

Schooling and the Challenges of Social Upward Mobility: College Readiness Program in a Borderlands Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

This longitudinal study employs quantitative and qualitative methodologies that explain how resources combined with quality education can make a difference for low-income students to attain post-secondary schooling. It uses data from a grant-funded college readiness program. It demonstrates how this program contributes for student success and their personal and academic development. The findings prove that students from working-class communities can improve their upward mobility and quality of life. The research indicates that knowledge deficits were significantly more evident among families with lower incomes and educational attainments. The context of this study is in El Paso, Texas, a borderland region where only a small majority make to Higher Ed. The local university was awarded nationally for contributing to students' social upward mobility after graduating with a college degree.

Keywords: Longitudinal study, tutoring and academic success, Working Class Borderland Community, First-Generation College Bound, Middle School, and High School Students

1. Introduction

United States is becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse, especially within the El Paso Texas/Ciudad Juárez Mexican border. The fastest-growing youth population in the borderland region includes students who have been the least serviced by the U.S. educational system from pre-school, middle school, and high school, including matriculation to a post-secondary institution. Students who live in the borderland region are the under-represented minority and lower-income youth who are less likely than their higher-income peers to graduate from high school,

enroll and complete a post-secondary education. The significance of college preparation, enrollment, and completion from a college or university must be addressed. For the low-income and working-class who constitute most of the border population in the region, a college degree is a critical path to a professional career, well-paying employment, and a proactive future.

During the middle grades, students who are engaged in imagining their future post-secondary and career choices tend to make more informed choices and better decisions. The research expressed the importance of middle school parents or parental guardians inquiring about college planning from counselors, teachers, and college readiness programs. It is also crucial for them to explore printed materials and utilize the internet. The research also stated that both English and Spanish mass media were conspicuously absent as sources of information. Language barriers were a significant factor impeding the acquisition of college knowledge. El Paso, Texas, is a poor working-class community, where only 23% "make it" to higher education; in 2001, only 13% of first-generation students graduated with a college degree. The majority do not "make it". Those who "make it" to higher education are not prepared for the academic rigor.

This research explores the knowledge about Higher Ed. and career attitudes of middle school first-generation college-bound students and the factors that contribute to post-secondary success. The transition to middle school is a vital effort in career and college planning, regardless of the type of post-secondary education students intend to pursue. College-persistence rates for specific subgroups of the high school population are even lower, particularly first-generation students, students from low-income households, and certain nonwhite ethnic minorities. There is a critical relationship between middle school and post-secondary success. The challenge for parents and school personnel is to help students see the

connection between thinking they want to go to college and learning how to prepare for it. These specific studies consistently indicate that first-generation students are at greater risk concerning persistence and degree attainment than their traditional peers, primarily because of lower academic and social integration levels. Various studies have been conducted on the phenomenon that occurs sometime between middle school and high school graduation that affects students' intentions to pursue post-secondary education. Educators and researchers continue to explore and determine why some students persist with their college plans while others do not. The research indicates that to help middle school students make a successful transition between high school and college, parents must know about the process and what actions need to be taken. The research also stated that knowledge deficits were significantly more evident among parents with lower incomes and educational attainment.

2. Longitudinal Study with Transnational Students

This study uses data from a college readiness longitudinal study based on two grant-funded projects totaling \$2.4 million dollars. The first grant was funded by the JP Morgan Chase Foundation and focused on the success strategies for high-risk students entering the university. The second grant was the Educational Talent Search (ETS) Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education and sponsored locally by the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). This grant provides college, career, and financial aid information to high school students each academic year. UTEP ETS identifies students who demonstrate an interest or desire to attend college and provides them with the motivation and support to enroll in post-secondary education (college, university, technical or vocational school) after high school graduation. ETS also encourages persons who have not completed education programs at the secondary or post-secondary level to enter or reenter and complete post-secondary education. The goal of UTEP ETS is to increase the number of youths from disadvantaged backgrounds who complete high school and enroll in and complete their post-secondary education.

