Cracks in the Schoolyard—Confronting Latino Educational Inequality

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*To those who courageously opened the doors to us and to the
hard work that needs to be done to keep those doors wide open.*

*And, special praise to my thoughtful partner—Briana M. Hinga—
who will labor alongside us to keep the doors always open.*

Contents

PART III: CRITICAL CASE STUDIES EXPLORING
ETHNICITY, IDENTITY, AND IMMIGRATION

Contesting Racism, Marginalization, and Mexican Immigrant Youth Failure

Examining the Elusive Path Toward Earning a Diploma from a Nontraditional High School

Eduardo Mosqueda & Kip Téllez

Latina/o students have among the highest school push-out and lowest GED-passing rates among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Within this group, Mexican-origin students are even more likely to leave school without a diploma. In this chapter we investigate the experiences of Mexican-American youth from a low-income agricultural community who are enrolled in a dropout prevention program in a nontraditional high school. Our findings show that despite odds stacked against them, individual and school-level factors are tied to persistence. In addition to student commitment to education, the combination of academic and social supports from family ties, peer groups, and institutional agents was critical to their engagement and persistence in school. We apply a social capital framework to examine the approach taken by "institutional agents" who facilitated access to resources that increase school persistence.

Latina/o immigrant students have among the highest dropout/push-out and lowest GED-passing rates among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Fry, 2010), and Mexican-origin students are even more vulnerable to being pushed out of school (Valencia, 2002a). In the most distressed school contexts, Latina/o student dropout/push-out rates range between 30% and 70%. The majority of estimates place the Latina/o push-out rate at about half of all students (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004, 2008). The precise figure is unknown because students expelled from one school may enroll in another whereas others may simply move their residence. Unless students and their parents alert the school, most states mandate that the students be placed on the dropout/push-out list. Nonetheless, we know very little about student experiences in these programs.

This chapter examines immigrant Mexican youth enrolled in a dropout prevention program in a nontraditional high school. We investigate individual characteristics of persistence. We also apply a social capital framework to examine how school personnel or "institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011) in a nontraditional high school are able to facilitate access to resources primarily in the form of both social and academic support that positively influences educational outcomes. We also draw attention to the influence of "peer" networks that provide achievement-oriented pro-diploma supports that counteract the lure of disengaged street-socialized peers. However, we depart from traditional conceptualizations of social capital that emphasize the social capital of middle- and upper-class students, and instead focus on the types of social capital available to support the social mobility of marginalized youth in low-income communities (Conchas, 2001, 2006; Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Oseguera, Conchas, & Mosqueda, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

Conchas and Vigil (2012) describe the unique challenges to the process of facilitating access to social capital to marginalized youth in low-income schools and communities:

> Institutions within enduring pockets of poverty build functional social structures based on networks and relationships, which may lead to various forms of social capital. On the one hand, some networks may be advantageous (i.e., teachers and other supportive adults), but on the other hand, some networks may promote negative consequences (adults socialized in the criminal justice system or other adults who follow a street lifestyle). (p. 4)

Our case study explores marginalized students' experiences and interactions with institutional agents and their peers as they work toward the diploma in an alternative school context. As Barrat and Berliner (2013) point out, little is known about the effectiveness nontraditional secondary schools, in spite of the recent growth in enrollments.

As a step in understanding the role that nontraditional schools play in advancing the social capital of underperforming students and how such schools may reduce the push-out rate, we completed a case study of the educational experiences of 16 Mexican-American students enrolled at La Costa High School, a community day school in central California. Using semi-structured interviews, we invited La Costa students to share thoughts on their immigrant status, peer support, school engagement, and gang participation. Our study was guided by the following broad research questions:

- Why do Mexican-origin students that are enrolled in a continuation high school persist in school, while others leave without a diploma?
- How do adults and peers at the continuation school forge meaningful and supportive relationships that foster the social capital necessary to attain a high school diploma?

