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# Latinas' Access to Advanced Placement Courses: A Case Study of a Catholic Female Single-Sex High School

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Latinas' Access to Advanced Placement Courses:  
A Case Study of a Catholic Female Single-Sex High School

by

Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,  
Loyola Marymount University, in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education

2013

Latinas' Access to Advanced Placement Courses:  
A Case Study of a Catholic Female Single-Sex High School

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Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar

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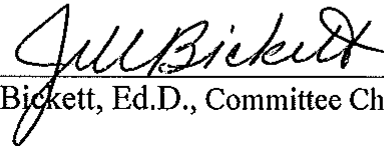
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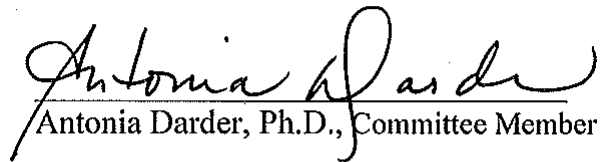
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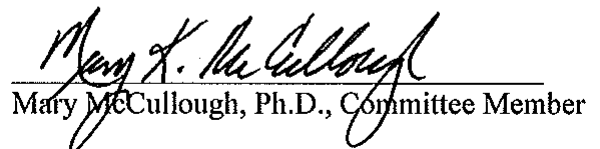
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## **DEDICATION**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND OF STUDY</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Latinos and inequitable access.....	6
Double jeopardy: being female and Latina.....	7
Viewing access issues from a Catholic social justice lens.....	9
Purpose of the Study.....	10
Significance of the Study.....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	13
Research Questions.....	18
Methodology.....	18
Limitations.....	20
Delimitations.....	20
Definitions of Key Terms.....	21
Outline of the Dissertation Content.....	22
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Breaking the Silence.....	24
Theoretical Framework.....	25
Critical biculturalism.....	25
Cultural democracy: a dialectical approach.....	26
<i>A dialogical model</i> .....	28
<i>Empowerment and emancipation</i> .....	31
Chicana feminist theory.....	32
Intersectionality and decolonization: developing a mestiza consciousness.....	33
<i>Voice</i> .....	38
Resistance and oppositional consciousness.....	40
Breaking through invisibility: the power of survival.....	42
Chicana feminist theory: unlocking possibilities.....	44
Catholic social teaching.....	45
<i>Life and dignity</i> .....	47
<i>The collective good</i> .....	48



Preferential option for the marginalized.....	50
The true definition of democracy: CST principles and Catholic education.....	52
Public school research and CST principles.....	53
Research on the Catholic School Advantage.....	54
The Catholic school advantage.....	54
<i>High expectations</i> .....	55
<i>Diversity</i> .....	56
<i>Care</i> .....	57
Latinos in Catholic schools.....	58
The Single-sex versus Coeducation Debate.....	60
The Debate around Single-sex Schools.....	62
The argument of the opposition.....	63
The argument of the proponents.....	64
Catholic Single-Sex Schools.....	67
The Status of Females: Then and Now.....	69
Latino/a Education: Then and Now.....	70
Effects of meritocracy.....	73
Testing and accountability.....	75
Tracking.....	77
Curriculum.....	79
Authority.....	82
A lack of cultural and social capital.....	82
An anti-Latino sociopolitical context and its effects on self-concept.....	84
Socioeconomic challenges.....	85
Unequal opportunities.....	86
Adult and peer influence.....	86
Self-perceptions and aspirations.....	88
Persisting in the struggle.....	90
Latinas.....	91
The Advanced Placement Program.....	92
The Access Dilemma.....	93
The reality of Latinas/os Access to Advanced Placement.....	96
The Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses.....	97
Conclusion.....	98
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>100</b>
Research Questions.....	102
Research Site.....	102
Design.....	103
Qualitative.....	103
Testimonios: storytelling and naming.....	104
Cultural identity: An ongoing production.....	107
Case Study.....	107
Process.....	108

Phase One.....	109
Phase Two.....	109
Phase Three.....	110
Phase four.....	110
Gaining entry .....	111
Participants.....	112
Participant Selection .....	113
Data collection method .....	114
Descriptive Statistics and Data .....	115
Personal data sheets.....	116
Interviews.....	116
Researcher’s journal.....	117
Data analysis .....	118
Validity .....	118
Triangulation.....	118
Member checks .....	119
Peer debriefing.....	119
Positionality .....	120
Limitations .....	121
Conclusion .....	122
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>123</b>
Descriptive Data.....	124
Philosophy of AP/Honors Courses .....	124
Enrollment and Ethnic Composition for the School and AP/Honors Courses .....	126
Procedures to Gain Admission into AP/Honors Courses for Current Students.....	135
Procedures to Gain Admission into AP/Honors Courses for Incoming Freshman.....	138
The Appeals Process for Current Students and Incoming Freshmen .....	141
Experiences.....	147
The Experience of Feeling Not Good Enough.....	149
Latina students whose appeal was denied.....	149
Latina students whose appeal was granted.....	152
The Experience of Feeling like an Outsider .....	154
Latina students whose appeal was denied.....	154
Latina students whose appeal was granted.....	157
The Experience of Feeling Competitive .....	159
The Experience of Feeling Prepared for the Future.....	163
Perspectives.....	167
Latinas’ Perspectives on the Decision to Appeal.....	167
Capacity.....	167
Driven.....	170
Exposure.....	172
Latinas’ Perspectives on the Process of Appealing .....	173
Latina students whose appeals were denied.....	174

Latina students whose appeals were accepted. ....	175
Latinas' Perspectives of Rationalizing the Results of Their Appeal .....	179
Latina students whose appeals were denied.....	179
Latina students whose appeals were accepted. ....	182
Latinas' Perspectives of Looking Back .....	186
Former Latina students and alumnae. ....	186
Current Latina students. ....	188
Latinas' Perspectives on the Sisterhood at St. Mary's High School.....	190
Sisterhood: working together and encouraging each other. ....	191
Sisterhood: masking differences. ....	192
There are More Blondes: The Perspective of Weak Latina Representation .....	192
Going Back into the Regular Classes: The Perspective of Compliance .....	194
The Squeaky Wheel Gets Oiled: The Perspective of Non-Compliance .....	196
Rocking the boat: financial circumstances and fear of non-compliance. ....	197
Blend in and don't be a Nuisance: The Perspectives on Race and Class. ....	199
Perspectives to be considered for the future .....	202
Advice to Latina peers. ....	202
Advice to decision-makers.....	203
<i>Placement tests</i> .....	203
<i>Grades and improvement</i> . ....	203
<i>Considering qualitative data</i> .....	204
Consider underrepresented experiences.....	205
Alignment with the Catholic, single-sex, and AP advantage.....	205
Catholic School Advantage.....	206
The benefits of being a small size. ....	207
Care. ....	208
Single-Sex Advantage.....	209
Girls are the priority: the boys can't take over. ....	209
Away from the distractions: being able to focus more. ....	210
Greater confidence in self: you don't have to dumb yourself down. ....	211
Advanced Placement Advantage .....	212
Laying the foundation: academic preparation and motivation. ....	213
Denied the AP advantage: wasting time and money. ....	215
Consistency and work ethic: revealing more than AP scores or grades. ....	216
Conclusion .....	218
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>220</b>
Critical Biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory.....	220
The AP/Honors Placement Process: Setting up Borders that Create Outsiders.....	220
On the Outside Looking in: The testimonio of the Outsider .....	225
Living in the Borderlands .....	232
Mestiza Consciousness: Defining Reality and Challenging the Discourse .....	239
Tolerating Ambiguity and Contradictions: Degrees of Resistance Exerted .....	239
La Facultad: Challenging and Transcending Objective Truth.....	240

Sobreviviendo: Negotiation, Fight, and Resistance .....	243
Catholic social teaching .....	245
Valuing the Dignity of Every Human Person .....	245
Human Equality .....	249
Recommendations .....	251
Future Research .....	256
<b>CHAPTER SIX .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>EPILOGUE .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>262</b>
<b>Appendix B .....</b>	<b>264</b>
<b>Appendix C .....</b>	<b>266</b>
<b>Appendix D .....</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>Appendix E .....</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>Appendix F .....</b>	<b>276</b>
<b>Appendix G .....</b>	<b>280</b>
<b>Appendix H .....</b>	<b>281</b>
<b>Appendix I .....</b>	<b>282</b>
<b>Appendix J .....</b>	<b>284</b>
<b>Appendix K .....</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>289</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. 2012-2013 Advanced Placement and Honors Course Offerings.....	115
Table 2. 2012 School enrollment by grade level and ethnic composition.....	116
Table 3. Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement English courses.....	117
Table 4. Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement Science courses.....	119
Table 5. Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement Social Science courses.....	121
Table 6. Participants Description Based on Student/Alumna Personal Data Sheet Information.....	136

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school and to examine their experiences and perspectives when they are granted or denied access into an AP/Honors course. This study also aimed to explore how the Catholic single-sex high school is aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course. The case study focused on one Catholic all-female high school in the Western United States and participants included Latina current students and alumnae (n=11), the high school principal (n=1), and teachers (n=2) from the school. Data was collected via document review, the gathering of descriptive data, as well as participant interviews. The theoretical framework used to analyze this data was a blend of Critical biculturalism, Chicana feminist theory, as well as the principles of Catholic social teaching. Findings highlight a fairly exclusive AP/Honors placement process with unclear guidelines to be followed in order to appeal a decision. Latinas' experiences range from feeling like outsiders and being made to feel not good enough, to feeling competitive and being resilient. Their perspectives on why they decided to appeal the decision of their placement had to do with their feeling that they had the capacity for advanced work, their driven nature, and their desire to be exposed to more learning. Further, perspectives also emerged concerning the school's sisterhood and its influence on issues of race and class. In regards to alignment with the Catholic, single-sex, and AP advantage the data illustrates that while participants seemingly agree that there are advantages, they are also cognizant of other factors that overshadow these advantages.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF STUDY

I am the daughter of unlettered Mexican immigrants who, while lacking a formal education, understood the value of it and sacrificed their life's earnings so that my siblings and I could receive a Catholic education. By and large, my experience in Catholic schools was positive and I credit my professional accomplishments to my parents' example and guidance as well as to my schooling. Gándara and Contreras (2009), however, posit that "only one in ten Latinos has a college degree, compared to more than one in four white Americans and more than one in three Asians" (p. 5). Evidently, I am part of this statistic. Yet, I believe it serves little purpose if I am unable to apply my studies so that someone else's quality of life is improved. As a Catholic Latina educator in a single-sex school for females, I have a vested interest in the advancement of Catholic schools, with special interest in the sustainability of Catholic single-sex schools, and in the success of the Latinas who attend them. I view research as a political process that can spur the implementation of more democratic schools and educational practices. In other words, I view my research as a means of giving back and of preventing others from getting left behind.

Catholic schools, since their inception, have been committed to a mission of aiding the impoverished (Buetow, 2002; Byron, 1998; Litton, Martin, Higareda, & Mendoza, 2010), and creating a mutual relationship (Freire, 2010) with those who are not from the privileged dominant culture (Martin & Litton, 2004). The effectiveness of Catholic schools has been the focus of research studies since before the turn of the century; results have emphasized the academic benefits in attending Catholic schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman, Hoffer,

& Kilgore, 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 2002; Keith & Page, 1985), sometimes referred to as the Catholic school advantage (Bempechat, Boulay, Piergross, & Wenk, 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Keith & Page, 1985). Recent research on the effects of Catholic schooling continues to be favorable. Most notably, research indicates that ethnic minorities and students of low socioeconomic status attending Catholic schools are academically outperforming their public school peers with comparable backgrounds (Bryk et al., 1993; Convey, 1992; Higareda, Martin, Chavez, & Holyk-Casey, 2011; Litton et al., 2010; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009). Another area of research with similar promising findings for underprivileged minority students is that of Catholic single-sex schools. Studies in this area often cite improved academic achievement for females, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, who attend single-sex schools (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers, & Smith, 2005; Riordan, 1990; Salomone, 2003; Sax, Arms, Woodruff, Riggers, & Eagan, 2009).

Despite the aforementioned gains, Latino students continue to be a part of staggering statistics. Latino adolescents have a significantly higher dropout rate than their White peers (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Salomone, 2003), are a minute percentage of the students who demonstrate advanced achievement on the reading, math, and science tests on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and have lower scores than their White peers on Advanced Placement exams (Salomone, 2003). Other ethnic groups, including minorities such as African Americans, have improved their college graduation rates over the last few decades, yet Latinos have not experienced progress at the same rate (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valencia, 2011).



