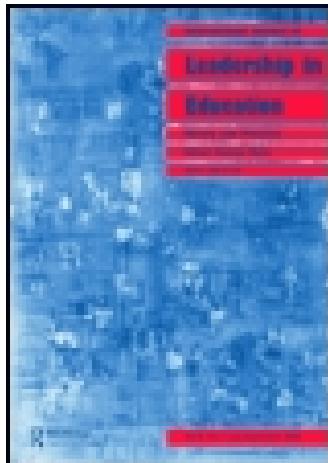


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'It's like giving us a car, only without the wheels': a critical policy analysis of an early college programme

LESLIE ANN LOCKE and KATHRYN BELL MCKENZIE

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Latina students, who were underperforming in an early college high school (ECHS), regarding their achievement and experiences. Additionally, the school's institutional documents were used to critically assess the viability of the ECHS as an equity-oriented, social justice policy intervention to increase educational opportunity. Conceptual frameworks of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum frame the analyses, which reveal a myopic focus on achievement to increase educational opportunity is naïve. While the ECHS studied may have been designed with good intentions, as a policy intervention it was not broadly effective. A perspective existed that opportunities for advanced achievement were accessible to all students in the programme. Unfortunately, this perspective naively ignored the constraints students faced in their lives. These constraints were often unavoidable and tended to undermine students' progress towards high achievement and increased the likelihood, students would make choices that negatively impacted their achievement. Findings reveal significant gaps between policy-makers' assumptions regarding how to expand educational opportunity and what students need to achieve. Equity-oriented, social justice policy interventions, like the ECHS, do little in terms of increasing achievement if they ignore the holistic lives of students.

Introduction

In many areas of the United States Early College High School (ECHS) programmes have been instituted as a social justice and equity-oriented remedy to serve students who have historically been, and continue to be, underserved by traditional high schools (i.e. students of colour, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, first generation college-bound students and students considered 'at risk'.¹) These rigorous early college programmes reduce the time to degree completion by enrolling students in high school and college simultaneously, and by providing students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and up to 60 (and sometimes more) college credits, tuition-free, within four or five years. As ECHSs have only existed since 2002, there has not been extensive research on

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their effectiveness, or how the students participating in an ECHS perceive the effectiveness of the school and their performance within it.

One of the targeted student populations for ECHSs is Latinas/os or students of Hispanic descent.² This group is projected to increase in size substantially during this century (Suarez, 2013), and by 2030 will comprise approximately 25% of all public school students nationwide (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Unfortunately Latinas/os have the highest high school dropout rate compared to other racial/ethnic groups, approaching 50% in many regions and as high as 70% in some urban areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Moreover, Latinas are the largest population of girls of colour in US schools (National Women's Law Center [NWLC], 2009) and drop out of high school at rates higher than girls of other racial and ethnic groups (Peguero & Shekarkhar, 2011). In fact, Latinas are less well-educated than non-Hispanic women with some 36% having less than a high school education compared with 10% of non-Hispanic women (Gonzalez, 2007). However, despite their comparatively low education levels, Latina students have high aspirations. The NWLC (2009) reported that 98% of Latinas surveyed said they wanted to graduate from high school, and 80% reported they wanted to graduate from college and perhaps continue their education beyond college. This contradiction of high aspirations yet low achievement needs to be examined.

Perhaps the best way to discover why Latinas who appear to have high aspirations are not performing well in school is to talk to the students themselves. Therefore, this study analysed discourse around and dialogue with Latina students who were academically underperforming at Tambryn Early College High School (TECHS).³ It describes how the girls perceived and reflected on their school, school experiences and school performance, and how the school, in terms of a policy intervention, attempted to provide opportunities to achieve from both the institutional perspective and the student perspective. To this end, we examined this education policy critically (Ball, 1993), taking a hard look at the structure of the policy and its enactment for a particular group of students in a particular school context. Thus, a micropolitical focus (Ballenger, 2012).

Related literature

The legislation of No Child Left Behind (2002), with its built-in accountability measures, focused national attention on achievement disparities among student groups. The result was a clarion call for intervention remedies to improve achievement and ensure equity. Although there have been intervention programmes at the secondary level, such as Advanced Placement and Dual Credit,⁴ they have been largely unsuccessful in keeping students in school and preparing them for college, particularly students from historically marginalized groups (Kyberg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). There are, however, recent programmes that have enjoyed more success in terms of academic achievement, graduation rates and students entering college. These include Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (United States Department

of Education [USDE], 2011a), TRIO (USDE, 2011b),⁵ the *Puente* Project (Puente, 2011) and Advancement via Individual Determination (Dodea Pacific, 2011).

Beyond these intervention programmes, entire schools have been formed with an equity-oriented imperative to ensure the success of all students. These schools aspire to improve high school graduation rates and better preparation of students, specifically those from historically marginalized groups. Two examples of whole-school designs with an equity orientation are Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and Individuals Dedicated to Excellence and Achievement (IDEA) schools. KIPP and IDEA schools, however, have been criticized for serving a neoliberal education agenda (Buras, 2011). Neoliberalism has been characterized by Apple (2001, 2004) as the tendency for policy-makers and reformers to have faith in and reliance on meritocratic individualism, as well as colour- and gender-blindness, as proxies for fairness via an unfettered, competitive market. Neoliberalism in education, then, is a productivist ideology that shifts the focus from student needs to student performance and is disconnected from the actual lived realities of schools, teachers, students and communities (Apple, 2004; Marginson, 2006). Marginson (2006) noted, 'Neoliberalism has little warmth or generosity about it; it is considerably less attractive than the notion of equality of educational opportunity' (p. 207).

As Sondel (2013) suggested, neoliberalism is no longer simply about marketization and efficiency, rather it has been 'rearticulated ... as movements toward equity and forms of social justice' (p. 6). With a focus on educational inequity, an outcome of this rearticulation has been a transformation of the traditional high school model. KIPP and IDEA are examples of rearticulated high school models. Scholars have noted that because neoliberalism plays on people's sensibilities, those who are interested in reducing educational inequities may be promised rosy or simplistic answers with such reforms and rearticulations (Buras & Apple, 2005; Sondel, 2013). A further aspect of the neoliberal critique stems from a strong connection between KIPP and IDEA, and Teach for America, an organization known to place underprepared teachers in classrooms in some of the nation's neediest schools. This act, according to some educators, further widens educational gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010), and perpetuates inequality (Veltri, 2010). Additionally, while KIPP and IDEA schools often publicize that their students perform well on standardized tests, scholars suggest these numbers may be inflated based on informal selection biases and high attrition rates among students (Wolf, 2011). Thus, despite numerous and varied reform efforts, few schools have achieved equitable outcomes for all students (Vasquez Helig, Williams, McNeil, & Lee, 2011; Venzant Chambers & Huggins, 2014).

