

The responses fit in two general categories: (a) school issues—discrimination or racial microaggressions, apathetic and bad teachers, bad school or negative school climate, irrelevant and boring coursework, and falling behind in grades and coursework; (b) personal issues—ditching, hanging around with the wrong crowd, cultural issues, not understanding English, using drugs, fighting, working, laziness and bad attitude.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants discussed several themes related to school issues, including discrimination and racial microaggressions, apathetic and bad teachers, a bad school or negative school environment, irrelevant and boring coursework, and falling behind in school. These themes were assigned to the "school" category. The themes assigned to the "personal" category included ditching, wrong crowd, drugs, fighting, and laziness; cultural issues; ESL; pregnancy; work; and mental health issues. Participant quotes are provided for each theme, and an analysis follows each category.

School Issues

Discrimination and racial microaggressions. Generally the most prominent theme discussed by participants had to do with issues at school, specifically discrimination and racial

microaggressions by teachers and administrators. *Microaggressions* "are subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978, p. 66). Also, Davis (1989) defined *microaggressions* as "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (p. 1576). Finally, Delgado and Stefancic (1992) further described examples of subtle racism as ones in which victims become sensitized to the subtle nuances and codewords of racism—the body language; averted gazes; exasperated looks; terms such as "you people," "innocent whites," "highly qualified black," "articulate," and so on—that, whether intended or not, convey racially charged meanings (p. 1283). These subtle forms of racism can have a dramatic effect on people of color.

Participants generally believed that teachers, administrators, and school personnel gave preferential treatment to Whites and Blacks and that they were treated negatively based on their ethnicity. One participant said that he got expelled for "just smoking, whereas White kids could do all kinds of things and nothing would happen." Another male participant said that he was blamed for stealing a box of suckers because he was the only Latino in the class. All participants provided personal experiences of feeling discriminated. One young man stated the following, very emotionally:

> With Latinos everything is gang related. If three Latinos are hanging out, it's a gang. They'll [school police] stop you and pull up your shirt to check out your tattoos then take pictures. I walked into one of my English classes and I just had a sweater and I just sat down and put my head down and the teacher actually, she called the school police thinking that I was going to shoot up the school only because I had my hoodie up and I put my hands down . . . I saw an officer in front of me and he's asking me can I unzip my jacket. I was like okay. So I took off my sweater and then they searched me and they're like, "Oh no, we're just being precautious." I'm like being precautious by searching me because I got a hoodie on?

Participants definitely did not believe that their culture was valued and thought that it was seen as a negative. One student was told by his White Spanish teacher, "You speak slang Spanish not correct Spanish." He felt bad about this and said, "They just put you down." Students thought there was an ungenuine effort to appear to value their culture: "We only have 5 de Mayo even though it's Hispanic Month! We are feeling left out, they say it is Hispanic Month but don't do anything, don't teach us anything about our history." Another participant said that a teacher told the class, composed of mostly Mexican students, that "if they didn't study they would end up like the other Mexicans standing outside of Home Depot."

In summary, the theme of discrimination and racial microaggressions was the most salient. Racial microaggressions can have a tremendous impact on students' motivation and ability to persist in school. Students were very aware of teachers' attitudes and beliefs and how they were communicated, whether in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. For several participants, leaving school was done in resistance to the discrimination they experienced on a daily basis in school. This kind of resistance can be classified as self-defeating resistance, as noted previously (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, if students have no articulated or conscious critique of discrimination, it can be viewed as reactionary behavior (unmotivated for social justice/liberation and lacking a critique of social oppression).

Apathetic and bad teachers. Another theme discussed by focus group participants had to do with teacher experiences. Participants were very critical of teachers, although they acknowledged that there were some good teachers. Participants perceived most teachers as apathetic and as not enjoying teaching. The following statements reflect their perceptions: "Even if students fail, teachers still get their check." "We are treated like little kids; they are constantly insulting our intelligence." "Some teachers hate their job and take it out on the student. Most teachers are not willing to help." "Teachers only focus on students who are doing well. They don't try to help kids who are struggling, they try to get you out." "Most just give you a worksheet and tell you to fill it out." "There are teachers that actually let students fight in the classroom . . . yeah, the [physical education] coach would be betting on it . . . they'd be like I'll bet $20 this one wins right here."