Narrowing in on Latina adolescents, a recent study by the College Board's Advocacy and Policy Center shows that Latinas, particularly those in their twenties, are accessing college at higher rates than their male counterparts (Lee, Contreras, McGuire, Flores-Ragade, Rawls, Edwards, & Menson, 2011). Yet Latinos remain the ethnic group with the smallest percentage of adults with an Associate's Degree or higher (Lee et al., 2011). Additionally, research on Latinas shows that their educational trajectory is complicated by factors such as entering into early marriages or pregnancies (Blea, 1992; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Salomone, 2003). Further, as the population of females entering the juvenile justice system quickly grows, research shows that two-thirds of those young women are minorities (Salomone, 2003). Latinas are now "the largest 'minority' group of girls in the United States" (Ginorio & Huston, 2001, p. viii) and yet with the overall burgeoning Latino population, measures of achievement such as graduation rates, college admissions, and other achievement data imply that schools are inadequately serving the needs of a diverse student population (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). "61 percent of Latinas aged 25 to 44 have no high school diploma, 24 percent are graduates, and 15 percent have gone on to postsecondary education" (p. viii), posited Ginorio and Huston (2001) over a decade ago, when Latinas were a quarter of the female population in California. More recently, Fry's (2009) examination of Latinos/as in the school and work force found that in 2007 one of every five Latinas was neither in school nor in the work force. While Catholic schools are experiencing success with low-income and minority students, a deeper look into the experiences of adolescent Latinas is necessary to ensure that Latinas are being served in the best way possible by all Catholic schools, not just those in the inner city, and that their academic experiences are not

stifling their current and future academic and professional pursuits, but rather providing them with opportunities for a promise-filled future.

Catholic schools purport to be socially just institutions. To that end, this research assumes a critical and introspective look, which is necessary in order to examine how the Catholic school mission fares in terms of Latina students' access to Advanced Placement or Honors courses. In other words, it is imperative that Catholic schools' actions match their mission. While it is important to acknowledge how Catholic schools are serving marginalized populations by bolstering their graduation rates in comparison to public schools and by preparing students to attend college (Litton et al., 2010; Higareda et al., 2011), it is equally important to study the equity in access to rigorous courses, such as Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which can facilitate college admissions and prepare students for college work and to examine the academic experiences for these students. AP courses, which are sponsored by the College Board, are one of the gatekeepers to college access because performance on AP tests are noted as good predictors for college and future success (Conger, Long, & Iatarola, 2009; Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, & Gitomer, 2008). In addition, high school courses which are denoted as Honors have a similar influence to AP courses because they are higher level and more rigorous than a traditional college preparatory course, better known by students as "regular" courses. Further, in some institutions, both Honors and AP courses receive an additional grade point in the grade point average calculation, which ultimately can boost a student's grade point average. However, recent research on Catholic education has not explored the issue of access to Honors or Advanced Placement courses. The research conducted in public schools illustrates that Latinos are underrepresented in AP courses, even in schools where they form the majority of

the school population (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Further, offering several AP or Honors courses at a school can hardly be called access if not everyone has an equitable opportunity of taking the course. Additionally, in line with Catholic tradition, Catholic schools operate under a patriarchal paradigm which can misrepresent or altogether exclude the experiences of females, thereby posing a challenge to the Catholic mission of social justice. Thus, using feminist and Catholic social teaching lenses this case study will comprehensively explore if Latinas are being served as the research says, by focusing in on the area of access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school, and will elicit the voices of a group of females who are often ignored because of race and/or gender.

One issue that has complicated the educational experiences of Latinas for some time is unequal access to Advanced Placement classes (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Handwerk et al. (2008) claim that there exist “major racial/ethnic differences in participation in the AP program” (p. 4) and this is evidenced by the fact that Black and Latino high school students enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses at approximately half the rate of White students (Klopfenstein, 2003). Additionally, Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) found that even when Latinas/os attend public high schools that have high enrollment in the AP classes, Latinas/os are underrepresented in the AP classes. While the latter is a finding discovered in public schools, it is important to study if the same is true in Catholic schools. In particular, the benefits of a Catholic education that have been promoted by past and current research rest on achievement rates, such as high school graduation rates and college admission rates (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010), as well as anecdotal information shared by current and past Catholic school students and parents. But, in order to paint a more

accurate picture, issues of equitable access to rigorous courses also need to be explored in Catholic school research.

Certainly AP/Honors classes are only one component that can influence the college admissions process (Handwerk et al., 2008; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004), but it is an important factor nonetheless. Performance in AP courses serves as a strong predictor of academic achievement in high school, college, and even in labor outcomes (Conger et al., 2009; Handwerk et al., 2008; Klopfenstein, 2003). But, a problem exists if only a select few have access to these courses. Further, it begs the question of what students who are denied access to these courses experience. This study aims to contribute to the qualitative literature on Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school setting. The study will also explore how being granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses affects Latina students' experiences and perspectives. Additionally, it will explore how a Catholic single-sex high school is aligned with the advantages that are said to exist for Catholic, single-sex schools and for advanced courses for Latina students in light of their experiences and perspectives concerning the Advanced Placement/Honors admissions process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Latinos and inequitable access**

The Latino population in the United States has experienced rapid growth (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004) and is projected to triple in size in the next 40 years (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; US Census Bureau, 2011, Valencia, 2011). However, Solorzano and Ornelas's (2004) data from 2001-2002 revealed that Latinos attending public schools traditionally: (a) do not attend top high schools, as ranked according to

an AP Student Access Indicator; (b) have minimal to no access to AP courses when they attend these poorer quality schools; and (c) are not proportionally represented in AP classes even when they attend high schools with strong access and high enrollment in these courses. Likewise, minorities continue to occupy low track classes while their representation in high track classes is scarcer (Ballón, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981). Understanding what access to advanced courses signifies for students reveals even more about the inequity committed in barring potentially eligible students from these classes. For example, students enrolled in AP/Honors courses gain several advantages including exposure to a culture of rigorous coursework and learning (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Handwerk et al., 2008; Schneider, 2009) and sometimes an additional grade point in these classes if the grade earned is a C or better, thereby providing the possibility of earning a higher grade point average than a 4.0. In AP courses, specifically, college credit is sometimes given for courses where the AP exam is passed with a score of three or better; the latter could grant some students advanced standing upon beginning college (Klopfenstein, 2003) and consequently, provide students with savings on their tuition expenses. The issue of access to quality educational programs for minority students reflects institutionalized discrimination and hinders the learning potential and experiences of minority youth, making their educational experience one filled with struggles of inequality (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

### **Double jeopardy: being female and Latina**

While the status of women in the United States has improved over the years, females still experience inequities based on gender. The United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2011) in a report on women at work notes that in comparison to the 1970s more women have secured

higher education, are active in the labor force, and have improved their wages. However, this progress needs to be contextualized. According to the United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2008, 2009), in jobs with wages or salaries, women earn 80 percent of men's earnings on a weekly basis and when examining women's earnings by ethnicity, while White and Asian women make comparable earnings, Latinas earn approximately 20 percent less.

In terms of education, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (1998) acknowledges that improvements have been made in making education fairer for female students, but reports that "for girls, an equitable education is in many respects still an elusive goal, in sight yet out of reach" (p. 1). However, some researchers have argued that rather than polarizing the education crisis between boys and girls, what really needs to be looked at as a crisis is the disparity that exists for students by race and socioeconomic status (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Lapour & Heppner, 2009). This research will look at both gender and ethnicity, not as separate factors but rather as they intersect, because although strides have been made in providing females with more equitable experiences in the workplace and in schools, improvement does not signify complete equity. For instance, in 2006, "while 95 percent of white women had completed high school, only 67 percent of Hispanic women" (Corbett et al., 2008) had done the same. Moreover, while being female in the United States still brings its set of challenges, to be female and Latina seems a double jeopardy. Although myriad factors shape an individual, careful attention needs to be given to how education shapes a person. Academic experiences are often tied to an individual's future and outlook and therefore empowering Latinas through education is one way that they can gain greater equity not only as women, but as women of color.

## **Viewing access issues from a Catholic social justice lens**

Access to Advanced Placement courses for Latinas is a problem in public schools and is an issue that has not been examined in Catholic high schools. As a matter of fact, recent studies promoting the benefits of a Catholic education have largely studied graduation rates, rates of students who complete courses for eligibility into the University of California/California State University system, and rates of students going on to college (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010). Johnson (2006) suggests that fear prevents people from “looking at what is going on and makes it impossible to do anything about the reality that lies deeper down” (p. 12). The latest studies on Catholic schools highlight the positive effects of these schools on disenfranchised or ethnic minority youth (Convey, 1992; Greeley, 2002; Higareda et al., 2011; Keith & Page, 1985; Litton et al., 2010). Certainly, there are benefits to a Catholic education but Catholic educators cannot fear asking pointed questions as well, especially if Catholic schools are to continue to honestly and vociferously endorse a mission of social justice. While success rates and achievement data are important measures of achievement, they do not tell a complete story.

Fundamental to the work of Catholic schools is a commitment to work with the poor and marginalized (Buetow, 2002; Litton et al., 2010) and to adhere to a mission guided by the principles of Catholic social teaching (Byron, 1998). This mission is intended to influence all school practices, including academic ones. In a study of students supported by the Catholic Education Foundation (CEF), findings showed that these students completed school at a much higher rate than their public school peers (Litton et al., 2010). Additionally, Bryk et al. (1993) in their study of Catholic schools found that while “the curriculum in Catholic high schools

differentiates to some degree according to variations in students' prior preparation, the actual academic experiences of students remain relatively similar across classes of differing ability levels" (p. 113). They attribute this to the fact that there is a "common core of intellectual experiences" (Bryk et al., 1993, p. 114) for students to engage in and therefore suggest that tracking in Catholic schools does not create drastically varied experiences for students in different tracks. But, these findings are neither specific to a certain ethnic group nor do they reflect the personal, emotional experiences that can arise from gaining or being barred from access to a certain level of curriculum. Also, while the research illustrates that Catholic schools have proven academically effective, particularly with poor and working class minority youth (Bryk et al., 1993; Greeley, 2002; Keith & Page, 10985; Litton et al., 2010; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009), most of these studies focus primarily on Archdiocesan Catholic schools. Private Catholic schools, let alone private, Catholic, female single-sex high schools, are a slightly less researched terrain, in this regard. Further, there appears to be no research on Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses in any sort of Catholic high school as well as documentation of their experiences. Thus, this study will explore Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school and document the experiences and perspectives concerning their being granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purposes of this qualitative study were several. The overarching purpose was to examine Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school. Focusing the research on one Catholic all-female high school, the next purpose was to examine what Latinas in one Catholic all-female high school experience when they are



granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses. Another purpose was to learn what the perspectives of Latina students attending one Catholic all-female high school are after having been given or denied access into AP/Honors courses. The final purpose of this study was to explore how one Catholic single-sex high school is aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research on Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school is critical for several reasons. First, this research is providing a time and space to look at the experiences of Latina adolescents, an ethnic group whose population is burgeoning but whose academic accomplishments, in general, are not keeping up. Additionally, this research study is creating an opportunity for Latina students to share their stories; and, through that experience, they can build greater support for each other and a collective capacity to self-advocate. Also, most of the research on access is quantitative and has been conducted in public schools. This study focused on a Catholic female single-sex high school (which will be identified by the pseudonym of St. Mary's to protect the confidentiality of the study participants; it is also the work site of the researcher) and implemented a qualitative methodology, thereby giving voice to those students who had been granted or denied access to AP/Honors classes.

Also, research on the effect of Catholic schools on minority students illustrates that minority students demonstrate higher achievement than their public school counterparts (Bryk et al., 1993; Greeley, 2002; Higareda et al., 2011; Keith & Page, 1985; Litton et al., 2010; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009). However, while acknowledging the value of this research, it is not

enough to stop at improved achievement, especially when achievement is largely measured by rates (such as graduation rates, college attendance rates, etc.), which do not tell a complete story about a student's experience. This study therefore delved deeper and looked critically at Latina students' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a private Catholic female single-sex high school and studied if access or lack thereof affected their experiences and perspectives.

The significance of this study is fortified by research on public schools that resoundingly shows that greater equity can be achieved insofar as minorities and access to AP courses are concerned (Klopfenstein, 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Taking an AP laden academic load in high school and earning passing scores on the examinations has provided students with a distinction that has facilitated entry into competitive institutions of higher learning (Schneider, 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004) but large disparities exist in public schools insofar as which students are able to take these courses (Conger et al., 2009; Handwerk et al., 2008; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Ballón (2008) argues that "tracking is deeply entrenched in American schooling and upheld by strong normative beliefs about intelligence, race, and social class as well as by political clout of those who benefit from a stratified and unequal school system" (p. 273). Tracking influences access and is a socialization process (Darder, 2012). That is to say, the rigor of Advanced Placement/Honors courses prepares students who have access to them to excel in college courses and hence, be more competitive in the labor force, but when access to these courses is restricted to white, middle class students (Klopfenstein, 2004), the benefits are reaped by a select few.