Services provided by the program include: academic, financial, career or personal counseling, advice on entry or re-entry to secondary or post-secondary programs, career exploration and aptitude assessment, tutorial services, information on post-

secondary education, exposure to college campuses, information on student financial assistance, assistance in completing college admissions and financial aid applications, assistance in preparing for college entrance exams, mentoring programs, special activities for sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders, and workshops for the families of participants.

The target area of the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Talent Search (T.S.) is El Paso County, Texas, also known as *El Corazon de El Paso* (The heart of El Paso). The target area is primarily urban, with an estimated population of 839,238, located in the most impoverished, inner-city region of El Paso, Texas. For the last ten years, the target area has been designated as a Round II Urban Empowerment Zone, eligible to receive federal funding to rebuild communities in poverty-stricken inner cities. Latinos account for most of the population (82.9%), while African Americans account for about 4.0%. There has been steady growth in the Hispanic or Latino population since the 2010 Census due to a massive influx from Mexico and Central America. The UTEP ETS Project focused on providing program activities and services to the high percentage of low-income and potential first-generation college students attending the four target schools in the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) in the target area. This longitudinal project began in 2012 in this area, which borders the city of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Only 25.2% of students living in this community earn a college degree compared to (57.4%) of Texas residents and (59%) across the U.S. Eighty nine percentage of these families are classified as economically disadvantaged. According to the Texas Education Agency, 67.6% of students are underprivileged at the national level and 58.8% across Texas.

MacLeod [1] discusses and demonstrates in his classic book (*Ain't no makin' it...*) how inner cities schools lack quality education besides students' efforts to "make it" (complete high school education and enroll in post-secondary). His longitudinal studies provide overwhelming evidence that even students classified as high academic achievers lack the skills and knowledge to face the challenges of the job market because these poor inner-city communities lack quality education. In addition, there is a public stigma of place, community institutions, and racial profiling (and racism) against students in these marginalized communities.

Hence, we question how the lack of resources combined with low-quality education affects students' success? How can quality education impact and make a difference in students' lives? What is quality education?

How does the stigma of place and institutions leave an imprint on students' sense of identity? How can schooling deal with racial tensions and multicultural challenges? To answer these questions, this study concentrates on quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data to examine how federal grant funding provides resources to assist low-income first-generation college-bound students in being successful in enrolling and attaining a post-secondary education. According to Kozol [2], resources matter. In his New York study, he provides overpowering evidence that schools that lack resources lag behind compared to schools with appropriate and ample resources. Many students in the U.S. struggle with tuition payments and student loans, some spending their entire life paying them off, making higher education viewed as unattainable. Furthermore, the U.S. spends over 50% of its federal budget on the military/border surveillance-industrial complex, 7% on health care, and only 6% on education.

Similarly, this study argues and demonstrates how resources are fundamental for student success combined with quality education, making a significant difference in students' academic development. In addition, this research will show how education in inner cities in the U.S. lacks quality education, making it difficult for poor working-class communities "to make it." We will discuss and reflect critically on how transnational students' third space (imaginary) and sense of identity can be transformed and empowered.

Educational ecologies are an essential space where diversity is viewed as a resource for expansive historical learning. These spaces are described as "third spaces." Our border reality is that students, who are born in the US or are legal residents, walk across the international bridge every day to attend school. These transnational, border crossing, and boundary-crossing students, born of families who chose to live in Mexico, bring a cultural wealth and cultural capital that will help them excel in this global economy. Sadly, our educational systems and institutions indoctrinate children with white culture and exploit them and/or deprive them of their own history and culture. We can utilize our educational system to motivate and encourage students to develop their individual cultural capital to compete academically and linguistically in this hegemonic educational system. We need to validate and listen to the socio-linguistic-cultural histories of students while being attentive to their narratives so that students can have a public, academic space where students can contribute as historical agent with their own thinking.

The English and Spanish languages can create a third-border translanguaging space where students can utilize their sociolinguistic abilities to actively co-construct knowledge within the classroom. According to [3] Esquinca, A., Araujo, B., and de la Piedra, M, the fluidity and flexibility of language use in the classroom, when bilingual teachers and students use different communicative resources at their disposal, create understanding and connection, making sense of their bilingual worlds.

