Latina/o Dropouts: Generating Community Cultural Wealth

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Abstract

This article builds upon a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) to discuss how strategies for school persistence are articulated, cultivated and employed through individual aspirations and practices. The analysis draws from testimonios of six Latina/o young adults between the ages of 18 and 20 living in California's 9-County Sacramento Region who left or considered leaving high school before graduating. Findings suggest that the use of "dropout" to describe students who leave school before graduating both shifts disproportionate blame to them and masks the wealth of insight and experiences these youth contribute to their families, communities, and society. To better understand and address the crisis of low graduation rates for Latinas/os, it is imperative that we include their voices in our quest for addressing disparities that contribute to educational inequities.

Introduction

I didn't drop out of school. I still continued all the way. I tried until my senior year. -Joaquín

Joaquín's voice provides a counter-narrative to widespread perceptions of young people who leave school without graduating as disinterested and disinvested. Indeed, there is much to learn from young adults who are dismissed as "high school dropouts" but have a wealth of perspectives on their ability to persist and resist despite not earning their high school diplomas in traditional ways. Their insights are critical to improving educational opportunities for Latina/o youth. To this end, this work offers an overview of the experiences of 6 Latinas/os between the ages of 18 and 20 living in California's 9-County Sacramento, California Capital Region who left or considered leaving high school without graduating. We build upon a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) to discuss both the challenges faced and resources utilized by these young adults.

Literature Review

At first glance, the national average for high school completion is a promising 70%. However, the dropout rate for Students of Color and poor students is disproportionately high (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2010). Only 56% of all Latinas/os who begin element ary school receive a high school diploma (Burciaga, Pérez Huber, & Solorzano, 2010). Even when controlling for class and citizenship status, Chicana/o students still have lower rates of educational attainment than their White peers (Covarrubias, 2011).

There is an inextricable link between individual and institutional factors that influence high school completion (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Fine, 1991). School factors that have been shown to negatively and disproportionally affect Black, Latino and Native American students include academic tracking, disproportionate placement in Special Education, high stakes testing for which students are under-prepared, limited support for high school students that have fallen behind academically, school climates that are not conducive to learning, low teacher and administrator expectations and over-reliance on and uneven implementation of punitive school discipline policies (Noguera, 2008). In addition, lack of bilingual teachers, counselors and adequate advising especially affects Latino students and families (Reyes 1990). Beyond school walls, broader patterns of regional and local investment, community development, and school finance often converge in ways that also constrain the educational opportunities and outcomes of low- income youth and Youth of Color (Anyon 1997; Noguera, 2003). In recognition that multiple factors which impact individuals' school persistence are well-beyond their

control, some scholars and advocates have taken up the phrase "school push-out," which was first used by Michelle Fine (1991) to describe school practices of actively discharging students into GED or other alternative programs rather than ensuring they received needed support to complete high school. In comparison, school "pull-out" theories have been described largely as financial and communal responsibilities to family that may compete with the completion of education (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Together this body of work suggests that both schools and broader contexts are central factors in school completion.

Despite this research, Latinas/os poor educational outcomes are often attributed to students' and families' lack of caring about education (Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). In response, researchers are documenting how families and communities play important roles in students' educational and occupational aspirations (Burciaga, 2007; Ceja, 2004; Gándara, 1995, 1999; Solorzano, 1986). Dynamic conceptual frameworks undergird these efforts to understand the myriad ways that Latina/o families and communities positively influence young people's agency in and out of schools (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yosso, 2005). In particular, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth conceptual framework has been increasingly influential in highlighting the agency of Latina/o youth in the absence of structural support from schools (Liou, Antrop-González & Cooper, 2009).

