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This Is My Neighborhood: An Exploration of Culturally Relevant Agency to Support High School Latinx Students in an Urban Career Academy

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and strategies internal and external stakeholders used to support students in a career academy serving a predominately Latinx community. Within this case study, the principal of the school was Latinx, grew up within the same community as the school, and therefore shared the same culture as his students. Thus, we wondered how effective the principal would be in overcoming the cultural, political, and social barriers of students in the predominately Latinx school. We found the school leaders had a heightened awareness of organizational, cultural, and political complexities because of their own personal investment as well as their lived experiences of living and growing up in the community. The identities of the school leaders, then, led to a collective sense of agency and transformational leadership practices that facilitated a change in the grim situations and prospects of their students, and motivated them to become role models and community leaders providing resources and supports to ensure the high academic performance of students in the academy. However, we also realized that cultural understanding may sometimes lead to parochial views on what is best for students, leading to practices that prevent the exploration of student options beyond high school.

Keywords

Career Academy, Case Study, Culturally Relevant Leadership, Identity Theory, Latinx Students, Urban School Leaders

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This Is My Neighborhood:
**An Exploration of Culturally Relevant Agency to Support
High School Latinx Students in an Urban Career Academy**

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives and strategies internal and external stakeholders used to support students in a career academy serving a predominately Latinx community. Within this case study, the principal of the school was Latinx, grew up within the same community as the school, and therefore shared the same culture as his students. Thus, we wondered how effective the principal would be in overcoming the cultural, political, and social barriers of students in the predominately Latinx school. We found the school leaders had a heightened awareness of organizational, cultural, and political complexities because of their own personal investment as well as their lived experiences of living and growing up in the community. The identities of the school leaders, then, led to a collective sense of agency and transformational leadership practices that facilitated a change in the grim situations and prospects of their students, and motivated them to become role models and community leaders providing resources and supports to ensure the high academic performance of students in the academy. However, we also realized that cultural understanding may sometimes lead to parochial views on what is best for students, leading to practices that prevent the exploration of student options beyond high school. Keywords: Career Academy, Case Study, Culturally Relevant Leadership, Identity Theory, Latinx Students, Urban School Leaders

Growing up in urban communities is challenging. Navigating through the education pipeline is also difficult, especially for youth from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. To be sure, helping youth succeed in urban communities has been a lingering issue with no easy solution (Yeakey, 2012). To address this issue, researchers have pointed to the role of school leadership in assisting students with access to multiple pathways; these pathways may result in positive education outcomes for urban youth. The literature in urban school leadership has consistently documented urban schools as complex settings that are socioeconomically, linguistically, ethnically and/or racially diverse. In urban settings, students and their families have high proportions of poverty, individuals speaking languages other than English, communities of color, and students that have varying citizenship statuses. As such, the job of urban school leaders is full of challenges associated with organizational, cultural, and political dimensions of public schools. Within that context, urban school leaders have to balance multiple and diverse perspectives, meet varying instructional needs, manage meager budgets,

address prejudices, and deal with intersecting issues rooted in historical and contemporary oppression (Crow & Scribner, 2014).

To make matters worse, it has been well documented that teachers in urban schools tend to be less qualified and have a disproportionately high turnover rate (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012; Guin, 2004). Under these conditions, urban school teaching is often characterized by instability, ineffective instruction, limited teacher collaboration, and decreased morale (Guin, 2004). Unfortunately, these issues often intensify to the point where urban school leaders must deal with the continuous need for professional development, heightened accountability pressures, threats of state takeovers, and even possible plans for school closure (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). As a result, school staff, students, and families are negatively impacted. For example, urban students are often met with teachers and administrators who are majority White and from middle-class backgrounds; these school personnel often espouse deficit perspectives of students in urban communities (Flessa, 2009). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that individuals of all backgrounds and income levels may hold deficit perspectives as well. Not surprisingly, the capacity for urban public schools to provide students with a rigorous and quality education remains problematic (Kozol, 2005).

However, research has pointed to a promising interface bridging identity theory, culturally relevant leadership, and the concept of small learning communities. That is, urban school leaders that share the same culture as their students, identify with the school community, and utilize culturally responsive practices in their leadership can address many of the aforementioned challenges (Lomotey & Lowery, 2014). In turn, research findings demonstrate that smaller learning communities, such as career academies, provide promising grounds for identity development through career themes (e.g., business, engineering, health sciences, information technology) and positive student outcomes (Fletcher, Warren, & Hernandez-Gantes, 2018; Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2010).

With this frame of reference, the purpose of this study was to explore the role and perspectives of internal and external stakeholders with culturally relevant backgrounds and understandings to promote student success in the context of an urban Information Technology (IT) career academy. We were particularly interested in learning how culturally relevant understandings and local agency interplayed to support students in a smaller learning community operating in a predominately Latinx setting. Within that context, the research questions guiding the study were:

- 1) What are the roles, perspectives, culturally relevant practices, and strategies utilized by urban school leaders serving a predominately Latinx career academy?
- 2) How do these roles, perspectives, and strategies support and constrain students in preparing them to succeed beyond high school?

Theoretical Framework

Identity Theory

The foundations of identity theory may be found in the philosophy, sociology, and psychology literature describing identities as fluid, improvisational, and involving human agency (Crow & Scribner, 2014; Ryan, 2007). Thus, to understand the motivation behind urban school leaders' practices and decisions, it is critical that we understand the interplay among their multiple identities including gender, ethnic and racial background, socio-economic status, experiences, and organizational memberships and how these factors influence relationships and implementation practices. According to Burke and Stets (2009), an identity is defined by an

understanding of who one is and one's role in society. Hence, identity may include membership in a group, individualistic sense-making when one is separate or a part of a group, and role identity within a work environment. Thereby, individuals navigate through identities within all three of the membership categories noted above. For example, Scribner and Crow (2012) explained how an urban school leader was shaped by his working-class background, religious affiliation, fatherhood, teaching experiences, and residence in the same urban setting as the school. In this context, identity theory also fits within a symbolic interactionist perspective, which focuses on how individuals define and interpret themselves, other individuals, and their situations (Burke & Stets, 2009). As such, by examining how individuals attribute meaning to their world, we can determine the reasons why people do what they do. In this context, it is evident that the development of identity is shaped by an individual's lived experiences and participation in a community, formed both by individual agency and the impact of social structure and the culture of communities (Wenger, 1998). Thus, over the past decade—considering schools as communities with specific structures and cultures - identity theory has been applied within the context of educational leadership scholarship (Lumby & English, 2009; Ryan, 2007; Scribner & Crow, 2012). Nonetheless, research applying identity theory to urban school leadership in particular is uncommon.

