

# Catching them Early: An Examination of Chicano/Latino Middle School Boys' Early Career Aspirations

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**Abstract** The authors draw from a 16-month ethnographic study to examine Latino middle school boys' early college and career aspirations. Sources of information and support for students, as well as contextual factors that shaped students' early career aspirations were explored. Findings indicate that early college and career exposure may allow Latino middle school males to form feasible college and career plans. While parents and older siblings served as sources of encouragement, teachers and other institutional agents played a more direct role in assisting students prepare and plan for college. The AVID program provided exposure and concrete information that allowed students to identify different colleges and admissions requirements. Findings from this study may be beneficial for school leaders who hope to engage Latino males during this critical stage of development and help improve their college participation rates.

**Keywords** Latino males · Middle school · College access · School agents

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## Introduction

Chicana/o/Latina/o students represent the fastest growing population in the U.S., yet matriculate in college at lower rates than other racial and ethnic groups. In 2011, Chicana/o/Latina/o students comprised 24% of the national pre-K through 12th grade public school enrollment, but only 15% of the college enrollment for students ages 18–24 (Pew Hispanic Research Center 2012). Furthermore, Chicano/Latino males experience lower college enrollment rates when compared to their female counterparts (Riegle-Crumb 2010; Zarate and Burciaga 2010). Research suggest that Chicano/Latino males are becoming disengaged from school at early ages and “vanishing” from the educational pipeline altogether (Sáenz and Ponjuan 2009; Solórzano et al. 2005; Gándara and Contreras 2009).

Lower college enrollment patterns for Chicano/Latino males, when compared to Chicana/Latina females may be explained, in part, by the differential treatment that males encounter in the educational system. For instance, Chicano/Latino males are more likely to be tracked into lower performing paths, special education programs, and face severe disciplinary practices that lead to their disengagement (Gregory et al. 2010; Sáenz and Ponjuan 2009). Chicanos/Latinos are frequently stereotyped and portrayed as deviant who engage in gang-related activity and are truant in school (Huerta 2015; Yosso 2002). The assumptions teachers and school administrators hold of students influences the manner in which they interact with and perceive them. Cultural affiliations, such as speaking Spanish and socializing with other Chicanos/Latinos, are often interpreted as signs of defiance and ultimately contribute to their disengagement from school (Katz 1999; Morris 2005; Rios 2011). Chicano/Latino students who speak Spanish along with English language learners receive less support and encounter additional barriers from their teachers who may view them as having less potential (Blanchard and Muller 2015). Such lack of engagement has been known to limit Chicano/Latino boys’ ability to think and plan for the future (Gutman and Akerman 2008).

Despite a growing body literature on Chicano/Latino males, a majority of the research is coupled with the experience of African American males (Gillen-O’Neel et al. 2011; Gregory et al. 2010; Noguera 2008), often rendering the experience of Chicanos/Latinos as insignificant to that of other groups. Unfortunately, the literature on Chicano/Latino students focuses primarily on Latinos’ high school experiences (Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Conchas 2006) or college experiences (García and Garza 2016; Pérez 2014; Vasquez Urias 2012) and neglects the critical middle school years. Outside of Huerta (2015) and Conchas and Vigil (2012), few scholars have explored how Chicano/Latino males specifically experience K-12 schooling and how their experiences are shaped by unique elements of their identity such as gender, immigration/generational status and language.

Early adolescence has been known to be an important period in which students begin to consider their future aspirations more seriously, yet little is known about Chicano/Latino middle school boys’ early career and postsecondary aspirations (Lent et al. 2000; Patton and McMahon 1999; Seligman et al. 1991). Students who

possess greater expectations for the future are likely to attain greater levels of educational and occupational success (Akos et al. 2007; Trusty and Niles 2004). Given Chicano/Latino middle school students' negative educational experiences, unique developmental needs, and disengagement in school, such students are at risk for reduced aspirations (Gutman and Akerman 2008; Schoon et al. 2007).

The decisions students make during middle school, including the classes they take, influence their possibilities for the future. According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2002a) those who are successful in gaining college admissions begin to acquire college qualifications as early as eighth grade, highlighting the need to focus our attention on this segment of the pipeline. In the current study, we acknowledge the unique experiences of Chicano/Latino boys and examine the formulation of their post-secondary aspirations. Specifically, we seek to answer the following question:

1. How do Latino middle school students formulate their college and career aspirations? What obstacles or resources, if any, do they perceive as potentially limiting or supporting their success?
2. What individuals and experiences influence their early aspirations? How do these individuals shape students' aspirations?

In what follows, we discuss the literature and theoretical frameworks that informed our understanding of Chicano/Latino middle school boys' aspirational development.