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) specifies values and capacities cultivated by Communities of Color that enable persistence and social mobility in the face of significant obstacles. Such resources and values are often overlooked in widely used analyses of cultural capital and social mobility that tend to frame Communities of Color and other marginalized populations as merely deficient with respect to a constructed norm (Bordieu & Passeron 1977). In doing so, such analyses obscure resources that are produced, deployed and could be further engaged. Yosso (2005) has identified six types of community cultural wealth:

- Resistant capital: challenge inequity and/or subordination
- Linguistic capital: communicate through different languages and/or styles
- Navigational capital: maneuver social institutions
- Social capital: social networks and/or community resources
- Familial capital: cultural and/or family knowledge and histories
- Aspirational capital: aspiration and/or hope despite challenges

These forms of capital are fluid in nature – one's experience can reflect multiple elements. While some of these values and resources are inherent within families and communities, others are cultivated as protective and resistant measures against the absence of opportunity and basic needs such as quality education, health and social services.

These understandings offer an important conceptual framework for scholarship that challenges incomplete and deficit-based portraits of Latina/o communities and provide a powerful foundation for practice and programs that support school persistence. However, to-date, there has been limited attention to how students who do not complete high school are generating and using community cultural wealth.

Methods

We draw here upon research conducted through Healthy Youth /Healthy Regions, a partnership between the UC Davis Center for Regional Change, the Sierra Health Foundation, and The California Endowment to document the connections between improvements in youth well-being and regional prosperity in California's Sacramento Capital Region (London, Erbstein et al., 2011).[8] The project adopted a transdisciplinary, mixed-method approach to learning about young people and the region, producing a multi-faceted dataset that offers insight into their experiences of education, employment, health, civic engagement, and the social and built environments. This research was conducted in accordance with Human Subjects Protocols approved by the UC

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8. Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions was commissioned and funded by Sierra Health Foundation with additional funding from The California Endowment. For more information see http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/projects/healthy-youth-healthy-regions

Davis Institutional Review Board; additional protection of participants' confidentiality is afforded through NIH Certificate of Confidentiality CC-HD-10-30.

Participants

We discuss findings associated with six Latina/o young adults[9] between the ages of 18-20 who left or, in the case of Araceli, considered leaving high school without graduating. Participants were recruited though a purposive sampling method targeting young adults ages 17-24 years old who embodied demographic and experiential characteristics common to youth in the region who are not completing high school in large numbers. We connected with potential study participants through adults considered by community members to be allies of this young adult population. Table 1 provides limited background information on the six Latinas/os discussed in this paper. All names are pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1. Study Participants

	Angélica	Araceli	Benjamín	Graciela	Joaquín	Ricardo
Age	18	18	19	21	19	20
Community	rural/suburban	rural/suburban	Rural	urban	rural	urban
Immigration History	2nd generation	2nd generation	1st generation undocumented	1st generation	2nd generation	2nd generation
Grade of Exit	12th	N/A	12th	11th	12th	12th

Method(ology)

While methods are the tools and technique of gathering and analyzing evidence, a methodology is "a theory and analysis of how research does and should proceed" (Harding, 1987, p. 3). This study employed ethnographic methods and the methodology of *testimonio. Testimonio* is a qualitative methodology developed in Latin America that incorporates the political, social, and cultural histories that accompany one's life experiences. *Testimonio* is similar to oral history and critical ethnography, yet challenges conventional approaches to collecting and compiling narratives by repositioning the power relationship between researcher and participant (Cruz, 2012). Here this involved establishing a rapport and providing participants with interview questions and a personal, confidential journal prior to their interviews so they had an opportunity to consciously construct a narrative of their experiences. Doing so better facilitated their reflections on personal, political, spiritual, and intellectual understandings of self and community (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). *Testimonio* therefore provides a co-constructed epistemic lens to support analytical inquiry of narratives of education, health, civic engagement, employment, and the built environment (Benmayor, 1988; Burciaga, R. 2007; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Negron-Gonzales, 2009; Partnoy, 2006; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

Testimonios were revealed across three meetings. Each began with a semi-structured interview and discussion between the researcher and participant. Participants received a copy of the questions prior to the second and third interviews. In addition to the *testimonios*, we employed a demographic interview questionnaire at Meeting #1, a mapping activity (Lynch, 1960) on perceptions of their environment at Meeting #2, and photographs (taken by participants between the first and second meetings) reflecting important aspects of their life-stories at Meeting #3. Participants were given honoraria of $25 in Target gift cards at each of the meetings.