Linda, an immigrant from El Salvador, said,

> I had teachers who were Hispanic, but my teacher who was also from El Salvador . . . she told me that she didn't speak Spanish. But once I heard her speaking Spanish, and told her so, and she said yes, but not to you, but, I told her that I didn't know how to do my homework. She said I must do it anyway.

The teacher never helped Linda or explained the instructions in Spanish; therefore, she was not able to do her assignments. Several participants did remark that the adult high school they were attending had better teachers. One student said, "Teachers care," referring to the adult high school teachers.

Valenzuela's (1999) work on "caring" affirms many of the narratives heard from participants regarding this theme. Her research demonstrates that educational institutions continue to strip away the identities of Mexican children through a system that shows a lack of caring and through subtractive assimilation practices. Participants also confirmed what Valenzuela found, that teachers fail to make meaningful relationships with students; and, just as in Valenzuela's work, students generally believed that "no one cares."

Bad school or negative school climate. Participants were very aware of the disparities between schools. "It seems like people just go there [schools in "rich" neighborhoods] to do their work and just go. But these schools are so out of control," said one person. Another student agreed, "For some reason, the schools in the west side are the most messed up, the west and the east side, like the good schools are like down in the south." Alan said that people do not really hear about all of the problems at the school. He said that there was a big riot at his school and that people actually lit trashcans on fire, hit the dean with a bottle of Clorox, and had food fights. He said, "It's like hard to go to school and focus on school with all this stuff around you, there's so many problems you've got to worry about." He added, "It's getting hard out there, just hope you guys can make it better for those that are coming. They underestimate us and are quick to judge."

Students were fully aware of the fact that their schools were sorely underresourced, and this had a direct impact on their perception of the value of their education and self-perception. Although they critiqued the educational system, many believed they have very little recourse and ability to create change around this reality. One participant said,

> They had to actually put in just single chairs without desks because they were running out of room . . . sometimes you'd be like, "Well you got to go outside in the hall, here's your book . . . if you have questions come inside." You just try to do the work, but if I don't get it, I'm going home.

Irrelevant and boring coursework. Another major reason cited for dropping out was irrelevant and boring coursework. Armando was placed in an "easy" English class. "They did work for kindergartners," he said. He still failed the class. "The work was too easy and boring," according to Armando. Adam kept being tested for ESL classes and he always passed; he said, "They underestimate people." Participants said that they sometimes got classes they did not need, and if they wanted to change the class, it would take months to do so. In third grade, Armando attended school in Mexico. He said classes were a lot more challenging there; he did work there that he later did in high school in the United States. Alan said that his English class was so easy "it makes you think 'Are you serious?' You think I'm that dumb?"

The lack of culturally relevant pedagogy, coupled with low expectations of working-class and poor students, immigrant students, and students of color, is a strong indicator of a pushout factor in schools. However, although most student retention research focuses on student "failure," very little is being done to hold institutions of education accountable for changing the culture of the school from a focus on remedial work to high achievement and student-centered curriculum. Students' critiques speak to this area of need.

Falling behind in grades and coursework. Several students discussed being credit deficient and not likely to graduate even if they stayed in school. A few students said that once they knew they were failing, they just "gave up." Other participants had no credits at all when they dropped out. One participant said that the only time he ever talked to his counselor in 4 years of school was the time she told him that he was credit deficient. Another male said that he was pretty much an "average kid, not bad or good," but that he was one credit short and ended up deciding to leave school before graduating.