Johnson (2006) suggests that an interconnectedness within privilege exists such that one person's privilege is another person's misfortune; he further posits that the problem of privilege

cannot be eradicated unless the privileged are compelled to do something about it. In St. Mary's mission rests a similar challenge to use one's privilege for the betterment of others. As an administrator who oversees academics at St. Mary's, I have a responsibility to ensure that the curriculum and academic practices of the school follow our mission and serve all students. By studying Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses and by studying how being granted or denied permission to enroll in AP/Honors classes affects their experiences as well as perspectives, I sought to further the discourse on how Catholic schools, specifically Catholic female single-sex high schools, can better serve Latinas and continue to function as socially just institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Central to understanding the lived experiences of Latina students in the United States is the recognition that they often live life straddling multiple identities. Macedo, as cited by Darder, (2012) posits that

many of these children deal with an existence that is almost culturally schizophrenic—one in which they are present but not visible, and yet also visible but not present. This condition almost invariably results in the reality of a bicultural life—the constant juggling of at least two worlds, two cultures, and two languages that are always marked by asymmetrical power relations. (p. xi)

As such, an essential component of this study is to ground the work in a theory of critical biculturalism. Too often Latinas are treated as the non-White or other, making the dominant culture the most favorable and valuable. Further, they are forced to assimilate and are held to the standards of the dominant culture, as though their Latino culture is worthless or a handicap. As

Darder (2012) notes, “awareness of otherness is seldom used to valorize but to devalue, demonize, and dehumanize” (p. xi). Thus, by using a critical bicultural lens, Latinas and their stories are pulled from the periphery to the center. They are no longer the other, and instead are the focus and priority of the research. Their stories are considered legitimate and provide a counternarrative to what is recorded by the dominant culture.

Aside from challenges with cultural identity, Latina students are often oppressed because of their gender or class as well. Identifying with feminism may aid female adolescents in developing “a positive personal identity that acknowledges, but rejects, the social devaluation of their gender” (Manago, Brown, & Leaper, 2009, p. 751). Manago et al. (2009) further note that females who associate with feminism are keenly aware of inequalities. As a branch of feminist theory, Chicana feminist theory “draws upon participants’ lived experiences, multiple ways of knowing, and their sharing of community knowledge through *consejos* (narrative storytelling) and *testimonios* (testimonials)” (Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010, p. 131). “Critical raced-gendered epistemologies, emerge from the experiences a person of color might have at the intersection of racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressions” (Bernal, 2002, p. 107). And, this recognition of life at the intersection of multiple identities and oppressions is important in understanding the experiences of Latina students.

Given that this research study focuses on a Catholic school rooted in a mission of social justice, it is important to anchor the research with a theoretical lens that brings this Catholic mission to the fore. Both Critical biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory are grounded in the idea that all individuals have dignity and are worthy of respect and opportunities. Catholic social teaching (CST) also stems from this belief, and gives particular attention to those who are

disenfranchised, working to incorporate them into society and for the privileged to build solidarity and mutuality with them. Moreover, CST is an appropriate lens in this study that focuses on Latina students in a Catholic, all-female high school.

Crucial to qualitative studies that intend to understand the issues that Latina students contend with in education must be the stories of Latina students (Fernández, 2002) just as central to understanding female students' needs is a methodology and theoretical framework that elicits the female experience. As such, this qualitative study examining Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a female single-sex Catholic high school will rely heavily on Critical biculturalism, Chicana feminist theory, and the principles of Catholic social teaching as theoretical lenses.

Research conducted in public schools has proven that Latinos and other minorities often experience inequitable access to strong academic programs and even when they attend schools with programs such as Advanced Placement, they are not proportionately represented (Klopfenstein, 2004; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Why, after identification of a problem, does the problem of inequitable access persist? One reason inequitable access persists is because American schools are traditionally viewed as democratic spaces, but this false perception blinds people to the reality and silences discussions of race and racism, and its numerous intersections with gender, class or other critical identities, which are at the root of inequities in education. In other words, schools and curriculum are neither neutral nor apolitical and in order to ameliorate the challenges faced by the disenfranchised, asymmetrical power relations need to be confronted (Darder, 2012). Bernal (1998) posits that “epistemological concerns in schools are inseparable from cultural hegemonic domination in educational research” (p. 556) and further notes that “a

Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research thus becomes a means to resist epistemological racism and to recover untold histories” (p. 556). Fernández (2002) echoes this and notes that inequities are often not mitigated because most research focused on students of color does not treat these students as the centerpiece of the research, thereby continuing to rely on dominant discourse and impeding developing a true understanding of Latina education. This is evidenced in how much of the research on Catholic education and its benefits have focused on achievement data which is important but does not tell the entire story of students’ experiences. In response, as a theoretical framework both Critical biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory elicit participants’ feedback on their experiences (Yamamura et al., 2010) and allows the researcher to acknowledge Latinas ways of knowing, help participants connect with others who have shared a similar trajectory, and work together to overcome the effects of oppression. Further, in this process counter-stories are left behind to challenge the dominant discourse and inform the world of the educational experiences of Latinas (Fernández, 2002).

Schools, as microcosms of the larger society (hooks, 1994), also contend with inequities caused by class, gender, and race. Catholic schools try to counteract these inequities by returning to their mission of social justice, a mission inspired by the tenets of Catholic social teaching (CST) (Byron, 1998). According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (2011), CST encompasses seven central themes, which include Catholic teachings on the dignity of human life and rights and responsibilities. The Catholic teaching on the dignity of human life claims that every human being deserves respect simply because they are human (Byron, 1998; USCCB, 2011). Similarly, the teachings on rights and responsibilities posit firstly, that all individuals have the right to life and from that right stem other rights such as

education, work, health care, etc. According to the Council of Bishops, it is the responsibility of Catholics to ensure that these rights are granted and respected for oneself and for others (USCCB, 2011). This foundation of social justice is what distinguishes Catholic schools from public schools and is a source for hope as the Latino population burgeons nationally, and as more Latino students enroll in Catholic schools. The CST principles promote respect for diversity and compassion for the marginalized—reactions uncommon in a society dominated by a “Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on White privilege” (Bernal, 2002, p. 111). While research on Catholic education and the achievement data that supports it illustrate that ethnic minority students outperform their public school counterparts, it does not reveal how Catholic schools are aligned with the Catholic school advantage, single-sex advantage, and Advanced Placement advantage in regards to Latina students’ access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses, particularly in light of Latinas experiences and perspectives. This study aims to probe further by examining how the Catholic school mission of social justice manifests itself with the matter of access to advanced courses.

Together, Critical biculturalism, Chicana feminist theory and the principles of Catholic social teaching will provide the theoretical underpinnings for this research. Each considers important aspects of individual identity that influence life experiences and has at its core the intention to give voice to the silenced, agency to the powerless, and inclusion to the marginalized.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions are:

1. What are the experiences of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
2. What are the perspectives of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
3. How is one Catholic female single-sex high school aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course?

## **Methodology**

This investigation used a case study methodology. Hatch (2002) posits that case studies examine a modern phenomenon in context and within delineated boundaries. For this study, the researcher conducted fieldwork on the topic of AP/Honors course access at St. Mary's, a private Catholic female single-sex high school in the Western United States, primarily through interviews of current Latina students or graduates, who appealed for access into an AP/Honors course. This investigation, which was conducted in phases, commenced by collecting descriptive statistics on overall enrollment and ethnic composition of the campus as well as Latina enrollment and representation in AP/Honors classes on that campus. Additionally, by interviewing an administrator at St. Mary's High School, descriptive data was collected on what the procedures are for students to gain access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses, particularly if they are not initially placed into those classes in their freshman year. Then, the study relied primarily on semi- formal interviews, which Hatch (2002) defines as interviews led



by the researcher at a pre-determined date and time, usually tape-recorded, and semi-structured through the use of guiding questions. In addition to each student being interviewed, two teachers who have granted and/or denied students access into an AP/Honors course were interviewed as a means of triangulating the data generated by the student interviews and creating greater context.

The sample consisted of 14 individuals, of which three were adults at St. Mary's High School. One of the adults was an administrator who was interviewed to determine the procedures students must follow to gain access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses at the school. The two other adults were teachers at St. Mary's High School, who had both granted access and denied access to an AP/Honors course. The remaining 11 individuals were Latinas, a blend of current St. Mary's students and St. Mary's alumnae, who appealed to gain access into an AP/Honors class at some point in their high school career. To appeal, in this study, means that students were not initially placed into an AP/Honors class. In order to seek access to one of these advanced classes for the following year, these students took a placement test. However, based on results of the placement test, grade in the current class of the subject they were testing for, and/or teacher recommendation, these students were denied access into the advanced class. These students appealed the decision by speaking to an adult on campus—teacher, advisor, or administrator—to challenge the original decision. Triangulation was achieved by comparing unobtrusive data, namely the school's procedures on gaining access to AP/Honors courses as well as the school's mission, with information gathered during the semi-formal interviews.

My positionality as a researcher is that research is a political process. Likewise, recognizing my privileged position as a school administrator and doctoral student, I intend to use my findings to help Catholic schools become more democratic not only in mission but in action.

### **Limitations**

The demographics of this one school site reflect a predominantly middle to upper middle class Caucasian female population which could limit the generalizability of the results. Also affecting the generalizability of results is the use of purposive sampling strategies, specifically criterion sampling, (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009) rather than random sampling. Another limitation is that the researcher serves as the Assistant Principal for Academics at the research site, which may influence how students and/or teachers respond to the researcher during interviews.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations set by the researcher include the research site and type and number of participants. First, the work of this study occurred in one female, Catholic single-sex high school. Initially, 11 Latina students were interviewed about their experiences of having been granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses and their perspectives on this. Likewise, an administrator from the campus was interviewed to determine procedures for gaining access to AP/Honors courses and two teachers who have both granted and denied access to advanced courses were interviewed to triangulate data gathered from students. Lastly, only students in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, or alumnae/past students, participated in this research study. Freshman were excluded from the study because they are new to the high school and may not have a firm grasp on the school's mission or a clear vision of the academic load they desire to create for their years in high school.

## Definitions of Key Terms

Several terms used throughout this dissertation are defined below in order to facilitate comprehension of the study.

*Access* in this study refers to students' ability to enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors classes after having satisfied prerequisite requirements and/or procedures.

*Advanced Placement (AP) Program* was developed by the College Board and allows high school students to take AP, or college-level, courses (Klopfenstein, 2004).

*Advanced Placement Courses* are developed by a team of college faculty and AP teachers and mirror college level courses in the respective subject; the courses culminate in examinations given in May which are intended to assess a student's ability to perform at the college level (AP Central, 2013). The examinations are graded on a scale of one to five. Students earning a score of three or better on the exam are sometimes given college-credit for the course.

*Appeal* is used to refer to the action a student takes after she has been denied access to an AP/Honors class after having taken the prerequisite placement exam. To appeal signifies that the student has spoken to a teacher, advisor, or administrator in order to challenge the decision of her placement.

*Catholic school advantage* is the term used to describe the positive benefits that Catholic education has on students; this advantage exists in Catholic schools despite having access to fewer funds, resources, and curricular/technological innovations (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993)

*Latino(a)* "has itself an elastic meaning; sometimes it is used as a large umbrella to cover all people with ancestors in or connected with Latin American countries, and thus includes

Chicanos” (Torres, 2004, p. 127-128). “Under this rubric are included people who descend from inhabitants of Mexico, countries of Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean” (Ginorio & Huston, 2001, p. viii). The word “Hispanic” may also be used in this study as it is a term also used in the literature to refer to people of Spanish-speaking descent.

*Single-sex* is the term used to describe schools where only one sex is educated. Morse (1998) states that “In feminist theory, ‘sex’ typically designates the biological status of being ‘male’ or ‘female,’ whereas ‘gender’ designates the characteristics that have been associated with being male or female....‘Gender’ would include, as well, physical appearances associated with maleness and femaleness. In this light, some of the research on single-sex education has confused sex and gender, as in references to ‘single-gender’ schools. Schools with all girls are not necessarily single ‘gender’ because they may include students with both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ identities” (p. 36).

### **Outline of the Dissertation Content**

This study focused on Latinas’ access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in one Catholic female single-sex high school and how access or lack thereof affects their experiences and perspectives. In chapter one an outline of the research was provided and specifically highlighted the background, problem, purpose, significance of the study, and theoretical framework for the research. Chapter two will offer a review of the literature and research on the topic and will situate this study in the related scholarship. The methodology used in this study will be discussed in chapter three followed by the presentation of the results of the research as well as analysis of these results in chapter four. In chapter five the significance of the findings will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be made.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This case study aims to examine Latinas' access to Advanced Placement (AP)/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school. Additionally, this study will examine what Latinas in a Catholic female single-sex high school experience when they are granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses as well as explore their perspectives on this. Lastly, this study will assess how the Catholic single-sex high school aligns with the advantage that exists for Latinas around attending Catholic and/or single-sex schools as well as taking Advanced Placement courses.

Some research on Catholic single-sex education and single-sex schools, in general, has found favorable academic benefits for underprivileged minority students (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Mael et al., 2005; Riordan, 1990). Similarly, Convey (1992) posits that research on Catholic schools has often been examined by educators to determine what public schools could learn from Catholic schools. While it seems appropriate to take pride in the gains that Catholic schools have made with students, it also seems fitting to reverse roles so that Catholic education uses research on public education to reflect on its practice. One such issue is that of access to high levels of learning. Studies conducted in public schools concerning access to Advanced Placement courses illustrate an imbalance; Latinos are often overrepresented in low tracks yet have poor representation in high tracks (Ballón, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). In light of the achievements that recent research on single-sex and Catholic education has highlighted, and out of a desire to preserve an authentic adherence to a social justice mission, this research study will look beyond measures of achievement and

improved achievement for ethnic minorities such as Latinas. Thus, this study will explore the issue of access—another factor that contributes to the academic experiences of students—specifically to Advanced Placement/Honors courses, so that the story of Latina students’ experience in Catholic single-sex education is further developed.