Our classrooms in the border city of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez should foster educational ecologies of socio-cultural spaces in which students and teachers are proactive in fostering linguistic learning environments. Students in the El Paso, Ciudad Juarez border region use translanguaging to voice their historical perspectives. Garcia [3] explains that translanguaging includes multiple expansive practices in which bilinguals engage to make sense of their bilingual worlds. The students in this border region live between two worlds, two borders—a bi-national sense of identity. They exist within the elements of Spanish and English, between the Mexican and the American. These translanguaging students exist between two worlds, two sister cities held together by an international bridge [4].

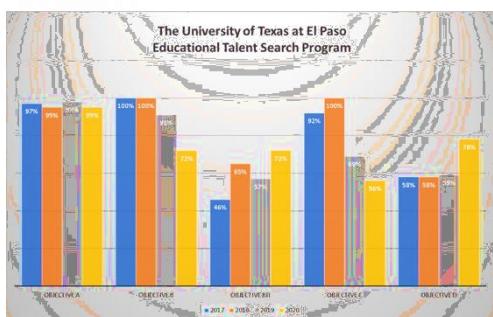
Greenwald argues that placed-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people inhabit. Educators ought to discuss local history and reality with students. [5] Rossatto states that incorporating border pedagogy conversations into courses opens doors of possibility. The classroom should be socially and culturally dynamic. It should be utilized as an academic space where students learn and interact by making historical and linguistic connections with their peers. According to [6] Cashman, "Critical border dialogism offers hope for the reconstructionist approaches that are needed to address the structural inequalities in our present-day schools." Engaging in border dialogue is an essential part of creating a third space that values and provides tools and resources towards college readiness preparation for students. [6] Cashman argues that "critical border dialogism offers the conviction that societal woes (such as college preparation for transfronterizo students) can, indeed, be addressed and ameliorated through quality educational experiences. We can draw upon successful models beyond our own political, geographic, historical, and philosophical borders. We can build upon our existing knowledge of place and understandings of borders." [6] Cashman encourages critical border dialogism because it is also

comprised of "pragmatic hope, as it encourages educators and cultural workers to confront the problems facing our educational systems through collective action."

3. UTEP ETS Program Objectives

Our findings indicated that 80% of students who have graduated with a regular secondary school diploma, during the project year, are estimated to enroll in an institution of higher education by the fall semester immediately following high school graduation or will have received notification, by the fall semester immediately following high school, from an institution of higher education, of acceptance but deferred enrollment until the next academic semester

Table 1. Data



Objective A: Secondary School Persistence

Objective B: Secondary School Graduation Diploma

Objective B II: Secondary School Graduation Rigorous Study

Objective C: Post-Secondary Education Enrollment

Objective D: Post-Secondary Attainment

The above objectives are explained in detail with subcategories that identify four major themes: the needs of the target area, measurable progress, and how ambitious and attainable each budget period objective is.

3.1. Objective A: Secondary School Persistence

In objective A: Secondary School Persistence, the data showed 90% of non-senior participants served each project year will complete the current academic year and continue in school for the next academic year at the next grade level.

The needs of the target area show, on average, 92.9% of low-income students attending the target

schools. Between the two high schools identified in this study, an average of 69% of students from Bowie High School and 77% of students from Jefferson High School will persist in high school each year. There is a high student-to-counselor ratio of 283:1 in the target schools that proves to be unfavorable to counselors when conducting individualized academic advising and encouraging students to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education. Furthermore, the needs of this target area demonstrate a lack of programs and services in target schools that are designed to facilitate college readiness standards and encourage student persistence in school.

The measurable progress towards meeting Objective A was assessed and tracked via individual and group contact logs, weekly monthly contact summary reports, report cards with student progress, and final transcripts to verify individual persistence.