NONTRADITIONAL SCHOOL CONTEXTS

A wide range of educators (e.g., Sizer, 2004) have suggested that the structure and pedagogy found in large public high schools in the United States fail to meet the educational needs of even average students. For those students whose circumstances place them at risk of being pushed out, most high schools lack even the minimal funding and staff to overcome their challenges. Consequently, many marginalized students are pushed out of school, a costly failure for both students and society (Rumberger, 2004).

In California alone, the economic losses to society owing to high school dropouts/push-outs are estimated in the billions of dollars. High school noncompleters earn significantly lower salaries (or are perhaps unemployed for extended periods), which results in diminished salaries, in turn yielding much lower tax revenues (Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1999). In addition, high school push-outs and their families tend to rely heavily on social service institutions such as welfare and state-subsidized health care. More concerning is the increased likelihood that push-outs will find themselves involved with the criminal justice system (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

In response to high push-out rate, the state of California has developed two types of nontraditional secondary schools: the continuation school and community day school.[1] These alternatives to traditional high schools have become the cornerstones in the state's dropout push-out prevention strategy; in fact, these schools are legally bound by California state policy to provide students with the opportunity to complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school (Ruiz de Velasco, Austin, Dixon, Johnson, McLaughlin, & Perez, 2008). Although both types of schools often enroll similar students, their specific charges differ. Continuation schools are designed to serve students who are 16 years of age and older who have not yet completed high school, who are at risk of being pushed out, and who are not yet exempt from compulsory school attendance (see http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/ce/ for a full description). By contrast, community day schools were developed specifically to serve youth whose previous schooling experiences include expulsion, probation, chronic truancy, or some combination of these factors. These schools are mandated to provide challenging academic curriculum and to develop students' pro-social skills and resiliency (see http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/cd/ for a full description). A review of nontraditional schools in California (Barrat & Berliner, 2013) reported that there are over 770 continuation and community day schools statewide, enrolling approximately 22,000 students.[2]

Several recent reports have indicated that the number of students who leave comprehensive high schools and attend alternative, nontraditional, or GED programs has grown significantly (see Goldin & Katz, 2003, for a review of nontraditional schools in the United States). Such nontraditional schools settings are largely viewed as dropout prevention programs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2004, 2008). However, generalizations about schools serving marginalized youth are unwarranted because we found great variability in the structure and quality of continuation programs. Some continuation

programs may function as "dumping grounds" for disruptive students and ineffective educators, whereas others offer innovative settings leading students to higher education, work, or a return to the comprehensive school (Kennedy, 2011; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).

STREET-SOCIALIZED YOUTH AND SCHOOL PERSISTENCE

Even if we are unsure regarding the effectiveness of nontraditional secondary schools, we have a clearer picture of the students they serve: most are left unsupervised by adults, and, as a consequence, become deeply embedded in peer networks where identification with peer groups is dominated by a set of expectations and approval that are learned outside of adult-supervised settings. This street socialization often results in gang membership owing to "multiple marginality" (Vigil, 1988, 1997). Lacking meaningful relationships with adults in schools (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008; Fine, 1991; Flores-Gonzales, 2002), street-socialized youth are often further marginalized in large schools, becoming increasingly disenfranchised (Vigil, 2002, 2004)—often leading to gang participation.

Understanding gang involvement and affiliation for street-socialized youth differs across parts of California, especially in the central part of the state. In this geographical area, gang membership is established not by neighborhoods but rather by two large gangs known as the "*Sureños*" and the "*Norteños*." Although the precise origins of these gangs is disputed, most researchers agree that in about 1960, incarcerated Chicanos from Southern California formed a protection gang that eventually became known as the *Sureños* (Moore & Garcia, 1978). Another gang composed of members from the northern part of the state formed soon thereafter and became known as the *Norteños*. Each gang seeks the control of specific regions, including the drug traffic in specific parts of their city. Consequently, members from both gangs have access to a wide array of weapons, and the inevitable violence and multiple retaliatory acts of violence tend to consume their activities.