To that end, the following research questions will be addressed through this study:

1. What are the experiences of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
2. What are the perspectives of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
3. How is one Catholic female single-sex high school aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course?

### **Breaking the Silence**

For years the dominant culture in schools has largely been wealthy, European, and male, creating a tendency to ignore the voices and experiences of the disenfranchised, females and ethnic minorities—critical groups in the citizenry (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009; Streitmatter, 1999). When the dominant culture is used as the standard by which the experiences of minorities, such as Latinas, are assessed (Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006), research, policy, and practice fall short of being able to accurately examine and precisely respond to the experiences and needs of this group. Additionally, the image that emerges for Latinas, then, is deficit-based (Bernal et al., 2006) and the root of the problem is located within their own biological, social, or cultural spheres (Barrera, 1997), rather than within “the historical, political,

and economic dimensions that shape public schooling in most Latino communities” (Darder, Torres, & Gutierrez, 1997, p. xi). For Latinas, who are at the intersection of racism, classism, and sexism (Blea, 1992; Elenes, 1997), among other oppressions, the rule of the dominant culture puts them in triple jeopardy. With this in mind, the literature review will first explore research that examines the Catholic education advantage, followed by a review of the debate and contributions of single-sex schools for females, with particular attention to Catholic single-sex schools. The focus will then shift to first discussing the progression leading to the current status of females and secondly the progression leading to the current status of Latinos/as as ethnic and social class minorities, concluding with how the issue of access in education, particularly to Advanced Placement/Honors courses, has cheated the academic experiences of Latina/o students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Critical biculturalism.** Darder (2012) posits that the term bicultural asserts that Latina students experience a different enculturation process since they “must contend with 1) two cultural/class systems whose values are very often in direct conflict; and 2) a set of sociopolitical and historical forces dissimilar to those of mainstream Euroamerican students and the educational institutions that bicultural students must attend” (p. xix). Since this aspect of a Latinas identity and experience is often ignored, “traditional values of public education have, wittingly or unwittingly, sustained a hidden curriculum of cultural invasion and made a mockery of indigenous knowledge” (Darder, 2012, p. xviii). These traditional values, which favor and sustain the privilege of the dominant culture without ever bringing it into question, have, quite literally, made it a tradition to oppress Latinas and other students of color. Thus, for all the proclamation of schools being democratic, the reality is that many schools continue to function

as oppressive structures. Freire (2010) asserts that prescription is essential to the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. In other words, “every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior” (Freire, 2010, p. 47). Prescriptions, however, are not mandates. But, in order for the oppressed to be liberated from the oppression, Freire (2010) posits that individuals need to understand the causes of oppression. Moreover, in order for schools to become truly democratic and to help marginalized students to emancipate themselves, they need to break away from the notion that “the object of education is the free, enterprising, independent individual, and that students should be educated in order to adapt to the existing configurations of power that make up dominant society” (Darder, 2012, p. 4). Rather, the role of education needs to be re-examined and the structures and relationships of power need to be scrutinized since powerlessness would not exist without power and oppression would not exist without oppressors. To accomplish this and to offer bicultural students the tools and skills they need to liberate themselves from oppressive structures, a critical bicultural pedagogy, as proposed by Darder (2012), is necessary.

***Cultural democracy: a dialectical approach.*** A central aspect of critical bicultural pedagogy is cultural democracy. In order to be genuinely culturally democratic, power relationships must be unveiled, understood, and challenged when unjust. Trying to effect change while accepting existing power relationships at face value is only putting a bandage on the problem; it does not effect change at the core, which is the power relationship itself. Darder (2012) asserts that culture and power are linked and that in order to understand that relationship,



we must also understand the dynamics of knowledge production and power. Given that schooling is often based on traditional values that favor the dominant culture, the privilege and power of the dominant norm is sustained. Their knowledge and experiences are considered legitimate and become the yardstick against which the progress and success of bicultural students, such as Latinas, is measured. Meanwhile, Latinas experiences and ways of knowing are not recognized, excluding them from participating in the production of knowledge. Further, their alternatives are to assimilate to the dominant norm, giving up their cultural identity and becoming one with the oppressor (Freire, 2010), or to reject the dominant norm and be perceived as mediocre when they do not measure up to the dominant norms' standards. In reality, these options really do not provide a true choice. Moreover, Darder (2012) argues that "any educational theory of cultural democracy must challenge how meanings and values tied to 'regimes of truth' are imposed and perpetuated in schools through social mechanisms of economic and political control found in society at large" (p. 27).

In order to challenge meanings, values and truths, a dialectical approach needs to be taken. According to Darder (2012), a dialectical notion of knowledge intends to "uncover the connections between objective knowledge and the norms, values, and structural relationships of the wider society" (p. 85). Thus, knowledge, values, and truth are not fixed and instead are dynamic in nature. When students critically engage with the knowledge and values that shape who they are, it is the dynamic nature of these elements that allows students to analyze and eventually transform their reality (Darder, 2012). In large part this is accomplished because students begin to break away from dichotomous thinking and instead, through their analysis and thinking, define their own truths (Darder, 2012). As Darder (2012) posits, a dialectical approach

is not absolute; the subject and object are linked and interactive. And, it is because of this interconnected nature of humanity that a dialectical approach relies on that it is necessary for critical biculturalism to also rely on dialogue.

*A dialogical model.* Also essential to establishing a true cultural democracy is the integration of the experiences of bicultural students as well as ensuring development of their bicultural voice in the pedagogical process (Darder, 2012). At the center of these tenets is dialogue or, as Freire (2010) posits, the word, which requires reflection and action in order to be truly transformational. “While to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying the word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone” (Freire, 2010, p. 88). Thus, as Freire (2010) suggests, the silenced cannot simply rely on those with a voice to speak on behalf of them because dialogue is integral to a human’s existence. “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (Freire, 2010, p. 88). Thus, Freire (2010) posits that the notion of dialogue and voice are essential to a democracy; without this dialogue students cannot critically engage with their world, deconstruct it, and transform it and cannot participate fully in life (Darder, 2012). The notion of voice, as it relates to the emancipation of bicultural students, particularly Latinas, will be discussed further in the section related to Chicana feminist theory.

Related to dialogue, incorporating bicultural students’ experiences, posits Darder (2012), also requires that educators consider the role of language. Language is heavily tied to a student’s ethnic identity (Anzaldúa, 2012) as well as to their ability to share and think about their world (Darder, 2012). As such, it “is essential to the process of dialogue, to the development of

meaning, and to the production of knowledge” (Darder, 2012, p. 105). However, it is important to note that simply using a student’s primary language in the classroom is not a cure-all. While, as Darder (2012) posits, it is a starting point that can increase a student’s comfort by providing them something familiar when they are learning new, unfamiliar concepts, the intention of incorporating a student’s primary language in the classroom is to ultimately get them to engage in critical dialogue about their realities and about “how language and power intersect in ways that include or exclude students of color from particular social relationships” (Darder, 2012, p. 106).

Educators must also consider the notion of authority and how they exercise it if they hope to more effectively integrate bicultural students into classroom life. A common understanding of authority is that it is hierarchical in nature. However, as Darder (2012) notes, authority does not literally translate into authoritarianism. Instead, it “requires an understanding of power and how power is used to construct relationships, define truths, and create social conditions that can, potentially, either subordinate or empower bicultural students” (Darder, 2012, p. 109). Moreover, a teacher has not achieved authority if he/she has created a classroom culture of compliance where they, as the teacher, are the holders of knowledge and the students are the receptacles to be filled with that knowledge. To the contrary, a teacher educating in the tradition of critical biculturalism recognizes that rather than demanding compliance, they must engage their students in questioning and thinking critically about what they are asked to do, why they do it, and how that affects their experience as a bicultural student. Further, they understand that knowledge is co-constructed and therefore comprehend that “all forms of knowledge must be

open for question, examination, interrogation, and critique by and with students in the process of learning” (Darder, 2012, p. 113).

A confrontation of hegemonic practices is also important for practicing critical biculturalism in the classroom. Hegemony is defined as influence, whether economic, social, ideological or cultural, exerted by a dominant group (Merriam-Webster Online, 2013). This influence, however, is not overt, and rather has an effect on the subordinate group through their consent because as Darder (2012) explains, “the oppressed actively subscribe to many of the values and objectives of the dominant class without being aware of the source of those values or the interests that inform them” (p. 91). Moreover, hegemony takes effect when norms and values are accepted as a matter of fact and are not questioned or scrutinized. When this happens, the dominant group’s privilege is sustained while the subordinate group is further marginalized. As such, critical biculturalism calls educators to challenge hegemonic practices and to engage students in this challenge.

Thinking critically about educational concepts and practices and redefining them is also important not only to stopping the perpetuation of hegemonic practices, but also to ensuring that bicultural students are being included in the educational system. For example, Darder (2012) notes that the concept of being fair and equal is often defined as giving everybody the same. This, however, ignores that recipients are not beginning on a level playing field and discounts the influence that class, ethnicity, and social status, or the lack thereof, can have on students. By ignoring this truth, under the guise of fairness and equality, everybody gets the same and nobody’s power or privilege is called into question. “Buried within traditional educational views of fairness and equality is a stubborn refusal to engage with the realities of a deeply racialized

economic system that sustains the marginalization of many working-class students and students of color in this country” (Darder, 2012, p. 116). Yet, that is precisely the problem and the task at hand for an educator in the tradition of critical biculturalism. Thus, the notion of dialogue as a central tenet of critical biculturalism is as much about developing the bicultural student’s voice and engaging that voice in classroom life and with peers, as much as it is about encouraging students to use that voice to critique and challenge the practices and structures that marginalize them across several aspects of their identity.

***Empowerment and emancipation.*** Much of critical biculturalism focuses on dialogue and voice. This is because as Darder (2012) notes, voice is an essential concept in the discussion of cultural democracy because it empowers students, giving them the ability “to participate in and influence the manner in which power is relegated in society” (p. 62). Freire (2010) posits that those who have been denied the right to exercise their voice must first reclaim that right so as to put a halt to their denigration and dehumanization. Moreover, the ultimate objective of critical biculturalism is to empower students to emancipate themselves from the structures and practices that oppress them. Through the dialogue that bicultural students have, they can begin to deconstruct preconceived notions of who they are and who they are supposed to be, reclaiming their authority to define themselves and rejecting to fit into a mold fashioned by the norms and values of the dominant culture. By achieving what Freire (2010) terms “conscientização” (p. 35), “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2010, p. 35), bicultural students become empowered because they are no longer being told what or how to think and instead are learning to do this on their own as well as learning to challenge injustices. As they become empowered

as individuals, they also become empowered to “participate in the collective public voice—a voice that must be built around a collaborative effort and commitment of the many to examine critically their collective lived experiences so that together they might discover the common good” (Darder, 2012, p. 63). Thus, while an important tenet of critical biculturalism is for bicultural students to be liberated from oppressive structures and practices, the benefits of achieving this are more far reaching. Ultimately, when individuals can dialogue about power, authority, and their connections to culture, language, and education, injustices can be more effectively challenged and corrected. In that way, true fairness and equality can be established.

**Chicana feminist theory.** Anzaldúa (1990) states: “If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories” (p. xxvi). Many Catholic schools, like the Catholic Church, are steeped in a patriarchal paradigm. While numerous strong women have fashioned Catholic education (Buetow, 2002; Litton et al., 2010) or have emerged from Catholic institutions as empowered women, a male-centered approach to organizational structure can overlook the female experience, down to the student level. Adopting a feminist lens allows for the female experience to be captured intentionally and the documenting of counter narratives aids women to be empowered by theory, allowing the voice of the silenced to be heard.

Feminist theory at its root intends to cast light on the inequities women experience so that women can step out from and overcome the shadows that oppress them. Initially, feminist theory took shape “within a liberal, mostly white Western movement for ‘women’s rights’” (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011, p. 37) and as an uprising against sexism (Blea, 1992). However, women of color who believed in women’s rights simultaneously found the feminist movement a

misfit. While it addressed women's issues it did not address the undeniable intersection of race, class, or sexuality (Bernal et al., 2006; Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997).

This omission was an outright negation of significant factors that shape identity and experience (Blea, 1992; Vera & De Los Santos, 2005). Further, it was a clear indicator that Anglo feminists wanted women of color in their movement to create a critical mass that could overturn oppressive sexist structures, but not if they were going to challenge oppressive systems that required Anglo women to engage the asymmetrical relationship of their privilege or power and the lack thereof for women of color, and to transform these relationships (Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997). Bringing multiple oppressions (Elenes, 1997; Flores, 1996; Flores, 2000) to the fore spurred an emergence of other more specialized feminist theories, including Chicana feminist theory, which more effectively frames the discourse and experiences for women of color and includes them in the production of knowledge by recognizing their experiences and stories as valid (Flores, 2000).

