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Adriana Ayala Hire

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES AND FACTORS IN
K-12 EDUCATION THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE
ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF LATINO STUDENTS
OF MEXICAN DESCENT

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development:
Higher Ed and P-12 Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

May 2015

This Dissertation by: Adriana Ayala-Hire

Entitled: *An Exploration of the Experiences and Factors in K-12 Education that Contributed to the Academic Success of Latino Students of Mexican Descent*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development: Higher Ed and P-12 Education, Program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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ABSTRACT

Hire, Adriana Ayala. *An Exploration of the Experiences and Factors in K-12 Education that Contributed to the Academic Success of Latino Students of Mexican Descent*. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2015.

The high percentages of Latinos entering U.S. public schools and the high population predictions for the next decades have been highlighting the urgency to prepare Latinos for upward social mobility through educational attainment. Latinos have been the largest minority in the United States, yet for more than 2 centuries their educational attainment has been lagging behind White, Black, and Asian students. This narrative study explored the experiences and factors in K-12 education that contributed to the academic success of 14 Latinos students of Mexican descent who broke the odds placed against them by following a pre-college path in high school or by successfully attending a 4-year college or university.

Eight high school seniors on track to go to college, 3 seniors in college, and 3 college students of Mexican descent participated in 14 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Participants were chosen based on their ethnicity, grade point average, and being the first generation in their family to attend college. Data from interview transcripts, autobiographies, school records, field journal notes, and personal artifacts were triangulated and analyzed to conclude findings. The epistemology for this study was

grounded in constructionism in which meaning was constructed through a qualitative study conducted with participants as they engaged and interpreted their own lived experiences. The main results from this study indicated there were specific common threads among successful students that could be replicated with other students.

Major findings indicated that academic rigor in advanced level classes, discipline, and high expectations from teachers and other adults were imperative to academic achievement; critical thinking was necessary to navigate conflicts derived from asserting one's Latino identity; academic English acquisition happened in mainstreamed, rigorous classes but it was often delayed in English as a Second Language Programs; mentors and pre-college programs significantly increased the likelihood for Latinos to successfully plan, matriculate, and finish college; and financial support determines whether or not Latino students enroll in college. The implications of sharing the common characteristics of the 14 participants of this study could illuminate educators in the right direction to help Latinos overcome educational barriers that hinder their educational promise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres. . . . Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. (Barthes, 1981, p. 65)

My mother insisted that hard work always paid off and that there was no substitute for it. She was my first teacher. She taught me to be brave in the face of adversity and inspired me to dare to overcome life's obstacles. Antonina Anchondo was and will continue to be my greatest role model. Even when she has been gone for many years, her presence around me is still palpable. This dissertation is a delivered promise I made to her. Thank you for your unconditional love and for believing in me, *te amo mamá*.

I would also like to thank my family for allowing me to be absent from their lives for the past four years that I have been immersed in this educational endeavor. You knew it was important for me and you made every accommodation possible so that I could succeed. This accomplishment is yours as much as it is mine. Denisse and Chris, I can only hope that I am able to instill in you as much love and determination as my mother instilled in me. To my husband Greg, thank you for believing in me when I doubted myself and for not letting me quit. Your support is the reason why I am at the end of this journey. My grandchildren Kenneth and Eva, you are my sunshine. Your loving faces helped me get through the days when my mind and body felt depleted.

To Linnea and Jen, my dissertation sisters, who always had a word of wisdom or a funny comment for me, thank you for keeping me moving forward, we did it!

To my advisors Dr. Linda Vogel and Dr. Spencer Weiler for your continued guidance and support. Your honest feedback and your encouraging words allowed me to keep the eyes on the prize. You were my mentors, my role models, and my friends. Your leadership kept me in this journey that has ultimately changed my life forever--Thank you! Dr. Madeline Milian, your kind smile and your knowledge of my subject area helped me refine the focus of my perspective so that this study could yield significant contributions to the field of Latino education.

Last but not least, to my amazing participants who shared with me their insights so that together we may help bring other Latinos out of the shadows of academic underachievement. By analyzing your stories, I was finally able to analyze mine. I will be forever grateful to you and to the promise you represent for others.

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CHAPTER I
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LATINO
UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Research Problem

The academic underachievement of Latino students has received additional attention in the past decade (Irizarry, 2011) after the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 was passed. The Latino population has continued to grow at greater rates than any other minority in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 1970, the population of Latinos was 9.6 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). That figure more than doubled by 1990 and, by 2011, the Latino population had reached more than 52 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Consequently, national policy has emphasized the urgency for a reduction of the achievement gap between specific populations (Billig, Jaime, Abrams, Fitzpatrick, & Kendrick, 2005) such as students of color and White students, between students from lower socioeconomic status and those from middle-class, and between students who were learning English in U.S. schools and those who were native speakers (Irizarry, 2011).

Despite the recent national awareness of Latino low-academic achievement (Gándara & Contreras, 2009), educational statistics have been perplexing (Aud et al., 2013). Forty-one percent of Latinos 20 years of age or older did not have a high school diploma, compared to 23.0% of Blacks and 14.0% of Whites from the same age bracket (Fry, 2010). This alarming fact of Latino underachievement had often been addressed by

educational leaders who were committed to social justice (Dantley & Tillman, 2010) as it represented a threat to the economy and to the social fabric of this country (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). The aforementioned facts were not new, nonetheless, as there was evidence that the educational opportunities and outcomes for Latinos had been “contested” for over a century, yet “history books” (San Miguel, 2013, p. 1) neglected to acknowledge these struggles until late into the 20th century. At the time when school districts and state governments across America were looking for ways to diminish the achievement gap that existed between students of poverty and/or color and other groups, it was perhaps both the best of times, due to the rich information available to educators and practitioners, and the worst of times, because of the longevity of this issue and the present education crisis, to bring about innovation and change so that the critical issue of Latino underachievement in schools was improved.

Taking up the challenges of educating poor and minority students, however, has not been an easy task. It has required school leaders to hold difficult conversations about opportunity, race, and inequalities in education and in society (Singleton, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2005). Hence, if the current flow of opportunity for underprivileged groups is to ever change course, then in schools across America “the most urgent challenge has a Latino face” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 1).

With the high percentages of Latinos entering U.S. public schools and the high population predictions for the next decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), it was urgent that better educational systems were devised to support the academic achievement of all students in order to meet the demands of the 21st century and, in particular, to prepare poor and minority children for upward social mobility through educational attainment.

Doing so would require different kinds of analysis. It would require analysis that also included learners' voices in the mix, namely youths themselves (Irizarry, 2011; Lumby, 2012). James (2007) stated that groups who have less power should be encouraged to speak about their experiences, as this kind of analysis was a new and accepted "trend" (p. 261) in the social science research methods.

Purpose Statement

With the aforesaid in mind, the purpose of this study was to analyze academic experiences among Latino students who were able to break the odds by following a successful pre-college path in high school and by successfully graduating from a 4-year college. To guide the data collection for this study, the researcher departed from gathering the negative discourse that plagued the literature regarding Latino education and, instead, asked, listened, and analyzed the positive experiences that contributed to the academic success of Latino students who were currently college-bound seniors in high school, college seniors, or recent college graduates. The purpose was to encourage these young people to speak and construct meaning of their lived experiences.

Personal Philosophy

My philosophy of education has been shaped by my experiences as a Latina educator working closely with poor and minority students for the past 22 years. My philosophy has been grounded in the belief that promoting access to high quality education for all students was necessary to perpetuate American democratic values. My philosophy's major pillar has been my commitment to social justice as I have tried to eliminate the subordinate status of certain groups in American school systems. After many years of intense work with poor and minority students and their families, I have

come to the conclusion that I could no longer do work which did not have a direct impact on oppressed groups.

Through the continued challenges and growth that I have experienced in my career, I have come to the realization that schools are the main transmitters of cultural values and are the places where personal ideologies are tested and contested. I believe that as the United States has continued to transform into a multicultural and multiracial society, the future would be greatly determined by whether or not the racial and socioeconomic discrepancies in educational attainment were diminished. Hence, my commitment to social justice has led me to seek answers through critical theory lenses aiming at understanding the roots of oppression to then find ways to liberate the oppressed. I believe that, through hard work and determination, oppressed individuals can overcome the challenges placed upon them and shape their lives. I believe that my commitments to educational research would not only enhance the opportunities that lied ahead for me personally but also the opportunities of those who would cross my path.

Historical Perspective on Latino Education

For the past 2 centuries, the history of Latino education has documented a trend of inequalities. Delgado-Gaitan (2001) stated that, during the early 1800s, the purpose of schools was to acculturate, or Americanize, immigrants from Europe. Likewise, the last part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries were filled with educational historians documenting the need for schools to shape a just society by assimilating immigrants into “full-fledged Americans” (Donato, 1997, p. 11). Subsequently, while most Europeans quickly assimilated during this time, schools not only failed to integrate people of color who already constituted a significant part of the population but also promoted segregation

among them (Donato, 1997). Hence, the origins of school inequalities have been deeply rooted within the history of coexistence between the different ethnic and racial groups in their struggle for political and economic control (Valencia, R. R., 2011).

After the war between the United States and Mexico in 1848, many Latinos found themselves incorporated into new U.S. territory through military conquest decreed by the statutes of the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* (1848). The *Treaty* officially ended the war, yet the political, economic, educational, and social status of Latinos in the United States was never the same after it. Del Castillo (1992) noted that, with the “arrogance” (p. xii) gained by victory and dominance, the United States legitimized trends of inequalities between all the ethnic and racial groups that existed, and a new era of inferiority and second-class status began for Latinos. After the border “cut through [their] communities in 1848” (Moreno, 1999, p. 9), many Latinos believed that the government’s intention was to deprive them of their cultural heritage, their language, and values. This led to strong feelings of rejection toward the new rules of the land that were being imposed on Latinos as “conquered” people (Acuña, 1972, p. 9).

Marginalization of Latinos in Public Schools

Acuña (2011) indicated that the surrender of the Southwest territory destined Latinos living in the United States to years and years of discrimination. Donato (1997) added that, from the second half of the 1800s until well past the mid-1900s, Latino students were forced into segregated schools. This segregation was considered one of the main causes of the widespread history of academic underachievement for Latinos (Valencia, R. R., 2008). Further impacting this group was that, in American public schools, the use of the Spanish language was prohibited while English became the official

language (Moreno, 1999). This attitude that negated the Spanish language and culture among Latinos created public division and hostility and denied them a fair chance to a quality education (Moreno, 1999). With a government that had already implemented a “legacy of discrimination” (Menchaca, 1999, p. 24), the United States diminished the number of educated citizens that could vote, further spreading the perception that Latinos were foreign aliens who did not belong in U.S. society.

Starting at the end of the 19th century, the Catholic Church began establishing schools throughout the Southwest where many Latino children received their education in highly segregated environments (San Miguel, 1999). These schools, however segregated, were more successful at educating Latinos due to their dedicated teachers who taught for less money, the support they received from the Spanish-speaking community who strove to preserve their culture, religion, and identity, and the Catholic Church’s respect for the Latino culture and language (San Miguel, 1999). Government-supported public schools were also spreading across the country, but Latinos did not benefit from their propagation because those schools did not support Latinos in their struggle for integration.

Additionally, the financial issues resulting from World War I and from the Great Depression only intensified the racial and social conflicts between Latino and White citizens (Donato, 1997). Furthermore, Donato (1997) stated that Latino children were segregated into Latino schools because school officials had found it vital for them to work on their language and cultural deficiencies before they could be mainstreamed in public schools with White children. By 1930, 85.0% of Latinos children were segregated in Latino schools or classrooms (Donato, 1997). Segregation continued throughout the

20th century despite the several court cases that were aimed at desegregating schools and improving education for all students.

School Desegregation Court Cases Affecting Latinos

Three significant court cases, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), *Méndez v. Westminster School District* (1946), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), brought national attention to the issues of segregation that affected African American and Latino students. In the first case, Homer Plessy, a citizen from Louisiana with one-eighth African-American blood was sent to jail because he rode the train's White section. In his defense, Plessy contended that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution protected him from slavery and involuntary servitude and afforded him the same benefits as any other citizen of the United States of America with equal protection under the law. Despite his arguments, John H. Ferguson, judge of the Criminal District Court for the Parish of Orleans, found Plessy guilty. The *Plessy* case was later appealed in the Supreme Court to no avail. The result was a *Separate but Equal* doctrine, which stated that segregated facilities were acceptable as long as they were equal in quality (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

Méndez v. Westminster (1946) represented the story of Gonzalo Méndez on his quest to end segregation for Latino children in public schools in California. After a school in Westminster, California, denied enrollment to Gonzalo's three children but accepted their cousins who were half Italian and who had lighter skin, Gonzalo Méndez, along with four other Latino parents, appeared in a federal court to demand change of the segregation laws that kept Latino children relegated to inferior schools (Strum, 2010). *Méndez* was the first court case that challenged segregation laws arguing that separate

was not equal in K-12 public education and, therefore, was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Valencia, R. R., 2008). Strum (2010) mentioned that about a year after the filing of *Méndez v. Westminster*, Judge Paul J. McCormick's decision ended *de jure* segregation in California stating that:

The equal protection of the laws pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, text books and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to the other public school children regardless of their ancestry. . . . A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage. (p. 125)

R. R. Valencia (2008) stated that segregation in California did not end after the *Méndez* decision and that Latino students became even more segregated in the decades that followed but that the ruling had paved the way for national movements against ethnic and racial segregation in schools. *Méndez* has been known as a precursor to *Brown* (Strum, 2010).

In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Oliver Brown's young daughter was denied the right to attend an all-White elementary school that was close to her house. Instead, she had to cross the railroad track and walk more than 20 blocks to arrive to her all-Black school. The judges from a federal court in Kansas argued that the schools were equal and, therefore, there was no violation of the law. The case then went to the Supreme Court where the following words that have been often referenced in the literature of civil rights were used to stamp the verdict: "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of *Separate but Equal* has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, p. 1). *Brown* ended the legal segregation of students, but it would take a long time before the law

would be implemented with noticeable results (Spring, 2007). Hence, Spring (2007) concluded, the frustration of the people regarding the rate at which students were being integrated into public schools, along with other forms of discrimination prevalent during and after the *Brown* ruling, contributed to the beginning of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

While *Brown* mandated that citizens could not be discriminated against based on ethnic, cultural, or racial characteristics, some politicians in the Southwest continued to devise laws and mandates to segregate Black and Latino children in schools. For Blacks, color was the reason for separation. For Latinos, however, ethnic and language background were the excuse for keeping them isolated (Donato, 1997).

Activism During and After the Civil Rights Era

Despite the situation in public schools, Latinos held education in high regard and never ceased to engage in political battles to fight segregation in public schools (González, 1999). Freire (2000), in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, questioned, “Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (p. 27). Hence, during the Civil Rights movement, Latino parents and students started to be more vocal about their evident oppression and began to take action (Donato, 1997). They fought in federal courts regarding the inequalities of education that went from the oversimplified conclusions that Latinos were deficient according to results from “IQ” (González, 1999, p. 71) tests to the overt discrimination based on language and culture. The emergence of Latino organizations such as La Raza, Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), Aztlán, and leaders such as Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez, Sal Castro, Cesar Chavez, and Reies Tijerina led to organized public protests and

solidarity among Latinos during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s (Acuña, 1972). Minor victories were won during the first half of the 1960s as a result of years of activism by Latino leaders. Schools became more integrated and the curriculum started to include Latino history and culture, bilingual instruction, and more Latino teachers were recruited (Acuña, 1972).

Notwithstanding the progress made in increasing the margin of inclusion among Latino children in public schools during the last century, the issues that were highly debated regarding the education of Spanish-speaking Latino children today were parallel to those debated over a century ago. Schools have been microcosms of society and have continually reflected the issues that affect individuals who share similar characteristics (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991), be it race, language, culture, physical attributes, or socioeconomic status.

Latino Underachievement

Even when the advancements in civil rights and educational equality for minorities in the United States have led to an increase in the number of Latinos receiving 2- and 4-year degrees, as shown in Figure 1.1, Latinos still trailed other groups in college completion rates, as indicated in Figure 1.2 (Carey, 2004; Fry & Lopez, 2012). Likewise, Gándara and Contreras (2009) stated that Latinos were “stalled” (p. 5) when it came to educational attainment. Only 13.4% of all Latinos 25 and older had a 4-year college degree, while for Blacks the rate was 18.7%, for Whites 31.8%, and for Asians 50.3% (Motel & Patten, 2011). If this college completion rate did not increase drastically, there would be a national crisis in the next decades as the demographics for the Latino population were expected to grow dramatically (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). In this

regard, Fry and Gonzales (2008) stated that the Latino school-age population was expected to grow more than 150.0% by the year 2050 and that Latino youths would be the largest group of students in U.S. schools.

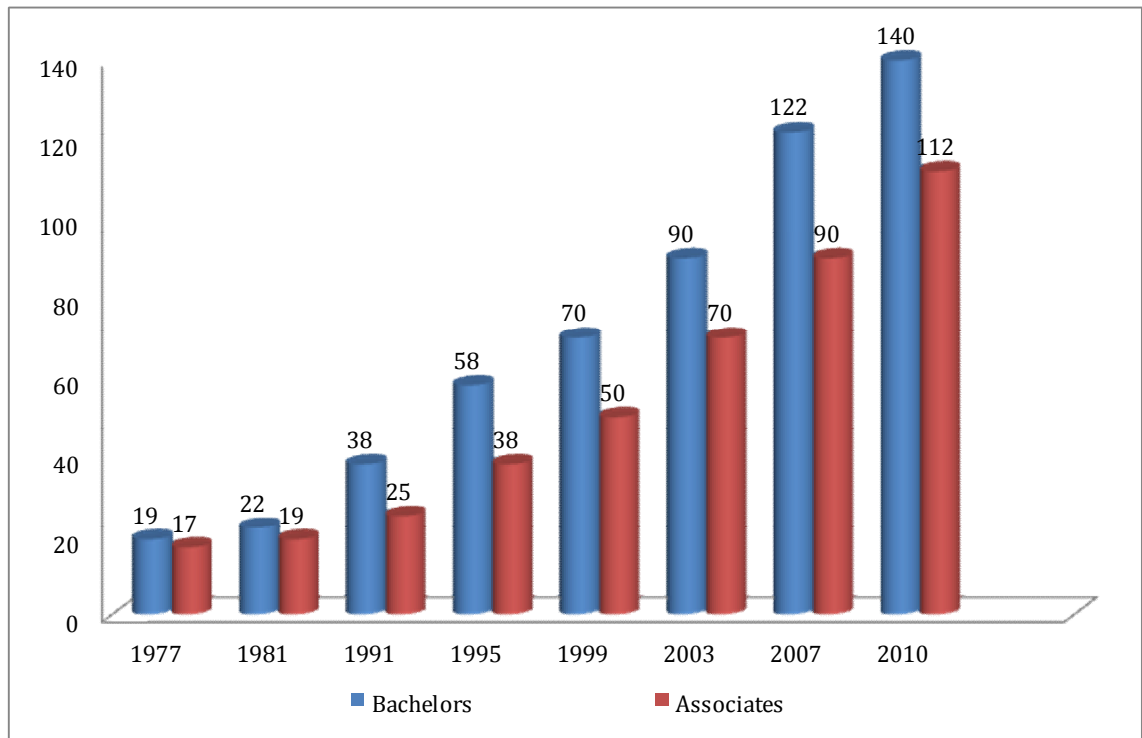
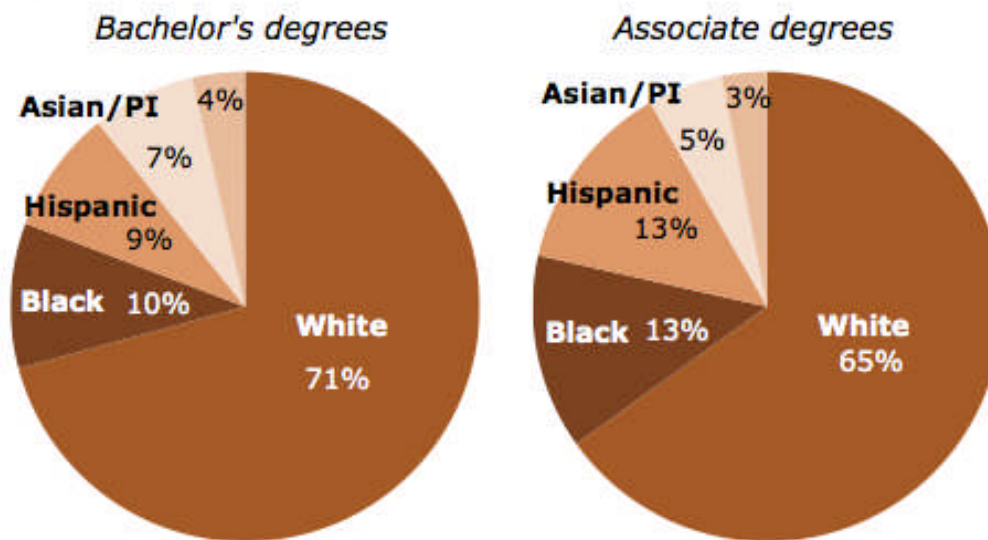


Figure 1.1. Number of hispanics earning associate and bachelor's degrees (in thousands). As the Latino population has increased, so has the number of bachelor's and associate's degrees granted to them. Adapted from "Hispanic Student Enrollments Reach New Highs in 2011" by R. Fry and M. H. Lopez, 2012, *Pew Hispanic Center*, p. 11, Pew Hispanic Center.

In recent years, the achievement gap between the different ethnic and racial groups in the United States has been made evident by quantifiable indices such as results from standardized tests, college enrollment, college completion rates, and income brackets. According to Aud et al. (2013) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms

another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant, that is, larger than the margin of error” (p. 210).



Notes: White, black, Asian and other includes only the non-Hispanic portions of those groups. Unlabeled slices include non-Hispanic American Indians/Alaska Natives and non-resident aliens. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Degree-granting institutions grant associate or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

Figure 1.2. Degrees conferred by race/ethnicity 2010. Adapted from “Hispanic Student Enrollments Reach New Highs in 2011” by R. Fry, M.H. Lopez, 2012, *Pew Hispanic Center*, p. 11.

Consequently, the answers to the achievement gap have been explored by analyzing and addressing test score discrepancies, graduation rates, dropout rates, teaching practices, and policies in academic circles, which apparently have not rendered the expected gains in Latino academic achievement. Figure 1.3 shows that the achievement gap between Latinos and Whites has narrowed in high school completion, yet Figure 1.4 indicates that the gap in college completion has widened in the past 20 years (Aud et al., 2011). This gap between high school graduation and college completion

has brought up a question of the academic level and college readiness of high school graduates.

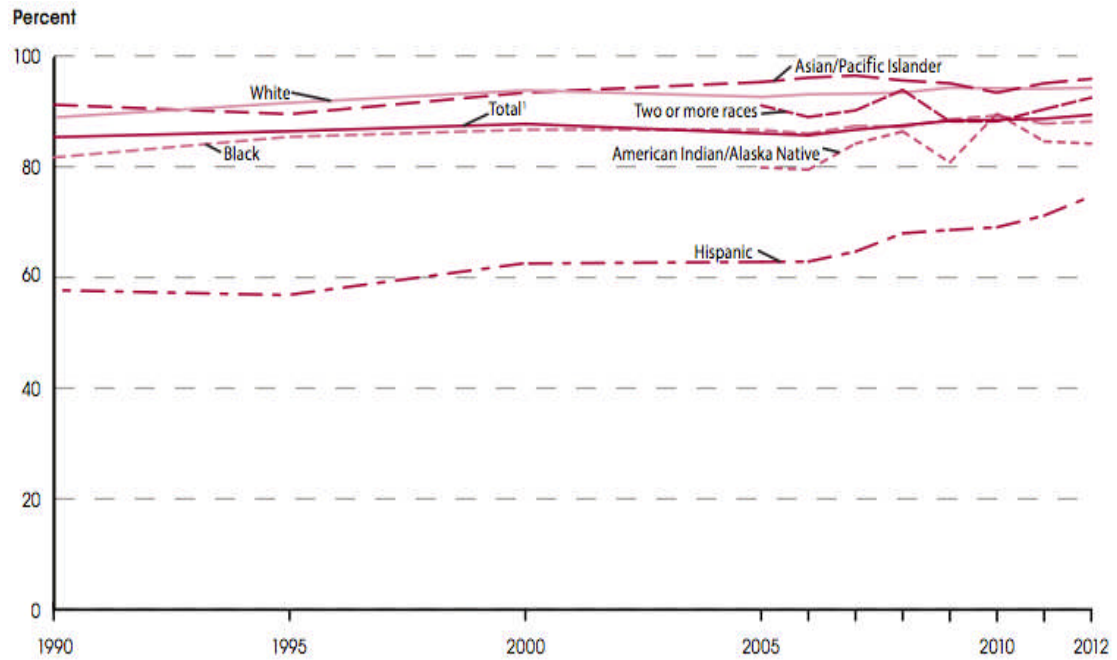


Figure 1.3. Percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds who completed at least a high school diploma or its equivalent by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1990-2012.

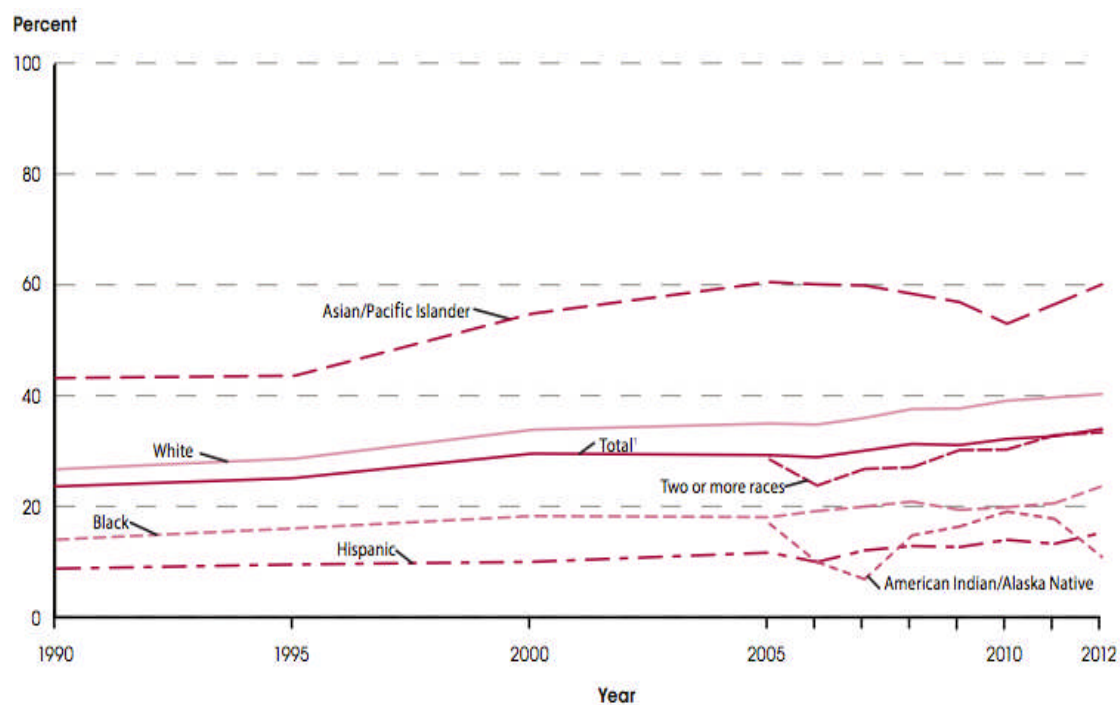


Figure 1.4. Percentage of 25-to 29-year-olds with a bachelor's degree or higher by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1990-2012.

Despite significant gains in the education of Latino students in the past decades as shown by improvements in graduation and dropout rates, “educational changes and reforms have not been entirely successful in eradicating Latino students’ chronic underachievement” (Gonzalez & Soltero, 2011, p. 263). In Colorado, the data retrieved from the Colorado Department of Education (2013a) has shown that Black and Latino students have consistently underperformed when compared to White students in every subject measured by the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and by the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP)¹. Table 1.1 displays data from the 2013 TCAP scores which showed that 52.77% of Latino students were proficient or

¹ CSAP was the name of the Colorado state standardized test that after 16 years was replaced for TCAP in 2012.

advanced in reading, 37.65% in writing, 40.17% in math, and 29.0% in science. In comparison, White students were 80.0%, 65.56%, 66.97%, and 63.33% proficient or advance, and Black students were 52.02%, 37.83%, 35.5%, and 28.8%, respectively. The gap between these groups has remained constant since the implementation of these state tests.

Table 1.1

Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) 2013 Detail by Ethnicity on Percentage of Proficient and Advanced in All Content Areas

	Black	Latino	White
Reading	52.02%	52.77%	80.00%
Writing	37.83%	37.65%	65.56%
Math	35.50%	40.17%	66.97%
Science	28.80%	29.00%	63.33%

Discrepancies in CSAP and TCAP test scores have raised concerns among educators in Colorado on the effectiveness of state schools to prepare minority students for post-secondary educational opportunities. At the same time, focusing mainly on test scores might have created a myopic view that neglected to contemplate other important indicators of student success (Irizarry, 2011). According to Marshall and Oliva (2010), state testing and accountability increased the emphasis on improving the curriculum and instruction to meet high standards, but the same accountability measures also narrowed the focus to look at standardized test results only. Because of the “obsession” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 95) with test scores, educators have not spent the time needed to measure skills that were not demonstrated by those scores and this oversight may have widened the

academic gap. Besides test scores, there are other important measures of accountability and equity that ought to be included in the evaluation of school effectiveness, such as the dropout and graduation rates for minority students (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Likewise, Harris (2007) suggested that using NCLB measures of accountability to interpret student achievement in the academic context failed to include the importance of family and socioeconomic status in student academic achievement outcomes. For this reason, Harris (2007) argued that the data from testing mandated under NCLB was “flawed” (p. 389) and inadequate to guide and sustain academic improvement in high-poverty, high-minority schools across the United States.

Gonzalez and Soltero (2011) conducted a study to interpret Latino underachievement using multidimensional methods. Their findings indicated that, beyond teaching the standardized curriculum, educators needed to analyze and validate Latino history and culture in order to help students understand their social and political status in society. Educators have a “critical social and moral responsibility in Latino education” (Gonzalez & Soltero, 2011, p. 275) for they need to step into the role of advocates and role models to help Latino students fully develop their academic potential.

Valdés (1996) explained school failure among non-mainstreamed Latino students with three arguments that differed from the more common issues such as segregation or language. The first was the “generic argument” which claimed that certain groups were inherently inferior based on their race. This argument, Valdés clarified, has been rejected by researchers and scholars but was often used as the reason to explain the low-academic achievement of Latino students. The second was the “cultural argument” arguing that Latino students, or students of poverty, self-preserved their own cycle of

underachievement due mainly to the lack of role models in their communities and the lack of support they received from their parents. The third was the “class analysis argument” which argued that the schooling system in America was designed to maintain class differences among students, often deceiving students of poverty by making them believe that they were responsible for their own lack of academic success. Valdés stated that students who failed left schools with a strong conviction that their place in society was with the working class, because they were not able to achieve academically at the same level as their peers in higher classes. Latino students left our schools for many reasons but lacked of academic success, known also as underachievement, was one that pushed them out of school without a high school diploma and left them ill prepared to pursue a college degree.

Hence, the rapid growth trend for the Latino populace in the United States has represented a challenge for educators when dealing with the group’s prevalent underachievement crisis. In Colorado in particular, the Latino population has seen an increase of 45% in the last 10 years, becoming the eighth state in terms of the size of its Latino population (Brown & Lopez, 2013). Furthermore, data retrieved from the Pew Research Hispanic Center (2013) indicated that there were 51.9 million Latinos in the United States and that native and foreign born constituted 10.6% and 6.0% of the U.S. population, respectively, for a sum of 16.7% of the total population. Whites constituted 63.3% and Blacks 12.3% making these the three largest groups in America. A 55.0% increase in the Latino population made them the fastest growing group in the last 10 years. Mexicans represented two thirds of all Latinos, making up 65.0% of the total Latino population in the United States.

Graduation Rates

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2013), the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was the number of diplomas granted in a given year calculated by a percentage of the estimated freshman class 4 years earlier. Figure 1.5 indicates that, at the national level, the Latino high school completion rate has grown from 50.0% in 1972 to 72.7% in 2011. In Colorado, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2013b) reported that, in 2012, the statewide graduation rate increased 1.5 percentage points from the class of 2011 for a 75.4% graduation rate and that the increase was seen in nearly all-racial and ethnic groups. The on-time graduation rate for Latinos was 62.5 % compared to 82.1% for Whites and 66.2% for Blacks. Colorado Department of Education also reported on completion rate which combined all completers with those who received a certificate, a General Education Development (GED) certificate, or a designation of high school completion. The 2011-2012 Colorado completion rate was 78.2%, a 1.4% increase over the previous year.

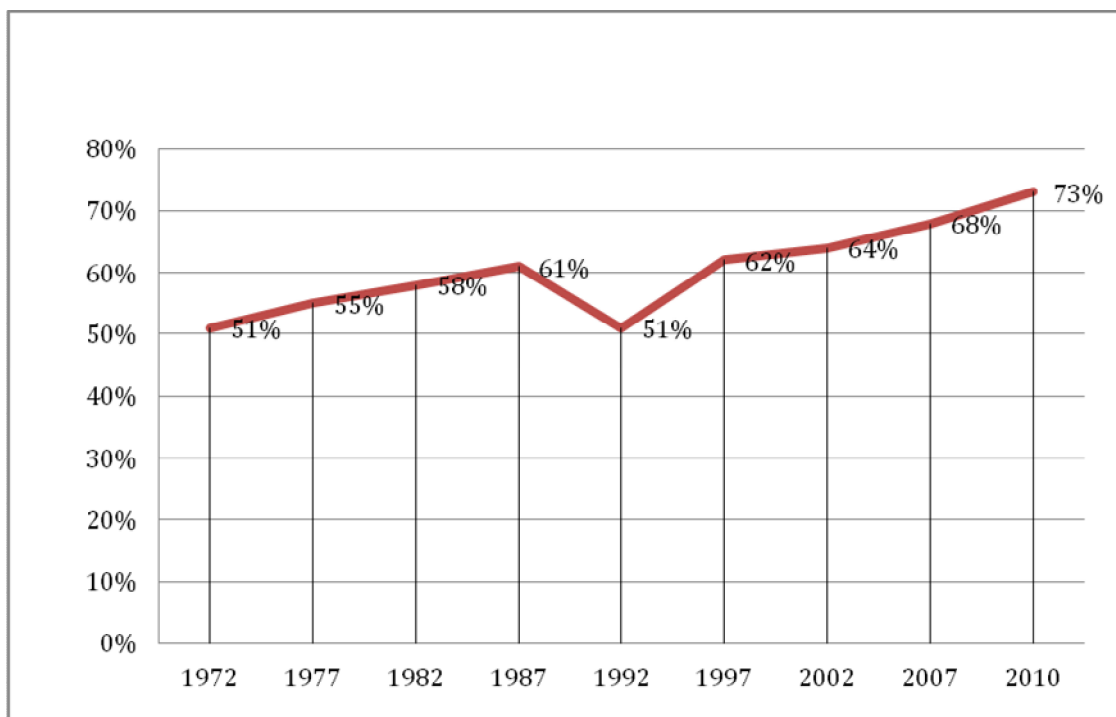


Figure 1.5. Hispanic 18-to-24-year-olds completing high school, 1972-2010. Adapted from “Hispanic College Enrollment Spikes, Narrowing Gaps with Other Groups,” by R. Fry, 2011, *Pew Hispanic Center*, p.10.