Given the deficit perspectives of many teachers and administrators in diverse urban schools, researchers have noted the saliency of culture and community histories in exploring leadership practices relevant to students with varied and multiple identities (Beachum & McCray, 2011). Further, Crow and Scribner (2014) studied the role that values, beliefs, and identifies have on effective instructional and transformational leaders in urban school contexts, and they have argued that urban school leaders need to move beyond simply addressing the technocratic issues of leading a school. For example, Lumby and English (2009) recommended that urban school leaders should focus on how their practice influences identity construction of themselves, their students, and the overall school community.

Based on this frame of reference, identity theory provided a promising lens for the examination of professional identity, how identity impacted leadership practices, and the motivation for school leaders' practices. As such, urban school leaders who possess the motivation, sense of urgency, and moral energy for improving their schools will likely have the drive to ensure high expectations for performance and hold abilities to motivate other school personnel, students, and community members (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010).

Culturally Relevant Leadership

More recently, scholars have examined how the ethnic and racial backgrounds of urban school leaders impact the franchisement and success of students with similar identities (Kelley, 2012; Williams, 2012). Research findings indicated benefits as a function of having a shared culture (e.g., ethnic and racial background), common experiences, and heightened interests in connecting with each other (Reitzug & Patterson, 1998; Tillman, 2004), and is referred to in the literature as cultural relevance or cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). For instance, Lomotey (1993) used the term *ethno-humanist* role identity to highlight how African American/Black principals embodied a high level of commitment to educating all students; confidence in their students' abilities to perform at high levels and compassion for as well as a heightened understanding of students and their communities. However, prior research in the United States on this topic has primarily been limited to African American/Black principals and students. Thus, scholars have articulated the need for urban school leaders to connect to the culture of students and parents, as well as their local communities (Khalifa, 2012; Warren, 2005). Khalifa referred to urban school administrators as community leaders because they play a critical role in navigating complex political and moral challenges of urban

schools. Scholars have highlighted the importance of urban school reform efforts to forge linkages to their communities and provide social, economic, and health services to families; provide cultural and social capital for students; support asset-based perspectives through community role models and their histories; advocate for increased accountability and responsiveness to their schools and communities; and form connections to political advocates to serve school and community needs. According to Crow and Scribner (2014), “In order to play this role effectively and morally, they need not only the technical skills of leadership practice, but also the identities that motivate and energize their practice” (p. 301).

As mentioned previously, urban school leaders must navigate a complex political and cultural structure in advocating for and advancing the efforts of their schools. Another important issue urban school leaders must contemplate is the stance they take on racial equity, as well as the policies and practices they implement to address issues, such as low expectations of their students (Crow & Scribner, 2014).

Small Learning Communities and Career Academies

Culturally relevant leadership may also have important implications in the context of smaller learning communities (Lee & Smith, 1997). The term “smaller learning communities” refers to a variety of school structures and designs, including career academies (or schools within a school), and magnet programs with an enrollment range of up to 600-900 students (Kuo, 2010). In this regard, schools with small student populations, such as career academies, often show reduced dropout rates, increased attendance, and higher graduation rates (Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002). Students in smaller learning communities often report having an increased sense of personalization and belonging, lower levels of school vandalism, and a feeling of safety in the school community (Kuo, 2010; Page et al., 2002).

The career academy model, in particular, theoretically bridges the premises of small learning communities, the positive elements of school culture, and an emphasis on learning in specific occupational contexts to enhance the schooling experience (Castellano, Sundell, Overman, & Aliaga, 2012). Decades of implementation and evaluation, including data from conclusive random-assignment studies, have shown that participation in career academies has resulted in positive academic and employment outcomes for students (e.g., higher labor market and postsecondary outcomes for males and increased graduation rates for both females and males) (Kemple, 2008; Stern et al., 2010). There is also evidence indicating that career academy students perform as well as their counterparts in college preparatory tracks, while a higher number of career academy students have a transitional plan upon graduation from high school (Kemple, 2008; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Silverberg, Warner, Fong, & Goodwin, 2004). Further, Hemelt, Lenard, and Paeplow (2019) found career academy students were 8% more likely to graduate on time and have higher attendance rates. Nonetheless, there are limitations found for career academy participants with regard to student academic performance. Hemelt et al. (2019) also found no statistically significant differences in ACT scores and advanced course-taking patterns between academy and comprehensive high school students. In addition, Kemple and Snipes (2000) found that participation in career academies did not significantly improve scores on standardized mathematics and reading assessments. We also have a lack of research examining whether academy students matriculate into the industries they study in school.

One of the key elements of career academies is the use of occupational themes (e.g., IT) serving as an anchor for identity development for students, teachers, administrative leadership and community partners (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Stipanovic, Lewis, & Stringfield, 2012). Further, career academies following standards of practice under the guidance of national organizations such as the National Academy Foundation (NAF), are

further encouraged to establish a culture of collaboration with community partners (NAF, 2017b). In general, career academies following the NAF model should promote cross-collaboration among teaching staff, integration of academic and technical curricula, and college- and career-readiness. The NAF curriculum is externally supported and informed by professional development, industry partnerships, and advisory boards (NAF, 2017b, 2017c). To assess the fidelity and quality of implementation, in addition to state assessments, NAF academies must complete an annual academy assessment to determine their strengths and challenges in implementing its design (NAF, 2017a).

Career academies are known for their effective partnerships with business and industry. The emergence of school and business partnerships is predicated partly by chronic budget restraints and the shrinking fiscal environment of U.S. schools, particularly those in urban environments (Molnar, 2005). Critics contend that these school-business partnerships often result in corporate exploitation and a mismatch of interests: where the school is focused on the needs of educating students for democratic and civic functions, and corporations sometimes treat “students as consumers to be manipulated” (Molnar, 2005, p. viii) and to be obedient and uncritically minded (Hewitt, 2005). For example, employers desire employability skills (often referred to as “soft skills”) in the workplace as a universal value system of professional characteristics, but instead ideals about professionalism are based on class, gender, and racial beliefs. Challenging the negative effects of school-business partnerships in public education is difficult as the American economy operates in a marketplace system and is therefore thought of as “the American way of life” (p. viii). Another impact of school-business partnerships is the development of educational policies to reform schools by providing schools with market-influenced solutions, such as strategies to increase school and teacher accountability as well as school choice (Trammell, 2005). In addition, the level of school and business partnerships across schools are uneven in that urban schools usually suffer from a lack of resources because they are typically situated within poor communities, thereby further exacerbating inequalities (Warren, 2005). Thus, a lingering question is whether career academies have the abilities to maintain a culturally-supportive environment while its curricula frequently promotes a universal value system on certain learned behaviors and cultural/societal norms.

