

Article

Nepantleras Building Bridges toward College Readiness: Latina/o/x Educators Fostering Equity in an Urban High School

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Abstract: This article builds on previous studies that establish urban high school contexts that Latina/o/x students likely navigate as under-resourced and deficit. Guided by the frameworks of community-oriented teachers of Color and *nepantleras*, this study takes an asset-based approach to examine how Latina/o/x educators fostered college aspirations and how they developed college-going structures to support college aspirations of Latina/o/x students. Findings clarify that through self-reflection and collaboration, teachers engaged in college information workshops, college exploration assignments, and supported students with applying to extracurricular internships. The study proposes the concept of community-oriented *nepantlera* educators who aim to develop a bridge between high school and college for Latina/o/x first-generation college students.

Keywords: college-going culture; under-resourced urban high school; Latina/o/x teachers; nepantleras; college access

1. Introduction

While in high school, over 80 percent of Latina/o/x students report that they hope to enroll in postsecondary education [1]. However, a trend exists in Latina/o/x students believing that their postsecondary aspirations are not realistic [1,2]. Although Latina/o/x parents help to establish and affirm college aspirations for their children [3,4], the majority of Latina/o/x students have to navigate an under-resourced public schooling K–12 system, if they hope to meet their college aspirations [5]. Therefore, the contradiction between aspirations and expectations is not surprising.

Throughout their K–12 schooling experiences, Latina/o/x students are likely to experience numerous institutional barriers that prevent access to higher education [6], which influence students' postsecondary expectations and access to resources [5]. For instance, a deficit school context often results in Latina/o/x students being tracked out of college-preparation courses [6]. Furthermore, students spend day-after-day in K–12 schooling systems where teachers and counselors often have not been trained to help them prepare for college [6,7]. Finally, Latina/o/x students likely attend high schools that are racially segregated [8] and represent a school-prison nexus where “both institutions operate as one in the same under the same set of rules” [9].

Within such inequitable contexts, in schools that enroll a majority of Latina/o/x students, teachers are likely to maintain lower expectations and a lower sense of responsibility for student learning [10–12]. Deficit perceptions regarding the academic and financial abilities of Latina/o/x students can influence teachers and counselors to offer community college as the only postsecondary options for Latina/o/x students [6,7,13]. It is within the likely context of low expectations that this study is situated. Such deficit contexts have been linked with the colonial roots of the U.S. education system and defined as the educational borderlands [14]. Education borderlands acknowledge the nexus between the college

aspirations of Latina/o/x students and a context where educators maintain low expectations fueled by the inequitable distribution of educational opportunities within schools and colleges [14]. This study builds on the concept of education borderlands by framing educators as *nepantleras* who work within education borderlands to foster college-going opportunities for Latina/o/x students.

2. Purpose of the Study

Although Latina/o/x students likely encounter deficit teachers and counselors, there are educators who support college-going pathways [15,16]. Through the lenses of community-oriented teachers of Color [15] and *nepantleras* [17], this study examined the practices of Latina/o/x teachers who fostered college-going environments for Latina/o/x students. By integrating the above frameworks, the study frames teacher participants from an asset-based perspective, as individuals who care about the educational wellbeing and outcomes of Latina/o/x students and students of Color. As such, the study aimed to understand how educators fostered college aspirations for Latina/o/x students and how they developed college-going structures to support the college aspirations of Latina/o/x students.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

In developing the community-oriented teachers of Color framework, Kohli and Pizarro [15] adapted Wilson's [18] indigenous cultural paradigm of "research as ceremony" within a teaching context (p. 73). As such, Kohli and Pizarro [15] propose that community-oriented teachers of Color are individuals "who feel a relationality and relational accountability to their communities" (p. 75). Community-oriented teachers of Color challenge deficit notions that frame success as requiring students to depart their communities. More specifically, Kohli and Pizarro [15] contend that teachers of Color aim for students to achieve success through traditional academic measures, such as grade-point-average, but they also intend for students to foster a critical consciousness [19]. However, Kohli and Pizarro [15] find that community-oriented teachers of Color often do not have access to institutional resources that may be needed to thrive in their positions. The community-oriented approach aims to incorporate communities' ways of being and forms of knowledge as a representation of honoring the legacy of families and communities. In the present study, the notion of community-oriented teaching was examined, with a specific focus on educators who aim to foster the college aspirations of Latina/o/x students.

