"… the hardest job I ever loved so much": Perceptions and Experiences of Educators Working on the Border between High School and College

"…el trabajo más duro que he amado tanto": Percepciones y experiencias de los maestros que trabajan en la frontera en el nivel de media superior y universidad

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Abstract

The purpose of this interpretivist, qualitative study was to understand the perspectives and experiences of leaders and teachers who work in Early College High Schools (ECHS)—social justice and equity-oriented school models that combine high school and college—regarding their work environment, the challenges they face, and the preparation of students from marginalized and underrepresented groups for post-secondary success. In-depth interviews with 27 ECHS educators served as the primary means of data collection. The conceptual lenses of social justice, equity, and Anzaldúa's borderlands were used to understand and interpret the data. Findings reveal that the participants easily embrace the ECHS in terms of social justice and equity. However, the challenges they discussed suggest the ECHS may not be as effective as planned due to their day-to-day challenges. These challenges were categorized as Workload, Border Encroachments, Lack of Resources, and Staying True to the Mission.

Key words: Early College High School; students from marginalized and underrepresented groups; social justice; equity; border

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio interpretativo y cualitativo fue comprender las perspectivas y experiencias de los líderes y maestros que trabajan en Early College High Schools (ECHS), modelos escolares orientados a la justicia social y la equidad que combinan el nivel medio superior y la universidad, con respecto a su entorno laboral, los desafíos que enfrentan y la preparación de estudiantes de grupos marginados y subrepresentados para el éxito postsecundario. Las entrevistas en profundidad con 27 educadores de ECHS sirvieron como medio principal de recopilación de datos. Se utilizaron los lentes

conceptuales de justicia social, equidad y la zona fronteriza de Anzaldúa para comprender e interpretar los datos. Los resultados revelan que los participantes adoptan fácilmente la ECHS en términos de justicia social y equidad. Sin embargo, los desafíos que discutieron sugieren que el ECHS puede no ser tan efectivo como se planeó debido a los desafíos del día a día. Estos desafíos fueron temáticos como Carga de Trabajo, Invasión Fronteriza, Falta de Recursos, y Mantenerse Fiel a la Misión.

Palabras clave: niveles combinados media superior-superior; estudiantes marginalizados; grupos no representados; justiciar social; equidad; frontera

INTRODUCTION

A lack of preparedness through the K-8 pipeline for many students, especially those from marginalized and underrepresented groups is a serious issue. This lack of preparation often creates such achievement, or perhaps better named, receivement and opportunity gaps (Carter & Wellner, 2013; Chambers, 2009), making many students are unable to successfully complete high school. Historically, high school incompletion rates for students from racialized groups have been higher than those for White students and students from middle- to high-income backgrounds. Over the last three decades alone, the high school completion gap has remained as wide as 20 percentage points between racial/ethnic minoritized groups and their White peers (U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015). Likewise, for the same time period, students from low-income backgrounds have left school prior to graduation at twice to three times the rate of middle- and higher income students (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). Moreover, the impacts of race and income are often compounded. That is, being a student who is from a racialized group, and who is also poor, can be double jeopardy (Battle & Lewis, 2002), with regard to educational achievement, receivement, and opportunity.

Some researchers argue that the ways schools are designed (i.e., comprehensive models with academic tracks), combined with the traditional norms and values inside schools, make a variety of gaps almost inevitable (for example, Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Bourdieu, 1977). Examples of these traditional norms and values might be reflected through structures of classrooms and schedules, choices related to curricula, and approaches related to pedagogy (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Combine these norms and values with a lack of achievement, receivement, or opportunity as well as with working class parents; a need to work to contribute to the family income; no college narrative at home; and deficit perspectives held by teachers and school leaders—and the gaps are reinforced. Indeed, unequal circumstances inside and outside of school largely allow students to, "… leave schools with unequal skills and abilities, in both cognitive and non-cognitive domains" (Rothstein, 2004, p. 129). Resultantly, stratification outside of school is maintained, and is often reinforced through schooling.

Early College High Schools (ECHSs) offer a structural change in public schooling, where, unlike the traditional high school model, the inevitability is not to stratify students or to create gaps, but to disrupt the perpetuation of inequality. As a structural change, ECHSs offer both high school completion and significant college credit to students who typically end up stratified and in the gaps. They do so by creating small schools and classes that force an intimate atmosphere, and one that encourages connections among leaders, teachers, and students. These connections are reinforced by both high rigor and expectations. These rigorous and engaging schools also forge a connection between high school and college where students are simultaneously both high school students and college students. It is important to note that, although creating small schools and classes, and offering the opportunity to earn early college credit are not new concepts, doing so while

purposefully targeting students from marginalized and underserved groups, and partnering with institutions of higher education, is new. ECHSs then are situated on a theoretical border between high school and college. That is, they inhabit a unique in between space with qualities of both a high school and a college. Moreover, ECHSs seek out students who historically have encountered barriers when attempting to maneuver across this in between or border.