Personal Issues

Ditching, hanging around with the wrong crowd, drugs, fighting, and laziness. Despite all of the negative experiences and hardships in school, participants primarily blamed themselves for leaving school without graduating. They all regretted it and believed it was ultimately their mistakes that led them to leaving school early. Many participants said they ditched, hung out with the wrong crowd, did drugs, fought, and were lazy. Participants felt pressure from their peers to ditch and use drugs. They also acknowledged being "lazy" and having a "don't care attitude." They acknowledged being unmotivated and having procrastinated in school. The young adults did not believe that it was the school's role or responsibility to make school more interesting. "It's school, it's not supposed to be fun," said one young woman.

The need for intervention programs and early detection of student dropout and pushout is of the essence. Students take accountability and responsibility for their actions, but without proper guidance and navigation through the educational pipeline, falling behind in school and personal issues continue to be huge sources of concern.

Cultural issues. Participants who came to the United States related stories about missing their county, having to learn a whole new system of life, and feeling frustration as a result of not understanding the language. Linda said the following:

> Well I used to live in Michoacan, it wasn't a city, it wasn't like here. Plus back there we would have to do all kinds of different stuff to obtain food . . . here you just go shopping and get everything, it was harder over there and it was easier here but either way you miss back home, you miss your family members back over there and just coming here and getting used to something that you basically have no idea what it is and everything, it was hard.

Efren said, "I just missed my country." Rocio said the biggest obstacle she encountered was "just getting used to a whole new country when you come from a whole different place where you basically don't know anything or anyone . . . but just getting used to here and having to learn everything." In response to the question "What are some of the differences in school experiences between Latinos and non-Latinos?" Carolina said the following:

> Our parents don't speak any, well my parents don't speak any English, I think that's pretty much why I think it's harder, just speaking everything and learning all the stuff. You know people that are from here usually know what you're getting yourself into and they teach their kids before they go to school and all of that. But us, I think that's pretty much the difference between us and them, but there's really no difference.
>
> *Question: What do you think they teach the kids?*
>
> Like if they start off as little kindergartners, probably just the ABCs and numbers, the few words that they have to know and us we go in there not knowing anything. Like I went in there not knowing nothing and it was, I think that was the only thing. I don't see any difference though between us and the other races or the people that were born here. I think we're pretty much all the same except we have to learn the language and they probably already know it, not all of them, but most of them do.

ESL. The focus group of Latina/o immigrants discussed the problems they encountered in school as a result of not understanding English. "For me it was hard, a little bit hard because I didn't understand the language, but then I got used to it. I started, you know, understanding and little by little it got better," said one female. Julio stated, "Well me, the teachers are always getting mad because I only spoke Spanish and well she would like say, 'Oh you're, well you guys are here in the U.S. now and you guys got to learn how to talk English.'" Julio was in third grade when he came to the United States. Carol came to the United States in fourth grade:

> My year was pretty hard because I was a fourth grader and my teacher didn't speak any Spanish and I didn't speak English, there were two of us that didn't speak any English at all. So the struggles were pretty much learning how to talk it, how to write it and to be in a whole class where everybody knew how to speak.

Another male participant said he struggled to do the work and understand the teacher. Linda said her teachers would tell her to get help from other students.

Several of the examples of the two themes above were discussed in the work done by Yosso (2006) as she identified areas of community cultural wealth such as linguistic capital, familial, and social capital that many educators do not view as assets. Instead, a student's bilingualism and multiculturalism are viewed as deficits. The student's experiences and culture are not valued, recognized, or acknowledged.

Pregnancy. Several participants mentioned knowing someone who had dropped out because of a pregnancy, but only two participants revealed that they had left school because they had gotten pregnant. Fabiola finished tenth grade, got married, had her baby, and moved in with

her husband across town. Fabiola's husband, mother, and mother-in law all encouraged her to continue with school and were available to babysit. She had been highly encouraged by her teachers at Rancho High School to continue with school after her baby was born, and she was planning to do so. However, she started 11th grade at a new school and quit after a few weeks. Fabiola was failing her classes and could not get any help. She did not think that the teachers were helpful or friendly; she also did not make any friends at the new school, so she felt alone. "At Rancho they used to help me a lot. All the teachers I had for the two years they helped me really good and that's how I passed and any problems I had I used to go with them," said Fabiola. She did not think that she had the same support at the new school. Another female participant said that she ditched school and was not a good student when she became pregnant. She said her mother was very disappointed because she had brought her to the United States so she could be successful. However, she has returned to school to be a good role model for her baby daughter.