***Intersectionality and decolonization: developing a mestiza consciousness.*** The inception of a Chicano movement, “a social movement characterized by a politics of protest” (Garcia, 1989, p. 218) in the United States, can be traced as far back as the 1960's. At this time, Chicanas rallied against the gender discrimination they experienced while they fought alongside Chicano men to overturn inequitable socio-political, economic, and educational systems (Blea, 1992; Córdova, 1998; Garcia, 1997). While feminist theory started to emerge at this time, Chicanas did not wholly embrace it because the Anglo authors of feminist theory essentially charged Chicana women with choosing “between being female and being a person of color” (Blea, 1992, p. 6). Unable to separate the two and recognizing the power in the experience of the

intersection, it was in the 1970's and 1980's that Chicanas paved the way for the Chicana Feminist Movement (Córdova, 1998; Garcia, 1989). Thus, a Chicana identity is firmly rooted in a politics of opposition and resistance to oppression (Bernal et al., 2006).

Through the Chicana Feminist Movement, Chicanas began to critically examine “the forces shaping their own experiences as women of color” (Garcia, 1989, p. 218), in a culture and society that was highly influenced by colonialism (Anzaldúa, 2012; Córdova, 1998; Flores, 2000) and patriarchy (Anzaldúa, 2012; Garcia, 1997). As is recognized by critical biculturalism as well, these forces that defined their experiences were and continue to be largely tied to asymmetrical relationships of power along several axes of their identity. Darder & Torres (1998) posit that those in power define and assign “truth, rules of normalcy, and notions of legitimacy which often defy and denigrate the cultural existence and lived experiences of subordinated groups” (p. 130). Thus, as Godinez (2006) asserts, relationships to power are neither colorblind nor apolitical. Rather they are racially, socially, and economically charged to sustain power for the dominant culture and to subjugate minority groups. Recognizing the combined tensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, what Anzaldúa (2012) terms “los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (p.42), prompted the development of Chicana feminist discourse (Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997). A lens of intersectionality, therefore, is signature to Chicana feminist theory. In implementing such a lens, Chicanas' experiences are no longer examined using the dominant culture as the standard, therefore encouraging authentic Chicana experiences to emerge and to be embraced as legitimate.

Colonization has colored the history of Chicanas with theft and displacement (Anzaldúa, 2012; Córdova, 1998; Flores, 2000) and therefore also plays a role in the experience Chicanas



have at the intersection of multiple oppressions. For one, the colonization of land and people brings with it a demand for assimilation to the dominant culture. Darder (2012) characterizes the numerous response patterns that bicultural students can express in navigating the “cultural dissonance” (p. 51) they experience in terms of an axis that depicts culture and power as it relates to domination and resistance on one end and dominant and subordinate cultures on the other. What she terms cultural alienation is the response pattern that most adequately captures the effects of assimilation, where the primary culture is rejected and the dominant culture is assumed as the internal identity (Darder, 2012). Ley (2006) discusses her experience with assimilation saying: “assimilation led me to many bewildering, aching experiences that seemed to dismember me through the infiltration of my veins with poison and marginalization, inducing me to vomit my *cultura* and lead my life as a *vendida*” (p. 18). The most important point taken from the various response patterns that Darder (2012) lays out is that the response is tied to a level of engagement that is intertwined with the relationship between culture and power. That is to say, when engagement does not exist or when one does not feel a sense of agency, this becomes a point of oppression and exclusion for racialized students.

In regards to invisibility, Murillo (2010) posits that racial, cultural, or political exclusion of minority groups is inextricably linked to the political economy of racism. According to Darder (2012), racism is often defined as an individual’s prejudice towards another when in reality it is a “structural phenomenon associated with institutional power and control” (p. 37). Further supporting this definition of racism, Gorostiaga as cited by Darder and Torres (1998) notes that “inequality is not a distortion of the system. It is a systematic prerequisite for growth and permanence of the present system” (p. 134). Moreover, mechanisms that marginalize,

whether it is through politics, education, or any other avenue, are often done with the intention of simultaneously sustaining the privilege of the dominant culture and oppression of the subordinate culture. As such, it is the mechanisms of colonization and marginalization that Latina students are up against, which need to be critically examined and changed if there is to be any hope of breaking free from these oppressive systems.

Since Chicanas often find themselves straddling multiple worlds or identities (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 1996; Vera & De Los Santos, 2005), the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2012; Elenes, 1997; Soto, Cervantes-Soon, Villareal, & Campos, 2009), and given the history of colonization and marginalization, a desire for one's own space is a common theme discussed by Chicana feminists. Not being solely female, poor or rich, Mexican or American, for instance, and not strictly assimilating to any one identity creates a borderland conflict—an inner struggle of disintegrated identities (Anzaldúa, 2012) or a bicultural crisis (Darder, 2012). Blea (1992) posits that when the colonized realize that truth is defined by the colonizer and that that does not have to be the case, it is at that moment that the colonizer is defeated because he no longer holds control. Aside from highlighting how truth and power are created and enforced by the colonizer, Blea's (1992) insights also suggest the ongoing nature of and diverse forms that colonization assumes and, as such, implies that decolonization (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 2000; Soto et al., 2009) is also an ongoing process.

For Chicanas, decolonization occurs in the constant process of negotiating multiple identities. It is the process by which the Chicana “reconstructs her self to liberate it from the oppression of the colonialist construct whose only purpose is to debase her in order to control her” (Córdova, 1998, p. 379). Decolonization emphasizes the richness in the intersectionality,

allowing rejection of dichotomous conceptualizations of the Chicana which are inaccurate and essentialist (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 2000; Sandoval, 1991; Soto et al., 2009; Villenas, 2006). In overcoming essentialist dualities or dichotomies, Chicanas create a space of their own. This space, posits Pérez (1999), is an “interstitial space” (p. 6) where Chicanas, in essence, form a double or hybrid consciousness as they uphold and simultaneously attempt to change oppressive systems (Bernal, Alemán, & Garavito, 2009; Darder, 2012; Sandoval, 2000). In that space, Villenas (2006) suggests, is where all conflicting dilemmas are negotiated and new ways of being emerge. Moreover, while by traditional theoretical frameworks Chicanas were relegated to the margins or to invisibility, through the process of decolonization Chicanas move to the center, “learn to *sobrevivir*, that is to survive sexism, class oppression, and discrimination while laying their mark on the world” (Villenas, 2006, p. 151-152).

Bernal et al. (2009) note that Latinas live a life of hybridity because of the constant creation and re-creation of their history and culture stemming from racist practices such as assimilation and segregation. By engaging in the process of decolonization, Chicanas are further empowered by the resulting hybrid identity (Anzaldúa, 2012; Darder, 2012; Sandoval, 2000) that emerges, otherwise termed a mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2012; Bernal et al., 2006). This consciousness “straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities, and spiritualities—that is, living with ambivalence while balancing opposing powers” (Bernal, 2006, p. 117). While a hybrid identity may be perceived as weak because it is not wholly tied to one culture or race, it actually proves more powerful because of its malleability (Anzaldúa, 2012; Sandoval, 2000); “in attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 101-102).

The notion of needing to fit in neatly to a dichotomous category is a Western one. A mestiza consciousness works to dismantle and overcome such dualities (Anzaldúa, 2012). The mestiza consciousness, which emerges at the intersection of multiple oppressions, allows Chicanas to challenge these oppressions and to embrace a politics of difference (Bernal, 2006; Godinez, 2006), rather than to be paralyzed by the difference not acknowledged as legitimate by the dominant culture. Further, in the act of living pluralistically (Anzaldúa, 2012), the Chicana's mestiza consciousness allows her to challenge the Western and dominant practices that have worked tirelessly to oppress her and confine her to the margins. Moreover, a mestiza consciousness gives Chicanas strength and the power to transcend dualities and to reinvent themselves constantly. In other words, a mestiza consciousness allows the Chicana to survive.

***Voice.*** Central to emancipatory movements, such as Critical biculturalism and the Chicana Feminist Movement, is the notion of voice because voice and empowerment go hand in hand. Failure to integrate the experiences and culture of bicultural students, such as Chicanas, into society is a failed attempt at democracy (Darder, 2012). Voice is “connected to the control of power and the legitimation of specific student discourses as acceptable truths or rejected fallacies, and consequently determines who speaks and who is silenced” (Darder, 2012, p. 60) and, thus, it is an essential aspect of a genuine democracy. When Chicana students are not empowered to develop or use their voice, they go unrecognized and therefore are unable to engage in a dialectical exchange with their teachers, peers, or the very system that oppresses them (Darder, 2012). Chicanas, in particular, come from an ancestry that has been silenced in multiple ways: from early colonization that stripped them of their land and language to more recent English-only movements, and even the masculinity of language (Anzaldúa, 2012). This

silencing, while making Chicanas invisible, also imposed a sense of shame. Moreover, for Chicanas, to exercise voice is to embrace their cultural existence and to break the streak of silence.

McLeod (2011) argues that when different voices are acknowledged, the authority of the voices that traditionally dominate is diminished. Moreover, voice can function as a means to empower or transform as well as a means to provide opportunities to engage and participate in the democratic process (McLeod, 2011). Part of the transformational power of voice, however, is engrained in its counter of listening. Barrett (2004) highlights the importance of the hegemonic ear's ability to hear when voice is exercised and as McLeod (2011) notes "the responsibility for recognition shifts from the speaker to the listener" (p. 185). It is this dialogical process that allows students to "feel heard but also feel free to talk—and to talk back" (Darder, 2012, p. 62) and to overturn oppressive systems that have silenced and marginalized Chicanas.

Flores (2000) posits that since Chicanas' stories have been excluded from history and silenced by oppression, the Chicana is essentially invisible in theories, discussions, and communities. Thus, the notion of voice is political because not only does it recognize Chicanas existence and unique experiences, but in the act also resists oppression, counteracts hegemonic stories and practices, and acknowledges Chicanas' contribution in the production of knowledge. As hooks (1989) notes: "It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject" (p. 9). The section that follows discusses how Chicanas voices have been heard and their stories documented and how this has helped them reclaim their identity and challenge dominant discourse.

***Resistance and oppositional consciousness.*** Much like Anzaldúa's (2012) notion of a mestiza consciousness, Sandoval's (2000) notion of oppositional consciousness also draws on Latinas borderland experiences and regards the everyday life experiences as legitimate founts of knowledge (Bernal et al., 2006). Similar to how Chicana Feminists broke off from the White women's feminist movement because their raced and classed experiences were not captured through the initial feminist lens, U.S third world feminism was developed by women of color aiming to create a more liberating social movement than what was represented in the period (1970's-1980's) of "hegemonic feminist theory" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 42.3). Moreover, US third world feminism emerged as a result of a feminist movement that denied it. Sandoval's work, however, is an attempt to bridge the gap that has divided the social justice movements in the US by uniting them and coupling them with other global movements that aim to decolonize and establish justice (Sandoval, 2000); it supports the potential for a "self-conscious flexibility of identity and political action" (Davis as cited by Sandoval 2000, p. xii) so that a global solidarity can be established as economic and cultural globalization spread (Davis as cited by Sandoval, 2000). In essence, the idea of oppositional consciousness is that "the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is marshal the knowledge necessary to 'break with ideology' while at the same time *also* speaking in, and from within, ideology" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 44.3). Moreover, oppositional consciousness is not only about survival, but also about what happens after survival (Bernal et al., 2006).

Sandoval's (2000) work on oppositional consciousness is organized around five tenets, which she defines as a topography of consciousness, that can transform power relationships of dominance; these include the equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist, and differential

forms of oppositional consciousness. In the equal-rights form of oppositional consciousness, members seek equal rights to the dominant group because all people “are created equally” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 56.6). As Sandoval posits, “aesthetically the equal-rights mode of consciousness seeks duplication; politically, it seeks integration; physically it seeks assimilation” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 56.6). The revolutionary form of oppositional consciousness proposes a reordering of the categories that define domination in the social order whereas the supremacist form asserts their differences and believes that those differences make them inherently better than others (Sandoval, 2000). In contrast, the separatist form detaches itself from the dominant social order so that their differences can be further fostered (Sandoval, 2000).

From Sandoval’s (2000) perspective, resistance is only effective if it is directly linked to the domination-subordination relationship being challenged. Moreover, the power of differential consciousness is that it allows for an individual to move “among different oppositional practices, depending on political needs” (Bernal et al., 2006, p. 97). In other words, it allows them a “tactical subjectivity with the capacity to de- and recenter, given the forms of power to be moved” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 58.9), never confining them or essentializing them. Bañuelos (2006) discusses how resistance and oppositional consciousness emerge in the notion of cultural citizenship, which she defines as spaces of belonging. She asserts that while often in education cultural citizenship is viewed as a White social space, leaving Latinas to feel like outsiders, Latinas can create their own counterspaces within the oppressive structure that is marginalizing them (Bañuelos, 2006). Much like challenging the domination-subordination relationship, these counterspaces are created against whatever is serving as the point of exclusion—race, class, gender, sexuality (Bañuelos, 2006). Bañuelos (2006) study found that Latinas created these

counterspaces by working collectively with each other, similar to the goal of solidarity that Sandoval (2000) posits. Sandoval (2000) posits that in all hierarchical structures there is a domination-subordination relationship and “these subject positions, once self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants, can become transfigured into effective sites of resistance to an oppressive ordering of power relations” (p. 54.5). However, to perceive the power relationship and be able to readily adopt an ideological stance that can appropriately resist and change it requires fluidity and strength in identity (Sandoval, 2000). Thus, like a mestiza consciousness, a differential oppositional consciousness is a testament to the strength that Latinas and other women of color possess and the dynamic quality of their negotiation of identities and survival tactics.