An assumption of the ECHS may be that if students (particularly those who traditionally end up in the gaps) are given an opportunity for advanced education, they will take it, and with appropriate help and support they will be successful. However, providing the appropriate help and support is difficult. Teachers and leaders in ECHSs undertake the challenging work of providing this support while also collapsing the distance between high school and college for students who very likely have been underprepared in the K-8 pipeline. In order to understand the overall impact and effectiveness of the ECHS, it is important to understand teachers' and leaders' work in this unique educational borderland. Therefore, our purpose here is to illustrate the perspectives of teachers and leaders who work in ECHSs regarding their work environments, the challenges they face, and the preparation of students from marginalized groups for post-secondary success. Our guiding research question was: What are the perceptions and experiences of teachers and school leaders, who currently work or who have formerly worked in an ECHS regarding their work environments, the specific challenges they face, the school culture, and the preparation of students from underrepresented groups for postsecondary success?

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Students from marginalized and underserved groups continue to suffer from historical and contemporary indignities in our school systems. These indignities are frequently manifested in zero-tolerance policies, high discipline rates, overcrowded schools, outside and within school segregation, low school completion rates and associated low college attendance and completion rates, and overrepresentation in special and remedial education (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Kozol, 2012). These student experiences and outcomes have a deep structural nature (Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O'Connor, 2015).

The students who are targeted by and likely to attend an ECHS (those from marginalized and underserved groups) face multiple and compounding issues regarding achievement, receivement, and opportunity, and likely have been impacted by some or all of the previously listed indignities in their K-8 experiences (Carter & Welner, 2013; Chambers, 2009). Although the following is by no means an exhaustive conversation, the mis-education of students of Color and students from other marginalized groups in the K-8 pipeline continues to be advanced through a lack of rigor in the education pipeline, a disproportionate exposure to low-quality schools and teaching, a lack of access to advanced placement or high tracks, deficit perspectives held by teachers and leaders, and a lack of representation in the curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Students' lives outside of school might be further compounded by poverty and the resultant lack of access to some educational supports (Locke & McKenzie, 2015), residential instability, and/or food insecurities.

Prior research with students attending an ECHS indicated that students also struggle with a lack of a college narrative at home, and low parental education and, concomitantly, little power or influence in educational and other systems (Locke & McKenzie, 2015). In addition, students might be balancing multiple non-school responsibilities, for example, a need to work outside the home for wages or inside the home by assisting with younger siblings or other chores (Harklau, 2013; Locke & McKenzie, 2015). These struggles and responsibilities frequently impact achievement, and result in some students having fewer opportunities to

achieve. Thus, their presence on the other side of the educational border—in college—continues to be low (NCES, 2016). Rothstein (2004) noted, "It is unreasonable to think that [students from marginalized groups] can achieve, on average, at middle-class levels without similar opportunities" (p. 143). ECHSs might work to compensate for or to address these absent opportunities through their structure, and through their existence as a nexus between high school and college.

Acceptance to and enrollment in ECHSs are not based on students' past academic performance. That is, students do not need to be at the top of their classes, or have stellar academic records. In order to meet the requirements for admission, they must articulate a desire to attend the ECHS, through an application process, and acknowledge they will be progressively taking on college-level coursework in addition to or in lieu of pre-AP (advanced placement) and AP-level high school courses (see typical ECHS application procedures detailed for Quest Early College High School in Texas here: https://www.humbleisd.net/Page/24865). Thus, the teachers and leaders inside the ECHS have an ambitious charge—to take average and underprepared students and not only to ensure that they successfully complete high school, but also are prepared to be successful on the other side of the border—in college. Thus, these compensatory borderland schools can be viewed as social justice interventions in education aimed at increasing equity and educational value, and reversing historic trends in education (Locke & McKenzie, 2015).

Specifics on Early College High Schools

The first ECHS opened its doors in 2002. Presently, there are approximately 280 ECHSs in the United States serving approximately 80,000 students (Early Colleges, 2016). Many ECHSs are district charter schools, and many of the initial ECHSs were funded in part through grants from the Gates Foundation and other sources, to assist with operational costs for the first 2 years—allowing for some independence in the initial stages of development (Lieberman, 2004). ECHSs continue to have the freedom to design their own mission statement(s) and guidelines to follow that mission. However, all ECHSs share the common social justice-oriented elements detailed earlier and those elements are typically articulated in official school discourse. For example, the mission statement of Pender Early College High School (2016) in North Carolina is a typical one:

> We, the community of Pender Early College, are committed to empowering a diverse body of students to develop and apply their skills in order to pursue knowledge and become productive college students, workers, and citizens. We will accomplish this by designing curricula and support structures that ensure all students meet and exceed all performance standards to obtain a high school diploma and an associate degree or two years of transferrable college credit. (para. 1)

Several scholars (e.g. American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2007; Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Edmunds et al., 2010; Haxton et al., 2016) have provided important evaluative data inclusive of ECHS graduation rates and college credits earned by students in ECHSs. Although these data are impressive (90% of ECHS students graduate; 94% earn college credit in high school; 71% enroll in college [JFF, 2016]), these studies are largely quantifiable, defined by particular outcome variables. Some scholarship exists that addresses the student perspective in ECHS programs (e.g., Locke & McKenzie, 2015; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). However, little research has been conducted that critically outlines the success of ECHSs, particularly from the perspectives of teachers and leaders working in these schools. In addition, past research (Locke & McKenzie, 2015) indicates high rates of turnover in ECHS staff. Studies conducted by Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013), as well as Ingersoll and Strong (2011), have highlighted the adverse effects on student achievement in schools

with high teacher attrition and turnover. A high turnover rate for ECHSs, particularly with the vulnerable student groups ECHSs target, is a problem for ECHS effectiveness writ large.

