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# The Education of Escobar Cruz: Sports, Identity and Masculinity in Middle School

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### Cover Page Footnote

Eligio Martinez Jr. is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the Claremont Graduate University School of Educational Studies where he teaches in the Higher Education/Student Affairs Program. Eligio is also a Research Affiliate with Project M.A.L.E.S. at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests focus on the experiences of Latino middle school males and the development of career and college aspirations.

## The Education of Escobar Cruz: Sports, Identity, and Masculinity in Middle School

Eligio Martinez Jr., *Claremont Graduate University*

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Some assert that middle school should be the stage in an individual's educational trajectory where they begin to make plans for the future. For many young men of color, middle school becomes a stage where they begin to get off track academically. This is the story of Escobar Cruz, a young Latino male student, and his navigation through the 7th grade attempting to figure out who he is and who he wants to become. Escobar must choose between listening to his English Language Arts teacher or his peers and soccer coach and make decisions that will impact his future. Masculinity and school engagement are analyzed to explore the daily negotiations that young men of color engage in at schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Middle school is supposed to be the age of innocence, the stage in a student's educational trajectory where students begin to make plans for the future (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Martinez & Castellanos, 2018). For many young men of color, middle school becomes the turning point in their lives as they encounter increased discipline and academic tracking (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Middle school presents a challenge for students as they are going through a stage of greater identity exploration and desire for autonomy, but encounter teachers who emphasize control and discipline (Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015; Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987). This is the story of Escobar Cruz and his search for his identity as a Latino male during his transition from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. While attending Central City Middle School (CCMS) (pseudonym), Escobar must determine how he wants to define himself, choosing between being known as a soccer player or a good student.

Escobar arrived in the US during the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and struggled with English when he began middle school. Many of his friends recalled how he did not speak English when he enrolled in school and his teachers believed that he had come a long way since then. Over time, he became one of the more popular students at CCMS where he captained the boys' soccer team. On the soccer field, he was the team leader and the person that younger players looked up to. In the classroom, he was constantly engaged in the conversation and occasionally got in trouble for not paying attention or talking with his friends.

Academically, Escobar's performance was largely tied to his involvement in the soccer team, consistently dropping during the offseason

but excelling during the season. His teachers believed that he had all the tools to be a great student, but it all depended on whether or not he wanted to be successful. Escobar recognized that he was receiving a great education and was trying his best to be successful; however, he was also cognizant of the role that race and gender played in shaping his experience. Escobar believed that his status as a Latino male could hinder his future opportunities, which influenced his attitude and behavior during middle school.

### Masculinity in Schools

Previous research on males and masculinity has focused on the development of tough, rebel types of masculinity that are largely created by students themselves (Connell, 1989; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Willis, 1977). However, the role that schools and school practices play in the production of masculinity is often ignored. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue that while students' views about masculinity are influenced by what they see outside of school, schools reinforce these views through hidden messages embedded in the curriculum, the heavy value placed on sports, and the organization of schools themselves.

Mac An Ghail (1994) argues that schools participate in the construction of masculinity as they teach young men who to be, what to value, and how to negotiate and differentiate school codes in order to establish their masculinity. Mac An Ghail (1994) posits that males learn about the social order around gender and masculinity through classed and racialized discourses. In particular, they learn that there are different ways to be a male, some that are more valued, prestigious, and powerful than

others that emphasize superiority over other males and females.

Similarly, Connell (1995) examined the complexities of masculinity and argues that masculinity is not a single role or entity, but rather is only understood in a model of “multiple masculinities” that are enacted by men and embody different configurations of masculinity depending on their social relation to others. Connell divides his model of masculinity into four types that create a hierarchy: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized. In Connell’s model, strong and male centric behavior is the dominant form of masculinity. Masculinity, therefore, imposes another set of expectations and struggles for domination among males of different backgrounds.

While the categorization of different typologies and formation of social groups may be something that schools may not sanction or believe they influence, athletic and sports programs are a school-sanctioned pathway for young men to demonstrate their masculine superiority over others (Kidd, 2013; Messner, 2002). Yet within sports, there is also a hierarchy as to which sports personify masculinity. Most often mainstream sports, such as football, baseball and basketball are viewed as superior to others. However, these sports impose a class structure as they are only available to students who have the financial resources to pay for equipment and other fees and prevents that participation of low-income students (Eckert, 1989; Flores-González, 2002; Goldsmith, 2003).