Dropout Rates

The dropout rate, on the other hand, represented the percentage of persons between 16 and 24 years old who have not earned a high school diploma or its equivalent and who were not currently enrolled in school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). The Pew Research Hispanic Center (2013) reported that from 2000 to 2011, the Hispanic high school dropout rate declined from 17.5% to 6.8% showing that the dropout rate for native-born Hispanics was 5.2% and for foreign-born was 14.2%. The overall high school dropout rate for White students was 3.3% and for Black students was 5.9% in 2011. The number of Latino 16 through 24 year-old dropouts declined from 1 out of

every 3.1 students, or 32.0% in 1990, to 1 out of every 7.1 students, or 14.0% in 2011.

Figure 1.6 helps to better explain this claim.

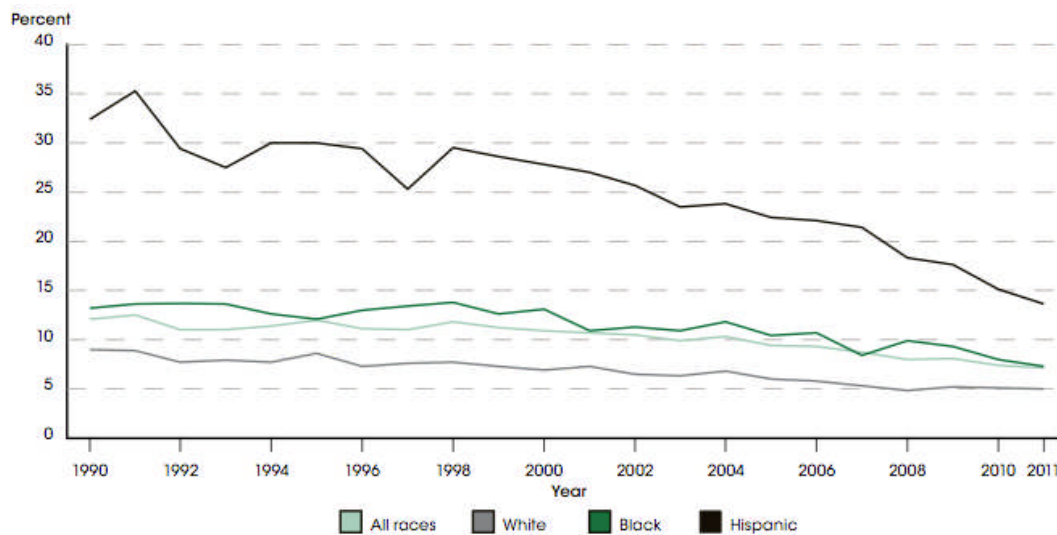


Figure 1.6. Status dropout rates of 16- through 24-year-olds by race/ethnicity from 1990 through 2011. Adapted from “The Condition of Education 2013,” by National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013, p. 125.

The Colorado Department of Education reported that the school year 2011-2012 was the sixth consecutive year in which the dropout rate had decreased. CDE indicated that the dropout rate in Colorado reflected the percentage of all students matriculated in school from grades seven through 12 who had left school without transferring to another educational environment during the same year. It was calculated by dividing the number of students who left by the number of students enrolled in the same year. CDE indicated that, in the school year 2010-2011 in Colorado, 4.9% of Latino students dropped out of school while the dropout rate for White students was 2.0% and for Black students was 4.4%. The average state dropout rate was 3.0% when all students were combined. Figure 1.7 helps us to analyze the dropout rate in Colorado by race and ethnicity.

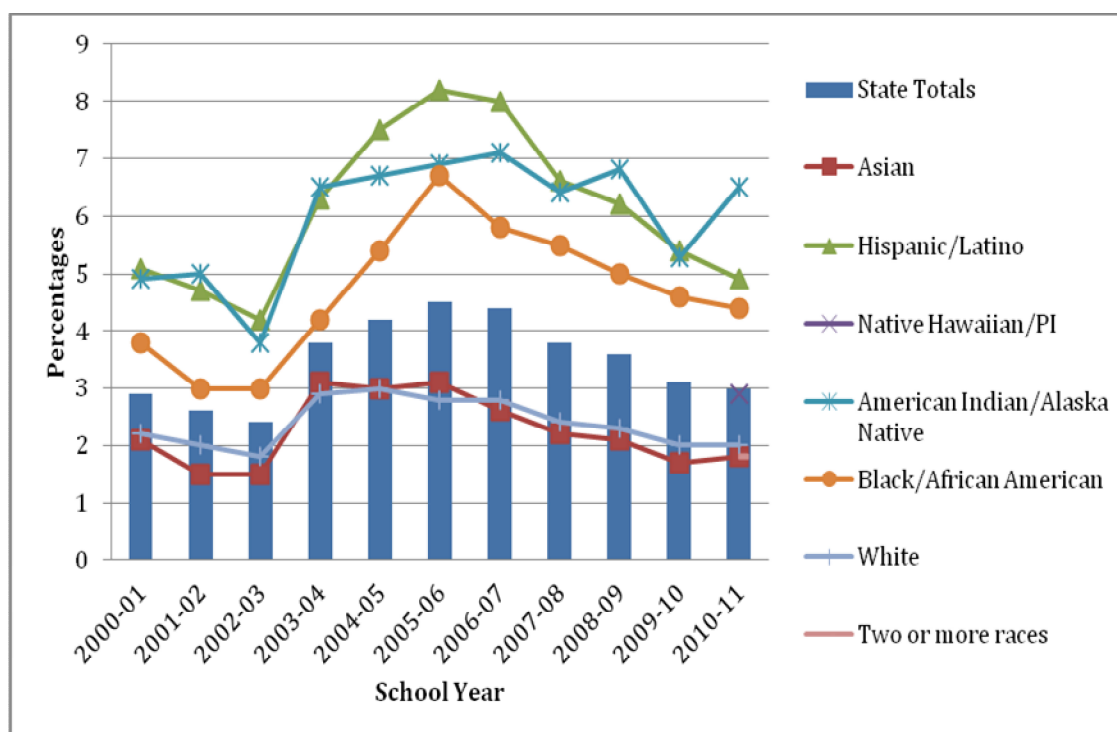


Figure 1.7. Annual dropout rate by race/ethnicity in Colorado from 2001 to 2011. The Latino, Black, and American Indian dropout rate fluctuate from year to year. The White and Asian dropout rate stays more consistent. Adapted from “Dropout data for 2013-14--Historical Overview,” by Colorado Department of Education, 2013c, retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/dropoutcurrenthistory>

Even when the number of Latinos completing a high school diploma has grown from about 50.0% in 1972 to 72.7% in 2011 (Fry, 2011), as indicated in Figure 1.5, “the number of Hispanics awarded college degrees lagged that of other groups, and their share of college graduates remained below that of all college student enrollments” (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 11). Further, Gándara and Contreras (2009) pointed out that 10 in 100 Latinos had a college degree compared to 25 in 100 White Americans and that the rate for Latino college completion had not significantly increased for the past 20 years. Gándara and Contreras (2009) concluded:

Education is the single most effective way to integrate . . . Latinos into the U.S. economy and society. Thus, if the high dropout rates and low educational achievement of Latino youth are not turned around, we will have created a permanent underclass . . . Latino children are America's children and America's future. (pp. 13-14)

Despite the improvement of national and state dropout and graduation rates, the achievement gap that has existed among public school pupils of different ethnicities and different socioeconomic backgrounds has continued to be a concern.

When it came to high school completion, Reyes (2010) alluded to one of President Obama's speeches when the President stated the need for a "highly educated workforce" (p. 11a) and how it could not be accomplished when more than half of the one million students who dropped out every year were Hispanic and Black. Reyes mentioned that, in an effort to alleviate the dropout problem among Hispanics, the Spanish network Univision, along with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, started a campaign called "Es el Momento" [Now is the Time]. This campaign targeted Spanish-speaking television viewers promoting college education among Latinos. Cesar Conde (as cited in Reyes, 2010) wrote in the *Miami Herald* that "Hispanic parents need . . . to learn about the value of a high school and college diploma, and make it not an aspiration, but an expectation" (p. 11a). Narrowing the achievement gap would yield greater social and economic benefits for the U.S. society. Henceforward, it would be imperative that the large discrepancies in academic underachievement between different ethnic and racial groups be solved if America was to compete in a global economy in the future.

Definition of Terms

An explanation to clarify the difference between the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” was required before proceeding with the review of the literature. Fears (2003) explained the differences between the two terms by stating that the two had been used interchangeably for years but that the experts claimed that the term “Hispanic” derived from Spain and Portugal, while the term “Latino” derived from the indigenous people of the Americas who were conquered by the Spaniards. Latinos or Hispanics could be the first, second, third, or later generation living in the United States and could be of many races, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds. First generation would refer to people born outside the United States to non-U.S. citizen parents, second generation would refer to people born in the United States to immigrant parents, and third or higher generations would refer to those born in the United States to U.S.-born parents (Pew Hispanic Center/The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). A survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center/The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2004) found that an equal number of first and second generation members preferred the terms “Latino/Hispanic” to identify themselves but that first generation members used mainly their country of origin to describe their ethnicity while second and later generations used the term “American.” The survey also described the term *generation one-and-a-half* for those who arrived at or before the age of 10. As adults, these generation one-and-a-half immigrants were more likely to be bilingual or English dominant, enjoyed more financial wealth, were more likely to have at least a high school diploma, were less socially conservative, and had a deeper connection to the United States than to their native countries.

Given the diversity of Latinos in the United States, it was difficult to identify them with one single ethnicity as they came from different nations and cultures (Planas, 2013). Roberto Ramirez also indicated that it was problematic for Latinos to identify with the “White” race so often times on surveys or questionnaires, Latinos would leave the race box empty or would check “some other race” (as cited in "Is ‘Latino’ a race or an ethnicity?," 2013). Other terms used to identify Latinos in the United States were related to the country of origin such as Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Argentinian (Planas, 2013). For *Mexicans*, the term *Chicano* was used for U.S. citizens whose parents or grandparents came from Mexico. Chicano had political connotation during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Donato, 1997) but continued to be heard among people of Mexican descent who preferred it instead of more generic terms such as Hispanic or Latino (Planas, 2012). Some Mexican-Americans did not identify with the Chicano label because of its ties to leftwing politics (Planas, 2012). The vast majority of Latinos living in the United States (64.6%), however, have originated from Mexican descent (Motel & Patten, 2011) regardless of the term they used to identify themselves. The other 35.0% of Latinos was divided among several other nationalities. The researcher mainly used the term “Latino” throughout the study when referring to students from Spain, North, Central, or South America who were bound together by the Spanish language but sometimes the term “Hispanic” was used to preserve the source being quoted. According to Fears (2003), there was not a distinct difference between the two terms as the two were used interchangeably.

Conclusion

While the educational equity for Latino students has been a prevalent struggle for the past 2 centuries, current national data indicated that there was more work to be done before this group could compete nationally and globally at the same rate as others. Several court cases initiated by Latino activists have disputed the segregated conditions that Latinos have been exposed to in U.S. schools (Donato, 1997). Yet, more than six decades after *Brown* overturned the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Latinos have continued to attend inferior and segregated schools that have limited their access to higher levels of schooling (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). However, while segregation has been attributed as one of the main reasons of the widespread history of academic underachievement for Latinos (Valencia, R. R., 2008), the reasons for Latino academic underachievement included factors other than segregation.

Latinos have disproportionately dropped out of high school and college at higher rates than any other group in America (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Motel & Patten, 2011; Reyes, 2010). Furthermore, Latino students who did graduate from high school often lacked the academic skills and the social capital to navigate their path to college graduation (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013; Valencia, R. R., 2011). The reasons for this educational deficit were multiple and could not be contemplated from a single point. Hence, this study was designed with the goal to learn from the successful academic experiences of Latino students who were able to break the odds by successfully following a pre-college path in their K-12 education. To better organize this study, Chapter II provides a review of the literature regarding the problem

of Latino underachievement divided in to three main factors: macro-external, internal, and micro-external.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the past century of educational struggles has shown, there was a perpetuated school situation in public education in which Latino students were deprived of adequate preparation to graduate from high school, and those who graduated high school often did not receive a college degree (Diaz & Cruz, 2005; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Jensen & Sawyer, 2013; Zarate, Sáenz, & Oseguera, 2011). The reasons for the stated Latino underachievement have been complex and could be better studied by dividing them according to their scale. Hence, to comprehensively organize the review of the literature for this research, this chapter was divided into three main factors: macro, internal, and micro. Macro-external factors were those that influenced the social issues of Latino underachievement at a larger scale such as national legislation, national school reform, and economic barriers. Internal factors were those that lied within the unique characteristics of the Latino culture such as their shared language, immigration status, and the issues associated with poverty such as mobility and the lack of positive role models. Last were micro-external factors or issues that lied within the confines of each smaller system such as school culture, teacher perceptions, amount of college counseling provided to students at their local schools, and college admissions requirements.

Macro-External Factors

This section is divided into three topics. The first topic explored school reform and legislation, the second analyzed the patterns of school segregation that have existed for Latinos for the past 2 centuries, and the third topic explained the financial barriers that Latinos encountered when intending to pursue college education.

School Reform and Legislation

National legislation has attempted to solve the pressing issue of academic achievement gaps amongst different groups by holding schools accountable for all students in America while paying special attention to students from minority and poor sectors of the population (Irizarry, 2011; Ravitch, 2011). *A Nation at Risk*, an influential study chaired by David Gardner (1983) highlighted the need for government intervention to improve the preparation of teachers, increase the time children spent in school, increase the rigor of the curriculum, and create opportunities for more students to attend college after high school. Subsequently, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 had several similar mandates aimed at ensuring that every school implemented higher academic standards, improved students' literacy skills, hired better-prepared teachers, incorporated math and science in the curriculum, used technology in the classroom, and promoted second language learners to English fluency. *No Child Left Behind Act* also required yearly testing that measured student academic achievement. In Colorado, the standardized tests implemented to satisfy NCLB mandates also measured student growth. The abovementioned reforms have made a difference in student outcomes but have come short of their expected academic results.

A new piece of legislation, the Advancing Students for a Strong Economy Tomorrow, or ASSET Law (2013), was passed by Colorado State Legislation and signed into law in March of 2013. Advancing Students for a Strong Economy Tomorrow allowed undocumented students to enroll in state colleges or universities at in-state tuition rates and went into effect fall semester 2013 in public colleges and universities in Colorado. To be eligible for ASSET, students must have graduated from high school or completed a General Education Development (GED), have been admitted at an accredited college or university, and have applied for legal residency in the United States.

According to Engdahl (2013), advocates of this law believed that the measures provided support for students who have overcome the achievement gap that existed by excelling in school. Engdahl reported that ASSET could bring revenue into the state coffers by increasing the number of students paying tuition and by improving the educational attainment of future Colorado workers. With the passage of ASSET, many Latino students in Colorado could have an opportunity for social mobility through college education. Many of the students who stood to benefit from ASSET were brought to this country as young children and have received most of their education in the United States. Without ASSET, many could not afford to attend college with out-of-state tuition rates three times the cost of in-state rates. The ASSET bill was rather new so there was no data to describe its effects, but Engdahl (2013) reported an analysis that projected about 500 students would be enrolling in college in the fall of 2013 because of the ASSET bill.

While this projection did not guarantee that those students would graduate from college, many educators anticipated that it would bring hope and engagement to a larger number of Latino students who did not feel encouraged to achieve academically in schools before

the law was signed. Nevertheless, as the college retention rate among Latinos showed, it was not the number of Latino students being admitted to colleges or universities that indicated how many were academically, financially, and psychologically ready to succeed by leaving with a college degree. The lack of academic success among minority students, targeted by national mandates and demonstrated with quantifiable measures such as test scores, has attracted the criticism of scholars such as Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education and a historian of education. Ravitch, once a strong proponent of testing and accountability, was now a critic of government intervention to reform schools. In her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Ravitch (2011) stated the following regarding government intervention in schools:

The policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools. Indeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective. . . . Our schools will not improve if elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that properly should be made by professional educators. Congress and state legislators should not tell teachers how to teach, any more than they should tell surgeons how to perform operations. (p. 225)

Legislation alone cannot change education outcomes for Latinos if the only way to measure success was through accountability methods that tested students with a pen and paper (Valencia, R. R., 2011).

Throughout the history of the United States, Latinos have been a constant presence and their academic achievement a constant quandary (Donato, 1997; Spring, 2007). Despite the progress made by landmark legislation of the last 2 decades, however, U.S. citizens of Latino ancestry have been left behind as newer, non-Latino immigrants have adapted to this society faster and have surpassed Latinos in educational attainment

(Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Clearly, there was a discrepancy between the goals of legislation and the outcomes that have derived from it.

Segregation--From *De Jure* to *De Facto*

Latinos were regarded as an “army of cheap, mobile, unorganized, and dependable labor” at the beginning of the 1900s (González, 1999, p. 53). Hence, González (1999) added, for most of the last century, there was no apparent incentive to educate this population because they were also perceived as having lower intelligence. González further explained that Latinos, which at that time were mainly from Mexico, were seen as having completely different cultures from White students, and therefore, it was in the best interest of both to be educated in separate schools and separate classrooms. These beliefs about Spanish language, culture, and low intelligence as indicated by intelligence quotient (IQ) tests contributed to the claim that Latinos were a burden for White students when placed in the same classrooms, thus, continued to be segregated in schools despite Latino efforts to change this practice (González, 1999).

K. B. Clark (as cited in Medina, 1988) observed that, more than 30 years after the *Brown* ruling of 1954, which ended *de jure* or legal segregation of students, *de facto* segregation had increased and reached a point where some schools were more segregated than before the *Brown* ruling. Clark claimed that this practice continued to do injustice to Latino children and only perpetuated prejudice. Additionally, Medina (1988) reported more than 25 years ago that the school reforms of that time perpetuated a “Hispanic economic and social apartheid,” because they again failed to address the evident segregation and inequalities of Latino students in U.S. schools (p. 346).

With the increase of the Latino population in the Western states, the United States has been undergoing a major adjustment within its schooling system. The White majority has been declining while the Latino minority has been increasing (Kucsera & Flaxman, 2012). In their report, *The Western States: Profound Diversity but Severe Segregation for Latino Students*, Kucsera and Flaxman (2012) analyzed the current placement for most Latino students in the Western states. They found that White students in the West were attending more racially diverse schools than other White students in the nation but that their interactions with students of other races were more limited than ever before. In Nevada, they compared the 84.0% of Latino students that attended schools with White classmates in 1970 to 2009 when that percentage had shrunk to 29.0%. Kucsera and Flaxman found that, on average, Latinos only attended classes with 10.0% or less White classmates in the West. They attributed this trend to the rapid change in demographics and to the lack of systemic desegregation efforts by the government. Figure 2.1 helps us to illustrate their statement by graphing the distribution of students by race/ethnicity among the four main regions of the United States.

It is also important to point out that housing patterns have re-segregated many Latino students in U.S. neighborhood schools (Fry & Taylor, 2012). Latinos have lived in the poorest of neighborhoods and often attended schools that were double segregated by race and by poverty (Kucsera & Flaxman, 2012). This also has had an economic impact in communities where the schools were largely segregated with minority students, because non-minority buyers were not interested in acquiring property near those segregated schools. Consequently, the housing market has stayed low in those areas, keeping Latino families from accumulating assets that could be used as collateral to pay

for college or that could serve as spring boards to move out of those segregated areas (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

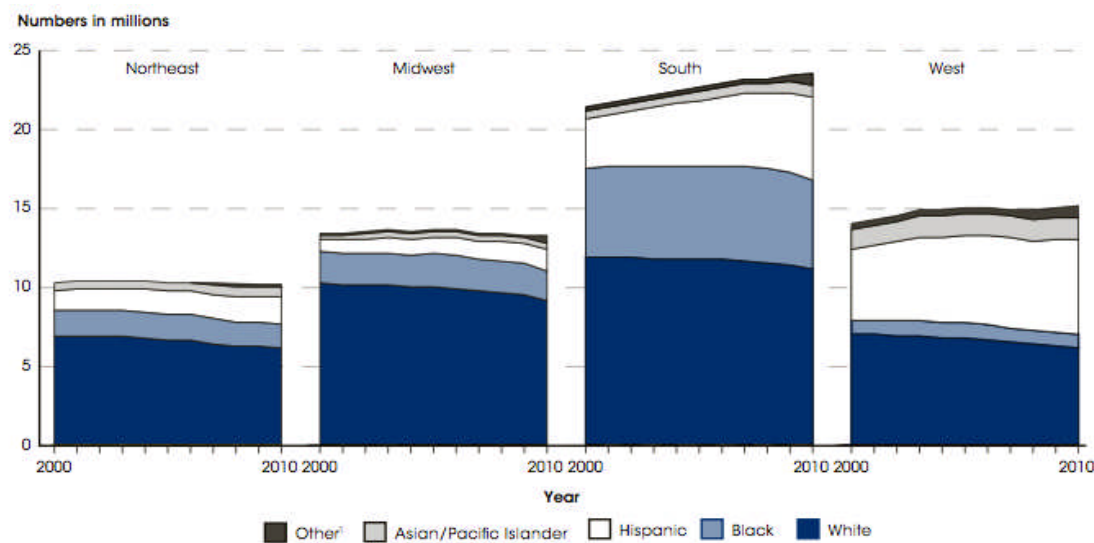


Figure 2.1. Enrollment in K-12 grade by region and by race/ethnicity: fall 2000 to fall 2010. The West has significantly more Hispanics enrolled in school than any other region in the United States. Adapted from “The Condition of Education, 2013” by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, *U.S. Department of Education*.

The adverse effects of school segregation can occur in different environments. In academic contexts, R. R. Valencia (2011) noted, the more segregated the schools, the lower the test scores, graduation rates, rates of matriculation to colleges, and the number of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). In social contexts, Valencia pointed out that school segregation hindered the opportunities that White and Latino students had to get to know each other so that they could eliminate pre-conceived prejudice.

A journal article by Weiler and Walker (2009) depicted the dangers of segregating students by ability-grouping them, because ability placement determined the quality of education children received in segregated classes. If advanced placement courses and

low-ability grouping courses were racially imbalanced, the authors pointed out, administrators and teachers must begin to ask questions as to how schools could open more opportunities for underrepresented students to participate in higher level classes. Failure to question unfair practices was an injustice that relegated minority students to low-quality education (Weiler & Walker, 2009).

Minority students benefited from being integrated with White students. In a study of high achieving Latinos, Gándara and Contreras (2009) found that Latinos learned important college readiness skills and knowledge by being around White students. Additionally, Hallinan (1998) conducted a study to measure the effects of diversity in student outcomes at the elementary, secondary, and college levels finding that all students benefited from diverse environments shown by several indicators such as academic achievement, level of contentment, and overall acceptance of each other's racial and cultural differences. When Latino students were exposed to the social capital that White middle class students had, they learned the paths to social access (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valencia, R. R., 2011), and they were exposed to teachers that held high expectations. However, when Latino students were segregated in classrooms filled with others who looked and acted like they did, they missed the chance to learn from other students who were more successful than they were and from teachers who held high expectations of their students. Segregation has been an unsound practice that has continued to impact poor and minority students in the United States as there was a “strong correlation between school segregation and academic achievement” (Valencia, R. R., 2011, p. 51).

Another important point to consider was the emergence of minority segregated charter schools around the country where poor and minority students were bridging the academic gap. Are students and parents who have historically underperformed in mainstreamed schools opting to self-segregate? The literature has documented the adverse effects on segregation, yet current quantifiable measures such as standardized tests and college enrollment rates have demonstrated that some schools were getting promising results with poor and minority students despite their highly segregated environments. Such was the case of the STRIVE Preparatory Schools in the Denver Public Schools system. According to a news release posted on their website, STRIVE schools served approximately 2,300 students, 90.0% identifying as students of color and 90.0% as students of poverty (STRIVE, 2013). Data available from the Colorado School Grades Website indicated that, in 2014, three of the STRIVE schools that earned “A” on student growth also had over 90.0% Latino enrollment. These findings seemed to indicate a gap in the literature on the effects of school segregation when school culture and practice overcame the negative effects that were associated with it. However, Vogel (2010) stated that “while charter schools can properly serve as a research and development venue for public education, segregated charter schools cannot become the de facto American public school system” (p. 18).

Financial Barriers Paying for College

Kohler and Lazarín (2007) stated that Latinos were more likely than Whites, but less likely than Black students, to receive financial aid to pay for college but that, on average, they received less aid than any other group. To this end, Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda (1993) highlighted that financial aid played an important role in Latino college

persistence. Longerbeam, Sedlacek, and Alatorre (2004) related the findings of a quantitative study of about 3,000 college students on the differences between Latino and non-Latino students. One of the outcomes indicated that Latinos had more financial hardships than non-Latinos in paying for college and that they often had to work longer hours to take care of personal needs and family obligations, often worrying about being able to continue paying for college. Longerbeam et al. (2004) also found that Latinos were more likely than any other group to drop out of college due to financial reasons. Moreover, A. Valencia (2003) stated that, after the Latino high school dropout crisis, the Latino college dropout rate indicated that some universities lost 50.0% to 60.0% of their freshman Latino students due mainly to financial issues. He called this the “migration” (p. 68) of the dropout crisis.

Ironically, financial issues for Latinos were not only related to access to resources. They could also be related to cultural beliefs held by Latino students and their families that made it harder for them to seek financial support to attend college. A report “Latinos’ School Success,” (2012) indicated that culture could get in the way for Latinos to solicit financial aid because they were either not familiar with the process or because gender norms were tied to cultural values. Young girls, for example, were often discouraged to pursue higher education because they were expected to stay close to help at home. The “Latinos’ School Success,” (2012) report also mentioned that the strict immigration laws had added a second dimension of issues for Latino students attending schools. Such was the case of Alabama’s recent immigration law including a provision that required districts to ask public school students for proof of legal residency status.

The fear of this provision created an exodus of Latino enrollment affecting achievement for all Latino students regardless of their immigration status.

Conclusion

Despite some advances gained through national legislation after NCLB, the segregated conditions in schools have not significantly improved for Latinos. This segregation has tracked Latinos in low-academic classes, making them ill prepared to succeed in college or to access financial support.

Internal Factors

This section will cover internal factors often associated with the Latino culture that constitute barriers to their educational attainment. It has been divided into four sections covering immigration, poverty, mobility, and language.

Immigration

Immigration or legal status, for example, while important factors to be considered, should not represent a huge impediment for access to education for Latino students, yet they did. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) showed that less than 6.0% of all Latinos 18 or younger living in the United States were not U.S. citizens. However, on immigration issues for Latinos, Gándara and Contreras (2009) reported that, despite the fact that most Latino children living in the United States were legal citizens, more than one quarter of their parents were not. The authors explained that a series of unfavorable issues derived from parental immigration status because undocumented parents were less likely to find jobs that paid well or offered health benefits and because families of mixed (documented children of undocumented parents) status could not access the same social assistance and, thus, had greater difficulties in life. Ultimately, Gándara and Contreras (2009) stated that

it was not possible to discuss Latino education without discussing immigration due in part to the pervasive sentiment many Americans held that children of immigrants should not receive benefits made possible by taxpayer's contributions. The authors rationalized that this sentiment was ignited by popular perceptions that undocumented workers did not pay enough taxes and instead overloaded public systems, including public schools.

Although the argument on whether or not to educate undocumented or children of undocumented immigrants has already been disputed in court, it has continued to be a highly debated issue. *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) amended Texas education laws making it illegal to withhold state funds to educate children who were undocumented immigrants. *Plyler* mandated that all students attend school until they reached a certain age and that no school could deny access to public education based on immigration status. Justice William Brennan, who authored the *Plyler's* majority opinion, stated that children could not be accountable for their parents' actions and that the policy would deter them from fully contributing to American society. Justice William Brennan included the following statement to their decision: "We cannot ignore the significant social costs borne by our Nation when select groups are denied the means to absorb the values and skills upon which our social order rests" (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, p. 221).

Years after the *Plyler* ruling, two states passed laws that would have reversed it. California was first with Proposition 187 in 1994 which prohibited California public schools from admitting undocumented students. The second was Alabama with Bill HB 56 in 2011 that required school districts to report to the state the immigration status of all new students. Although both rulings were blocked in federal courts, both had negative effects on Latino student achievement. After HB 56 in Alabama, for example, schools

had three times the absences among Latino children, and, by mid year, 13.0% of them had already withdrawn from school (Winograd, 2012). In any civilized society, educating the people was at the core of said society. However, when children and parents were pre-occupied with covering basic needs such as personal safety, freedom, food, and shelter, school achievement tended to suffer.

Poverty

Poverty could not be separated from class or from race as these two factors were inextricably related (Rothstein, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2005). Hence, school improvement could not shoulder the sole responsibility of improving education in America without first eliminating the effects of social class among American children. Over the past decades, there has been ample research that has documented the struggles that poor children have faced in schools. Pedro Noguera (2011) claimed that, despite numerous efforts, dedicated teachers and administrators were not enough to overcome the issues related to poverty that children faced in American schools. Noguera was skeptical about the so called “no excuses” (2011, p. 9) reforms in education and stated that much of the new literature coming from recent researchers and educators pointed to teachers and administrators as the main influences in student achievement but neglected to include issues of socioeconomic status among students and parents. Poverty has been highly linked to learning, Noguera asserted, not because poor children were incapable of learning but because there were many outside obstacles poor children faced which directly affected their academic achievement. He claimed that it was not fair to make general assumptions that teachers and administrators alone could control learning without first tackling societal issues of poverty outside school nor was it valid research for public

policy. Altogether, Noguera pointed to three main reasons why poverty affected student achievement in schools. First was the lack of supportive relationships between parents and staffs as poor parents were often seen as adversaries rather than partners and were often blamed for the lack of access to enrichment opportunities their children had outside the school setting. Second was the effect of violence, substance abuse, and health issues associated with toxic environments where poor children lived. Third was related to poor children attending poor schools which often lacked the community resources that more affluent schools could access. However, Noguera concluded that issues of poverty have been overcome in many schools serving poor children in America by concerted efforts from communities, parents, and school personnel working together to offer opportunities that enhanced what was already offered in schools, such as early childhood education and intervention, summer and after-school programs, and parent support, to name just a few (Noguera, 2011).

Poverty also has affected language and, in particular, vocabulary development. A study conducted by Hart and Risley (1995) compared the conversations between parents and their children from different socioeconomic status. They found that well-educated parents spoke over 2,000 words an hour to their children, working class parents spoke 1,300 words, and mothers on welfare only spoke 600. By age 3, the vocabularies of children whose mothers were on welfare were half of those whose parents were professionals and three quarters of the middle-class children (Hart & Risley, 1995). Lack of academic vocabulary has been a leading cause of reading and academic problems among school children in America (Hart & Risley, 2003). When young children enter

school, those that came from poor environments were already behind their more affluent peers. Often times, this language gap became an academic gap that was never bridged.

Poverty issues intensified with the recent chain of economic events in the United States. After some of the largest banks were rescued by the government, the recent recession took the jobs of more than 10 million people in the United States alone, creating a backlash of financial problems for the working poor and, in particular, for uneducated citizens (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Motel and Patten (2011) reported that 34.1% of Hispanic, 13.6% of White, and 39.0% of Black children under the age of 18 lived in poverty while the overall poverty rates were 25.9% for Hispanic, 10.9% for White, and 27.9% for Black. To add to these poverty trends, Pearl (2011) claimed that the job market had declined for jobs that did not require formal education leaving uneducated Latinos with fewer options for employment. To make matters worse, Pearl pointed out that male and female Hispanics earned less than White males and females with the same educational attainment and that the gap in earnings was wider between men.

An additional contributing factor related to poverty was the shift in family structure. Single parent households were becoming more prevalent among minority groups living in the United States contributing to the increase in poverty levels among Hispanics (Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2013). Figure 2.2 shows how nearly half of all Hispanic births were to single women. According to Motel and Patten (2011), 33.6% of Hispanic families lived in single-parent homes compared to 16.6% in White families. Additionally, Gándara and Contreras (2009) explained that children born out-of-wedlock were more likely to be poor and that single mothers often suffered from stress and depression which negatively influenced their child rearing.

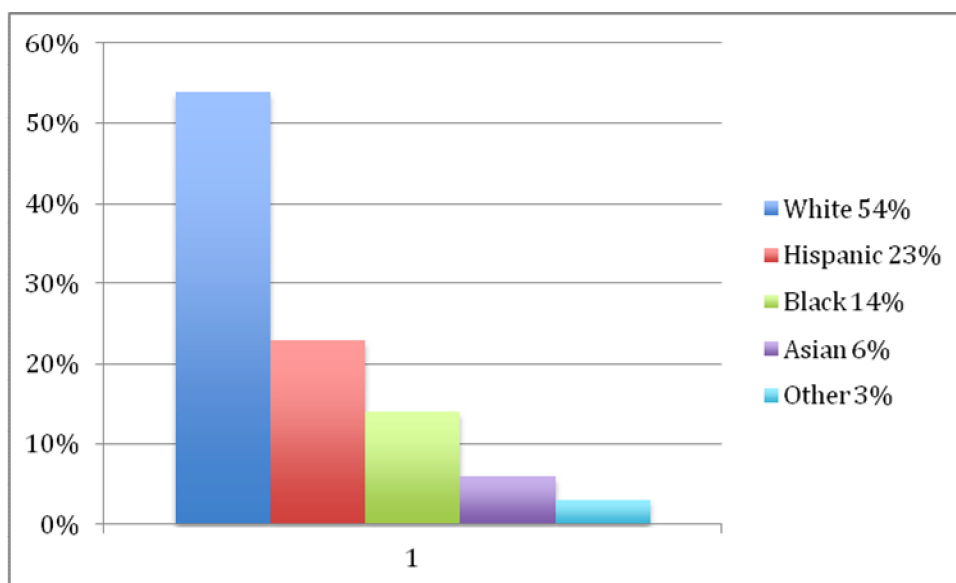


Figure 2.2. Percentages of all births nationwide in 2011. Nearly a quarter of all births nationwide were to Latino women in 2011, and nearly half of those births were to unmarried women. Adapted from “A Statistical Portrait of U.S. Hispanics: Hispanic population trends,” by *Pew Research Center*, 2013.

Essentially, the discrepancies between student achievement and test scores of Latino and White students have been linked to many of the consequences of poverty. Even when several studies revealed that Latino families cared deeply about their children’s education (Valdés, 1996), poor families lacked the skills and knowledge “cultural capital” and the access “social capital” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 51) to help their children navigate the education pipeline. Low-income parents have often refrained from questioning the status quo regarding the hierarchy of the schools and accepted placement decisions that schools made on behalf of their children. Even among middle-class Latino families, parents often lacked the cultural and social capital to assist their children in school-related issues (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Mobility Issues

Another consequence of poverty was the issue of mobility among poor children and, in particular, Latino children in the United States. In a meta-analysis related to achievement conducted by John Hattie (2009), the effects of any innovation that enhanced student achievement in schools scored an effect size of 0.40 or higher in the scale he used. Mobility, on Hattie's measurement, had a reverse/negative effect in student achievement of -0.34. Mobility, in fact, had the greatest adverse effect in student achievement, coming after the negative effects of television, retention, and ability grouping. Hattie stated that mobility prevented students from making friends who could support their academic achievement and those schools ought to find ways to help newcomers feel comfortable within the first month of arrival if they were to diminish the negative effects that mobility placed on students (Hattie, 2009).