### **Aspirational Development**

We conceptualize students' post-secondary aspirations as a set of educational and vocational goals that students have for their futures (Akos et al. 2007; Sirin et al. 2004). Several factors have been known to influence students' post-secondary aspirations including individual factors (e.g., age, gender, attitudes, self-concept, level of maturity), interpersonal factors (e.g., social networks), and systemic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, ethnicity and race, level of parental education) (Akos et al. 2007; Gottfredson 1981; Gutman and Akerman 2008; Marjoribanks 2002; Reisman and Bañelos 1984; Solórzano 1992; Sirin et al. 2004). As students mature and become more familiar with the social structures around them, they begin to develop a decline in their aspirations—this is especially true for students who face several barriers (Gottfredson 1981; Gutman and Akerman 2008). As they mature, males experience a greater decline in their aspirations, compared to females (Schoon et al. 2007; Suárez-Orozco and Qin 2006). Those students who perceive few viable opportunities for upward mobility, often develop aspirations to become professional athletes (Conchas et al. 2014). Among all of the individual factors involved in students' aspirational development, students' self-efficacy and locus of control appear to play the greatest role (Bandura 1977). Students with high self-efficacy and those who attribute their success to hard work tend to have higher aspirations than those who attribute their success to intelligence per say (Dweck 1999). While few researchers have focused on the specific experiences of Chicano/Latinos, research findings on students of color (SOC) indicate that by 8th grade only

4% of SOC aspire to be doctors and lawyers, compared to 27% non-SOC students (Cook et al. 1996).

Social supports play an equally important role in students' aspiration development, especially in influencing students' perceived barriers and opportunities (Bandura 1997; Gutman and Akerman 2008). Parents, teachers, and peers may shape students' academic and career aspirations through the information and encouragement they provide. These individuals communicate messages regarding the appropriateness of students' desired career path (Akos et al. 2007). Such messages are especially important during middle school, a developmental period in which students are most susceptible to peer influences (Eccles et al. 1993). Parents, teachers, peers, and schools may socialize students by encouraging high aspirations (Gutman and Akerman 2008; Mena 2011). Peer selection has been found to support female students' college going aspirations, as they tend to surround themselves with peers who have high aspirations and social capital (Riegle-Crumb 2010). While parental expectations are important for all students, these expectations are especially important for student of color. The post-secondary aspirations of middle school students of color have been found to parallel the expectations of their parents (Mau 1995). Interestingly, parents of ethnic minority students, especially immigrant parents, have been found to hold higher aspirations for their children, compared to any other group (Gutman and Akerman 2008).

Contextual factors play an important role in the post-secondary expectations of inner city boys (Cook et al. 1996). By eighth grade, boys begin to understand social structures and internalize what others perceive as realistic career goals for them (Cook et al. 1996; Gottfredson 1981). Latina/o students, in particular, appear to have less stable educational aspirations compared to any other racial and ethnic group (Kao and Tienda 1998; Mau 1995; Paulson et al. 1990).

School administrators and teachers who do not understand the developmental process of Chicano/Latino males and their identity exploration process may develop lower expectations for them (Martinez et al. 2016; Clark et al. 2013). As a result, Chicano/Latino middle school students are at risk for reduced levels of academic engagement (Seidman et al. 2003; Simmons and Blyth 1987; Wampler et al. 2002) which has been found to influence their future college aspirations and likelihood to drop out of high school (Barber and Olsen 2004; Aud et al. 2012; Seidman et al. 2003).

### Significance of Middle School

Middle school marks an important period in the development of students' early career aspirations and educational opportunities. It is during this period that students begin to experience a greater need for autonomy, identity exploration, and peer-orientation (Simmons and Blyth 1987). The transition from elementary to middle school, coupled with students' developmental needs, present several challenges. For example, middle school classrooms, compared to elementary classrooms, are marked by a greater emphasis on teacher discipline, fewer opportunities for student decision making and self-management (Midgley and Feldlaufer 1987), fewer personal and positive student–teacher relationships (Eccles and Midgley 1989), and

an increase in ability grouping (Oakes 1981). According to Eccles et al. (1993) the fit between middle school students' developmental needs and the educational environment plays an important role in their self-perceptions and motivation to succeed academically.

Students of color, especially males, may be at greater risk for reduced learning opportunities and growth given that they are more likely to be placed in lower academic tracks (Oakes 1985; Ochoa 2013). African American and Chicano/Latino boys receive stricter disciplinary actions compared to their White and Asian counterparts (Losen et al. 2015; Skiba et al. 2011). As these students become more cognizant of gender roles they develop gendered identities and like other males, Chicanos/Latinos often internalize perceptions of appropriate male behavior. Pollack (1998) describes the "boy code" as a strict set of rules about how boys must behave. These rules include, keeping a stiff lip, not showing their feelings, acting tough, not being too nice, and being cool. The adoption of such norms may further conflict with Chicano/Latino boys' academic performance and engagement in school. Chicano/Latino boys who often engage academically are viewed as school boys or nerds and are not accepted by the rest of their peers, which may prevent some from becoming more engaged for fear of being outcast by their peers (Cuero and Kaylor 2010; Hurd 2004).

A major distinction for youth of color is that unlike their white male counterparts, young men of color have to develop masculine identities that not only affirm their maleness, but also affirm their racial and cultural identity (Howard et al. 2012). Chicano/Latino males are often stuck in a paradox of honoring their parents' sacrifices, particularly for those who immigrated to the United States, while also proving their manhood and contributing to the household as they get older (Abrica and Martinez 2017). Work has long been an integral part of a man's sense of masculinity as it provides a stable rights of passage into adulthood (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005; Haywood and Ghail 1996). For Chicanos/Latinos males, upward social mobility and material wealth have long been used to define their masculinity (Sáenz et al. 2013).