Anzaldúa's Chicana feminist notion of *nepantleras*, aligns with the notion of community-oriented teachers of Color. In order to explain the concept of *nepantleras*, first I define *nepantla* by using Anzaldúa's conceptualization. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word meaning the in-between space of overlapping worlds [17]. Anzaldúa [17] theorized that *nepantleras* "are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system" (p. 20). In other words, *nepantleras* maintain multiple identities and encompass opposing worldviews. Mignolo [20] reminds readers that "nepantla is not a happy place in the middle" (p. 2). As such, a *nepantlera* is susceptible to harm, including being rejected by the conflicting worlds [21]. Nevertheless, a *nepantlera* aims to transform perspectives and possibilities.

Anzaldúa [22] further explained that *nepantleras* also "serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*, serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being" (p. 20). In other words, *nepantleras* serve to guide the process for others who are moving toward a state of consciousness and self-reflection, as well as learning to shift between worlds. Previous research frames Chicana/o/x students who navigate the education borderlands as *nepantleras/os/x* [23]. The present article aims to examine the experiences of Latina/o/x educators, who were first-generation college students and became teachers in a low-income urban neighborhood. The overlap between *nepantleras* and community-oriented teachers of Color is indicated in the intent to support others toward pursuing a critical consciousness and in meeting traditional academic measures (in the case of the present study, Latina/o/x students). The two frameworks were used to examine how Latina/o/x teachers served as a bridge for students by fostering a college-going environment, despite having to challenge deficit messages from other educators.

4. Literature Review

Previous studies find that when teachers maintain high expectations of students' academic achievement, the beliefs are exemplified through both implicit and explicit messages and influence the available opportunities for learning [24,25]. Using an experimental design, Rosenthal and Jacobson [26], found that when a teacher maintained positive expectations for a student's potential for academic achievement, there was a positive effect on the growth in the test score obtained by such students. More recent studies confirmed that teacher expectancies have an effect on student achievement [27,28]. Similarly, there is an effect on the enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges, when teachers have high expectations for college enrollment [29]. While researchers establish that parental expectations also influence postsecondary enrollments [30,31], teacher expectations have a longer lasting effect on student achievement [32] and are more predictive of college enrollment over parent expectations, particularly for low-income students [33]. Furthermore, studies also conclude that students who are less likely to attend college, such as low-income African American and Latina/o/x students, benefit from high teacher expectations because the expectations may serve as a protective factor [31–33]. Clearly, teacher expectations influence the high school and postsecondary pathways of students.

When considering that teachers must take actions beyond establishing expectations, Jarsky, McDonough, and Nuñez [34] found that college officials could collaborate with K–12 educators to develop a college culture, which they defined as all students receiving adequate information to make informed postsecondary decisions [34]. When examining the role of teachers specifically, a separate study found that while teachers felt responsible for preparing students for college, they felt it was a secondary responsibility and that multiple individuals were interconnected within this process [35]. Similarly, Monzó and Rueda [36] indicated that Latina/o/x teachers perceived that their having graduated from college could benefit Latina/o/x students because they represented role models but the self-perceptions of a teacher's role in developing a college-going identity among students or fostering college-going structures within the school was not discussed. Therefore, the role that a teacher takes during the college-going process remains unclear.

Teachers can also represent an obstacle within the college-going process. For instance, in the study conducted by Jarsky and colleagues [34], they found that while college-going stakeholders, such as principals, aimed to provide important information to students, teachers represented a roadblock if they thought that students would not benefit from such messages. Such resistance from teachers resulted in students being unable to meet with a college advisor [34]. Nevertheless, an overall lack of teachers, counselors, and college preparation curricula contribute to Latina/o/x students having limited access to college guidance [6,37]; the lack of access to resources as a whole is representative of the inequitable college-going context that Latina/o/s students have to navigate.