Fletcher, Warren, and Hernandez-Gantes (2019) found the career academy contributed to a positive school culture that embraced a unique attitude of acceptance for others and students believed it was a safe place. The open enrollment policy, wall-to-wall nature, small size, and student shared interests by focusing on a unified career theme were all elements that contributed to a positive school culture. However, as the concept of career academies has grown in popularity, the interface of local conditions and culturally relevant leadership—especially in urban settings—is often missing with varying results in the quality of implementation. Thus, in this study, we posited that in a career academy featuring IT curriculum and located in a predominantly Latinx community, culturally relevant leadership should play an important role in understanding the local context and social identity and shaping the implementation of the career academy model. The role of school stakeholders and the academy size and design, in particular, were closely examined to explore the backdrop for culturally relevant implementation of the career academy.

Positionality

It is helpful to acknowledge our own inherent biases, perspectives, and frames of reference as researchers, which most likely influenced and shaped research encounters, processes, and outcomes. All three of the research team members are university faculty with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (one African American male, one Latino male, and one Trinidadian female of African descent). Two of the researchers have professional backgrounds

in the field of career and technical education and the other in cultural anthropology. We have taught and studied issues related to academy students' experiences, engagement, and readiness for college and careers. As such, we have experienced and understand the value with regard to student participation in both college and career preparatory coursework at the high school level. The National Science Foundation (NSF) funded this particular study; the purpose of the project is to understand students' experiences in information technology (IT) academies and its impact on their readiness for college and careers. We intend for this project to contribute to our knowledge of ways to broaden participation in STEM careers for ethnically and racially diverse individuals.

Methods

To conduct the study, we followed a qualitative case study design to explore the experiences of school personnel and community partners associated with the implementation of the career academy model (Stake, 2006).

Research Design

The case study approach allowed the documentation of thick and rich descriptive information about the setting that the high school IT academy was implemented for the purpose of identifying both factors and detractors (e.g., interpersonal and inter-organizational features) that moderated student experiences and outcomes. According to Stake (2006), "qualitative case researchers focus on relationships connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to a few factors and concerns of the academic disciplines" (p. 10). Thus, in this project we studied an IT academy (the case) operating within unique contexts (e.g., community and school district) and at a certified level according to the NAF (formerly known as the National Academy Foundation) standards of practice. The goal was to document how the IT academy was implementing the NAF's key elements, which focused on the following: (a) the organizational development and purpose, (b) the nature of curriculum and instruction, (b) strategies for supporting teachers and students, and (d) the external support system. Pseudonyms are used throughout the discussions to replace participant and school names as well as locations.

The Case: Victory Academy

Victory was a certified wall-to-wall (whole school) NAF IT-themed magnet academy, located in an urban area within the western region of the United States. The academy was comprised of approximately 383 students and the school district had a population of 24,000 students.

Student admission into the magnet school was based on an application system. The school did not admit students based on competitive admissions criteria (e.g., essays, GPAs, interviews, or test scores), but instead had an open enrollment policy to ensure equity and inclusion of students regardless of background. The school district did not have transportation for students but encouraged students to ride the public transportation—bus system. However, the school did not reimburse students for using public transportation. This issue represents a major concern and equity issue for students from low-income backgrounds. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of students at Victory Academy were as follows: 93% Latinx, 4% Asian, 1% African/American/Black, 1% White, 0.3% Multiracial, 0.3% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. The gender makeup was 52% female and 48% male. Ninety percent of the student population was economically disadvantaged and staffed by 16 full-time teachers.

The school had a focus on filmmaking where students enrolled in courses related to digital video media production, computer programming and game design, and digital arts and graphic design. The school issued all students laptops for the full four years of their schooling. Ninety-six percent of seniors in 2017 graduated within four years from Victory Academy, higher than the school district rate of 77%. Further, 58% of twelfth graders participated in advanced placement courses and 62% successfully passed at least one exam.

A NAF IT academy. Victory is a career academy affiliated with the NAF network. The NAF model seeks to promote college and career readiness within the context of occupational themes and postsecondary preparation through customized support to help academies improve and grow (NAF, 2014). In this study, we focused on the academy model situated within an IT theme. The NAF continuously evaluates their high school academies to assess their level of implementation based on standards of practice. The NAF rates academies on five levels of implementation, using the following hierarchy from highest to lowest: distinguished, model, certified, member, and under review. The academy identified in this research rated as a certified academy.

Data Sources and Participants

To inform the iterative process, we collected implementation data through the review and analysis of school and academy documents, and a four-day site visit to conduct classroom observations and interview administrators, faculty, staff and school partners.

Review of school information. Regarding document review and analysis, we collected documents pertaining to the structure and implementation of the NAF IT Academy. Victory Academy assembled these items within an electronic binder that included documentation and evidence of enacting the NAF's standards related to academy development and structure, advisory board, curriculum and instruction, and work-based learning. Our institution's institutional review board (IRB) approved all facets of the study. We also identified a school coordinator (e.g., principal, career specialist) to assist with identifying stakeholders to interview. We also ensured all interviewees understood the study and we obtained verbal consent for all participants to participate. We further assured all participants that all information collected would remain confidential. All interviewees received \$25 Amazon gift cards for their time. We use pseudonyms throughout the manuscript in replacement of names and locations.

The site visit. To conduct the four-day site visit, the academy principal agreed to provide access to the school and assist with the coordination of interviews with district and school administrators, school board members, IT and core academic teachers, school counselors, parents, staff, postsecondary, business and industry, and community partners. Relying on school personnel to identify stakeholders to interview was a limitation for the study as it likely contributed to the skewing of results and the promotion of positive findings. Nevertheless, our research team attempted to view the data using a critical analytic lens. Data collected focused on the setting and characteristics undergirding the implementation of the NAF academy model as well as their internal and external support networks. In total, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with 28 participants. The interviews were with district ($n = 5$), deputy superintendent ($n = 1$), school administrators ($n = 2$), school board member ($n = 1$), IT and core academic teachers ($n = 11$), school counselor ($n = 1$), parents ($n = 3$), support staff ($n = 2$), and local agencies (e.g., Bright Prospects and Upward Bound) to support student transitions to postsecondary education ($n = 2$). Individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Questions from the individual interviews related to the NAF model, the purpose of the program, curriculum and instruction, and internal and external supports. In addition, during the site visit, we also engaged in 10 classroom observations to understand the instructional environments, teaching and learning processes, and types and levels of

assessments administered in the academy. To document our observations we used a protocol for note-taking.

Data Analyses

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to capture contextual factors underlying program implementation (Boyatzis, 1998). We then identified recurring themes. The process to identify themes included reading the transcripts in their entirety to seize a sense of the whole in terms of how participants talked about their programs. Next, we re-read the transcribed interviews and demarcated transitions in meaning in the content of the text utilizing a lens focusing on internal and external supports. This was followed with open reflection on the meaning of content units to examine and validate related content gained within each transcript as well as across participants' experiences. Finally, we synthesized the themes into statements seeking to accurately represent the perspectives of the participants (Wertz, 2005).