South, Crowder, and Chavez (2005) conducted a study on the incidence of Latinos either entering or exiting high and low poverty neighborhoods. They found that Latino families included more youngsters than any other group, so their likelihood of staying in a high-poverty neighborhood track was 91.5%. Even when Latinos made an effort to move out of high-poverty mobility tracks, housing discrimination often reduced their chances to relocate into more affluent communities (South, et al. 2005). Crowley (2003) added that low-income families often moved for negative reasons, such as being evicted or to avoid violence. Therefore, moving frequently disrupted the overall well-being of the entire family including the school performance of their children. Stable housing, Crowley claimed, provided parents and children with better opportunities to retain jobs, make long-lasting relationships, and stay in the same schools without

disruptions. She stated that residential mobility had more oppressive consequences for poor and for minority children than for any other group because poor children often lived with friends or relatives in crowded, sub-standard, and risky conditions.

Last, in a study conducted by Rumberger and Larson (1998) on the risk of high school dropout caused by student mobility, the researchers noted another study conducted by Lee and Burkam in 1992 where they had found that only 40.0% of the high school students who had changed schools did so for reasons other than housing mobility. Hence, the authors suggested not just families but schools also played an important role in student mobility. To help alleviate this problem, the authors advised that schools should also take an active role in helping poor students minimize mobility from school to school. Rumberger and Larson (1998) claimed that low social-class students were more likely to change schools but that mobility affected students differently depending on their grade levels. Students in primary schools had issues making friends and adjusting to new environments, while students in secondary schools were more likely to drop out without a high school diploma. Taken from the persuasive evidence of the harmful effects of poverty, the educational issues of the 34.1% of poor Latino children in America must be addressed in order to counter the effects of poverty on their education.

Language

School achievement is strongly associated with English language proficiency. The language barrier, as it is often called, is frequently identified as one of the major impediments for communication between schools and Latino students and families, and it is often viewed as the main impediment for access to high academic content (Crosnoe, 2006). Regarding English language issues for Latinos, Gándara and Contreras (2009)

indicated that it was critical for Spanish-speaking students to be exposed to “appropriate language models” in order to acquire academic language for the school setting (also see Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008, p. 158). Gándara and Contreras (2009) stated that language was deeply rooted in culture and identity. The authors also indicated that Latinos had fought for centuries to retain their identity in this country but that, despite their efforts to preserve their native Spanish language, “the major civil rights issue for Latinos” continued to be related to language (p. 122). These language debates have prevailed notwithstanding the fact that most Latino students in schools today were not classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP; Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Being literate and speaking English fluently have removed barriers for Latino students to access higher levels of education, yet common practices have placed LEP students in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for longer than necessary where their academic English language acquisition often plateaued (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). This slow-down of academic language acquisition, Gándara and Contreras (2009) stated, has delayed their progress towards more challenging mainstreamed curriculum and yielded higher dropout rates for LEP and Latino students. LEP students often could only exit the ESL track after meeting a certain language-based criteria demonstrated on standardized tests (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). These exiting policies many times worked against ESL students because, in order to join more challenging, mainstreamed classes, students had to demonstrate proficiency in English language which was not the same as academic proficiency (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Gándara and Contreras (2009) argued that it was more convenient for politicians and educators to blame language issues as the main impediments to Latino academic achievement instead of

addressing the real reasons why Latino students failed in schools. The authors were also critical of the way bilingual skills were often not important for policymakers as the only goal of evaluations was to measure English proficiency without validating bilingual or Spanish proficiency.

To this end, Latinos have advocated for their own bilingual legislation in the past century. Such was the case of Texas where two state senators persevered for over 10 years (from 1969 to 1981) in their struggle to institutionalize bilingual education in their state (Moreno & Valencia, 2011). Also, Shannon and Milian (2002) stated that bilingual, also known as dual language, programs provided greater academic gains and greater levels of social and academic status for language minority students. However, bilingual or dual language education, a proven strategy for language minority students, has been battled and defeated in states with large amounts of Latino students. As of 2009, there were 42 states that “encourage or allow bilingual” (Collier & Thomas, 2012, p. 157) education, while the other 8, including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, banned it. Regarding bilingual education for White and for Latino students, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) made a distinction between learning a second language as a choice versus learning a second language as a necessity. When learning as a choice, it was because individuals already spoke the dominant language and learning a second language was seen as additive. However, when learning a second language as a means of survival, individuals’ first languages were seen as deficient, and those individuals were often encouraged to drop their first languages, as they were perceived as being detrimental to the individuals’ second language acquisition. This difference in views, the authors concluded, was at the

heart of the debate surrounding bilingual education in this country. Salomon further described this language paradox in the following way: “Language is now viewed socially and politically as both a skill of international necessity and a symbol of national threat, especially when that language is Spanish” (as cited in Scanlan & López, 2012, p. 586). The focus on English language proficiency has produced a perception that Latinos would not achieve academically until they developed native-like fluency in English. Yet, Gándara and Contreras (2009) disagreed with this perception, arguing that millions of Latino students who were fluent in English and for whom language could not be used as the reason for their academic failure have consistently performed significantly lower in academic settings.

The language debate was problematic to analyze because, even when many new immigrants from Latin America encountered insurmountable difficulties in schools, many of them surpassed second or third generation U.S. Latinos in school achievement and academic English language proficiency (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). This contradiction in learning English between Latino immigrants and Latino U.S. citizens was in part due to new immigrants’ positive attitudes toward school (Gándara & Contreras, 2009), and in part due to the fact that immigrants’ literacy skills in Spanish are often strong enough to support learning of a second language in an organized, efficient way (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). In recognizing these differences and paradoxes, school leaders must make clear decisions about the most educationally sound programs that cultivate language proficiency by first recognizing that the native language of an individual was an asset in the acquisition of a second language.

The United States of America has continued to prosper due, in great part, to the dreams and energy brought by the millions of immigrants that have come to this land; this has been why America has been called the land of immigrants. Kao and Tienda (1995) conducted a study on immigrant optimism and achievement among youth. The researchers stated that the “immigrant optimism hypothesis” was associated with first- and second-generation immigrants having greater expectations (Kao & Tienda, 1995, p. 13). Their results suggested that second-generation students greatly benefited from their parents’ optimism and that parental immigrant status was more influential than the immigrant status of their children in determining scholastic performance. In their study, Kao and Tienda (1995) found that first- and second-generation outperformed their third-generation or higher counterparts on various scholastic outcomes because they found that immigrant parents were more successful at transmitting their goals and dreams to their children. Further supporting the parent influence claim, the common denominator found among highly successful Latinos who broke the odds of their low socioeconomic status and who succeeded academically was that they all “had mothers that dreamed out loud of extraordinary futures for their children” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 207). Hence, in order to improve the education of Latino children in America, it was critical that their parents were involved in the process as they were a very influential factor.

Conclusion

Up to this point, this literature review has included the most commonly found factors associated with Latino school underachievement taken from a macro-external perspective of national influences to then analyze influences from the perspective of internal factors that rest within the unique characteristics of the Latino culture. What were

left to include in this review were micro-external factors that play a role in student achievement. These micro-external factors were often found under local control such as teacher's perceptions, staff development, the amount of college counseling provided to Latino students and their families, standardized tests interpretations, and college admissions requirements, which all very much differed across American high schools, colleges and universities.

Micro-External Factors

In this last section, the literature review captures the micro-external factors that contribute to the academic achievement of Latino students which rest under local control and consequently vary greatly from school to school. When effective, these factors associated with school culture, values, and practices could have a significant impact on academic achievement leading to college enrollment and college completion among Latino students. Perceptions regarding student achievement and parental support were closely related to class and ethnicity (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Good, 2011; Valdés, 1996). Hence, career and college guidance often have derived from pre-conceived assumptions that hinder the possibilities to engage Latinos in college tracks early on in their school careers (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013).

Teachers' Perceptions

Regarding teacher perceptions among educators, Guadalupe Valdés (1996) conducted a study of 10 Mexican origin children entering school. In her conversations with teachers who taught those 10 children in their classes, Valdés found that most teachers expressed a need for more skills to teach immigrant children. Teachers perceived that Latino parents had no interest in helping with their children's education and believed

that immigrant children were not equipped to succeed at the same rate in school. Time and time again, well-intentioned teachers put the blame on parents and indicated that the only chance to Latino academic achievement was to reach their parents (Valdés, 1996). Parental involvement could be described in different ways, yet its main goal was to support student achievement.

The assumptions that parents did not support students masked the effects that teachers and schools actually had in student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Further, Good (2011) pointed out that, even though parental involvement had been established as a predictor of student achievement, it only acquired statutory validity when NCLB was signed into legislation in 2002. This legislation, Good asserted, was significant because it set expectations for two-way communication between parents and school. However, Good contested that parental involvement interpretation had different meanings for different parents. In her research with Latino migrant families, Good found that, in contrast to commonly held beliefs about immigrant parents, Latino parents cared deeply about their children's education but interpreted parental involvement into action in different ways. For example, many Latino families did not understand why U.S. schools expected parents to get involved in their children's classrooms, as they trusted that teachers and administrators knew best. Instead, many Latino parents "teach their children about the value of education through hard work . . . by taking them to work in the fields" (Good, 2011, pp. 150-151).

Teachers' expectations were generally based on White middle-class culture and values, which could lead teachers to predict success mostly from those students who shared their same values. This was not surprising given the ethnic distribution among

teachers in American public schools. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) reported the demographic characteristics of public school teachers indicating that 83.1% were White and that Latino and Black were 7.0% each. Twenty-four percent of those were males compared to 76.0% females. This low representation of Latino teachers was a “longstanding and pervasive problem” (Valencia, R. R., 2011, p. 16). The lack of educated Latino role models has sent a message to students that Latinos were not smart enough to be educated, that Latinos were not educated, or both (Salazar, 2000).

Regarding teachers’ expectations of Latino students, Weinstein and Suárez-Orozco (as cited in Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008) demonstrated how expectations from teachers based on pre-assigned student labels and the resultant daily interactions between students and teachers shaped the academic results of their Latino students. They stated that White and Asian students were often regarded as being capable of doing schoolwork while Latino students were seen as less intelligent or capable. Teachers often formed opinions about students’ ability based on whether or not they completed homework, participated in class, and attended school regularly. These indicators, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) challenged, placed immigrant students at a disadvantage as they lacked the family support to complete homework assignments or to understand teachers’ values and expectations in the classroom. Treatment and expectations of Latino boys was another frequent form of inequality found by the authors because teachers’ expectations affected the differences in achievement between Latino boys and Latino girls (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Latino males between 25 and 29 years of age had lower overall rates of educational attainment. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2012), Latino males had a 73.3% high school completion rate compared to

76.9% for Latino females and the rate for bachelor's or higher degrees was 12.5% for Latino males and 17.4% for Latino females.

Another way to perceive student achievement was through labels placed on students, as those labels could become the predictors of either success or failure for many of them. Renowned cognitive psychologist Robert J. Sternberg (1996) challenged teachers to disregard standardized tests results and student labels and to start looking into their own expectations as the precursor of students' outcomes. He said that his teachers from first to third grade had labeled him unintelligent based on IQ test results but that his fourth grade teacher denied all previous labels and, instead, expected more of him. From a "dumb" student, he became an "A" student and ended up attending two prestigious universities in the United States. He dedicated one of his books to his fourth grade teacher for inspiring him to learn despite his low IQ scores and pre-assigned labels. After his dedication on the book, Sternberg (1996) stated:

As I learn from my own experience, one of the biggest obstacles to the development of what I call successful intelligence is negative expectations on the part of authority figures. When these authority figures, whether they are teachers, administrators, parents, or employers, have low expectations, it often leads to their getting from an individual what they expect. The process may start in school, but it usually doesn't end there. Low grades become a ticket to life's slow lane. Thus, it's not a low IQ per se that can so easily lead us down the road to ruin, it's the negative expectations that are generated. (pp. 17-19)

Students meet their teachers' expectations, whether those expectations are high or low. A critical practice to improve Latino academic achievement was to raise teacher's expectations.

Academic and College Counseling

Delgado-Gaitan (2013), in her book *Creating a College Culture for Latino Students*, delineated a path for successful programs that engaged Latino students and their

families on their trail to college. She claimed that the process began in infancy and that Latinos ought to be brought into this process the minute they started school because they often lacked the social capital needed to navigate these academic channels to higher education. Delgado-Gaitan alerted educators that, without a college degree, Latinos were at higher risk of being unemployed since new jobs required more skilled workers than ever before. Pre-college preparation programs in middle and high school were among the most successful programs that had a strong reputation for increasing the number of Latino students attending and graduating college. These programs stressed college knowledge and provided counseling for students and for their parents as well.

Many Latino students arrived in middle and high school without ever having had a conversation about the meaning of attending college (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013). Delgado-Gaitan (2013) summarized six characteristics of successful pre-college programs that were found by a group of Latino educators working together on a project founded by the former First Lady Hillary Clinton in 1999. These six characteristics of successful pre-college programs were as follows:

- programs were led by Latino leaders who clearly understood the families' values and struggles;
- all activities included Spanish language and culture in an effort to acknowledge and value what the parents had to offer and to bridge the communication gap for better understanding of the college process;
- there were specific parent programs designed to not only help parents better understand the schooling system in the United States but to also help them access community resources such as access to health care and community organizations;
- there was a system to re-evaluate their program needs and successes based on their results and make continuous adjustments;

- they publicized their results in an effort to provide ideas and resources to other practitioners to help them build leadership capacity and successfully educate Latino youth in schools;
- successful programs were sufficiently funded to provide the services and programs necessary to engage parents and students in the college process, including college academic counseling, parent education, and the college application process. (pp. 80-83)

Delgado-Gaitan concluded that it was imperative to offer pre-college programs and services to Latino students in schools that went beyond the school settings. She emphasized that educators could no longer leave it to chance that Latino students would end up going to college but that this important task could only be accomplished by building systemic approaches such as hiring the right people, reaching out to parents in meaningful ways that profit from utilizing their native language and culture, and continuing to make adjustments based on ongoing assessments (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013). Pre-college programs helped level the playing field for Latino students and their families by strategically teaching them the skills necessary to be successful in college starting as soon as they entered school.

In recent years, some of the initiatives to engage poor and minority children in college-tracks have gone beyond creating pre-college programs within schools to the creation of complete pre-college schools such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Academies. Tough (2012) described that the efforts to educate the first college-bound group of mostly poor Black and Latino KIPP middle school students from the Bronx included high-intensity curriculum combined with attitude and learning behaviors. Within 4 years, these strategies combined yielded the highest test scores of any middle school in the history of the Bronx. Such amazing marks incentivized private funding from different philanthropies that saw the replication of KIPP as the solution to the

underachievement problem among children of poverty. Most of the first KIPP middle-school class transferred to some of the top private and parochial high schools with substantial financial aid. According to David Levin, one of KIPP founders (as cited in Tough, 2012), almost every student of the first class made it through high school and enrolled in college. Alas, notwithstanding the high test scores and the financial aid most of them received, only 21.0% of the first KIPP cohort had completed college 6 years after they had graduated from high school. When the college dropouts continued to pile up for the second and third KIPP classes, Levin learned that, even more than grades and test scores, students needed to have what he called “character strengths” (p. 52) to bounce back from obstacles and successfully make it through college. Tough summarized Levin’s findings explaining that children of poverty did not have family resources or safety nets that caught them when they made mistakes and had to rely on their “optimism, resiliency, and social agility” (p. 52) to make it past college graduation day. If they made it through, Tough concluded, they were ahead of wealthier students who did not have to develop as much grit and character to climb the college peak (Tough, 2012). Can character and grit be attributed to one’s mindset, and can our mindset change with experience and training?

Author of the best-selling book *Mindset*, Carol S. Dweck (2006) explained how most people operated from either a “growth” or fixed “mindset” (pp. 6-7). In education, those with a growth mindset, Dweck explained, thrived when exposed with challenging tasks. Dweck stated that recent findings had demonstrated that the human brain had the ability to continue learning over time at a greater scale than what was previously thought, so those who started smart in school did not always end up being the smartest in life. Her

findings led her to illustrate how a teacher who had walked into one of the worst high schools in California had taught his students college calculus. She deduced that the teacher Jaime Escalante operated from a growth mindset, so instead of asking himself “Can I teach and can they learn?,” Escalante asked “*How* can I teach them and *how* can they learn best?” (Dweck, 2006, p. 64). From low achievers, those inner-city, poor Latino students made it to the top of the math national test scores. Hence, Dweck strongly suggested, “there’s a lot of intelligence out there being wasted by underestimating students’ potential to develop” (Dweck, 2006, p. 64).

While the number of college degrees for Hispanic students has increased in the past decade, which has been encouraging, Fry and Lopez (2012) noted that Latinos still trailed behind other groups when the college success data were compared. Among the bachelor’s degrees awarded to students in 2010, 71.0% were awarded to White students, 10.0% to Black students, 9.0% to Hispanic students, and 7.0% to Asian students (Fry & Lopez, 2012). The discrepancies between the increase in high school graduation rate versus the low-college completion rate raised questions about how well high schools were preparing Latinos to succeed in college. Could it be that high schools are lowering their expectations to meet accountability mandates, so instead of expecting all students to meet high standards, they are becoming diploma factories? Regarding schools who legitimately increased academic achievement for low-income students such as KIPP, Rothstein (2004) stated that it was “implausible” to give credit only to the teachers and the schools for such success as those schools operated with a different set of conditions similar to “affirmative action” as they selected from the top percent amongst low socioeconomic children. “The only prudent conclusion is that raising achievement of

lower-class students will be very expensive, requiring more than high standards, testing, and tough accountability” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 83). Hence, population growth alone or high school graduation rate could not determine gains in Latino college enrollment, or indicate future college enrollment trends. Other indicators such as the number of Latinos scoring high enough in college entrance exams must also be examined as an important impediment to Latino college graduation.

Standardized Testing for College Enrollment

Among other impediments for college enrollment and the attainment of college degrees by Latino students, standardized tests have been among the greatest gatekeepers. R. R. Valencia (2011) referred to the “adverse impact” (p. 25) of high-stakes testing. Valencia explained that anytime the gap between test results of minority and majority students was used for grade promotion, class placement, or high school graduation, there was an “adverse impact” (p. 25) for minority students. Furthermore, the gaps in testing results have been used to argue for and against affirmative action in college admissions in the United States. A study by Antonovics and Backes (2013) on how all eight University of California campuses changed their admission requirements after passing Proposition 209 (the mandate that ended Affirmative Action in California) found that universities had changed the weight they placed on college-admission tests and on grade point average and took into consideration family background in order to accept more minority students. The changes in admission requirements, however, did not restore the configuration of the students admitted into colleges and universities in California after Proposition 209 was implemented (Antonovics & Backes, 2013). Moreover, Gándara and Contreras (2009) noted that, even before the new mandate, the lack of Latino and Black college enrollment

was already an issue in California which was intensified by a decrease of 50.0% on Latino college enrollment. University presidents and chancellors in California rejected the mandate arguing that diversity was academically stimulating and, hence, needed by students and faculty in colleges and universities (as cited in Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Likewise, Sternberg et al. (2010) argued that standardized tests such as the American College Testing (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) narrowly measured the social and academic ability that students had to succeed in college because students came from different backgrounds, so it was not valid to compare them in statistical measures. The authors saw a problem in selecting college freshman based on the same criterion because all the applicants to selective colleges were too similar in grade point average, ACT/SAT scores, family backgrounds, and even personal statements. Sternberg et al. (2010) concluded that those who drew admissions criteria had the ability to open or close doors for students and, hence, design the course of society.

However, when it came to class placement, there were high school and college counselors who saw potential beyond test scores and were able to open doors for some students. To this end, university professor and Latino writer Concha Delgado-Gaitan reflected that her low test scores in language had placed her in remedial classes in high school so she had to advocate her way out of those classes every fall semester. Thankfully, the author recognized, her high school counselor ignored her test scores and placed her in advanced classes that eventually prepared her to attend college (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013). Nonetheless, school support along with academic ability and high-test scores could not guarantee that Latino students would successfully attend and graduate from college.

Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Access

Advanced Placement (AP) courses have offered students the benefit of a rigorous curriculum that better prepared them for college admissions tests used for postsecondary admissions such as the ACT or SAT and also augmented their chances to earn financial assistance to more selective colleges and universities (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Unfortunately, for many years, Latinos have been left out of the opportunity to participate in those courses. While there has been steady progress in the academic growth for Latinos, when all the data from all different ethnic groups were analyzed, Latino students performed lower than any other group in standardized tests (Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002).

Advanced courses taken by all students in the United States have shown an upward trend in the past 10 years and Colorado was no different (College Board, 2014a). According to the College Board (2014b), the overall percentage of students who scored a 3 or higher in any exam in 2013 was 24.4%, showing an increase of 9.7% overall within the past 10 years. A total of 39.0% of high school students in 2013 took at least one AP exam nationally. In Colorado, Latinos comprised 23.1% of the 2013 graduating class and roughly 15.3% took at least one AP exam. Of those who took an AP exam, 12.2% scored a 3 or higher score (College Board, 2014a). Although Colorado trailed behind the nation in AP exam representation for Latino students, the progress had been consistent within the past 10 years. About 18.8% of the overall U.S. graduating class of 2013 was Latino, and close to 18.8% of all AP exam takers were Latinos. Of the 18.8% exam takers, 16.9% scored a 3 or higher. This represented a gap of 6.6% between Colorado and the national scores; although the increase in the number of Latino students enrolled in AP coursework

in Colorado denoted a better academic prediction for Latino students. According to a report on program results from the College Board (2014c), the likelihood of students graduating on time from a 4-year college increased significantly when they had access to AP classes. This was especially important for Latino students who historically had been ill prepared to succeed in college after high school (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Conclusion

For two centuries, Latinos have been searching for identity and validation in this society. Although they have continued to be oppressed people, they have not ceased in their efforts to preserve their language and culture and to reach their educational aspirations. All things considered, I guided my study regarding the historical achievement and underachievement of Latinos in this country with the aforementioned facts taken from the literature. Given the multiple barriers that Latinos have faced, it was not surprising that so few reached the American dream through educational attainment. Even those who graduated high school and attended college often did not leave with a 4-year college degree. Latinos have been underrepresented in 4-year colleges and seldom met admission requirements for highly competitive colleges and universities. The numbers and statistics speak loudly about these challenges and about the need for change. Yet, some resilient voices of those who have broken the odds have been waiting to be heard in the literature of Latino education that could perhaps reveal what worked for them and how it could be replicated for others searching for a better future through educational achievement. Resiliency needed for Latinos to overcome all barriers and succeed academically could be worth studying.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The U.S. Department of Education stated that,

A college education has never been more important. . . . Eighty-nine percent of the new jobs created in this economy will require post-high school levels of literacy and mathematics. . . . The typical worker with a college degree makes 73 percent more. (as cited in First Generation College Bound, 2013, para. 1)

The above-mentioned Department of Education prediction highlighted the existing Latino education crisis as the current literature, supported by national statistics, showed that Latino students have been disproportionately underrepresented in higher education completion rates in the United States (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). These outcomes have been explained somewhat through historical perspectives of racism, poverty, and language (Acuña, 1972; Donato, 1997; Moreno, 1999; Valencia, R. R., 2011), but the reasons could be as different as Latinos themselves. It was pertinent to point out that the literature showed pockets of Latinos reaching higher educational attainment as well. Such was the case of Colombians, Peruvians, and Cubans who, as subgroups, held higher levels of education than other Latinos (Brown, Patten, 2013; Motel & Patten, 2011) but who only constituted 6.6% of the overall Latino population in the United States (Motel & Patten, 2011). Overwhelmingly, the literature showed that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, the two largest subgroups of Latinos in the United States, “fare exceptionally poorly in public schools” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 18). Mexicans were by far the largest

subgroup, comprising 64.6% of all Latinos; Puerto Ricans, the second largest subgroup was comprised of 9.5% of all Latinos (Motel & Patten, 2011). Taking into account the aforementioned national statistics, this study focused on enhancing the literature by adding stories of successful Latino students of Mexican descent who were able to succeed academically, given that historically Mexicans have struggled (Acuña, 1972, 2011; Crosnoe, 2006; Donato, 1997; Trueba & Bartolomé, 2000; Valencia, R. R., 2008, 2011). I wanted to find the positive and constructive experiences in school that helped graduating Latino high school seniors on track to attend college in the fall, college seniors, and recent 4-year college graduates attain their educational aspirations. Mexicans have been the largest subgroup represented within the Latino community in Colorado, as well as in the United States, but have often been grouped and studied together with other South and Central American groups. So, in order to have findings that could offer the greatest level of transferability, I only selected participants of Mexican descent. I also only selected students planning to attend, those who were attending, or who have already attended 4-year colleges. The reason for selecting 4-year colleges only was that Latino students in more selective colleges, those that required a certain scholastic aptitude test score for admission, were more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree than those who attended less selective institutions. This "positive effect of selective institutions on attainment suggests that they have the potential to increase the graduation rates of minorities while narrowing the persistent college completion gap" (Melguizo, 2008, p. 214). In the next sections, I have described the research design that best fitted the overarching question of this study.

Research Question

In order to contribute to the body of research that would hopefully increase the number of Latino students who successfully navigated the college education channels, it was important to start asking questions to those who spoke from pragmatic personal experiences that led them to success. The main source of information in this study came from asking the following question:

What experiences or factors, from kindergarten to 12th grade, in Mexico or in the United States, contributed to the academic success of Latino students of Mexican descent?

Research Design

As suggested by Crotty (1998), the research methods were developed with the end in mind by first predicting the information and knowledge that would be gained and that could be shared with the readers. The research epistemology was grounded in constructionism in which meaning was constructed through a qualitative study conducted with participants as they engaged and interpreted their own lived experiences (Crotty, 1998). The methodology followed the guidelines for a narrative research study, which explored the “detailed stories or life experiences of . . . small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). According to Crotty (1998), “methods are the procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question” (p. 3). For this study, the method was one-on-one interviews supported by artifacts and mixing constructivism with a constructionist approach. Piaget’s constructivism (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) helped explain a view of participants’ circumstances, interests, and development at the different stages of their lives that they perceived to have enabled them to negotiate learning in school. Constructionism, according to Papert and Harel (1991), offered me the

opportunity to construct new learning by engaging with the participants through planned interviews and sharing stories about personal artifacts. By combining perspectives of constructionism and constructivism in the research methods, my participants and I worked together to co-construct meaning on how their school experiences contributed to their success in achieving either readiness for college among high school students or completing a 4-year college degree. Subsequently, in order to include all the important elements of a qualitative study, this study followed the design suggested by Creswell (2007) for a qualitative constructivist/interpretivist proposal format. At a glance, Creswell's proposal format included an introduction and procedures including the role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, foreseen ethical issues, preliminary pilot findings, and predictable outcomes. This format fit the analysis because its traditional design for collecting and analyzing data went well with this narrative study.

Research Participants

The selection criteria included eight high school seniors enrolled in two of the four high schools located within the Rocky Mountain School District (RMSD)², and a combination of three college seniors, and three college graduates. None of the three college seniors graduated from RMSD. Rocky Mountain School District was located in a mountain resort community in the Western Slope in Colorado. Its student population served students from a wide variety of socioeconomic levels. The largest ethnic groups were Latino and Anglo with a minority majority representation of over 55.0% Latino students. RMSD was selected because of its large Latino population and because, as a

² RMSD is a pseudonym used to protect the confidentiality of the participating school district.

researcher, I had easier access to student participants due to my former employment and connections within the district.

A purposeful sample, “a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77) of 14 Latino participants of Mexican descent was selected. Eight were seniors on track or admitted to attend a 4-year college after high school, 3 were seniors enrolled in a 4-year college, and 3 were recent 4-year college graduates younger than 30 years of age. According to the President of the College Board, Gaston Caperton, a college-bound high school student was one that was engaged with demanding academic courses that placed higher standards for their academic achievement (College Board, 2010). Hence, high school seniors were selected based on grade point average (GPA), American College Testing (ACT) score, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score, and rigor of course load in high school. Rigorous curriculum meant that students took advanced placement (AP) and college classes while in high school. The cut-off criteria for selecting high school participants were done by ranking them according to their GPA and ACT/SAT scores. I asked the top four males and the top four female students until I had eight high school participants.

College seniors enrolled in 4-year colleges were selected based on their successful trajectory as college students, such as GPA and the likelihood that they would graduate at the end of their senior year. This likelihood was demonstrated by the number of years the student had been enrolled in school and his or her academic performance while at school. College seniors were not older than 30 years of age. Recent college graduates were selected based on their successful completion of a 4-year degree from any college or university in the United States and on their age. College graduates were also 30 years or

younger as the intent of this study was to have current research on recent educational practices that could inform school professionals about practices that were successful preparing Latino students academically. To make it applicable to American schools, all participants attended school for at least four years of their K-12 education in the United States, four of which had to be in high school. The reason why high school was important for this research was because high school education was a critical step toward the college road. All participants were the first generation in their families to graduate from college, meaning that neither one of their parents graduated from a 4-year college or university in any country. These first-generation college graduates were either first-, second-, or later-generation living in the United States. It was important not to confuse first-generation college graduates with first-generation immigrants.

The reason for choosing first-generation college graduates was that students whose parents did not graduate from college often did not possess the social capital--“features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67), nor the cultural capital--“knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14). Saunders and Serna (2004) stated that social and cultural capital attributes were as important as academic ability for Latinos in their ability to succeed in college. Hence, by selecting first-generation college graduates only, the results of the study were less indicative of parents’ social and cultural capital and more revealing of factors such as programs, experiences, or influential people in their academic success. Because legal status was not a particular focus of this study, participants did not have to be U.S. citizens when they attended school. Also, because

some Latino students preferred to use their native language, they were given a choice in the language that they preferred to use for the data collection process including the face-to-face interview and written artifacts. I made an effort to balance the gender of the participants but ended up with eight males and six females. To get a wider perspective of their experiences related to their area of attendance, I tried to vary the geographical areas where college students and college graduates attended high school. To identify and select participants who fit the criteria for this research, I talked to high school counselors and administrators from RMSD to select high school students. To identify college seniors and college graduates, I sought out information from minority support personnel at state colleges and universities. I also benefitted from more than 20 years of personal networking with students and educators and from the connections and relationships I made while serving as director of a pre-college program. Hence, recruiting students was not a huge challenge as I was able to recruit college graduates through my personal connections with former students and with my current professors.

Concepts of Interest

Because of the narrative style of this research, I incorporated aspects of portraiture in the description and analysis. I found myself drawn to portraiture as I sought to blend the narrative with social science research and because I intended to derive my research from what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) called “goodness” which filters information to find what was “good” (p. 9) instead of what was not. Hence, my objective was to conduct my study “counterpoint to the dominant chorus of social scientists whose methods and goals have been greatly influenced by the positivist paradigm, whose focus has largely centered on the identification and documentation of

social problems” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. xvi). There has been much to critique in K-12 education, but my intention was to part from that negative discourse and discover the elements of goodness that students collected throughout their education that shaped their path to college. While my personal interest has laid in finding out what worked, I did not disregard negative comments from my participant’s discourse.

Data Collection

Once approval was granted from the school district superintendent to conduct research with students (see Appendix A) and from the University of Northern Colorado’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B), I made personal contact face-to-face, via telephone, email, and social networks with prospective participants explaining the purpose of the research, the data collection and analysis methods, and the time and artifacts needed. Artifacts were explained to participants as “things or objects . . . differentiated from documents that represent some form of communication” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). Participants were made aware of their voluntary participation at all times during this project (see Appendix C for Consent and Assent letters in English and Spanish). Creswell (2007) suggested that, in narrative research, one method of collecting information was through interviews and documents in order to analyze the data for re-telling the stories in the order and time they occurred.

Therefore, I completed one semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009) with each participant of approximately 90 minutes, with follow-up questions as needed (see Appendix D). Prior to their interview, all but one participant submitted their autobiography. By doing this, I was able to save time in getting to know them during the interview and instead used our time together asking questions that helped us construct

meaning of their school years. Participants were asked to recall some of their school experiences and to co-construct a chronology of their years in school. They were encouraged to bring to their interview personally significant artifacts from their school years to complement the notes I was keeping in a field journal for later triangulation of the data collected. The setting for the data collection was one-on-one, face-to-face interviews conducted within the State of Colorado as well as two video conferencing interviews with college graduates. Meetings with high school participants took place at their respective high schools and meetings with college students and college graduates took place at public places that were convenient for them. One video conference was with a graduate who currently lived in the East Coast as she was recently admitted to a Ph.D. program. The other graduate lived in the Western Slope but was not able to make the scheduled interview due to his job as an engineer so we “met” online.

In constructionism, Schwandt (2001) stated that it was essential to understand what was being constructed by the data collection process. Hacking (1999) further explained the three main types of things that could be socially constructed as being objects, ideas, and facts. I took Schwandt's (2001) and Hacking's (1999) guidance and developed interview questions about the participants' experiences in K-12 education, about how the participants believed those experiences contributed to their academic success, and about how they summed up the value of their K-12 experience in relation to their academic success.

For the purpose of a narrative study such as this, Roulston (as cited in Merriam, 2009) suggested a “constructivist” type of questioning in order to pay attention to the conversation as it progresses through the interviews and the data collection. The

interview questions for this study were thoughtfully constructed, piloted, and then edited again so they could yield reliable data for a trustworthy study (Merriam, 2009). The same main questions were asked to each participant.

The interview protocol was based on the guidelines proposed by Creswell (2007), which suggested that permission was obtained before each interview began, that questions started and ended with invitations to open up, and that all questions were piloted first. For this study, questions were first tested with one high school student and one local college graduate. Creswell (2007) also suggested the use of suitable recording measures and a site free of interruptions. I recorded each interview using an electronic pen that records voice and converts handwriting to editable text. I also backed up the data by audio recording each interview on a smart mobile device and on an electronic tablet. To avoid interruptions and to stay focused on the questions and on the answers, we selected relatively quiet places to meet such as public libraries and the conference center at their high schools.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data in this study was divided in two parts. First, the researcher transcribed every interview and made initial notes in her field journal. Then, after all 218 pages of transcriptions were typed, the researcher printed each interview with two columns in either side for open coding (Merriam, 2009). Several markings including quotes and follow-up questions were noted. This open coding process allowed the researcher to start finding main themes that had enabled students to navigate a successful school career. After the last page of transcription was coded, the researcher was able to divide the codes into distinct categories for deeper analysis that were easier to

understand and that could provide new ideas regarding current perspectives of educational practices using clear, simple language not only for practitioners and educators but also for Latino students on their quest to improve their academic achievement. Dey (1993) used an analogy of climbing a mountain to depict the process of analyzing qualitative data. He explained that researchers climbed up to see the world from a different perspective. They climbed the mountain, Dey explained, because they were interested in the renewed view of the horizon with every step they took. They evaluated the path behind and the path ahead of them and considered their new viewpoints to plan ahead, to retrace steps, or to take different and unexpected routes as the climb could be easy at times, but it could also be hard and slow due to unexpected conditions. The new view, however, Dey assured, could be overwhelming with magnificent new discoveries. As a researcher, I was prepared to reach the peak and the new views did not disappoint.