### Accesses to Information

Developing occupational aspirations during 8th grade is crucial, as students begin to identify a college degree as a requirement to meet their future career plans (Cabrera and La Nasa 2002b). As students enter high school, they take courses to meet their high school graduation requirements and/or to gain college admission (Crosnoe and Muller 2014). Students' high school course selections have important implications on their postsecondary opportunities (Hurtado et al. 1997; Stearns et al. 2010). Limited availability of coursework, along with lack of information about colleges may result in a clustering of students at less selective colleges (Perna 2006).

Students with college educated parents often enter high school with knowledge regarding coursework that allows them to have an edge in college admissions and competitiveness (Crosnoe and Muller 2014; Kelly and Price 2011). Those who do not have this benefit rely on teachers and counselors for information, but this information varies depending on who teachers deem as college material (Kimura-

Walsh et al. 2008). Beyond course requirements, students also need access to recruitment programs, access to institutional agents and information about paying for college to become eligible and competitive for college (Gándara and Contreras 2009). General lack of college knowledge, may lead students to have lower aspirations (Bohon et al. 2006). Access to precollege programs, on the other hand, may increase students' aspirations by providing information on different opportunities beyond high school (Mendiola et al. 2010; Ward 2006).

## Theoretical Framework

An understanding of the development of Chicano/Latino middle school boys' educational and career aspirations involves a consideration of students' individual characteristics, the environments in which they are located, and the individuals who occupy those spaces (Bandura 1986; Gutman and Akerman 2008). Four interrelated theoretical perspectives guide our understanding of how Chicano/Latino middle school boys may formulate their post-secondary aspirations: social cognitive theory, social capital theory, cultural capital theory, and the community cultural wealth model. First, social cognitive theory holds that learning occurs through reciprocal interactions among persons, behaviors, and environments (Bandura 1986). Students' aspirations are not constant and continue to change depending on their perceived abilities and opportunities. Middle school marks a developmental period in which students become aware of status hierarchies and begin to think more abstractly (Eccles et al. 1993; Gottfredson 1981). The social environments in which students are located influence which post-secondary and career options they perceive as realistic. Such beliefs determine students' behavior. As students begin to form expectations of what post-secondary options are and are not feasible, they make decisions regarding what classes, activities, and goals to pursue. Such behaviors may, in turn, further limit students' aspirations and ability to succeed.

Social and cultural capital theory provide an understanding of how environmental factors, namely structural and social barriers, influence Chicano/Latino boys' early aspirations. The social and cultural resources that individuals possess influence their opportunities for upward mobility (Bejarano 2005; Coleman 1988; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Lamont and Lareau 1988). According to Bourdieu (1986) social capital (social networks, connections) and cultural capital (education and language) can be acquired through an individual's family and formal schooling. The acquisition of social capital is critical for Chicano/Latino students to develop and maintain their career aspirations. Limited access to social networks and systemic knowledge about different career and educational opportunities limits Chicano/Latino students' chance for success. Chicano/Latino students with limited social capital often rely on teachers, school staff, and peers to enhance their networks, which in turn helps develop and maintain high career aspirations (Stanton-Salazar 2004; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995).

It is important to note that while Chicano/Latino and other students of color may lack dominant forms of social capital, they possess other forms of capital that aid in their success. Drawing from the principles of critical race theory, Yosso (2005) argues that communities of color have at least six forms of capital including

aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. These cultural strengths allow students to succeed despite societal barriers. For instance, aspirational capital refers to students' ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite barriers; while, navigational capital encompasses students' skills and ability to maneuver through social institutions that were not created for them. As institutional agents, teachers and school administrators play a critical role in legitimizing or rebuffing the capital that students' bring to school (Lareau and Horvat 1999). Building positive and supportive relationships with teachers and school agents is imperative for Chicano/Latino students' school engagement and academic success.

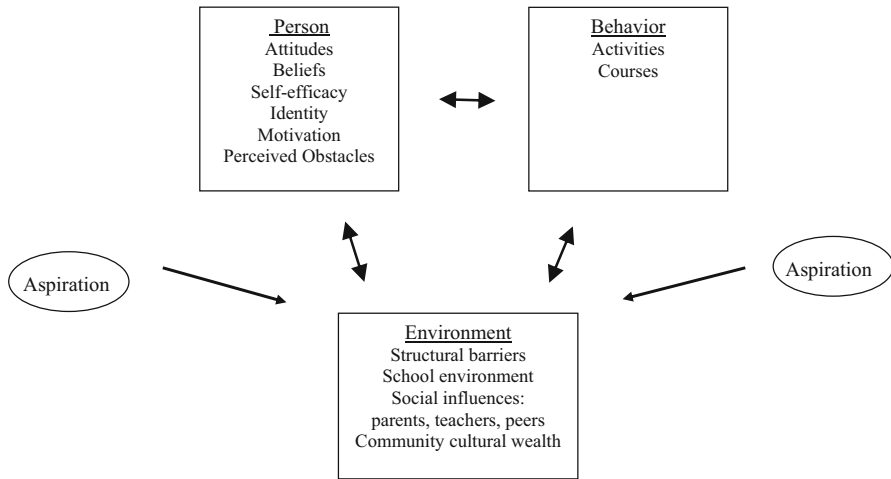
Taken together, social cognitive theory, social capital theory, cultural capital theory, and the community cultural wealth model describe the multifaceted nature of Chicano/Latino middle school boys' post-secondary aspirations development. That is, Chicano/Latino boys must cope with real and perceived structural barriers during a critical point in their development. Social cognitive theory allows us to identify environmental factors that can influence how students come to see themselves as young men. In using Social and Cultural Capital, we aim to analyze their experiences, social networks, the messages they receive and how they internalize these messages during middle school which can influence their perceptions of themselves, opportunities available to them, behavior, and outlook for their future. While these students must deal with several developmental and structural challenges, they possess abundant cultural resources that may aid in sustaining high aspirations for the future (Fig. 1).