As we know from both the research literature (Vigil, 1988) and testimonials (Rios, 2011), breaking this cycle of violence is very challenging, and it is not clear if schools can play a role. Once members, youth find it difficult to leave the gang. However, Téllez and Estep (1997) found that Latina/o youth gang members who wanted to leave the gang believed that earning a GED or diploma would "signal" to the gang that they were making a new life and therefore be allowed to leave the gang on agreed-upon terms. This option was considered far superior than either getting "jumped out" of the gang (i.e., getting severely beat up by the gang) or remaining on the periphery, knowing that one could be called upon to commit a crime on behalf of the gang at any moment. As Vigil suggested, "for a small but considerable portion of barrio youth with problematic backgrounds, the street gang has arisen as a competitor of other institutions, such as family and schools, to guide and direct self-identification" (Vigil, 1988).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MITIGATING DROPOUT/PUSH-OUT

Having access (or lack thereof) to social capital has become a popular term for explaining educational outcomes, including dropping out of school. Several studies have applied a social capital framework to educational outcomes and have expanded on Coleman's (1988) conceptualization. According to Coleman (1988), social capital facilitates the creation of human capital through access to resources or support through closely knit ties. An important aspect of Coleman's conceptualization of social capital includes the notion of social or intergenerational closure—whether parents know the parents of their children's friends—which is one of the ways that social capital influences the educational outcomes of children (Dika & Singh, 2002; Oseguera, Conchas, & Mosqueda, 2010). In a study that examined the potential social capital that teachers can provide students to diminish dropout/push-out rates, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that although teachers' support and guidance benefited all students, disadvantaged students with weak academic records benefited much more from such teacher-based social capital.

A small number of studies have focused on the relationship between dropout and access to social capital specifically for low-income Mexican-origin youth. Stanton-Salazar (2001, 2011) documented how access to social capital from school adults, or "institutional agents," along with pro-school-oriented peer supports helped some Mexican-origin working-class youth navigate social networks that promoted school persistence and also fostered empowering forms of resiliency (Stanton–Salazar, 2001).

A recent study focused on Mexican-origin students' access to "peer" social capital and dropping out relative to forms of social capital available to White students. Rumberger and Ream (2008) found that school engagement and school-oriented friendship networks helped foster school completion. However, Mexican-origin youth were found to be less engaged in academic endeavors and extracurricular activities than their White peers, and Mexican-origin youth were also more involved with academically disengaged peers who tended to expose students to street orientations. Research on Mexican-origin youth that examines the link between access to social capital and dropout highlights both the importance of connections to institutional agents and also peer supports that provide encouragement and a pro-school orientation. Portes (1998), however, argued that not all forms of social capital are positive and asserted that social capital can also have negative consequences.[3]

Lastly, Briggs (1998) expanded the notion of social capital to account for the "amount and quality of resources" that are accessed through social relationships by drawing a distinction between two forms of social capital. Briggs (1998) distinguished between *social support* as social capital that helps one "get by" or cope, from *social leverage*, which is defined as a form of social capital that helps one "get ahead" or change one's opportunity (e.g., access to job information, or a recommendation for a scholarship). In this study, we drew attention to individual drives of persistence, school-oriented supports, as well as potential sources of negative social capital or what has been termed "marginal" social capital from street-socialized peers (Conchas & Vigil, 2012).

THE RESEARCH SITE AND THE PEOPLE

La Costa is located in a city that is largely Latina/o (about 70%) in which agri-business attracts a consistent job market for undocumented workers. Thus, many of the families moving into the area experience the dislocation common to im-migrant families worldwide. Combine the general shock of a new culture with enduring poverty, and the result can create a wide gulf between the cultural un-derstandings of immigrant parents and those of their children.

La Costa Community Day School began in 1992 with a mission to serve non-traditional youth who had been expelled from the traditional high schools in a medium-sized school district. But, as we will explain shortly, the history and ongo-ing educational purpose of La Costa School cannot be understood without a brief history of Latina/o gangs in Northern California.