The data for this study were analyzed using a three-dimensional approach that described personal and social interactions “based on narrative elements, rewriting the stories into a chronological sequence, and incorporating the settings of the participant’s experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 158). The concepts from the data collected were first identified through descriptive coding and then connected through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial or analytical coding “goes beyond descriptive coding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). Richards (2009) described analytical coding as “coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (pp. 102-103). Richards (2009) stated that analytical coding was the hardest but also the most rewarding because the researcher considered meanings within contexts--the researcher ought to take

the time needed to question and interpret the data collected as this would be the first step to creating concepts and interpreting findings. The researcher continued to stay in touch with participants throughout the summer and fall for clarification of ideas that emerged.

The researcher began analyzing the data soon after the second interview was conducted in order to avoid being overwhelmed with information and, thereby, compromising the accuracy of the findings. Merriam (2009) recommended that, after a second interview, the researcher should be in a position to start comparing the first with the second to begin categorizing findings by themes that could answer the main research question and sub-questions which, in turn, should guide the next data collected following a similar pattern. Merriam (2009) pointed out that ongoing data collection and analysis was the favored way for qualitative studies because accumulated and unsorted data could become “unfocused, repetitive, and overwhelming” (pp. 170-171). Member checks were conducted after every interview was transcribed and every step was taken to assure that new data were collected with every new interview. By the last interview, it was evident what the main themes of the study were.

Creswell (2007) suggested organizing the stories and events in chronological order to then begin to identify relative information that would guide the final interpretation of the story. Therefore, after determining the main themes, the researcher presented said themes through her entire analysis running horizontally from elementary to high school validating them with participants’ personal quotes. The review of the literature was also modified to add voices that echoed what the participants had proclaimed once the findings were determined and organized by themes.

Data analysis that yields trustworthy findings must be carefully conducted so that its interpretation cannot be seen as “figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243) because “in our search for accuracy and alternative explanations, we need discipline; we need protocols, which do not depend on mere intuition and good intention to get it right” (Stake, 1995, p. 107). In search of accurate data, the researcher went back and forth interpreting what her participants had said and what she had observed and what they had shared in their autobiographies. The researcher had several follow-up questions for every participant for the mere purpose of making meaning.

Trustworthiness and Generalizability

I have worked as an educator in the same Colorado mountain community for 21 years. I have seen the struggles of the Latino population through my eyes as an immigrant and as an educator. The stories of failure or success shared by many Latino students were a source of inspiration and motivation that fed my sense of urgency for change. Therefore, I conducted my study with the utmost respect for the field and for my participants, pursuing the highest levels of trustworthiness. For my study, I followed a rigorous and well-designed qualitative analysis by means of carefully interviewing the people that I strived to serve. Because of my background being similar to that of my participants, I had a personal as well as a professional attachment to my research study. This personal attachment, Machi and McEvoy (2009) stressed, could be positive but it could also be negative as it could add passion and dedication subjectively driven by personal bias, so they suggested “methodical scholarly work” (p. 19) in order to have control of one’s own judgment. As suggested by Machi and McEvoy, I self-reflected and deeply analyzed and isolated my own personal experiences, beliefs, biases, and opinions

on this topic in order to preserve a neutral position as a researcher. By doing an exercise of self-reflection as the authors suggested, I was able to look at my participants' lived experiences more objectively.

Trustworthiness on the finding of this research also came from the careful plan for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data that was followed and by the manner in which the findings were reported (Merriam, 2009). Merriam suggested that, for internal validity, the best method the researcher should consider was triangulation of the data. Therefore, I triangulated interview data with field journal notes, with artifacts provided including autobiographies, and with member checks. Maxwell (2005) stated that member checks were "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning . . . and the perspective . . . as well as being an important way of identifying your own [researcher's] biases and misunderstandings of what you observed" (p. 211). Member checks were done after the first interview data were transcribed to avoid misinterpreting the meaning and perception of my participants and to keep them engaged. In order to do this, a written transcription of their answers was presented to each participant soon after his or her interview in order to give them a chance to verify the authenticity of their answers, which would lead my interpretation. Hence, member checks were conducted with every participant by providing them with a verbatim transcription of the entire interview and by corroborating findings and interpretations before I began coding the data for ongoing analysis.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to discover factors such as programs, experiences, or influential people that Latino students of Mexican descent attributed with

their academic success. This was done using what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) identified as operating from what works. Lawrence-Lightfoot stated that, while the ambitious expectations that society had placed on public schools had not been met, the literature in education had gloomily focused on describing what was wrong instead of what was right. The author added, however, that there were a number of researchers who were asking questions that examined what has worked and whether or not what worked could be replicated in other environments. It was precisely from this point of view that I launched my research study to find out what experiences from kindergarten to 12th grade contributed to my participants' academic success. To guide this study, I have listened to students' voices, which were often missing from the literature as students were frequently seen as the problem in schools while professionals were seen as providers of answers (Lumby, 2012). I wanted to challenge those power relationships by empowering students to speak with their own voices while we constructed meaning of their experiences. A detailed profile of each participant is given in Chapter IV of this dissertation. The results from this study intended to contribute to the literature by providing current data, narrated with students' voices, as they co-constructed their lived experiences that helped them succeed academically.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANTS

Despite the fact that the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954 ended *de jure* segregation, Latinos have continued to be marginalized within the American society due to issues related to language, racism, culture, segregation, and education (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Consequently, to provide insightful sources or information, all participants for this study were selected based on their evident academic success despite the fact that they faced similar struggles afflicting other Latinos in the United States.

For this study, an examination of factors among successful Latino students provided the foundational structure for the final analysis and recommendations included in Chapters V and VI of this study. Crotty (1998) indicated that, for a constructionist view, “meaning is not discovered but constructed” (p. 412). Hence, the participants of this study engaged in at least one semi-structured interview with the researcher in which they co-constructed their lived experiences within their own context. Using portraiture as a method for capturing and describing the participants in this study, the following portraits “capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality” of their school experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 3). These portraits introduced the participants to the reader and also presaged the major themes presented in the findings section of this study.

All participants to this study had Mexican ancestries and were either first, second, or third generation Americans. A total of 15 high school students were recommended as

participants, but only 8 were selected. College seniors and graduates were more difficult to find due to time constraints. Four college graduates never responded to the initial invitation, two responded but did not follow up with an autobiography, and one could not find time to meet for an interview. Of the total 14 participants of the study, 8 were high school students, 3 were college seniors, and 3 were college graduates. Three of the eight high school students were born in Mexico and five were born in the United States. Two of the high school students were undocumented. They declined admission to 4-year colleges due to high costs and lack of resources but enrolled in their local community college with plans to transfer after 2 years. All three seniors in college were born in the United States. Two of the three college graduates were undocumented. One became a legal resident through marriage, and the other one was legally working under *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* rights for undocumented citizens. The *DACA* rights allow individuals who meet specific criteria to remain in the country legally and to obtain renewable work permits for 2-year periods. The Department of Homeland Security has the right to cease or renew the deferred status of the individual and can determine the criteria to be eligible for *DACA* status (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2013).

Participants came from two high schools, five colleges or universities, and from six different cities in the country. Gathering diverse participants was important to assure trustworthiness for later analysis of the data (Merriam, 2009). The participants are categorized in Table 4.1 below. Their real names were substituted with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Table 4.1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Schooling	U.S. Born	Legal Status	Parents Legal Status	Raised By
Julian	High School Senior 1	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Undocumented Father Documented	Both Parents
Faridhe	High School Senior 2	No	DACA	Mother Undocumented Father Undocumented	Both Parents
Natalia	High School Senior 3	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Undocumented Father Undocumented	Both Parents
Rene	High School Senior 4	No	U.S. Citizen	Mother Documented Father Documented	Both Parents
Rodolfo	High School Senior 5	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Unknown	Both Parents
Lizzy	High School Senior 6	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Documented Father Documented	Both Parents
Charlie	High School Senior 7	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Undocumented Father Undocumented	Both Parents
Jenny	High School Senior 8	No	Undocumented	Mother Undocumented Father Undocumented	Divorced Parents

Table 4.1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Schooling	U.S. Born	Legal Status	Parents Legal Status	Raised By
Ruby	College Graduate 1	No	Legal Resident	Mother Documented Father Undocumented	Divorced Parents
Chino	College Graduate 2	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Undocumented	Single Mom
Miguel	College Graduate 3	No	DACA	Mother Undocumented	Single Mom
Mario	College Senior 1	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Documented Father Documented	Both Parents
Mariana	College Senior 2	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Documented Father Undocumented	Both Parents
Ralph	College Senior 3	Yes	U.S. Citizen	Mother Documented Father Documented	Both Parents

DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

The setting for the interviews occurred face-to-face at different locations within the State of Colorado, except for two that were conducted face-to-face through Skype communication due to their distance at the time of their interview. All high school students were interviewed at their respective high schools in private offices or empty classrooms with all of their interviews occurring during free periods or after their normal school hours. All three interviews with college seniors were conducted in or near their college libraries. Two interviews with college graduates were conducted Skype communication and one took place in the researcher's house on a Sunday afternoon. Before the interview, the researcher established communication with all participants which continued after the interviews. When the participants are mentioned in the narrative, their assigned code will follow their pseudonym. This code was assigned based on their classification. Every high school senior has the code "HSS" followed with a number from one to eight. College seniors have "CS" followed with a number from one to three, and every college graduate has "CG" also followed by a number from one to three. This coding was intended to help the reader keep track of each participant as their narratives were presented.

High School Seniors

Julian--High School Senior 1 (HSS1)

There is something they can never take away and that is your knowledge. They can take away all your money; however, your knowledge will always be with you.

Julian's smile was big enough to fill the room when we met. A senior in high school who had received a full scholarship to attend any college in the United States, he had chosen a private university in Colorado, despite the fact that his two older siblings were attending a larger, public university about 100 miles north of the one he chose.

When I asked him why he had chosen a private institution, with a big smile on his face, he answered that it was a matter of pride. Julian's grade point average (GPA) in high school was 3.386, giving him a ranking of 26 out of 78 students in his graduating class. His ACT composite score was a 22, with a math score of 26. His scores did not make him a superb candidate for a private, selective school or for a full ride scholarship, but his personal life and troubles he had overcome did. Julian challenged himself in high school, taking advanced placement (AP) classes in math and English. In addition, he took some community college classes in the evenings while also participating in football, rugby, soccer, and basketball. He proudly wore a state championship ring from his rugby team.

At about 250 pounds and 6-feet-2-inches tall, Julian was a popular kid among his peers. He was born in Delano, California, to migrant workers. His mother only finished third grade in Mexico, and his father did not go much further in school. However, both of his parents instilled in Julian and his siblings a strong work ethic. His mother's constant mantra throughout his childhood was "education will get you further."

Julian's family moved to their small town in Colorado when Julian was 5 years old so he considered Colorado to be his home. His parents crossed the border by walking the hot desert from Mexico in search of a better life. His father was able to obtain legal residency but his mother had not. So, as soon as Julian's older brother turned 21, he had filed paperwork to claim his mother as a legal resident. All three sons started working the summers before their freshman year in high school as an expectation to help the family pay for bills and cover personal expenses. Unfortunately for Julian, the summer between his freshman and sophomore year, his father went to jail where he served a 2-year sentence. This incident put a tremendous financial strain on their family, so everyone had

to pick up extra hours at work to make up for the loss of their father's income. In his own words, Julian "never stopped working." He worked in restaurants, grocery stores, and other jobs that his mother would procure for him. But, no matter how hard he worked, the message from his mother was always to do well in school and go to college so that he would not have to live a life of struggles as his parents had.

During the fall of his senior year in high school, all residents of the trailer park where his family had lived for many years were being evicted by town ordinance. The government officials gave the residents a few months to find a place to live or to make arrangements with a moving company to relocate their trailers. Most were in bad enough shape that they could not be moved. Julian and his family struggled to find a place they could afford to live while watching their house being demolished. Despite his friendly smile, there were several instances when Julian's eyes got teary remembering his struggles and, at one point, he completely broke down.

Julian's attitude toward school and what education could offer was remarkable and worthy of this study. His closing remarks included,

I didn't get picked on by kids at all or bullied for not being as smart as my White friends, because I was at the same level as they were . . . or I was smarter because I have had more life experiences and knowledge gained through experiences that they haven't had.

Julian also stated that Latinos should represent their countries with pride and show everyone that they could be as smart as "any Anglo kid."

Faridhe--High School Senior 2 (HSS2)

I wasn't ready for high school academically, because I had been put in all these lower-level classes in middle school because I didn't speak English that well, so when I went to high school, it was the hardest thing ever... I was not in any ELL classes, because I was finally at grade level in English, but I wasn't at that level in math, science or history.

Faridhe was born in Tijuana, Mexico, and came to the United States when she was 8 years old. At the time of our interview in March, she was 18 and a senior in high school. She did not know where she would be going to college despite being admitted to several universities already. The main reason was that, as an undocumented student, Faridhe did not qualify for any kind of financial assistance from the government. Even after the Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow (ASSET) bill passed in Colorado, the price tag for college was out of her reach. Faridhe was a beautiful, tall, and slim young lady with big bright eyes and long black hair. Despite her looks and great success in school, attributes that were greatly valued in American culture, there was a hint of sadness and despair in her demeanor.

Faridhe's GPA was 3.00 and her ACT score was a 20. She only took the ACT test once and did not see the point of retaking it again since she had already been admitted to several colleges. Faridhe was very proud of her heritage and had been involved with a group that advocated for immigrant rights. She believed that organizations needed to value the diversity of their members while positively interacting with each other and allowing them to be leaders in their communities. She participated in student council while in high school and her last year was elected senior class president. She planned on pursuing leadership roles so that she could continue to serve her community as a role model as well.

Faridhe's outlook was filled with ambiguities because her undocumented status made it very difficult to achieve her dream of going to college after high school. She was upset about her reality and thought it was unfair that some kids had more opportunities than others, even when they had not earned them. During our interview, she sadly stated,

Why should I keep pushing for this? Like, there is nothing really happening for undocumented people, and I don't see a way how I am going to push myself, but definitely just look at the bright side and there are people who are willing to help you and support you even though you might be really down.

Several times during our interview, Faridhe wept out of frustration and out of fear for her unknown future, mainly due to her undocumented status.

Faridhe started her education in Mexico and came to the United States with high standards for herself and others. She did not accept the status quo that Latinos had in her new school in the United States. She rejected the notion that, because of being Latino, one had to conform to the low expectations placed upon them by teachers and by society. Her challenges were finding her place in a system that did not honor or acknowledge her language or her culture, adapting to it, and finding warmth and comfort in a fairly cold place; she was not only referring to the weather in Colorado. Her greatest difficulty as a newcomer was dealing with isolation when she did not know English. Her demeanor changed as she started talking about her social circle of friends as a monolingual student. She was apprehensive of the practices schools followed by placing English language learners (ELL) in low-level academic classes due to their inability to communicate in English. She stated that her ELL classes were nurturing and gave her the need for love and belonging but, because she was in those classes, her teachers and administrators did not give her and others a chance to succeed at higher levels academically. Faridhe felt that teachers compared kids with each other and made some students feel less than others. Her greatest goal when she arrived from Mexico was to learn to speak English well, but college was a foreign concept that no one in her family understood. When Faridhe was finally able to exit the ELL program, all of her other academic areas were low, so she had to go through the remedial course track, working hard in order to join the more

challenging classes. Being behind in school limited what she could do her first 2 years in high school and that affected her GPA score. By her senior year, however, she was already taking AP and community college classes.

At the end of her seemingly upstream high school career, Faridhe found the validation she had been so desperately seeking. “I wanted to get myself noticeable for all the hard things I had done. I wanted people to know that none of my challenges had affected me.” Faridhe was planning on becoming a professional photographer and was committed to helping the Latino community by being a “voice” for those who did not seem to have one. She concluded by stating that the current curriculums that were offered to students in high schools made many of them waste their time and talents with irrelevant classes that prepared them for nothing and that many classes were heavily segregated so having to meet all graduation requirements forced very talented kids into boring and irrelevant tracks, leading them to disengagement from school. Faridhe felt ready to succeed in college mainly because she forced herself to take rigorous classes and because she was savvy enough to find opportunities to balance her schedule with classes that interested her.

I think teachers make preferences towards White students when trying to get help or in comments they made, maybe not directly to me but to others, and I find myself thinking that they would not make that comment to a White kid because there is definitely discrimination, and I don't know if discrimination is the right word but there is definitely a border between races, and I know you are not supposed to do it as a teacher but I know it still happens a lot.

Despite her contradictions, Faridhe seemed ready to succeed in college and was determined to graduate with a 4-year degree. Because of the expense, however, she was planning on going on the 2-year community college route first, then transfer the last 2 years.

Natalia--High School Senior 3 (HSS3)

I think that some of the things that set me up for college are definitely the college classes that are offered at the school, simply because it is a bigger workload than normal high school classes. You're expected to do things that you are not expected to do in high school courses. There is definitely that sense of independence more. You have to do it on your own and do well, and the teachers aren't going to be there to hold your hand along the way and tell you that you have to do this and do that. You have to have self-discipline and just do it on your own.

Natalia was one of the last students I interviewed mainly because we struggled finding a time to meet that worked with her schedule as a young mother. Natalia was born in the United States to immigrant parents from Mexico. She was the oldest of two in her family. With the help of her tutors from a pre-college program and her work for the past 3 years, she was able to earn a scholarship that completely covered her tuition and room and board expenses for the next 4 years at a large university in Colorado. Despite her amazing career as a high school student, however, having her baby the summer between junior and senior years had really shaken her confidence in being able to attend college. Yet, her tenacity and zest for higher education kept her dreams alive. The last semester of her senior year, Natalia was busy with a heavy academic load, nursing a baby, and trying to earn as much money as possible before she departed for college. Going away meant that her parents would take care of her daughter while she was away studying.

Natalia's GPA in high school was 3.6 and her composite ACT score was a 26. She took mainly AP and college classes during her junior and senior years. Her family had been very supportive throughout her schooling although at times her parents' high expectations were hard for Natalia to meet. Her pregnancy was a surprise, as Natalia told no one until about two months before her due date. This experience made everyone in her

family re-examine the next steps but, knowing how important it was for the entire family that their children attended college, they decided to adopt her baby as their own to let Natalia go to college and make the most of it.

She was a quiet, reserved girl, who never broke dress code at her school, never acted disrespectful to her teachers or peers, and never missed a class due to misbehavior. She was a favorite among her teachers for her tenacity and effort to do well both personally and academically. Missing an assignment was unheard of for Natalia, and her peer group of friends was similar to her, all Latinas and high achieving. When she felt frustrated, she cried instead of expressing her feelings for fear of offending others. Her parents were strict but always attentive and supportive to her and her sister. Now, imagine a fearful young Natalia keeping her pregnancy to herself and dealing with the unknown for 7 months before she talked about it. Natalia kept her pregnancy a secret for as long as she was able, until late in the summer when the changes in her body were so evident that her mother confronted her. Because she was always wearing loose clothes, no one ever noticed her changing in appearance and, even if they did, no one would have suspected a pregnancy. In her own words, Natalia described the “shame” she felt for “letting others down.” Despite the rumors at school, Natalia moved on with dignity. She went back to school and finished her senior year. She learned to keep her head up, revealing to no one the identity of her baby’s father.

Natalia’s shy personality did not get in the way of her being eloquent during the interview, however, and fully expressing her feelings, goals, and dreams for her future. She said it would be very hard to leave her baby behind but she knew that the best thing to do was to get an education and take advantage of the generous scholarship she had

received. Her senior year was especially hard, because she missed a lot of school when her baby was born in September and during school when she did not have babysitting available. She managed to succeed at the end due to the support she received from her teachers, mentors, and family.

In retrospect, Natalia felt that the right people came to her at the right time when she was about to give up on all of her dreams. She mentioned the advice she received from a highly successful person who had been a teenage mother herself. This person had told her that a son or a daughter should never be a reason to be ashamed and, that she should keep her “head straight up and her feet moving forward” because her baby would become the force behind her actions. Despite some negative feedback she received from others, she felt that the network of support she had in high school was instrumental in helping her reach the next steps. She felt academically ready for college because she had already been challenging herself with rigorous classes for the past 2 years and she was optimistic about the future. “When I was in middle school, I did an internship with a dentist and decided that I wanted to become one. Now that I see my future a little closer, I have decided to become a chemical engineer.”

Rene--High School Senior 4 (HSS4)

If you are a teacher, you better be strict as a teacher, but nice as a person...in middle school, they are preparing you for high school, but they are not, because they have to prepare you since elementary school.

Rene was the fourth student in the smaller high school that I interviewed. Our interview took place literally the day before his high school graduation, so he was quite excited. A good looking soccer player, proud of his heritage, and well adept at navigating between his two cultures, Rene, like other participants, felt honored to be selected for this

study and felt deserving of such recognition given how hard he had worked and how far he had come. Rene was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, in 1996. His father had been previously married and had four older children who lived in Texas. Rene, his sister, and his mother waited in Mexico until their legal residency was approved.

Once the legal papers arrived, Rene's immediate family moved to the United States. Rene entered fifth grade when he arrived, and he keenly gave credit to his early years in Mexico for his success in school. In his own words during the interview, Rene stated over and over the importance of rigorous classes and high expectations from teachers, including homework and graduation requirements. He felt that the years he had spent going to school in the United States had made him a little "lazy" because his friends from Mexico were taking harder classes such as Calculus and Physics as graduation requirements, while here he had been given the choice and had elected not to take such challenging classes. "The school system in Mexico makes you do your work. You don't get to chose classes, and if you don't do your homework, you have consequences." Rene expressed frustration with other students who started in the ELL program with him and had continued in that program for many more years after he had left. His GPA at the end of his high school career was 3.3 and his ACT score was a 22. He took college and AP classes his senior year and felt academically ready to succeed in college. He taught himself how to play several musical instruments and was taking his guitar and his accordion with him to college. He planned to major in recording arts and produce and play music in his own recording studio. He entered and left the room with a joyful smile on his beautiful tanned face. Rene concluded his autobiography with the following paragraph:

I am Mexican-American. The exotic ostrich boots and distinguished black cowboy hat my father wears fills me with pride. As my father and I share intimate conversations about his goals to prosper and give us a better life, inspiration warms my heart. Realizing how hard it must have been for my father, an orphan boy and self taught musician, to have hoped for a better future inspires me to be a man like him and someday accomplish all my goals. By passing down his wisdom and admirable work ethic, my dedication to enhancing my personal growth and maturity will allow me to fulfill his expectations of me. I am my parents' legacy.

Rene still has a little bit of a Spanish accent, not different from the accent you find in Latinos who have lived in border towns most of their lives. He stated that his English learning was improved once he stopped “hanging out” with students in the ELL program at the middle school he attended. He concluded that teachers in America were “nice” but that they “give you too many freedoms . . . and lower expectations” and that was not a way to learn. He stated several times that highly challenging classes and strict teachers were the only way for Latino students to succeed academically.

Rodolfo--High School Senior 5 (HSS5)

Moving into a society where foreigners are obscured by uncertainty and cultural dilemma is something that my immigrant parents had to endure upon their arrival on uncharted soil to pursue the “American Dream.”

Rodolfo was an extremely eloquent young man who walked and talked with confidence, whose black hair was perfectly combed and wore immaculate ironed clothes and polished shoes. I met with Rodolfo two times during the study. The first meeting lasted about one hour. We talked about the study and why I was interested in finding out about his experiences in education that led him to be such an extraordinary student. Rodolfo's response was that it was “fair” to investigate students who were willing to discipline themselves and not only those who continued to make excuses for their low performance in school and in life. For Rodolfo, success was stated as a matter of “discipline and hard work.” Our second meeting was an interview that lasted a little over

two hours. (I could have gone longer given how amusing I found him to be.) He arrived 10 minutes before his scheduled time and politely announced himself.

Rodolfo's GPA was 3.9 and his ACT score was 27. His transcripts only showed three Bs in his entire high school career, all three were in advanced Chemistry classes. The rest of his grades were As including AP Physics, AP English, Calculus II, and other college courses he took his junior and senior years. Rodolfo was accepted to many elite colleges and universities in the United States and, as I followed up with him in May for our third interview, he informed me that he had decided to attend a highly rigorous university in Missouri that had offered him substantial financial aid. Later, at his graduation, I found out that he had also received substantial financial aid from community businesses and organizations.

Rodolfo was the oldest child in his family and the first one to be born in the United States. He proudly explained his family's journey from Mexico to America. He mentioned his father's work in the only job he could find that paid "decently" but that took so much of his energy. His mother, on the other hand, was lonely and often yearned for the family and friends she had left behind in Mexico. When the demand for workers grew, his father convinced his siblings to join them in Colorado. That was when Rodolfo and his family started to settle in his community and began to feel at home regardless of their legal status as some were documented and some were not. According to Rodolfo, they all shared the same goal, "to work to provide a better future for their children, not to abuse the system as some would say."

Rodolfo was proud and felt a great responsibility to reciprocate his parents' hard work. His greatest challenge came in early elementary school when several other kids

were selected for the Gifted and Talented (GT) program in his school while he had not even been invited to test for it. He recalled that experience as unfair to ELL and Latino students. As a small child, he already knew he would excel academically, but there were some instances when he felt his ethnicity and first language held him down. At times, he felt the target of low expectations from his teachers and administrators. His disappointment was still palpable even after so many years and so many accomplishments. He stated that the experience of being rejected did not serve to discourage him but had made him more determined to demonstrate that he was just as capable as the other gifted and talented students even when he had not been given a chance to prove it. In high school, “I was tutoring gifted kids in math and science.”

Rodolfo embodied “discipline” as he often put it in his writing and his words. His father taught him that “there are no excuses for not finding success.” Rodolfo took his father’s advice to heart and often repeated that it did not matter that he was a first-generation American, or that English was not his first language because he was determined to do what it took to be successful. Rodolfo was focused on his school and his future and stated that, “At the end of the day, life is a learning process, and nothing stresses that more than staying in school and getting an education.”

Concerning race and ethnicity, Rodolfo was adamant about this topic and stated, “Don’t treat your heritage as a barrier or an excuse for not working hard. The moment that happens, mediocrity will catch up with you and failure will reach you. Don’t use it as an excuse.” For Rodolfo, at the end of the day, “the most effective support a parent can give their child is discipline.”

**Elizabeth (Lizzy)--High School
Senior 6 (HSS6)**

I also think that a lot of Hispanic children think that their teachers are racist and it confuses me because I've never felt discriminated or segregated. It's often the group sitting at the back, who are consistently getting yelled at and they think that the teachers don't like them and it's not really true.

Lizzy, a curvy, attractive Latina with big brown eyes and beautiful long, black hair was dressed in tight, black pants and a dressy blouse, high heels, and several bracelets on her wrist. Lizzy's confidence added to her attractiveness as she carried herself with poise. Her face and her demeanor showed a mixture of pleasure and contentment to be telling her story. Her answers were clear, explicit, and beautifully enunciated with no trace of Spanish accent.

Lizzy repeatedly mentioned her father and the influence he had in her accomplishments. The greatest challenge Lizzy recalled was in middle school when she dealt with an "identity crisis" as she felt "muddled" not knowing where she belonged or how to choose her friends. Tears in her eyes formed as she recounted how she dealt with "snarky" comments her peers made about Latinos and how they justified themselves by explaining that she was not like "them," that she was different. On the other hand, she also dealt with Mexican kids who often reminded her of her heritage and how she was nothing but a "whitewashed" Mexican. It was not until high school that Lizzy started "feeling comfortable in [her] own skin" because she finally found her own "niche" of friends and also classes that she loved. Her GPA throughout high school was 3.9 and her ACT was 28 composite. She took a heavy load of academics including AP and college classes during her junior and senior years. In her autobiography, she stated that, aside from realizing that she did not care for advanced levels of mathematics past pre-calculus,

that she fell in love with writing. Semi-jokingly, Lizzy offered examples of the things she liked to do and those she did not like doing but she did anyways, like getting up early and limiting what she ate. An articulate young lady, Lizzy's vivid black eyes complemented her speech. "I think that a lot of what comes with pushing yourself is confidence."

Confidence would be the first word I would use to describe Lizzy.

Lizzy indicated that all kids had a need to be recognized for what they did in order to stay motivated. She demonstrated academic ability early on in elementary years and was noticed by her teachers but experienced peer pressure in middle school with Latino students who would make fun of her because her Spanish skills were not as good as her English or because she excelled in her classes. She started to "hide" her grades from other students and often would lie about them. Nonetheless, she often was asked to help Latino students who were behind in class. She did not like being asked but did it because she was often finished with her work. She stated that some teachers slowed down their classes at the expense of "bright" kids who ended up being bored because they were not challenged.

Like the other successful students in this study, Lizzy found sports to be an important part of growing up. She played soccer and basketball mainly because her friends were also playing sports. Lizzy's parents were first-generation Americans but did not fit the stereotype of many other immigrant parents who lived in trailer homes and worked hard hours for low pay. Her father owned his own business and employed several other people. Money, Lizzy stated, had not been a problem for her family yet, but it did worry her at that point as her top choices were very expensive schools. Financially, however, Lizzy was ahead of many of the other students in this study. An example was

that, the following weekend after our interview, Lizzy and both of her parents were flying to visit some of the universities where she had been accepted. None of the other participants had the opportunity to do anything like that with their parents.

Growing up as a Latina, Lizzy explained that it had not been as easy as it had been for White kids but that it was not impossible to succeed either. She said that going to college where Latinos constituted 1.5% of the population really scared her and highlighted the fact that she was a minority, but she also affirmed “I don’t want to be a Hispanic student. I just want to be a student.” For a long time, Lizzy had chosen to be “White” but, as the time passed and she started to learn more about her own identity, she felt more comfortable with who she was and who she represented.

**Carlos (Charlie)--High School
Senior 7 (HSS7)**

I think ELL helped a lot actually, and the teachers helped a lot, but when they put me back into regular classes, I got better.

A round face with two vivid eyes that hid a shy smile walked into the room and sat quietly while I turned the recorder on and got the interview questions ready. I met Charlie for the first time after his Assistant Principal referred him for the study even when his grades and scores were not as high as those of the other participants she had referred. I talked to him and immediately wanted to learn more about his story.

Charlie was born in California to Mexican parents who came to the United States a few months before he was born. He described himself in his autobiography as a “compassionate, hard working, carefree person.” He liked being indoors surfing the Internet, playing videogames, or watching sports. He followed football and basketball on television. His grandfather was an alcoholic who never took responsibility for his

children, so Charlie's father inculcated in them that drinking destroyed families and he swore that he would never drink. Charlie had already made the same promise early on in his life. Neither one of Charlie's parents graduated high school but they always made school a priority for their children telling them that school would give them a better chance at succeeding in life. His parents reminded him often that they did not want Charlie to do the hard jobs they did. His family was very involved in the Catholic Church where the entire family often volunteered. Charlie concluded his autobiography stating that he saw himself working with technology, being married, and having a family. It was ironic that Charlie was so optimistic about getting married when, during the interview, he stated that he had never had a girlfriend because he was too shy to talk to the girls he liked. Sheepishly, he said that the only person who knew his secrets was his best friend in high school but that his secret was well kept.

Charlie's ACT composite score was 20 and his GPA 3.27. He took only two college classes in high school but considered himself good in math, science, and technology. He was not sure of his language arts skills and indicated that he had a hard time understanding how to write proper English. He said math was a lot easier because there was one correct answer all the time. Charlie had aspirations to become a teacher and the next quote illustrated his gentle approach: "I love learning, and it's great being around kids and knowing that you are growing their future and the kids will always love you and they will make you feel good when you work with them." Charlie advised administrators to offer more extracurricular activities to students, not only sports because many kids do not like or are not good at playing sports, and they struggle to find things to do. Overall, Charlie felt that high school had been the best of his experiences and felt that his peer

group was supportive and had helped him to stay focused and motivated to do well in school.

**Jennifer (Jenny)--High School
Senior 8 (HSS8)**

Latinos are so judgmental to one another that, if you start doing good in school and care about your grades, they call you “whitewash” and exclude you from their group. I do hang out with White kids but that doesn’t make me any less Latino or less proud.

Jenny was undocumented and, from the first time I met her, she told me how hard it was for her to accept her reality. She appeared to be angry and desperate and asked for any help or guidance I could provide. Jenny was driven; she took three AP classes and three college classes her senior year and got accepted to all five colleges she had applied. She earned a 3.28 GPA and a composite score of 23 in her ACT test. She only took her ACT test once.

Jenny was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and had moved to the United States when she was 5. She started kindergarten not knowing a word of English. She said she was a precocious infant, however, who learned quickly. She started talking and walking at 11 months of age and learned to milk the cows at her grandfather’s ranch by age 3. Her parents were from a small town in Mexico and had stopped attending school when they were 11 years old as it was the norm for most kids in their small town. Jenny remembered learning English quickly, making teachers notice her potential early on. School had been easy for Jenny until her last 2 years in high school when the academic load became more rigorous. She said that she had kept in mind that “school wasn’t supposed to be easy and that no dream worth living for [was] an easy one to reach.”

Jenny knew that Latinos were a minority in colleges but felt motivated to “prove people wrong.” She felt that hard work and motivation overcame all obstacles as she dreamed of one day becoming a medical doctor. Jenny mentioned that the lack of academic success among Latinos was mostly their own fault because, “Latinos exclude themselves and they don’t try.” But she also rationalized that more Latinos would aspire to graduate from college if they were able to afford it.

Jenny’s bitter undertone was evident in all my encounters with her. We met first to determine if she would be interested in this study and then for the 2-hour interview. We later met three other times to talk about her college process and plans. The last time I met with her, she was determined to transfer to a public school in downtown Denver starting in the spring of 2015 semester, but she had decided over the summer to start out at the local community college. Jenny planned to attend a 4-year college right after high school but her parents’ divorce and family “drama,” as she called it, had changed her plans. After her father left his family, her mother fell into a deep depression that left Jenny and her younger brother to fend for themselves. Jenny was only a sophomore in high school and had to assume the responsibility to pay for all bills at her house including rent. She was still very upset about it and resented both of her parents for their actions. She felt her father was irresponsible for leaving his family and her mother for being weak and not able to face her reality.

Jenny’s encouragement came, in part, from her aunts and uncles who would encourage her to do well in school in order to change her destiny. She was also encouraged by some of her teachers who held high expectations for her. Jenny mentioned one of her science teachers who had been strict with her and stated, “Mrs. [name of

teacher], because she didn't give me any choice. She made me do my work, and she made me try harder and made me forget about my problems." All through high school, Jenny's parents were too wrapped up into their own lives and had no time or energy to help or guide her. On the contrary, they discouraged her from wanting to attend college, arguing that it was too expensive and for White people only.

Jenny never had the opportunity to play sports or participate in after-school programs in high school because she had to work to pay her bills. She found the motivation to stay positive and keep moving forward in her little brother, "I didn't want him to look at my dad and think that hurting someone was okay or to look at my mom and think he could just lock himself and forget about his problems." Unlike many other successful students, Jenny did not have the support of her parents. She had to assert herself every single day to keep moving in the direction of academic achievement.

Along the way, Jenny had met teachers and tutors who had advised her to keep moving forward and to keep her dreams and goals alive. Paradoxically, Jenny exemplified the faults in the immigration system in the United States. Her potential and talents were exceptional among Latinos, as it has been previously documented in this study, yet the system hindered her academic drive and added to her already complicated financial situation.

College Graduates

Ruby--College Graduate 1 (CG1)

As Ruby, I perfected my English, I maintained an unbroken record of a perfect grade point average, and I started thinking about college and what lay ahead. My role as Ruby was to take advantage of this land of opportunities and to not let my parents down after all the sacrifices they had made for me. . . . As Ruby, I also had the misfortune of going through a rite-of-passage that caught me by surprise.