## Methods

The current study takes place at Dolores Middle School (DMS, pseudonym), located in a historically white community with a recent influx of Latina/o immigrants in the Pacific Northwest. The school has a diverse student body, with 39.6% white students, 21.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 26.2% Latina/o, 4.7% African American, 0.8% Native American and 7.3% multi-racial. About 49% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction 2012). Since 2001, the population of Chicano/Latino students at DMS more than doubled from 11.7% to 26.2%. DMS now represents the middle school with the largest concentration of Chicano/Latino students in the district.

## Sample and Procedure

In the current study, we examine the aspirational development of 11 Chicano/Latino boys (Table 1). This sample of students was derived from a representative sample of DMS 8th grade Chicano/Latino students who participated in a larger year and half ethnographic study regarding their socialization. The academic progress of the sample ranged from high achieving students to students struggling academically. Students' represented three generational statuses, with first-generation students being born abroad and second-generation students being born in the U.S. with parents born abroad. Students' aspirations varied from broad athletic careers to



**Fig. 1** Conceptual model for Chicano/Latino students’ aspiration development

**Table 1** Student characteristics

	Birthplace	AVID student	Sport participation	Generational status	Career plan
Escobar	Mexico	Yes	Soccer	1st	Soccer player or engineer
Bobby	California	Yes	Soccer	2nd	Teacher or social worker
Ganso	California	Yes	Soccer	2nd	Navy
Lupe	Mexico	Yes	Basketball/soccer	1st	Basketball player
Michael	Washington	Yes	None	2nd	Architect
Jaime	Washington	Yes	None	2nd	Veterinarian or police officer
Pablo	California	No	Soccer	3rd	Soccer player
Andre	Utah	No	Basketball	3rd	Basketball player
Memo	California	No	Soccer	2nd	Professional soccer player
Anthony	California	No	None	2nd	Engineer
Teddy	Washington	No	Soccer	2nd	Undecided

specific careers such as architecture. All participants were eligible for free and reduced lunch and considered their families to be working class. Six students were enrolled in AVID.

Students were followed at the beginning of 7th grade (2011) through the end of 8th grade (2013). Observations took place during the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), science, language arts and social studies classes, which provided insight into the day to day experiences of students (Merriam 2009).



Observations led to follow-up questions that were discussed during individual interviews and focus groups.

Participants took part in an initial focus group that consisted of questions regarding their school experiences and interactions with teachers and peers. Each participant was invited to take part in a series of four individual interviews that explored their background, experience, academic ability, future aspirations, and identity development. During the first interview, participants were asked about their future career plans, a topic that was discussed consistently throughout the duration of the study. In the final interview, students discussed their career plans, aspirations, as well as their sources of information and support. The length of the study provided an opportunity to examine students' thought process over the course of the year. Observation during class periods and interactions with both peers and teachers allowed for greater understanding of the role of social networks and school engagement for students at DMS.

## **Analysis**

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the permission of participants. We coded transcripts in multiple phases: individually and collectively. Coding data in this manner allowed us to not only see what themes emerged but also compare findings and discuss how themes may intersect and overlap (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). We first used open coding to identify emerging themes around the experiences of Latino students at DMS (Emerson et al. 1995). We then employed focused coding, as we were specifically interested searching for signals that informed and shaped students' aspirations. The coding process generated themes and patterns that provided a starting point for the structuring of findings and subsequent discussion (Miles and Huberman 1994). Emerging themes were discussed with participants during individual interviews or follow-up conversations.

## **Findings**

Three main findings emerged regarding Chicano/Latino middle school males' early career and college aspirational development. First, students received different type of academic support from family members and institutional agents. While parents, family members, and peers offered much encouragement, teacher and other school agents provided more specific advice. Second, students' who engaged with mentors, academic programs, and peers had greater familiarity with the requirements needed to gain college admissions. Third, students with greater exposure to information about college developed more concrete aspirations and were better informed about how to plan for the future. An in-depth discussion of each theme follows.