In order for Latina/o/x students to value the information that educators provide; trust must be established first. On the one hand, Latina/o/x students trust the advice of teachers who demonstrate that they care about student well-being, learning in the classroom, and academic achievement [38–40]. On the other hand, Kohli and Solórzano [41], found that the cumulative impact of experiencing racial microaggressions committed by teachers, influence students of Color to experience “anxiety” and “othering” in school (p. 455). Therefore, Latina/o/x students may not trust teachers to provide guidance and support [42]. K–12 teachers do not tend to view Latina/o/x students as college-bound and, instead, highlight behavior limitations [43]. In their findings, Monzó and Rueda [36] noted that through a previous understanding the students' background, culture, and language, partnered with getting to know individual students, educators were able to establish relationships of *confianza*/trust. The *confianza* then fostered help-seeking behaviors among students, which encouraged students to ask questions regarding academic tasks, learning, and the school context. In their study, Monzó and Rueda [36] found that teachers prioritized students' emotional needs and validating students' language and cultural assets because they believed it would have social and academic implications. This study builds on previous research and aims to contribute to the literature by examining the experiences of Latina/o/x

educators who support the college-going pathways of Latina/o/x students in an under-resourced urban high school.

5. Method

This study was guided by the following research questions: How do educators foster college aspirations of Latina/o/x students? How do educators develop college-going structures to support the college aspirations of Latina/o/x students? Data derived from an ethnographic case study that examined college-going structures within an under-resourced Latina/o/x-majority high school. Data in the original study included oral history interviews with 57 students, semi-structured interviews with 17 educators, and weekly ethnographic observations for one academic school year. Because the study involved a broad range of issues, not all data were pertinent for this particular article. I used the data selectively, as they pertained to asset-based teacher expectations and aspirations.

6. Data Source and Sample

This ethnographic case study examined college-going structures within Academies High School (AHS). AHS was an overcrowded urban school located in northern California where Latina/o/x students composed 83% of the population and 75% of all students qualified for free/reduced lunch. Due to budget cuts the year before the study began, teacher and administrator positions were eliminated and the number of college fieldtrips reduced. Despite the institutional limitations, AHS aimed to develop a college-going culture, primarily with the support from college outreach programs.

The broader study drew from semi-structured interviews with 17 educators, which included counselors, teachers, support staff, and administrators from diverse backgrounds. Individuals were selected from this dataset because they fostered and supported college-going efforts. The participants were selected based on their active involvement and participation in building a college-going culture. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the ideologies, policies, and practices of college-going efforts. Data for this paper drew specifically from seven of the semi-structured interviews with educators; these included: one principal, four teachers, and two college advisors, all of whom self-identified as Chicana/o/x or Latina/o/x. Two of the four teachers were interviewed in a focus group format due to their limited availability. The focus group setting allowed participants to share experiences, remind each other of events that occurred in their efforts to support a college-going culture, and maintain conversations, which provided a range of experiences [44] and allowed the participants to relate to one another.

Student data derived from two oral history interviews with 47 Latina/o/x students. Oral history interviews highlighted what participants did, what they wanted to do, and what they believed they were doing [45]. This method revealed the socio-historical contexts that influenced the postsecondary aspirations, resources, and expectations of students. During the first interview, 47 participants shared their experiences with K–12 schooling, college aspirations, college information, and choosing a college. The semi-structured interview protocol included when and how participants decided to pursue a college degree and who provided support during the preparation process. The first interview occurred during March, April, and May of their senior year. The second interview occurred after the first fall term of college and emphasized how students chose a college and their experiences during the transitions to college.

7. Data Analysis

The theoretical frameworks informed the data analysis process and the interview data were coded using inductive and deductive coding. Coding entailed: (1) examining for all possible explanations to the research questions, (2) formulating a hypothesis for each explanation, (3) checking the hypothesis empirically by re-examining data and existing literature, and 4) choosing the most plausible explanation [46]. After each interview, the data were coded deductively and inductively by following steps one and two. In line with the theoretical frameworks, deductive codes included:

college aspirations for students, personal experience with college, roadblocks in fostering college access, and motivation for supporting students. Among others, the inductive process codes [47] included: guiding students with personal statements, changing curriculum to incorporate college guidance, seeking support, and helping students with financial aid. Upon coding the interviews, I then returned to the literature to continue the analysis [46]. The data analysis revealed two overarching themes: the development of college aspirations and high expectations by educators. The data were then analyzed again using process coding [47] to better understand the processes that teachers followed.