The branding of the label “illegal” upon my person marked the moment that I, Ruby, had to grow up and face reality.

A beautiful brunette, petite, kind, young woman, Ruby graduated first in her high school class despite going back and forth from school to school and from Mexico to the United States. Ruby was the first Latina valedictorian in the history of her school. In all, Ruby attended five schools in four different towns and in two countries. When I interviewed her, she was in her first year at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill working on her doctoral degree.

I met Ruby years before this study. She was a student at a high school where I taught and also participated in a pre-college program I directed. In all my interactions with her, I was always impressed by the quality of her work and the strength of her character. Ruby was undocumented in the years before the ASSET bill. Her only chance of going to college was through private funding. Together, we spent many hours applying to private colleges and universities that did not require legal status. Ruby never waived while keeping a watchful eye in her mail and email correspondence waiting for a miracle to happen. The miracle did happen and, by the end of her senior year, she had secured enough private funding to attend a private school in Colorado.

In her autobiography, Ruby explained the many meanings of her name. As a married woman in her mid 20s, Ruby had adopted her husband’s last name so there was no trace of the name and identity she had in Mexico. In Mexico, she was Ana Ruby Gonzalez Martinez; in the United States she was Ruby Neil. “In the role of Ana, I learned my first life lessons, laid out a foundation of values for my life, and took note of what I thought life was and what it ought to be . . . I stood on firm ground.”

Ana Gonzalez, in her own words, was “a contradiction or an incompleteness of sorts. I was fully here, but not fully accepted. I was a part of a system that simultaneously encouraged me and prohibited me from dreaming.” Ruby arrived at her college campus on a sunny day; that same night, she met the young man who would become her husband 5 years later. Ruby graduated in 4 years with a Neuroscience major and, in the process, she learned that barriers did not mean impossibilities. After getting married, Ruby and her husband moved to the East Coast where they both entered graduate school. Being Ruby Neil meant that life was full of possibilities, but those possibilities were conceivable because of the life lessons that Ana Gonzalez learned early on in life. Ruby felt “blessed” with her two heritages, her two languages, her two cultures, and her two families. She embodied the perfect match for what was possible in a human being who, instead of being divided by name and culture, was able to become a beautiful hybrid of both.

Ruby was encouraged by her parents to do well in school and to not let life get in the way of her dreams. The most difficult part of schooling was going back and forth from school to school, but she felt some kind of pleasure every time she was able to “dismantle” low expectations that some teachers placed on her for being Latina or for being a transfer student. Ruby explained that, after teachers noticed the quality of her work, they would start treating her differently. Ruby stated that “discipline” was the road to academic success for her and that it was the schools in Mexico that taught her the tools she needed to be a successful student in the United States. From the formality of treating teachers with utmost respect to the way students were expected to keep their notebooks and take notes, the rigor and high expectations for all and the discipline to do the work

well all the time had made her a successful student. Like many successful students, Ruby had mentors at school that took an interest in her. For Ruby, it was the school librarian and a science teacher in middle school. The librarian encouraged her to read good books and to go “above and beyond” what others did if she wanted to go to college. Her science teacher treated her with respect and never put down her limited English proficiency. By the time Ruby was in high school, her parents had divorced and remarried. Her mother’s new husband provided a more stable home allowing her to attend the same high school all 4 years

Ruby’s advice for teachers was to get to know their students well and to encourage them to challenge themselves. As a junior, she was encouraged by a science teacher to enroll in an AP Biology class. She did and earned the highest score in the test. The success in that AP class encouraged her to take more advanced and college classes her senior year. Had her science teacher not encouraged her to take AP classes, Ruby would have not known about them. Her parents did not know about those classes, and her counselor had not mentioned them either. In retrospect, Ruby felt that her AP and college classes prepared her for college where she enrolled in the honors program. Her advice for teachers dealing with Latino students was, “Please don’t hold low expectations of Latino students because you never know how capable they are.” Ruby concluded our interview by stating, “social-emotional wellbeing of children affects their academic success” more than society cares to understand.

Raúl (Chino)--College Graduate 2 (CG2)

The region where I was born is unique, yet notorious for cutting lives short. I was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, and while it was a war zone, it was a place that taught me the lessons for living that no classroom, internship or Socratic seminar could teach.

The nickname “Chino” came from his small, narrow eyes. A husky physique, Chino wore long shorts with a big t-shirt and tennis shoes. He told me he dressed that way most of the time; others could have confused him with a gang member. His hair was short and he proudly displayed the following tattoos all over his body: “Tiahui,” a Nahuatl word that meant relentlessly moving forward; “SC LA” the place where he was born; “The Odds Are Against Me, I love Those Odds” on his left arm; “Calmness Is Power, Say Unto Your Heart, Peace Be Still” on his chest; and some others that I did not catch. His English was refined and his discourse filled with political nuances. He stated in his autobiography that he liked “intellectual conversations” because they allowed him to change perspectives. He described himself as observant but strong on convictions and values. He stated that he could be society’s worst nightmare, “an educated Latino with an attitude.” It was that attitude that taught him a hard lesson his junior year in college.

Chino, his single mother, and his little sister moved to Colorado from Los Angeles his junior year in high school. They arrived by Greyhound with only their clothes and some change in their pockets. Tragic events with uncles and cousins getting killed in his gang-infested neighborhood precipitated their move. His grandparents were from a small Mexican town where his mother was born. They moved to California when their children were young where they “became what many immigrants become, workers.” Grandparents were “another set of parents” to Chino and inculcated Mexican values and traditions that he proudly mixed with his American culture. In his interview, Chino often brought up Aztecs, La Raza (The Race), and some of the iconic Latino Civil Rights activists such as Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Corky Gonzalez. When asked about school experiences, Chino described his teachers from California as cold and

disinterested, and his former school as old and heavily segregated with “brown” kids. He claimed that his involvement in the community was the reason why he was able to succeed in that environment and the reason why he started to look at the world through a critical lens, seeing what was unfair in society.

Chino was noticed in his small high school in Colorado. He wore different clothes, spoke English with a slightly different vernacular, and more importantly, he did well in his classes for a Latino boy from Los Angeles who looked more like a gang member and less like a college-bound student. Chino acknowledged that his teachers in Colorado were “good” to him and that some took the time to get to know him well which was instrumental in his success. He also had a mentor who became the only other father figure he had beside his grandfather. This man was educated, wealthy, held high expectations of him, and was non-judgmental. He invited Chino to attend meetings after school with a group of girls he was mentoring. Chino attended the first meeting because he “had nothing better to do after school” and because it was a way to meet girls. With the help and support of his mentor, Chino earned a complete scholarship to attend a large public university in Colorado.

Everything went well in school until his “attitude” got him in trouble at the end of his junior year in college when he struck a police officer at a bar. He was sent to jail and faced years in prison. He also lost his scholarship. Chino had nobody else other than his high school mentor to help him with his troubles. At that particular low time in his life, Chino remembered his father’s last words to him when he was still a young boy in California, “You won’t amount to anything.” At that point, Chino was afraid to continue in the same cycle of underachievement where his family had been for three generations.

Soon after his detention, however, Chino had the opportunity to learn how influence and access could make one's life a little easier. His mentor from high school hired a lawyer and contacted other influential people to get Chino out of jail and back in college. He graduated 2 years later. When I checked back with him in November of 2014, he was working for the I Have a Dream Foundation in a large metropolitan area. The greatest advice from Chino was for schools to fund programs that provide support for minorities and poor children, for colleges to be more inclusive, and for society to learn how to turn people's differences into the one thing that united them all. Self-consciously he admitted that he had an edge over wealthier kids because growing up poor had taught him how to problem-solve at an early age.

Miguel--College Graduate 3 (CG3)

My teacher from elementary school . . . she was really strict . . . she was really mean but everybody did really well with her.

Miguel graduated from engineering school and was fully employed at the place where he had interned while in college. He was able to work legally after claiming DACA status for qualified applicants. Miguel was born in Mexico where he lived with his mother and brother until he moved permanently to the United States. Miguel attended three different high schools in three different towns but managed to earn good enough grades to get accepted in college. He also had the opportunity to pay lower tuition at a university that offered a modified tuition to undocumented students who had graduated from Colorado.

During high school, Miguel joined an after-school program ran by volunteers that provided a safe place for low-income kids to do homework and have a healthy snack. Miguel met a retired engineer at this place who encouraged him to take advanced math

classes in high school. His tutoring and the help of the director for this program helped Miguel stay focus in high school and played a critical role in helping him apply for college scholarships. Miguel's mother went back to Mexico when he was a sophomore in high school leaving him with his older sister. His sister never knew what was going on in high school because most communication was through email and she did not have access to electronic communication. It was his volunteer mentors who took the role of his parents.

Miguel attended a highly rigorous, public middle school in Mexico. He explained that "classes at the middle school were pretty tough. The teachers may not be very interested in the kids, but they make you do the work." When he came back to the United States and was placed in ELL classes, he immediately felt the lack of rigor compared to what he had been exposed to in Mexico. Miguel stated that the reason why he got ahead in school was because he had refused ELL classes his second year in high school. "ELL [teachers] need to make them [students] struggle . . . if they don't struggle, they don't learn anything." Miguel reflected on his graduating class from high school and added, "Kids that I graduated with never left ELL. Those kids still don't know English . . . I don't understand how they graduated, you know?" He took three English classes his second year in high school to get caught up with his graduating class and "took harder math classes. I never took AP courses but I took all the hard classes that I could find and that I could get into."

Miguel was particularly critical of the way ELL programs were structured, perhaps because he was older and more aware of the value systems and hierarchy in schools. He was at the top of his class in Mexico and refused to be placed at the bottom in

the new system. He had the attitude and the skills to succeed academically and learning English was not going to be a barrier in his path. He stated that, in America, Latinos were not taught the “habits” they needed to succeed in college. He recommended that teachers and administrators get the ELL kids out of the “Mexican Hallway” and into the mainstream. He said that he never attended any school dances, “I didn’t even know when they were,” or joined sports, “I didn’t know how to join.” He reflected on his experiences in high school and sadly stated, “I always felt like I didn’t really belong. I always felt like I was an outsider.” However, Miguel felt that being Latino was not an impediment to succeed academically; the problem was the “segregated” environments where Latinos were placed. He adamantly stated that students ought to be taken out of ESL and get involved in school. “Everybody just speaks Spanish [in ESL classes] and teachers don’t know what is going on there . . . they set aside a lot of time, and you end up with a lot of wasted time.”

Miguel’s reflections deeply examined the complexity of educating ELL students and the many layers that it involved. Even when he shared similarities with other ELL students, Miguel came to the American system already equipped to succeed emotionally and academically. At the end, however, Miguel concluded, “I think kids are the same in Mexico as [they are] here; I think kids are the same everywhere.” And because of the similarities ELL students shared, Miguel recognized that the reason why he went to college while many other Latinos did not was because “I had a mentor . . . who helped me look beyond high school and into college . . . and [another] mentor who helped me get scholarships to go to college.”

College Seniors

Mario--College Senior 1 (CS1)

The ACT scores were a huge barrier going to college. Many of my friends didn't go to college. All the Mexicans performed low in those tests.

Mario's parents moved to Denver 2 months before their first child was born. His father moved to Denver when he was 13 years old and was a legal resident but his mother was not. She crossed the border without "papers" and 7 months pregnant. Mario was tall and light skinned, handsome, and had a quiet demeanor and a friendly smile. We met at the large university in Colorado where he was studying and about to graduate. He was excited about his upcoming graduation and told me that he was the first in his family to graduate from college; many family members were traveling to celebrate his great accomplishment.

Mario received a scholarship that paid for his entire college bill including room and board. He did not hear about the scholarship from his counselors in high school or from his parents but through a friend who encouraged him to apply and who also received the same scholarship. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science and planned to run for public office in Colorado. His interest in politics derived from his experiences in high school participating in a national government competition in Washington, DC. He attended a large, public high school located in an affluent neighborhood. Most of his classmates were White students who came from wealthy families, so often times he was the only "Mexican" around. "As a Latino student, I always felt like I never quite fully fit in any school." Mario indicated that the social aspect in school was critical to Latino students because they often "don't belong in the United States, but at the same time, we don't belong in Mexico."

He considered himself fortunate because he had the chance to be in high-level classes but acknowledged “barriers like segregation still affect students.” Mario escaped segregated classes in middle school that allowed him to access higher-level classes in high school. His middle school had three tracks, “high strides, gifted and talented, and regular.” He further explained that “high strides was for preppy kids, gifted and talented was for kids who were good at something, and regular was mainly for Blacks and Mexicans.” He was placed in the regular track and felt like “I was being devaluated of my education.” Without his parents’ knowledge, he “challenged my teachers and was put in high strides. . . . This was challenging because I had to prove them that I was good enough to be in high strides.”

Mario’s advice to teachers and administrators was to challenge Latinos in school. “When people make it easier for them, [it] motivates them to do less.” In other words, Mario asked for educators to raise their expectations of Latino students. In retrospect, Mario mentioned that his second grade teacher had given him confidence to do well because she had high expectations of him. “She was Black and she changed my life forever.” Mario had a lot to say about good and bad teachers and stated, “a good teacher is transformational if he has high expectations.” He asked for teachers to teach Latino students to be better writers and not to give them the easy way out, “It sometimes seemed that teachers passed students on just because they were Mexican.” Mario was mentored by a prominent lawyer in Denver who took the time to coach him and who helped him exceed his own expectations. He also had a teacher who “pushed me academically and that’s what helped me get to college.” At the end of our interview, Mario realized how

important elementary school was in leading him in a different path. He stated how sad he was for some of his elementary school friends that “never even made it to high school.”

Mariana--College Senior 2 (CS2)

If students are speaking Spanish, it is probably because they are trying to comprehend what's going on. They are asking questions . . . and don't be afraid to not understand, I think that's the teacher's biggest fear. You have to learn from your kids. You're not just there to teach, you are there to learn.

Mariana, a proud Latina with a strong handshake and a beautiful smile, met me at the library of her large university. Even when she was in the midst of her semester finals for her junior year in college, Mariana was dressed very professionally with perfectly applied makeup complementing her beautiful, long hair. I thanked her profusely for agreeing to meet with me in such a busy week, but she assured me that my study was of high interest to her because she was studying to become a bilingual teacher. Her English was perfect with no trace of Spanish accent, yet she often interjected phrases in Spanish, maybe as a sign of pride on her native Spanish language, or perhaps as a sign to me that we understood each other's language.

Mariana's answers were direct and followed by examples, as if I needed to clearly understand her point of view so that I did not have any doubts of her passion for education. Mariana was 1 year shy of college graduation but already spoke like a teacher. She analyzed the interview questions and often expanded on them with her own questions and comments.

Mariana was the third child born in Colorado to Mexican immigrants but her parents had moved back to Mexico when she was 4. “People didn't think I was a real Mexican.” It took 2 years for Mariana to adapt to the people and the culture in Mexico, but eventually she learned to speak, read, and write well in Spanish. It was different for

her older siblings because they already knew English better than Spanish when they moved back. “It wasn’t a problem for me . . . because my father was very strict and we could not speak English at home.” In Mexico, Mariana learned math from “Señorita María” (Ms. Maria) and Spanish from “Profe Juan”(Mr. Juan) who taught her what high expectations meant. Perhaps it was the fact that her school facility was only available in the mornings, the strict rules to accommodate for 40 plus students or a combination of other factors, that made Mariana and other students in Mexico appreciate their education a little more. Mariana was grateful for her schooling in Mexico and gave credit to those 5 years for her academic success in the United States.

Once back in Colorado, Mariana started middle school and was placed in ELL classes. She had good and bad experiences but remembered a monolingual teacher who did everything in her power to accommodate her learning. Among other tools and tricks, this teacher provided bilingual books and flashcards to help Mariana understand the lessons. Her ELL experience, however, was not positive, as “all we did was sit there and read books in Spanish so there was no instruction and no learning.” At that time, Mariana did not know anything about college. She only knew that her parents wanted her “go to work ready to go to work, not dreading to go to work.”

Mariana was acutely aware of the obstacles that Latinos have faced in attaining higher education, as she herself had faced and overcame them. The first 2 years in high school Mariana was not able to attend after-school events or activities because her parents could not drive her around due to the many jobs they held. To make matters worse, Mariana’s father was deported to Mexico in her sophomore year in high school so, by the time she was a senior, she held three jobs on top of a rigorous academic load

including an AP English class, “I didn’t pass the test, but I passed the class and it helped me a lot my freshman year in college.” Mariana stated that AP classes and a summer pre-college programs were a great introduction to college for her but that many Latinos did not know of or were accepted in those classes or programs.

In her last year in high school, Mariana got called into the counselor’s office to talk about college and whether or not she had thought about where she was going or about applying for scholarships. To that point, Mariana had no idea where she was going after high school. After that, she began talking to her other teachers and friends. “I became obsessed with applying for scholarships . . . so it wasn’t really until my senior year of high school, especially when I got the [name of the scholarship] that I knew I was definitely going.” She also realized that her goal were to become a teacher, “part of being a teacher is not just reading books, it’s relating to your students.” Mariana understood the fears, worries, and doubts of Latino students and wanted to become someone that students could trust.

In college, Mariana enrolled in a teacher preparation program and became a sorority member where she found the support she needed to overcome the loneliness that many Latino students faced. “We all had similar lifestyles” she explained. For Mariana, it was difficult to leave her mother, “my family were very dependent on me.” So, when she left home to go to college, the income from her three jobs was gone, resulting on them losing their house. The family had to move back to the same apartment complex where they first lived when they moved to Colorado from Mexico. With sadness, Mariana explained, “I felt like we were taking steps backwards and it was all because of money.”

Mariana's message to teachers was to start encouraging students to go to college early on and to build "support systems" for students by being positive and encouraging about their future. Mariana also mentioned that college programs and professors might need to go the extra step helping Latino students and parents understand what a college education meant; and especially helping with financial aid questions. Mariana will be a great bilingual teacher; undoubtedly, her life experiences will help her influence students in a positive way.

Ralph--College Senior 3 (CS3)

. . . It's pretty much a White nationalist curriculum. If you want to learn about people that look like you . . . only in a Chicano studies class in college. In high school, you learn how to pass tests by memorizing stuff, but you don't learn to think critically . . . about 85.0% of books we read had White protagonists.

A charming young smile, White complexion, dark hair, brown eyes, glasses, and a friendly personality were waiting for me when I arrived at the large university library where we had agreed to meet. I brought flavored coffee for him and for me. With perfect English, he politely greeted me while opening the door of the meeting room.

Ralph was born in Colorado and identified himself as a "Chicano." His parents were born and raised in the United States as well. His father was half-Mexican, half-German, although he identified more with his Mexican side. His mother was Mexican and was raised with a strong cultural identity. Ralph's parents inculcated school values in him since an early age and, even though neither one had gone past high school, they always expected that Ralph would graduate from college.

Starting in elementary school, Ralph took advanced math and reading classes and in high school he took several AP courses. His parents contributed to his success in school by being involved in his education and by advocating for better teachers and

adequate curriculum. There has been a tendency for parents of Latino students to leave school issues to teachers and administrators, but not for Ralph's parents who understood the school system in the United States and their role in it. He mentioned a struggle he had in fifth grade and how his parents demanded that he be placed in a different class "with a different teacher." Soon after his parents' intervention Ralph, "started thriving again."

Ralph had a lot to say about curriculum and schools. He stated with disappointment that he had not learned about the history of Chicanos and Latinos until he had attended college. He was a thoughtful young man who seemed to have learned about identity later in life. He reminisced about an incident he had with his middle school principal because he and other kids were accused of "loitering . . . but we were just waiting for our parents and playing around, like 13-year old boys do." This interaction made him wonder if the principal would have accused them had they all been White. On the other hand, Ralph acknowledged teachers who validated who he was "so this teacher compared me to Einstein to a kid who already didn't like me, but like, he always had respect for my math ability." Ralph said his name and skin color categorized him as White, so it was a hard balance to keep his Latino identity and roots. There were instances when he was confused with his identity. "I remember in gym classes, especially dodge ball, when you could pick your teams, you could guess who would be on each other's team." Ralph said teachers ought to watch carefully because kids can be "pretty nasty" to each other. The only time I heard Ralph talk about fears and insecurities was when he talked about high school and the responsibility he felt to his parents. "A lot of kids see their parents as overpowering, where I saw mine as older and wiser." Without being overtly critical, Ralph made constant reference to race and ethnicity and his

experiences with others based on the hierarchy that lay embedded in each of those. “I was always too White for Mexicans but too Mexican for Whites. I made friends on both camps . . . I did have a period when I was a loner.” He concluded that, in college, he had learned the “vocabulary” he needed to express himself with all his identity conflicts or contradictions. Basically, the knowledge Ralph learned in college gave him the gift of a long-lost voice and identity; a gift that all students have to the right to be given.

Conclusion

While I have seen many Latino students fail, I have also seen many Latinos succeed and break the barriers placed before them by their socioeconomic status, race, culture, native language, and ethnicity. All participants for this study overcame obstacles in front of them and carved a successful path for college. They were a source of inspiration to me as I move forward and strive to inspire others to follow their lead. With Colorado being one of the top 10 states in Latino population growth, I attempted to collect evidence of success stories within the State of Colorado that could pave the way for more similar stories to follow. At this juncture in my personal life and professional career, I have more freedom to explore my passions and professional aspirations, and I find myself captivated by the possibilities of new revelations that could lead educators to implement better methods for bringing Latino students out of the shadows of academic underachievement and eventually out of their cycle of poverty that has prevailed for so many years. This has been a passion and a personal commitment as I personally was able to escape poverty and overcame barriers through a college education.

As I analyzed and wrote the participants portraits for Chapter IV, I could not help but see several glimpses of myself in those portraits. Thus, as I move forward as

practitioner, I have legitimate information that could help educators implement different practices to educate Latino students and also to influence more Latinos to follow an educational path similar to the participants of this study. Portraiture style was the best method found that could enhance the dimensions of the study by using descriptive language aimed at creating symbols and images that could allow the reader to see a “picture” of each participant. The portraits generated attempted to create a holistic interaction between the reader and the history, values, personal characteristics, and personality of the 14 participants.

Without ignoring or undermining the struggles of the many Latino students who have been left behind in their educational attainment, I was able to make my own assertions alongside the participants and metaphorically stood on their shoulders to speak with my own voice to educators and practitioners on the experiences of 14 successful students who have already paved a trail for others to follow. I know what distinguished these students from their peers. I took the time to learn from them and their experiences so that I could pass that knowledge onto others. The findings, recommendations, and limitations from this study will be presented in the subsequent Chapters V and VI.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

By the year 2011, the Latino population in the United States had reached more than 52 million, making it the largest and the fastest-growing minority in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Furthermore, the Latino school-age population was expected to grow more than 150.0% by the year 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). This rapid growth, along with advancements in civil rights and educational equality for minorities in the United States, led to an increase in the number of Latinos receiving 2- and 4-year degrees in the last decades (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Despite stated educational advancements, however, the number of Latinos completing college degrees still trailed other minorities and was not growing at a rate fast enough to catch up with other groups (Carey, 2004; Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hence, for Latinos to become active contributors to the U.S. economy, schools have continued to be the main pathway to success (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Considering the implications that a society with a large number of undereducated citizens could represent, this study aimed to gather and analyze the voices of 14 successful Latino students of Mexican descent who navigated a path to college. The narrative came from a central question aimed at finding the constructive experiences or “goodness” in their lived experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9). These stories, each unique but jointly sharing startling similarities, were woven together

to create a tapestry which illustrated the journey of 14 Latino students. In doing so, the analysis presented some paradoxes. On the one hand, the findings were analyzed in such a way that there was a logical organization of themes. On the other hand, this same organization cut across the interconnectedness of lived circumstances and put separation between connected lines. Such separation, however, was necessary to allow for a scholarly analysis of themes essential to give meaning to the findings that follow.

Explaining the context in which turning points and conditions occur that bring about changes in people's lives, Professor Holbrook Mahn (personal communication, December 20, 2014) used the development of an orange to explain qualitative transformation. To the observer, Mahn stated that the description of an orange was mainly centered on what it was at the moment of the description and rarely with the origins and the metamorphosis that took place before and after all its organic matter was transformed, such as the conditions of the soil, the amount of rain, sunshine, nutrients, and decomposition. Hence, to create the context that would give meaning to the texts of the lives of the 14 participants before and after the present study, the physical, social, and emotional factors of their lived experiences in elementary, middle, and high school were co-constructed and woven together following the framework of a narrative study that created the final text of this dissertation. Through a dialectical experience, the researcher discovered the cycle of context and experience where context had shaped the participants' lived experiences and where their lived experiences had shaped their context.

Understanding the Vygotskyan (1994) concept of *perezhivanie*, or the active relationship between emotion and cognition, helped apply meaning to the findings of this

research for participants who statistically would not have succeeded academically. The perspective of successful students allowed the researcher to understand how individuals who had experienced the same context experienced it differently and, therefore, changed the course of their environment.

Merriam (2009) explained that, due to the many varieties of qualitative studies, the researcher had to be concerned with the trustworthiness of the study and that it should be done carefully paying attention to the “study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted and the way in which the findings were presented” (p. 210). Creswell (2007) also offered suggestions for a “good” (pp. 214-215) qualitative study which were taken into account to collect the stories of 14 participants in 6 different cities organizing them as a chronology of their entire K-12 education so that their story could be told in a literary way grouped by their collective experiences that were easily identified by main themes. These themes guided the findings on the journeys of the 14 students as they navigated their K-12 education overcoming obstacles.

Portraiture was used to describe all participants in Chapter IV as it was intended to blend their narratives with social science research in order to “capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 3) of their lived experiences in social and cultural context, transmitting their perspectives as they negotiated their K-12 education. In fitting with portraiture, after all interview data were gathered, transcribed, organized, triangulated, and scrutinized, the researcher searched for “convergent threads, illuminating metaphors, and overarching symbols” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 185) that could help synthesize and embed the main themes within the students’ portraits presented in Chapter IV.

The central research question to be answered with this narrative study came from asking:

What experiences or factors, from kindergarten to twelfth 12th grade, in Mexico or in the United States, contributed to the academic success of Latino students of Mexican descent?

Themes

The 3 central themes related to the factors and experiences that allowed 14 Latino students to build a successful path to college are introduced based on relevance: (a) Academic Rigor, (b) Mentors and Pre-college Programs, and (c) Financial Support (see Figure 5.1). Represented in Table 5.1 are the grouping sub-themes clustered in three main themes presented in alphabetical and chronological order from elementary to high school to help the reader understand how the same themes overlap and build upon each other. Subsequently, Figure 5.2 illustrates the sub-themes associated with academic rigor divided into clusters. To support the themes and to strengthen the results of this study, some student quotes were added in the narrative of the findings. The conclusion of this chapter includes a summary of the main findings and an introduction into Chapter VI for further reflections, recommendations, and the limitations of the study.

Table 5.1

Main Themes Arranged by Relevance and Sub-themes Arranged by Alphabetical Order

Sub-themes	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Main Theme
Advanced Placement/College Classes				Academic Rigor
Confidence	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Culture	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Discipline		x	x	Academic Rigor
English Learning/ English as a Second Language	x			Academic Rigor
High Expectations		x	x	Academic Rigor
Identity		x	x	Academic Rigor
Judgment of Each Other (Group Blame)			x	Academic Rigor
Love	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Low Expectations	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Name-calling (White-wash)			x	Academic Rigor
Owning Success			x	Academic Rigor
Peers	x	x	x	Academic Rigor

Table 5.1 (continued)

Sub-themes	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Main Theme
Pride			x	Academic Rigor
Racism/Discrimination	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Relevant Curriculum			x	Academic Rigor
Segregation	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Social Pressure		x	x	Academic Rigor
Stereotypes	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Teachers	x	x	x	Academic Rigor
Extracurricular/School Involvement		x	x	Pre-college Programs
Mentors/Champions			x	Pre-college Programs
Role Models		x	x	Pre-college Programs
Immigration	x	x	x	Financial Support
Scholarships			x	Financial Support

* The “x” denotes the level when sub-themes were mentioned by the students.

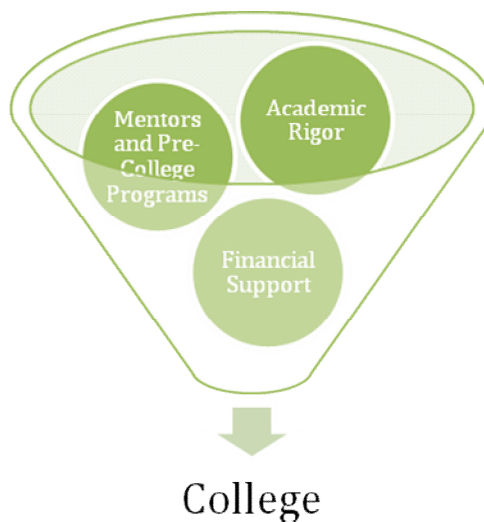


Figure 5.1. The three central themes identified for college success.

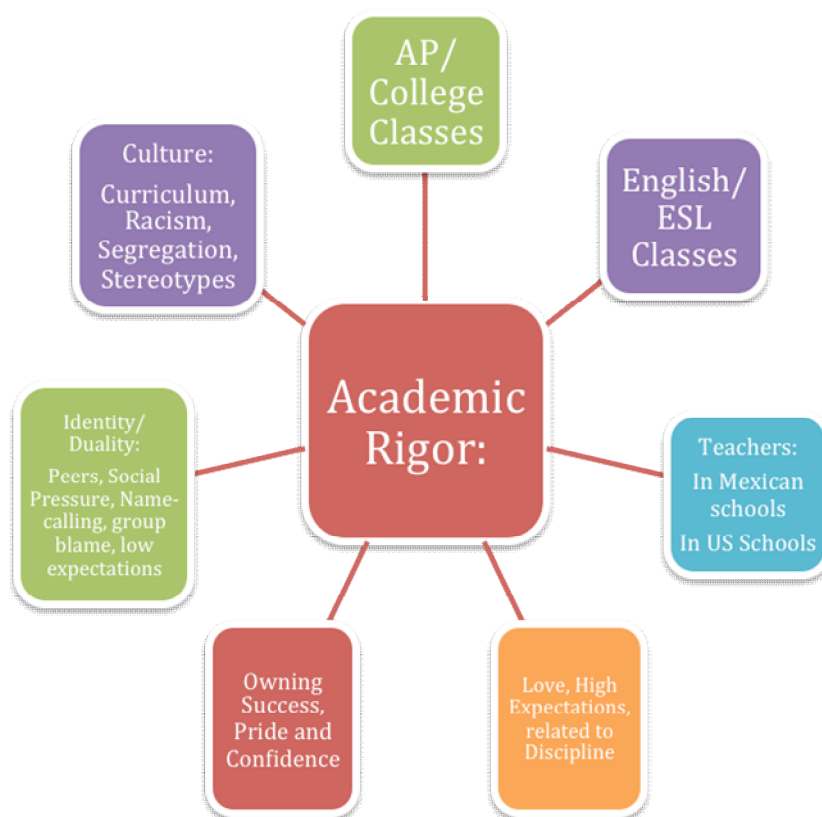


Figure 5.2. Sub-themes associated with academic rigor divided into clusters.

These three central themes are supported in detail in this chapter and my own personal voice as a Latina and as a first-generation college student was added in Chapter VI as a bookend to this study. Family encouragement was a central theme that ran throughout their entire K-12 experience for all 14 participants. Instead of classifying it as a theme, it was woven within each of the other themes and sub-themes. The decision to do this was the constant mention of family influence during the interviews and the artifacts that participants shared since 10 of the 14 artifacts showed a deep connection to family. Eight of the 14 participants brought family pictures for their artifact and Mariana (CS2) added that, since her father had been deported, her friend had *photoshopped* him in on one of their family photos she kept with her in college.

Academic Rigor

Advanced Placement (AP) and Dual-Credit College Classes

One of the requirements for participation in this study was to be considered college-bound which, according to the President of the College Board Gaston Caperton, a college-bound student was one that carried an academic load more rigorous and demanding than the average student (College Board, 2010). The College Board Report on Program Results (College Board, 2014a) claimed that students who scored a 1 in any Advanced Placement (AP) exam had a two to six percentage point higher likelihood to graduate from college in 4 years. A score of 2 on the exam showed an increase between 7 and 11 percentage points higher; a score of 3 between 12 and 16 percentage points higher, a score of 4 showed between 17 and 22 percentage points higher, and a score of 5 showed between 23 and 27 percentage points higher. Hence, AP and dual-credit enrollment was important when selecting the participants due to the direct correlation

found in college-degree attainment. Justifiably, all participants in this study acknowledged the benefits that their AP and college level classes had in their education but expressed concern with having been among the few Latinos represented in those classes. Jenny (HSS8) indicated that what contributed the most to prepare her to college were “all the AP and upper-level classes that only a certain amount of people can even look at sign up . . . I was always among the only few Latinas in those classes and that’s why other Mexicans called me ‘whitewashed.’”

The AP and dual-enrollment college classes that high school seniors took are listed in Table 5.2 in the order in which the participants were introduced in Chapter IV. Classes offered through the local community college are represented with a *CC* prefix, and classes offered through the University of Colorado high school program show a *CU* prefix. College seniors and college graduates did not provide a copy of their high school transcripts but all six of them credited their advanced-level classes to their ability to succeed in college.

The claim made by the College Board (2014c) regarding the advantages of engaging in AP and rigorous classes to prepare them for college was evident through the data collected from the eight high school students. The six students with the greatest number of advanced English, math, science, and social studies classes (Julian, Natalia, Rene, Rodolfo, Lizzy, and Jenny) were accepted at 4-year colleges. Another similarity noted among students who took advanced classes was that, with the exception of Jenny, over 90.0% of their tuition was secured with scholarships. Julian (HSS1) claimed that he was ready to succeed in college with the following statement:

Table 5.2

Advanced Placement and Dual-enrollment Classes Taken by High School Participants

	ACT	GPA	English	Math	Science	Social Science	Other
Julian	22	3.40	AP Literature	AP Calculus CC Trigonometry CC Algebra	Chemistry Physics	CU Sustainability CU Political Science	CC Business CC Entrepreneurial Operations CC Service Learning
Faridhe	20	3.00		CC Algebra	Chemistry		CU Art History AP Spanish Literature CC Art Studio CC Art Portfolio
Natalia	26	3.600	AP Literature	CC Algebra CC Trigonometry	Chemistry Environmental Science CU Biology Ecology Physics	CU Political Science	CC French I & II
Rene	22	3.30	AP Literature	CC Trigonometry CC Algebra	CU Biology Chemistry		CC Business CC Entrepreneurial Operations CC French I & II
Rodolfo	27	3.95	CC English I & II AP English	AP Calculus AP Calculus II	Anatomy Chemistry Physics AP Biology	CU US History	French I, II, & III

Table 5.2 (continued)

	ACT	GPA	English	Math	Science	Social Science	Other
Lizzy	28	3.90	CU Composition CU Telling Tales Journalism Shakespeare	Pre-calculus	Physics Chemistry AP Biology		
Charlie	20	3.27	Shakespeare	Pre-calculus		CU US History CC Psychology	French I, II, & IV
Jenny	23	3.28	CU Composition CU Telling Tales	AP Calculus	Chemistry Physics AP Biology AP Physics	CU US History	French I, II, III, & IV

Note. CC = Community College class; CU = University of Colorado classes

I've taken six or seven college classes and that has really helped me to understand how their classes are different from high school and how much more work you have to do. That has kind of given me a feel, not 100.0% feel, but a better feel for how it's going to be. Having college classes really helped.