We also used data triangulation strategies by analyzing data sources (curricular documents from the electronic binder, classroom observation notes, and individual interviews) to establish cross-data consistency. We further conducted analytical triangulation by engaging as a review team in the collective reading and analyses of transcripts to verify themes and underlying categories.

Data Interpretations

Victory City, where the school is located, was incorporated in the late 1800s and has a rich history of diversity rooted in Latinx heritage visible everywhere through street names and landmarks. Today, the City's population is predominantly Latinx (79%), followed by White residents (10%) and the rest comprised of African Americans/Blacks (5%) and Asians (9%) – individuals could select multiple ethnic and racial categories. The median income for the city is about \$50,000 and has a poverty rate of 22%. In terms of the context and school setting of Victory Academy, the majority of students came from difficult and challenging backgrounds, which is often the case in urban schools (Crow & Scribner, 2014). Administrators, teachers, and the school counselor confirmed the challenges students at Victory Academy face. Some of the issues included being situated in a community with high crime rates, increasing instances of gang activity, a proliferation of drug activities, a heavy presence of prostitution, and a large homeless population. In this regard, many of the stakeholders we interviewed shared that students are solicited for sex as they walk past a major street—one that is known for prostitution—leading to the school. Other issues were students' Latinx background rooted in minoritized status, low socio-economical upbringing, and social/political tensions derived from the fear of deportation, lack of parental engagement with the school, and a lack of parental knowledge regarding college admission processes and financial aid opportunities.

Within this contextual backdrop, we identified three themes - homegrown agency, school design, and student expectations - that appear to shape the social and functional fabric of the career academy.

This Is My Neighborhood: The Role of Local Agency

When interviewing the school stakeholders, we discovered that they were all homegrown professionals with deep roots in the community, in depth understanding of the local culture, and were largely vested in contributing to the common good. This was the case

regarding school leadership and staff, as well as other stakeholders including parents, district personnel, and community partners – all sharing a sense of agency.

School leaders as homegrown agents. During our visit, it was evident that school leaders were invested in Victory Academy because of their own personal history growing up in the community. Dr. Santiago, the Academy Principal, is of Latino descent and grew up in Victory City raised by his family who came from Central America. As such, he is personally aware of the issues the Latinx population faces in the country and the community. He successfully navigated the educational pipeline all the way to a doctorate, and he is now a local player as the Principal of Victory Academy. In that capacity, he understands both the administrative needs of running a school, and he understands how to meet the specific needs of the local student population from a cultural and social perspective. Dr. Sanchez, recounted his professional journey as follows:

I was born in the area and grew up near places [similar to Victory City]. I mean, all those cities have, for the most part, the same socioeconomic problems. [...] It's my third year as principal here, sixth year of administration across three different schools within [the School District]. This is my 13th year total with the district. I'm a lifetime educator. Started as a math teacher, moved to be an assistant principal [...]. I was fortunate enough to be part of a [District initiative] where they tried to build their own leaders, and they select people who are academic leaders in the classroom, and then they groom them to be administrators.

Mr. Ladon—the Assistant Principal, on the other hand, is White. However, like Dr. Santiago, he grew up in the community and has developed a deep connection to the sociocultural diversity and historical development of the community. His spouse is African American, and he too showed an understanding of the sociocultural nuances required to work with a predominantly minority student population. He would refer to minority students as part of the longstanding fabric of the community, and it was apparent that diversity is integral to the local heritage and relevant to all residents regardless of ethnic roots. Mr. Ladon shared his journey leading to his role as an Assistant Principal in the academy:

This is my first year at this site. I've been in the district since 1970s as a student all the way—but the last 21 years, multiple roles, teacher, resource teacher, athletic director, dean, assistant principal. This is my first year at this site, first year at an academy. [...] I used to live right up the street, and I always heard all these great things about this school, and—which is unusual, 'cause it's—location, everything around us, to have this school that's indoor, closed with no sports program or band or anything like that. It's more, "How is this group really getting it done?" Speaking to Dr. Santiago and a couple of teachers, they were like, "You'll love it up here. It's great. It's definitely a different culture on campus."

The common denominator reflected by the school leadership is a deep sense of understanding of the community context given their homegrown roots. As such, they were keenly aware of the social and administrative challenges involved in the education of a predominantly Latinx student population. Additionally, school leaders at Victory Academy understood issues related to class as well as institutional and community barriers to social advancement.

The role of other local stakeholders. This investment of other stakeholders—district personnel, school board, parents—also stemmed from their own backgrounds and experiences

growing up in the community and school district. School administrators were keen on the community, backgrounds, experiences, and unique cultural contexts of their student population—primarily Latinx students. This understanding of the common struggle and cause led them to have a sense of pride with the school and students. Thus, administrators discussed their desires for students of Victory Academy to get every possible opportunity to support their success in school and beyond. For example, Mr. Gonzalez, a School Board Member who grew up in the community, described:

To me, as a board member—I grew up in this community. I was in one of those needy families, and I came from one of those poor families. I raised my family in this same community. Because of that, I think, myself as a board member, view things a little differently. I want every option to be available to our community because I didn't feel it was available to me when I was a student.

Participants spent a great deal of time discussing these unique community contexts. They described the economic realities of families at Victory Academy, parents' lack of familiarity with college and university environments, and the limited social capital of students' families. They also told us that these factors contributed to a lack of parental engagement. Thus, many of the parents relied heavily on the school to provide adequate supports to prepare their children for success beyond high school. The school and district administrators spent a great deal of their time trying to empower parents and families; they strategized ways to convince parents and families that an investment in school and college preparation was a tactic to improve their life circumstances. Many of these conversations included reflecting on their own life circumstances and how they themselves navigated to create a better life and strive for upward mobility. Mr. Gonzalez was a role model for students and their families. He spoke to these issues when he stated:

I believe that if we provide options for our families, they'll take advantage of those options. They don't want to continue to be poor they're whole life. They want to educate their kids. Even if the parents aren't well-educated, they always want what's best for their kids. Sometimes, they're afraid to advocate for themselves, so that's where, in my eyes, it's my job to advocate for families...We have to empower them, and the way we empower them is by giving them the knowledge to know that, "You know what? He did it, and so could I. He's a board member, and he grew up on these streets just like I did." Anything is possible. I tell them, "Dream big. There's no reason to have small dreams."