The objective proved to be ambitious due to the secondary school persistence objective that had been set approximately 15% higher than the target schools' current persistence rate of 69% and 70%. The objective was attained by implementing services (by grade level) that consisted of individual contacts, small group meetings scheduled with Talent Search staff to provide Dropout Prevention Activities and college readiness workshops, career interest assessments and exploration, high school grade transition services, course advising, goal setting, time management, and monitoring grades, graduation credits, and post-secondary awareness. With these planned services funded by the project budget and other resources, the persistence objective of 90% is expected to be attained within each reporting period.

3.2. Objective B: Secondary School Graduation Diploma

In Objective B, 90% of seniors served during the project year were expected to graduate during the project year with a regular secondary school diploma within the standard number of years. The needs of the target area showed that 82% of adults had not obtained a high school diploma, and a low percentage of students scored at the proficient level on the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment in English, Language Arts, and Mathematics. Furthermore, the needs of the target area evidence a lack of programs and services in the target schools that are specifically designed to ensure that students graduate with a regular diploma in 4 years. The high school student to counselor ratio of 283:1 in the target schools also does not support the expectation of counselors' roles to effectively assist students

academically to complete and graduate from high school.

The progress toward meeting this objective was assessed, tracked, and measured via graduation plan and grade reports, final transcripts verifying the Regular Diploma awarded to affirm a graduation rate of 90%, and by the actual number of participants who graduate annually with the regular diploma.

The ambition of this objective proved to be light of the high percentage of low-income students that required graduation planning services in schools with a very high student-to-counselor ratio. The objective upheld attainability because all students in Texas work toward the Recommendation High School Diploma, which meets the definition of a rigorous program of study.

3.3. Objective B II: Secondary School Graduation Rigorous Study

In Objective B II, 90% of seniors served during the project year were expected to complete a rigorous secondary school program of study and to graduate during the project year with a regular secondary school diploma within the standard number of years.

The needs of the target area showed that 82% of adults had not obtained a high school diploma. There were low enrollment and completion rates for economically disadvantaged persons (Jefferson 7.4%, Bowie 17.8%, and the State of Texas 23.1%), usually low-income and first-generation in advanced/dual enrollment courses offered at the target schools. Furthermore, the needs of the target area evidence a lack of programs and services in the target schools that are specifically designed to ensure that students graduate with a regular diploma in 4 years. The high school student to counselor ratio of 283:1 in the target schools also does not support the expectation of counselors' roles to effectively assist students academically to complete and graduate from high school.

The progress toward meeting this objective was assessed, tracked, and measured through individual and group contact logs, contact summaries, graduation plans, copies of 6 weeks' report cards and grades, final transcripts, and copies of Recommended Diplomas to verify the resulting diploma graduation rate of 90%. This objective will be measured by the actual number of participants who graduate annually.

The objective proved to be ambitious due to the high percentage of low-income students that required graduation planning services in schools with a very

high student-to-counselor ratio. The objective was attainable due to the development of a detailed and thorough plan of operation outlining an intensive set of specific services to be provided to target school participants in grades 6-12. The services that meet students' needs are as follows: Academic Year Counseling, Back to School Social, Academic Year Workshops and Presentations, Tutoring in Math and English, Bi-Annual Assemblies, Annual College and Career Day, Lock-in-Leadership Retreats, Summer Program Academy, College Application Workshops, STEM Summer Programs, Eight Grade Transition, Summer Program Referrals.

3.4. Objective C: Post-secondary Education Enrollment

In Objective C, 80% of participants who had graduated with a regular secondary school diploma during the project year were expected to enroll in an institution of higher education by the fall semester. Immediately following high school graduation or to have received notification by the fall semester immediately following high school completion, from an institution of higher education, of acceptance but deferred enrollment until the next academic semester (e.g., spring semester).

The needs of the target area evidenced a very low percentage of target school students enrolling in college (44% of Bowie and 52% of Jefferson High School). A low percentage and scores of target school students taking standardized college entrance exams (Bowie 38.9 %, Jefferson 56.1%, and the State of Texas 65%) were also evidenced. Furthermore, the ineffective high school student to counselor ratio of 283:1 in the target schools proved to not be conducive to individualized technical assistance with the ACT/SAT registration, college admissions, and financial aid. These target areas also showed a lack of programs in target schools aimed at assisting students in enrolling in post-secondary educational programs. A lack of financial aid information and financial planning for post-secondary education was also unavailable at target schools.