To ensure trustworthiness and quality of the findings, I employed various qualitative strategies. To address credibility, “prolonged engagement” was employed by being in the school for one academic year [48]. Credibility was also addressed through member-checking [48]; after conducting interviews, preliminary findings were shared with the participants and their feedback was considered. In addition, by having one small focus group and individual interview data, the similar yet distinct characteristics of each method allowed the researcher to triangulate to inform credibility [49,50]. Transferability was addressed by providing a description of the contextual factors and the organization [49]. Finally, the feedback from colleagues who reviewed preliminary interpretations and findings was considered.

8. Results

Through self-reflection and collaboration, the educators centered students in an asset-based perspective and maintained a commitment to students. As such, teachers worked actively to develop student college aspirations and aimed to motivate students to pursue a postsecondary education. In order to support students in their quest for higher education, teachers integrated college-going materials into coursework and provided a space for students to explore college pathways. Teachers collaborated with other educators to foster a classroom environment through college information workshops, college exploration assignments, and guidance to apply extracurricular internships. The students benefited from such opportunities but still had to navigate marginalizing and deficit schooling experiences within the larger school culture.

9. Asset-Based Ideologies

Teachers enacted asset-based ideologies if they were influenced by their personal experiences of being a first-generation Latina/o/x college student. For instance, Ms. Ochoa maintained college aspirations for her students. When explaining why she incorporated college in her class, Ms. Ochoa referred to other Latina/o/x teachers at AHS who also maintained college aspirations: “Because we are Latino, I talk up college and the importance of going to college. I know, for me, there was nobody around to tell me, ‘This is how you do it. This is how you apply’ . . . My parents always pushed school even though they didn’t know how to get there . . . I was one of the first in my family to go so there was no one to turn to . . . so you have to tell them because you know. Maybe if I came from the background where everybody knew about college, I might assume they all know.”

Ms. Ochoa did not hesitate when responding and immediately connected her own social identities with the student. She identified as a Latina who was the first in her family to pursue a college degree and lacked guidance during high school. She used her epistemological standpoint to establish a climate of college aspirations for students and she also took every opportunity available to talk about college in her classroom. Ms. Ochoa emphasized that she had insight into the context of parents and students valuing education but needing more information to support postsecondary pathways. Ms. Ochoa was able to know that students may not have access to college information in other courses or at home.

She aimed to support students with this process and she was not alone in ensuring that students had access to college. Ms. Ochoa worked alongside other colleagues who maintained similar ideologies: “We double-time and emphasize it more because we know how important it is for them.” Ms. Ochoa and her colleagues emphasized college aspirations and information in order ensure that students received necessary guidance.

Similarly, Mr. Rivas revealed his college aspirations for students, which influenced the commitment he had to foster a climate of college aspirations in his classroom. He noted, “You just have to build a relationship with them . . . make it engaging . . . I want them to become engineers. I want them to be successful. I want them to be productive. I want my kid to grow up with good bosses—that’s what I always tell them, ‘Be a good boss to my son; I want my son to work for you someday.’”

Mr. Rivas revealed his ideology of college aspirations for students and his belief in the potential of students to succeed academically. He explained that he aimed to make the course material engaging and establish relationships of trust with students. He did not view students in a deficit perspective but instead set high expectations for them to become leaders in the field of engineering. As such, Mr. Rivas’ perspective aligned with the community-oriented teachers of Color framework because he felt accountable to being able to prepare students to pursue careers and serve the community. As a result of college aspirations, teachers and college-going agents also developed a college-going climate, which is explained in the following section.