ECHSs are a further example of whole-school inventions. They are designed to respond to two major issues. Firstly, the disturbingly low high school graduation rates of students from historically marginalized groups, and secondly, the low numbers of such students continuing on to and being successful in college. To address these issues, ECHSs are

specifically designed to challenge the traditional demarcation between high school and college (Fischetti & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, while having similar foundational principles as some of the previously mentioned intervention programmes, ECHSs differ in significant ways primarily through 'a focus on college acculturation and enrolling students who may be academically underprepared when they enter high school' (Cole, Duffy, Keating, & Berger, 2012, p. 152).

To achieve the goals of high school graduation and continued post-secondary success, many ECHSs are configured as small schools that, in collaboration with colleges and universities, include a high proportion of tuition-free, dual credit courses. Students may complete a two-year degree at the conclusion of high school or transfer completed coursework to four-year colleges and universities (Smith, Fischetti, Fort, Gurley, & Kelly, 2012). The founders and partners⁶ of ECHSs believe that by changing the composition of the high school years, compressing the number of years to a college degree, and establishing a direct line to college through partnerships with institutions of higher learning, there is greater potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into highly skilled careers (Glick, Ruf, White, & Goldscheider, 2006).

Research design

Little is known, particularly from the student perspective, regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of programmes like ECHSs. Of specific interest for this study are the experiences of Latina youth, a group who have historically suffered from a lack of attention to their experiences in educational settings (Villenas, Godinez, Delgado-Bernal, & Elenas, 2006). Moreover, Harklau (2013) suggested that when the educational experiences of Latinas are addressed they are often attributed to stereotypic 'socialization into traditional cultural patterns of familialism, submissiveness, and early marriage and motherhood' (p. 23). Thus, understanding the perceptions of Latina students who are actively defying these stereotypes by attending an ECHS with the intention to go to college, and understanding the social impact of policies that target Latinas is important if we are to create better interventions while increasing educational opportunity. In addition to the perceptions and experiences of Latina students, we also analysed several of the ECHS institutional documents in order to better understand the school from a policy perspective. Therefore, this study addressed the following questions, (a) what are the perceptions of Latina students, who are underperforming, regarding their school performance and experiences at an ECHS designed to prepare them for college? and, (b) what does this mean for the ECHS as a policy intervention? We focused specifically on Latina students who were underperforming based on course failure rates because this underperformance seemed in conflict with the students' decision to attend a rigorous early college programme.

Conceptual frameworks and methodology

This was a qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), with the goal of understanding the perceptions and experiences of Latina students at TECHS, and the implications these have for ECHSs as a policy intervention. Furthermore, this study extends the work of Anderson and Larson (2009) who examined the perspectives and experiences of students participating in an Upward Bound programme (a component of TRIO) to understand how this programme, implemented as an educational policy intervention, attempted to increase educational opportunity for the students it was designed to serve. These authors also interviewed the director of the programme to better understand it as enacted policy. Anderson and Larson analysed their data within the conceptual frameworks of freedom to achieve (Sen, 1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2002), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2002), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999, 2000), which allowed for divergent and dynamic perspectives regarding achievement to be illuminated. Whereas the students in the Anderson and Larson study were African-American and Latino males participating in an Upward Bound programme, we chose to study Latina students participating in an ECHS. Moreover, while Anderson and Larson interviewed the director of the programme, we analysed the ECHS institutional documents to better understand how the policy was implemented and enacted. We felt a critical interrogation of these documents was more substantive in terms of understanding the foundational tenants of the policy as well as how particular aspects of the policy played out in students' lives.

Conceptual frameworks

The frameworks of freedoms (Sen, 1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2002), unfreedoms (Sen, 1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2002), and deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999, 2000) stem from the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999a), that is, a focus on human capabilities—what people are effectively and truly able to do and be (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005). This approach was initially conceived and applied in the field of economics in the early 1980s and has been interpreted in diverse ways. Since its introduction to scholarship, Sen's capabilities approach has been advanced and applied to a variety of fields including education (e.g. Anderson & Larson, 2009; Hart, 2013; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005, 2006; Unterhalter, 2003; Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

According to Unterhalter (2009) 'capabilities represent the freedoms to achieve combinations of valued functionings ...' (p. 416). That is, capability is 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being ... represent[ing] the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be' (Sen, 1993, p. 30). Likewise, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) note that 'capabilities are opportunities or freedoms to achieve what an individual reflectively considers valuable' (p. 2). The expansion of human capability then, involves 'the freedom [people] actually enjoy to

choose the lives that they have reason to value' (Sen, 1979, p. 81), and develop into who they want to be.

As noted by Robeyns (2005), an individual's 'capability is equivalent [to] a person's opportunity set' (p. 100). Sen (1992) further suggested that 'in a very basic sense, a person's capability to achieve does indeed stand for the opportunity to pursue his or her objectives' (p. 7). Additionally and importantly, Sen (2009) argues that the focus of the capabilities approach is on what a person is in fact 'free' to do (i.e. what opportunities they have), and not on just what a person actually ends up doing. Within this approach then lie questions regarding social equality, inequality and constraints on opportunities that hinder well-being (Robeyns, 2005).

Freedoms. Freedom 'gives us more opportunity to pursue our objectives—those things that we value' (Sen, 2009, p. 228). For example, a student who is able (has the freedom) to attend tutorials has an opportunity for advanced achievement. This student is experiencing a freedom to achieve. However, the freedom to achieve is given by the set of real opportunities, rather than actual achievements (Sen, 2009).

Sen (1992) noted, where we stand in society is a result conceived of both actual achievement and the freedom to achieve. Sen would argue then, that each perspective, the actual achievement and the freedom to achieve, must be considered interdependently, highlighting that a student's real opportunities do not occur in a vacuum. Walker (2006) agreed that a person's actions are context-dependent. 'We should not view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms' (Walker, 2006, p. 166), because there is a difference between doing something and being free to do something (Sen, 2009).