The progress toward meeting this objective was assessed, tracked, and measured via Academic Progress Plans; Individual and Group Contact Logs, Contact Summaries, Graduation Plans, college admissions, financial aid checklists, completed ACT/SAT registration forms, completed college admission application, completed scholarship applications and FAFSA submitted; ACT/SAT scores, college

acceptance letters, and financial aid award letters and confirmation of post-secondary enrollment obtained from National Student Clearinghouse to verify the resulting college enrollment rate of 80%.

Objective C proved to be ambitious due to the high percentage of low-income students that required assistance with the college admissions and financial aid process and the low percentage of target school graduates that enroll in college after high school graduation (44% at Bowie and 52% at Jefferson High School). This objective proved to be attainable due to the development of a detailed and thorough Plan of Operation. Services that met the student needs are as follows: Academic Year Counseling, Back to School Social, Academic Year Workshops and Presentations, Tutoring in Math and English, Bi-Annual Assemblies, Annual College and Career Day, Lock-in-Leadership Retreats, Summer Program Academy, College Application Workshops, STEM Summer Programs, 8th Grade Transition, Summer Program Referrals. This project is confident that 80% of target school 12th-grade participants will enroll due to these planned services and activities funded by the project budget and other resources.

3.5. Objective D: Post-secondary Attainment

In Objective D, 30% of participants served during the project year who enrolled in an institution of higher education by the fall semester immediately following high school graduation or by the next academic semester (e.g., spring semester) as a result of acceptance but deferred enrollment was expected to complete a program of post-secondary education within six years.

The needs of the target area showed a high number (78.8 %) of individuals over the age of 25 residing in the target area having education completion levels below a baccalaureate degree. There was also a low average percentage of target school students enrolling in college after high school graduation (44% at Bowie and 52% at Jefferson High School). The high school-to-counselor ratio of 283:1 in the target schools was not conducive to providing academic advising, college planning, and orientation activities. Furthermore, academic and socioeconomic issues faced by target school students became barriers to high school graduation, college enrollment, and post-secondary degree attainment.

The progress toward meeting this objective was assessed, tracked, and measured via National Student Clearinghouse or college contact reports placed in each

prior participant's file at the end of each year to verify the resulting college degree attainment rate of 30%.

Objective C proved ambitious considering it is 26% higher than the target area's current post-secondary degree attainment rate. The objective was attainable due to the development of a detailed and thorough Plan of Operation outlining specific services offered to 11th and 12th-grade participants to promote their college persistence and graduation from college while still in high school. Due to these planned services and activities funded by the project budget and other resources, the ETS project remains confident that 30% of target school graduates enrolled in college will attain a post-secondary degree within six years of their initial college enrollment each project year.

4. The Impact of COVID-19 on UTEP ETS

In March 2020, following the Texas Governor's Covid-19 "shelter in place" order, The University of Texas at El Paso Educational Talent Search Program halted all face-to-face instruction and services. The order continued through the end of May when the state slowly began working towards a gradual reopening.

As a result, ETS and our community partners began serving participants virtually via phone calls, text and email messages, Zoom, Schoology, Blackboard, and Microsoft Teams. In mid-June, UTEP officially announced plans to provide all its courses and services online through the end of the Fall 2020 semester. UTEP ETS, El Paso Community College, and El Paso Independent School District announced that at least through the Fall 2020 semester, students had the option of either an all-virtual or blended schedule. Families opting for blended learning were placed in a group with face-to-face instruction taking place on either Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday, with remote learning taking place on the days when their group was not scheduled to be at school.