Ultimately, the more resistance is exercised, the more Chicanas break down the identity and history constructed *for* them, allowing them to reclaim power, create a space of their own, and establish a history written *by* them (Flores, 1996; Flores, 2000). This is possible because of the mestiza consciousness or differential oppositional consciousness, a hybrid mode of living (Anzaldúa, 2012; Bernal, 2001; Sandoval, 2000); a Chicana “has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode...not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 101). Through the acknowledgement and negotiating of multiple identities, the Chicana becomes more powerful because she transcends essentialist dualities and proves her ability to survive and thrive in any condition (Anzaldúa, 2012).

***Breaking through invisibility: the power of survival.*** To uphold an assimilationist ideal is to openly admit that non-dominant cultures are inferior both socially and culturally, posits



Elenes (1997). When Chicana feminists broke off from the Anglo feminist movement it was because they refused to assimilate to the white women who saw sexism as their primary challenge and who were unwilling to validate the intersectionality of Chicana experience or to share power with them (Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997). Chicanas believed in their culture and fought for it to no longer be subjugated. However, the way history has played out, it would seem that a refusal to assimilate is a sentence to invisibility. Flores (2000) notes that Chicanas have been excluded from history and books and that many people today do not even understand the definition of Chicana, hence Chicanas' experiences and stories have been unrecognized and therefore seemingly invisible. Moreover, a Chicana Feminist epistemology is critical in breaking through the invisibility as it calls for a counterstory to be kept alive, consequently acknowledging and validating the Chicana experience, bringing it to the fore and allowing it to survive over time.

Survival is an essential and potent practice of a Chicana Feminist epistemology. Flores (2000) posits that survival is the most powerful form of resistance because despite the multiple oppressions that Chicanas suffer, they remain alive, standing and fighting. Anzaldúa (2012) notes that Chicanas understand survival and attributes their ability to do so to their *mestizaje*—to their being which is “stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable” (p. 86). Through survival, Chicanas continue to use their voices to tell their stories—deconstruct old ones and construct their own, resist domination, create a collective of power, shape their cultural identities and contribute to knowledge production.

The construction of a *mestiza* or differential oppositional consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2012; Sandoval, 2000), therefore, is evidence of the ongoing nature of the development of a Chicana's

identity, particularly because there is not a singular experience that appropriately represents every Chicana (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 2000; Sandoval, 2000) and yet there can be solidarity in the collective experience. While the ongoing production of identity allows the Chicana to break through rigidly defined boundaries, it is not without the experience of dissonance. Anzaldúa (2012) posits that when she writes about her cultural identity she experiences blocks, which she attributes to cultural shifts. Since the mestiza lives in multiple overlaid identities, some of which can contradict each other, she is liable to experience clashes, or what Anzaldúa (2012) terms cultural ambiguity. While this ambiguity or dissonance has the power to stun, it also has the power to promote growth and to enable Chicanas to serve as an “agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 97). Through such a dynamic identity production, Chicanas can liberate themselves from the confines that continuously aim to subjugate them.

***Chicana feminist theory: unlocking possibilities.*** As a group of strong women who have been marginalized for their gender, race, class, and even sexuality, Chicanas have often been ignored by educational scholarship or have been portrayed through the lens of the dominant culture. Often this is because, as Bernal et al. (2006) posit, the yardstick that is used to compare the experiences of all other people is that of a middle class European American. Thus, when Chicanas do not meet that standard they are often perceived as deficient. Implementing a Chicana feminist theory, however, challenges this practice. Through a Chicana Feminist lens through which to view this research, the experiences of Latina students are drawn from the margins to the center, illustrating how Latinas negotiate multiple and contradictory facets of their identity, how they resist and oppose the constant attempts to colonize and dominate them, and

how they survive (Anzaldúa, 2012; Bernal et al., 2006; Sandoval, 2000). Moreover, the testimonios they share leave behind counter narratives to challenge the dominant discourse and guides for Latinas who can be empowered by the connection they might share with these Latina participants.

As such, Chicana feminist theory is appropriate for this study, which will be examining the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who attend a Catholic female single-sex high school because, first, as a Catholic school, there is a natural patriarchal overtone in place. Yet, as a single-sex school, St. Mary's High School rejects a diminished view of women and strives to teach this to the young women who attend the school. Inspired by an order of strong, independent women who promote a mission of social justice, St. Mary's students are encouraged to act with confidence and integrity as leaders and to advocate for the marginalized. A Chicana Feminist perspective will allow the interplay of these two forces to surface. Additionally, it will allow for the researcher to study the intersection of gender and race. Secondly, since the research site is predominantly Anglo, using Chicana feminist theory as a lens will allow Latina students a forum to be heard and to be acknowledged as women who are knowledgeable and able to leave behind stories that challenge a patriarchal Eurocentric dominant discourse. As Bernal et al. (2006) posit, "the Chicana social agent insists on moving forward toward ways of knowing that legitimize the narratives of the women in our families and toward standpoints that will challenge the censure of the brown body" (p. 60). This is the aim that implementation of Chicana feminist theory will help further.

**Catholic social teaching.** Similar to the intent of Critical biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory, recognizing the humanity and importance of Chicana women as knowledgeable

individuals whose stories are important to listen to within an educational discourse about equity, the essential goal of Catholic social teaching is to establish a social order “that ensures that all people have fair and equitable opportunities to live decent lives free of inordinate burdens and deprivations” (Massaro, 2008, p. 1). While CST existed in the late nineteenth century (Scanlan, 2009), the importance of CST, particularly in Catholic education, heightened in the years after Vatican II (post 1965) because both the families served by and the goals of Catholic education changed; that is to say that Catholic social teaching is dynamic and adapts to meet the needs of the time (Hornsby-Smith, 2006; Scanlan, 2009). First, the children of immigrants served are no longer largely European, but rather Latino and African American, among other ethnic minority groups (Denig & Dosen, 2009; Higareda et al., 2011). Secondly, the goals of Catholic education now reflect a commitment to “transform society through social justice and service” (Denig & Dosen, 2009, p. 141), along with the initial goal of evangelizing students to the Catholic faith. The integration of social justice to the mission of Catholic schools at a time when the face of Catholic education is increasingly becoming more diverse is neither coincidental nor is it taken lightly. Recognizing the disenfranchisement that ethnic minority or low-income youth experience in trying to climb up the proverbial ladder of success, the Second Vatican Council saw ensuring equity in Catholic education as one of its responsibilities to aid these students in full participation of American life (Denig & Dosen, 2009; Hill & Celio, 2000). It is this idea, inspired by the principles of CST, that has become the frame for Catholic schools’ mission of social justice and as Bryk (1996) notes “The charter for Catholic schools shifted from protecting the faithful from a hostile Protestant majority to pursuing peace and social justice within an ecumenical and multicultural world” (p. 30).

Of particular importance with Catholic social teaching is its recognition that humans live with “multiple dimensions of diversity” (Scanlan, 2009, p. 7), much like the intersectionality argument of Critical biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory. As such, CST strives for inclusivity of all humanity, but particularly of those who have been disenfranchised. Moreover, the value and dignity of human life individually and also in terms of the collective, as well as preferential option for the marginalized, form the crux of Catholic social teaching (Scanlan, 2009; Stoutzenberger, 2007). It is these foci of Catholic social teaching doctrine that are also particularly helpful in examining Latina students’ experiences and perspectives in a Catholic school.

***Life and dignity.*** According to the USCCB (2013), “The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society” (p. 1). The central principles of Catholic social teaching are rooted in the belief that all humans have inherent dignity (Curran, 2002; Scanlan, 2009; Stoutzenberger, 2007). Having inherent dignity, posits Stoutzenberger (2007), means that because humans are created in the image of God, the dignity they have comes from God and cannot be taken away for any reason. Whereas humans are often marginalized because of their gender, race, or class among other dimensions of their identity, Catholic social teaching aims to influence “people’s motivations and consciences and societal norms” (Scanlan, 2009, p. 8). The latter is particularly important because it is often societal norms that define the parameters—such as social status or race—by which human worth is determined. Moreover, CST as a social doctrine reframes how human worth is established, acknowledging that all humans are valuable and worthy because they are God’s children, and calls for individuals to embrace the godliness in every human.

Stoutzenberger (2007) notes that the principle of human dignity is grounded in the fifth commandment “You shall not kill” (p. 70). While this commandment orders a literal directive that should clearly be observed, it is the metaphorical implications that require constant exploration and discussion, particularly in a Catholic school setting. In other words, practices and policies can be discussed in light of how they honor the life and dignity of the community they serve or how they symbolically kill certain members in the community by barring them from opportunities or marginalizing them, for example, and thereby impede them from living the best quality of life possible. As Scanlan (2009) posits, implied in the principle of human dignity is the belief that life is vocational and “that each individual is personally responsible for discerning his or her calling and developing his or her aptitudes and abilities” (p. 9). While the individual plays a critical role in this endeavor, the important role that education plays in developing students’ abilities and guiding them to finding their calling cannot be ignored. Moreover, schools, particularly Catholic schools, have the great privilege and responsibility of ensuring that all students discover and maximize their ability, potential, and gifts for their sake and the benefit of the common good. However, when Catholic schools only do this for the students who are already in a privileged position or do this with pre-conceived notions of what a particular student’s ability and role in life should be, not only is the purpose of education defeated, but the moral obligation of respecting and valuing all life is violated.

***The collective good.*** The belief that humans have a social nature that is fostered in relationship with others (Curran, 2002; Scanlan, 2009; Stoutzenberger, 2007) also forms parts of the core of CST. According to Gaudium et Spes (1965), the companionship between man and woman, that is to say of all humanity, “produces the primary form of interpersonal communion.

For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential” (para. 12). Thus, Catholic social teaching rebukes isolation, individualism, and selfishness because it hampers life. This principle of Catholic social teaching is often referred to as the collective or common good, “the totality of conditions in society that allow people to reach fulfillment and live the life of dignity that God intends” (Stoutzenberger, 2007, p. 71), and it is based on the idea that the good of the individual directly correlates to the good of the collective (Scanlan, 2009; Stoutzenberger, 2007).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2013) posits that the organization of society directly “affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community” (para. 3). Therefore, the discussion of disenfranchisement and the collective good cannot be had without a simultaneous discussion of privilege and power as well as the structures that work to maintain that. After all, “the dignity of the human person requires opportunities for participation and pursuit of the common good by everyone” (Stoutzenberger, 2007, p. 71). However, as Scanlan (2009) posits, much of the efforts of promoting Catholic social teaching in Catholic education have been focused on the curricular rather than the structural level. Though CST in the curriculum definitely has its merits, it does not suffice to teach students about Catholic social teaching and charge them with its practice without examining genuine adherence to CST, particularly at the structural level, in the very structure that is teaching about it.

Scanlan (2009) posits that several key areas in Catholic schools have been studied against application of CST principles and have been critiqued. These key areas are ones that Catholic schools can use as starting points to focus on in an effort to improve enforcement of CST principles at the structural level; they include recognition of multiple dimensions of diversity

beyond poverty and constant study of how the school mirrors unjust social structures, which can range from sustaining power and privilege for the elite to assimilationist ideals regarding language, culture, and practices (Dorr, 1992; O’Keefe, 1996; Scanlan, 2009). Moreover, application of CST principles challenges oppressive structures and brings the disenfranchised from the margins to the center, not only giving them an opportunity to voice their experiences and their reality, but allowing them to “participate in society” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013, para. 3). Further, this gives others the privilege of working in community with them to have their dignity acknowledged. In the Catholic faith this is one of the biggest privileges for as Jesus says in the book of Matthew, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

***Preferential option for the marginalized.*** The principle of giving preference to the disenfranchised is another central tenet of Catholic social teaching. It stems from the idea that the goods of creation are intended for everyone, not just a privileged few (Stoutzenberger, 2007).

The USCCB(2013) posits that:

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25: 31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. (para. 5)

While rich and poor can be defined literally, and a discussion along these lines can yield change for the better, again, a call for the metaphorical significance of these words is what can produce the greatest impact for Catholic schools. Wealth and poverty exist in more than just a class basis; they exist in privilege and power, in who is able to gain knowledge and contribute to



knowledge production, and in whose experiences are deemed legitimate, amongst other ways. Who is wealthy and who is impoverished, then, depends on which side of the spectrum an individual stands.