Testimonios were coded in NVivo8. One coding focus was factors contributing to young people's school persistence, or lack thereof. In addition, we aimed to identify ways in which community cultural wealth was produced and employed,

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9. The larger sample includes 17 young adults.

particularly in relationship to school persistence. Although the sample size was limited to 6, findings are aligned with themes that emerged through interviews conducted with other youth of different backgrounds and adults in the region.

Findings

By many societal measures these young adults would not be considered successful. All have struggled with school, and some have experienced abuse, the juvenile justice system, or teen parenthood. Each has faced family, community and institutional challenges. Yet community cultural wealth was abundantly evident within their *testimonios*. We provide here examples of the six forms of community cultural wealth as they manifested in participant experience: resistant, linguistic, navigational, social, familial and aspirational capital.

Resistant Capital

Resistant capital, the ability to challenge inequity and subordination, was prevalent among all six participants. When asked to describe common stereotypes of dropouts with respect to their own lives, each noted and resisted stereotypes of dropouts as lacking intelligence and motivation. Moreover, the term dropout was used sparingly by the participants and possibly only because this study suggested it as one of many terms (including pushout and pullout) that described their high school completion status.

While the term "dropout" evokes the sense of a sudden leave, all six countered the idea of an impulsive departure, describing leaving (or considering leaving) high school as a process. Multiple factors – both within and beyond school – contributed to leaving before graduating. For example, while Angélica remembered the date she dis-enrolled at her counselor's recommendation, "March 10, 2009," she chronicled challenges including years of residential and school mobility, her family's dependence on her for childcare, and difficulties securing Americ an Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for her parents. She shared,

> I would always explain to [school officials] that my parents can't hear. They always said, " I want to talk to your parents directly. " I was like, " the only way you can do that is if you bring an interpreter. " And they were like, " Oh. Well, can your mom bring one? " Even if we were to be able to bring one, they are too much money . . . I've been pulled out of school [to interpret] a lot.

Angélica did not experience support for her parents at any of the seven schools she attended.

Given their understanding of school departure as a complex process, their resistance to the term "dropout" may reflect their sense that leaving school was neither a sudden decision nor a long-term plan. These young adults never gave up their pursuit of high school completion. Araceli pushed through a period of questioning to graduate. Joaquín and Ricardo completed their GED through alternative programs; the others maintain this as a goal.

Resistant capital was most often demonstrated through challenging inequity and subordination and articulating a vision for rethinking misconceptions. The aversion to labeling themselves as dropouts and the associated negative connotations signals important critiques of how our society disposes of youth who leave school before graduating, as well as an ability to maintain their own self-esteem in this social context. This resistant capital offered a basis for persisting in school, or their intent to some day complete high school, in the face of difficult conditions with inadequate support.

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital highlights capacity to communicate in various modalities (Yosso 2005). We provide examples here and extend the construct to include art as a form of communication that facilitates identity development, exploration of ideas and civic engagement, especially among adolescents (Kárpáti & Kovaks, 2002; Stickeler, 2006).

Six of four participants grew up in households with primary languages other than English (Spanish and American Sign Language (ASL)). The concept of linguistic capital promotes attention to these young adults' roles as linguistic and cultural brokers for people who might otherwise not be able to communicate as effectively, re-framing family as a locus of powerful skill development rather than merely as deficient and linguistically isolated. The contributions to family well-being of these bilingual and bicultural young people are often overlooked by the institutions intended to serve them and society more broadly. For example, Angélica spoke at length about her experiences with interpreting for her parents in schools and places of employment. Having assumed this role in her family at an early age, she described the nuances involved in interpreting from English to ASL, ". . . if I were to talk to you, just how I am now and translate it to my parents, they wouldn't understand it. I [would] have to sign it in a way [they could] comprehend and it's hard." Indeed, it is common for ASL interpreters to work in teams of two to monitor accuracy during conversations as well as to provide breaks for the interpreter (Atkinson, personal communication, January 27, 2010). Through serving as her family's primary interpreter Angélica, like other child interpreters, has developed remarkable skills including metalinguistic awareness, civic and familial responsibility, social maturity and cross-cultural awareness (Orellana, 2003).