UTEP ETS continued to provide college readiness services to meet the objective of preparing participants for virtual summer dual credit courses at El Paso Community College. The UTEP ETS program continued to run every summer Monday –Friday, from May through June of each year through 2022, and included virtual college mentoring and online tutoring. The El Paso Independent School district phased in students on October 26, 2020, for families that selected in-person instruction. Students and communities around the world are still feeling the ripples of the global pandemic. There is still a multitude of research

that needs to be conducted to evaluate how COVID-19 impacted the personal and academic lives of our youth.

5. Quality and Transformative Education in the Borderland

We need to rethink how students access critical multiculturalism/pedagogy and transformative quality education geared explicitly towards borderland communities. Finland, Singapore, and South Korea have the best education programs globally, and quality education makes a difference in people's lives. Education is not expensive; ignorance is expensive. Martin Luther King's words resonate, "Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." Quality education is the program where students learn to develop skills such as: critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, ownership over their learning experiences, where they can see the direct connection of what they are learning and real life know-hows, based on current events. It is a schooling where students become agents of their own history and producers of knowledge *a la Freirean*.

6. Systemic Racism and Education

Without quality education the predicament for the new generations are bleak. It is 3 times more expensive to keep someone in jail than to provide them with an education. US incarcerated population constitute 25% of world-incarcerated population. The criminal justice system in the United States has proven to directly influence mass incarceration rates towards African Americans, Latin@s or people of color in general and even poor whites, leaving a significant impact on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of society. Alexander [7] highlights the correlation between the War on Drugs and the system of mass incarceration that has evolved into the control and oppression of entire communities of color. With drug offenses accounting for two-thirds of the rise in the federal prison population and more than half the rise in the state prison population between 1985 and 2000, it is without question that over 31 million people have been arrested for drug offenses since the drug war began [7]. However, incarcerated people are not equally or remotely distributed by race; there are significantly more African Americans and Latinos in jails and prisons than whites. The defense and explanation that supports the efforts to incarcerate are to reduce crime rates; however, to primarily incarcerate black and brown people highlights a

different narrative, one that bares similar parallels to the Jim Crow era, as they cannot vote or exercise their citizenry.

The criminal justice system now controls and manages poor people of color and communities, leading to a new caste system that Alexander describes as being felt most tragically in youth around the United States (2020). She continues to inform of how young black men are more likely to go to prison than college, stating, "As of June 2001, there were nearly twenty thousand more black men in the Illinois state prison system than enrolled in the state's public universities" [7]. However, the normalization of black youth that goes to prison instead of entering higher education institutions is unsurprising.

Alexander mentions a study published in 2000 by the National Institute on Drug Abuse that reported white students using cocaine at seven times the rate of black students, using crack cocaine at eight times the rate of black students, and heroin at seven times the rate of black students [7]. With evidence of white students using drugs vastly more than black students and black students being arrested and imprisoned for drug crimes, it is obvious that the criminal justice system collaborates with the educational system, unjustly acquiring black and brown youth and stamping them with a lifelong weight to carry.

7. Racial Tensions and Multicultural Challenges in School

Schooling within the United States has long presented an immediate need for systemic educational change due to the lasting hereditaries of racism and oppression. With persistent themes of poor-quality education and discrimination against marginalized communities and peoples, the existence of racial tensions and multicultural challenges have permeated the educational system. Research from The International Commission on the Futures of Education [8] and Alexander [7] bolster the demand to spread awareness of racial injustices and reinvent the current education model.

Alexander [7] discusses the stigma of race and criminality that enters the education system, noting how blatant discrimination against someone "young, black, and male" leads to expulsion from employment, housing, and educational opportunities. Furthermore, the stigma of black youth being viewed as criminals leads to black students being "pushed out" of schools through racially biased school discipline policies [7].

To combat this systemic racism, Alexander states an urgency for racial justice advocates to ensure that America's current racial caste system is its last by "accepting all of us or none" [7].

According to The International Commission on the Futures of Education [8], a reinvention of education is urgently required to promote lasting sustainability beginning with readdressing past injustices and redefining the social contract for education through two foundational principles: (1) the right to quality education and (2) a commitment to education as a public societal endeavor and a common good (p.11). Fulfilling these contractual obligations requires a basis and commitment to human rights and devotion to the lens of education regardless of intersectional characteristics used to discriminate and exclude.