Returning to the foundation that the commandments provide, the principle of preferential option for the poor is based on the seventh commandment, argues Stoutzenberger (2007), “You shall not steal” (p. 73). Therefore, to ensure that this principle is being followed in Catholic schools, leaders not only need to continuously assess how their most disenfranchised groups fare but they also need to determine whether they are being robbed of any good owed to them. In the Apostolic Letter titled *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), Pope Paul VI writes about the specific teachings regarding charity imparted by the Gospel and notes: “the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others” (para. 23). Stoutzenberger (2007) posits that this extends far beyond simply having basic needs met and it is not a matter of creating class conflict, but rather of understanding the communal effects that the suffering of the poor creates (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). Thus, when individuals or groups are marginalized in Catholic schools, especially because of any dimension of their diversity, not only is their individual dignity being violated, but the common good is an unmet ideal (Stoutzenberger, 2007; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). While ensuring that all CST principles are lived in curriculum and in school structure is one critical role that school leadership plays, giving preferential option to the marginalized is particularly significant because it calls into question, on a personal level, the leadership’s own positionality and privilege and the role that plays in sustaining inequity.

**The true definition of democracy: CST principles and Catholic education.** American schools, including Catholic ones, have traditionally been viewed as democratic spaces and education perceived as a benefit for the common good (Buetow, 2002; Bryk et al., 1993; Litton et al., 2010). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, education was primarily intended to prepare students for citizenship and for economic contribution (Buetow, 2002; Carpenter, 2005), suggesting not only that schooling prepared students to enter existing class structures but that students determined which class structure they entered based on their hard work and determination. From this viewpoint, education is viewed as an equalizer where a desire to learn and a commitment to work hard enables students to achieve and move up the proverbial socioeconomic ladder regardless of their color, culture, class, or creed (hooks, 1994). Giroux (2009) argues that this view of democratic schooling is “undermined by its connections to a broader set of institutions that limited in practice its rhetorical commitment to serving the public good and its silence about its complicity with those processes of inequity and power” (p. 8). For example, the philosophy that individuals control their destiny deflects attention from the effects of racism and instead reinforces a meritocracy (Camarota, 2006; Darder, 2012; Torres, 2004), which contributes to sustaining inequitable systems (Darder, 2012; James & Taylor, 2008) and “dismisses the role that power in all its dimensions...plays in the determination of opportunities” (Torres, 2004, p. 124). While schools are often perceived as neutral, democratic spaces, the reality is that they are microcosms of the larger society (hooks, 1994) and as Darder (2012) contends, allowing the relationship between schools and society to go unchallenged permits the dominant culture to be perceived as flawless and allows the oppression to persist.

Given the tendencies for schools to mirror the inequities in society, and a school's influence in shaping and preparing students for their futures, it is especially important that as Catholic schools devise practices and policies that affect the experiences of students, they heed the principles of Catholic social teaching. Of particular relevance for Catholic schools are the principles of: human dignity and the common good, participation, preferential protection for the poor and vulnerable, and human equality (Byron, 1998; Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996; US Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979). Integration of these principles into school practice and policy offers Catholic schools an evaluation tool that allows them to assess the degree to which their school truly lives a mission of social justice. Since this case study is situated in a Catholic school that promotes a mission of social justice and is studying a marginalized group of students, the application of CST as a theoretical lens seems appropriate in assessing how a mission of social justice fares in terms of Latina students' access to advanced courses.

### **Public school research and CST principles**

While keeping in mind that CST principles have significant relevance in the practices of Catholic education, it is also important for Catholic schools, as noted previously, to use research on public schools to evaluate current practices and make changes, as necessary. While the research on Catholic schools illustrates a Latino population that is achieving (Bryk et al., 1993; Convey, 1992; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009), research on public schools illustrates an underachieving Latino population and educational practices such as tracking or limited access to Advanced Placement courses that often are implemented on the basis of race, class, and/or gender. Given these myriad disadvantages, Latinos experience other

repercussions such as higher push out rates and lower college attendance rates (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Gándara & Contreras, 2009), which also affect their labor possibilities in the future. Hall (2002) notes that the fight for social justice includes “forms of disadvantage and disrespect, misrecognition and social exclusion rooted in attributions of difference” (p. 98). As CST principles illustrate, differences should not detract from basic human dignity and this needs to remain ever-present as Catholic schools work to integrate an authentic mission of social justice inspired by Catholic social teaching.

### **Research on the Catholic School Advantage**

**The Catholic school advantage.** Several research studies on Catholic schools have revealed that “Catholic schools advance their students’ achievement with far fewer resources and curricula and pedagogy that are not necessarily on the cutting edge of educational research” (Bempechat et al., 2008, p. 168). This effect has come to be termed the “Catholic school advantage” (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) and appears to be especially potent for students from low-income or ethnic minority groups (Bempechat et al., 2008; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Greeley, 2002; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010). However, this research is not without criticism. For instance, Coleman et al.’s (1982) study which used data from the High School and Beyond database concluded that in comparison to public schools, Catholic schools had less racial segregation, developed higher cognitive achievement in students, and had achievement patterns not highly dependent on family background. While the work is seminal to Catholic education research, it has been simultaneously controversial (Bryk et al, 1993; Keith & Page, 1985). Specifically, critics argue that the data represented a limited cohort of students and did not track students longitudinally to

see long term Catholic school effects on student experiences and progress (Bryk et al., 1993). For supporters of the research on the Catholic school advantage, how is it that Catholic schools have developed this advantage? According to the research, part of the answer can be attributed to factors such as holding high expectations, welcoming diversity, and practicing an ethic of care (Bae, Holloway, Li, & Bempechat, 2008; Bempechat et al., 2008; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010; Shields, 2004), which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

***High expectations.*** One of the ways that Catholic schools have been able to promote growth for students, particularly those considered high risk, is by responding to disadvantaged students by raising expectations and believing in all students' potential. According to a study by Litton et al. (2010), exploring the benefits of Catholic schools and their impact on low-income and ethnic minority groups, "ethnic minority Catholic students were twice as likely to have more than five hours of homework a week, and were nearly a third more likely to say that they were confident they could graduate from college when compared to public minority students from an equal family background" (p. 4 & 5). This approach of rigor and encouragement in education is one factor that largely differentiates Catholic schools from public schools. Bae et al. (2008) also contend that Catholic school students are aware and responsive to the standards their teachers set for them and note that "for these students, the standards are not mysterious—they are clear, are unambiguous, and apply to everyone. In setting such goals, teachers are communicating the belief that *all* students have what it takes to achieve at the level expected of them" (p. 175). Further, a growing literature cites repeatedly that minority low-income public school students are outperformed by their ethnic and socio-economic peers in Catholic school in several areas of achievement (Bae et al., 2008; Bempechat et al., 2008; Coleman et al., 1982; Higareda et al.,

2011; Litton et al., 2010). Helping students from disenfranchised backgrounds necessitates a school environment that is welcoming, caring and individualized. This in turn creates a sense of belonging for pupils and acknowledges the human dignity and potential of each student, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic class. To that point, Greeley (2002) posits that the success of Catholic schools with ethnic minority students “is but a reflection of a larger success in breaking social class barriers to achievement” (p. 77). By avoiding a deficit-model of thinking, and remaining consonant with a mission of social justice, Catholic schools are able to provide disadvantaged youth with a hopeful experience.

***Diversity.*** While Catholic schools have an application and selection process for admitting students, welcoming diversity is a primary focus of Catholic education that also resonates with Catholic social teaching and contributes to the Catholic school advantage. Morris (2005), in his literature review of Catholic schools in England, cites excellence and education with a preferential option for the poor, the latter congruent with CST (Byron, 1998), as key factors distinguishing Catholic schools. Catholic schools vow to work with each individual they accept, embracing his/her diversity, and practices social justice by aiding students from disenfranchised backgrounds in realizing their fullest potential. For instance, Higareda et al. (2011) note that Catholic schools today educate students of diverse faiths and ethnicities. Similarly, Higareda (2011) and Litton et al.’s (2010) study which examines students receiving financial assistance from the Catholic Education Foundation also suggests that Catholic schools accept students of diverse socioeconomic status. While in most other cases the intersectionality of these diversities might put students at a disadvantage, “the apparent Catholic school effect is concentrated on the multiply disadvantaged students: students who come from a background of

low educational achievement by the parents, and whose own educational achievement does not permit them to obtain entrance into an academic track” (Greeley, 2002, p. 83). Moreover, it appears that along with holding high expectations and engaging students in rigorous coursework (Greeley, 2002), having an appreciation for diversity also helps foster gains for students in the Catholic education system.

**Care.** Another hallmark of Catholic education is the care for members of the school community. Shields (2004) believes that relationships are the crux of life and must bear the same weight in matters of education. Central to this focus on relationships is care—care to include those in the school community whether student, parent, or educator—as well as respect and mutual trust. These qualities surface in studies of Catholic education repeatedly. For instance, studies that have conducted interviews of students attending Catholic schools have noted that students cite an ethic of care and teachers who are invested in their academic and overall welfare (Bae et al., 2008; Bempechat et al., 2008). Similarly, Litton et al. (2010) posit that Catholic school students remain in school despite the challenges they face. They further contend that “Catholic schools keep ‘at risk’ students in a safe, respectful, and trusting environment where they can learn” (Litton et al., 2010, p. 17). When students and their families find care in schools, the relationship between the school and the students and parents is solidified. Notre Dame Task Force (2009) found that “successful Catholic schools in Latino communities often host evening and weekend events that welcome Latinos so that the school is seen more as a community center than simply a traditional daytime school” (p. 40). The partnership in Catholic schools illustrates a vested interest in students’ success that encourages students to remain in school and to succeed and gives them the confidence to know that they will

be supported along the way. Just as Catholic schools embody a mission of social justice, Catholic single-sex schools also echo a similar mission, particularly as it relates to creating gender equity.

### **Latinos in Catholic schools**

San Miguel and Donato (2010) note that prior to the Civil Rights era Latinos had sought Catholic schools as one way of challenging “conformist intentions and inferior or exclusionary educational opportunities” (p. 33) present in public schools. In more contemporary times, Catholic schools have focused on improving academic achievement, particularly for low-income and ethnic minority students (San Miguel & Donato, 2010). And, as research has illustrated, Catholic schools have been quite successful in this area (Bryk et al., 1993; Convey, 1992; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010; Notre Dame Task Force, 2009) as often low-income and ethnic minority students outperform their peers in public schools in academic performance and graduation rates. McDonald and Shultz (2013) in The Annual Data Report published by the National Catholic Educational Association for 2012-2013 report that Latinos currently comprise 14.3% of students in Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The hope is that Latino enrollment in Catholic schools will continue to burgeon just as the Latino population is expected to do and in order to make this hope a reality several efforts have been launched to “attract more Latinos” (Parrott, 2011, p. 2). This campaign to enroll more Latinos in Catholic schools comes at a time when many Catholic schools are closing due to low enrollment. Bishop Curry of Los Angeles is cited by Chittister (2010) as saying that “As in the past, Catholic schools are a gift to the Catholic immigrants to America” (p. 1). While this statement holds truth, it also seems that



the Latino population is a gift to Catholic schools, as their enrollment could make the difference between schools remaining open or not.

While the common perception might be that more Latinos are not enrolled in Catholic schools because of tuition costs, the founder of the University of Notre Dame's Task Force on the Participation of Latinos in Catholic Schools (2009) asserts that there are several other reasons, a primary one being that having been accustomed to catering to European immigrants, Catholic schools have not been culturally responsive to the new wave of Latino immigrants. Moreover, while research on the academic achievement of Latinos attending Catholic schools is favorable, it is important to note that academics and achievement are only a few aspects of a student's educational experience. They say little about equity in opportunities or how Catholic schools respond to the intersectionality of oppressions that Latinos must grapple with. In other words, creating a caring environment that claims to embrace the diversity of the students it accepts as well as hold high expectations for them will only go so far if the embracing of diversity is superficial. In the absence of interrogating how Catholic schools are responding to Latino and other bicultural students through curriculum, pedagogy, practice, and policy, they run the risk of sustaining oppressive structures and practices like public schools. Thus, given that the surge in a Latino immigrant population is fairly recent in Catholic schools, it is important that Catholic schools scrutinize their practices, policies, curriculum and pedagogies to ensure that they are providing a culturally relevant curriculum that encourages students to celebrate their differences. Indeed, "the Latino presence, more than any other factor, offers Catholic education the opportunity to renew itself and face the vexing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (ncronline.org, 2010).

## **The Single-sex versus Coeducation Debate**

Traditionally single-sex education was characterized by schools for males only (Riordan, 1990; Shah & Conchar, 2009). Education for females—whether in a coeducational or single-sex environment—was “an afterthought” (Riordan, 1990, p. ix). If single-sex schools existed for females their purpose was quite different than an exclusively male-only school as all-female schools were often perceived as finishing schools (Salomone, 2003). As public education was established coeducational institutions became the norm and it was believed that, by mixing the sexes, women would now gain equal educational opportunities (Riordan, 1990; Salomone, 2006). The fallacy of that belief became more apparent over time (Salomone, 2006) and eventually the disparity of opportunities was the cause of much criticism. Particularly, feminists argued that women deserved the same opportunities as men and this culminated in their joining the Civil Rights Movement where they began to advocate for equal access to schools (Salomone, 2003; Shah & Conchar, 2009; Valentin, 1997).