Mr. Gonzalez informed us about district campaigns and initiatives to showcase successful alumni to inspire students to realize their own potential. These initiatives also served to educate students on what is possible and to not limit themselves or succumb to their own life circumstances and potential barriers. This is a role that Khalifa (2012) referred to as a community leader as Mr. Gonzalez attempted to forge linkages to the community to provide social and cultural capital, community role models, increased accountability and responsiveness, and political advocacy to serve school and community needs. Mr. Gonzalez went on to note:

We've also done things where we have—we're putting banners up in our neighboring districts and schools that showcase our students and where they're going to college. When they're walking down the street, you might recognize

it's your neighbor on that banner. It's our Success Starts Here campaign. My son happens to be on one at his former school with his scholarship. He's got a full-ride academic scholarship at Michigan. We want our kids to know those things, and they don't generally just know those things. They may know that their neighbor, Frank, is going to college, but they don't know it's a full-ride scholarship.

Mr. Gonzalez further explained his reasoning for all of the additional efforts the school district provided for their students. These experiences, were once again, filtered through his own experiences and cultural understandings. He went on to say:

It's just giving positive reinforcement to our kids. Sometimes, they don't have that reinforcement at home. Sometimes, they don't have parents at home. I was raised by my grandmother. Many of our kids aren't raised by their biological parents, and so it's really just being kind, because I think sometimes, the only smile you may see is the smile from your teacher that says, "Good morning and welcome to the class." It's not that our parents are not trying—but sometimes what they're going through, it's hard to put on that happy face for their kids and say, "Go have a great day." They're trying to just make enough money to pay the rent or their—put food on the table. These are real issues that we have to address, and we address them here, because you're not gonna' [sic] learn on an empty stomach. You can't concentrate if you are worried about an abusive thing you seen or whatever it may be.

Collective agency. In response to the difficulties that Victory Academy students faced, school administrators, teachers, and the school counselor engaged in strategies to mitigate students' fears and reached out to their parents to offer support. The school and school district provided college preparation presentations, financial aid workshops, and DACA meetings for parents. Mrs. Haines, a school district administrator with the title of Associate Director of Poor People and Community Services, explained to us the services provided by the district. Similar to Mr. Gonzalez, she has been with the school district for 27 years and was born and raised in the local community. Mrs. Haines articulated:

We've begun to really double down and focus with our parents more about, what is that experience? We're currently—with our current political climate, a lot of the DACA students sensing fear and dread about opportunities for college. Should I even take AP exams? Should I even try anymore, because what's going to...? We're actually working a lot right now with helping our students to feel safe and secure, and helping them to continue to move forward. Because for a lot of our families, right now, there's a lot of fear. It's a lot of fear in the community.

Victory's Assistant Principal further talked to us about the life circumstances of the students. However, he focused on the resilience of students and how that could be transformed into an increased focus on academics. Thus, he believed students had unique abilities to transform their "toughness" from surviving the struggles of their everyday lives to achieve academic success. In fact, Victory Academy was indeed the top-performing high school in the district in terms of academic achievement. Victory's Assistant Principal, Mr. Ladon, emphasized:

For me, I don't know if you can necessarily quantify it, but this is my *pride*. *This is my neighborhood*. To know what our students see and go through and what they walk past every day and what they have to walk past at home. You gotta' [sic] carry yourself a little different if you're from here, because the reality is if one gang member punks you, you're gonna' [sic] get punked all the time. I always say we're a little bit tougher, 'cause [sic] we're from [the City], and *that toughness we apply to the classroom*. We take on that challenge of, "Yeah. Maybe my parents didn't go to high school, or maybe they didn't graduate high school," or whatever it may be. Maybe we're acquiring a second language and that language is English, but our students still find a way to be involved in their community in a positive way in a sense of giving back, come up to—show up to school regularly. Knock on wood, we've had no fistfights on this campus. We don't have a gang issue on this campus. We have kids who graduate high school and go to college...For our kids to continuously prove that wrong by getting a high school diploma and getting accepted to college and being involved in the community, to me, I think that's a huge success. I don't know if that's the quantified answer you guys are looking for, but that's from the heart.

The major goal of Victory Academy was to help students achieve academic success and social mobility by obtaining a college education. This initiative was quite challenging for the school given the students' backgrounds and because many of their parents did not have college experiences to draw upon. Further, the parents had limited school involvement due to working multiple jobs, language barriers, and fears about their immigrant status. Mr. Leon, an Assistant Director for Upward Bound, noted:

[Students] are always concerned about the burden they're gonna' [sic] be on their parents and what their—they're concerned about their contribution to the family like, "I need to get to working right away. I need to do this right now." Also, some of the parents, they just feel—some of them feel like, "I didn't go to college. I did well."

Mr. Nelson taught math, advanced placement (AP) statistics, psychology, and debate. He had been teaching at Victory Academy for eight years, but was a neuropsychologist by training. Mr. Nelson is White and lived a privileged life – one that led to extensive international travels (including 38 different countries) and degrees from Ivy League institutions. Mr. Nelson told us about a student's success story despite parental opposition to her going to college. He stated:

It's hard to break the mold sometimes for the parents 'cause [sic] I had one girl came to me last year, just in tears. She's saying, "My father wants me to drop out of school in my senior year." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because he needs the money to buy food for my younger brothers and sisters." I said, "Well, why doesn't he?" She said, "He's an alcoholic." She said, "But I wanna' [sic] go to college. I wanna' [sic] become a nurse." She's ready to graduate from nursing school next year.

As a result, the school counselor and postsecondary partners (e.g. Upward Bound and Bright Prospects) worked closely with parents to explain the value of attending college and the application process. Mr. Jimenez, a postsecondary partner, stated:

We very much partner with the parents and say, “This is a team effort. We have to do this together.” They know what they’re signing on for day one. We demystify the college process. We demystify what exactly is—what this journey is going to entail and what financially—all of these doubts, all of these fears that they may have, we try to mitigate them as much as possible.

Mrs. Collada, a Latina parent, explained the importance of the school providing supports for parents regarding attending college, particularly as it relates to the lack of awareness of parents in terms of postsecondary opportunities, prospects, and processes. She told us:

No parent should have a fear of their children going away to study. Students can go to school for free, there are opportunities, help, you can apply for scholarships. That’s something that the school starts doing in ninth grade, starting to help. I think it’s very important because many parents at this school don’t have a very high academic level. So there’s often a lot of fear. A lot of people want their kids to go to college but they say, “How am I going to do it with my low salary?”

Ms. Garcia, the school counselor, is Latina and was well connected with the community. She was a member of the Rotary Club, Optimist Club, Eagles Club, and Arts Commissioner for the City. She happened to also grow up in the community, been a counselor for over 30 years and worked as a school counselor for Victory Academy for two years. She encouraged every student to apply to a local two-year college. She also worked with most students individually on the application process. She proudly announced:

At this point right now, as of December—by December, every single student will have applied to college. At this point, I have probably 98% have already applied to financial aid. There’s only one who has not and because he’s going into the military. He’s going to be a Marine.