In the late 1980s, gang activity in the city surrounding La Costa High School grew at an alarming rate and several highly motivated and energetic educators embarked on creating La Costa, a school that would "unite" the community, and help to stop the Sureño/Norteño violence. Over its 21-year history, La Costa has enrolled approximately 75 students per year, nearly half of them seniors. Virtually all of La Costa's students are Latina/o, and most of Mexican origin. Three-quarters qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, although it is likely that nearly all would qualify if the remaining one-quarter chose to return the necessary forms to the school. About half the students are considered English learners. The current staff includes a principal, four teachers, a counselor, and an office staff. Although the principal and teachers at the school are all White, several Latina/o teachers have taught at the school during its history. Class size is typically around 10 students.

We used case study methodology to investigate a contemporary phenome-non within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). We collected qualitative data with a focus on the context that included interviews and observations of the study par-ticipants within the school—16 students (8 female and 6 male). We conducted interviews during the school day in a private office space. Most interviews took place on Fridays when students had more free time in their schedules. All but two interviews were conducted in English, but Spanish was used throughout all the interviews, especially when students did not know a term in English or if the interviewer was asked to clarify a question.

THE COMPLEXITY OF EXPERIENCES AT THE
SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

Students attending La Costa High School were there for several interrelated rea-sons (e.g., truancy or fighting), so it is difficult to point to distinct explanations for why students were removed from the mainstream high school and referred to La Costa. For example, Nadia stated:

> I ended up coming here because…my credits were really low. I had problems of like going to [comprehensive] school. Like with the teachers, they really wouldn't like focus 'cause there were a lot of students, like 35 students in one class, and I really wouldn't understand the teacher. Like, if I would ask him over and over again, he would get mad. He would get impatient with us…. They're really strict so like then I stopped going to school and I would always ditch, or like get into trouble, or I don't know. Um, I started hanging out with people I wasn't supposed to and that's how I ended up here.

Nonetheless, we found four themes that clearly emerged from our data and help explain why students in La Costa worked hard to earn a high school diploma despite their economic hardships and social challenges. These themes are (1) students' commitment to getting a high school diploma, (2) family ties, (3) peer-group influence, and (4) institutional agents as sources of academic and social support. These themes represent both school- and community-level factors, and the last three themes specifically embrace a social capital framework.

Commitment Toward Diploma

The data revealed that the primary reason why Latina/o students were motivated to stay in school was because of their belief that a diploma was the key to finding a meaningful and good-paying job. The students were also well aware that La Costa was their final opportunity to earn the right to return to the comprehensive high school or, if they remain at La Costa, their avenue to a high school diploma.

All of the participants in this study affirmed that they were committed to attaining a high school diploma. This finding challenges the deficit perspectives and debunks the myths and stereotypes about Mexican-origin youth not caring about their education (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valencia, 2002a; Valenzuela, 1999)—even among the most vulnerable to school failure. Also clearly evident in the participants' responses was that the diploma was not an end in and of itself, but a means that students believed would help them improve their occupational attainment prospects.

Specifically, students revealed that earning a diploma would allow them to either continue their education in the local community college to enhance their career opportunities or to directly get a "better job" than what is available to them without a diploma. As Nadia noted:

> Because that represents the education, not only education, but that you did it. That you put yourself into a goal and you went far. And that you should be really proud about yourself. It's really important for going to college or any job.

Similarly, Francisco expressed the desire to graduate to enhance not only his own career opportunities but also set a positive example for his son. He stated:

Because I want to have better, I want to give a better life to my kid…like work in a good job and get whatever I can to give to my kid…'cause I don't know like I just want to go school, so he could see that when he grows up that I am not a failure or I am not all like that I am like a good person, so that he would want to graduate and go to college or have a good career probably he will be motivated to graduate.

When asked about what motivates her to stay in school, Alejandra responded, "My parents, and I [also] want to graduate and need to go to college." Similarly, Brenda shared, "I want to become like one of those nurses that work at [the women's clinic]." These responses reflect students' investment in the high school diploma in order facilitate their transition to a technical career program at the local community college.

Other students were motivated by their belief that attaining a high school diploma would help them find a job that was "better" compared to what their parents did for a living. In this community, most of the parents work in agricultural fields. Luz noted, "Because I don't want to be like, like my parents right now, they're working in the fields and I don't want that for myself." The study participants were committed to attaining a diploma from the continuation school to improve their opportunity to find a better-paying job or to continue on to community college to pursue a vocational training program.