To counteract the multi-faceted, systemic problems discussed earlier, ECHSs offer a change to the traditional structure and framework of high school. Some of the ways that ECHS personnel work to accomplish this change include small schools and small classes, with high rigor and high expectations, mixed ability grouping and the elimination of tracking, and early exposure to college classes (tuition free) and college expectations.

Small Schools, Small Classes + High Rigor, High Expectations

Small schools and small class sizes can positively influence student achievement (Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000; Vander Ark, 2002). Moreover, research has indicated that students from marginalized and underrepresented groups tend to perform better in small schools (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Conchas & Rodriguez, 2008). These small spaces encourage and support student-teacher interaction as well as peer interaction, which positively influence student achievement (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). ECHSs typically have approximately 100 to 125 students per grade level. The typical class size is approximately 25 students. High rigor is a staple in the ECHS as all of the classes are at the pre-AP or AP levels. Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) suggested that the demands of rigorous courses tend to drive higher engagement, achievement, and expectations from teachers.

Kuh et al. (2006) noted "The quality of high school academic preparation strongly predicts chances for post secondary success…" (p. 29). A clearly articulated goal of ECHSs is for students' successful transition to post-secondary education. Alongside small and highly rigorous courses, the ECHS works toward its goals of post-secondary success for its students through mixed-ability grouping.

Mixed Ability Grouping + No Tracking

Notably, a major deterrent to the full recognition of educational equity is reflected in the way schools are structured academically and socially (Futrell, 2004). Ability grouping and tracking of students of Color and low-income groups have resulted in thwarting desegregation of schools and broad denial of equitable educational opportunity (Futrell, 2004). Many scholars have noted the negative effects of school tracking policies—or within-school segregation (Chambers, 2009; Mickelson, 2005; Oakes, 2005). Students on higher tracks tend to have increased opportunities for exposure to rigorous courses, interesting and provocative teaching, and high expectations (Gamoran, 2018). Many high track students are exposed to AP and college coursework through their traditional high school programs. Alternatively, many students on low tracks do not have similar opportunities. Rather, they tend to be exposed to remedial, un-rigorous courses and low expectations (Watanbe, 2008). Not surprisingly, low tracks (e.g., general education, special education) are frequently dominated by students from marginalized and underrepresented groups (Moore & Slate, 2008).

Although ECHS students surely enter the program with different levels of preparedness, the ECHS offers an alternate approach—one where all students are mixed together, and all students are exposed to highly rigorous courses and expectations. Research has shown that heterogeneous classes (i.e., classes with students with high, medium, and low grades) tend to accelerate achievement for all groups (Burris & Welner, 2005; Theoharris, 2009). Furthermore, mixed ability peer groups are also likely to support college-going aspirations for all students (Tierney & Venegas, 2006).

In addition to small classes, high rigor, and mixed ability grouping, ECHSs also provide their students with exposure to college courses while they are still in high school (Lieberman, 2004). While taking these courses progressively throughout their time at the ECHS, students not only gain college credit early, but also they are exposed to the expectations of college coursework and collegiate norms and customs (Mollett, Stier, Linley, & Locke, 2020).

Early Exposure to College Expectations and College Courses

Another way that the ECHS may work to weaken educational borders is through unique partnerships with institutions of higher education. The goal of the partnership to provide all students with significant college coursework, tuition free, while they are completing their high school program. Research has demonstrated that participation in dual credit or dual enrollment programs has positive impacts on students' educational aspirations (Barnett & Stamm, 2010), eases the transition between high school and college, and permits high school students to gain exposure to college course expectations and requirements (Mollett et al., 2020). Importantly, while the students are earning college credit that can transfer to another college or university, they also are learning how to function independently on a college campus. That is, they are learning the norms and customs of higher education.

In sum, the ECHS aims to eliminate marginalization for students from underserved groups through effective research-based means including small schools and classes, mixed ability grouping, high rigor and expectations, and early exposure to college. Moreover, these means center on narrowing the border between high school and college.

Conceptual Foundation

ECHSs are situated on the border ground between high school and college. The teachers and leaders in ECHSs seek to prepare students from marginalized and underserved groups not only to be border crossers—but also to be successful on the other side of the border—that is, not only to go to college, but to have the skills and knowledge to be successful there (Magolda, 2001). Therefore, it was appropriate to use the combined conceptual lenses of social justice, equity, and Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands, to understand better the ECHS teachers' and leaders' perspectives and experiences.

Social Justice

In education, social justice is the idea that all students and groups of students are treated with fairness and respect, and that all are entitled to the resources and benefits that the school has to offer (North, 2006). If education were to ensure social justice, then, according to Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck (2001), school success would be equitable across such differences as race and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, social justice would ensure that all students in the United States have access to high-quality education that will decrease the likelihood of later lifetime inequalities (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). Currently, most schools are not meeting these goals. Educational gaps and unequal schooling continue to be serious issues across the nation. ECHSs have been prescribed as a social justice reform that might redress educational gaps and inequality that so many students from underserved and marginalized groups experience (Locke & McKenzie, 2015).