The only student who did not enroll in a 4-year college after high school despite having taken several advanced classes was Jenny (HSS8). This was mainly due to the limited college counseling she received, her undocumented status, and the lack of scholarship aid she was able to secure her senior year. All three reasons are described later in this chapter. College and AP classes helped participants prepare for the ACT or SAT tests, but the highest test results did not match the effort that students made in taking such challenging academic loads. For Rodolfo (HSS5), “the test put Hispanics at a disadvantage.” He took the ACT test four times while taking a highly rigorous class schedule, yet he sadly stated that the highest he had scored had been a 27 while other [White] students in his classes had scored higher than him even when they were at the same class level. He claimed that the ACT test was biased and hard to understand for Latinos. His professed low score put unnecessary pressure in him and left him frustrated because he had been pushing himself academically all 4 years in high school. Mario (CS1) also commented on the ACT test saying, “All the Mexicans performed low in those tests. The ACT scores were a huge barrier going to college. Many of my friends didn't go to college.” Adding significance to Mario and Rodolfo's claimed regarding college admittance tests, Rooney and Schaeffer (1998) indicated that the timed nature of the test placed an added and unjust measure on Latino students and that the test did not predict college success for Latinos as well as it did for White students, even for Latino students whose dominant language was English.

**English Language / Learning
English as a Second
Language**

Low English language skills have been documented as one of the main reasons why Latino students may not have been able to access advanced classes (Crosnoe, 2006), as without “appropriate language models” (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008, p. 158) it was extremely hard for students to acquire the academic vocabulary needed to succeed in rigorous classes. The ability to read and write English at higher levels have removed barriers for Latino students to access higher levels of education, yet common practices have continued to place limited English proficient (LEP) students in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for longer than necessary where their academic English language acquisition stopped (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). The terms ESL and ELL were used interchangeably by participants of the study and were also used interchangeably in this narrative. English as a Second Language (ESL) literary referred to the program, while English Language Learner (ELL) referred to the student.

Eleven of the 14 participants mentioned being placed in ESL programs when they first entered school, but there was a definite message of having been trapped in ESL classes for longer than it had been necessary. For Faridhe (HSS2), having been in the ESL program in middle school kept her isolated from her peers. She recognized that her ESL teachers were caring and nurturing and played an important role when she was a newcomer but felt that her involvement in ESL took longer than necessary and came at a high cost for her academically. Faridhe specified, “I was taken out of history and science classes so I didn’t really learn these until I was in eighth grade, and it was hard because I didn’t know what the Constitution or the amendments were and I felt stupid.”

Rene (HSS4) and Miguel (CG3) entered U.S. schools older than the rest of the participants, but their opinions about the rigor in their ELL programs were not positive either, even when they both acknowledged that the ELL teachers were “good” people. Both of them expressed frustration with other Latino students as opposed to the teachers in charge of those programs. Miguel felt that ESL classes were a waste of his time, so he refused to be in ESL classes his second year. He stated that most of the students in ESL classes were not serious about their education and that it was hard for teachers to control them. He was upset about how disrespectful some students were to their teachers, especially when speaking Spanish. His solution was that Latinos should be made to speak only English in ESL classes so that they could learn faster and move on. He had been exposed to a highly rigorous track in Mexico and was prepared to endure a rigorous path even as a monolingual Spanish-speaking student. He enrolled in three English classes his sophomore year and credited his decision with his ability to learn English faster. For Rene (HSS4), the ESL classes in middle school helped him learn enough English to get by, but he stated that “hanging out” with other ELL students did not help him academically. Both Rene and Miguel expressed frustration with the lack of academic rigor in ESL programs and recommended that teachers should have higher expectations of their students. In the narratives of all nine students who had been in ESL programs, there were similar statements of dissatisfaction about the rigor in ESL classes, and all nine stated that learning English well had been the most difficult challenge they had encountered in school.

When Rodolfo (HSS5) entered school, he “could not speak a shred of English,” and 10 other participants made similar comments. Chino (CG2), Ralph (CS3), and Lizzy

(HSS6) did not mention learning English as a difficult process, but all three expressed that their older siblings or parents spoke English at their home. Of the 14 participants, 11 indicated entering school as monolingual Spanish speakers and, with the exception of Ralph (CS3), all came from Spanish-speaking households. Natalia recalled her ESL experience from elementary school, recommending the following:

I think I would tell [administrators] to simply don't segregate. Even the kids who don't know how to speak English very well, from the kids that do know how to speak. I know a lot of people may say it may keep the other [White] kids back a little bit, but it's still helping the other [ELL] kids learn their English better so I think it has consequences. I think that's one of the main issues because I was in the ELL program all elementary and it was kind of hard because we were segregated, like all the kids that didn't know how to speak it very well were in different classrooms all the time so we never got a chance to interact with others.

For all 14 students, English fluency happened in mainstreamed classes and no one indicated that they had been neither challenged nor encouraged to learn academic English in their stand-alone ESL classes. On the contrary, all 14 indicated that the slow-down of academic language acquisition delayed the progress of other students towards more challenging mainstreamed curriculum. Ruby (CG1) had chosen to skip ELL classes and, in her own words, she stated “was harder on me because [I was] drowning for a little bit, but it meant that I had to pick it up quicker and then catch up, so total immersion was good for me.”

Teachers

As it was presented in the review of the literature, *A Nation at Risk*, a study chaired by David Gardner (1983) highlighted that in order to increase student achievement, the rigor in the curriculum had to be increased at all levels of schooling. Subsequently, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 had several mandates aimed at ensuring that every school implemented more rigorous academic standards in schools.

Similarly, all students in this study agreed that rigorous teachers and classes offered to them had been paramount to their academic success. Starting in elementary school, rigorous teachers sent a clear message of high expectations to all students.

Teachers in Mexican schools. For Ruby (CG1), the skills and habits she learned from her teachers as a little girl carried her through the challenging journey back and forth from Mexico and from school to school. Ruby commented on the accountability she had to her principal at her demanding elementary school to the extent of keeping all notebooks and notes using a certain organizational format. She also recalled having memorized all multiplication tables in third grade and the fear she had of failing; she had found academic pressure to be motivating. Mariana (CS2), Miguel (CGS), Rene (HSS4), and Faridhe (HSS2) also recalled their teachers from Mexico who demanded high-quality work and engagement with everything they did. “My fifth-grade Spanish teacher,” Mariana commented, “was one of the really tough professors, but I feel that is why I liked him. He had high expectations of me, and that’s what pushed [me] along.” Miguel (CG3) moved permanently to the United States as a freshman in high school and attested to the academic rigor he had in elementary and middle school in Mexico. Miguel said that his teacher in elementary school was very “tough” but that, not surprisingly, most kids in the class had done well under her guidance. Elementary school teachers also played an important role in the academic rigor for Rene (HSS4) who moved from Mexico in middle school. “There was a lot of discipline in school [in Mexico], and if you didn’t do your homework, there wasn’t anyone telling you ‘it’s okay, you can turn it in tomorrow.’”

By middle school, Miguel (CG3) pointed out that not all students were interested in school anymore but that teachers still needed to make school stimulating for them and

not give them an easy way out of rigorous classes. In Mexico, Miguel had to pass an admission test to get into a middle school that would have channeled him into the “best” high school in his town. “If I didn’t pass the test, I would have been sent to a different school in the middle of nowhere.” (Miguel moved to the United States before high school.)

Teachers in United States schools. Ralph (CS3) was born and raised in Northern Colorado and recalled that his teachers in middle school were “pretty nice,” especially his counselor. Ralph pointed out that teachers needed to be aware of what students did in middle school because they could be mean to each other and could discriminate against minorities. Ralph was in an advanced track since elementary school so his classes were more rigorous in middle school and he enjoyed the challenge. His sister, however, did not have that same chance so he was aware of the superior preparation he had going into high school comparatively. Rodolfo (HSS5) did not have much to positively say about his middle school teachers. He felt that the discipline system in his middle school lacked the consistency needed for higher academic rigor.

Teachers played a very important role in academic rigor at all levels, but high school was definitely the one that most participants recalled. For Ruby (CG1), the best thing that teachers did for her was to encourage her to take the Advanced Placement (AP) Biology exam and to challenge her to get a score of 5. She explained, “I got the highest score, and then my teachers encouraged me to take more AP classes and exams the following year.” I want to remind the reader that Ruby was undocumented when she graduated high school but was currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the time of this study. Lizzy (HSS6) scored high enough to be placed at the sophomore level math and

English her freshman year in high school so the academic rigor was already on her schedule from day one of high school. Lizzy added that, in high school, teachers basically only needed to be available to help their students after school or during lunch to help them reach higher academic levels, as her ability to cope with the academic rigor was enhanced by how open and willing her teachers had been to her. Mario (CS1) added, “We had another teacher who was a senator. He challenged us a lot, and we had to practice at night. He pushed me academically and that’s what helped me get to college.” Jenny (HSS8) also commented on the role of her high school science teacher saying, “She [teacher] never gave up on me. She always pushed me harder...seeing her try that hard made me want to do the same for her.”

Love, Discipline, and High Expectations

Love, discipline, and high expectations were sub-themes tied to academic rigor due to the context in which the participants described them. For all participants, the rigor and high expectations of their teachers and parents were both symbols of love. Discipline was described as an admirable trait needed to uphold academic rigor and to reach high expectations.

Julian (HSS1) spoke about his mother’s relentless love and encouragement throughout school. He explained that, even when she never learned to speak English, she had seldom missed a school meeting and had always paid close attention to his report card. His face lit up when speaking about his mother. Julian claimed:

My mom would always make me do my homework before I could go outside and play. She told me to keep going despite the tough times but this is what makes you great at the end, and I know it was hard for her to make me work and to go to school, but I know she demanded a lot of me because she cared about my future.

Natalia (HSS3) mentioned the love she felt for her baby girl and how hard it would be to leave her, but she knew that she had the discipline and the skills needed to succeed in college and leaving her baby was a symbol of love from her to her daughter and to her parents. Natalia also spoke about the love of her teachers expressing:

[Teacher's name] was one of the best science teachers that I ever had, and just a great person overall who cared for me a lot. He really pushed me, hum, he really saw that I had it in me to keep going, and even though I was a Latina, and later a single mother, he really demanded the same of me as the other White students . . . he just knew that I was going to be successful in all his classes and that I was going to strive for better things.

Rodolfo (HSS5) mentioned the word “discipline” five times when referring to rigor and high expectations from his father. He conveyed his desire to succeed and how it could only be accomplished through discipline. He stated:

One of the main things my father really taught me is that there is no excuse for not finding your own success. And I really take that to heart you know, because it really doesn't matter that we're not from this country and it doesn't matter that English is not your first language, you shouldn't treat those things as obstacles you know, because if you keep working hard you'll eventually make it, and those are things I really take to heart. And one thing I can't stress enough is the amount of discipline that we had to go through, but the dreams my parents have for me... I will never disappoint them. I will make them proud.

Mario (CS1) spoke about love and kindness and what those two together could do to a child. He described the following after his first grade teacher had labeled him a low reader and a problem child:

The second grade teacher was Black and she was awesome; she changed my life forever. Her kindness changed my life. She made me believe that I was intelligent. She validated me and gave me the confidence I needed to move on...I think that grade teachers can either tear you apart, or build you up with confidence. A good teacher is transformational if he has high expectations.

Ruby (CG1) described her academic success despite her changing from school to school. She credited her middle school science teacher for her love of science and her

desire to discover new and interesting things. The following is a section of Ruby's description of her teacher who helped her reach high expectations despite being Latina:

She [teacher] really made me love science. She was fun, and I think that some teachers make you love school and feel good about yourself when they give you praise and with her we felt that she wasn't racist as she always stated how much she loved her Latin students and she wanted to have a positive relationship with us, and even try to speak Spanish. She was aware that we were different but she treated us equally.

All 14 participants talked about the love they felt for their parents and how their family's love had been a driving force keeping them disciplined and motivated to set high academic expectations for themselves. Jenny (HSS8) was the only participant whose parents did not encourage her to go to college, but she justified them by concluding that they did not know any better and had "too many personal problems" to help guide her in school.

Owning Success, Pride, and Confidence

According to Vygotsky (1994), the emotional reactions that arose from lived experiences determined the effects they would have in a child. He used the term *perezhivanie* to combine emotion and cognition as the two main forces for psychological reaction. He argued that it was not just the factors or experiences that determined how a child would be influenced, but the "prism of the child's emotional experience" that filtered and absorbed them (pp. 338-339).

For participants of this study, the context of their academic experiences had been filtered in such a way that their environments were changed by how they filtered those experiences. Most of the participants faced challenges associated with poverty, language, and segregation, yet they were able to overcome those challenges and saw their

environments filled with opportunities rather than obstacles. Julian (HSS1) lost his home while his father was in jail. He worked almost full-time while taking AP classes and playing sports, yet he managed to earn a complete scholarship to a private college and never hinted feeling sorry for himself. Chino (CG2) grew up in a gang-infested neighborhood in Los Angeles but managed to escape along with his mother and had a strong message of “Sí se puede” (Yes, you can do it). Mariana (CS2) and Ruby (CG1) moved back and forth to Mexico but always managed to take advantage of their schooling regardless of where they were and what language they had to learn.

Pride and confidence, openly expressed by all participants of the study, were interpreted as byproducts of academic rigor, all which entitled the participants to their personal academic success (see Figure 5.3 for a diagram). The presumption of success that all 14 participants shared often suggested that other Latino students lacked the discipline to succeed (group blame). This message was heard from Miguel (CG3) and Jenny (HSS8) especially when referring to other Latino students who were documented but lacked the discipline or drive to succeed academically. Miguel talked about his niece who spoke English well and could have gone to college but instead chose to drop out of high school and became a young mother. He could not understand how anyone would not choose to go to college. Jenny talked about the pain she felt about being more qualified than most other Latinos in her school yet not being able to afford tuition as an undocumented citizen.



Figure 5.3. The Succession From Academic Rigor to Personal Success

Without taking merit from the accomplishments of all these 14 participants, the message of empathy to other Latinos who did not succeed academically like they all did was linked to blame. The presumption of their success expressed by all participants led to the emergence of other sub-themes regarding the image that these high achieving Latinos hold of those who do not follow their lead.

Identity

Identity was categorized in the center of sub-themes identified by the participants as part of their Latino identity that affected their academic rigor. These sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 5.4 and examples are given with quotes from the participants.

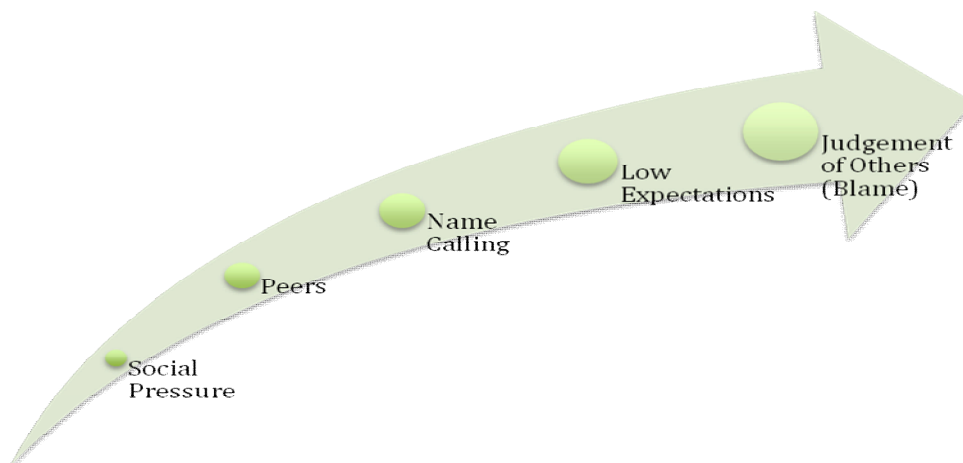


Figure 5.4. Sub-themes related to Latino identity linked to academic rigor.

All 14 participants expressed extra pressure for being high-achieving Latinos. This pressure came from different directions and yielded different results. For some, the pressure came from society's low expectations on Latinos. For others, the pressure came from their peers who would call them names for performing well in school and, for others, the pressure came from being Latino and, therefore, being clustered with other Latinos who did not do well in school. Below are some quotes from students supporting all the aforementioned claims.

Peers social pressure, name-calling, and blame. Faridhe (HSS2), Lizzy (HSS6), and Jenny (HSS8) stated being called “whitewashed” several times by their Latino peers, and all three indicated feeling more comfortable among White students. Faridhe mentioned, “It was always me hanging out with Anglo kids. I remember the Hispanic kids saying I was whitewashed and ‘I bet she doesn't even speak Spanish,’ so it was definitely hard.” Lizzy’s comments were similar. What follows is a quote from Lizzy’s interview, “She [her friend] was kind of the same way. She's Hispanic and she is my only Hispanic friend and we would always get called whitewashed because we didn’t hang out with other Latinos.” Regarding the term “whitewashed” Jenny commented:

One of the things I would say . . . don't care about what others say because Latinos are so judgmental to one another that, if you start doing [well] in school and care about your grades, they call you whitewash and exclude you from the group. I can personally say that I don't really talk to many Latinos. I talk to two. You have to be confident in yourself to include yourself in the mixing, because you're not going to be part of the Latina group any more. You need to know what you are doing and what you want to become in order to break down barriers because I'm not in any classes with Latinos. So, yeah, I do hang out with White kids but that doesn't make me any less Latino or any less proud.

For Rodolfo (HSS5), his friends were important to him, and he was careful when choosing them. He explained that he had nothing in common with the “slackers” and did

not have any desire to “focus on temporary pleasures” like other Latino students did. His conclusion was clear and simple regarding his education. He stated, “if I don’t get myself into college, that’s my fault basically.”

Low expectations. Other students also mentioned that their identity as Latinos had made them targets of low expectations. Such was the case of Mariana (CS2) who felt that her teachers held lower expectations of her because she had to worry about two languages and because teachers did not feel prepared to meet her academic needs. Rodolfo (HSS5) felt discriminated against for being an ESL student and, therefore, excluded from the gifted and talented program. Ralph (CS3), in his own words, stated that, growing up, he was “too White for the Mexicans but too Mexican for the Whites.” Lizzy (HSS6) hid her grades from other students because she was criticized for being smart and for acting White.

Speaking metaphorically, Chino (CG2) stated that kids in schools were always willing to hold others down in the fight but, instead of separating them, society needed to learn to understand the reasons for their fights. His experience coming from large suburban areas gave Chino the advantage of a more global and objective manner or expression. Instead of blaming, Chino advocated for awareness among the cultures and the races. Related to identity and social pressure, during his interview, Chino stated, “Don’t be afraid of the unknown, because tradition can work against you in a society that becomes more global by the minute.”

While all participants made many comments and innuendos related to their Latino identity, their main message loudly stated that being a high achieving Latino was seen by many others as equal to acting White. The following and last cluster of sub-themes that

emerged from this study covered some of the negative comments that were brought up by participants related to their Latino culture that affected their academic rigor and performance.

Culture

Culture was categorized in the center of sub-themes identified by the participants as part of their Latino aspects that affected their academic rigor. These sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 5.5.

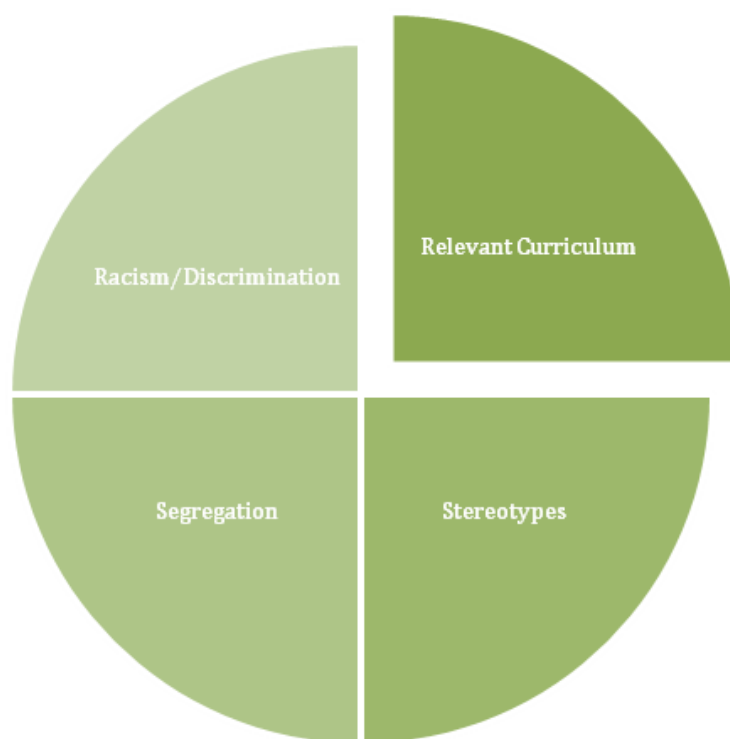


Figure 5.5. Sub-themes associated to Latino Culture and academic Rigor,

Relevant curriculum. It was during his sophomore year in college that Ralph (CS3) finally learned the vocabulary he had been missing all his life that could fully allow him to express pride in his culture. Ralph proudly stated, “I am a Chicano,” but he also regretfully pointed out, “I never read a book in high school where the protagonist

looked like me.” Ralph was a proponent of changing the K-12 curriculum to integrate more minority culture and history. He recalled a comic to express how he felt:

I saw a comic and it hit harder than it probably should have, but there was a guy asking about more Black people in U.S. history, that was the first panel. And then the teacher in the second panel replied, “you have to take Black studies for that, this is American History.” And that's how it feels. Everything is a fight. That was a political cartoon comic, but it didn't feel good.

Mario (CS1) also had comments about curriculum and culture. He stated:

Validate their culture, Mexican history, is important. At my school, we learned a lot about Black culture, because it was predominantly Black so I really appreciated their culture. But it would be cool to learn about my culture. We learned about MLK, but I wondered about Mexicans and what they were doing during that time. I had a lot questions that were never answered until I came to [university].

Stereotypes. Stereotypes did not help anyone either, and breaking them sometimes took more effort than letting them go. For Ruby (CG1), every time she moved to a new school, her role was to dismantle stereotypes from teachers and other students so that she could access higher academic rigor. For Charlie (HSS7), hanging out with other smart Latino males helped him feel more confident and also lessen the fears of making mistakes in class. Charlie commented, “if I made a mistake in class, the other kids wouldn't think that I was stupid because my friends were smart so others thought that I was smart too.”

For Lizzy (HSS6), acting White was the best way to avoid being stereotyped, yet it came to be a painful experience as she faced an identity crisis that lasted several years.

In her own words,

It got really bad in eighth grade, because it felt like I was being bullied and then even my White friends would make comments about other Mexican kids . . . and they would tell me not to worry because I [was] different. It was meant to be comforting, but it really confused me because I didn't know what I was supposed to be.

Segregation. Housing patterns have re-segregated many Latino students in U.S. neighborhood schools (Fry & Taylor, 2012), and ability grouping has continued to be a negative practice that segregates students in classrooms (Weiler & Walker, 2009). For participants of this study, segregation was a term used to describe their experiences in both ends of the spectrum, either in ESL classrooms as newcomers or as high achieving Latinos in classes with mainly White classmates. Mario (CS1) stated, “East is the best school in Denver, because it has a lot of money. It’s segregated, and there are lots of White, rich kids. . . . I was lucky . . . I was able to tap into those resources.” Mario also reflected on the other high schools in Denver and how racially imbalanced and segregated they were. Mario stated, “Barriers like segregation still affect students more now than 40 years ago. This is due to class segregation. Poor with the poor, rich with the rich . . . I was lucky.” For Miguel (CG3), the segregation in his ESL classrooms was the first red flag to its academic rigor, “Kids are the same everywhere and everyone wants to be cool . . . and being smart is cool. . . . Take the Mexican kids out of the Mexican hall.”

Racism. Although the participants did not mention being direct victims of racism, some of their comments referred to their observations on how Latino ethnicity was seen by others. Julian (HSS1) stated that some teachers in his high school “picked” on Latino kids more than White kids. He recalled his math teacher yelling and screaming at the Latino kids who sat in the back and how she used sarcasm to try to motivate them. His advice was “Don’t yell at them, if you want them to learn math. By yelling you will just make them mad, and they will just quit trying.” Faridhe (HSS2) stated that the athletic director at her school was a very popular teacher but that he and the other “cool” teachers

mainly bonded with White kids. “Mr. [teacher] only has White kids as his office aides, like, why can’t I be your aide and be cool and all?”

Natalia (HSS3) recalled the comments she heard from a parent who had dismissed her academic potential after her baby was born. “Mrs [last name] made sure I knew that every single teen mother at [high school] has been Latina for the past 10 years and that, this year alone, there are 8 Latinas pregnant.” Sadly, the comment Natalia heard from the parent was supported by evidence at her school. The odds were stacked up against Natalia but she seemed determined to overcome them. Her idealism was refreshing and contagious.

For Lizzy (HSS6), having her coach embarrass her father in front of her soccer team and the spectators was enough to make her quit the team. She felt discriminated by him. Ruby (CG1) stated how much she enjoyed surprising teachers. “They would explicitly tell me that they didn’t expect much from me. One teacher told me that she was very pleasantly surprised.” For Chino (CG2), racism was still alive and well and the only way to erradicate it was through education. “I am telling you, education is the best weapon we have.” The rest of the participants repeated similar refrains related to racism.

Pre-College Programs

By the numbers, Latinos have been the most underrepresented group on college campuses (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013). Without a college degree, Latinos have been at higher risk of being unemployed since the new job market requires more skilled workers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Pre-college preparation programs have been highly successful preparing Latinos to graduate from college even when many arrive in middle and high school without knowing what college was (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013).

Besides family and teachers, all participants in this study had mentors who helped them pave their path to college and 9 of the 14 were involved in college-preparation programs. This second theme of pre-college programs was not nearly as extensive as academic rigor but, because of its significance helping Latinos prepare for college, it was categorized as a central theme. The two sub-themes associated with Pre-College Programs were: (a) Mentors as Champions and Role Models and (b) Extracurricular Involvement (see Figure 5.6).

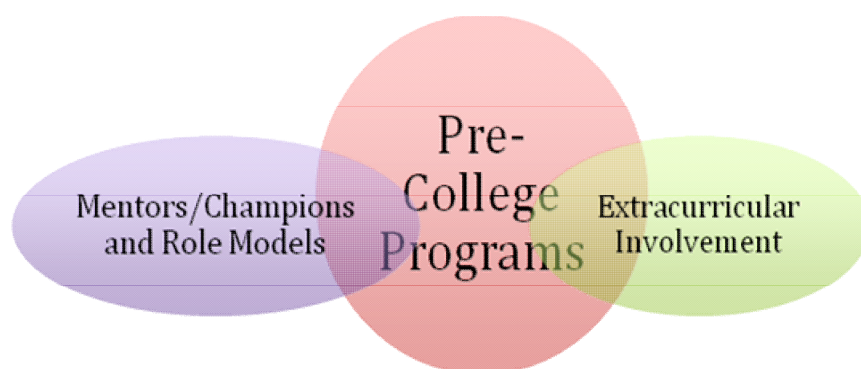


Figure 5.6. Pre-college programs and its related sub-themes.

Mentors as Role Models and Champions of Education

The importance of non-family adults in the school performance and social mobility of Latino students had continued to be an area of discovery. For young adults who have come from families with little experience in the college process, the role of mentors has expanded the opportunities these young adults have for social networking beyond the close family circle to include the larger community (Valenzuela, 1999). For minority groups, family support was given by guiding them away from risky behaviors,

but “public and private institutions such as the school, community organizations, commercial centers, religious institutions, the media, social service agencies, employment sites, and the police and judicial systems, also participate and share in the adolescent socialization process” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003, p. 232). Low income and minority parents and families could not teach their children the “speech, social skills, values, customs, dress code models, and other skills necessary for upward mobility” (Bandura, 1969, p. 248), but mentors and role models could fill that gap.

The Latino immigrant parents of the participants in this study were aware of their limitations to guide their children in their academic challenges but compensated by enticing them to dream and to make the most of their schooling experiences. Valenzuela (1999) stated that Latino youth had to build a strong system that fostered and enhanced their self-esteem within a positive view of their ethnicity but that, unlike privileged youth, they had to overcome the barriers imposed on them by a society that had stereotyped their culture, language, and race. For all participants of this study, mentors with more access to social capital played a critical role in their development as college-bound students. These mentors served as academic coaches, counselors, financial sponsors, and champions of education.

The importance that mentors had in the lives of the 14 participants was mentioned with examples by all 14 participants. For Julian (HSS1), mentors held him together during his difficult times in high school. His coaches allowed him to miss practice when he had to go to work and his pre-college mentors helped him pay for school supplies and also supported him when filling out the forms needed for the scholarship he received to attend college. Natalia (HSS3), Rene (HSS4), Ruben (HSS5), Lizzy (HSS6), Ruby

(CG1), and Chino (CG2) all credited their pre-college mentors with setting them up for college success. Natalia felt that the efforts from her mentors to help her reach her academic dreams had motivated her to try even harder in school. Rene also mentioned how much he valued the support that his soccer coach gave him. He stated:

Mr. [name] was always aware of my grades, especially because I was the captain of the team and had to mentor the younger kids. He helped me stay eligible to play and that motivated me to always do well in school. Mr. [name] would set me as an example to others and that made me feel good.

For Charlie (HSS7), it was his choir teacher who served as his mentor in middle school. She helped him come out of his shell by getting him involved in the school play. “She gave me a role in the play, not a major role, but it was a role and that would bring out confident Charlie, not shy Charlie, but exciting Charlie.” Jenny’s (HSS8) mentor was an older lady who taught her how to play the piano while she waited for her dad to finish working on her yard. Jenny recalled, “She became like a grandma . . . I loved the idea that she treated me like I was one of her grandkids.” Ruby (CG1) had several mentors that helped her along the way, but she mainly mentioned her pre-college mentor who had encouraged her to apply for college and for scholarships even when she was undocumented.

[Mentor] wouldn’t take no for an answer. I had a plan B; I was going back to Mexico because college in America was not possible . . . but she did not give me a choice and made me apply. . . . Even when I was submitting applications, I was thinking, “this will not work.”

While in high school, Mario (CS1) was involved in student government competitions and had lawyers as mentors who helped him afford his trips and expenses related to those activities. He claimed his parents were very interested in his involvement

but could not help him financially. He recalled, “I was the only Mexican kid in the group . . . but, because East had a lot of money, I didn’t have to pay for my trips.”

Extracurricular Involvement

There was a link between the participants’ academic rigor and success, their extracurricular activities, the colleges they attended, and the scholarship funds they received. As Faridhe (HSS2) stated, “It’s not just about schoolwork, you may have other activities too.” Julian (HSS1) also commented, “The only way to deal with my stress is by running out in the field playing a sport.”

As it was often the case with successful students, participants of this study were also accomplished in areas other than academics. Some played musical instruments, participated in student competitions, played sports, held jobs or internships on the side, and served as volunteer in their communities. For Chino (CG2), his saving grace was being involved as a volunteer working with needy families in Los Angeles. For Charlie (HSS7), it was helping young children at the elementary school. This experience introduced him to teaching and made him feel that he belonged and was needed. For many others, it was playing a sport and being a part of a team.

The pre-college programs that were mentioned had been pivotal for students and their families in their path to college. Along with their pre-college programs, other extracurricular activities are listed below. High school seniors from the smaller high school and their extracurricular activities are reflected in Table 5.3; those from the larger high school are listed in Table 5.4, and all extracurricular activities for college seniors and graduates are listed in Table 5.5.

Table 5.3

Extracurricular Activities for Students of the Small High School

	Julian (HSS1)	Faridhe (HSS2)	Natalia (HSS3)	Rene (HSS4)
Pre-college Program	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Sports	Basketball Rugby	Dance	Dance Volleyball	Soccer
Clubs	National Honor Society	Immigrant Rights	National Honor Society	Key Club Guitar Club
Church	No	No	Yes	Yes
Internships/Work	Work	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scholarships	Full-ride Daniels'	Almost full-ride (all private)	Full-ride Chick Evans	Almost full ride
College Type	4-year University	2-year Junior College	4-year University	4-year University
Studied in Mexico	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note. HSS = High School Student

Table 5.4

Extracurricular Activities for Students of the Larger High School

	Rodolfo (HSS5)	Lizzy (HSS6)	Charlie (HSS7)	Jenny (HSS8)
Pre-college Program	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sports	No	Soccer Basketball	Watching on TV	No
Clubs	National Honor Society Youth mentor	National Honor Society Peer Counselor Journalism	Tutor for young students	No
Church	No	No	Yes	Yes
Internships/Work	Both	Both	Both	Both
Scholarships	Almost full-ride Merit	Almost full-ride Merit	Grants from Federal government	Substantial Aid to junior college
College Type	4-year University	4-year University	2-year Junior College	2-year Junior College
Studied in Mexico				

Note. HSS = High School Student

Table 5.5

Extracurricular Activities for College Seniors and Graduates

	Ruby (CG1)	Chino (CG2)	Miguel (CG3)	Mario (CS1)	Mariana (CS2)	Ralph (CS3)
Pre-college	Yes	Yes	After school mentoring program	No	Yes	No
Sports	Soccer	Basketball	Dance	Baseball	No	Baseball
Clubs	National Honor Society	Community organizations	Dance	Government Mock Trials	Dance	Guitar
Church	No	No	No	No	No	No
Internships/Work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scholarships	Full-ride Private school Merit	Full-ride Daniel's	Almost full-ride	Full-ride Daniels'	Full-ride Daniels	
College Type	4-year University	2-year Junior College	4-year University	4-year University	4-year University	4-year University
Studied in Mexico	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

Note. CG = College Graduate Student/ CS = College Student

Extracurricular involvement along with a challenging academic load had a direct correlation with admittance to college and with financial aid offered to the 14 participants. According to Marsh (1992), a study he conducted indicated that the effects of participating in extracurricular activities during high school yielded positive outcomes in “social and academic self-concept, educational aspirations, coursework selection, homework, absenteeism, academic achievement, and subsequent college attendance” (p. 553). Likewise, the more engaged the participants were in school, the more they seemed to enjoy it and the greater their social circle. This was also a strategy that college-bound students used to look better-rounded in their college applications. The small sample from this study also seemed to indicate that, the greater their involvement outside of schoolwork, the greater their scholarships to 4-year colleges and universities.

Financial Support

As it was already documented in the review of the literature, poverty could not be separated from class or from race as those two factors were inextricably related (Rothstein, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2005). Over the past decades, there has been ample research that has documented the struggles that poor children have faced in schools. Pedro Noguera (2011) claimed that, despite numerous efforts, dedicated teachers and administrators were not enough to overcome the issues related to poverty that children faced in American schools. Noguera asserted that poverty was highly linked to learning, not because poor children were incapable of learning but because there were many outside obstacles poor children faced which directly affected their academic achievement. Children of poverty were less likely to pursue higher levels of education as the pressure for earning money started earlier in life (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

All participants of this study were first-generation college students, which meant that their parents did not complete college and, in several instances, did not complete high school either. With the exception of Mario (CS1) and Ralph (CS3), the parents of the other 12 participants were immigrants from Mexico. Mario's father grew up in Denver but his mother was from Mexico. Both of Ralph's parents grew up in Colorado. As expected, the lack of college degree was somehow reflected on the jobs and living conditions their parents had. Julian (HSS1) and Mariana (CS2) lost their homes and had to find low-income housing when they were in high school. Ruby's family had to relocate several times in search of less expensive rent. Jenny's family also had to change their living arrangements after her parents divorced. Mario's home in downtown Denver was broken into several times when he was a child, losing everything of value they possessed. Rodolfo remembered the long hours his father worked in his construction job just to get by, and Chino never owned furniture as they moved so often that they had to be ready to pick up and go. When Chino moved to Colorado, only a suitcase accompanied him, his mother, and sister. The stories of financial struggles were abundant from the participants and, as expected, when the time to apply for college arrived, the lack the financial support from their parents was a big barrier that they had to overcome by relaying on scholarships (see Figure 5.7).