## **Advice Versus Encouragement**

Throughout the course of the study, participants indicated that their parents, teachers, and peers were supportive of their educational outcomes and future career

plans; however, they reported differences in the type of support they received from these individuals. Teachers, older siblings, and extended family members who attended college provided students with detailed advice and information regarding the requirements needed to gain college admissions. While parents and peers provided academic and career encouragement, they did not possess the knowledge necessary to guide students' academic pursuits. The encouragement parents provided, however, served as a source of motivation for students. In most cases, parents emphasized the importance of getting good grades as education was the key to a better life. Bobby's parents, for instance, described the importance of hard work and character:

Never look down, always look up and get good grades.

Bobby stated that such comments encouraged him to challenge himself academically. When Bobby had questions about school, however, he referred to his counselor and teachers.

Like with my teacher, it's like about college. And they're like, to start from high school and middle school, like join clubs, so then like when you do your application it can show better things about you.

In Bobby's case, teachers and counselors provided concrete advice about the extracurricular activities that he should engage in order to become competitive for college admissions.

While parents provided encouraging messages, they were unable to help students with homework or answer questions regarding college. Extended family members and siblings who attended college were able to answer a few questions but were typically the first in their families to attend college, and possessed limited information. Lupe's older brother, a community college student, encouraged him to take school seriously and avoid trouble. Anthony, a student who had limited involvement in school received similar support from his older siblings, both of whom had attended DMS. Anthony's older siblings talked to him about different colleges and the challenges that he would face in being admitted. However, his knowledge about college was limited to what his siblings had told him:

Some are different, harder to get into, and some a little easier. I learned that some have, like some have different classes to take, and they're harder because teachers push you around and all that.

Despite his limited exposure, Anthony learned that college selectivity varied and could be very competitive. His older siblings provided encouraging words, but not the specific requirements needed to gain admissions to highly selective colleges and universities.

Teachers, on the other hand, provided a consistent source of information and were able to fill gaps in information that parents and family members were not able to provide. Teachers provided specific information that could help students begin to prepare for college. A majority of participants reported having a good relationship with their counselor, Ms. Brown. Those who were in AVID indicated that Ms.

Brown talked to them about more than just grades. Ganso described his level of trust with Ms. Brown,

Like when I tell her stuff, personal stuff, home problems and stuff, she's always there and she acts like if she was my sister, she was like my mom or something. She gives me good advice.

Ms. Brown often checked-in with students regarding their families and tried to connect their personal lives with their school lives. She also informed students about scholarship and other programs that would help them prepare and pay for college.

Access to student records positioned teachers in a better place to know how to support each student specifically as opposed to just giving students general advice about school. Participants' teachers were often aware of class projects, major assignments, and 8th grade commencement requirements. Escobar recalled the supportive role that his former social studies teacher played in helping him remain in good academic standing:

One of my biggest supporters here at DMS is my social studies teacher. I used to have him for social studies but they changed my schedule and now I don't have him, but everyday he checks my grades and if I'm missing something in a class, he tells me to turn it in and helps me. Just seeing him do that, when I don't even have him as a teacher gives me a reason to keep my grades up and be good in school.

This type of support showed participants that teachers cared about them and wanted them to succeed academically, which helped students remain focused and engaged in school.

The encouragement participants received from their parents often encouraged them to reflect on the sacrifices their parents made in order to provided them with opportunities to succeed academically, which in turn allowed them to maintain motivated when faced with challenging course work. Likewise, advice from teachers often allowed students to navigate through difficult task and receive the information necessary to begin to prepare for college. Encouragement and advice complemented each other and was instrumental in motivating students to keep pushing themselves academically.

### **Engagement and Social Capital**

One of the clear differences among participants was the impact that increased school engagement led stronger and more developed future plans regarding career and the colleges that they wanted to attend. Higher levels of engagement meant clear and deep understanding of the necessary steps to pursue a higher education. Most importantly, the more engaged students were in school, the more confident they were about being able to go to college and have a successful future. Increased levels of engagement also meant that students had more teachers and adults to go to for support. Participants who were active in athletics, student clubs, and in the AVID program had a better understanding of how to begin to plan and prepare for college.

All of the participants that played sports expressed an interest in becoming professional athletes while in 7th grade, but most changed their minds during 8th grade, as the majority had begun to learn and explore other career options. Memo, who was primarily involved in soccer, had expressed an interest in being a professional soccer player or boxer, mainly as a result of his relationship with his father. Increased positive interactions with his teachers and older family members who had attended college, along with continued support from his mother allowed him to explore other options, leading him to develop an interest in architecture.

Well, my dad, he wanted me to play soccer. I didn't want that though, because an injury can mess it all up. And so if you get injured it's not good. My cousin wanted me to be like him, like a Checker employee. I don't know what it is really. And then that's pretty much it. And then my mom was telling me about the architecture stuff, and then that's when I told her that that's what I actually wanted to be. And then she told me about the stories when I was little and would build stuff.

Although Memo still had the desire to become a professional athlete, he began to consider architecture as a possible career. As he discussed this with his mom, she reminded him of how he used to build things when he was younger. An injury that he suffered playing soccer gave Memo a reality check. This experience, coupled by a supportive older cousin who had attended college and positive relationships with teachers allowed Memo to have additional sources of information that were not readily available to other peers.

Increased engagement with teachers also allowed students to learn more about their teachers' life experiences and paths to college. Given students' family backgrounds, many of them were unfamiliar with the path to college and how to develop their own trajectories. Ganso was a student who played soccer and had been in AVID for 3 years. Throughout the years he developed a close relationship with Mr. Jackson, his language arts teacher.