Equity

Educational equity can be defined in terms of both opportunities and outcomes, including the settings in which the students participate in educational experiences and the extent to which those experiences support their academic growth (Nieto, 1996). According to Unterhalter (2009), the academic literature that uses the term equity in education concentrates primarily on fairness in distribution, collapsing equity into aspects of equality. Yet, equity and equality are not synonymous. ECHSs, as equity-oriented spaces, can be seen as means better to equalize educational opportunities of equal worth (Howe, 1993). That is, ECHSs aim to provide equitable educational experiences that might work to compensate for the denial of preparation and/or opportunity that students experienced earlier in the educational pipeline. That is, the ECHS might help bring equity to scale (Locke & McKenzie, 2015).

Borderlands

According to Anzaldúa (1987), a borderland is "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional reside of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants" (p. 25). Students, teachers, and leaders in ECHSs inhabit a literal and figurative border, an in-between or nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987), between high school and college. Similar to Anzaldúa's border, the border that currently exists between high school and college is increasingly peopled with non-traditional crossers—those whose parents do not have college degrees, those whose first language is not English, those who are of Color, and those who are poor (NCES, 2016). It is important that we understand the experiences of people in this in-between, this nepantla, this literal and figurative borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987), if we are interested in a more holistic understanding of educational spaces that espouse to embrace social justice and equity, as well as understand the educational trajectories of students from marginalized and underserved groups. Through mission and practice, the ECHS model works to make this educational in-between less distinct. Teachers and leaders in ECHSs traverse this border between high school and college daily, often with one foot on each side of the line.

METHOD

Because we were interested in understanding the direct experiences and perceptions of teachers and leaders who had experience working with an ECHS, an interpretivist (Lichtman, 2014) qualitative approach was required. This approach allowed for the meaning making practices of the participants to be at the center of the study.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Twenty-seven current and former teachers and leaders who had experience working with an ECHS in Georgia, Texas, North Carolina, or Ohio were interviewed in person or via telephone. The participant pool was made up of four current ECHS teachers, seven former ECHS teachers, 10 current ECHS leaders, three former ECHS leaders, and three participants who served in an ECHS-related position with the higher education partner. The participant group was racially and ethnically diverse. There were three Black participants, 10 Latinx participants, and 13 White participants. One participant did not identify a racial or ethnic group membership. The participant group was nearly equally balanced between men and women, and more than one half of the group had been first-in-the-family college students. See Table 1 for a profile of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to replace all given names.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race or Ethnicity	Age	ECHS Position	Employed by an ECHS	Years in ECHS Position	1st Gen
Ashley	F	Latina	34	Leader	Currently	0.5	Y
Clair	F	Latina	55	Leader	Currently	10	N
Hannah	F	Latina	46	Leader	Currently	3	Y
Katie	F	Latina	46	Leader	Currently	2	Y
Kristy	F	White	47	Leader	Currently	9	Y
Sarah	F	White	46	Leader	Formerly	5	Y
Clark	M	Black	44	Leader	Currently	2.5	N
Blake	M	Latino	48	Leader	Currently	5	Y
Nathan	M	Latino	53	Leader	Currently	5	Y
Anthony	M	White	47	Leader	Currently	2	N
David	M	White	46	Leader	Currently	9	N
James	M	White	33	Leader	Formerly	1	Y
Mike	M	White	37	Leader	Formerly	3	Y
Courtney	F	Latina	50	Leader & HE Admin	Formerly	5	N
Shelby	F	Latina	NA	Leader & HE Admin	Currently	2	Y
Eric	M	Latino	55	HE Admin	Formerly	1	Y
Rachel	F	Black	39	Teacher	Formerly	5	Y
Emily	F	White	29	Teacher	Formerly	4	N
Sandy	F	White	40	Teacher	Formerly	6	Y
Ethan	M	White	33	Teacher	Formerly	1	N
Joseph	M	White	28	Teacher	Formerly	3	Y
Josh	M	White	50	Teacher	Currently	8	N
Tyler	M	White	38	Teacher	Currently	6	N
Lacey	F	Latina	42	Teacher (HE)	Currently	0.5	Y
Bill	M	Black	36	Teacher (HE)	Formerly	2	N
Chuck	M	White	44	Teacher (HE)	Formerly	1	N

Note. NA = data not available

Individual, semi-structured interviews1 and detailed field notes were the primary and secondary means of data generation, respectively. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 1.5 hours. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed via the constant comparative method (Glaser,1965) by the authors. Multiple rounds of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were performed with all of the transcripts and notes. The first round helped to identify broad and central constructs within the participants' perspectives. An additional round of coding helped to capture preliminary working themes and subthemes. A final round of coding helped to delineate and solidify the working themes and subthemes into concrete themes that uniquely reflected the perspectives of the participants regarding their work in ECHSs. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of data, member checking with participants during the interviews, and peer debriefing throughout the analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS[2]

This section begins with a discussion of the positive or favorable aspects of the ECHS work environment as reported by the participants. The goal however, was to frame the majority of the findings within the challenges faced by educators working within this unique educational border.