10. Toward a College-Going Curriculum

As *nepantleras*, the teachers fostered climates of college aspirations, which were rooted in their personal ideologies in acknowledging the various strengths of students. As college-going *nepantleras*, the teachers created climates of college aspirations by aligning course standards with college preparation. In order to do so, teachers invested additional time and sought resources to support the students.

For example, Ms. Martinez created a four-year college-going climate in her classroom by aligning her pedagogical practices and curriculum with college. As such, students had the opportunity to explore postsecondary pathways and prepare for college writing. Ms. Martinez began college portfolios, which included a pre-survey, college information form, exploration, and planning activities, and then concluded with a post-survey. During the year, Ms. Martinez integrated various college exploration activities, including presentations led by the college and career center director. Students also researched colleges, wrote about possible college pathways, and presented their work to their peers.

As she was new to California and did not have a background in college advising, Ms. Martinez did not know the college admission requirements. Regardless of her predicament, she felt an urgency to align the curriculum with college preparation projects. Thus, she reached out to colleagues so that she could prepare to support students: “I knew that if I didn’t try it out, I probably would have never done it . . . I had no idea what I was doing with the college kit, especially because there are certain standards that are different from California and [my state]. I had no time to learn everything. I went to Ms. Jacobs and Ana Lilia and said, ‘Tell me everything I need to know’; I took notes . . . We went through the whole college kit portfolio . . . She would have ideas as to what to cut and what to require. I tried not to go to too many people. I went to Mr. Malone about how he does personal statements, Ms. Ochoa as to resumes.”

Ms. Martinez tapped into the information resources available to her. She met with Ms. Jacobs, the director of the college and career center, on multiple occasions to learn the deadlines and align her course requirements with the deadlines. In addition, Ms. Martinez explained that she went against the standard practices at the school by seeking support from other teachers. She expressed that Mr. Malone was more than willing to help but it was not a standard practice for teachers to collaborate with one another, particularly if they were not housed in the same career academy. She also requested written information and in-class workshops from the director of the college and career center to make sure that students received accurate information from various sources.

The teachers also secured guest speakers who provided students with information about college admission requirements and college success. During the presentations, speakers would emphasize the importance of college and the enjoyable memories. Finally, teachers also used class time to facilitate workshops where students would search online for colleges and/or career options and pathways. During a classroom observation, Ms. Ochoa had her students take an online quiz to assess career options. In addition, the students searched the postsecondary pathway required to attain the career.

She explained that her aim was for the activity to spark interest in bachelor degrees and four-year colleges among her students.

11. Bridging College Aspirations with Career and College Preparation Internships

In reflecting about their experiences with college access and preparation, it became evident that student participants benefited from the opportunities that teachers fostered. Students benefited from the in-class college information workshops, college-going assignments, and extracurricular opportunities. Student participants often identified the paid summer internships as a pivotal experience in knowing that that they could and would pursue college.

The participants who accessed the summer internships were satisfied and spoke highly about their experiences. In particular, they noted benefitting from the internships because the experiences allowed them to understand careers to consider and the steps needed to take in preparation for college. For example, as a twelfth-grade student, Pedro aspired to enroll in a four-year college and he noted that his English teacher connected him with an internship opportunity. He recalled,

I got the internship since I was a freshman, it was over the summer. My English teacher, Ms. Ochoa, introduced me to it first and then they give you college credit for a week. I did that for two summers, freshmen and sophomore (years). Then Ms. Dani took over it and during Ms. Dani's time we were able to do four weeks . . . I got credit and I got paid \$1200. I had to go through a rigorous application process: an online application and letter of recommendation . . . The internships have helped me a lot, they allowed me to see what an engineer does on a daily basis . . . The internships would tell me what classes to take. In ninth and tenth grade, the internships would tell me what to do. I first wanted to be an engineer but, by junior year, I knew what type of engineer I wanted to be after doing all of the internships.