We now turn to the findings on social capital—family ties, peer connections, and institutional agents—that influence nontraditional student progress toward the diploma. These, in turn, help explain students' increased commitment toward attaining a diploma.

Family Ties

Family ties provided an important external source of intangible support in the form of encouragement to earn a diploma. In the context of La Costa, social capital from family members provided *social support* to help students "get by" as they progressed toward a diploma.

Our interview with Pedro revealed that he was very conscious of support from his mother, along with a school counselor, in trying to get him to stay in school. Pedro noted, "Mostly my mom and my counselor. They've been there trying to get me in school." Similarly, Lidia explained the ways in which her older sister provided her with advice and encouragement to stay in school. She noted:

Like when I was having problems in my house last year. Yeah, but I talked to my sister, she's 23 now and she's like my mom 'cause I tell her everything…. She graduated from a school like this. She just tells me not to leave school, to go back to regular [comprehensive] school 'cause like right now she's a nurse, but she told me if you graduate from a normal school you can like do something way better and get paid more.

The importance of kin ties has been shown to increase school persistence.

However, in marginalized communities such as La Costa, where low-paying agricultural jobs are by far are the most common sources of employment, breaking the cycle of poverty seems to leave students and families susceptible to street socialization. In a limited number of instances where street socialization spilled into a family's home life, relationships between parents and their children were strained. Often a result of tension from stressed relationships with their parents, some students did not experience positive pro-school supports from family members.

Lisa, for example, described that she felt her father had low expectations for her and often felt put down. Lisa explained:

> Like my dad, he doesn't believe in me. He's always telling me you're dumb and you're never going to graduate. He's always trying to make me feel bad, but I don't listen to him. I'm going to do my work and, well, do something for myself and, just watch me.

Similarly, Nadia described the tense relationship she had with her mother and how she sometimes turned to drugs to help her deal with their intense arguments. Nadia's father was in jail for drug distribution and use, so when her mother would confront Nadia about using drugs and warned her to avoid the same fate as her father, arguments with her mother would turn emotionally charged and dysfunctional. Nadia noted:

> I would get mad and I know she's my mom but I would start screaming at her back and cursing, and I started turning into a person that I didn't even know myself. I completely lost myself. And that's when I started getting involved with drugs and she would tell me don't turn like your dad, 'cause my dad he's in jail right now because of selling drugs and drug dealing, and because he used drugs.

In situations where parents were unable to buffer their children from street socialization because parents themselves were impacted by such dynamics, family ties did not always result in positive support. While some students received encouragement and support at home from family members, others students received negative messages about their potential to succeed in school. In Nadia's case, because her father was in jail and she found it difficult to relate to her mother, positive support from her family was missing. For youth in Nadia's circumstances, schools can intensify supports and attempt to buffer from the impact of street socialization spilling into the home life.

Peer-Group Influence

Similar to the findings on family ties, the influence of peers at La Costa High was positive for some students but negative for others. As the research has shown, peer

influences have a powerful influence on individual students' school engagement (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004). For some students, having consistent sources of pro-diploma-oriented peers provided an important source of support that contributed to their persistence in school. In contrast, some students were provoked by street-oriented peers to cut classes and hang out, whereas other students felt threatened by street-oriented gang members that would come around after school to look for trouble.

Luz, for instance, discusses how at first she did not care about school or her future. However, as a result of having friends who often discussed their goals and educational aspirations, Luz changed her study habits. She stated:

> Oh yeah, because now like since I came to La Costa like now everything is different, like I see friends, like different friends, that they want to succeed and I was like, I just thought about by myself, like they want to succeed and I just don't care about my life and then I don't know I just started to think about it like more….and then I decided that I wanted to study too.

Similarly, Maria's peer group was focused on attending community college. She notes how her friends have their sights set on completing high school to transfer to college:

> Well, what are you going to do when you get out of here? And then some of them are going to graduate from here. But like most of us are going to transfer out. Well they all want to go to college and one of my friends, Maria, wants to be a soccer player and go to a university. We all have different goals.