They give me examples, like Mr. Jackson, he thought he was going to get into law. He thought he wanted to, but then it turned out to be really boring for him. So he tried another thing and it didn't work out for him. So he ended up teaching, because that was what he liked.

Such advice helped Ganso feel more connected with his teachers and understand the importance of performing well academically. Students that were more engaged also felt more comfortable speaking and seeking advice from teachers. Michael, a high performing AVID student, recognized that his teachers possessed experience and knowledge that would help him gain college admissions.

...my Language Arts teacher is kind of on the older side. She knows more and has been through more, so she has a lot of experience that she can share with other people. And my AVID teacher, since he teaches about that stuff, he can help me out.

Teachers would often give Michael specific tips in order to be successful in school, he recounted their advice,

Be prepared, use your time wisely, don't procrastinate, pass your test, do your homework. All the stuff everyone would tell you to do.

Specific examples like time management, being prepared and using time wisely outside of class reminded Michael that he needed to do work outside of class and the responsibility would fall on him to get work done once he got home.

In contrast, Pablo, as student athlete who was not enrolled in AVID, communicated limited information regarding career options and fluctuations in his career aspiration from 7th to 8th grade. Pablo expressed an interest in becoming a professional soccer player in 7th grade and continued to do so in 8th grade. When discussing his initial aspirations of becoming a professional soccer player, he was unclear of what the process would be aside from getting good grades.

First I want to go to college and stuff. Then I want to start playing soccer a little bit more, like professionally and then after that I want to retire I guess and then just start living a normal life...I want to play college soccer but I don't know, I want to start thinking about my grades, cause like whenever I play soccer, I don't do my homework at my house, because when I play soccer I have less time to do my homework.

While he aspired to be a soccer player and go to college, he did not understand that going to college and playing soccer were not mutually exclusive, but rather he could do both if he desired. Pablo's lack of involvement in any other groups or activities outside of soccer limited his exposure to other adults and sources of information about various career options and college preparation. As such, he relied heavily on his mother's advice about the future.

Well I want to be a soccer player. But if I don't, I probably want to be like a construction worker or something like that...[M]y mom, she told me that that's BS. To not be the hard worker. To get the job that's going to be easy but that pays really good.

While he discussed other options with his mother, she pushed him to think higher than what he was aspiring. His mother tried to teach him the life lessons that she learned, having dropped out of high school and struggling to make ends meet as a single mother. Despite his mother's encouragement, Pablo's lack of information, role models, and engagement with teachers led him to be foreclosed in his career aspirations.

Similar to Pablo, Andre was not active in many school activities and only participated in basketball briefly. Andre only interacted with teachers when he was required to do so given his grades. Andre did not feel comfortable seeking teachers and discussing his academics or any other issues, and often felt helpless.

I don't know, I just don't feel like they can do anything to help me. I feel like since they're different and they're not like...I don't know. I just don't feel comfortable talking about it with teachers. I mostly talk about it with friends that I know that would help me.

Andre's low academic performance affected his confidence to the point where he felt a bit ashamed and there was nothing teachers could do for him. Even with the additional support, Andre was not confident about being able to pursue college after high school. When asked about whether he believed he could go to college, Andre stated,

No, because I've been not impressing my parents, and not raising my grades, and not paying attention, not asking enough questions.

For students with limited engagement, their aspirations for the future strongly depended on athletics, while students who were more engaged, still dreamed of being professional athletes, but had explored and wanted to pursue other careers instead.

### **Benefits of Early College Preparation**

Increased exposure to college culture enhanced the knowledge that participants had about higher education and the opportunities available to them. While DMS promoted college to all of its students through its belief of a college preparatory school, participants who were involved in the AVID program further benefited from the information they received from guest speakers, campus visits, and a college readiness curriculum. Such participants developed a good understanding of the different types of universities that existed. While most students identified college as the next step after high school, AVID students knew specific information about different types of colleges and universities. For instance, Michael stated,

Like there's institutes, there's universities and then there's, what else is there, there's certain schools that focus on different things, like there's all girls, all boys, African American, Latino schools...There's four year colleges, community colleges, two year colleges...

Through AVID, Michael learned about the difference between a 2- and 4-year college, as well as the existence of minority serving institutions. Escobar added,

I know there's religious colleges and then there's normal ones, private colleges, and community colleges. There's big, small. There's some that are specific for one career. Like there's this one, the engineering in electronics college or something like that. There's just a lot.

AVID students like Michael and Escobar learned about the differences between, 2-year colleges, 4-year colleges as well as vocational/technical colleges, which in turn allowed them to understand and reflect on what type of colleges may be best suited to meet their needs and interests after high school.

Beyond information regarding types of colleges, AVID students developed a deeper awareness of the importance of higher education and understood the function of some segments of higher education, such as the role of community colleges. As Escobar explained,

Oh. Community college is one where you can go to, if you think you're not prepared for college or the university, then you go to the community college where they'll prepare you and then you'll be ready to go.