While real opportunity is indeed relative, the traditional meritocratic discourse (or the familiar 'bootstrap' mentality) suggests each of us has access to opportunities that ensure upward mobility. However, as Sen (1992) noted, the opportunities or 'resources a person has ... may be very imperfect indicators of the freedom that the person really enjoys to do this or that' (p. 38). Furthermore, these imperfections may 'lead to substantial interpersonal variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into *achievements* ... [and] make the ... freedom to achieve similarly variable' (Sen, 1992, p. 38, emphasis original). Simply, facing more options should not be 'seen as an expansion of a person's freedom to do the things she would like to do' (Sen, 1992, p. 63). Thus, to believe that we are all able to achieve at the same level and pace is naïve. Specific to this study and based on Sen's work, we define 'freedoms to achieve' as avenues or supports TECHS provided that were designed to increase and expand the Latina students' educational opportunity.

Unfreedoms. There are limits on freedom. Having the freedom to do something and the capacity to do it, do not always coincide. If we want to understand inequality, then we must understand the real choices individuals are able to make, inclusive of social, familial,

political, environmental, and economic liberties and constraints. These constraints or limitations on freedom are what Sen (1992) calls unfreedoms.

Sen (1999b) suggested that unfreedoms can develop through ‘inadequate processes … or through inadequate opportunities’ (p. 17) that keep us from achieving what we would like to achieve. Unfreedoms, then, are the aspects of our lives, imposed externally rather than internally, which bar us from taking advantage of certain resources or opportunities. While unfreedoms are common to us all, those who are considered poor (and we would add all groups who have been historically marginalized) are particularly vulnerable to the harsh effects of unfreedoms (Sen, 1992). For example, an unfreedom in a student’s life may arise from a family illness: the student may have to ‘skip’ school in order to take care of the sick family member. The fact that the student is needed at home *prevents* the student from going to school, which we assume the student would do if she truly had the choice to do so. Thus, the student is experiencing an *unfreedom*. However, looking at opportunity to achieve from the lens of freedoms and unfreedoms is uncommon. More common, as Larson and Murtadha (2002) suggest, are:

… school leaders who believe that their schools are equitable for all children [and] regularly enact programs and policies that they assume are fair and serve the academic and social interests of all students. But many are misguided … because they are not sufficiently aware of the differences that limit children’s and their families’ freedoms to achieve. (p. 156)

Thus, a framework that includes freedoms and unfreedoms provides a useful analytic lens with which to view student achievement. It allows us to consider relative life circumstances of students, and how achievement may be influenced by such contextual factors.

*Deformed choices.*⁷ Complimentary to Sen’s (1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2002) notions of freedoms and unfreedoms, deformed choices (Nussbaum, 1999; 2000) arise from the constraints, restrictions or limitations (unfreedoms) that prevent individuals from taking advantage of opportunities. For example, the student who had to stay home from school to take care of a sick family member *chose* to stay home from school. However, this choice was not a genuine choice, rather it was *deformed*. In this sense, it was no choice at all. Without the unfreedom of having to stay home and assist the family, we assume the student would choose to go to school. Thus, the perceived freedoms students have—the freedom to go to school—may indeed not be a freedom. A student may be experiencing an unfreedom that results in an unavoidable deformed choice.

Sen (1979) suggested that a conflict always exists between choices, however, certain choices must be made. Regarding education, those choices, specifically deformed choices, may compromise achievement. Thus, given the context of a student’s life it is possible that the student may sacrifice her own well-being (by choosing a less than ideal option) for other goals which could prevent her from taking advantage of the freedom to achieve a high level of future well-being (Sen, 1999a). Thus, a

person's choice may be contingent on other circumstances (Sen, 1999b) and cannot be truly assessed by ignoring the context in which the choice was made.

Methodology

Since the fall of 2007, a major university and a community college in Tamblyn, Texas have partnered with TECHS. The shared partnership permits TECHS students to enrol in community college coursework free of all costs. The major university provides a graduate assistant to work with TECHS (the lead author, Leslie, was the graduate assistant from 2007 to 2011), a team of undergraduates who serve as tutors, and some classroom equipment. Based on Leslie's role at TECHS, we employed a positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001) for this inquiry. Thus, we acknowledge that Leslie's insider observations informed this study. These 'insider' opportunities allowed Leslie to not only observe, but also to interact closely and frequently with the students, teachers and leaders at TECHS, and to build significant relationships (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

Given Leslie's time spent in the study context, and the relationships she was able to build, fluid and honest communication developed with potential study participants. In order to identify participants, purposive sampling techniques were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which allowed subjects to be chosen based on particular characteristics (Patton, 1990). For this study, the particular characteristics were gender, ethnicity, underperformance,⁸ and eligibility for subsidized lunch,⁹ as they were indicative of the broader student population at TECHS. The TECHS administration identified 14 students based on our selection criteria. We invited all 14 identified students to participate, 10 responded with an interest and eight returned the necessary consent forms. These eight students agreed to participate in the study.

We conducted two 1–1.5 hour semi-structured (Fontana & Frey, 2000) interviews with each student. The individual interviews were scheduled according to each participant's availability, and were held in intervals of three to four weeks. Additionally, each student participated in one of two focus groups (Fontana & Frey, 2000), which lasted approximately two hours. The focus groups were conducted after all individual interviews were complete. Some questions from the interview protocols include: Why did you decide to come to TECHS?; What do you most worry about or what causes you the greatest stress?; How do you think your experiences here are similar and/or different than those of other students here?; Please tell me about any positive and/or negative experiences you may have had at TECHS. How do you think that or those experiences may have affected your academic performance?

In addition to the interviews, student journals, a researcher journal, field notes and observations were used as other means of data collection. Furthermore, because we chose to look at the early college programme as

a policy intervention, several TECHS institutional documents were analysed. The institutional documents included the mission statement, the core values, the scholar's oath and the student/parent/staff contract (S/P/S contract). These multiple modes of inquiry allowed us to confirm information gathered from the interviews, gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study, and see a holistic portrait of the context. Moreover, trustworthiness was established through triangulation, prolonged engagement at TECHS, member checking during data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and peer debriefing throughout the study. All data were initially analysed for emerging themes and subthemes, and coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The frameworks of freedoms (Sen), unfreedoms (Sen) and deformed choices (Nussbaum) guided the subsequent thematic analyses. As is customary with this qualitative method, in reporting the results we used exemplary statements from individual participants to illustrate themes and subthemes, however, these statements were reflective of the participants' perspectives as a whole.