Thus, it was quite evident in our discussions that school/district administrators, teachers, postsecondary partners, and the school counselor were on board with the mission to prepare students to transition from high school to postsecondary education. The school administrators and counselor provided additional supports such as parent workshops and postsecondary partners (e.g., Upward Bound and Bright Prospects). These supports were aimed at addressing issues (e.g., lack of parental engagement/knowledge of college) the students encountered that oftentimes serve as barriers to college participation. As a result of agency on the part of the internal and external stakeholders, all students applied to college. To that end, it was apparent that Victory Academy students were resilient and many overcame their life circumstances while focusing on high academic achievement and postsecondary pursuits. To that point, Mr. Ladon acknowledged:

For our kids to continuously prove that wrong [the negative stigma of the community and disparaging life circumstances] by getting a high school diploma and getting accepted to college and being involved in the community, to me, I think that's a huge success.

Role of Career Academy Design

There were two elements of the career academy design that appeared to have an impact on building a sense of community and shared understanding of identity and purpose for students, teachers, and stakeholders. First, the small school size appears to have a critical role in creating a sense of community where everyone knows each other and feels safe. In addition, the role of film as the curricular theme also appeared to provide a platform for the promotion of cultural and community identity through digital storytelling. Hence, this is an example of how the career academy curriculum can promote cultural sensitivity and respect for students.

Role of a small school. The career academy's student population is short of 400 students and is housed completely indoors in what used to be a mall. The wing where the school is located is a small building with four entrances, all leading to halls with classrooms on the side and lined around an island of classrooms serving as a roundabout. All classrooms have large windows to allow public viewing of instruction. Thus, students, teachers, and staff get to know each other during the high school years and get to develop an apparent sense of strong community. Mr. Ladon, the Assistant Principal, provided additional context:

The fact that everything's transparent—I always tell people I can do a two-minute walk and see what every student and teacher is doing just because all the windows. You walk past a class, the computers are facing the hall, so you can see what every student's working on. You can see if a teacher's just sitting behind their desk not doing anything, and I think that—and teachers see each other. I think that has created teachers that are a little bit more high energy in a sense of you don't get to go and hide in your four walls.

As such, the career academy has developed a reputation for visible instruction and the added benefits of the small school size. That is, everyone can see what everyone is doing and get to know each other. Dr. Santiago, the Principal, further explained:

We're fully indoor. I think one of the other things that—this isn't by design, it's just organic. When you have a small setting, you tend to have parents who want their kids who maybe at other schools wouldn't in their eyes be a fit for a larger campus, and we have that magnetic approach, I guess, or feel for families like that.

Thus, it was not surprising for us to learn that students and their parents are interested in being part of the academy because it is small and for its reputation of being safe and welcoming to everyone.

Storytelling (and identity development) through film. The curricular theme of the career academy centers on filmmaking and production. The curricular theme was chosen due to an interest in technology as critical skills every student should have, and the prominence of related industry in the area. Although the interest in filmmaking and production was initially incidental, it became evident to us that students were not really interested in the completion of the related track. However, it was evident that students were using related courses as a platform to tell their stories, to address social issues of personal and communal significance. As such, when working on projects, students would write scripts and produce short films involving all aspects of visual storytelling and production. Completed films, including movie posters, are then showcased at an annual festival held at the movie theater adjacent to the academy. This is

a community event that is highly regarded and where students get to share their stories and contribute to the development of group and community identity.

The filmmaking and cinematography classes helped students develop their maturity and gain confidence. Students were also engaged in making films for the school (school news), the school district (filming events), and several local competitions (film festivals). Mr. Gonzalez identified directly with the experiences of students at Victory Academy. He described:

It's really looking at everything and developing that whole child to know that everything is possible. It may be hard, yes, and I'm proof of it. I know it's not easy, but if you persist, and you want something different, you can get something different. Providing options like this at [Victory] Academy, where the focus is film and technology, that's kind of our world right now. So, giving our kids something that grabs their attention, that they're already fond of and letting them grow into it, to me is a perfect world. Why would we not do something that's going to help them earn money and do what they love. Having something like this—we have a theater just a few suites down that we use for things as well. I know the district is invested and investing in that theater to make it both performing for actors or for shows that we might put on as well as the production where we film, then show it.

By talking with Mr. Gonzalez, we could sense the pride and investment he had (individual agency) for improving the conditions and opportunities for students as he personally identified with their challenges and experiences through his own lived experiences of growing up (participation) within the same community. His own lived experiences influenced his relationships with Victory Academy students and school administrators (Scribner & Crow, 2012). Thus, Mr. Gonzalez had high motivation, level of urgency, and moral energy for improving the school, and ensuring high expectations for performance, as well as the ability to motivate others – school administrators, students, and the overall school community (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Ms. Garcia explained that some of the students were initially shy during the filmmaking and cinematography activities; however, when she watched the school news produced by the students, they could “actually take themselves out of their own personality and become this different person.” Mrs. Paez, a school district administrator with a title of Director of Secondary Education, indicated:

One of the students who is autistic and has a hard time engaging in eye contact and working with others, she did the [School Mascot] news. She was up there. I said, "I saw you up there on the [School Mascot] news." She gave me a big grin. I can hardly get eye contact when I try to teach a lesson.

She also mentioned another student who had struggled with English and blossomed through his participation in the film academy's video showcase:

It was his time to shine. He had come so far in terms of maturity, and this was his element. I got to see him in a different light than the student who's struggling and in constant need of help. Everybody has their area where they shine. I think this gives students who don't necessarily shine in terms of traditional academics, the opportunity.

For these students, the film academy was a medium where they were able to develop the confidence needed to increase their interpersonal and employability skills. It was also a mechanism for getting students to see possibilities that they may not have thought were possible. Dr. Santiago, Principal of Victory Academy, who came from the same community and understands students' circumstances noted, "When you give that skill set to a student who doesn't really have anything else in their life, they start considering what else can I do."

The film academy also provided students a creative outlet where they could share stories about their own unique lived experiences. Mr. Ford, an IT/film teacher, explained that his vision for the program has always been to give his students opportunities to share their own stories. He described how one of the student's videos went viral:

There's a video that these kids created about their life experiences and how they saw that life was very bleak. It's a video. It actually went viral, and Obama—that's how Obama picked it up. Actually, that video is what brought Obama here, to let the kids know, "Don't feel like there's no hope. There is hope." Now we're back to that hope not being there. I didn't mean to get emotional.