The unfaltering evidence of systemic racism that lives in the United States and bleeds into institutions of education must be dismantled. Forms of racism and oppression have proven to be recycled through our youth; it is learned and expected. Understanding the current educational system in the United States requires unbiased awareness and knowledge of the historical injustices that have propagated through generations.

8. BLM

Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter have erupted with the mission to eradicate white supremacy and to create and practice localized empowerment that will intervene in the violence that continuously harms Black communities. According to the Howard University School of Law, "Black Lives Matter Movement" (2018), the origin of this movement erupted in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2013, with leading black organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The Black Lives Matter movement has since become recognized as a global social movement protesting police brutality and systemic racism against the black community. The prevailing movement of BLM inspired other social movements to erupt, such as Black Lives Matter at School, an educational justice mission created by The National Education Association intended to engage and mobilize social justice advocates in the fight for racial, social, and economic justice in public education. The efforts to resist and combat systemic racism within all facets of society have certainly spurred into action from the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement. It is notable to recognize the onset of social change initiatives and, most importantly, how to

practice their mission and goals throughout all areas of life most affected by these injustices.

9. Place and Institution on Students' Sense of Identity

Research on students' sense of identity is a highly regarded topic amongst educators and instructors alike, informing disciplines on a global scale with the intention to move learned individual student practices into academic communities. Dunham [9] explains student academic identity as the appropriation of academic values within a sense of self that ultimately reflects the willingness and commitment of the practices of the academic community.

The expectation of student success in academia has contributing factors that involve culture and geography, according to Ellis [10]. Ellis argues the importance of classrooms in serving as spaces of positive identity and social support, emphasizing the strain of academic competition that precludes these *place* experiences from occurring. The social construction of place is based on the social and physical resources allotted to a given space, informing the development of a place to be one representative of the culture and identity of its inhabitants. Place-making is, in turn, bestowed upon the educators to ensure that the rules and routines introduce appropriate resources for their students.

Developing a place that encourages a student's sense of identity to flourish and thrive must come with an understanding of the systemic disparities that exist and affect students daily. Fortunately, with the rise of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, the necessity to implement inclusive places and institutions is on the rise.

Historically critical pedagogy has examined the consequences of capitalist predatory systems critically. Lately, it incorporates critical feminist theories and studies, yet more recently, a conference that generated the book *Reinventing Critical Pedagogy* added critical race theory studies and anti-racism education as essential epistemology to counteract racism and white supremacy. The hegemonic totalities that affect human existence are predatory capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. A ramification of these three hegemonies is the root cause of human oppression.

Fine [11] contributed the classic article on Silencing Public Schools, studying a high school community but also indicating that in elementary and middle school, students develop and construct an idea that to be a good student means to be a quiet and passive learner.

Teachers and administrators avoid discussing topics such as abortion, drugs, and school dropouts...hoping students will not get the wrong idea and actually do it. Nevertheless, the opposite happens; the more schools avoid talking about these topics, the more it brings a predicament. Fine [12] also revealed findings of a study with a longitudinal character where students that earn straight A's pay a hefty price for being high achievers--have excellent paying jobs but have more relationship and emotional problems. In contrast, students that drop out of school and protest against schooling experiences have fewer emotional problems and have low-paying and low-skill jobs yet have many bills to pay. Hence, we advocate for a balanced schooling experience, academic achievement, and personal development.