Michael elaborated on the difference between 2- and 4-year colleges by adding,

Community colleges are like, they usually tend to be a lot cheaper and they're up to two-year colleges and usually when you're done with your two years there, most people get transferred over to a four year college.

Ganso, another AVID student, even linked a community college to that of a junior high school.

I think that community college is probably middle school, and [four year college] is probably like a high school.

While different than the role of a middle school, Ganso saw community college as a stepping stone that could help get students a 4-year college.

Participants who had the greatest sense of their future plans were currently, or previously enrolled in AVID. All students had visited at least one college campus, with most visiting multiple campuses. After a campus visit to a local flagship university, Escobar described his experience as eye-opening:

I was surprised, because before I went, I thought it was just one big house or something like that, something that's just big. But then I went there and it was a lot of buildings and stuff like that. And I started learning about how there's different courses, different classes, different stuff like that.

Visiting a major university allowed Escobar to have a better understanding of what it is like to be a college student and become familiar with college coursework. Further, he became more familiar with existing college expectations.

Campus visits also helped demystify what college life is like for other students that were familiar with higher education. Lupe, who had learned from his older brother about college, was able to visualize what life as a college student would be like, as he recalls from a visit,

It was cool, I didn't really learn anything [new], I just learned time management and what classes to take and how hard it is to get into a college. And how schedule works and how students' daily, like daily life is at college.

Visiting a university that he is interested in attending made him realize how competitive admissions was and how he needed to keep working hard and improve his time management skills. Campus visits allowed students to become more familiar with college requirements as they prepared to transition to high school.

Students who had limited time in AVID varied in their understanding about college. For instance, Teddy spent 4-year in AVID but left the program during the 7th grade since he felt that it was too much work. Teddy, stated that he wanted to attend a community college in Florida, however, he was unaware of what type of college it was or the degrees it offered. His interest in attending this college was

primarily fueled by a class project in which he learned about the institution's diversity:

Yeah. There's more type of [races], like Latinos, Indians, Africans in Miami-Dade than [the local] University.

While limited in knowledge about the role of a community college, Teddy understood that Miami-Dade Community College provided additional support to Latino students, which made it an attractive option. Teddy could have benefitted greatly from remaining in the AVID program during 8th grade as he could have learned more about other minority serving institutions that offered 4-year degrees.

Students who were not enrolled in AVID possessed a limited knowledge base about higher education. Andre, a student who was not very involved in school, possessed limited knowledge about college. His knowledge about college was limited to those institutions with athletic programs and that were in close proximity. As he explains,

I've seen them on T.V. I've seen them play college games. I've seen them play basketball. Mostly all the games. And then when I see people wearing it [sports gear], it kind of makes me feel like I want to go to that school. So [local college], I want to go because it just seems more, I don't know makes me want to go [there] because everyone's such a big fan of [it].

Being in close proximity to a major university and seeing their athletic teams on television made him desire to go to college, but he did not know where to begin to prepare for college.

Students who were enrolled in AVID also had exposure to different careers as they were often treated to guest speakers who would talk about their educational trajectories. Some of the speakers that presented in the AVID class were former DMS students who shared how they started preparing for college during their time at DMS, which led them to their current careers. Escobar was a student who benefited largely from the guest speakers as he was able to begin to explore different career options that could allow him to remain engaged in athletics.

Yeah. I don't want to work in sports, not just being an athlete like playing soccer or anything. If I can than yeah, but also something that involves sports. This guy came to my class on Thursday and Friday, both days, that he's going to Washington State University right now. He's [concentrating] on sports management. So I kind of want to do that too, if I can. Well, one of those three—being an athlete or that or an engineer.

While he still had a desire to play soccer, he realized that he should have a backup plan in case a professional soccer career did not develop for him, a large development from 7th grade in which he had only considered playing soccer as a career and had not given any other careers any other thought.

Students that were enrolled in AVID, also understood the benefits of going to college and receiving a degree beyond a bachelor's. Bobby, who had expressed an interest in being a teacher or social worker, knew that he would be required to get a



master's degree, but also knew of the financial benefits that came with receiving an advanced degree.

Like if you go to college and you go to get a master's degree and all that, that will get you a really good job. But if I don't and don't go to college, I'll get like a low job that doesn't pay you that much.

While primarily monetary, Bobby believed that pursuing an advanced degree would allow him to be in a better position financially in the future.

Students in regular classes also aspired to go to college and pursue careers that would have great financial reward, however, their career aspirations were not as clearly defined as students who were in AVID. Anthony, for example, was interested in pursuing a career in engineering, however, he did not know much about how to obtaining the degree, aside from the fact that he would have to take a lot of math and science classes. Anthony stated,

I want to be an engineer. Like a housing engineer, something like that.

While he knew he wanted to go into the field of engineering, he was unclear about the different options available within the field, as he had previously stated that he wanted to get a degree that would allow him to build. When prompted about discussing his future with teachers, he stated

No, because I'm focusing on my grades so I can do better in high school.

Had Anthony been involved in AVID, or any other pre-college program, he would have been able to develop a solid foundation for his future that he could of carried into high school.