The teacher was emotionally recounting the hope students experienced under former President Obama's administration, and the despair and uncertainty they and their families currently confront with President Trump's administration. Thus, it was quite evident that current political issues negatively impacted this community as is the case in other urban schools, particularly with large populations of Latinx students (Crow & Scribner, 2014). Ms. Garcia also spoke about the life experiences and challenges of students at Victory Academy, she said:

I recently had the kids write a scholarship essay. I cried. I mean I'm very, very sensitive. I mean I still—just thinking about it makes me choke, because the challenges that these kids face are hard. I'm gonna' [sic] cry. I didn't realize, not having food on the table...I actually went to go pick up one of the kids for the financial aid workshop. She lived in a place that I thought was condemned. It's hard because I think their challenges are deep...It's not just one or two. It's many of these kids here have really deep challenges that they have to deal with on a daily basis. I'm impressed that they even come to school. Right now, a lot of them are facing, "What's gonna' [sic] happen if my parents get deported, Ms. [Garcia]? What am I'm gonna' [sic] do? Where am I gonna' [sic] live? Who's gonna' [sic] support me?" What is really gonna' [sic] happen to these kids if their parents are deported? This is what they are faced with...Do you think that tryin' [sic] to get your homework done and knowing that—I had a kid in there, "My mother almost got deported." They just did a raid. There have been raids recently, and they're taking families. They're taking people. I think that's the challenge that these kids face.

Presently, as the country's politics have become more conservative due to a Republican administration, tough immigration language and views critical of illegal immigrants have sensitized a community with long roots in immigrant residents. Thus, the film academy allowed students to share their own stories and funnel despair into something positive. However, we questioned the likelihood of students being successful in the film industry, particularly given that students were not provided work-based learning experiences (e.g., job shadowing opportunities and internships) with film-related businesses during their time at Victory Academy. In fact, Victory Academy was 50 miles from film-related industries and had no transportation opportunities to enable students to benefit from it. Nonetheless, the focus on film

activities helped students develop interpersonal and employability skills, opened their eyes to possibilities, and seemed to be therapeutic by expressing their lived experiences. In some respects, the film academy was a positive intervention that provided these vulnerable children an outlet to escape their realities and envision a newer and brighter future (Yeakey, 2012).

Views on Student Expectations: Doing the Right Thing?

Given the circumstances and conditions shaping the education of students in the community, we discovered an underlying tension regarding student expectations upon graduation from high school. To be sure, the career academy is now one of the schools with the highest graduation rate in the district, and everyone appears to be working together to help students apply to college. At issue, is whether a culturally relevant understanding of the student population yields realistic or limiting views on college expectations.

Pushing for realistic college expectations? While we generally found a culture of high expectations for students at Victory Academy by school and community leaders, not every member of the school team had the same vision and ideals for success for students. Ms. Garcia, the School Counselor, required all students to apply to at least one local college prior to graduating from high school, and she prided herself on staying connected with students after they graduated. She noted: “I make sure that 100% of the students here apply to college. They don’t have a choice.” It was apparent that Ms. Garcia knew about students personally, their home lives and culture. She believed that the Latinx culture reinforces the notion that it is best to stay near one’s home, continue to assist one’s family, and to save money. In that regard, Ms. Garcia discussed: “This community, it’s very hard to get them to think outside the box. They want to stay close to home. I respect that. That’s their culture. That’s how they believe. I respect that.” In this case, she believed she understood the reality of students, their families, and their cultural outlook and she pushed for what she thought was best for the students.

Pushing for limited college opportunities? During our visit, we learned that the previous counselor had a different take on college expectations. She was also a Latina, but her take was to expand student horizons and pushed for seniors to apply to colleges in and out-of-state as a means to go beyond the local world. This outlook appeared to be at odds with the current emphasis, which as noted by Mr. Nelson—one of the teachers, may be limiting the opportunities for students to expand their aspirations:

A lot of our students—when you go to our school, we have pictures around, the top 20 students every year. We put the pictures where they’re going. We’ve always had amazing schools, the UCs, the Berkeleys, the Smith College, Wellesley. If you look at last year, we stopped shooting for amazing and we started going for—we have a new counselor. Her idea is, go close, live at home, save money. So many of our students go to [In Community University], which is a great school...It’s a wonderful school, but they’ve lost that vision of, don’t you want to go to school at [State University in Florida]? You ever been to Florida? Have you ever been? Wellesley is an amazing college. You can get in there. We have students from years ago going to Smith College and Wellesley, and we have a girl at Columbia. It used to be such a motivating thing, and now it’s, “Oh, now, I’m just gonna’ [sic] go to [Local Community College]. Oh, I’ll just go to [In Community University].” We look at those numbers, and we go, “Wow. All but one student who applied to college is going to,” big deal. Talk about an empty statistic. Yeah, it looks great, but we have kids who are at [In Community University], living with their parents, who should have been at the University of Washington pursuing a biology degree on their way to being a

medical student. Instead, they're living at home, working at Sonic, to save money. Are you serious? You were gonna' [sic] get a free education anyway.

Mr. Nelson continued to share with us that this was certainly a challenge for students with parents that are undocumented. Thus, it seemed that many of the students' parents also were encouraging their children to select a local school. Nonetheless, Mr. Nelson believed that the practice of Ms. Garcia – of ensuring students applied to local colleges/universities – was quite limiting in terms of students' life goals, possibilities, and trajectories.

And, while the literature addresses cultural mismatch issues of students and teachers from different backgrounds and experiences (Flessa, 2009), this issue led us to wonder about the negative influence that culturally responsive practices might have on students when individuals use cultural norms as a form of indoctrination that may reinforce the social stratification system inherent in our society – instead of education being a source of encouragement for students to follow their own unique pathways to prosperity and self-expression. In this instance, it appeared to us that Ms. Garcia was limiting the possibilities of her students by creating low expectations that fit neatly in the common narrative of the Latinx student experience shaped by cultural norms and her own lived experiences and identity affiliation within the Latinx culture. Thus, this common narrative might be a result of viewing Latinx individuals as a monolithic group, instead of offering guidance based on individual interests and potential.