Pedro began his internship experiences after completing his ninth-grade year and benefited both financially and in terms of his college and career pathway. Over the years, Pedro learned the various responsibilities for each type of engineer. With the experiences, he was able to learn that he aspired to be a structural engineer and gained confidence in pursuing the pathway. During the early years in high school, the internships provided Pedro with the opportunity to know what courses to take during high school in preparation for college. Pedro also discussed the networking and leadership skills that he learned as an intern, which resulted in him helping to establish a chapter of a national Hispanic Engineers organization at the high school. However, without the internship opportunities, fostered by Ms. Ochoa, Pedro would likely not have concrete ideas as to how to prepare for college, what career pathway to pursue, and how to develop an organization at the school for the benefit of other students. Thus, Ms. Ochoa served as a *nepantlera* by connecting students with such college-going opportunities.

Other students also highlighted the benefits of college visits and summer internships. Jacob also visited several colleges while in high school, partly due to his enrollment in various college programs. He noted, "I've been to (two University of California (UC) campuses and one California State University (CSU) campus). (The visit to one UC and the CSU) was a fieldtrip. (The other UC) I visited with a summer program. It's called (Math and Science Summer Academy). My teacher, English, announced it my sophomore year saying that it's a program where students get to live the college experience for a month and basically live like a college student at the dorms and studying there and eating there. It was really good, got a lot out of that. They gave UC classes that have to do with math and science. There's also extra classes that have to do with English and multi-media."

Jacob was able to visit various UC and CSU college campuses as a high school student. However, when reflecting on his college-going pathway, Jacob concentrated on the experiences that he had while in the summer college program. He explained that the program allowed him to understand what it would mean to be a college student. As a program participant, he took math and science courses at a UC campus to prepare for college. Jacob highlighted the need for students to prepare for college, not just by taking fieldtrips, but also by experiencing college academically. None of these

opportunities would have been possible if it were not for the teachers ensuring that students knew about the internships and then supporting students with applying to the internships. In doing so, the teachers exemplified being community-oriented teachers and serving as *nepantleras* who facilitated a pathway to higher education.

12. A Need to Improve Schooling Systems

Although some students benefited from the college-going pathways developed by teachers (in collaboration with other educators), other students continued to encounter obstacles within the school. Obstacles related to surveillance and policing have been discussed in prior research [51], this article highlights that school the school entailed change, instability, and marginalization, which hindered teachers' abilities to foster college-going structures.

Teachers, administrators, and students often referenced the continual changes that occurred at AHS—regardless, if interpreted as negative or positive. For example, Ms. Martinez argued, “We have no culture” and critiqued unwelcoming climates at AHS. Ms. Ochoa, who had been an AHS teacher for eight years, discussed an example of the constant change: “When I first came, we had just entered the house system—like a mini-academy. Then, we got linked up with the academies, we have been through five principals, and now we are on the next one. We had one year that was a bad year—really horrible—all the teachers left because the teachers could not take the climate among the teachers. It seems like there is always a transition . . . In the school system, that’s the biggest problem; there is no sustainability.”

Ms. Ochoa recalled that within her years at AHS, she experienced two different organizational systems: academic houses and career academies. In addition, within approximately eight years, the school had five different principals and numerous vice-principals. Ms. Ochoa associated the constant systemic changes and lack of administrative support resulting in several “good” teachers transferring out of the school. As a result of the high turnover rates, the efforts by the educators to improve student academic outcomes were not sustainable. At the beginning of the data collection process for this study, one of the vice-principals was new. After completing one academic year of observations, the principal and the senior vice principal relocated to different positions within the district. The constant changes hindered teacher abilities to remain in a stable work environment.

According to teacher participants, a lack of adequate funding also meant low teaching salaries, which influenced turnover rates and contributed to deficit perspectives of student potential to succeed in college. Ms. Ochoa noted, “I can count ten teachers that have been here since I’ve been here, everybody leaves.” She continued to explain that she remained in the school only because of her commitment to the students. With increasing household expenses, she considered if it was also time for her to transition: “The only reason I would leave is for money, we don’t get paid well for this area.” In 2013, the average high school teacher in California made \$69,435 [51]. The average salary for a teacher within the school district in 2013 was \$57,253 [51], which was not in line with housing costs. On the other hand, less than an hour away, teachers in the highest-paying California district on average made \$103,172 a year [51]. The AHS school district average teacher salary ranked 671 out of 832 of the California school districts that shared data publicly, regardless of size [51] In total, six of the seven teachers interviewed pointed out the low-paying salary scales at AHS.