Roberto and his male friends described how they often discussed their post–high school goals. While Roberto was interested in entering the military, most of his peers expressed an interest in pursuing a vocational trade in a community college. Roberto said:

> We would talk about what we were going to do when we were out of high school. Like what if we were going to go to college or, I mean, what computer technician, or mechanic, or just something….Like I always say Navy Seals…something like that.

Students with access to pro-diploma-oriented peers received support to remain engaged in school. While many students were encouraged by their peers to think about their post–high school goals, Lourdes described how her friends consistently reminded her to stay in school to improve opportunities for herself and her child. Lourdes stated, "Well, they tell me to think about my baby, to get an education."

Another student mentioned the positive academic support and encouragement she received from her peers to complete her schoolwork. Alejandra explained, "By coming and sitting with me [while I am] doing my work, we help each

other out." Another student, Roberto, mentions that he also received support from his peers who provide encouragement to consistently attend school and hold him accountable for attendance. Roberto stated, "If I don't come to school, they will call me [and say], 'Hey why didn't you come to school? Get your ass to school!'"

Not all students received positive support from peer ties. Others reported that their street-oriented peers often provoked them to cut classes, engage in deviant behavior, or to get involved with gangs. In a joint interview, Luz and Lidia described to the interviewer how they were influenced by their peers to cut class:

> *Luz:* Because I didn't go for six months.
> *Int:* So why did you stop going to school?
> *Luz:* Because I didn't have much time to be with my friends after school and that was like my only time to be with my friends. So I didn't go to class and [I would] go with my friends.
> *Lidia:* Well I was cutting a lot too. The second semester there was this girl who was my friend…so she would like get me to cut and stuff, but I would never do that and like she got me to like cutting and stuff and I wouldn't go to class, so, yeah.

Without sharing specific details, Francisco described the pressure he felt from peers to become involved in illicit activities that could potentially lead to his arrest if he was caught and thereby jeopardize his opportunity to complete high school. Francisco noted:

> My friends…because they keep on telling me, oh do this and that, and whenever if I do listen to them, um, I will end up in prison or jail for a really long time, and get myself to ruin my life, like not graduating.

The lure of involvement with street-socialized peers often led to youth being provoked into gang activity.

Thus, it becomes evident that peer ties become essential—students with friendship networks that are school oriented can be critical for low-income youth to achieve institutional goals such as attaining a high school diploma.

Institutional Agents as Sources of Academic and Social Support

Students not only felt a higher sense of academic support at La Costa than at the traditional school, they also felt that teachers better explained material they were struggling to learn. As one student noted:

> Well, just the teachers [at La Costa] make it really easy. 'Cause like in the other schools, they'll just hand you out the assignment and like the papers they have to do. They don't explain it. And right here they explain everything…and you have to do your homework. (Lidia)

Students seemed to appreciate their perceived greater attention to instruction at La Costa relative to what they received at their former school. Perhaps the smaller class setting at La Costa created a greater sense of both instructional support on the part of teachers, and also fostered a sense that teachers were more caring with regard to students' personal lives and challenges. For example, Ramon described his experience as

It's kind of the environment and the teachers. Like they didn't really pay that much attention, like they do here…they pay more attention to like your life, school work, and everything.

Most of the students we interviewed described how much more positive their experiences were in terms of the academic support they received from adults at La Costa relative to their perceptions of teachers that did not really "pay attention to them" at their former comprehensive school.

Students also spoke of the importance of social support. Students perceived school adults as supportive and critical to their persistence in school. Relative to students' experiences with "uncaring" adults at their former comprehensive schools, school adults at La Costa were considered to be highly caring of students above and beyond the academic supports they required to succeed in school.