### **Race, Culture and Gender**

Schools often equate masculinity with toughness and poor academic performance amongst young men of color (Carter, 2005; Morris, 2012). This assumption is generally a result of gender scripts, or gender practices, which males and females follow that allow them to constitute themselves as masculine and feminine in structured and locally normative ways (Yancey Martin, 2003; Morris, 2012). As sites of socialization, schools often send messages regarding the social order. Masculinity often conflicts with schooling as young men attempt to express themselves through non-academic behavior, while teachers and administrators struggle to control students and bring them into the academic order of the school (Nasir, 2011; Noguera, 2008). Schools’ administrators attempt to gain control through the suppression

of masculinity and the expression of their cultural identity (Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018).

Research on typologies of students demonstrates the significant role that peer groups play in shaping the educational aspirations and motivation of youth, particularly males (Connell, 1989; Stoudt, 2006). Given that middle school is where students become more cognizant of gender roles, students will begin to develop identities based upon what they believe are gender appropriate (Mahar, 2001; Tatum, 2003). During early adolescence, peer-influences are assumed to have the greatest effect on students as this is often a time of heightened self-consciousness coupled with instability in an individual’s own identity (Erikson, 1964).

Pollack (1998) describes this behavior as the “boy code,” a strict set of rules that young men internalize about how they must behave and that most males seem to generally fear breaking. These rules include keeping a stiff lip, not showing their feelings, acting real tough, not acting too nice, and being cool. In many instances, the adoption of these norms creates conflict with schooling and tends to cause the academic performance and engagement of male students to decline (Gándara, O’Hara, & Gutiérrez, 2004). While students may behave in this particular manner, much of the behavior that they tend to engage in is regulated by peers.

A major distinction for youth of color is that unlike their white male counterparts, young men of color must develop masculine identities that not only affirm their maleness, but also affirm their racial and cultural identity (Howard, 2013; Rios, 2011). Young men of color are constantly negotiating several aspects of their identity as they come of age in American schools (Morris, 2012; Nasir, 2012). The role that gender plays in constructing masculinity is a central element of their identity that is constantly in flux during this stage of the lives of Chicanos/Latinos. Masculinity is connected to other aspects of their identity, including racial and cultural expectations. Young men will often adopt a persona that goes in accordance with what they think will earn them respect or protection from their peers and older men (Carter, 2003; Rios, 2011).

Additionally, students of color often struggle with the cultural negotiation of academic success. Carter (2005) found that engagement

and interaction with course material was viewed as effeminate in nature by young men who assumed that being smart was not part of what it meant to be masculine. Feeling a strong sense of masculinity can supplant academic performance amongst males who are academically gifted. Shepard, Nicpon, Haley, Lind, and Liu, (2011) posit that males who endorse traditional masculine norms positively associate with feeling competent, self-reliant, and self-assured. Feelings of inadequacy for poor school performance also decreased when endorsement of masculine norms increased. Morris (2012) argues that males participate in what he refers to as “contrived carelessness,” a publicly displayed absence of academic diligence and planning, and approach school in a carefree manner that often affects their school behavior. This serves as a mechanism for young men to challenge peer standards by associating performing well on a test or assignment as pure luck.

Many of the negotiations that young Chicano/Latino males go through deal with peer pressure brought on by the expectations that friends develop of them, but there are also other issues that students must negotiate that are brought on through societal pressures. Rios (2011) contends that young men are in a quest for dignity and behave in a manner that will allow them to feel like men. Whether that dignity is gained within school or in the streets, students will determine their own paths according to how they are treated in school. As Carter (2006) argues, young males are often straddling boundaries between school culture and peer culture in order to navigate through both spaces. Similarly, Huerta (2015) found that for young Latino males, making decisions about school and their future is often tied to the sources of information that young men receive.

### **Adult Influences**

Mentors play a key figure for engagement and socialization of Chicano/Latino males during middle school (Martinez, Fernandez, Perez, & Montes, 2016; McQuillin, Strait, Smith & Ingram, 2015). Positive interactions with school personnel can lead to academic, personal and behavioral benefits for students (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Wolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Having access to school agents can lead to increased school engagement and the development of college and career aspirations (Martinez & Castellanos, 2018; Pizarro, 2005). As student transition into middle school and

beyond, they enter with high career aspirations and rely heavily on school staff to maintain those aspirations.

Academic difficulty coupled with the inability to connect with school agents, particularly with older males, causes students to search for individuals to fill the mentor void outside of school (Rios, 2011; Vigil, 2012). Lack of social and academic engagement in school leads many to become “street socialized,” a process by which individuals become influenced by environmental factors that has a major influence on their psychosocial development and life-course trajectories (Flores-González, 2002; Oliver, 2006). The street socialization process fills the need for students to feel validated and allows many young men to fulfill their masculinity (Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris & Sass, 2011).