The study site: TECHS. TECHS is categorized as both a public charter school and an ECHS. As a unique programme for the district, TECHS is guided by its own set of institutional policies. Additionally, TECHS utilizes a soft admission policy whereby students who apply to the programme, regardless of past academic performance, are accepted if there is space available. Reasons for denial of admission are based solely on past discipline infractions.

The student body at TECHS at the time of data collection was primarily students from historically marginalized groups: Latina/o (58%); African-American (19%); low-income (68%); first generation college bound (85%); and female (69%). Latina students comprised approximately 38% of the total student population at the time of data collection. The profiles of the eight Latina student participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Name (pseudonym*)	Grade	US-born	Age at time of interview	Desired profession
Ariel	10	Yes	15	Marine biologist
Victoria	10	No	15	Lawyer
Pooh	11	Yes	15	Registered nurse
Jamila	10	Yes	15	Bilingual teacher
Sarah	9	Yes	14	Teacher
Carmen	10	Yes	15	Singer
Berenize	10	Yes	15	Psychiatrist or Psychologist
Leah	11	No	17	Undecided

*All participants chose their own pseudonym.

Results: freedoms, unfreedoms and deformed choices

Before moving into a detailed discussion of the results of the study, it is important to reiterate our primary assumption. We assume that given the freedom and opportunity, the students who participated in this study would choose school as their first priority. We believe this assumption is valid given the students' affirmative choice to attend an early college programme, and their subsequent enrolment at TECHS.

Institutional documents

A review of the institutional documents that purportedly guided TECHS was critical in analysing the discourse of this policy initiative. As artifacts, these documents imply that the programme is built on a foundation that provides students the freedoms to achieve through a rigorous curriculum, small classes and increased communication, college courses and academic immersion, and student commitment. As the majority of students at TECHS are from historically underserved groups, these resources are meant to help 'make up' for the underpreparation the students have previously experienced throughout the educational pipeline, thereby allowing students expanded educational opportunity or freedom to achieve. These freedoms to achieve as outlined in the TECHS institutional documents are summarized here and detailed in Table 2.

Rigorous curriculum. Rigorous curriculum as a means to prepare students for current and future achievement is conveyed in the TECHS mission statement, the core values and the S/P/S contract.

Small classes and increased communication. The belief that freedom to achieve is expanded by providing small classes that facilitate increased communication between teachers/staff and students/parents is articulated in the scholar's oath and the S/P/S contract.

Creating future college students via college coursework and academic immersion. The S/P/S contract also reveals the belief that because students are taking courses on a college campus, this early exposure to college life would result in higher motivation to achieve.

Student commitment. In addition to rigour, small classes, and immersion in a college atmosphere, student commitment to doing the necessary work to succeed was purported as expanding the freedom to achieve in the S/P/S contract.

Putting it all together

A review of the guiding documents of TECHS reveals the mechanisms believed to expand students' educational opportunity or 'freedoms'

Table 2. Freedoms to achieve within the TECHS institutional documents

Subtheme	Institutional document	Supporting excerpt
Rigorous curriculum	Mission statement	We are a community of learners engaged in a quest for academic excellence...
	Core value 1	All students will be prepared for college
	S/P/S contract	[TECHS] offers a rigorous academic programme ... students attending [TECHS] will be successful in pre-AP/AP and dual credit courses, complete the distinguished achievement high school graduation plan ... enrol in a four-year college or university after high school graduation ... Students will ... take all pre-AP, AP and dual credit courses as appropriate ... Parents will ... provide time and space for their student to complete schoolwork at home, knowing that their student will have homework every night
Small classes and increased communication	Scholar's Oath S/P/S contract	We are a team of scholars discovering, discussing and learning together... [TECHS] offers a ... small, personalized setting ... Students will communicate with parents and staff regularly regarding progress, goals, questions, comments and concerns ... [and] ... Parents will communicate with students and staff regularly regarding progress, goals, questions, comments and concerns
Creating future college students via college coursework and academic immersion	S/P/S contract	Students will be successful in ... dual credit courses ... and enrol in a four-year university after high school graduation ... will follow ... the community college code of conduct. Staff members will follow ... the community college code of conduct
Student commitment	S/P/S contract	Students will ... set aside time for homework every night to help ensure assignments are completed on time ... come prepared for every class every day and turn in all assignments on time ... conduct self in an academically professional manner by following all the rules of common courtesy and demonstrating best work ethic at all times I understand that I am responsible for my own success and that I must fully commit myself in order to be successful at [TECHS]

to achieve. These included—rigour, small classes and increased communication, college courses and college immersion, and student commitment. Few would argue that these are not worthy. As worthy as they may be, however, implementing these initiatives with only partial vision of the students' lives is naïve. It reflects a meritocratic, individualistic discourse that does not acknowledge the disadvantages or unfreedoms students may encounter. Indeed, our examination of the TECHS institutional documents suggests the meritocratic, individualistic discourse at the school was being implemented and enacted simplistically and uncritically. In the following sections, we discuss the Latina students' perceptions of the freedoms at TECHS, the unfreedoms they experienced, the deformed choices they made, and the ways these played out in relation to the girls' academic performance at TECHS.

Latina students' perceptions of freedoms at TECHS

During the interviews and observations the girls articulated that they recognized the resources provided by TECHS designed to expand their educational opportunity, or the 'freedom' to focus on and obtain academic achievement. These resources were: free college, access to help, college preparation, and college credit and classes. Note that these are similar to those the TECHS institutional documents promote as resources to expand educational opportunity and 'freedom' to achieve. That is, the girls believed these resources, the collective 'jumpstart' to a college education that TECHS offers and promotes, would help them attain their goals.

Free college. The girls perceived the possibility of obtaining college credit, tuition-free as a resource to expand their education opportunities, or, in other words, a freedom to achieve. For example, Ariel noted that TECHS provided an opportunity for 'a brighter future' by providing a 'fifty percent discount on college'. Similarly, Jamila stated '... after my freshman year I saw the whole thing, the meaning [of TECHS] ... It's free college. So I'm saving thousands of dollars.' Thus, 'free college' was the primary objective of TECHS, according to Jamila.

Access to help. Another resource offered by TECHS that the girls perceived to provide them with freedom to focus on achievement was the individualized attention they received from their teachers, and their quick access to these teachers when they needed assistance. For example, Sarah noted,

When [the teacher] starts explaining or giving a lecture and you don't understand and the teacher looks at you and sees that you look puzzled or lost, she starts explaining [in a way you can understand]. And I'm like, okay, that's really cool.