Discussion

Victory Academy was an example case study of how internal and external stakeholders—that were primarily Latinx and grew up within the community—identified with the culture and shared similar backgrounds and experiences of students and their families within their school community (Crow & Scribner, 2014; Khalifa, 2012; Lomotey, 1993; Lomotey & Lowery, 2014; Warren, 2005). It was all members of the school community (e.g., school board members, school/district administrators, teachers, school counselor, and parents) that came together to address the challenges these students faced. To be clear, Victory Academy students faced substantial problems based on community environmental issues, cultural and family experiences, and political and social events that have led to a culture of social tension and fear. However, the school leaders and staff had a heightened awareness of the organizational, cultural, and political complexities because of their own personal investment in Victory Academy as well as their lived experiences of living and growing up in the community. School leaders, therefore, identified with the Victory Academy students, their parents, culture, and community (Crow & Scribner, 2014; Lomotey, 1993; Lomotey & Lowery, 2014; Lumby & English, 2009). The identities of the school leaders, then, led to a collective sense of agency and transformational leadership practices that facilitated a change in the grim situations and prospects of their students, and motivated them to become role models and community leaders that provided resources and supports to ensure high academic performance of students in the academy (Khalifa, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2010; Lumby & English, 2009; Wenger, 1998). It was quite evident that Dr. Santiago—and the other Latino(a) school leaders)—possessed an ethno-humanist role identity that led him to be committed to all students at Victory Academy; had confidence in the abilities of his students; and expressed compassion for and understanding of students, their families, and the overall school community (Lomotey, 1993). Thus, this study offers more evidence that urban school leaders with ethno-humanist role identities provide Latinx students with culturally responsive educational experiences. These positive experiences empower students and families to expand cultural

norms and barriers, and envision pathways for success that may have not previously been considered.

In addition, the career academy had other elements that led to this sense of renewed empowerment of students. First, the small size of the academy provided the grounds for developing a strong sense of community and, in turn, group identity leading to the underlying claim: *This is my neighborhood*. In this case, the academy is actually rather small, and it is not surprising that it provides the grounds for the development of a familial community as noted in the literature. The second element of the academy is the curricular focus on film. Film enabled students to overcome their life circumstances and embrace their individuality. It further provided them with enhanced interpersonal and employability skills. Despite the benefits realized as a result of creating positive experiences for students around film as a central career theme, we found this focus to be quite limiting. Victory Academy had no work-based learning opportunities (e.g., guest speakers, internships, job shadowing) for students to actually gain exposure and experience within the film industry. It was apparent in our interviews that the school had no partnerships with film businesses and industry experts, and transportation was not provided for students to facilitate work-based learning experiences. Thus, the academy focused almost entirely on the college readiness for students but did not provide adequate career readiness. Scholars have recognized the need for schools to recognize career readiness as a means to prepare students for life after high school, and career academies are known for their substantial role in the realization of career readiness efforts (Fletcher & Tyson, 2017;). Furthermore, the likelihood of students entering into film post-high school and securing a career within that industry seems to be improbable as film is heavily dependent on social networks. Instead, we believe a focus on several career pathways within the IT cluster would be more advantageous to Victory Academy students, as they could select the path that they are most interested in and have a wider array of opportunities by expanding the focus from film to IT. Related to this issue is that we found students elected to participate in the academy based on a sense of safety, not because of the career theme.

Second, the academy was comprised of a plethora of community school leaders and role models, from the school district, within the school, school counselor, and teachers that were invested in the success of the school and identified with the students, their culture, and communities (Khalifa, 2012). These school leaders had high expectations for students. They were invested because of being raised within the same community, what Mr. Gonzalez described as *This is My Neighborhood*. It was clear that Mr. Gonzalez wholeheartedly believed in the success of each and every student and wanted all students to understand that their possibilities were limitless. Thus, Mr. Gonzalez was an example of an urban school leader who used his social and cultural capital, as well as his political influence, to advocate on behalf of the students and school community. And, as a result of the investment and supports provided for students, Mr. Ladon believed that students were resilient in the face of difficult life circumstances and *That Toughness We Apply to the Classroom*. Remember how Mr. Ladon used the first person (e.g., *we* and *my*) to describe students in the academy. His choice of language confirmed that he was invested in the well-being of his students and he viewed them as his own children. Like the other school administrators (e.g., Mr. Gonzalez) and counselor (Ms. Garcia) at Victory, Mr. Ladon was well versed in understanding the unique challenges of his student population and community, including cultural and political nuances impacting their students. These beliefs and identities assisted the school administrators and counselor to be effective and transformational leaders at Victory Academy (Crow & Scribner, 2014). Therefore, students translated their resiliency in life to become the highest academic performers within the school district.

Third, all members of the school community had a shared goal of ensuring the social mobility of students through college participation upon graduation of high school. As a result,

school leaders, the counselor, and postsecondary partners developed targeted strategies to empower, educate, and advocate for parents and families. These strategies included financial aid workshops, DACA meetings, and college informational sessions. The school counselor also required all students to apply to at least one local two-year college.

While we found the school counselor to be well-intended, we also acknowledged the contention regarding her seemingly sole focus on encouraging students to stay local and to attend their local two-year college. This we believe is a shortcoming of culturally responsive leadership and has not been well addressed in the urban school leadership literature. In fact, researchers have found that White teachers and administrators that do not share cultural backgrounds and experiences of their students oftentimes have low expectations based on stereotypical perspectives of students, their families, and communities (Flessa, 2009). However, we found the school counselor (Ms. Garcia) to have similarly low expectations as found in other studies with White teachers/leaders, even though Ms. Garcia shared the same ethnic and racial background of her students and deeply cared about their well-being. Thus, the mere fact that she was knowledgeable and understood the cultural norms of her Latinx students resulted in her reinforcement of the social stratification system inherent in society and indoctrination into stereotypical pathways for Latinx students. This was even more problematic given that students at Victory Academy were the highest performing compared to their peers within the same school district. Actually, the majority of students in the school completed honors and AP coursework. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that Ms. Garcia's concern might also be grounded in financial realities as students incur debt in their pursuits of a baccalaureate degree.

Thus, we believe the downside of culturally responsive practices for some school personnel is that students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds are viewed as monolithic groups. And, unfortunately, students at Victory Academy followed the advice of the school counselor and pursued their studies at the local two-year college – even those that had the potential to pursue a four-year university. Instead, we believe that school leaders and personnel should understand the complexities within groups and treat each student as individuals with unique interests and potential. Lowery (2017) reminded us that “teachers and teacher leaders must ask themselves whether or not culturally relevant practices can help children currently in the schoolhouse be successful in tomorrow’s world” (p. 484). And, as Crow and Scribner (2014) pointed out, urban school leaders (particularly Dr. Santiago, in this case) must contemplate the stance school personnel take on racial equity as well as the policies and practices they implement (in this case, the expectation for all students to attend the local two-year college) to address issues such as low expectations of Latino(a) students.

In conclusion, in the study we confirmed that the small size and unifying curricular theme of career academies, attract students looking for a safe place to learn, and appear to provide the conditions for supporting students’ college and career readiness (Fletcher et al., 2018). We also found, that in a community with strong agency of homegrown stakeholders and culturally relevant outlook and leadership, there is an underlying understanding of what works with minority students. However, we also realized that cultural understanding may sometimes lead to parochial views on what is best for students, leading to practices that prevent the exploration of student options beyond high school. As such, we encountered an important issue that warrants further study: How to reframe cultural stereotypes of minorities to account for the realities of students and their families, and equal opportunities for successful college/work transitions.

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