### **Central City Context**

Located in the suburban community in the Pacific Northwest, CCMS lies within a predominantly white and affluent community. Over the course of the previous decade, Central City saw the emergence of a large immigrant Latino community in the southern part of the city. Since 2001, the population of Chicano/Latino students at CCMS more than doubled from 11.7% to 26.1%, becoming the middle school with the largest concentration of Chicano/Latino students in the district. Part of this can be attributed to the working-class communities adjacent to the south of the city.

CCMS enrollment is about 500 students and has a very diverse student body, with 39.6% of its students being white, 21.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.7% African American, 0.8% Native American and 7.3% multi-racial. 48.6% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch during the time of the study (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2012). While some students came from more affluent families, a majority of students were either lower middle class, working class or lived below the poverty line. Most Latino students at CCMS came from working class families.

Academically, CCMS offers a rigorous curriculum that included advanced math courses and multiple years of foreign language instruction in Spanish and French. Only students identified as English Language Learners were placed in separate language and

reading support courses, with most students mainstreamed into honors courses. Although the school belonged to one of the top public school districts in the country, it had recently faced several challenges, largely attributed to the changing student demographics. For decades, all four high schools in the district ranked amongst the top 100 public high schools in the country. However, with a growing Chicano/Latino population, the high school that CCMS students enrolled in had failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years and saw an increase in truancy and disciplinary issues leading many to believe that the problems stemmed from CCMS.

Within CCMS, soccer played a pivotal role for Chicano/Latino students as it is the main form of engagement for male students. Soccer was the only sport offered twice a year and was the most popular sport with over 30 members on the team. Members of the boys' soccer team were central to the school culture of CCMS and the school prided itself on the soccer team's winning tradition. CCMS was the current four-time reigning champion of the school district. The team was largely comprised of Chicano/Latino students that included all of Escobar's friends. Members of the soccer team were considered to be the cool students at the CCMS, not only because they are part of one of the more visible groups at the school, but because they brought pride to the school through their athletic accomplishments.

### **Methodology & Analysis**

Data from this study comes from a 16-month ethnographic study that explored the experiences of a group of Chicano/Latino middle school males. The study began during Escobar's 7<sup>th</sup> grade and followed him and his peers through their 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion. Through ethnographic research, I studied the spaces and environments that students navigated through to develop an understanding based on a reality that they created rather than one created by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As an ethnographer, I initially began working at CCMS as a 7<sup>th</sup> grade English and Social Studies teacher's aide and later became an assistant coach for the boys' soccer team. Over time my presence at the school became normal and I was considered part of the staff at the school, as my daily routine of checking in with students and teachers became integrated into the daily practices of the school.

Over the course of 16 months, I conducted focus group interviews, individual interviews and observations, and learned about the experiences of young Chicano/Latino males going through the process of understanding who they were as Chicanos/Latinos and as males (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2003). Interviews were spaced throughout the 16 months of the study and each focused on different topics, such as family background, aspirations for the future, peers and school experience. Observations occurred during class time and in spaces that students occupied before, during and after school. All interviews were audio recorded with the students' permission and transcribed for accuracy. Open coding was used at the beginning of the study primarily to code focus group interviews in order to identify any emerging themes outside of race and gender that may play a significant role in the experiences of students (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). Coding data in this manner provided me with topics that I followed up on with participants through individual interviews or in conversations, and to identify emerging themes and how specific themes or issues may intersect and overlap with one another (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Through this process, issues related to race, culture, and masculinity emerged and were followed up throughout the study.

Escobar and I often had conversation about soccer, school, friends, and family. As a Chicano graduate student, students were drawn to me given the lack of Chicano/Latino teachers and staff, but also because my status as a "college student" allowed the young men to visualize their futures selves. Not only did the conversations with Escobar allow me to get to know him better, but they also allowed me to triangulate my findings (Merriam, 2009). Through conversations with Escobar, his peers, school staff, and observations of different activities, I was able to verify accounts of events that occurred on a daily basis at CCMS.

### **Findings**

Escobar was a central focus of the study as many of his peers gravitated toward him and followed his lead. Escobar was charismatic, polite, and in tune with what was happening at school. Although he often had lapses in behavior, his maturation during the course of the study demonstrated the struggles that young men at Central City encounter as they negotiate their identity. Escobar best exemplified the struggles

that Chicano/Latino males negotiated on a daily basis as they navigated multiple spaces at CCMS.