Favorable Aspects of the ECHS Work Environment

There were many aspects of the ECHS environment that the teachers and leaders valued and reported on positively. These aspects, in particular, were the primary reasons they chose to work on this educational border. For example, most participants were first-in-the-family to attend college and, therefore, were drawn to working with this particular student population. Relatedly, Nathan stated, "The reasons I came [to the ECHS were] because it was working with a population that was at risk and that was a population that I guess I felt very near and dear to…"

In addition to a professional draw to the student population, participants also discussed believing they were doing something "right" by working with the student groups targeted by ECHSs as well as working with the early college design. Almost all of the participants reported that they were attracted to the social justice- and equity-oriented mission of the school. For example, Josh noted:

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1 In the interviews, participants were asked questions or provided with discussion prompts such as these:

Please describe your ECHS.

What is it like to work here?

Why did you decide to work at an ECHS?

What are some of the good things about working at an ECHS?

What are some of the challenges you face working at an ECHS?

How do you manage those challenges?

What are the differences, for you specifically, between working at an ECHS and a traditional high school?

What type of training, if any, did you receive before starting your position at an ECHS?

What do you think about this training? Would you change it, and how so?

What types of Professional Development do you think should be created specifically for working in an ECHS?

2 With respect to space we did not include representative quotes from all participants.

… we give [students] the tools to be successful and to compete and collaborate with anybody on the planet and that is a powerful thing. If I didn't feel in my core that what we're doing was not the right thing, I would be outta here in a skinny minute.

Alongside working with the particular student groups, the participants reflected positively on the motivation of students to be in the early college program. Recall that ECHS students make an affirmative choice to attend the rigorous program. Relatedly, the teachers and leaders reported that the students were, in general, motivated to come to school and to participate. Ethan recalled the students' motivation and the positive benefits that motivation provided to his teaching, "the vast majority of them are motivated and they want to be there. So, it gave me a lot more opportunity to focus on developing lessons for teaching rather than, you know, concerns about classroom management." Thus, Ethan believed that due to the motivation of the students, he had the opportunity at the ECHS to improve his teaching practice. Relatedly, and perhaps resulting from a similar classroom environment, Rachel noted that the students she taught felt "smart." She went on to describe an intellectual debate among students that she encountered in her ECHS:

> [In my] first year teaching there, I walked into a 10th grade class and… these two boys are having this heated argument. And one of them said, "Miss, tell him that he's an idiot. He says that Machiavelli is better than Euripides." [I was like], carry on! It was just the norm in the school to be smart.

The smallness of the ECHS made for not only a rich intellectual environment as Ethan and Rachel suggested, but also the creation of close relationships among teachers, leaders, and students. The teachers and leaders reported positively on the close-knit communities inside ECHSs, noting repeatedly that it was more family-like than what typically is created in traditional high schools. Rose reflected on the benefits of the small, family-like environment:

> The kids get to know one another. The teachers get to know one another. So, when we have collaboration with the teachers, every one of the teachers know the kids; so, it's easy to pinpoint, say Johnny is having trouble in algebra, but he's not having trouble in English. Is there a way that we can help [him] be successful together?

As Rose pointed out, the smallness of the ECHS and the relationships that ensued allowed for easy identification of student needs. She went on to note, "there is really nowhere for [students] to hide. We see everything that's going on." Because of the small, family-like environment of the school, teachers and leaders not only were quick to identify potential problems, whether they were behavioral or academic, but also they were quick to address them before they escalated. To this point, Katie noted,

> I know our students do have that type of reaction when we call them by name in the hall. "How did you know my name?" Yes, I know all your names. I was just looking at your [exam]. What happened? When are you coming to tutoring?

In addition to the small size of the ECHS, the availability to create close relationships with students and the pro-intellectual environment, the teachers and leaders reported feeling appreciated and respected by the students and their families. The vast majority of the students were first-in-the-family college bound; thus, the participants reported that both the students and their families were not only excited by the potential of college, but were supportive and appreciative of each step along the way that moved the potential toward reality. For example, James noted:

> Any time I had a problem with a kid, I'd call the parent and say, "look, we've gotta talk about this or I don't know if it'll work" and it's a bluff. But it works 'cuz you get mom and dad and three cousins up there in a minute, talking about how they're gonna take care of that so you don't have to.

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Relatedly, Tyler, an English teacher, recalled an experience with a parent that he found particularly rewarding:

[Student Name] is about to finish at [university] with his undergrad[uate] but he's already started his master's work to become an English teacher. His mother came up to me and got watery-eyed and through a translator told me "I don't know what to do. I know you know what to do. Just do what's right for my kid"…and when I think about that… there's not anything better.

Although the participants saw their work in the ECHS as rewarding, specifically through believing in the ECHS mission, experiencing high student motivation, having the ability to create a rich intellectual environment and close relationships with students, and feeling supported and appreciated by the families, there were other aspects of the ECHS environment that made the teachers' and leaders' jobs on this educational border particularly challenging.

Challenging Aspects of the ECHS Work Environment

The themes of Workload, Border Encroachments, Lack of Resources, and Staying True to the Mission emerged as significant and influential challenges in the participants' work lives. The culmination of the aspects described within these themes drove some of the participants to leave the ECHS environment, some after only a year. High turnover in both teacher and administrative positions was reported by a majority of the participants.

Workload. The participants perceived aspects of their work environments as "stressful" and "frustrating." Much of their stress and frustration stemmed from a variety of sources. Most commonly, however, was the heavy workload with which the teachers and leaders had to engage at the ECHS. Regarding the workload, Clark noted, "Teachers usually are there from 7 in the morning til 7 at night, sometimes later. They're also there on the weekends. It's not mandated, but it's kind of an expectation that you will be there long hours."