Pooh had a similar remark. Interestingly she drew a comparison between the teachers at TECHS and those from her middle school years. She said,

Teachers [at TECHS] are really cool and they really help you out. And in middle school the teachers would be like, ‘Oh just come to tutorial and you will be fine.’ But here it’s like ‘Meet me after class and we’ll talk about it,’ instead of waiting til tutorial time. That’s what I like. You can get [help] right then. You don’t have to go home and be like, well, I have this and I don’t know what to do. So that’s what I like.

Preparation for college. Preparation for college was another resource the girls thought would expand their educational opportunity. For example, Sarah noted,

[TECHS] was a very good experience for me because I got to see what it is going to be [like] in the future once you go to college. You have to know that going into college that we have to be prepared for anything, take notes, you know even though the teachers don’t ask us to.

Similarly Victoria stated, ‘If you want to succeed, this is a good school, because it prepares you for the college experience.’

Interestingly, Leah remarked about the difference between TECHS and traditional high schools in terms of college preparation: ‘[At the other high schools in Tamblyn] they’re just teaching you lessons, they’re not telling you how college is gonna be.’

College credit and classes. A further resource that the girls perceived to provide increased educational opportunity was the access TECHS provided to college credit and classes. Illustrating these points, Jamila noted ‘... [Here at TECHS] everyone goes to a high school where they can go to college at the same time. You’re getting 60 college credits.’ Similarly, Victoria remarked ‘The really good thing [about TECHS] is the credits that they give you for college classes, so that’s really good.’

Putting it all together

The girls perceived TECHS to offer many resources to expand their educational opportunity and increase their ‘freedom’ to achieve. Rigorous classes, extra help, college preparation and free college credits were all viewed positively by the girls as components that would help them achieve their educational goals, as freedoms to achieve. Interestingly, many of these ‘freedoms’ echoed those promoted in the TECHS institutional documents. As noted earlier, these documents emphasize an individualistic, meritocratic, ‘bootstrap-type’ of ethic. This meritocratic discourse was so pervasive that the girls did not question, critique or problematize it in terms of their low academic performance. That is, the girls were seeing these ‘freedoms’ as helpful to obtaining their immediate and long-range goals, yet they were consistently underperforming. Therefore, these ‘freedoms’ were not effectively working for them. Perhaps these ‘freedoms’ are not as effective as they could be because they insist that students focus on the future (through immersion in a rigorous college preparatory programme), while ignoring potentially distracting events in their school, home and/or community. These distractions may be considered ‘unfreedoms’ which derail students’ momentum toward academic achievement.

Latina students' perceptions of unfreedoms at TECHS

Despite liking TECHS as a whole and perceiving it to offer many resources for advanced achievement, the girls also discussed some aspects of their schooling that could be considered unfreedoms, or aspects that undermined their freedom to focus on academic achievement. These unfreedoms were verbalized as a perceived lack of ability and underpreparation, stress from assignments and heavy testing schedules, lack of organizational skills, and outside responsibilities.

Perceived lack of ability and underpreparation. The girls perceived themselves to lack ability in certain subjects. For example, Ariel said, 'I don't like math at all ... I've never learned how to do math, like grasp it.' And similarly Victoria remarked, 'I'm not good in history ... [and] ... I hate math. I can't wrap my head around it. It's like where do I pull up all those numbers from or all the formulas. Should I add or subtract?'

Many of the girls remarked that their perception of inability came from being underprepared for the rigour and expectations at TECHS. For example, a perceived lack of preparation is evident in the following exchange between Leslie and Jamila:

Leslie: Did the schools that you went to before, did they tell you about [Advanced Placement] classes?

Jamila: Not really. It was just either you do it or you don't.

Similarly, Pooh noted that her previous school experiences were unlike those at TECHS. Pooh stated her former schools,

... could have prepared me better, because I know my eighth grade year it was like I don't know, it was really easy. And you got here and I'm like, oh my gosh, I didn't realize—[teachers would say] 'oh you should have learned this in eighth grade.' And I'm like, I didn't learn that.

Heavy homework and testing schedule. The girls often felt stressed and frustrated by what seemed to them like a constant barrage of homework and tests, and the continual burden of having to study. For example, Victoria stated that she gets stressed '... whenever I get a lot of homework and that it's due like the same day. And whenever there's a day where I have to take like tests a full day.' Sarah also discussed being stressed by the workload. She said:

When I start stressing out, I start panicking. Like I do one thing that I start on and then I say, 'oh my God, I've got to do this, too.' I put that away and do that. And then it just keeps going on and on and on, and it's really stressful, and it's hard to deal with a bunch of things like for school, home, your siblings ... It's just really, really hard, you know.

Lack of organizational skills. Many of the girls did not know how to effectively organize their time and study habits. As a result, their academic performance suffered. For example, Berenize noted: '... I spend a lot of time doing one homework, I leave the other one and it's not complete. And whenever there's a lot of things to do you don't give it your hundred

percent.' Berenize continued, 'I worry about one [assignment] and then maybe while I'm testing I'm just thinking about "oh I forgot to do this." And like I just don't get focused.'

Likewise, Pooh also noted that she lacked organizational skills. Regarding her schoolwork she said,

[The teachers will] tell you the day before it's due, like 'remember your thing's due.' And I'm like 'oh my gosh, I haven't even started. I had two weeks to do this, and I haven't even started on it.' Cause once you get one thing you get another.

Non-school responsibilities. All of the girls reported that they held jobs outside school, or had responsibilities at home that competed for time they could devote to studying. For example, Pooh said her responsibilities at home were,

... like chores. [My mom will tell me] 'go clean your room, go fold up these clothes, go wash the clothes, go do the dishes, mop the floor, sweep the floor, go to the store and get me something. Like we'll be back, go watch the kids.' ... But I mean ... I'm usually all the help she gets.

Similarly, Jamila also discussed outside, non-school responsibilities:

Cause when I'm here at school, I'm just like, oh I've got to turn in this essay and do this and do this. And then when I go to [work], I'm like, oh yes ... we need to do this, we need to do that. And it's just like, ehhhhh!

Jamila later admitted that once she left TECHS, her homework only had a '50:50 shot' at getting completed.

Putting it all together

The girls perceived aspects of their lives and of their schooling to undermine their freedom to focus on achievement. These unfreedoms, a perceived lack of ability and underpreparation, the heavy homework and testing schedule, a lack of organizational skills and non-school responsibilities, like the 'freedoms' perceived by the girls, went without critique. However, these unfreedoms had critical outcomes in terms of the choices the girls were able to make regarding their schooling. Made in the context of unfreedoms, the choices available to the girls were often negotiated or deformed.