In following Escobar from 7<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I organized the findings into three areas. First, I examined the influences of two key male figures at Central City Middle School and the impact they had on Escobar's outlook on life and school. Second, I analyzed Escobar's behavior and engagement in school and his relationship with his peers and teachers. Finally, I looked at the maturation process that Escobar goes through as a young man and the decisions he makes to improve his life.

### **Learning from Male Influences**

As one of the most popular students at the school, Escobar was in tune with what was happening daily at CCMS. Even as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, he knew that he was a trendsetter and understood that other students looked up to him. Not only was Escobar popular with his peers, but also amongst teachers. When I first observed Escobar in Mr. Jackson's 7<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts class, he seemed a little distracted during class as he was always playful and constantly joking around with his friends Ganso and Memo. He was always friendly and excited to talk about soccer. He dreamt of growing up and becoming a professional soccer player, something he felt that he could accomplish if he worked hard. At this stage, his whole life revolved soccer. His friends played soccer, watched soccer and all dreamt of being professional soccer players.

Escobar developed a strong relationship with two adults at school who influenced his development – his Language Arts teacher Mr. Jackson and his soccer coach Ricardo. Escobar constantly had to negotiate between how his peers expected him to behave and what Mr. Jackson and Ricardo expected out of him. While they both wanted Escobar to do well, they sent him different messages. Coach Ricardo, as he was referred to, was a young Latino male in his early 20s who was also a youth minister at a local church. Ricardo addressed his players like a drill sergeant, often instilling fear in many of his players. Born in the border town along the U.S.-Mexico border, Ricardo grew up in Northern California and was involved in gang activity. Towards the end of high school, Ricardo moved to Central City and turned his life around. Regardless of how much he yelled at his players, Ricardo tried to instill respect onto his

players by constantly preaching about the need to respect women, each other their elders. Most of the members of the soccer team often confided in him and asked him for personal advice. Escobar considered Ricardo a big brother whom he could go to for advice when he was having problems.

I've known him for like three years now and I think of him more like a brother, like an older brother. And then I know I can talk to him. He tells us how to be respectful and nice and how to treat older people compared to your friends and stuff like that, and that really helps. That really helps you.

Escobar believed that Ricardo cared about him and would always do what was best for him and his teammates. He also recognized that Ricardo's form of caring was different than others, but always saw the positive side of Ricardo's coaching style.

[LAUGH] Well, he's kind of hard sometimes. It depends. Like if you get in trouble in school, he'll be hard in practice. It depends. But he's -- the things that he makes us do, if we run a lot during practice, I noticed that during the game we're faster than the other team. And I see that that helps.

Although their relationship appeared hostile, Escobar held Ricardo in high regard and considered him very influential in his development as a soccer player and as a young man. Ricardo admitted that he had a certain style that others did not like and was forward about it when he asked me to help him coach the soccer team. Because he was in charge of the soccer team, participants had no choice but to deal with Ricardo's coaching style.

Mr. Jackson, on the other hand, was a tall white male in his mid-30s who came from a working-class background. Before becoming a teacher, Mr. Jackson worked in the business sector and spent some time working for a couple of the professional sports teams in the area. He enjoyed some success athletically, having played amateur baseball in an independent league, but Mr. Jackson left his career in the private sector to go into teaching because he wanted something meaningful. Mr. Jackson constantly made references to lessons that his father taught him as a young man and still continued to teach him as an adult. He was one of the most popular teachers and treated everybody as a new

experience, never holding a grudge with anyone regardless of what happened the day before. Mr. Jackson also took his students' experiences into account and incorporated materials that were culturally relevant into his classes. Through his teaching, he attempted to validate the experiences of his students and their families.

Mr. Jackson and Escobar had known each other throughout middle school. When Escobar was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Jackson was a student teacher in Escobar's Language Arts class. The following year, he was hired and became the 7<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts teacher at CCMS and had Escobar in one of his classes. When Escobar started the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Jackson became the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher and maintained a close relationship with Escobar. Given that he had known most of the AVID students since they were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a greater level of comfort around him which caused students to push the boundaries and see how much they could get away with in class. Escobar was no exception to this.