Young people's use of the arts (including writing, music, and visual arts) as a form of discovery and communication is often overlooked as a rich resource. In Benjamín's case, a local community art center became an outlet for his artwork. Benjamín explains, "they were trying to make people stop tagging so then we started painting and I met this guy, I met [a local Chicano muralist] and we started [painting] murals. Ever since I met him I've just been hanging out with him and learning new things." As a result Benjamín renewed his commitment to high school completion and began developing his portfolio saying, "I want to be an artist when I grow up."

Navigational Capital

All young adults interviewed had cultivated navigational capital – a set of capacities that enable them to navigate complex social institutions and processes. Each demonstrated a propensity to employ these capacities on behalf of others' health, education, and economic well-being. We present two examples of young adults navigating Capital Region educational contexts in addition to the efforts of Angélica mentioned above.

Joaquín serves as a primary advocate at school for his younger brother, who has a speech impediment that makes it difficult for people to understand him. Joaquín's father, a migrant worker, is not often home; while his mother attended as many of the school conferences as she could, her employer's strict phone use policies limit her ability to communicate with school officials during the day. Joaquín's mother had requested his help advocating with teachers, principals and district administrators on behalf of his brother. Joaquín shared his frustrations with the school.

> Teachers are telling him, " Here's a book, read it. " He's not going to learn from it! ... If I show
> him how to do things, he'll pick them up immediately … every time I go in [to school] I have
> to convince them that he's not retarded, and they think he is. It's like, " Are you guys serious?
> We've gone through this already. " I have to convince them [because his teachers] put him in
> a mentally challenged class ... and I'm like, " No, my brother is not going to be in there ... I told
> them, just because you guys don't want to give him the attention, you're going to send him
> there...to get him out of your way? " That's how I see it with him. They don't want to give
> him the time of day so they'll just send him into an easier class, back to what they think he is.

Frustration with school officials led Joaquín to become more involved (another example of resistant capital). Through regular meetings with school and district staff, Joaquín successfully negotiated his brother's removal from the special education class and integration into mainstream classrooms. Joaquín's role as an advocate continued despite living an hour's drive away and working to complete his GED.

> I try and help him as much as I can in school. I would make him give me almost weekly reports. I called at school randomly, " Hey, how's my brother doing? Is there anything you guys need? " Or they call me, " Hey your brother's acting up, you need to talk to him. "

Joaquín's familiarity with the school system, belief that he had a right to advocate for his brother, attendance at school meetings, and willingness and ability to speak up challenged school officials' approach to educating his brother. Joaquín's navigational capital enabled his advocacy even when not living in the same city.

Ricardo demonstrated clear navigational capital as a young man who was deaf and openly gay. Ricardo never formally learned any signed languages or lip reading and had limited reading and writing skills. Despite these challenges, Ricardo earned his high school equivalency, became a self-advocate for resources including transportation and interpreting, and became active in his local LGBTQ center by starting a support group for the deaf.

A striking commonality among the six participants was their movement through different neighborhoods, cities/areas, states, in some cases nations, often for reasons that were mostly financial in nature such as periodic homelessness and following employment as migrant families. This mobility also resulted in their transfers to different schools. Participants attended an average of six schools from kindergarten to high school.[10] This movement often placed them at a disadvantage for various reasons including peer relationships, credit transfer problems, and needing to learn new systems and curriculum (the material had already been covered and they were bored or were advanced having missed important information). This level of mobility at times overwhelmed young people's capacity to adapt and/or overcome social and institutional challenges. Nonetheless, these young adults possess navigational capital as a result of their perseverance in maneuvering across new school environments from kindergarten through high school. When Joaquín was asked if he dropped out of school or was pushed out, he stated "No, I didn't drop out of school, I still continued all the way, I tried until my senior year." Their experiences challenge us to inquire what it must have taken for these young adults to stay in school despite significant obstacles.