Deformed choices

Due to the unfreedoms the girls experienced they often became frustrated, stressed or overwhelmed. Indeed, because the girls experienced unfreedoms such as being underprepared for the rigour of college preparation and inundated with in- and out-of-school responsibilities, the freedom to achieve was often unavailable to them. When this occurred, they reported making deformed choices, which did not make

school their top priority, and limited their opportunity to be successful in the early college environment. The most common deformed choice was procrastination, which resulted in not turning in schoolwork or turning it in late. Another deformed choice they discussed was not accessing help on a regular basis, which would have resulted in more school success.

Procrastination. Concerning her homework, Victoria noted her lackluster grades often were a result of not turning in her homework due to procrastination. She stated that she would often,

... finish the assignment, and then the day that it was due I would forget it at home. I'd leave it just lying around because the day before I'd fall asleep doing the work ... And then the next day I'd get lazy to turn it in, and I wouldn't turn it in at all...

Here, Victoria suggested she was sometimes lazy and did not turn in her assignments. However, previously Victoria noted that she was often overwhelmed by the amount of homework and multiple assignments being due on the same day. Moreover, she also held a job, which may have caused her to work on assignments late into the evening, making her too exhausted in the morning to remember to bring her homework to school. Rather than being able to organize her time and schoolwork, or having the luxury of not going to work, her deformed choice was to procrastinate and not turn in her assignments.

Jamila also told us she struggled with procrastination. She discussed procrastination in the following exchange.

- Leslie: So, is [TECHS] everything that you thought it would be?
- Jamila: I wish that we didn't have—that comes all back to me.
- Leslie: What [comes back to you]?
- Jamila: Procrastinating.
- Leslie: Procrastinating? What do you mean?
- Jamila: 'Cause [at TECHS] you really have all of your work [due] at the same time.
- Leslie: Close to the same due date? So you wish that you didn't do that, or you wish you didn't have so many assignments?
- Jamila: Maybe so many assignments.

Recall Jamila was also concerned about how much she had to work outside of school. Here though, she was concerned about the number of assignments she needed to complete within a similar timeframe. It appeared that Jamila was overwhelmed with her in- and out-of-school responsibilities and trying to complete her many assignments. Rather than being able to organize her work and tackle those assignments, she made a deformed choice to procrastinate.

Procrastination is also evident in the following example from Berenize. When asked what she thought distracted her from her school work, she replied,

... I got a job this year, and then I get home and I'm kind of tired and then I eat and maybe watch some TV and then I do my homework ... and I know it shouldn't be that way.

Clearly, Berenize knows she should not leave her homework until the end of her evening, but due to her life circumstances, and perhaps fatigue, she made the deformed choice to procrastinate.

Inability to access help. Another deformed choice the girls' discussed was not being able to take advantage of the help offered by TECHS. They knew assistance was available and agreed that the assistance was useful, but they often could not access it due to other obligations.

For example, when we asked Pooh if she took advantage of the academic help offered by TECHS, she said,

I went [to Saturday tutorials] once. Other than that I have to work. It was good—I need a lot of physics help, so I went and Mr. [Travis] was here, so I got all my physics done. And I was getting it, and I was like, 'yes!' I didn't know what I was doing in that class.

Clearly Pooh benefitted from the assistance, but usually had to work (a deformed choice) when it was offered.

Similarly, Carmen noted that her work schedule was particularly busy during the spring semester, which did not allow her to dedicate much time to her studies. Carmen stated,

... Like towards January and February between those months I was kind of busy after school. I wouldn't get home until about 8:00 or 9:00 and I was just exhausted. I think getting some [time off] would help me. But it's hard.

Like Pooh, Carmen knows that working less would assist her with increased academic achievement. However, as she articulated, a reduced workload would be a challenge. For Carmen, choosing work over studying constituted a deformed choice.

Jamila, whose homework had only a '50:50 shot' at getting completed once she left TECHS, commented '... when [I'm] caught up and doing [my] work, [I'm] like "go me!"' But she also acknowledged that she does not get caught up often, and '... can't always make it to tutorials because [I'm] at work'. Because Jamila noted that she was happy with herself when she was caught up on her schoolwork, we assume she wanted to do well in school, but because of her work schedule she was unable to put schoolwork first. And like Pooh and Carmen, choosing work, rather than studying or attending tutorials, constituted a deformed choice for Jamila.

Putting it all together

The girls perceived TECHS to be an effective and authentic school environment that provided many freedoms to achieve or resources to expand their educational opportunity. They believed TECHS had high-quality teachers and effective instructional practices. Moreover, they thought the programme would enable them to meet the expectations of high school graduation, complete some college credit hours, and be prepared for college.

These perceptions, however, were dynamic and often contradictory. Analysing the data in terms of freedoms to achieve, unfreedoms and deformed choices revealed that the social and institutional structure of TECHS worked in ways unconscious to all the stakeholders of the school, including the girls. For example, at times they appreciated the increased rigour at TECHS, and at other times, they felt it was overwhelming, frustrating and detrimental to their achievement. Furthermore, they discussed specific aspects of their lives, such as having to work and feeling under-prepared, which tended to derail their momentum towards academic achievement. These unfreedoms often paved the way for the girls to make deformed choices such as working rather than studying, and becoming frustrated with their schoolwork, which culminated in procrastination. These constraints were assigned by the girls to be inherent aspects of their lives, rather than structural barriers. The intersection of perceived freedoms, unfreedoms and deformed choices calls into question the viability of ECHSs as a policy solution to improve opportunities for students from historically marginalized groups, specifically here, Latina students.

Unaware of and immersed in the meritocratic discourse underpinning the policy and its enactment, the girls in this study understandably did not blame an educational, economic and political system that has historically underserved them and their families. They believed they were culpable for their comparative underachievement, a result of their own lack of effort, aligning with the meritocratic discourse. This begs the question, did these Latina students *actually* have the freedom to achieve to develop into who they wanted to be?

Discussion

To this point, the results have been discussed by themes and subthemes. Next, we offer our interpretation of the findings (see Figure 1).

The problems

ECHSs emerged as a policy solution to counteract two primary problems: (a) too few students from traditionally marginalized groups were completing high school and going on to college, and (b) for those students who did go on to college, many dropped out before obtaining a degree. In response, ECHSs were designed to reduce the time to degree completion by enrolling these target group students in high school and college simultaneously.