Although they did not work together, Mr. Jackson and Ricardo both contributed to Escobar's development in different ways. Mr. Jackson's work with Escobar had focused on ensuring that he became a good student, one that maximized his education and his future. Ricardo taught Escobar how to be a man and his responsibility and leadership on and off the soccer field. Although supportive, Ricardo's support was carried out through strictness and discipline. While unintentional, Ricardo perpetuated many of the negative aspects at CCMS around punishment, by suspending players and kicking them off the team when they did not meet his expectations. Ricardo constantly policed the hallways of CCMS to make sure that his soccer players were doing their work and behaving in class. On several occasions, I witnessed Ricardo pull his soccer players and made them do a plank, an exercise in which a student would assume the pushup position and hold it until they were told to stop, or he would make them do pushups in the hallway. Ricardo also demanded grades from his players on a weekly basis and yelled at them if they did not have passing grades, often dropping papers on the ground when he saw a bad grade.

Without realizing, Escobar was going through an internal dilemma trying to decide what messages were more important. Escobar was caught

between being a good soccer player or a good student. Rather than doing both simultaneously, Escobar felt that he had to choose between the two, which in turn meant choosing between two adult figures. On one hand, Escobar knew that developing a close relationship with Mr. Jackson would benefit him academically as he would have a mentor and someone who could vouch for him when necessary. However, Mr. Jackson was a white man and an authority figure at the school. If he built a close relationship with Mr. Jackson, Escobar would run the risk of being perceived as a teacher's pet and be ostracized by some of his Latino peers who were not academically inclined. On the other hand, Escobar knew that developing a good relationship with Ricardo would mean more playing time and remain a starter, which would give him credibility with his peers. Despite the attitude that Ricardo displayed towards his players, Escobar followed Ricardo and believed that his relationship with Ricardo would benefit him the most.

### **Escobar's Dilemma**

As a student, Escobar was very eager to participate in class discussions. As a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, Escobar seemed more focused and engaged. In instances in which he would get the wrong answer during Language Arts class, Mr. Jackson would thank him for participating in the conversation and would explain to him why there may be a more appropriate answer. Over the course of my observations in Mr. Jackson's class, this was a common practice used to ensure that students did not feel discouraged when they got the wrong answer. His relationship with Escobar was different and he would often ask him to stay after class to talk about things a little more or just to check in with each other. Mr. Jackson and I would often talk about Escobar's performance in his class; he would mention instances in which he felt that Escobar was distracted. Towards the end of Escobar's 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Mr. Jackson expressed concern over Escobar's attitude and felt that he was being dismissive towards him, even a little disrespectful at times.

A few months later as the school year was about to end, I stayed after class to speak with Mr. Jackson, something that we would do on a regular basis to talk about my work and check in about issues at CCMS. He mentioned that students in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade AVID class wrote postcards to teachers and thanked them for

something that they had done for the students. Escobar wrote a postcard to Mr. Jackson in which he thanked him for not giving up on him and giving him a second chance after he had done something bad in the beginning of the year. However, Escobar's negative behavior continued throughout the remainder of the year and into summer.

Towards the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Escobar appeared to distance himself from Mr. Jackson, even as Mr. Jackson went out of his way to reach out to him. Escobar would deny that there was something different about his relationships with Mr. Jackson, even when I would ask him about things that I had observed.

Eligio: What's your relationship like with Mr. Jackson?

Escobar: *He's really nice. And if you have a problem in that class, he helps you and stuff. He doesn't get mad -- he has like perseverance. He helps you. Instead of getting like mad and frustrated.*

Eligio: I've sensed that there's a special relationship between the two of you.

Escobar: *Well, I've known -- like last year in Language Arts I had him, he like, he helped me a lot. And yeah.*

Eligio: But it seemed that he kind of goes out of his way for you.

Escobar: *Well, he helps everyone. He really cares about his students and stuff.*

Eligio: You don't feel that there's anything particular about the two of you guys?

Escobar: *Well, I don't know. Sometimes it's kind of cool because he plays soccer and baseball. He's like athletic, and that's cool.*

Observing the interactions between Escobar and Mr. Jackson, it was clear that Mr. Jackson grew frustrated at Escobar for refuting his attempts to reach out. While he respected Mr. Jackson, Escobar did not consider him an influential person in his life. Instead, Escobar preferred to follow Ricardo, who he considered to be a brother. As he explained, "He's like a brother to me, he always gives me advice about things like, how to treat women, how to behave in class and what to do when I have a problem." Regardless of how Ricardo treated Escobar during team meetings and games, Escobar valued their conversations and felt he cared about him more than anyone else at school.