Talavera-Bustillos (1998) revealed that motherhood can also be a source of inspiration for continuing with education. According to Talavera-Bustillos, motherhood can foster resilience and be the reason that many young women return to school and continue on the path of education. This is pertinent for student retention research and needs to be explored further.

Work. Several participants worked full time or almost full time. These young people said that having a job made it easier for them to drop out. They agreed that they liked the money; one male said he was getting $14.86 an hour working in housekeeping at a hotel casino. Another male participant said he worked at a movie theater to have money for car insurance. Arnie worked on the weekends at a local dairy farm. He said he helped his family. According to the participants who worked, they did not quit school to work out of necessity but because they enjoyed having money. One female said the following:

> I wanted to work, I wanted to have my own things . . . I told my mom, "I want to work," and she didn't agree with it. She said I had to study and she got mad at me . . . I told her I could still go to school and work at the same time. She said, "Do you promise?" I said, "Yeah." But then you know you start getting money . . . then I gave up on school because of my work.

Economic survival is a key component of the decision to leave school early. Many students are financially responsible for themselves and their entire family very early in life. This is an incredible obstacle to school completion.

Mental health issues. Daisy dropped out of school for the first time when she was 12 years old. She tried to go back several times but kept getting into trouble. She said the primary problem she had in school had to do with mental health issues:

> When I started going [to school] I would always get nervous like because there was too many people . . . I guess you'd call it social anxiety, yeah I have problems with being with a lot of people, so. But then I had a depression problem so I didn't want to be in school . . . that's just really what kept me from going to school. I would always get nervous or just always felt like someone was, I don't know, but the teachers weren't even helpful either. I would throw up before going to school. I would have one teacher that I could talk to which was good and was my history teacher, but she would kind of understand what was going on, so we need more teachers like that.

Latina/o youth are more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as depression. Frequently these issues are more likely to go untreated, leading to social and academic problems (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

DISCUSSION

For the most part, participants had a critique of their oppressive conditions but were not motivated by an interest in social justice; therefore, many of the behaviors described in this article fit into the *self-defeating resistance* category. Students described various forms of discrimination or racial microaggressions they experienced at school by teachers and administrators. There is powerful evidence that racism in subtle and not-so-subtle forms can have a tremendous impact on the lives of students of color (Espinoza, 1990). In this case, students resisted the discrimination and racial microaggressions by ultimately dropping out of school.

Participants in the study reacted to forms of oppression and racial microaggressions by teachers and school practices by engaging in behavior that was not transformational and that in fact led to the conditions that maintained their oppressive structures, such as purposefully not doing their work and ultimately leaving school before graduating. Some students said that once they knew they were failing they just "gave up," demonstrating reactionary or defiant behavior.

The narratives about teachers provided by the participants demonstrate the subtractive schooling practices documented in Valenzuela's (1999) research. Participants described teachers as not caring; they subsequently engaged in reactionary or defiant behavior or in self-defeating resistance. Students enrolled in the adult high school were all motivated and committed to completing their high school degree. They also frequently discussed the fact that teachers at the adult high school "care." Again, this confirms Valenzuela's research that students are seeking caring relationships as the basis for the learning experience.

Beginning in elementary school, Latina/o children begin to get tracked and placed in lower reading-ability groups. They are clustered into a lower level curriculum, setting them on a pathway that becomes more unequal in middle school. Students in these lower level groups will come to see themselves as slower and not as smart as other students, setting themselves on a path of low-level achievement.