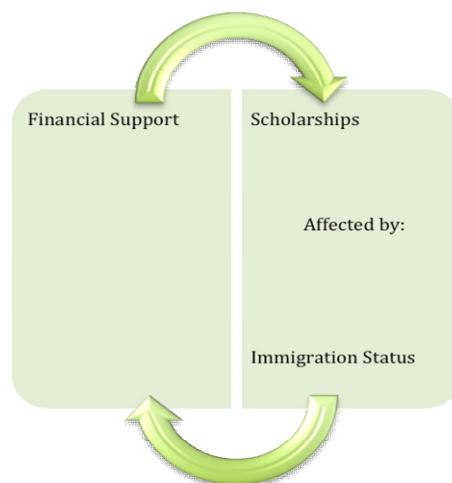


Figure 5.7 Financial support and its related sub-themes.

Scholarships

As it was presented in Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5, most of the participants received substantial financial assistance to attend college and recognized that, without those scholarships, college would be completely out of their reach. The financial assistance they received gave them an extra level of confidence that had not been there throughout their earlier education. Chino (CG2) stated,

My mentor had to lend me the money I needed to secure my dorm in college. My scholarship later refunded the money, so that I could pay him back but, instead of accepting the money, he told me to buy soap, shaving cream, and other stuff that kids need to bring with them to college. I had nothing with me when I left for college.

Regarding scholarships, Natalia stated, “As soon as I found out about getting a scholarship was when I knew I was going to college.” Mario (CS1) clarified, “I was worried about paying for college, so a friend told me about the [scholarship] and I got it. I knew then that I would be going to college.” Mariana (CS2) also received the same scholarship as Mario, but it was her high school counselor who told her about it. The rest

of the students who received scholarships were greatly appreciative and assured me that college was only possible because of the financial aid they had received.

The findings in this study revealed that the students who were able to secure financial assistance were those who were also legal residents of the United States. Faridhe (HSS2) and Jenny (HSS8) were not able to secure enough funds to attend a larger university, even when they had hoped they could. Based on the experiences of the other two undocumented students who had successfully earned scholarships to attend college (Ruby and Miguel), the difference was that neither Faridhe nor Jenny had mentors or belonged to pre-college programs. Therefore, it seemed that financial aid was more effectively secured for first-generation students when there were concerned adults guiding and encouraging young students in the process.

Immigration

Jenny (HSS8) was not involved in a pre-college program and did not have the guidance and support that the other students had. With her high school academic load and her test scores, under the right guidance with a pre-college mentor, she probably would have secured enough money to attend a larger university as she had planned. Jenny's greatest obstacle was her undocumented status.

Either directly or indirectly, 12 out of the 14 students stated that immigration issues had affected their lives. For some, the fear of deportation lingered in their daily lives. Julian (HSS1) talked about the fear he had of having both of his parents deported when his father was in jail. Jenny (HSS8) also talked about the ambiguities that came with being undocumented. She stated, "You never know when you will come home from school and your parents will be gone." Of the four students who were undocumented,

Ruby (CG1) received her legal residency soon after marrying a U.S. citizen. Ruby still worried about immigration issues, because her mother and younger brother were undocumented. Faridhe (HSS2), Jenny (HSS8), and Miguel (CG3) declared *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* status for undocumented citizens and were able to obtain their own social security number, work permit, and driver's license for 2-year periods. Even after receiving *DACA*, however, their immigration status was uncertain. Miguel (CG3) clarified, "You can be at the wrong place at the wrong time and be charged with a felony and be deported. We walk a very fine line." Some of the implications that immigration issues had in the participants' lives are listed below on Table 5.6.

Conclusion

To capture the essence of the clear and loud message I heard from all 14 participants, I would first state that rigor and high expectations were a symbol of love; that obstacles could be overcome when parents, teachers, and other caring adults took the time to listen, guide, and encourage young minds with the gift of confidence; and that children who succeeded were those with the attitude, understanding, and awareness of their environments and were able to change the context of their experiences as opposed to letting their experiences change the context of their environments. The answer to the quest of my pursuit of the past 22 years of working with Latino students lies in helping them build the confidence that engenders their academic competence.

With the highest respect to the field of education and to the participants of this study who so willingly shared their knowledge and experiences, Chapter VI includes my motive to do this study, the interpretation of the findings, implications for practitioners, recommendations for future research, limitations of the study, and new revelations that I

discovered in the process. It concludes with a description of my educational journey before I started college.

Table 5.6

Issues Related to Immigration

Immigration Issues	
Julian	Mother undocumented and unable to receive any financial help during the time his father was incarcerated. Father faced deportation while in jail. His mother had extra difficulty applying for FAFSA and filling out the Daniel's Scholarship because she could not file taxes.
Faridhe	Unable to apply for federal financial aid to go to college. Longing to go back to Mexico to visit family but unable to leave the country. Parents are also undocumented and no financial assistance other than private scholarships were available to her.
Natalia	Both parents were undocumented and could not get parent loans from the government.
Rene	His parents were separated for about 10 years waiting for their legal residency to arrive so that they could reunite in the United States.
Rodolfo	Both parents undocumented. Mother had some issues with depression missing her family when first moved to the United States
Lizzy	No mention of issues related to immigration
Charlie	Both parents were undocumented. No chance to leave the country
Jenny	Unable to apply for federal financial aid to go to college. Longing to go back to Mexico to visit family but unable to leave the country. Parents were also undocumented and no financial assistance other than private scholarships were available to her. She was not able to secure enough scholarship funds to pay for college mainly due to the lack of a social security number.
Ruby	Hard process applying for college and scholarships. She was able to secure funding to attend a private university based on her own academic merit.
Chino	Mother was undocumented and deported when he was in college. She has not come back to the United States in more than five years. Chino has plans to go visit her.
Miguel	Hard process applying for college and scholarships. He was able to secure funding to attend a public university in Colorado who offered a special tuition rate to undocumented students who showed merit.
Mario	His mother came to the United States by crossing the river while she was seven months pregnant. She later became a legal resident.
Mariana	Her father was deported when she was in high school creating a series of financial problems for the family causing them to lose their house that they had recently purchased.
Ralph	No personal problems related to immigration.

CHAPTER VI
**THE LENS OF MY OWN EDUCATIONAL
JOURNEY**

I always knew that I would complete a doctoral degree--it was a promise I made to my mother, a woman who only completed third grade but who gifted me with confidence to make me believe that I could do anything I set my mind to do. I left my mother back in Mexico when I was 15 years old, I was broke, and I was pregnant--and I never looked back. I came to America, the land of opportunities, to search for a better life for my unborn child and myself. My mother's message as I left was, "*Usa tu cabeza y estudia. Querer es poder.*" [Use your brain and study. When there's a will there is a way.]

When I started this doctoral program almost four years ago, I knew I had the will to do it and excitedly embarked in the journey that was in front of me. I wanted to expose myself to a deeper level of study in the field of education so that I could contribute in a more analytical way. After an extensive examination of my interests and passions, it was clear to me that I wanted to learn more about Latino students in their quest to attend and complete college. I have always believed that a college degree levels the playing field better than anything else; it had for me.

I have been a public school educator in Colorado for the past 22 years with my first 9 years working with English Language Learners (ELL) in a middle school that saw an influx of immigrants in a 5-year period. There I saw the struggles of Latino

children who were taken from their academic settings in Mexico and moved to a completely new system that was not equipped to meet their needs. While most of these new immigrants struggled and fell through the cracks, there were some that by all means defeated the odds in more ways than one. I had my first glance at diamonds in the rough.

The next 4 years of my career I taught at a high school where I often acted as a counselor to Latino students and their parents. Along with them, I battled the obstacles that divided the opportunities of Latino students, such as participation in student government, athletics, arts, civic engagement, or advanced placement classes. Latinos at that school were at the bottom of the totem pole--until a new principal came and among other changes, required that all AP and advanced classes mirrored the Latino representation in the school. Within 5 years, the school was recognized with state awards for academic improvements.

The next 4 years I was at the helm of a pre-college program where I had the opportunity to work with first-generation students going to college. This, by far, was the most rewarding experience of my career, which I left to become an assistant principal at a high school with a large percentage of Latino students. At this later assignment, I had my first opportunity to look at the data and compare longitudinal teacher effectiveness. In my first year I noticed the gross discrepancies between failure rate among Latinos and White students, the over-representation of office referrals for Latino students, and the under-representation of Latinos in upper-level classes, among others. Amid the few, however, were those Latino students who managed to excel. They were the diamonds in the rough that I had become obsessed with finding. Those successful students shared some common threads which I embarked to find with this inquiry. These young people were and have

continued to be my inspiration. They have faced obstacles and they have overcome them. They owned their success, they led by example, and they were worth of this study. My quest and biggest concern in education was, and has continued to be, getting underrepresented Latinos into college.

Interpretations of the Findings --Beating the Odds

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 and the increase in the Latino population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) has brought attention to the underachievement of Latinos in the United States (Irizarry, 2011). This has prompted national policy to urge educators to reduce the achievement gap between specific populations (Billig et al., 2005), such as students of color and White students, students from lower socioeconomic status and those from middle-class, and students who were learning English in U.S. schools and those who were native speakers (Irizarry, 2011).

Despite the efforts of the past decade after NCLB was implemented and the national awareness of the low-academic achievement of Latinos, “academically, they [Latinos] are lagging far behind” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 1). Latinos have been the largest minority in the United States, yet compared to Blacks and Whites, they have had the lowest high school graduation rate and the lowest rate of completion for General Educational Development (GED) credentials (Fry, 2010). This Latino academic underachievement has represented a threat to the economy and to the social fabric of this country (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Without a high school diploma, the other best pathway to college has been a GED. Given the low numbers of either one of those requirements among Latino students, the purpose of this study was to analyze the academic experiences of Latino students who were able to break the odds by following a

successful pre-college path in high school or by successfully enrolling and completing a 4-year college or university degree. Through the narrative style of this research, I incorporated portraiture in the description of the 14 participants and in the analysis as I went through the process of deciding what to include in a description that indicated, “resonance . . . because portraitists find and represent resonance that it is there to be discovered” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 266).

Working with Latinos in the pre-college program taught me that, when we invest in sending one student to college, we could exponentially be increasing the chances of sending the rest of his or her family as well. All it takes is one. The stories shared with me during this study along with the many other stories that I have heard throughout my career helped me create the final “portrait” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9) of the constructive educational factors that effectively get Latinos a fair chance at completing college.

The process of sending kids to college starts the minute they enter school, and the sooner they start the process the greater their chances of following a pre-college path. Contrary to common beliefs, this study indicated that there was promise for those who did not have the opportunity to start the college process early in life. The difference was that those students have some catching up to do. This study agreed with previous findings in the literature that indicated schools and the community together played a critical role, not only with the students themselves, but with their parents also. Since students spend over 80.0% of their time outside of school, it has been imperative that communities do their share at helping with the education of their children. Further, if we are committed to raising the social mobility of minorities, we must focus on Latino education as it not only

guarantees their well-being but that of the larger community as they constitute 17.1% of the U.S. population and 21.0% of the total Colorado population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Many studies on Latino education have critiqued what has not worked at bringing students out of the shadows of mediocre academic performance. Such research has been valid and has influenced the decisions that have improved academic outcomes for Latinos. However, my intentions with this inquiry aimed at finding the exceptions to the norm and to part from the negative discourse and discover the elements of “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 9) that students collected throughout their education that shaped their path to college.

The interpretations of the findings of this study were supported by the literature regarding the common threads among successful Latino students. Similar to other current studies, the need to invest in programs and in staff development for school personnel were identified as main findings. Adding to the literature, nonetheless, the findings of this study contributed in a unique way by adding the voices of successful young Latino students of Mexican descent who attended high school no more than 10 years ago so they could offer current perspectives of their educational experiences; voices that were often missing in the current literature.

Factors of “Goodness”

The main question that this inquiry aimed to answer was: What experiences or factors, from kindergarten to 12th grade, in Mexico or in the United States, contributed to the academic success of Latino students of Mexican descent? Through the analysis, three main themes were identified that crafted the framework for reporting of the findings and

the interpretations of the study: (a) Academic Rigor, (b) Mentors and Pre-College Programs, and (c) Financial Support. The order in which the themes were reported was related to the level of relevance implied by the participants.

Discipline, Academic Rigor, and High Expectations as a Symbol of Love

This inquiry found that confidence was earned by high-achieving students through discipline, rigor, and high expectations. Students expressed that rigor and high expectations from teachers, parents, and caregivers were symbols of love, and the most viable way to help them access higher academic levels. Rigor and discipline were proclaimed necessary starting in elementary school and continuing throughout their entire K-12 education. All students in this study agreed that rigorous teachers and the rigorous classes offered to them had been paramount to their academic success. While there were many comments regarding rigor at the elementary and middle school, high-school rigor was mentioned as the main catalyst for college success, especially the Advanced Placement (AP) and college classes they took. Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment classes taken by high school participants were listed on Table 5.2.

The data provided by the students' transcripts showed an association between the advanced classes they took and the financial aid they received to attend college. The only exception to this was Jenny (HSS8), but her undocumented status and the lack of college counseling greatly influenced that outcome.

An interesting and revealing finding was that ACT scores did not line up with the age when students entered school. Rene (HSS4) came from Mexico in fifth grade, yet his ACT scores were the same or better than three other students' scores who entered U.S. schools before he did. A possible explanation for this was the confidence that students

like Rene brought with them when they entered school in the United States. Rene came prepared to handle rigor and had already learned that high expectations were the ticket to academic success. His critical thinking about his place in society gained from years of non-minority status in Mexico, shielded him from internalizing the low expectations that teachers and the community held of Latinos. A recommendation for future study is to carefully examine these factors and establish why students like Rene have been able to catch up and pass other students in a relative short period of time when they started their education in Mexican schools.

The ACT data from participants also showed that math was the best score for five of the eight participants which aligned with their claim that delayed entrance to the mainstream academic English track slowed their academic English acquisition. Abedi and Herman (2010) showed that ELL student performance in math-standardized tests was closely related to who else was in the classroom with them at the time of instruction--mainstreamed math classes yielded highest scores for ELL students in their study. Their findings were related to the practice of placing ELL students in mainstream math classes faster than placing them in mainstreamed English classes (Abedi & Herman, 2010). As in studies done previously, this study also found a connection between highest score on ACT tests and the number of advanced English and Math classes taken. The more advanced classes the students took in high school, the higher their score in those areas. High school students' ACT scores are listed on Table 6.1.

Table 6.1

High School Participants' Best Scores on ACT Test

	Julian	Faridhe	Natalia	Rene	Rodolfo	Lizzy	Charlie	Jenny
English	20	18	23	23	29	29	19	22
Reading	19	19	26	20	24	32	15	23
Math	26	17	31	25	28	28	23	23
Science	23	20	22	23	27	25	21	23
Total	23	20	26	22	27	28	20	23
# Times Taken	3	1	4	2	4	3	1	2
Years in U.S.	12	10	12	8	12	12	12	11
Best Score	Math	Science	Math	Math	English	English	Math	Math

All teachers and adults who made a difference for these participants had three highly esteemed characteristics: (a) high expectations, as expressed by Ruby (CG1), “The best thing that teachers did for me in high school was to challenge me to take the AP exam and challenged me to get a score of 5,” or Mariana (CS2), “I always told my teachers I needed them to have high expectations of me and they were persistent with that and therefore I wasn’t a slacker; (b) Rigorous classes, as stated by Rodolfo (HSS5), “What contributed the most to prepare me for college was taking harder classes;” and (c) Caring demeanor, as illustrated by Jenny (HSS8), “She [teacher] never gave up on me. She always pushed me harder in her science class and I ended up being on the top of her class.”

This study also found that Latino students were often subject to comments and actions reflecting the low expectations teachers and other community members held of them for being Latinos and, in most cases, for being first-generation immigrants. Ruby (CG1) had to prove herself to teachers before she was given a chance to access higher level curriculum. Mario (CS1) took the risk to advocate for himself in middle school so that he could be placed in the “high strides” track. He attributed his success to that move.

Critical thinking and identity. Academic rigor in the findings of this inquiry was tied to many of the sub-themes related to academic achievement. Academic rigor breached into the cultural and identity factors tied to Latinos that affected their academic success. The findings indicated that the experiences of all 14 participants were shaped by their own critical thinking of their cultural identity that included an element of rejection and feeling of superiority which led them to alienate from their own culture. In some instances, the participants mentioned their greater assimilation with White students and a

ruling of blame for Latinos who did not succeed. This factor of superiority and their alienation tendencies, however, were a part of the journey of academic success for these 14 successful students. Their critical thinking about factors that influenced their academic performance allowed them to take risks and depart from cultural norms to venture on their own paths. This element of critical thinking came after the confidence gained through their interactions with supportive adults who cared for them and held high expectations of them.

What made the findings in culture and identity more relevant in this study was that every participant also alluded to conflicting feelings with the duality of their identity explaining how they did not feel Mexican enough to the Mexicans or American enough to the Americans. Critically thinking about their place in society, however, allowed them to deal with their dual-identity conflicts and like Lizzy (HSS6) stated, “Feeling comfortable in [her] own skin.” Critical thinking was necessary for these Latino students to shield from the negative comments they received from peers, teachers, and community members as they broke away from the stereotypes associated with the low-expectations tied to their race and as they escaped their groups’ segregation in lower academic tracks.

A marked difference found with this inquiry between identity conflicts of high school seniors versus those expressed by college seniors and college graduates was that high school seniors seemed to still be grappling with identity conflicts, whereas their older counterparts seemed to have already shifted their critical thinking to what actions were needed to change the dynamics of race and ethnicity to make things better for Latinos. The message from college seniors and college graduates was more about “What can we all do to help others besides ourselves?” The element of censure expressed by

high school seniors was not manifested with the six college seniors and graduates. An important question for further inquiry would be if cultural alienation serves as a motivator for minority students while they are in high school.

English as a second language programs. While this research focused on the elements of goodness that participants encountered in their K-12 schooling experiences, two strong themes emerged from their English as a Second Language (ESL) experience. One was the love and support provided ESL teachers and the other was the lack of academic rigor in ESL programs. Both of these findings came as a surprise to me. Along with the lack of rigor, there was a strong premise that ESL teachers were “good” people in charge of difficult students. The experiences for the nine students who were in ELL programs seemed to indicate an imbalance between providing a nurturing environment within a rigorous setting that fostered high levels of academic English. Interpretation of these findings indicate that, in their good intentions to provide safety for their students, ESL teachers held ELL students back from taking rigorous classes which hurt them on their road to college. This constituted a problem for Latino students whose time was limited for learning academic English when they entered schools. A recommendation for further inquiry is to investigate the reasons why ESL policies hinder Latino students’ college paths. Such policies include the criteria used to exit students from the ESL program, the rigorous exit exams, and the lack of effective assessments used to identify gifted second language learners.

English proficiency. All participants of this study stated that their academic English was learned in mainstreamed classes where they were exposed to correct English models and where the rigor of the class kept them at higher levels of thinking and

analysis. Gándara and Contreras (2009) explained that language had been used as an excuse to Latino underachievement but, if the common sentiment shared among these 14 high achieving Latino students indicated that their first encounter with the English language led them to a slower track, there was a possible response to why so many ELL students were left in a non-academic direction. When students were in a slower track, they did not qualify for advanced classes in high school and were left unprepared for college (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013).

Mentors and Pre-college Programs

Each of the 14 participants mentioned people other than their families who had mentored them in their college process. Students who were in pre-college programs credited their mentors with helping fill the void of their parents as college advisors. This finding aligned with the literature regarding the importance of adults in students' lives. According to Gándara and Contreras (2009), students who overcame obstacles had "one common denominator . . . some adult steps forward in their lives to encourage them--tell them they are smart and 'can do it'" (p. 233). These mentors not only filled the gap as college advisors, but they also helped on the building of confidence for these students. Mariana (CS2) beautifully stated, "You need people who believe in you because even if you are the strongest person in the world, you can't do it alone."

The findings from this study also showed clear evidence on the positive effects of pre-college programs on first-generation Latino students even when there were extra barriers associated with immigration or lack of financial support. Latino students had a greater chance at going to college if they had the right guidance through a comprehensive pre-college curriculum. An important finding for further analysis would be that most of

the students selected for this study participated in pre-college programs. This unintended selection was necessary as there were few other college-bound, first-generation Latino students who fit the requirements of the study. Without it being a limitation, it provided solid support on the effectiveness of pre-college programs for first-generation Latino students. This would be an area for future research on pre-college programs and what factors would determine their effectiveness. Professor Concha Delgado-Gaitan (2013) recently wrote a book regarding successful programs that lead Latinos to a college path. A list of mentors that students mentioned during their high school years is provided in Table 6.2.

Financial Support

Kohler and Lazarín (2007) claimed that Latinos received less financial aid than any other group. To this end, Cabrera et al. (1993) highlighted that financial aid played an important role in Latino college persistence. Latinos had more financial hardships than non-Latinos in paying for college, often had to work longer hours to take care of personal needs and family obligations, and were more likely than any other group to drop out of college due to financial reasons (Longerbeam et al., 2004). Moreover, A. Valencia (2003) indicated that some universities lost 50.0% to 60.0% of their freshman Latino students due mainly to financial issues. Hence, a significant factor that influenced these 14 participants in their road to college was the financial aid and scholarship money they received. This finding showed that the chances for Latinos to attend college increased as their financial assistance increased. As indicated in Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5, all 14 participants of this study received substantial scholarships and financial aid to attend college. Even the three high school students who decided on the community college route

and the four who were undocumented secured funds. In the case of Ruby (CG1) and Miguel (CG3), they both secured funds to go to a 4-year college right after high school.

Ironically, financial issues for Latinos have not only been related to access to resources. They could also be related to cultural beliefs held by Latino students and their families that made it harder for them to seek financial support to attend college. Parents were not familiar with the scholarship process and often had to find help filling out the federal financial aid forms and gathering all paperwork needed, including their tax information. This was particularly difficult for parents who were undocumented or who had limited English skills. Comprehensive pre-college programs that extended beyond college counseling with students filled the gap for parents needing to complete federal financial aid forms as well as other sources of financial assistance such as private scholarships. A suggestion for improvement to help Latino parents with scholarship information would be to hold college workshops specifically geared towards Latinos where counselors and other caring adults help parents with the application process.

Table 6.2

Pre-college Program Participation and Mentors Indicated by the Students

	Pre-college Programs	Club Mentor	School Mentor	Family Mentor
Julian	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentors	Football Coach	Mother and older brothers
Faridhe	No	Dance	Assistant Principal	Older sister
Natalia	Yes	Dance Pre-college Program Mentors	Science Teacher	
Rene	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentors	Soccer Coach	Father
Rodolfo	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentor		Father
Lizzy	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentor		Father
Charlie	No	Church	Middle School Drama Teacher	Father
Jenny	No	Piano Teacher	Science Teacher	Uncles and Aunts
Ruby	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentor	Science-Math Teachers	Mother
Chino	Yes	Pre-college Program Mentor		Mother
Miguel	After school program	Retired engineer and director of after school program		Mother
Mario	Government Competitions	Lawyers		Father

Table 6.2 (continued)

	Pre-college Programs	Club Mentor	School Mentor	Family Mentor
Mariana	Pre-College Program	Latina Support Group	Business Teacher	Mother
Ralph	No		Advisory Teacher	Mother

Interpretive Confidence of the Participants

From the first interactions with participants, there was a certain level of “superiority” observed in most participants. Yet, superiority or any of its synonyms were not words suited to describe those who had shown resiliency and had overcome challenges. I grappled with semantics and concluded that I had to find another word to express what I thought these participants exuded. What I found was confidence. In looking deeper to find out where and how these students had gained confidence, I found Vygotsky (1994) and a concept he developed later in his life, *perezhivanie*. This concept of *perezhivanie* further explained what I had already documented in the review of the literature explaining what “grit” (Tough, 2012), and a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006) meant for survivors and high achievers who broke the odds. Vygotsky used the concept of *perezhivanie* as a tool to explain the influences that situations had in the behavior of children and adolescents. In an attempt to interpret his term of *perezhivanie* in English, Vygotsky (1994) construed it as:

The emotional experience arising from any situation or from any aspect of the environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors themselves (if taken without the reference of the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience. (pp. 338-339).

Vygotsky (1994) offered an example of three children living in a home with an alcoholic mother. All three children experienced their mother’s addiction differently even though the experience would have been the same. The difference, Vygotsky (1994) explained, had to do with the “attitude, understanding and awareness” of the event, which determined the meaning and the effect to every child (p. 342). Hence, the concept of the

perezhivanie of Latino students with the same experiences in school offered me a new way to analyze the reasons why some students managed to succeed when exposed to the same environments as others who did not succeed.

Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) “examined the ways in which lending support to others” could help them “build their confidence” (p. 47). This confidence, Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) explained, was particularly important for students learning English as a second language. The authors explained that humans came into existence and developed during their lives in connection to others and that the role of affection through interactions and caring support fostered the “gift of confidence” (p. 48). This gift of confidence, the authors added, was given from a teacher or a caregiver to a student based on the “emotional rapport” (p. 50) that the adults had with their students.

This gift of confidence was what Mario (CS1) received from his second grade teacher who made him believe that he was intelligent. Because of the perezhivanie of these 14 students, they were able to shape their environment, as opposed to letting their environment shape their experiences. In going back to my first sentence, the “superiority” that I found in all 14 participants, was the result of their experiences in rigorous academic environments that had gifted them with confidence. I interpreted confidence as the qualitative difference and main motivator factor that lead Latino students to different and better academic paths.

Recommendations

Delgado-Gaitan (2013) stated that no one method could address all the needs of Latino students on their 12-year path to college. However, educators could implement “specific approaches to address the social, cultural, and emotional issues pertaining to

Latino students' personal identity and the various questions and concerns they harbor about college" (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013, p. 145).

Latino underachievement has been associated with a number of barriers such as segregation, financial barriers, immigration, poverty, mobility, language, teacher's perception, lack of college counseling, and standardized tests scores. All identified barriers prevented Latino students from earning a 4-year college degree. As such, all of the 14 participants of this study had to deal with several of these and other barriers, yet they managed to succeed. This success was possible due to the support received from similar factors used to create a series of recommendations below. These recommendations came from the analysis of the study based on the perspectives of the 14 participants regarding best practices that helped them break barriers and succeed academically. At the end of this section, I included messages to teachers and administrators from each participant.

Analysis Recommendations

First and foremost, in order to increase academic college readiness for Latino students, access to rigorous curriculum and to teachers who held high expectations were paramount recommendations. These recommendations would call for administrators and teachers to increase the rigor in the curriculum offered to Latino students. Instead of placing students in lower-level or ability grouping classes, administrators would need to advocate for more intensive rigorous curriculum that could accelerate the rate at which Latino students could catch up with their peers. Students with lower skills would have a better chance at catching up when they were placed in higher-level classes than when they were placed in lower-level classes. These students needing to catch up would need

more exposure to advanced curriculum, particularly in the areas of English and mathematics, and not any less. In the case of Miguel (CG3), after refusing ESL services, he enrolled in three English classes his sophomore year in high school. He credited his decision to his ability to learn academic English better and faster than those who had stayed in the ESL track. This could also be an area for future research on the possible results of integrating Latino students in higher-level classes whether or not they tested ready for them.

Staff development on the positive effects of AP and advanced enrollment would need to take place to create a shared vision on the goals to put all Latino students on a path to college. To do this, Walker (2013) recommended that schools propagate the benefits of AP classes to parents and students and also communicate the implications of early tracking on their road to college.

A second recommendation from this study came in regard to the lack of rigor found in ESL programs. It would be important that ESL teachers and school administrators create a culture of shared responsibility so that the entire school community worked on leading ELL students to college tracks as soon as possible. The recommendation from this study was for stand-alone ESL programs to re-examine the time when students were kept isolated from their peers and worked on different models that allowed ELL students greater integration within the school community. One key factor identified by this study suggested that ESL programs needed to enrich their college-track curriculum so that it was more rigorous and so that students could transition into the mainstream classes at a faster rate. A second key factor indicated that the tests or instruments used to exit ELL students from ESL programs served as gatekeepers for

Latino students who felt removed from challenging curriculum that would put them on a college path. Other instruments besides standardized tests should be taken into consideration to allow ESL students to access more challenging curriculum. In light of this research, the findings indicated a need for more research to examine the policies that dictate how ESL programs are structured and the practices of ESL teachers in how ELL students are led on a college path.

A third recommendation would call for access to comprehensive pre-college programs for first-generation students who statistically came to school with lower levels of college knowledge (Delgado-Gaitan, 2013). These students should access greater support on their road to college. This support could be provided by collaboration between teachers in advisory groups, parents receiving training, by comprehensive pre-college programs, and by mentors from the community. The goals of these programs should be to develop in Latino students the confidence needed to take academic and personal risks, to keep high expectations of students at all times by encouraging them to follow a college track, to help them secure financial assistance, and to offer other sets of services important to students and their parents such as filling out financial aid application or leading them to financial aid resources. A recommendation of this study would call for creating comprehensive pre-college programs for all first-generation students as early as possible but definitely during high school. These pre-college services should be offered to all first-generation students and should include strong parent advising and financial support components.

Student Recommendations

One of the questions asked during the interviews was if they could give advice to high school teachers and administrators on ways to better support Latino students. Below are responses from every participant.

Julian (HSS1). To support students is important. You need to show them what college can do for you. If you show them the college life they may be more inclined to stay in high school. Have more mentors to keep track on them and help them and tell them what they can do to improve.

Faridhe (HSS2). Show them that you care, because students, some of them might be at the end and they feel like they have been through enough and that no one else cares, it just doesn't matter, so even if one teacher just shows that they care; it is giving them that sign of hope.

Natalia (HSS3). To really just motivate kids and help them find their passions and help them create connections and the support network because high school is difficult . . . support network of having different connections with different people that will help you along the way. Make them understand that high school is not the end of the road, it's just the beginning of a new path.

Rene (HSS4). Research why kids do well, find out why and what programs are working in high schools and why do half of the students don't graduate.

Rodolfo (HSS5). Keep encouraging the challenge.

Lizzy (HSS6). As long as the teachers are available and you can contact them, that's basically all you need to do as a teacher.

Charlie (HSS7). Make everyone feel that we're together and no just from different clicks.

Jenny (HSS8). Don't let them fall behind. Is sends the message to Latino kids that they are not important enough for the teacher to help them.

Ruby (CG1). My teachers were not content with me walking into their lessons and getting an average score, they constantly pushed me to do better and pushed me forward for exams to show that I had a level of academic skill that would benefit me when applying for college. . . . Please don't hold low expectations of Latino students because you never know how capable they are.

Chino (CG2). They need to believe in the possibilities that every kid represents.

Miguel (CG3). I think getting us out of ESL, and getting us Involved. Because when I was in ESL, I wasn't doing anything. I used ESL to ditch classes instead, and no one knew because I was supposed to be in the ESL, and ESL didn't even know. That's the place where they segregate all of the kids, no one speaks English, and everybody just speak Spanish. . . . They see them as outsiders; they don't involve them in anything, in any teams. Yes, ESL helps kids who don't know English, but I think they need to make them struggle a little bit more. If they don't make them struggle, they don't really learn anything. A lot of the kids that I graduated with never left ESL. Those kids still don't know English, still cannot speak English, I don't understand how they graduated, you know?

Mario (CS1). Challenge them and just have people who are supportive. Have people with power [social capital] support the students.

Mariana (CS2). Encourage them to also continue to higher education because I know that even though I had a teacher that supported me with info and all that stuff, it wasn't until the beginning of my senior year that I even heard about college and that is too late.

Ralph (CS3). Value the children for what they are and what they bring, value their culture, yeah. Encourage them. Courses like AP, encourage them to take those.

Limitations

This study had some limitations. One issue was the requirements for selecting participants because mainly students in pre-college programs were identified. Perhaps having a larger pool of participants would yield a wider diversity of factors that help Latinos follow a pre-college path. A second problematic issue was the lack of second- and third-generation students included in the pool of participants. As it has been documented, Latino underachievement was not limited to immigrants or first-generation only. Another limitation was that only 14.0% of the students in this study came from single parent homes versus 86.0% who were raised by both parents. This limited the transferability of the findings given that, according to Motel and Patten (2011), 33.6% of Hispanic families lived in single parent homes and children born out-of-wedlock were more likely to be poor, and poverty affected student achievement in many ways (Gándara

& Contreras, 2009). An additional limitation of this study bound the conflicts found on dual-identity issues to U.S. states where Latinos have had a minority status. Latinos from states where they have been a majority for many years such as Cubans in Florida, Mexicans in California, and Puerto Ricans in New York, no longer seem to compromise their identity in order to access social upward mobility.

Researcher Final Reflections

I viewed this study as a promising beginning for future research on the creation of programs that could lead more Latino students on college paths. I am delighted with the opportunity I was given to put this study in the context of the field and create awareness among educators that was firmly based on student voices. As the researcher, I paid particular attention to my biases and chose to leave my own portrait to the end so that the reader would not be distracted by my voice. Below is my portrait detailing my journey which started in Mexico almost 50 years ago.

As the youngest in the family, I got to travel with my mother on her trips to “*el otro lado*” (the other side, meaning the United States). My mother was under-educated, but she was not ignorant. She never read a book to me, yet she taught me to love reading. She was single and, for many years, she and her brother made the round-trip to the United States as “braceros” (migrant workers). She shared many stories with us about the United States. When she was pregnant with me, she was living in Nogales, Mexico, and working in Nogales, Arizona. I heard many times that I should have been born in Arizona, but I came late so she started labor on the train ride back to Chihuahua.

I have fun memories of my trips by train, by car, and by bus across the Sierra Tarahumara with my mother. We played card games, we read books but, more

importantly, we talked. My mother was a master at telling stories and at motivating us with those stories. Her message about college was seldom related to us going to college, but on how “proud” other mothers must have felt when their children graduated from college. The pursuit of college was up to us and not to her in my mother’s perception. The responsibility was all mine. My mother admired discipline and hard work and that was how she encouraged us to do well in school. We heard stories about educated children from the homes she cleaned in America. She admired their good manners and their academic quest.

Education was very important to my mother. I went to public schools in Mexico for 10 years but in my 10th year, I got pregnant. As far as my elementary and middle school, the main factors that contributed to my academic achievement were similar to the ones shared by the participants of this study--high expectations from teachers, rigorous classes, and caring mentors from the community. I was an athlete and an activist. I also had caring siblings who filled the gap as my academic tutors. We never talked about going to college at my house--no one before my generation had gone further than fifth grade. College was always something that someone else had done that made their families very proud.