In addition to the administrative function of the school leader, the principal played the role of a caring adult at La Costa. A student described her relationship with the principal in contrast to the less responsive comprehensive school adult leadership she experienced in the following way:

There was nobody to help you at [the comprehensive school]. And [at La Costa] we could tell our problems to the principal. An over there it wasn't the same…because he understands and he's nicer to you. (Nicole)

Counselors at La Costa also provided much appreciated emotional support that fostered caring and supportive relationships with students. As a student notes:

Um, because my adviser has helped me a lot, and she is always there for me when I need her. And she talks to me, and teachers are nicer here; they help you a lot. They're really nice. (Yolanda)

Students at La Costa reported that counselors extended their emotional support in ways they didn't experience at their former comprehensive schools.

Then another support is the counseling. Like they get really into your emotions when you're feeling sad you know, the emotions you are feeling for that day. They get really into it and they don't really do that at other high schools. (Julie)

Adults at La Costa structured very rigid behavioral expectations for students and the students had to adhere to the behavior expectations set forth in the in-take contract. The contractual policies were strictly enforced and led to being expelled from the school if the rules were not followed. Thus, the provision of both academic and social/emotional support for students—in relation to the limited sense of support they experience in the former comprehensive schools—became an important source of motivation to stay in school.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

Latina/o students enrolled in La Costa's nontraditional program were heavily invested and committed to earning a diploma, which they believed was the key to finding a meaningful and good-paying job. The students were also well aware that La Costa was their final opportunity to return to the comprehensive high school or, if they remained at La Costa, their avenue to a high school diploma.

The school culture at La Costa appears to be largely responsible for the students' dedication. Defined by a balance of small size, behavioral control, and caring adults, La Costa did not have the typical surveillance and monitoring often found in schools serving similar students (Noguera, 2003). There are no metal detectors at the main school entrance, police officers and security guards do not routinely patrol the grounds (although students could be demanded, at any time, to undergo a urine test for the presence of drugs or alcohol), and the principal was viewed as one of the teaching staff who demanded that "gang affiliation stays at the door while on school grounds."

Furthermore, a signed contract—a condition for school enrollment—forced students to promise that their gang affiliation would not interfere with their schooling. Requiring students to refrain from gang activity, rather than asking them to renounce their gang affiliation altogether, was a practical decision.

Nevertheless, the process of getting La Costa students to agree to renounce their gang ties and to sustain a "gang-neutral" school environment was no easy task given the strong influence and lure of street-socialized youth in the surrounding community. This mechanism, however, was important for buffering students from street-oriented youth and helped students maintain a pro-diploma orientation.

By establishing a diploma-oriented culture, La Costa was able to create a safe and "gang-neutral" space in which the institutional agents play a critical role in school success. At La Costa, peers and family were most often seen as social support while the school provided the social leverage to attain a diploma. Thus, hiring caring institutional agents is critical in developing a diploma-oriented school culture. Consequently, we believe that state credential agencies must develop specific licenses for teachers who choose to work in alternative settings such as La Costa. At present, continuation and community day school teachers are prepared in routine comprehensive middle or high schools. Specialized credentials would require new teachers in these schools to have significant experiences in such school and

community settings and only really recruit teachers who genuinely want to work in alternative schools. That career choice ought to be clear at the outset.

It has become clear that nontraditional schools can potentially provide more "leverage supports" to further capitalize on students' commitment to attain a high school diploma. Students' dedication toward a diploma is only a means to an end and not an end in and of itself. In other words, their goal is to get a high school diploma because they believe it will help improve their job prospects and opportunities. Future research should focus on whether or not it may be useful for nontraditional programs to provide institutional agents that can provide social and academic supports and also serve as a bridge to work opportunities by facilitating access to students who earn a diploma to either continue their education (e.g., community college enrollment), or to serve as "leverage ties" by connecting students with concrete employment opportunities via internships or job placement in local businesses. This is the point at which social capital may transform into material capital for students growing up in low-income communities such as La Costa—this conveyance cannot be ignored.

NOTES

1. Continuation and community day schools are not typically charter schools, although some charter schools are created to meet the needs of students who might normally attend a nontraditional school.

2. The figures do not include nontraditional secondary schools designed specifically for students requiring special education (n = 103 schools statewide) or juvenile hall schools (n = 56).

3. See Portes (1998) for an elaboration of the negative consequences of social capital, which include exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, and restrictions on individual freedoms.

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