Policy formation and intent

The problems ECHSs were designed to counteract, along with the solutions offered, do not function within a vacuum. Rather, policy solutions like ECHSs function within the broader US foundational, political framework. Inherent in this framework is an ethic of individualism—the familiar

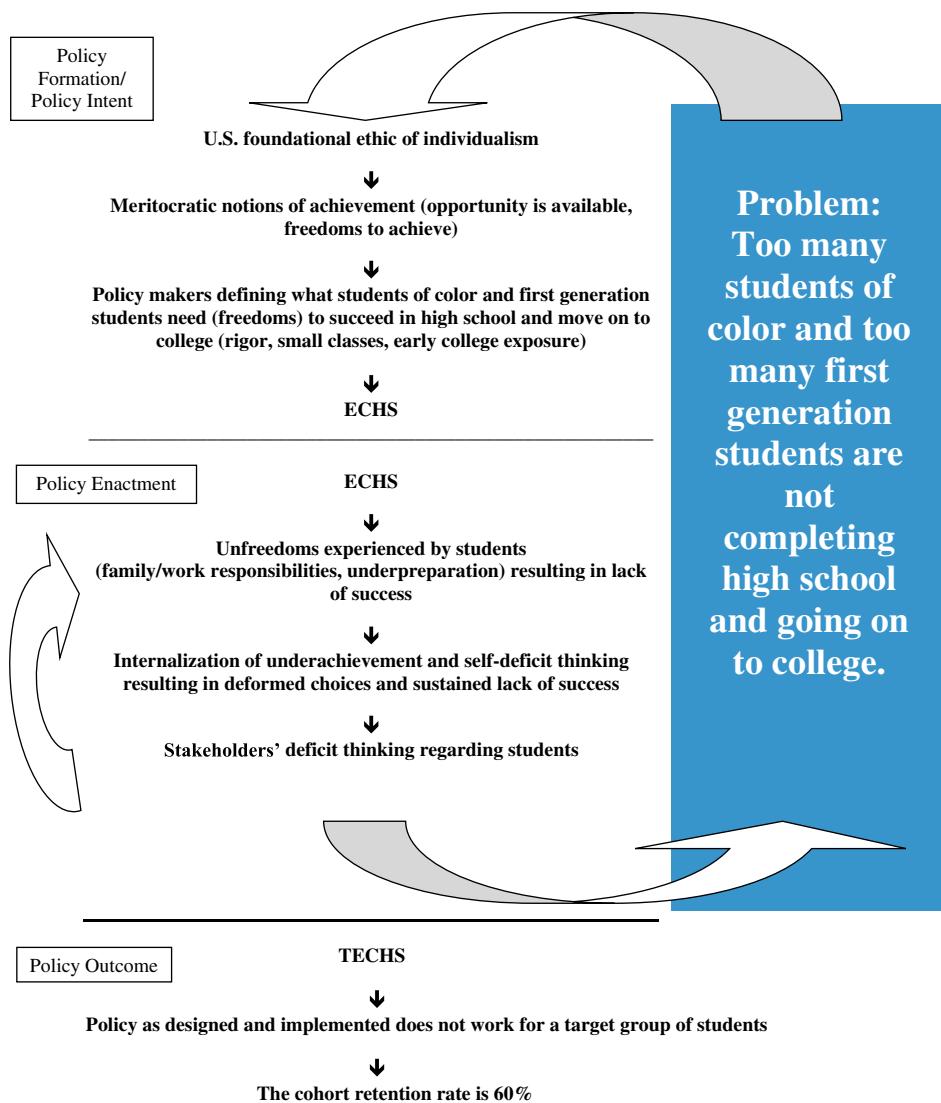


Figure 1. Policy formation, enactment, and outcome within an early college programme

and simplistic ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ mantra that promotes the neoliberal notion of a meritocracy (Apple, 2004). This premise suggests ‘opportunity’ or ‘freedom’ to achieve is available if one works hard enough, which disregards the social, cultural, familial, environmental and political influences that might work to impede an individual’s progress. As we have illustrated these opportunities or presumed freedoms are also present in the discourse towards school achievement. When formulating the ECHS as a policy solution to address the aforementioned problems, policy-makers incorporated what they assumed would afford students the opportunity or freedom to achieve. These included academic rigour, small classes and early college exposure.

Policy enactment

As we have demonstrated, however, the enactment of ECHSs as a policy solution designed to provide students the freedom to achieve is problematic. Certainly, built into these schools are supports, like small classes, that should provide students freedom to achieve, however, the unfreedoms students must contend with have been overlooked or dismissed. These unfreedoms included family and work responsibilities, underpreparedness for coursework, frustration with homework, and the inability to organize competing responsibilities. In our study, these unfreedoms resulted in the students' inability to take advantage of the opportunities presented and led them to make deformed choices, which led to a lack of success. This lack of success was internalized, albeit unconsciously, by the girls as a result of their own deficits. In other words, they uncritically saw the problem as residing in themselves rather than in the inherent meritocratic hegemony of the school and the policy. We would add, informed by our previous research (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), that all the stakeholders in this system may have internalized, normalized and projected these deficit views of the students and possibly their families, community, and culture, as well.

These deficit views, both of the students themselves and the stakeholders of the school, constitute an additional unfreedom impacting the girls' ability to benefit from the presumed freedoms afforded them at TECHS. Indeed, when seen by oneself or others as deficit, the cycle of underachievement and lowered expectations begins (McKenzie, 2009), reifying the perceived individual inadequacies of the student and obfuscating the inherent flaws in the policy and its enactment through TECHS.

Policy outcome

Thus, regarding the specific student group for this study, Latinas, a target ECHS student group, the policy as designed was largely ineffective. These students were unable to take advantage of the opportunities for high achievement that TECHS offered, even though they desperately wanted to do so. Of the eight girls interviewed for this study, only two graduated from TECHS. The others, due to their underperformance, were forced to transfer out of the early college programme and enroll in the traditional high school assigned to their attendance zone. These girls were not alone in their attrition. On average, from 2008 to 2010, TECHS lost forty percent of its class cohorts. That is, approximately forty percent of the students at each grade level left the early college programme either by force, due to low performance, or by choice.