Coming to this country at the age of 15 was the best thing I could have done for my daughter and for me. I was able to work during the day and go to school at night. It was not easy to do, but it was the best option I had. After my daughter was born, I enrolled in an ESL program and soon after took a GED test. Unlike the participants of this study, my ESL program was top notch--highly rigorous and highly desired by students. This program was intensive and lasted two semesters or less, depending on the

level where students were placed when they entered. Students graduated with high levels of English proficiency. The final grade was based on the score received on a standardized English test called Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). It was expected that, by the second year, most students would be able to cope with English classes at a junior college level and writing was a strong component of the program. Since there were many languages spoken in the class, English was the only language allowed for communication. This program was held at one of the branches of a large community college where I had great exposure to the American college life. I wanted to live the American dream. I rejected the stereotypes that Latinos had. I did my fair share of jobs cleaning houses and serving tables, but I always knew that was not the life I was going to live. I challenged myself to take advanced classes and avoided the remedial track--I moved ahead in my college career knowing that education was my ticket out of poverty.

Researcher Bias

Because of the struggles that the participants had to overcome, and because of my own struggles, I was not surprised when the participants placed blame and rejection towards those who did not succeed academically. As I stepped out of this research to analyze its findings, I realized that there had been a shadow with me that carried some of the same sentiment of blame and rejection towards low-achieving Latinos similar as what I heard from the participants of this study. I discovered resonance with their statements that rang true to me when I realized that their story was so similar to mine. I learned early in life that discipline and rigor was the formula to academic success and, just like most of the participants of this study, I also assimilated with American culture and values. After all, Americans value those who came from nothing and pulled themselves up by their

own merit so failure to succeed was seen as the sole responsibility of the individual. My own mother taught me that I was the architect of my own destiny.

As I transitioned through this academic exercise and had time to think critically about my identity as a Latina, I realized that the feelings of rejection were a protective mechanism that shielded me from the status that Latinos had in this culture, thus, it would be irresponsible to continue to blame the victim for this phenomena. Instead, our responsibility should lie on finding ways to help other Latinos break the barriers placed upon them on their path to a college degree. Hence, it was extremely important that the take-home message of this research did not place blame in the Latino culture for their low-academic achievement. There were many important and widely documented social issues related to poverty, immigration, segregation, mobility, language, teacher's perception, lack of college counseling, and standardized tests scores, among others that were directly related to the Latino academic failure. Some of us were able to break those barriers, but some of us were broken by those barriers.

Historically, the Latino underachievement has been contemplated from the perspective of deficiencies within the Latino culture when, in reality, Latino students were more directly affected by deficiencies in schools than other students since their options for learning outside of school were limited. Music and art lessons, as well as sports and other clubs after school, were typically exclusive of middle-class families and, given the poverty levels of Latinos, most enrichment activities after school were unreachable for them. For this reason, this study focused on school experiences and factors that contributed to the academic success of Latino students and implied that the

findings would be used by administrators and teachers who were truly committed to own more of the responsibility of sending more Latinos to college.

Concluding Statements

Latinos have been searching for identity and validation for centuries in this society, and even when their struggles in search of educational equality have been widely documented, their academic gap has continued to grow. America cannot sustain for too much longer a society with a large percentage of undereducated citizens--it is neither morally nor financially right. Therefore, schools ought to innovate their practices and programs to increase the opportunities they provide for all students to follow a rigorous curriculum so that all students participate in a pre-college path. It was my hope that understanding of this woven text of voices threaded through this study would help educators respond to the requests and recommendations that these 14 students had made on behalf of other Latino students. I call on teachers and administrators to respond to their message by increasing the academic expectations they hold of Latino students and by truly believing that Latinos could, and should, learn at high levels.

The best and most viable way for Latinos to reach high expectations is by being exposed to rigorous curriculum in both content and English language instruction. Comprehensive pre-college programs that include external mentoring, ample financial advising and guidance, and a parent education piece are also key factors that increase the practical steps on the college path. Rigor and high expectations were both symbols of love and should be the norm for every student, but especially for students who have historically been dismissed as not possessing academic promise.

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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
Phone: [Redacted]
Fax: [Redacted]

[Redacted] - Superintendent
[Redacted] - Assistant Superintendent
and Chief Academic Officer
[Redacted] - Asst. Superintendent of
Business Services

January 17, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter to grant Adriana Ayala-Hire permission to do her doctoral research in the [Redacted]. Her research will be conducted during the spring of 2014 and will include eight semi-structured, one-on-one, and face-to-face interviews with eight different high school seniors from all four different high schools within the school district. Adriana can contact counselors and/or high school administrators for names of students who are suitable for her research criteria.

Additionally, Adriana has permission to access and review personal records, including grades and transcripts from each of the eight participants. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
[Redacted Signature]
[Redacted]
Superintendent of Schools
[Redacted]

APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



Institutional Review Board

DATE: March 26, 2014

TO: Adriana Ayala-Hire

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [555822-1] Preparation of Latino Students for College Success

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 26, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: March 26, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of March 26, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Dear Ms. Ayala-Hire,

Thank you for a clear and thorough IRB application. Dr. Montemayor, the first reviewer, has provided his approval. He congratulates you on a very fine application narrative ? and, seeing that this is your doctoral dissertation research, congratulations too on reaching this stage of your program!

In my subsequent review of your materials, I really appreciate your careful and thorough approach on every aspect of this application. I especially appreciate how you will identify participants for your research ? you do have a privileged position as an employee in the school district, but it seems to me that you are still seeking all appropriate permissions as needed, and that you are taking appropriate precautions regarding confidentiality.

I have one item you should note: At the end of the application narrative, you indicate that you attached consent documents in both English and Spanish, however, I only found documents in English included in the IRBNet application package. The documents might well not be necessary for the younger participants but it might be necessary to translate just the parental consent form ? because you are interviewing "successful" high school and college students and recent college graduates, it might be safe to assume that they are fluent English readers, but the same might not be true of your high school students' parents.

Instructions are provided for uploading/providing consent forms in Spanish, if you will be using them in your participant recruitment and data collection. Amendments such as these can be provided after approval which is provided per this document.

Best wishes with your research and please don't hesitate to contact me with any IRB-related questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX C
CONSENT AND ASSENT LETTERS IN ENGLISH
AND SPANISH



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Preparation of Latino Students of Mexican Descent for College Success

Researcher: Adriana Ayala Hire
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Spencer Weiler
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: Spencer.weiler@unco.edu

The first paragraph of this form may sound redundant to you, because I briefly shared this information when I first contacted you. I included it here, however, so that you have it in writing for future reference. As I stated before, my name is Adriana Ayala Hire and I'm a Doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado. I am also an educator conducting research on educational practices and outcomes. This means that I study programs and practices implemented in schools that lead to positive academic outcomes for students. For this research, I would like to learn more about the factors that contributed to your educational success up to this point in school. I am asking several Latino students of Mexican descent who are currently seniors in high school or in college, or who recently graduated from a four-year college or university, questions about their school experiences from kindergarten to their senior year in high school. I want to find out what worked for you and them, so that we can replicate it for others. You indicated to me that this is something that interested you, so I would love to have you participate in this study.

With your agreement to participate, you will do two things for me: 1) write and submit an autobiography to me, and 2) bring artifacts or things that are important and significant to you. These artifacts can be anything, such as pictures, medals, letters, report cards, notes, etc. Please submit your autobiography electronically to my email ayal2593@bears.unco.edu. I would just ask that you submit it within two weeks of today's date. Once I have received your autobiography, I will contact you again via phone and email to setup a face-to-face interview. During this interview, I will ask you general questions regarding your schooling experiences starting in kindergarten. This interview will take approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted in a public place that you indicate. I would suggest your campus library, or a coffee place, but I am open to suggestions, as I want to make this as convenient for you as possible.

The results of your interview will be used to guide my findings regarding factors that help Latino students succeed academically. The responses to my questions have no right

or wrong answers and they will be kept anonymous so nobody will know what you answered. I would just ask that you are honest about your opinions and that you answer every question so that my findings are as accurate as possible. Your audio-taped responses will be locked and secured at my house in a personal computer protected with a passcode, and will be destroyed after three years. This “Consent” form will be kept in a secured place in the office of my academic advisor Spencer Weiler, at the University of Northern Colorado office of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and will also be destroyed after three years.

Participating in this study will not help or hurt you; it will simply allow you to help me do my job and complete my required studies for my Doctor of Education degree. The only compensation will be a \$20 gift card to a bookstore of your choosing. I encourage you to ask me any questions you have about my research before I start. You can do this by calling or by emailing me. I would love to hear from you even before we meet for our interview! My phone numbers are (xxx) xxx-xxx-xxxx, (xxx) xxx-xxxx. E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

If you want to participate in this research, please bring this “Consent” form to our interview.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

If you are participating in this study, please sign your name and today’s date below.
Thanks!

 Participant’s Signature

Date

 Researcher’s Signature

Date

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Preparation of Latino Students of Mexican Descent for College Success

Researcher: Adriana Ayala Hire
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Spencer Weiler
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: Spencer.weiler@unco.edu

In collaboration with my advisors, Dr. Linda Vogel and Dr. Spence Weiler from the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching the factors that contributed to the academic success of Latino students of Mexican descent. Your student has been chosen for this study because: 1) he or she will be the first in your family to attend college, 2) is Latino of Mexican descent, 3) has excelled academically, 4) has followed a pre-college path in high school, and 5) is on track to attend college this fall. If you are willing to let him or her participate, he or she will have a 90-minute interview with me at his or her school, during a time that is convenient for him or her. Prior to our interview, your student will need to submit a written autobiographical sketch of his or her life that will allow me to know more about him or her prior to our interview. During our interview, I will use open-ended questions that will co-construct meaning of the most significant factors that influenced his or her academic achievement. I will ask questions specific to all three levels of his or her education starting with elementary, then continuing with middle, and then high school. These questions will prompt your student to talk about his or her own perceptions of their academic success, the challenges faced in school and how those challenges were solved, the motivation and support he or she received and the relationships that helped foster that support, the academic support he or she received that paved the way for their academic success, the dreams and aspirations they held in school, the knowledge about how to attend college, the goals after high school, the level of preparation to succeed in college, the support received from family, the support received from peers, the experiences unique to Latino students growing up in this country, the advice your students would give to teachers and administrators to better serve Latino students at all levels, and anything else that could add to the data for this study. I will also ask your son or daughter to bring with them to our interview important artifacts that are important to them. These artifacts can be “things” that they have kept throughout the years, such as trophies, tests, letters or notes from teachers, pictures, uniforms, games, movies, etc. If you grant permission and if your child indicates a willingness to participate by signing and returning the enclosed “Assent” form, he or she may participate in this study. Your student will answer 30 questions that will be audio-

recorded for accuracy and for later transcription and analysis. Your student will not lose core academic classes, as we would do this interview after school, or during a free period. There is no monetary compensation for your student but he or she will receive a \$20 gift certificate to a bookstore as a token of appreciation.

The purpose of this study is to examine successful school experiences or factors among Latino students, which allowed them to follow a college path. Successful school experiences for this study will be defined when first generation college-going students follow an effective pre-college path in high school, reach their senior year in a four-year college, or graduate from a four-year college. The literature portrays multiple reasons for the prevalent Latino underachievement, yet it lacks evidence on the reasons why some Latinos succeed academically. Hence, in order to fully understand the factors that influenced successful Latino students to follow an academic path, it is critical to hear their voices, as they were able to overcome the barriers and hardships that come from being a first-generation college-going student. To guide the data collection, I will ask, listen, and analyze the positive experiences that contributed to your student's academic success. The potential findings from this study could help educators in Colorado who are struggling to find ways to engage Latino students by providing them with ideas for programs that effectively could put Latino students on a college track.

Prior to this, I contacted counselors and administrators from all four high schools in the Roaring Fork School District to help me identify students who fit the criteria for this research. After possible participants were identified, I subsequently contacted those students and asked them if they were able and interested in participating. Your student was one of those students who were contacted, and he or she indicated an interest to participate. I then contacted you to describe the study and asked if you would give permission to your student to participate. Because you agreed to let your student participate, I am sending you this "Consent" form so that I can have a written agreement with your signature. Your student will need to bring both forms, "Consent" from parents, and "Assent" from student, to our interview. I will cross-reference both permission forms before I start the interview. If one or both forms are missing, I will not interview your student at that time, but I may ask to reschedule another time to meet. All permission forms will be provided to my university advisors, and will be destroyed after three years. The student interviews will be the primary data collection tool, but a brief review of academic records, as well as notes from artifacts and from the autobiography will be evaluated in this study. All audio notes will be in my possession and protected with passcodes known only by me. Audio data will be erased after three years also. All interviews will be anonymous to allow students to openly express their opinions and feelings about their school experiences. Both permission forms for high school students are written in both English and Spanish for easier reference. The final findings of my study will be included in my doctoral dissertation.

There are no foreseeable risks for your student. Contrariwise, I anticipate having great conversations given that the questions are clear, simple, and intend to only evoke honest responses. The 21 years of experience working with high school students help them and me feel at ease in any kind of interaction. The foreseeable benefits, on the other hand,

could reveal positive educational models that can help educators put Latino students on a college path. This study could be cited when implementing programs proven successful for the academic achievement of Latino students. Please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the methods used to conduct this study. Please keep in mind that I speak Spanish also.

Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

Adriana Ayala Hire

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to allow your child to participate in this study and if (s) he begins participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Child's Full Name (please print)
(month/day/year)

Child's Birth Date

Parent/Guardian's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Titulo del Proyecto: Preparación de Estudiantes Latinos de Origen Mexicano para Estudios Universitarios.

Investigador: Adriana Ayala Hire
Weiler

Número de teléfono: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

Consejero Investigador: Spencer

Numero telefónico: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: Spencer.weiler@unco.edu

En colaboración con mis asesores, la Dra. Linda Vogel y el Dr. Spence Weiler, de la Universidad de Northern Colorado, estoy investigando los factores que contribuyeron al éxito académico de estudiantes latinos de origen mexicano. Su estudiante ha sido elegido para este estudio debido a que: 1) él o ella será el primero en su familia en asistir a la universidad, 2) es latino de ascendencia mexicana, 3) ha sobresalido académicamente , 4) ha seguido un camino pre - universitario en la escuela secundaria, y 5) está en camino para asistir a la universidad este otoño. Si usted está dispuesto a dejar que él o ella participe, él o ella tendrá una entrevista de 90 minutos conmigo en su escuela, en una hora que sea conveniente para él o ella . Antes de nuestra entrevista, su estudiante tendrá que presentar un bosquejo autobiográfico escrito de su vida que me permitirá saber más acerca de él o ella antes de nuestra entrevista. Durante nuestra entrevista, voy a hacerle preguntas abiertas para co-construir el significado de los factores más importantes que influyeron a su rendimiento académico. Voy a hacer preguntas específicas de los tres niveles de su educación empezando con la primaria, continuando luego con la secundaria, y después de la escuela preparatoria. Estas preguntas le pedirán a su hijo/a a hablar sobre sus propias percepciones de su éxito académico, los desafíos que han enfrentado en la escuela y cómo se han resuelto esos problemas, la motivación y el apoyo que ha recibido y las relaciones que contribuyó a fomentar ese apoyo, el apoyo académico que ha recibido, que abrió el camino para su éxito académico, sus sueños y sus aspiraciones que ha tenido en la escuela, el conocimiento de los procesos necesarios para asistir a la universidad, las metas después de la secundaria, el nivel de preparación para tener éxito en la universidad, el apoyo recibido de la familia, el apoyo recibido de sus compañeros, las experiencias únicas para los estudiantes latinos que crecen en este país, el asesoramiento que su estudiante le proporcionaría a los maestros y administradores para servir mejor a los estudiantes latinos a todos los niveles, y cualquier otra cosa que podría

añadir a los datos de este estudio. También voy a pedir a su hijo o hija para que lleven consigo a la entrevista artefactos importantes que son importantes para ellos. Estos artefactos pueden ser "cosas" que han guardado a lo largo de los años, tales como trofeos, ensayos o escritos, cartas o notas de los maestros, fotos, uniformes, juegos, películas, etc. Si usted le concede permiso, y si su estudiante indica la intención de participar, debe firmar y devolver esta carta adjunta "Consent" para que él o ella puede participar en este estudio. Su estudiante contestará 30 preguntas que serán grabadas en audio para la transcripción y el análisis posterior. Su estudiante no perderá clases académicas, porque vamos a hacer esta entrevista después de la escuela, o durante un período libre. No hay compensación monetaria para su hijo, pero él o ella recibirá un certificado de regalo de \$ 20 a una librería como una muestra de agradecimiento.

El propósito de este estudio es examinar las experiencias escolares exitosas o factores entre los hispanos, que es lo que les permitió seguir un camino a la universidad. Experiencias escolares exitosas para este estudio se definirán cuando los estudiantes de primera generación universitaria (que los padres no obtuvieron un diploma de una universidad) siguen un camino eficaz pre-universidad durante la escuela secundaria. La literatura retrata múltiples razones por el bajo rendimiento académico de los latinos, más sin embargo, carece de evidencia sobre las razones por las que algunos latinos tienen éxito académico. Por lo tanto, con el fin de comprender plenamente los factores que influyeron al éxito de los estudiantes latinos a seguir una trayectoria académica, es fundamental escuchar sus voces, ya que fueron capaces de superar las barreras y dificultades que se presentan cuando vienen de una primera generación. Para guiar la recolección de datos, voy a preguntar, escuchar y analizar las experiencias positivas que han contribuido al éxito académico de su estudiante. Los resultados de este estudio podrían ayudar a los educadores en Colorado que están luchando para encontrar maneras de involucrar a los estudiantes latinos proporcionándoles ideas y programas que efectivamente podrían ponerlos en camino hacia la universidad.

Antes de enviarle esta forma de permiso, me puse en contacto con consejeros y administradores de las cuatro escuelas secundarias del Distrito Escolar Roaring Fork RE1 para pedir ayudar identificando estudiantes que cumplen con los criterios de esta investigación. Una vez identificados los posibles participantes, me contacté con los estudiantes y les pregunté si estaban interesados en participar. Su hijo fue uno de esos estudiantes contactados y él o ella manifestó su interés en participar. Entonces me puse en contacto con usted para describir el estudio y le pregunté si le daría permiso para que su estudiante participe. Debido a que usted accedió a que su hijo/a participe, yo le envío este formulario "Consentimiento" (Consent) para que yo pueda tener un acuerdo por escrito con su firma. Su hijo tendrá que llevar las dos formas firmadas "Consent" de los padres, y "Assent" de los estudiantes, a nuestra entrevista. Voy a hacer referencia de ambas formas de permiso antes de empezar la entrevista. Si falta una o ambas formas, no voy a entrevistar a su hijo en ese momento, pero se podremos reprogramar otro tiempo para reunirnos. Todos los formularios de permiso serán proporcionados a mis consejeros universitarios, y serán destruidos después de tres años. Las entrevistas con los estudiantes serán la principal herramienta de recolección de datos pero una breve revisión de los expedientes académicos, así como notas de los artefactos y de la autobiografía serán

evaluados en este estudio. Todas las notas de audio estarán en mi poder y estarán protegidos con contraseñas conocidas sólo por mí. Los datos de audio se borrarán después de tres años también. Todas las entrevistas serán anónimas para que los estudiantes puedan abiertamente expresar sus opiniones y sentimientos acerca de sus experiencias en la escuela. Ambas formas de permisos para los estudiantes de secundaria están escritos en Inglés y español para facilitar la referencia. Los resultados finales de mi estudio se incluirán en mi tesis doctoral.

No hay riesgos previsibles para su estudiante. Por el contrario, anticipo tener grandes conversaciones, dado que las preguntas son claras, simples, y tienen la intención de sólo evocar respuestas honestas. Mis 21 años de experiencia trabajando con estudiantes de secundaria y preparatoria me ayudan a sentir cómoda en cualquier tipo de interacción con ellos. Los beneficios previsibles, por otro lado, podrían revelar modelos educativos positivos que pueden ayudar a los educadores a poner a los estudiantes latinos en un camino a la universidad. Este estudio podría ser citado en la aplicación de programas que han demostrado éxito en el logro académico de los estudiantes latinos. Por favor, no dude en ponerse en contacto conmigo por teléfono o correo electrónico si usted tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud acerca de los métodos utilizados para llevar a cabo este estudio. Por favor, tenga en cuenta que yo hablo español también.

Gracias por ayudarme en esta importante investigación.

Atentamente,

Adriana Ayala Hire

La participación es voluntaria. Usted puede optar por no permitir que su hijo participe en este estudio. Aún comenzada la participación, usted puede decidir retirarse en cualquier momento. Su decisión será respetada y no dará lugar a ninguna pérdida de beneficios. Habiendo leído lo anterior y habiendo tenido la oportunidad de formular preguntas, por favor firme abajo si le gustaría que su hijo/a participe en esta investigación. Se le dará una copia de este documento para futuras referencias. Si usted tiene alguna preocupación acerca de la selección o el tratamiento de los participantes en la investigación, por favor comuníquese con la Oficina de Programas Patrocinados, Kepner Hall, de la Universidad del Norte de Colorado en Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Nombre complete del estudiante
estudiante

Fecha de nacimiento del

Firma del padre o tutor

Fecha

Firma del investigador

Fecha

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



ASSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Preparation of Latino Students of Mexican Descent for College Success

Researcher: Adriana Ayala Hire
Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

The first paragraph of this form may sound redundant to you, because I briefly shared this information when I first contacted you. I included it here, however, so that you have it in writing for future reference. As I stated before, my name is Adriana Ayala Hire and I'm a Doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado. I am also an educator conducting research on educational practices and outcomes. This means that I study programs and practices implemented in schools that lead to positive academic outcomes for students. For this research, I would like to learn more about the factors that contributed to your educational success up to this point in school. I am asking several Latino students of Mexican descent who are currently seniors in high school, and who are planning on attending college in the fall, questions about their school experiences from kindergarten to senior year. I want to find out what worked for you so that we can replicate it for others. If this sounds like something you want to do, I would love to have you participate in my research.

I will ask that you take a "Consent" permission form to your parents, and talk to them about this research. If they allow you to participate, you will then have to return the "Consent" form signed and dated by your parent (or guardian) to me, and this "Assent" form signed by you before I can allow you to participate. If I have agreement from you and your parents to participate in this study, I will ask you to write and to submit an autobiography prior to our interview. You can submit your autobiography electronically to my email ayal2593@bears.unco.edu or I can stop by your high school and pick up a printed copy. You could also leave it inside an envelope in the front desk of your school. I would just ask that you submit it within two weeks of today's date. In the meantime, I will review your academic records including transcripts, attendance, and standardized tests results to gain more insight of who you are as a student.

Once I have received your autobiography, I will contact you again via phone and email to setup a fact-to-face interview. During this interview, I will ask you general questions regarding your schooling experiences starting in kindergarten. I will also ask you to bring artifacts or things that are important and significant to you. These artifacts can be anything, such as pictures, medals, letters, report cards, notes, etc. This interview will take approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted in your school. You will not lose core academic classes, as we will likely do this interview after school or during a period when you are free. The results will be used to guide my findings regarding factors that help Latino students succeed academically. The responses to my questions have no right or wrong answers and they will be kept anonymous so nobody will know what you answered. I would just ask that you are honest about your opinions and that you answer every question so that my findings are as accurate as possible. Your audio-taped responses will be locked and secured at my house in a personal computer protected with a passcode, and will be destroyed after three years. Your parents' "Consent" form, along with your "Assent" form will be kept in a secured place in the office of my academic advisor Linda Vogel at the University of Northern Colorado office of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and will also be destroyed after three years.

Participating in this study will not help you or hurt you; it will simply allow you to help me do my job and complete my required studies for my Doctor of Education degree. The only compensation will be a \$20 gift card to a bookstore of your choosing. However, even after your parents have said that it was okay for you to participate, you can change your mind and not participate at all, or quit in the middle of the interview. I encourage you to ask me any questions you have about my research before I start. You can do this by calling or by emailing me! I would love to hear from you even before we meet for our interview! My phone numbers are (xxx) xxx-xxxx, (xxx) xxx-xxxx. E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

If you want to participate in this research, please bring this "Assent" form, with your parents' signed "Consent" form to our interview.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

If you are participating in this study, please sign your name and today's date below.
Thanks!

Student's signature

Date

Researcher

Date

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ASSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Titulo del Proyecto: Preparación de Estudiantes Latinos de Origen Mexicano para Estudios Universitarios.

Investigador: Adriana Ayala Hire
Número de teléfono: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu

El primer párrafo de esta forma puede parecerle redundante, debido a que compartí brevemente esta información cuando me puse en contacto contigo por primera vez. Yo lo he incluido aquí de nuevo, sin embargo, para que lo tengas por escrito para futuras consultas. Como he dicho antes, mi nombre es Adriana Ayala Hire y yo soy una estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad de Northern Colorado. Soy una educadora realizando estudios de investigaciones sobre prácticas y resultados educativos. Esto quiere decir que estudio programas y prácticas implementadas en las escuelas que conducen a resultados académicos positivos para los estudiantes. Para esta investigación, me gustaría aprender más acerca de los factores que contribuyeron a tu éxito educativo hasta este momento en la escuela. Estoy pidiendo a varios estudiantes latinos de origen mexicano que se encuentran actualmente en su último año en la escuela secundaria, y que planean asistir a la universidad en el otoño, preguntas sobre sus experiencias en la escuela desde el preescolar hasta este último año. Quiero saber lo que funcionó para ti, para que podamos replicarlo en otros. Si esto suena como algo que quieres hacer, me encantaría que participaras en mi investigación.

Voy a pedirte que tomes una forma de permiso o consentimiento "Consent" a tus padres, y que hables con ellos acerca de esta investigación. Si ellos te permiten participar, tendrás que devolverme el consentimiento firmado y fechado por tu padre (o tutor), y esta forma "Assent" firmada por ti mismo/a antes de que pueda permitirte participar. Si tengo un acuerdo de ti y de tus padres para participar en este estudio, voy a pedirte que escribas una breve autobiografía antes de nuestra entrevista. Puedes enviarme la autobiografía electrónicamente a mi correo electrónico ayal2593@bears.unco.edu. Puedo, si así lo deseas, pasar por tu escuela secundaria y obtener una copia impresa. También puedes dejarla dentro de un sobre en la recepción de su escuela. Sólo quiero pedirte que la envíes

en un plazo de dos semanas de la fecha de hoy. Mientras tanto, voy a revisar tus expedientes académicos, incluyendo transcripciones, la asistencia y los resultados de pruebas estandarizadas para obtener una visión más clara de cómo eres como estudiante.

Una vez que haya recibido tu autobiografía, me pondré en contacto contigo de nuevo a través de teléfono y correo electrónico para configurar una entrevista en persona. Durante esta entrevista, te voy a hacer preguntas generales sobre tus experiencias escolares que comenzaron en jardín de infantes. También voy a pedirte que lleves artefactos o cosas que son importantes y significativas para ti. Estos artefactos pueden ser cualquier cosa, como imágenes o fotografías, medallas, cartas, boletines de calificaciones, notas, etc. Esta entrevista tomará aproximadamente 90 minutos y se llevará a cabo en tu escuela. No perderás clases académicas básicas porque nos veremos probablemente después de la escuela o durante un período que tengas libre. Los resultados los utilizaré para guiar mis conclusiones acerca de los factores que ayudan a los estudiantes latinos a tener éxito académico. Las respuestas a mis preguntas no tienen respuestas correctas o incorrectas y se mantendrán en el anonimato por lo que nadie sabrá lo que contestaste. Yo sólo pido que seas honesto/a acerca de tus opiniones y de que contestes todas las preguntas para que mis resultados son tan precisos como sea posible. Tus respuestas grabadas en audio estarán aseguradas en mi casa en una computadora personal protegidas con una contraseña, y serán destruidas después de tres años. La forma de permiso de tus padres, junto con la forma de permiso tuya "Assent" se mantendrán en un lugar seguro en la oficina de mi consejero académico Linda Vogel de la Universidad de Northern Colorado y también será destruida después de tres años.

La participación en este estudio no te ayudará ni te perjudicará, sino que simplemente permitirá que me ayudes a hacer mi trabajo y a completar mis estudios requeridos para mis estudios de doctorado en Educación. La única compensación será una tarjeta de regalo de \$20 a una librería de tu elección. Sin embargo, e incluso después de que tus padres han dicho que están de acuerdo en que participes en mi estudio, tu puedes cambiar de opinión y no participar en absoluto. Os animo a hacerme cualquier pregunta que tengas sobre mi investigación antes de empezar. Puedes hacerlo llamando por teléfono o enviándome un correo electrónico! Me encantaría saber de ti incluso antes de que nos reunamos para nuestra entrevista! Mis números de teléfono son (xxx) xxx-xxxx, (xxx) xxx-xxxx o mi correo electrónico es: ayal2593@bears.unco.edu.

Si quieres participar en esta investigación , por favor trae esta forma "Assent", firmada con el formulario de consentimiento de tus padres para nuestra entrevista.

La participación es voluntaria. Puedes decidir no participar en este estudio. Una vez que comienza tu participación, es posible que pares y te retires en cualquier momento. Tu decisión será respetada y no dará lugar a la pérdida de beneficios a los que tienes derecho. Habiendo leído lo anterior y de haber tenido la oportunidad de formular preguntas, por favor firma abajo si te gustaría participar en esta investigación. Te daré una copia de esta forma para futuras referencias. Si tienes alguna preocupación acerca de

tu selección o tratamiento como un participante en la investigación, por favor comunícate con la Oficina de Programas Patrocinados, Kepner Hall, de la Universidad de Northern Colorado en Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Si estás participando en este estudio, por favor firma tu nombre y pon la fecha de hoy a continuación. Gracias.

Firma del Estudiante

Fecha

Investigador

Fecha

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



*College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*

Interview Questions:

I want to personally thank you for taking part of this study and for submitting your autobiography. I know that this project has taken time out of your schedule so I want to make sure that we use our time today very effectively. First, I would like to congratulate you, because as a successful Latino student, you have already done better than many other Latinos in the United States. Did you know that 41.0% of Latinos 20 years of age or older do not have a high school diploma? This percentage compared to the 23.0% of Blacks and 14.0% of Whites from the same age bracket that don't have a high school diploma makes you a success story.

Not surprisingly, the numbers are not better in college completion rates. Only 13.4% of all Latinos 25 and older have a four-year college degree, while for Blacks the rate is 18.7%, for Whites 31.8%, and for Asians 50.3%. Your career path is unique and worth studying as it has the potential to impact the way we look at helping Latino students attain a college education. I want to reiterate that your participation is absolutely voluntary and that you can withdraw from participating in this research at any time. All your answers to my questions will be transcribed and interpreted and a written summary will be sent back to you for corroboration of my findings and interpretations. Your identity will be carefully protected, and your real name will never be used in any of the writings. Besides being able to contribute your experiences to the literature regarding Latino education, you will be compensated with a \$20 gift card to a bookstore of your choice, and you will also receive a copy of my completed dissertation. As I stated before, I would like us to use our time wisely today. I have a series of questions that will be asked to every participant of this study that will guide our interview today. Please do not hesitate to ask me questions or to clarify anything that I say or ask. Also, please feel free to restate something you say, or to change any answer that you provided. You can change your answers anytime during, or after our interview. I will be audio recording our entire interview, and will also be taking notes on a field journal for later transcription and analysis of the data collected today.

If you are ready to partake in this research, please sign this consent form (for older than 18), or please provide me your parent's signed "Consent" and your signed "Assent" forms (for younger than 18), which will be locked and stored in my advisor's office at the University of Northern Colorado. I will give you a copy for you to keep as well. I would like to begin this interview letting you know that the main question that I want to answer with the study is:

- a. What experiences or factors, from kindergarten to 12th grade, in Mexico or in the United States, contributed to the academic success of Latino students of Mexican descent?**

Do you have any questions before we start?

Initial Open-Ended Questions

1. Here is an oral account of the autobiography that you submitted to me. Is there anything else that you want to add?
2. In retrospect, tell me the time when you knew that you would be "college-bound"?
3. If you were to help other Latino students stay in school and be successful, what would you advice them to do, or not to do?

Intermediate Questions

According to the literature review for this study, there are several barriers to Latino education success. Amongst others, some barriers often documented are: 1) historical school reform and legislation, 2) segregation, 3) and poverty. Based on these and other barriers, I would like to ask you questions regarding your own personal experiences in school that allowed you to prevail and overcome said barriers. In order to co-construct meaning, we will do this in a chronological order starting from your earliest school years and continuing on until your last, or present year of education. Please expand and add in any of these questions as you see fit. Also, if you brought artifacts with you, please describe those and their importance as our interview continues. Do you have any questions?

Elementary School:

1. Can you remember any situations that you faced in elementary school that you thought were challenges? If so, how did you deal with those challenges?
2. Tell me who, or how you were supported or motivated in kindergarten and elementary school? How would you narrow the support you just mentioned to the relationships you had with other people? Who were those people? Why did they make a difference?

3. What type of support did you have in elementary school that you think paved the way for your future academic success? This could include support from teachers, coaches, community members, programs outside the school, such as summer camps, etc.
4. If you could advise teachers and administrators about how to support students like you when you were in elementary school, what would you tell them?

Middle School:

1. Can you remember any situations that you faced in middle school that you thought were challenges? If so, how did you deal with those challenges?
2. Tell me who, or how you were supported or motivated in middle school? How would you narrow the support you just mentioned to the relationships you had with other people? Who were those people? Why did they make a difference?
3. What type of support did you have in middle school that you think paved the way for your future academic success? This could include support from teachers, coaches, community members, programs outside the school, summer camps, etc.
4. If you could advise teachers and administrators about how to support students like you when you were in middle school, what would you tell them?
5. What did you know about college when you were in middle school? Did you want to go to college?
6. What were your dreams in middle school?
7. What made you feel optimistic about your future in high school?
8. What were your fears, hopes, and plans for high school? Were you ready for it?

High School:

1. Can you remember any situations that you faced in high school that you thought were challenges? If so, how did you deal with those challenges?
2. Tell me who, or how you were supported or motivated in high school? How would you narrow the support you just mentioned to the relationships you had with other people? Who were those people? Why did they make a difference?
3. What type of support did you have in high school that paved the way for your future academic success? This could include support from teachers, coaches, community members, programs outside the school, summer camps, etc.
4. If you could advise teachers and administrators about how to support students like you when you were in high school, what would you tell them?

5. What are, or were, your academic goals after high school? Did you feel supported to achieve those goals?
6. Do you, or did you, feel prepared to succeed in college after high school?
7. What educational factors contributed the most to prepare you for college while in high school?

Ending Questions

You have provided answers to similar questions throughout your educational career from kindergarten to senior year in high school. The following questions, however, will help us wrap up this interview with more global perspectives during your entire career.

1. Describe your family support for your education?
2. Describe how your family was supported, so that they could support you?
3. Describe how your peers supported you?
4. If you could explain in a few words your experiences growing up as a Latino student in elementary school, what would you say? Middle school? High school?
5. If you could give advice to colleges on how to support more inclusion of Latino students in their academic rosters, how would you sum up that advice?
6. Are there other factors that contributed to your academic success that we have not mentioned?
7. Did you learn anything throughout this interview that you had not realized before? Explain
8. Is there anything that you would like to know about me?
9. Do you have any questions about the results of this study?

Thank you so much for participating in this study! I will be sending you a synopsis of this interview so that you have a chance to corroborate my interpretation before I begin to code the data for future analysis. What is the best way to get a hold of you? Email, phone, Facebook, text? Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or comments. My cell phone is the best way to contact me quickly. You can reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Thanks again!