Things reached a high point with Mr. Jackson when Escobar jumped over a desk on his way out

of class one day and Mr. Jackson yelled "REALLY!?" Escobar, however, did not give the incident much significance and continued with his day as if nothing happened. Mr. Jackson felt frustrated since he thought he had made progress with Escobar during the year, but after the Spring soccer season ended, Escobar lost focus and went back to the negative attitude and poor behavior he had the year before.

As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, Escobar's behavior continued to decline as his participation in class discussions consisted of telling jokes or making unsuitable suggestions to get a laugh from his peers. In one instance during a class discussion, Mr. Jackson, now the 8<sup>th</sup> grade AVID teacher, opened the floor for students to suggest how they could make AVID more engaging and meaningful during 8<sup>th</sup> grade. While most students suggested fun and easy things to do, Escobar suggested a chant, "Late! Late! Late!" for students that walked in late to class. Mr. Jackson responded by saying that he had already decided to not allow certain things in class as he did not want to single out any particular student for negative reasons. After class, Mr. Jackson approached Escobar and explained that he appreciated his participation during the group conversation and his suggestion was good and did not mean to say that he was wrong by shutting this down. By checking in with Escobar, Mr. Jackson wanted him to know that he was not dismissing his comment and instead validating Escobar's participation and voice in class.

Socially, Escobar remained one of the popular kids at CCMS, always the center of attention during lunch and someone who younger students looked up to. During lunch, he was always visible, always catching the attention of the popular female students. His behavior in class, however, was erratic, with many teachers wondering what had happened to him and why his grades had dropped so much. As soon as Escobar stepped on the soccer field, his demeanor would change; he would be respectful, take control of practice and was a leader on the field. Had I never observed Escobar during soccer practice or a game, I would have never known that his demeanor would completely change because of soccer.

As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, Escobar appeared to be two different people -- one in the classroom and another on the soccer field. By this point, Escobar had become dismissive of Mr. Jackson.

Soccer had become Escobar's top priority and his relationship with Ricardo was the most important thing at school. Because of his relationship with Ricardo and his role on the soccer team, Escobar's influence over his peers also grew significantly.

### **The Coming of Age of Escobar**

On a late September day, the CCMS Soccer Team played Keystone City and dominated the game from the onset. Keystone City had a smaller school enrollment and fielded a co-ed team made up mostly of female players. Escobar and the other starters played a handful of minutes and watched from the bench as the second and third stringers scored at will against the visiting team. Ricardo used this game as an opportunity to reward his backup players and as an opportunity to build true teamwork amongst his starters. He hoped that his starting players would cheer on their teammates the same way that his backup players usually cheered the starters during most games. With 15 minutes to play, Ricardo put in all of the starters but told them to simply pass the ball to one another, using the game as more of practice rather than a game. Keystone City took advantage of a few turnovers and quickly scored two goals to make the score 8-2. With five minutes to play, Ricardo yelled to his players, "Alright, do what you have to do!" leading to an onslaught as the CCMS team moved from their half of the field onto the other team's half, scoring three goals in a matter of moments.

Inside the locker room after the game, Escobar was visibly upset. As I approached him, he looked at me and said in Spanish, "I scored a goal but he [Coach] only played us for like five minutes. If not we would have scored more." I then asked him if he understood why he had not played much and he said no. I asked him how many minutes he had played in the previous week's game which had been hugely contested and saw Central City comeback from two goals down to win 3-2. He told me that he played every minute of that game. I asked him if he thought if it was right for other players who practiced just as hard as him, to sit on the bench the entire time while he played the entire game, he responded "no." Initially, this was a lesson in maturity and teamwork; however, this would prove to be a pivotal point in the maturation of Escobar and his perspectives about Ricardo and Mr. Jackson.

While I had also felt Escobar distancing himself from Mr. Jackson, I did not foresee him distancing himself from Ricardo shortly thereafter. In the weeks that followed the game against Keystone City, CCMS boys' soccer team lost in the league semifinals to their rivals at Star City on penalty kicks, making it the first time that the team failed to reach the championship game. That season, the team had also lost the most games in a single season. For many of the players, losing the championship felt like their hearts had been torn out of their chest. For Escobar, something happened, for the first time, his team was no longer the best team and he was no longer the best player in the district, making him feel lost and insecure.

During the last week before winter break, an incident happened at school in which a student brought a water bottle filled with liquor to campus and shared it with other students. Two other male students and two female students got caught and were suspended for drinking. As I got to school, I pulled Escobar aside to try to figure out what was happening. In a flurry he yelled, "They're stupid, they drank tequila. They're dumb, they don't know what they're doing, they think they're tough, it's really dumb." Escobar went on to say that the people who did it were trying to be cool, and did not care about their future anymore. Shortly after that, winter break came and everyone left for the holidays with the incident unresolved.