Furthermore, interview data from Ms. Muñoz, Mr. Rivas, Ms. Noguera, and Ms. Ochoa revealed the inconsistency and marginalization of the district, school, and the individuals within the school. In doing so, teacher interview data attributed low academic student outcomes to structural issues. Given the constant changes and inability to staff the school, Mr. Rivas argued that dysfunction stemmed from the school and district level, not from the students:

The school is dysfunctional, it's not the students, it's the school, it's the district . . . I know businesses and education shouldn't mix, but at the organizational levels, we need some help . . . We are not appreciated as much as we should be . . . We don't have time to build relationships and administrators don't know how to do that—and the district—doesn't seem like it can happen . . . Communication is key and some administrators don't know how to deal with that . . . With the type of work we are doing, you definitely cannot have turnover or need teachers who are willing to work in this system, who are flexible, innovative, and willing to learn and work with each other.

Mr. Rivas highlighted the lack of communication, appreciation, and essential skills, which educational leaders lacked in the district and at AHS. The high turnover rate in administrators and teachers resulted in a lack of adequate and consistent leadership. Moreover, Mr. Rivas argued that AHS needed teachers who were innovative, flexible, cooperative, and open to learning. Without adequate administrators at the district and school-level, it was difficult for teachers to feel supported and reduced their abilities to invest long-term in AHS.

Teachers had to also navigate a culture of marginalization, which included deficit educators. Ms. Ochoa and Mr. Rivas recalled an incident when a counselor with low expectations disturbed the climate of college aspirations established in class. Mr. Rivas explained, "One of our kids came in with the counselor and the counselor was like, 'I heard that this kid is trying to apply to college? I don't know what's going on, what are you telling the students?'—In front of the whole class. I stepped outside and he was like, 'You know, a lot of these kids go to college and drop out, they are in debt, and lose confidence! I don't understand why you think this student has the potential.'"

Upon the learning that Mr. Rivas helped a student apply to CSU campuses, the school counselor confronted the teacher in front of a classroom of students. The counselor argued that AHS students were not academically prepared to enter college and that attending college would likely result in students withdrawing from college with loan debt. The Latino counselor engaged in a deficit perspective of students and did not believe that the particular student would succeed in college—despite meeting CSU admission requirements. The deficit ideology of the counselor of AHS students being academically unprepared to complete a four-year college degree influenced the experiences of all students who experienced this classroom interaction and likely influenced the students who met with him on an individual basis during academic counseling sessions.

However, Mr. Rivas and Ms. Ochoa had reviewed student transcripts to ensure that those who met the minimum application requirements for CSU and CU completed the application process. Mr. Rivas explained:

He had like a 2.7 grade-point-average; he was qualified to go to state—that was his goal. He had an IEP, so if he carries the IEP though college, he can get help there. We made sure everybody could apply; we did not just have anybody apply. But you have to have some belief in these kids. His approach was they are going to mess up. My approach was "Let's be optimistic, at least we can try." I understand his point about failing because I went through that. I think these kids have that fight or flight, they don't flight. They have a lot of perseverance, they can adapt to any situation, that's something that most of these kids develop growing up in the city. I wish I had the research and data to back that up . . . That's why I have faith that they can be successful. Some people don't see it that way, but I do, maybe that's why we help the kids go to college.

In contrast to the counselor with a deficit perspective of students, Mr. Rivas maintained college aspirations and argued that students possessed various strengths, which could help them persist in college. He was able to make a connection between the counselor's assumptions and his having "failed" in college; Mr. Rivas continued to believe that students have the abilities and skills to succeed in college. Therefore, he concentrated on providing students with an opportunity to pursue a college

education. This particular example provided insight into how conflicting climates trespass spaces developed by community-oriented teachers and *nepantlera* educators.