Tyler had similar sentiments regarding the expected workload. He stated,

I run Saturday school every morning from 8 to noon. Every faculty is required to do at least 2 hours [of tutorials weekly], most everybody does more. We have something called ICU… where we don't allow kids to opt out of work. You cannot keep a zero in your grade book. You have to chase the kid down, put the kid in the [ICU]… and they work on whatever assignment they're missing…so they're getting work in but it is wearing on the staff.

Similarly, Rose reflected on the necessity of ECHS teachers to do more than teach:

…because it's so small and we have such a small ratio of teachers, we have to wear a lot of hats. [It's] recommended that we all have a club [in addition to] after school tutorials. …we do this for the kids but it does get a little bit daunting.

Not only did the participants "wear a lot of hats" as Rose noted, but they did so while working within the serious confines of students' lack of academic preparation in the K-8 pipeline. Indeed, a lot goes into preparing students for college, particularly for students who enter the ECHS with gaps in their learning. Sandy related the students' lack of preparation to a potential source for teachers' heavy workload and stress levels: "[Teachers] think 'Oh, it's only 125 kids in the school, how bad could it be?' And they get here and it's like 'Oh my God, these kids are so needy. This is a lot of work!'"

The participants explained how meeting the expectations of the ECHS extended well

beyond the normative practices of traditional schooling. When aligning with the goals of the ECHS, for the participants, this meant an increase to their workloads. These workload demands included staying well beyond the end of the school day, conducting tutorials during lunch breaks and on weekends, and working extra with students who lacked preparation. Over time, meeting the workload demands led to high levels of stress and frustration for a majority of the participants. Another challenge of working in the ECHS environment that was identified by the participants was when typical "K12" practices and habits traversed or encroached upon typical "college" practices and habits.

Border encroachments. The participants reported being sometimes confused by the methods that the ECHSs were taking to provide "college prep," and were often frustrated when aspects of the ECHS or the "K12 world" migrated into or encroached upon the world of higher education, and vice versa. For example, the ECHS leaders would, at times, attempt to advocate for their students in the college courses or, as Chuck noted, "the high school aspects would sort of flow into what I was doing." Chuck went on to provide a specific example of this border encroachment:

> [In a college class I taught at the ECHS] I had about 10% of the students plagiarize the [final] paper and I gave them zeros. And, the principal said, "well, can we just have them write them again?" I'm like no… at a normal college, if you plagiarize, there's even more ramifications than just getting a zero.

Although teachers in ECHSs have smaller classes than do teachers at many traditional high schools, they are asked to provide highly rigorous curricula with engaging and innovative activities. As Emily described, a traditional lecture-formatted class—even though common in higher education—was discouraged in the ECHS college-preparatory environment. Emily declared,

> …[the ECHS administration said] don't lecture to the kids….you need to make it interactive. You need to involve them, you know…projects. But then we were struggling with, okay, how is that preparing them for college, when the college classroom is nothing but 'sit and get'?

A similar lack of understanding of how appropriately to engage with aspects of the ECHS also was experienced by those working on the higher education side of the border. There, Eric noted that, "…working with [college] faculty was the hardest part. Because they're so set in their ways." James had similar perspectives about the inflexibility of college faculty and how to approach and to contend with the rigidity of the higher education partner:

> In a lot of ways, [working with the higher education partner] has to be business first and so when I was trying to advocate for kids and get kids into things, I was having to come at it from a business side rather than the, "hey, this is what's best for kids," because that's not the best argument always for higher ed.

The participants reported being confused by the methods that the ECHSs were taking to provide "college prep," and were frustrated when aspects of the ECHS or the K12 world migrated into or encroached upon the world of higher education, and vice versa. In addition, the participants discussed the high expectations and demands placed on them in a workspace with limited human and financial resources.

Lack of resources. A lack of resources was a challenge for the participants and limited their capabilities to conduct their jobs in meaningful ways. That is, a lack of human and financial resources did not allow them to be able to do what they would have liked to do in their schools and classrooms to best serve their students. Participants pointed to district-level leadership as the responsible party because districts appeared to have limited knowledge of how to accommodate those serving in teaching or leadership roles at ECHSs. To this point, Lacey noted,

[It's] so expensive, having to pay for the professors, having to pay for transportation, having to pay for textbooks. You know, once that grant money ran out, our [district] really did a good job of allocating funds but, not really knowing how much it was going to take.

A lack of resources was widespread across the participants' schools. A majority of the participants reported feeling as though they had to go to extraordinary means to address their financial needs. Sandy noted, "It's always an uphill battle, particularly trying to get money to do the stuff you want. The district is really tight." Relatedly, Joseph remarked, "There was never enough money to do anything. I had to buy all the equipment if I wanted to do some interesting experiments in my classes. It was really inhibiting."

Although the ECHS is a small school model, still, as most participants reported, alongside a lack of finances, there were not enough staff to meet the needs of the students. To this point, Shelby confirmed, "…the teachers play many roles because we don't have a lot of the luxuries that a comprehensive high school has when it comes to staff and monies." Anthony corroborated this sentiment regarding the support for both teachers and students inside the ECHS. He stated,

You just can't go home with [the students] and so, the other alternative is an extended day, which I think would be beneficial to some. But how do you make that happen without paying somebody more? …we don't have the resources to support [students] as fully as we should.