After an extended absence from Central City, I returned in February without informing any of the students that I would be back. I sat on a table speaking with Mr. Jackson waiting for the AVID students to come into class after lunch. As the students walked in, they greeted me and asked me where I had been. When Escobar and his best friend Ganso walked in, Escobar froze in mid-sentence as his jaw dropped. He ran past Ganso to give me a hug, but Ganso pulled his backpack so that he could get to me first. Both of them hugged me at the same time, almost throwing me off the table. They were both excited and asked me questions about where I had been and why I did not return to school after the break. Escobar's initial excitement later turned into a bit of resentment and abandonment as I did not follow him to his next class and did not stay to hang out with them after school over the next few days.

It was during this period of time that I noticed that something was different with Escobar but

was not sure about what exactly was going on. As I returned to CCMS more consistently, I began observing Escobar closely to try to understand what was going through his mind. Through January, there had been a sense of abandonment amongst the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Latino males. After losing in the semifinals, Coach Ricardo left the school to help coordinate the creation of an afterschool program at a different middle school. Given the overlap in Ricardo's departure and my extended absence at the school, the Latino males felt that there was nobody that cared about them and many of them gave up academically. Upon my return, many of the teachers approached me and asked me if I knew what was going on with them. In addition to the low academic performance, some of the boys had started engaging in deviant behavior. The absence of a male figure of color led many of the soccer players to distance themselves from the school culture, despite some of the efforts by some teachers.

Escobar had seemed to give up as his grades dropped to mostly D's and F's. During this time, we had talked constantly about what he was thinking and how he felt about school and his future. Looking around him, all of his peers were also struggling academically and many were getting in trouble frequently. Ganso and Pablo, whom Escobar considered two of his closest friends, were doing poorly and had been suspended. Escobar was caught in a crossroads; he did not know if he should follow his friends down the path they were taking or if he should turn his behavior around and start caring about school and his future. Having been in control of his life during middle school, for the first time, Escobar did not know what to do. He also did not have Ricardo there to give him advice about how to move forward.

One day after school in early February, I was in the counseling center working on a project with Escobar and another student. Ganso was also supposed to be there but did not show as he had agreed to earlier in the day. After an hour and a half, Ganso finally showed up and I was visibly upset at him and I started talking to him about how disappointed I was in him since we just had a talk about being responsible a few days earlier and how he showed up late leaving his friend hanging to work on the project. As he started doing his work, we began to talk about their views about school and how they felt that race impacted their lives. In particular, how most of the Latino boys were misbehaving and how the

perceptions that teachers had of Latino students were turning negative.

Escobar began to talk to Ganso and shared his concerns with him about their future. Escobar turned to Ganso and told him, "You know I was thinking the other day at my house of how cool it would be if we grew up together and were still friends when we were older." Ganso put his head down and the room went silent. Escobar continued,

I was thinking that I don't want to do any of that stuff anymore, I want to be the best student that I can be. I don't care what others think about me, I just want to be a good kid and be successful.

This moment of reflection was pivotal and was a turning point for Escobar. For the past few months, he had been struggling with balancing himself socially with his peers and academically with his teachers. His coach who he had relied on had left and his relationship with Mr. Jackson had been deteriorating since the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade. He was left without an older male figure to look towards and relied on his peers more, even if they were going down the wrong steps.

As spring hit, there was something different about Escobar -- there was a certain glow to him that had not been there before. During our last interview he told me, "Since the quarter began I've been keeping my grades above C's. And like a lot of my teachers have been complimenting me." His academic achievements were winning him praise from his teachers and he became comfortable with the success that accompanied it. Socially, he had distanced himself from some of the negative influences that his peers were caught up in and was more attentive and active during class conversations. He also rebuilt the relationship that he had with Mr. Jackson and checked in with him regularly. Escobar's performance was noticed by his peers and he repeatedly told them to stop messing around and do their work so that they could not only play soccer but also get ready for the future. Sitting down and talking about the change, he simply said:

Since we had those talks about life and how you should take school...like not mess around the whole time but actually try in school. I was talking to [my coaches] and then my social studies teacher from last year

was talking to me, telling me to get my grades up. So like, I decided to keep my grades up.

During this and subsequent conversations, there was a sound of maturity in his voice and while he would still act like a kid his age and joke around with his friends, he was more focused and determined than before.