Social Capital

Depictions of social capital amongst these young adult interviewees reflected Yosso's (2005) description of social capital as human and community resource networks. While peer networks were important to these young adults, here we focus in particular on relationships developed and cultivated with adult allies.

The young adults interviewed spoke highly of the few adults with whom they had established close relationships. Most of these adults were employed by social services, some worked at schools, and others were family or community members who dedicated time to provide individualized support to the young people they served. Throughout most of our work, we call these "adult allies" because they are in meaningful, authentic relationships with young people, providing critical assistance and advocating on their behalf. Ricardo Stanton-Salazar's (2011) concept of "empowerment agent" helps further explain how some young adults were served through this type of relationship. Empowerment agents provide not only institutional resources but also "a commitment to empower youth with a critical consciousness, and with the means to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p.1068).

Adult allies played a key role in anticipating and supporting access to material resources instrumental in day-to-day living and fostering social mobility. For example, while waiting for a participant to arrive, the interviewer noticed a young man trying on dress shoes in front of one of the adult allies' desks. Upon asking about this exchange, another adult ally replied,

> . . . frequently we have to [do] " creative " things to get our students what they need. We buy things with our own money when they are on sale or keep stashes of whatever under our desks (we can hardly scoot in [our desk chairs] for the hygiene kits and duffle bags).

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10. This may be a low estimate since two participants had difficulty recalling all schools attended.

Whenever we are out we pick up job listings and meet management staff. Case management is more than 40 hrs a week. Really, you have to be on constant lookout for things the students might need. It's about anticipation. (SA_A_001 personal email communication, June 14, 2010).

The most trusted adults were those that participants felt genuinely cared about them and supported them unconditionally. In fact, some young adults shared examples of distancing themselves from adults who could provide institutional support but were perceived as uncaring, reflecting research demonstrating that the efficacy of resource networks depends heavily on the quality of their engagement with those they are intended to serve (Valenzuela, 1999).

When asked about what they liked about schools, caring teachers or school staff, in cases where they had experienced them, were framed as the most significant resource. When Joaquín became involved in a gang, teachers that he described as authentic and honest told him he was smart but was not going anywhere; their comments, in the context of their meaningful relationships with him, played an important role in his persistence. In contrast, when Graciela arrived at the front office of a new high school in the third trimester of her pregnancy, she vividly described the cold response from a staff member indicating that she did not belong in that school. More often than not, these young adults refused knowledge, material resources and enrichment opportunities offered in schools when the adult providers showed disrespect towards them – a finding consistent with previous research (Valenzuela, 1999).

Familial Capital

Familial capital includes the cultural, family, and communal knowledge and bonds that model the importance of caring, coping, and providing for others (Yosso 2005). While familial capital is often discussed as a dynamic within immediate family, this section also demonstrates how familial capital fosters a consciousness of caring and goodwill towards others that positions young adults as producers of social capital themselves.

Most participants spoke of family bonds that promoted school persistence. For example, Araceli shared that her parents supported and encouraged her through bouts of depression:

I mean they [family] were always supportive. It was never really stated. Like I realized like from the way my dad was so happy when I got awards that I waslike, " Oh, ok. I guess I'm doing something good. "

She noted that her parents communicated their caring, and the importance of caring, through the rituals of regular family meals as well as acts such as driving Araceli to activities and taking in struggling nephews even when it caused hardship.

We found that these young adults in turn regularly engaged in the civic life of their communities, in some cases in ways that enabled survival and school persistence. Everyday examples ranged from walking a friend home from the local community college at night because the bus stops running to opening their homes to classmates who faced family challenges so they could stay in school. These participants did not describe this engagement as purposeful volunteerism, but rather something they felt compelled to do in addition to pursuing their educational and professional goals. While this everyday civic engagement could be considered a form of familial capital because the dedication to help others in need is informed by a spirit of communal good-will, our findings suggest that this may be a new form of community cultural wealth – civic capital because they draw upon accessible resources to meet critical individual and community needs. For example, while all of the participants were socioeconomically poor and spoke of the economic poverty in their neighborhoods, many were considerate and empathetic towards those who had less than them. Graciela saves bottles and cans for two homeless people in her community.