To invest in education is to pave the way for a better future so individuals can transform their lives and subsequently transform the world. For the same reason, the quality of our democracy depends on people's quality of education. Consequently, what is transformative quality education? To define these terms, we focus on theoretical studies of Freirean and critical pedagogical principles to examine the current challenges of the U.S./Mexico borderland community. To talk about quality education in this context is first to denounce problematic dominant systems that prevent the academic success of those in oppressed conditions; to then announce educational programs that can be empowering and transformational. Most of the U.S. public school curriculum is based on white colonizers' version of history. Non-white students usually feel disempowered and develop identity crises as they are forced to internalize whiteness. The call for a critical multicultural education that deconstructs white supremacy and neo-fascism is extremely crucial in this context. For the most part, much of the racial tension built up in the U.S. consists of white people's fear of losing their privilege. White-dominated structures control the economy, politics, and history. People of color often encounter an invisible ceiling in their upward mobility. A citizenship pedagogy from the people, with the people, and for the people in the borderlands is to connect students' daily life experiences, where transnational students can see themselves as historical agents. Quality education then is defined as students' ability to practice critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills to develop intellectually and prosper academically to become contributing citizens to society.

10. Conclusion

Inspired in Gloria Anzaldúa we critically reflect on our locality and political positionality as borderlanders. She stated that the switching of "codes" from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of languages establishes a new language—the language of the Borderlands.

Overcoming the tradition of silence. "I will have my serpent's tongue - my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" [13].

Lack of preparation for college readiness leaves many students lacking post-secondary opportunities. The majority of our communities are working and middle-class families. Therefore, replicating an educational experience that reproduces their social-economic status. For the most part, since teachers come from the working class and middle class, they tend to teach the way they have been taught. Most of them experience an education of right and wrong, teacher-centered, dittos, memorization, discipline, and banking, while upper social groups have a creative, problem-solving, and critical thinking education. At the end of the day, higher social groups have a better-quality education that truly makes a difference in real life. Once a domesticating education keeps people as spectators and obedient to someone else's commands, the lack of creativity limits people's alternatives to make a living.

The implication of this study's findings reveals that students living in liminal spaces have so much against them. School curriculum and pedagogy need to focus on the specifics of culturally responsive multidisciplinary educational practices that transform and empower their critical consciousness in a holistic way. We don't need a test to find out who are the students who are left behind we do need to test our educational institutions on how they can make them successful. By actively participating in our grant-funded college readiness program, all students succeed in transitioning from high school and enrolling in a post-secondary institution. Otherwise, the spectrum of their academic endeavors would be bleak. For over twenty-five years that our program has been servicing students, the data reveals that personalized college mentors, tutors, and student development specialists make a significant difference in their intellectual growth. The objective of UTEP ETS is to foster knowledge and promote the development of skills that prepare students to be well informed, thoughtful, and productive and transformative intellectual leaders and

citizens. Our public institutions should provide to all students' quality education without exceptions.

The UTEP ETS program provides advising, information on financial aid programs, assistance in completing financial aid applications, financial literacy, and support for college enrollment. Moreover, the program supports students' non-cognitive needs to ensure that they persist, succeed, graduate from high school, complete a rigorous secondary school program of study and enroll in college. Based on the need, the UTEP ETS Project implemented (5) ambitious yet attainable objectives: (a) persistence from one academic year to the next grade level; (b) graduation with a regular diploma within the standard number of years; (c) graduation with a rigorous secondary school program of study; (d) college enrollment; and (e) postsecondary attainment.

The meager college enrollment rate of only 50% for target school graduates signals a definite need for individualized technical assistance in the college admissions and financial aid application process provided by the UTEP ETS Project. The data suggest that only 5% of target area residents have earned a four-year college degree compared to the state (31%) and national (33%) rates. This exceptionally low college degree attainment rate signals a definite need for the college, financial aid, and financial literacy awareness activities provided by the UTEP ETS Project.

The research suggests that there is also a critical need to support economically disadvantaged parents that are less knowledgeable about how the education system works so that children can gain access to and be successful in college. [14] Welton et al. supported the finding that schools recognizing the need to support parent engagement provide opportunities. College knowledge was objectively low among the Latin@ parents surveyed. Language barriers constituted a significant negative factor in acquiring college knowledge. This finding was evident across different communication channels and sources, face-to-face interactions with teachers or counselors, written materials from schools and colleges, and participation in information dissemination events such as college nights. In turn, students develop ownership over their learning experiences. This study confirms that only quality education allows our youth to "make it" and transcend beyond social barriers that prevent them from developing and succeeding into a social upward mobility.

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