In addition to a lack of financial resources as Anthony noted, there were simply not enough staff to meet the needs of the students, the ECHS expectations, or perhaps the ECHS mission. Sentiments from Sandy corroborate those of Anthony and confirm the need for more staff and support, "[With more] staff members they could accomplish so much more. More people, like in general. And time. More people and time." However, perhaps Courtney summed up the dilemma of a lack of human and financial resources best. She stated, "when the funds are not there, it's hard to keep and maintain the program with everything that is required."

Along with a high stress and often frustrating work environment, and a lack of resources, the participants also discussed the related challenges of adhering to the social justice- and equity-oriented mission of this educational borderland.

Staying true to the mission. The participants remarked that their ECHS often struggled with adhering to the social justice- and equity-oriented mission guiding the school, in particular, that of consistently targeting and serving students from underrepresented groups, specifically low performers. Emily described this phenomenon as going after the "cream of the crop":

I know the teachers really struggle with that because we're very torn because there was an expectation for us to be successful, to have a low failure rate, to have our kids growing. So, as teachers, we want the cream of the crop. We want the kids that aren't gonna struggle. We want the kids that we can push and see growth in, especially freshman year. But you know, the ones that needed our school are the ones that are gonna struggle as freshmen, that are probably gonna struggle as sophomores, that it's not gonna click until they're juniors…

Like the ECHS teachers, the higher education partners also coveted the benefits of working with the "cream of the crop." Joseph noted, "[The higher education partner] was really pushing us to just recruit kids based on grades because [the students] we'd been supplying them had been struggling." Eric remarked on this phenomenon suggesting, "It's so easy to fall into that trap, the professors, and even the high school teachers…they want to teach the easy kids."

Although working with the cream of the crop, or the easy kids, certainly would make teaching and leading less challenging, doing so runs counter to the ECHS mission. The ECHS espouses to assist the students who struggle, the lower performers, the students who regularly fall into the "gaps." Doing so, however, is not easy work. As Eric discovered, it was very difficult to "maintain the integrity of the model."

As Figure 1 describes pictorially, the findings, represented by the themes of Workload, Border Encroachments, Lack of Resources, and Staying True to the Mission, illustrate significant and influential challenges that the ECHS teachers and leaders experienced in their work lives. Even though the participants reported many positive aspects of working on this educational border, the culmination of these challenges may have encouraged burnout and turnover. We return to this point in the next section, along with a broader discussion of the thematic findings.
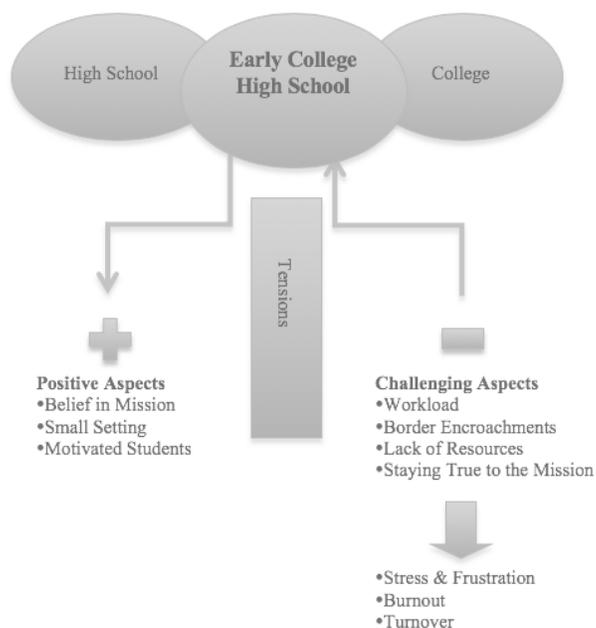

Figure 1. Pictorial representation of the perspectives of leaders and teachers working in ECHSs—borderlands between high school and college—regarding their work environments.

DISCUSSION

ECHSs can be seen as a means better to equalize educational opportunities of equal worth (Howe, 1993). Although the data included here demonstrate that providing access to college courses and college preparation was regarded in many meaningful ways by the participants, access and preparation are only pieces of the process. Importantly, providing this access and support is difficult, particularly without adequate human and financial resources.

The findings suggest that a border is "rarely a simple location to be in…" (Patel, 2013, p. 92). As the participants described, they were expected to engage in multiple roles or "wear a lot of hats" in the ECHS to address the various needs of the students—not only provide access and preparation. These expectations took a toll on the ECHS teachers and leaders. To this point, participants in this study averaged 3.5 years at the ECHS before moving to a different position.

Perhaps high turnover in ECHSs stems from a broad lack of support and resources. ECHSs are doing more, and they are expected to do more (than their counterparts in traditional high schools), with very constrained resources. However, many of the students that ECHSs target bring with them system-related challenges, in particular underpreparation, that were created earlier in the education pipeline. These system-related challenges, alongside other aspects of students' lives (i.e., poverty), require more energy and more human and financial resources from the ECHS to compensate for previous educational neglect and the resultant gaps. Perhaps an interesting way to think about this phenomenon is through ideas about linkages and efficiency.