## Discussion

Our purpose in the current study was to examine how Chicano/Latino middle school students' begin to conceptualize their aspirations for the future. In doing so, we examined students' (a) sources of information, (b) school engagement, and (c) benefits of early college exposure. Several discussion points are offered as a result of the findings from this study.

First, access to multiple sources of information allowed students to develop feasible career plans. While parents played a significant role in supporting participants' academic endeavors, it was teachers and family members who attended college that were able to provide students with academic support. Parents were highly encouraging of their children and wanted them to be successful, but were limited in how to guide students through the school system. The role of siblings and older cousins as sources of information is consistent with previous research on how college educated siblings and other family members can fill the knowledge void and assist students as they prepare and apply for college (Ceja 2006). Teachers however, possessed the knowledge to be able to give students specific information and provided them with the tools necessary to be successful. Further, findings highlight the critical role that school agents play in the development and maintenance of

future aspirations for first generation students of color (Stanton-Salazar 2004; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). While encouragement from parents and family members is important, having advice from teachers is also critical for students to feel that they can succeed in school and allow them to understand what it will take to get to college (Bryan et al. 2011).

Second, in the current study students aspired to careers such as architects, engineers, athletes, athletic trainers, construction workers, and mechanics. In examining students' access to information and role models, it was evident that those students with more access to information and role models had explored a wide range of careers and had a good sense of what it would take for them to be able to pursue their careers of choice. Students with higher levels of engagement in school, through participation in athletics and other student organization, encountered more support from teachers than their less engaged peers. Students with increased involvement also developed closer relationships with teachers who shared their personal stories and painted a trajectory for students to begin to develop their own paths to college. This finding is consistent with previous research on the importance of students' life circumstances, whereas aspirations may not be tied to a student's motivation to succeed, but rather are structured by the context in which students live in (Flores-González 2002; Gutman and Akerman 2008).

Finally, AVID proved to be a great program at DMS that gave participants an edge over their counterparts who did not have clearly defined post-secondary plans. AVID students were more familiar with function of different segments of higher education, college requirements and what college life would be like. AVID students also had an edge up on their peers as many of them were tracked into the high school program that would allow them to stay on track for college. Similar to Nuñez (2009), AVID was intentional and provided students with a specific curriculum and exposure to school agents that can help foster and develop future aspirations. Increasing access to AVID, or other pre-college programs can allow students to become more familiar with college requirements earlier, and in turn be better prepared to apply to more selective colleges.

## Implications

This study highlights the need for school staff to continue to expand the college preparatory services during middle school and ensure that teachers and counselors collectively foster a supportive environment for students. Counselors should continue to develop programs and provide students with information about college. As demonstrated in previous research, school staff play a critical role in helping students develop and maintain college and career aspirations (Bryan et al. 2011; Perez and McDonough 2008). But counselors should also be cautious as to not view Chicano/Latino males as deficient and provide them with the same resources and opportunities as other students. While Chicano/Latino students have high aspirations, counselors should ensure that they discuss all of their postsecondary options for students and not limit them to vocational programs or community colleges.

Second, the responsibility of developing a college going culture does not only fall on counselors but on the entire school staff. Teachers should find ways to incorporate college discussions into the curriculum and engage with students actively about college. Participants in this study discussed how teachers shared their personal experiences with them making the path to college something familiar and clear. But developing that culture is not limited to the classroom and the students inside of it, the culture of support needs to extend beyond the classroom and into the out-of-class activities that Chicano/Latino students are engaged in.

As researchers, we need to continue to explore and connect the role that middle school plays in the development of college aspirations and the acquisition of college credentials. This stage in the pipeline is critical and warrants additional research to add to our limited understanding of it (Broughton and Fairbanks 2003). Expanding research on Chicano/Latino males during middle school is critical to closing the gaps that exist between males and their female and white counterparts.

## Conclusion

Findings from this paper highlight the need to focus on how students formulate their career plans in earlier stages of the pipeline and the significance that having sources of information can have on the development of future aspirations. In examining these early career decisions and factors that relate to choices can provide insight for school counselors who seek to promote the academic and career development of all students (Akos et al. 2007). As practitioners continue to search for ways to keep students engaged through different segments, exposing students to college culture and providing them with information can make the path to college and careers clearer and allow them to remain hopeful about their future.

Providing students with information about college and different careers early, can allow students to see the feasibility of pursuing certain careers and allow them to maintain high aspirations for the future. Previous research has demonstrated how immigrant children enter school with high aspirations, but their aspirations fade as they enter the later years of schooling (Hill and Torres 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009). Exposing them early and finding different avenues of engagement can allow students to remain hopeful as they transition from elementary to middle school to high school.

As demonstrated in this paper, pre-college programs such as AVID can have a tremendous impact on the development of career aspirations of middle school students. Through a defined college preparatory curriculum, students can be made aware of the different systems of higher education, how to finance their education and the requirements necessary to enter college. Providing students with this information allows them to be more prepared to enter high school and begin to earn the necessary credentials for college admission.

Finally, exposing students to college information early, along with different career choices they can pursue can allow students to start to visualize their future selves. Most importantly, as this study demonstrates, exposing students early can take away the dependence on athletics as a way of upward social mobility that many

urban males, in particular Chicano/Latino and African American males, have and demonstrate to them other feasible career trajectories.

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