He always comes to my door and goes "Good morning, ma'am. Do you have anything for me today?" I'm like, "Yup, I do." So he knows when to come and it makes me feel good because

you know I am helping somebody out, you know hopefully somebody could help me out, cash me out and hopefully I can move but in the meantime that's all I could do. So another lady you know started noticing and he goes you got anything for me? So I am like "not today" so what I do now is like take turns for both of them, I mean that's the only thing we can do . . .

In return, the homeless man began to pick up leaves from her front yard and she insisted that he not, telling him, "No, I do this because I want to do it. You don't have to do work for me." She explained, "He's an old guy. He's very old and when his knee gives up, he's in his wheelchair pushing the cart and it's like, 'No, [you don't need to do this].' " Graciela, amongst others, identified a caring consciousness as an important part of who she is despite the tendency of our society to characterize young people like her as "stupid, lazy, and/or irresponsible."

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital – the ability to aspire and dream despite challenges (Yosso 2005) –was abundant amongst participants. Interviewees articulated aspirations for themselves, their families, their communities and their localities. Many of these aspirations were related to education.

These young adults each challenged the notion that youth who leave school early do not care about their education. Ironically, all participants described points at which their schooling was a barrier to their learning. Subject-specific interests that were stymied included psychology, math and a desire to know more about their own history and culture. All shared the desire for opportunities to connect what they learned in school with their own lives and future plans.

All young adults interviewed had educational aspirations for their families, as evidenced in some of the examples from Angélica's and Joaquín's *testimonios*. Participants who were parents spoke extensively about their aspirations for their own children. Despite their own challenges in school, all aspired to provide their children with better educational opportunities. Some, like Graciela, planned to move away from their cities with this objective in mind. With limited resources themselves, these young parents invested tremendously in caring for and teaching their children. Some participants were certain most of their aspirations are within reach. For example, although motherhood prompted Graciela to scale back her initial goal of becoming a judge, she continues her studies for the GED while planning her route to the local community college to become a certified court reporter.

Others were unsure about their ability to achieve their visions, highlighting challenging and intersecting personal and systemic barriers (London, Erbstein et. al., 2011). For example, Benjamín's resource-rich social network and optimism about his future as an artist are counter-balanced by uncertainty about his future in the United States as an undocumented immigrant – even with more education.

Conclusion

In summary, these six young adults provided insights regarding the multitude of challenges they have faced in the past are facing in the present and anticipate facing in the future. Although the sample size is small, their stories of cultural wealth and significant structural barriers echo those revealed by quantitative data and other young people and adult allies from throughout the region (Eubanks Owens, Nelson, Perry & Montgomery-Block, 2010, London, Erbstein et. Al 2011).

The cultivation and employment of community cultural wealth among these participants complicates predominant views of "dropouts" as simply disconnected and apathetic people who have made poor choices. Instead, our findings reveal these young adults to be contributing community-members who have neither had equitable access to opportunities nor adequate levels of support.

We advocate for a reinvestment of resources to support the various forms of capital that young people manage to create and maintain despite the challenges and disappointments they face. While community cultural wealth alone cannot mitigate all systemic or personal barriers, the various forms of capital used to navigate these obstacles are important to everyday persistence and are too often overlooked. As young adults who have

navigated, are addressing, and anticipate facing more challenges, they hold critical insight into how to approach change—wisdom well beyond what could be compiled in this overview. As such, it is critical for decision-makers, adults who work with children and youth anywhere, to recognize the community cultural wealth generated and utilized by these young adults. Their insight is critical to developing more effective programs and practices aimed at supporting school persistence.

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