Teachers understood that a larger shift in school culture would support their individual efforts to foster college aspirations. For example, during her interview, Ms. Martinez acknowledged that outside of her classroom, students were faced with an unwelcoming school context. She understood that students were not satisfied and presented an alternative vision for the school:

Part of a culture is having programs and breakfast provided in the morning ... Create the culture—give them the honey, let them come. I feel like after school programs should be changed. The library should not be closed, the labs should be open, and the lights should not be shut off. There should be flyers, “Please come to tutoring,” and snacks should be provided. There should be a culture where (students) feel welcome and this is where they want to be.

Ms. Martinez envisioned alternative school practices and policies that would foster student engagement through school programs, before and after school. Ms. Martinez presented an alternative to school as a “jail” and instead envisioned an environment that would likely make students feel welcomed in the school and such a culture would reinforce students feeling like they belonged and that they wanted to be present in academic contexts.

13. Significance of the Study

Given the findings, this study conceptualizes teacher participants as community-oriented *nepantlera* educators who aimed to develop a bridge between high school and college for Latina/o/x first-generation college students. The findings of this study revealed that as community-oriented *nepantlera* educators, the teacher participants were driven by a personal commitment to ensure that students of Color who attend under-resourced schools are provided with the information, guidance, and opportunities to pursue a higher education. The community-oriented *nepantlera* educators aimed to foster college aspirations and develop a college-going classroom environment through self-reflection and collaboration. First, self-reflection entailed reflecting both on personal journeys in higher education and contextualizing the previous experiences of students who they have taught. This allowed teachers to understand the types of support that a first-generation college student may need. Second, the community-oriented *nepantlera* educators understood that they needed to collaborate with other teachers and colleagues within and outside of the school. Collaboration included partnering with other teachers to ensure that students were supported in multiple classes. Collaboration also included learning from one another so that students could receive accurate college information. The teachers engaged in developing a bridge from high school to college by engaging in assignments and activities in their classes that fostered college aspirations, informed students about college pathways, and connected students with extracurricular activities, such as paid career and college internships. Being a community-oriented *nepantlera* educator also entails an educator continuing to navigate and challenge a school-wide culture that is likely deficit and the commitment to students fuels the need to persist in advocating for students.

While the educators within this study engaged in an asset-based perspective and knew that students were capable of pursuing a college education, more research is needed to understand how teachers develop into community-oriented *nepantlera* educators. In other words, research is needed to know how educators develop their own critical consciousness and abilities to collaborate, so as to support the college-going pathways of Latina/o/x students (and students of Color). Studies are also needed to continue understanding the resources that teachers can use as they work within a school culture of change, instability and marginalization.

Until then, it is evident that school districts need to collaborate with local colleges of education to support the development and hiring of community-oriented educators of Color who can identify with and support students. However, the high turnover rates of teachers, low salaries, and the inability to afford to live in the communities where they teach is well documented by previous research [5].

The participants highlighted that they would have benefited from a salary that took into account the support that they provided students. The teachers were living in an area in California where the cost-of-living outweighed the salary that they received, which, ultimately, hindered their abilities to afford to continue to work at the school. State governments need to ensure that public K–12 schools are able to pay teachers a salary that accounts for cost-of-living, so that they can continue to teach students to the best of their abilities. Otherwise, students of Color in under-resourced urban schools will continue to miss out on being supported by community-oriented *nepantlera* educators.

Studies that examine the schooling contexts of under-resourced urban high schools that serve a majority of Latina/o/x students are likely to focus on the shortfalls. However, this study aimed to examine the experiences of Latina/o/x teachers who were guided by asset-based ideologies. In doing so, the researcher hoped to acknowledge and honor the experiences of both the teachers who fostered college-going classroom environments and the students who thrived in such courses. As explained by Anzaldúa [17], “Where before we saw only separateness, differences, and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturance and reciprocity and encourages alliances among groups working to transform communities. In gatherings where we feel our dreams have been sucked out of us, *la nepantlera* leads us in celebrating *la comunidad soñada* (the yearned community)” (p. 568). Similarly, the Latina/o/x teachers in this study viewed students from an asset-based perspective and ensured that they fostered college-going structures for students. The educators serve as an example of a schooling experience where where student college aspirations are fostered and bridged with higher education pathways.

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