Despite their underperformance and deformed choices, the girls who participated in this study were clinging to the hope of finishing school and going to college. However, it is probable that their goals and aspirations decreased in response to increased unfreedoms and deformed choices. That is, their motivations and choices may have been hampered by the

reality of their complex lives. Thus, as Ariel noted, this early college programme in its current form '[Was] like giving us a car, only without the wheels'.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

Using the benchmarks of freedoms, unfreedoms and deformed choices, we were able to reveal that even though TECHS had goals of equity and social justice, some students face barriers that were unaccounted for in the formulation of the policy. By conceptualizing underachievement in the space of these frameworks, there is more scope to account for diversity in students' lives including diversity in their achievement.

The findings from this study, similar to those found by Anderson and Larson (2009), expose significant gaps between the policy-makers' assumptions regarding how to expand educational opportunity for students from traditionally underserved groups and what students need if they are to have the freedom to focus on their achievement. It is clear that the girls were often unable to convert the supports and resources offered at TECHS into capability (Hart, 2013), expanded educational opportunity and increased achievement.

The availability of supports or resources is inadequate as a metric to evaluate choice. Clearly, students have reasons for rejecting alternatives that may assist them in obtaining higher achievement. As Sen (2002) suggested, an individual is the ultimate authority in deciding what to do. Thus, while an individual may make decisions that she does not find fully acceptable, these personal decisions 'cannot be assumed away by others assessing her opportunity' (Sen, 2002, p. 671). Accordingly, others' (i.e. teachers, leaders, community members, policy-makers) assumption that all students can access specific supports or resources, while political and practical, is also illogical (Brighouse, 2000; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). We believe that traditional assumptions surrounding opportunity and access constrain our understanding of achievement. Furthermore, we assert that routine assumptions that shape the main tenants of a policy, like the ECHS, encourage exclusion of certain student groups.

As the Latina students' stories demonstrate, ECHSs, although designed as a social justice, equity-oriented intervention offering many resources, do little in terms of actually increasing achievement if they dismiss the holistic lives of the students. The frameworks of Sen and Nussbaum remind us it is naïve to believe that students' real lives and elements of those lives that influence their choices, can simply be ignored. We cannot be blind to the complexities of students' lives, for these complexities influence opportunity and achievement. Schools must see students' freedoms and unfreedoms in their interdependent states, and their choices need to be understood in full light. It is a mistake to interpret achievement only in terms of choice (Sen, 2002).

Moreover, we must begin to see access as an indicator of social justice. That is, we cannot assume that if a resource is offered that is it also accessible. We must look for an alternate barometer with which to measure achievement, for we know looking at achievement in isolation is not only unrealistic, but reifies the meritocratic discourse. If we continue to measure achievement aligned with the meritocratic notions, we are, in reality, measuring advantage not achievement. Thus, in efforts to level the proverbial playing field—what we should equalize are human capabilities—not resources, not income, not the ratio of teachers to students, but what people are actually able to be and do (Sen, 1992; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

However, ECHSs do have the potential to profoundly change education, particularly for students from traditionally marginalized groups. We agree with Cole et al. (2012) that the ECHS could be a ‘promising alternative approach for designing high schools in the 21st century, particularly for ensuring that students who are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education are college-ready’ (p. 166). However, as the results of this study articulate, supporting a myopic focus on academic achievement alone does little to support the social justice imperative in such education policies. Therefore, effective policy-makers and policy implementers, such as school leaders and teachers, must acknowledge, rather than ignore, the diversity of students’ and families’ real lives.

Paying attention to the broader needs of students and families will require a change in design of programmes like the ECHS (Anderson & Larson, 2009), and an illumination of the deeper problems at the heart of education policy. That is, a goal of such redesign should be to illuminate the meritocratic notions built in to policies. Furthermore, as our data articulate, all students do not share equally in the assumed attainments often associated with education reforms (Gillmore, 2005). Thus, the perspectives of students and families targeted for social justice policy interventions, such as those found in this study, must be integrated into reforms and redesigns (see Harklau, 2013 for an additional call for policy to be inclusive of individual student perspectives). And finally, for a social justice policy to live up to its intentions, the burden of proof must be on the policy—or the institution enacting the policy—not the student. That is, the policy must provide both the car *and* the wheels, to authentically increase student achievement.

Certainly professionals working in social justice, equity-oriented educational programmes, like ECHSs, have their work cut out for them (Ryan, 2010). However, we encourage school leaders and teachers, particularly those in ECHSs, to embrace the results of this study, although it will require they be open to listening to uncomfortable truths about educational inequity and turn a critical eye to their own institution to examine contradictions between their practise and their students’ needs (Hynds, 2010). We call for a challenge to the myth of meritocracy, and a re-examination of our deeply held values about individualism, equity, social justice and opportunity.

Notes

1. 'At-risk' students are: under 21 years old and failed in at least one grade level; show low performance and low assessment; are non-native English speakers; wards of the State; pregnant or a parent; homeless; or hospitalized (Texas Education Code 29.081).
2. The terms Latina/o and Hispanic are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. The terms refer to someone who is from Latin America or of Latin American descent who is currently living in the US. Usage of the terms throughout the paper reflects how they are referenced in the literature. Though the research that informs most of this work focuses on students of Mexican descent, the argument is germane to almost all Latina/o groups. The umbrella term we use here to refer to all subgroups is 'Latina/o' because it is a term that has most currency in the community, despite the fact that 'Hispanic' is the preferred term for governments and institutions. It should also be known that academic performance among Latina/o ethnic groups varies depending on education, geographic location and social mobility.
3. Pseudonyms have been used in place of all given names of schools, places and participants.
4. Advanced Placement and Dual Credit are in-school intervention programmes at the high school level designed to expose students to advanced and college-level coursework. Started in the 1960s, these programmes remain commonplace in traditional high schools.
5. TRIO is a group of federal grant programmes (originally there were three programmes) under the Higher Education Act of 1965. TRIO is not an acronym.
6. The 13 partners are: the Center for Native Education, the City University of New York, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, the Georgia Department of Education/University System of Georgia, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Middle College National Consortium, the National Council of La Raza, the North Carolina New Schools Project, the Portland Community College's Gateway to College, SECME, Inc., Communities Foundation of Texas (Texas High School Project), the Utah Partnership Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.
7. While we use the term 'deformed choice' here, we feel it does not accurately reflect the resultant and often *absolute lack of choice* some unfreedoms produce. Perhaps a better term may be a 'negotiated choice' or a 'competing choice'.
8. Underperformance was defined by failing three or more classes based on six-week semester grades.
9. Subsidized or free-and-reduced lunch classification, a proxy for low income, was indicative of the student population of the school.

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