Despite the critique of the teachers and the system, participants engaged in self-defeating resistance. These critiques can lead to transformational resistance, and in fact, as most of these students were enrolled in an adult high school, they had moved to conformist resistance. They blamed themselves, their families, and their culture for the negative conditions they found themselves in. In conformist resistance, students hold no critique of the system and want things to get better for themselves, but they engage in activities and behaviors within a more liberal tradition, such as returning to school but doing nothing about the system that led them to leave school in the first place.

By blaming themselves for leaving school without graduating, participants internalized the majoritarian narrative that blames students for "failure" instead of using a counterstory. Counterstory telling is a method of telling the experiences of racially marginalized people. Majoritarian narratives tell the story of those with racial and social privilege. Participants said that they did drugs and engaged in other self-defeating behavior such as ditching and having a "lazy" and "don't care" attitude. Although the issue of drug use is beyond the scope of this article, there

is an abundance of research demonstrating the risk factors for substance use, which include the availability of drugs, the laws and norms of the community regarding drugs, and other issues that impact whether youth use substances—such as leaving school early. Drug use is not exclusively an individual decision but rather is influenced by social, biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Participants did not question what led to their "don't care attitude" and believed it was not the school's job to make school interesting, again internalizing the majoritarian narrative instead of reflecting on what led them to have the "I don't care attitude."

Students frequently mentioned missing their country and feeling alienated because of not understanding the language. As described earlier, Latina/o students' culture is often viewed not as a strength but rather as a deficit. If teachers engaged in culturally relevant and authentically caring pedagogy or understood the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) that students brought with them to school, the students' experiences would be valued and legitimized and could be included as part of the curriculum. Also, teachers, with support from the system, could strive to make genuine connections with students.

Students who worked during high school did so to "help their families" and be able to "buy their own things." Perhaps students were able to obtain some respect and independence through working that they could not obtain in school. For the reasons mentioned previously, work was more rewarding and seemed to provide a feeling of autonomy. The question then becomes, Why does school not provide the rewarding feelings of being independent and autonomous?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is not one primary reason participants gave for dropping out. Participants revealed various reasons for leaving school early, as well as many school experiences that resulted in overall negative experiences in school that may have led to a pushout factor. The focus group discussion revealed many points of possible intervention and prevention strategies. At the closing of the focus group, one participant said, "I hope you make it better for the ones that are coming. Being Hispanic you are considered low. They underestimate us."

Given these data, the authors believe that the *majoritarian* narrative that depicts students simply as dropouts is extremely narrow and unhelpful for student retention purposes. When the work of Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) is considered, perhaps there is a possibility for critical education and thinking that will lead students toward transformational resistance, resilience, and persistence in school; that is, there is potential to foster and create a space for a heightened critique of social oppression that creates the incentive for students to pursue personal change as well as social change.

COMPARISON WITH THE CCSD DROPOUT SURVEY REPORT

The dropout survey and the focus groups and interviews are very different methods and tools for gathering information; therefore, they cannot truly be compared. Nonetheless, this general comparison demonstrates some differences and similarities in Latina/o school experiences and reasons for leaving school early than for the early school leavers who were surveyed, as a group. The focus groups and interviews demonstrated school issues to be the primary cause of school

dropout among Latina/o students; however, more personal issues were mentioned, as demonstrated by the list of factors. In other words, it seems that school structural and institutional issues generated more discussion and that there were more memories related to experiences such as discrimination, bad teachers, bad school climate, irrelevant coursework, and being credit deficient; however, participants mentioned as many personal issues, such as ditching and drug use, that affected school, but they did not spend as much time discussing those issues. The CCSD telephone survey demonstrated school issues and personal issues to be equally salient, as demonstrated by the percentage who responded to each reason; however, the report did not include any qualitative data or explanation, and therefore it is difficult to understand the context.

With thousands of students leaving school early every year, it is understandable that school district personnel want a fast method, such as a fill-in survey, to assess and assign reasons for this phenomenon. However, as the discussion with these 17 participants revealed, there is not one simple fill-in-the-blank reason. If a solution is to be developed, then it will be necessary to spend time understanding complex issues from students' and families' perspectives.

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