Certainly, "educational opportunity has a chain-like character" (Howe, 1993, p. 330), where early educational opportunities are related to later ones. Therefore, weak links anywhere in the chain (or pipeline) undermine the strength of the chain. Creating links that reinforce weaker links earlier in the chain is simply not good practice. Clearly it would be more "efficient" for all the links in the chain to be strong. However, this is not a reality of our schools. A strong chain, or a sturdy education, has not been created for many students and families, particularly those from marginalized and underserved groups. ECHSs could be an important link in this chain.

Problems associated with those typically burdened by weak links in the education chain, that is, underpreparation, discrimination, and lack of access, are common and complex issues that individuals from marginalized and underserved groups deal with on a daily basis. These complexities should not be reduced or undignified by what is "efficient." As Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2007) noted, "a programme or [an] institution may be efficiently managed, but not effective in achieving its mission, goals, or objectives" (p. 38). Thus, "efficient" may not be synonymous with "effective."

Because of weak links in the educational "chain" early in many students' educational careers, "raising the achievement of [students from marginalized and underrepresented groups] will be very expensive…" (Rothstein, 2004, p. 83). Thus, in order for the ECHS successfully and effectively to attend to its social justice- and equity-oriented mission, this intervention will require more support and will need to be resource intensive. Duncan-Andrade (2007) concluded, "an equitable education suggests resource allocation based on context, which would include attention to funding and teachers, but in a manner that pays closer attention to the specific needs of the community" (p. 618). Relatedly, being efficient inside the ECHS should not undermine being effective. When the goal is to be effective in disrupting the perpetuation of inequalities, applying the traditional frameworks around efficiency (or aspects of it), might not be sufficient. That is, simply expecting ECHS teachers to do more with less, will not produce desired results.

Although ECHSs have been doing very well in terms of graduation rates and college credits earned by students (Haxton et al., 2016; JFF, 2016)—they could do much better, or be more effective, on this educational border if they were better supported. To this point, Emily, who left the ECHS for a less demanding job in another high school, stated that teaching at the ECHS "was the hardest job I ever loved so much." Most teachers and leaders would argue that teaching and leading in any educational setting is not easy, but, as Emily suggested, the task, while rewarding, might be exceptionally challenging in the ECHS. Based on its mission, there are no low track classes or ability grouping. Teachers have small classes; yet they must, inside the same highly rigorous classroom, differentiate their teaching methods and strategies to meet the diverse needs of all their students (including those most underprepared in the K-8 chain).

Relatedly, it is likely that every educator's dream is to work in a school with students who have been well prepared, well fed, are socio-economically stable, and who have degreed family members who incorporate

a college narrative into the nightly dinner conversation—that is, the cream of the crop, namely, the easy kids. However, these are not the populations that ECHSs target. Adhering to the ECHS mission, although it might positively serve many students and families, is challenging for these teacher- and leader-border crossers, and being effective in their positions might not serve the principles of educational efficiency (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, & Roberts, 2015; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

CONCLUSION

It is important to hear and to understand the voices of teachers and leaders (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). It is also important to understand that the measures of effective schooling for students (e.g., small classes, high rigor, relationships, early exposure to college [Rutledge et al. 2015]), might not be similarly effective for teachers and leaders. The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives and experiences of teachers and leaders working on a unique educational border between high school and college, the ECHS. Although some scholarship regarding the perceptions and experiences of students in ECHSs has been published (e.g., Locke & McKenzie 2015; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011), we know little about how teachers and leaders working in ECHSs, a new educational border, perceive their unique work environments, the challenges, the school culture, and the preparation of students from underserved groups for post-secondary success. Here, we provided a more nuanced look at the complicated work of teachers and leaders as they strive to bridge the border between high school and college for students from marginalized and underserved groups. Results indicate that although ECHS teachers and leaders strongly believed in the value of their work at the ECHS, they also found it to be a stressful, frustrating, and challenging work environment that, at times, falters from its driving mission.

Moving forward, we know that the ECHS is not without challenges. ECHS students, teachers, and leaders function within the educational nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987)—the in-between—a middle space that can be uncomfortable and unstable. However, the ECHS is teaching students how to acculturate and to integrate into the higher education environment, and to be successful there by teaching them the customs, norms, and values of this environment. Thus, the ECHS might be a means to transform marginalization and to release the previously ignored and untapped potential of students and families from marginalized and underserved groups. That is, it might be a means successfully to bridge educational gaps and narrow educational borders. It might serve as a means to democratize higher education—providing an education of equal worth and, therefore, enhanced access—for those who might not have found access otherwise (those who would have been stopped at the border). Based on the results of this study, the ECHS has the opportunity to create this space into one of resilience, resistance, survival, and success. Resilience, resistance, and survival, however, without matching human and financial support for those implementing the model (like the teachers and leaders who participated in this study) may result in more of the same of what students from marginalized and underserved groups have experienced in schools for decades—a lack of social justice, a lack of equity, and a lack of educational attainment.

FUTURE STUDY

Based on our work here as well as other research regarding the education of students from marginalized groups and their exposure to higher education, we suggest that future study focus on the perspectives and experiences of students who were successful in the ECHS system, as well as those who

attended an ECHS then returned to a traditional high school prior to graduation. Such research would help to better understand what works and what does not work in the ECHS environment, and will help to make appropriate changes in this unique school environment to best serve students, teachers, and leaders and providing the supports needed for educational success.

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