By the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Escobar had made a complete transformation from who he was at the beginning of the study. No longer did he make excuses when his academic performance dropped, instead he accepted the responsibility and worked hard in the areas that he needed to improve. Escobar felt ready and willing to accept the challenges that high school would bring:

I think I'm ready for high school. Like I know what it's going to be like, because one day when AVID, since I'm taking AVID, we spent the whole day at [a high school]. So I got to see how it feels, how it looks. It's actually not that hard. You just gotta keep up with the work and not mess around. I'm not prepared like "oh my god" like I'm ready to go. I don't feel so bad about it. I think I'm ready.

In addition, he had moved away from only wanting to become a professional soccer player and started considering other careers, including engineering. His maturation was largely personified by how he chose to define himself as a student and not just a soccer player. Escobar came to terms with the fact that he could be a good student and a good soccer player, and how these two aspects of his identity were complementary instead of conflicting.

## Discussion

Escobar's maturation is an example of the many dilemmas that young Chicano/Latino males must negotiate during middle school. Just like most young men of color, Escobar dreamed of improving his life through sports, not caring about the consequences of failing to prepare himself academically and having a backup plan. His struggles with his identity were evident as he negotiated between fitting in with his friends or listening to Mr. Jackson and becoming a good student. Escobar was caught in what Carter (2006) calls "straddling boundaries" having to choose between listening to his white teacher or continuing to follow the influence of his peers

and coach. Part of this sentiment was attributed to interactions that Escobar and his peers had with other teachers who treated Latino students poorly.

The major transformation that occurred for Escobar was that he was no longer defined as simply just a soccer player, but rather he had now become defined by his academic achievements. Escobar wanted to prove that you could be a Latino male and be a good student as well. This transformation was made possible by continued persistence by Mr. Jackson who never gave up on him and fostered a relationship with Escobar, and by his involvement in the AVID class that provided him with additional opportunities. Other young men were not as fortunate and did not have the consistent mentoring that Escobar had, which led many of them to make poor decisions and limited their academic engagement. While Escobar was able to push and encourage some of his friends to improve their grades and their behavior, the lack of consistent mentors was very damaging for their development.

While athletics, in this case soccer, can be viewed as a way that masculinity is reproduced in schools given the structure that the soccer coach created, there are a few lessons that can be learned. First, for Escobar and many of his peers, soccer was the main form of engagement in the school. Being eligible to play soccer is what motivated Escobar to do well academically, even if temporarily. Second, it took a combination of mentoring from Ricardo and Mr. Jackson to help Escobar navigate through his identity exploration process. While not in competition with one another, they both provided Escobar with important lessons about leadership, respect, and commitment, something that must be further explored to help young men of color understand what it means to be a male of color. Finally, just like Escobar, young men of color go through the K-12 school system every day without the proper guidance. Educators and practitioners must be able to recognize the many ways young men of color engage and seek validation. Like Mr. Jackson, educators must be willing to step outside of the box and meet students at their level.

## Implications for Practice

Escobar's experience provides several lessons about how to close the opportunity gap for Latino males. First, it is important to recognize

that Escobar was a young man trying to figure out who he was. As such, his behavior was the result of Escobar being a teenage boy. Mr. Jackson's approach to Escobar is a great example of how teachers can engage and work with Latino males. Mr. Jackson recognized that Escobar was not rebelling against his or the school's authority, but rather he was in the middle of trying to figure out who he was as a young Latino male. Instead of giving up on Escobar, Mr. Jackson was persistent and got through to Escobar. Educators must learn not be so quick to pass judgement, but rather understand the developmental stage that students are going through and seek ways to engage them.

Second, while participation in athletics has been known to help engage young men of color, it can also limit their academic opportunities (Martinez & Huerta, 2018; Conchas, Lin, Oseguera, & Drake, 2015). Alternative forms of engagement that consider students' background and interest must be identified. As we saw with Escobar and his peers, they performed well academically during soccer season but struggled after. Educators must find ways to capitalize on students' interest in athletics and continue to engage students around other activities that consider their interest and background.

Finally, educators must identify ways to support young men of color during this critical developmental stage. In addition to coaching students, Ricardo also taught discipline and respect towards others, in particular to women. Ricardo recognized that these conversations were important and critical to showing young men the value of respect. Mr. Jackson also recognized the importance of having students see themselves in the curriculum and often incorporated readings and materials that discussed the Latino community. One of the unintended consequences of this is that it allowed students to imagine themselves as being successful. Teachers must show students that their academic performance does not conflict with their culture (Carey, 2018).

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