In 1972 Congress passed Title IX of the Educational Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a federal law prohibiting the exclusion or discrimination of an individual on the basis of gender in any education program that is federally funded (Valentin, 1997). As Title IX called for equal education for both genders (Salomone, 2003), Riordan (1990) argues that it essentially “climaxed the institutionalization of coeducation in American society” (p. 3) because coeducation was perceived as the most effective means to bring about gender equity in education. In 1997, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of Title IX, the US Department of Education released a report titled *Title IX: 25 Years of Progress* in which a claim is made that while there is room for more improvements “women have been granted greater opportunities to

reach their full potential” (Valentin, 1997, p. 6). However, do greater opportunities for women translate into equitable opportunities?

While women have reaped some benefits as a result of the enactment of Title IX, some disparities still exist for females. For example, women still are not proportionately represented in what are considered typically male careers or positions of power (The Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California, 2012) and even when they enter such fields, they are subject to wage gaps (Sadker et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2009). This is so because there is a significant difference between equal access and equal treatment versus equitable outcomes (Valentin, 1997). To that end, Datnow and Hubbard (2002) posit that the 1980s saw a resurgence of the issue of females being shortchanged by coeducation and they note that in general, the research argued for an elimination of gender bias. Similarly, Sax et al. (2009) report that several studies conducted in the 1990’s in co-educational settings claimed that gender bias favoring males existed in K-12 educational settings. Moreover, the data from the studies conducted “suggest that the gender context of schooling is a consequential factor affecting what males and females derive from schooling” (Riordan, 1990, p. 8). As gender bias and gender inequities continued to surface in the educational debate, the role of Title IX also remained at the fore.

The pendulum of Title IX began by seemingly promoting coeducation as a means of achieving gender equity (Riordan, 1990; Salomone, 2003; Spielhagen, 2008) but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the pendulum swung the other way, casting more attention on single-sex schools. Riordan (1990) posits that “data on classroom organization and climate suggest that females may be generally disadvantaged in mixed-sex settings” (p. 9), which served as the impetus for the shift in thinking. Hubbard & Datnow (2005) note that several efforts have been made to improve

the academic experiences and achievement of low-income and minority students and in an effort to provide greater school choice, Title IX restrictions formerly placed on single-sex schools were decreased. Single-sex education garnered support as a possible counter to gender inequities (Sax et al., 2009) and as a way of mitigating the academic experiences of students who have not been well served by public coeducational schools (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005). Consequently, this formally caused a change in policy and practice as Title IX was rewritten in 2006 (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Salomone, 2003), making the option of single-gender classrooms available to districts so long as the same services were available for the other gender either in a single-sex school or a coeducational school. With more lax Title IX restrictions, the United States witnessed a resurgence of single-sex public schools, which also served to cast a new light on private and/or religious single-sex schools.

### **The Debate around Single-sex Schools**

The concept of single-sex schooling provokes varying sentiments in people (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Sadker et al., 2009; Salomone, 2003). Parker and Rennie note that “single-sex schooling has been seen, simultaneously, as both conservative and progressive, and as both oppressive and empowering” (p. 1). In other words, while some may view single-sex education as a means of achieving an equitable education for both genders, others view a single-sex environment as a means of preserving differences between males and females (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Riordan, 1990; Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). Further complicating the debate around single-sex schools versus coeducational schools are the types of students each type of environment attracts and the backgrounds, especially socioeconomic background, of these students (Riordan, 1990). For instance, Riordan (1990) notes that while traditionally single-sex

schools attract students of a higher socioeconomic status, “girls in Catholic single-sex schools in America are below average in socioeconomic status” (p. 7), a statistic also noted by Billger (2006). Overall, opponents and proponents of single-sex education each uphold certain arguments that support their stance and there are research studies to affirm both positions.

**The argument of the opposition.** The debate on single-sex and co-educational education provides mixed and inconsistent results in the literature (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Sadker et al., 2009; Salomone, 2003), offering arguments for both opponents and proponents of single-sex education. The arguments of the opposition center around gender stereotypes, gender separation not having an impact on certain aspects of education, and the effects that socioeconomic status can have on educational experiences (Billger, 2006; Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Riordan, 1990). First, opponents of single-sex schooling contend that contrary to claims, single-sex schools perpetuate gender stereotypes (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Karpiak, Buchanan, Hosey, & Smith, 2007; Riordan, 1990). While for proponents a single-sex environment has been considered favorable for females because it empowers them to be self-confident in themselves and their ability to lead, it has also been criticized for essentializing and homogenizing gender by its opponents (Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). The role that the educational environment has on the effects of schooling has also been questioned. At the college level, Astin (1993) found that the school environment—whether coeducational or single-sex—had no significant effect on areas such as achievement or professional preparation or skills such as critical thinking. Other studies of graduates from single-sex schools have found that the positive effects of a single-sex education are short term (Leder & Forgasz, 1994; Smith, 1986). For example, Karpiak et al., (2007) found that while

female graduates of single-sex high schools entered college declaring a neutral major, rather than a traditional major for their gender, more often than their co-educational peers, this difference was not sustained across their four years of higher education.

Critics also argue that research on the effects of single-sex education can be muddled by socioeconomic status, selectivity with admissions, and religious values, among other factors (Chouinard, Vezeau, & Bouffard, 2008; Mael et al., 2005; Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). Some researchers posit that single-sex schooling is more prominent within private sectors and therefore is often associated with elite education (Salomone, 2003; Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006); as such, it is difficult to “establish unambiguous associations between single-sex provision and academic performance” (Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006, p. 214). Tsolidis and Dobson (2006) also note that along with curriculum or teacher dedication, which can make a difference in a student’s educational experience, one cannot ignore a student’s cultural capital in the study of single-sex schools because often students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are also equipped with social and cultural capital (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Sullivan, 2009), which offers them more leverage and control of their education.

**The argument of the proponents.** The arguments of proponents for single-sex education are also many. One of those arguments “point[s] to educational equity: improving overall academic achievement; developing interest and competency in math, science, and technology; enhancing self-esteem; opening access to non-traditional careers; [and] providing leadership opportunities” (Salomone, 2003, p. 188-189; Riordan, 1990; Riordan, 2000; Sullivan, 2009). Another argument suggested in a review of the literature on single-sex schools, albeit with mixed results, is that single-sex schools help foster more favorable academic aspirations in their

students (Riordan, Faddis, Beam, Seager, Tanney, DiBiase, Ruffin, & Valentine, 2008). Bryk et al. (1993) suggests that single-sex schooling for females “serve to sensitize young women to their occupational and societal potential in an atmosphere free of some of the social pressures that adolescent females experience in the presence of the opposite sex” (p. 240). Moreover, while some of the benefits are academic, more of the benefits appear to be socioemotional (Riordan et al., 2008).

The arguments supporting improved academic achievement for females attending a single-sex school abound, but the greatest benefits are for students from disenfranchised backgrounds because social class is one of the greatest determinants in the effects of single-sex schools and socioeconomic status is tightly connected with race and sometimes even gender (Riordan, 2000). For instance, a study by Sax et al. (2009) controlled for differences that can exist between single-sex or co-educational school students and found statistically significant differences, positing that female graduates of single-sex schools demonstrate greater academic and political engagement than their co-educational peers. Similarly, Sullivan’s (2009) study on academic self-concept found that single-sex schooling for girls does not enforce gendered norms as strongly as coeducational schooling and as such promotes an academic self-concept that is gender atypical. Likewise, in a review of the literature on academic accomplishment in single-sex versus co-educational schooling, findings support single-sex education in matters such as subject achievement tests and higher educational and career aspirations for girls (Carpenter & Hayden, 1987; Lee & Marks, 1990; Mael et al., 2005; Sax et al., 2009). Moreover, proponents argue that for females, especially those from minority ethnic groups, single-sex schools counter

gender-inequities and result in higher academic achievement (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Mael et al., 2005; Riordan, 1990; Shah & Conchar, 2009; Sullivan, 2009).

The learning environment unique to a single-sex school or classroom is also a benefit to a single-sex education. Riordan et al. (2008) note that in a comparison of single-sex and coeducational schools, observers found more positive student interactions both academically and behaviorally in single-sex schools. Additionally, Streitmatter (1999) posits that the goal of single-sex education is “to provide females with learning environments that provide every opportunity for future success in a competitive and heterogeneous world” (p. 25). Recognizing that females live and partake in a diverse world, proponents of single-sex education believe that single-sex schools instill in their students not only academic preparedness, but a sense of confidence that exceeds being secure in ones’ femininity. In support, Riordan (1990) posits that in single-sex schools for females, “girls must necessarily compete and achieve in all positions, including some that might otherwise be considered ‘masculine’” (p. 50). Hence, single-sex graduates emerge with a greater self-confidence (Sax et al., 2009). This may be partially attributed to the suppression of what Coleman (1961) terms the adolescent subculture which tends to favor superficial qualities such as popularity over more meaningful qualities such as achievement in school. The adolescent subculture may also be less pronounced in a single-sex environment and therefore “might increase interest in academic affairs and enhance the disciplinary climate of the school” (Riordan, 1990, p. 57) as well as help students circumvent social pressure from peers or teachers that may reinforce stereotypes (Lee & Marks, 1990). For instance, Karpiak et al. (2007) note that research on single-sex education corresponds “with retention in high school courses that are stereotypically nontraditional for the student’s gender”



(p. 283). To work hard and to be intelligent and successful is not looked down on in a single-sex school for females. Further, female single-sex schools seemingly create a culture that encourages their female students to challenge themselves despite the stereotypes that exist around a particular subject, sport, or opportunity.

Role models also add to the benefits that a single-sex environment offers (Riordan, 1990; 2000; Riordan et al. 2008). Riordan (1990) defines role modeling as a process where individuals with certain characteristics identify with and model their behavior after individuals with similar characteristics. He further notes that single-sex schools not only provide males and females with strong role models of their same sex, but in the case of girls especially, the top students in all disciplines will always be female and, therefore, also serve as exemplars of successful women (Riordan, 1990). As such, a single-sex environment lends itself to providing models of strong and successful women for the female students who attend these schools.

### **Catholic Single-Sex Schools**

While it can be argued that females now have access to more opportunities in schools than before, Streitmatter (1999) posits that the general school culture is still strongly Euro-male centric. She further posits that anyone hoping to benefit from that education and culture must assimilate to it. Such a school culture does not acknowledge the presence of females, let alone females of an ethnic minority, and silences their voice in the education process. Single-sex education challenges this culture and encourages women to grow in confidence and assert their individuality. The findings of Riordan (1990) and Salomone (2003) suggest that single-sex schools are most beneficial for low-income, minority youth or youth who have been disadvantaged, in some way, historically. “Minority students in single-sex schools often show

dramatic improvements in attitudes toward school, greater interest among girls in math and science, and dramatically fewer behavior problems” (Hutchison, 2001, p. 1076). Moreover, for minority students who are often treated with a deficit approach, perhaps a Catholic single-sex school, coupling the best of both of these types of education, is a viable response for helping them to be recognized, and encouraged to achieve academic success and confidence.

Much of the research on single-sex schools has been conducted in private or religious based institutions because public single-sex schools are simply not as common. As a matter of fact, many private schools were initially established as single-sex schools (Riordan, 1990), whereas the enactment of Title IX made single-sex schools more challenging to establish in the public sector (Riordan, 1990; Valentin, 1997). The research specific to Catholic single-sex schools is favorable. For example, in comparing outcomes for graduates of coeducational versus single-sex Catholic schools, it was discovered that single-sex schooling is most beneficial in improving academic achievement, particularly for females and underprivileged students (Riordan, 1990; Sax et al., 2009). Additionally, Sax et al. (2009) found that when background and school-level variables are controlled, all-female single-sex Catholic high schools have a positive effect on SAT scores and Latina students, in particular, who attend a Catholic single-sex school tend to have a stronger interest in science as they prepare for college in comparison to their Catholic co-education peers. Further, Sax et al. (2009) note that “all-girls Catholic schools produce graduates who are more academically engaged and who value college more for its intrinsic or academic purposes, and less for its extrinsic or economic functions, than do graduates of coeducational Catholic schools” (p. 56).

## **The Status of Females: Then and Now**

As was discussed in the coeducation versus single-sex debate, women have experienced inequities prior to making some gains and this struggle for equality continues to burden women. Torres (2004) argues that the United States is characterized by imbalances of power such that the power holder views the powerless as an “other,” which is a condescending and alienating viewpoint. Throughout history, women were viewed as the inferior, often excluding them from comparable experiences and opportunities to their male counterparts. The Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California (2012) and Corbett et al. (2008) note that the last century has been one of progress for the status of women, with more females at the various levels of education; however, not without discomfort for those whom they threaten to outperform.

Additionally, achieved progress does not necessarily constitute equity. For example, while women’s access to education has improved, they still remain sorely underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers (Karpiak et al., 2007; The Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California, 2012; Sullivan, 2009) and overrepresented in helping professions (Karpiak et al., 2007). While Sullivan (2009) stresses her worry about the school of thought that girls may be naturally inferior at STEM fields, Karpiak et al. (2007) further note that “unequal distribution of the sexes across college majors is of clear economic concern for women. College major at graduation is related to the nature of subsequent employment and is an important factor in unequal pay and in lower starting salaries for women” (p. 286). While education is one factor that influences career opportunities and economic success, it seems that for women an education does not necessarily facilitate breaking in to male-dominated professions or securing comparable wages to their male counterparts. Further, as The

Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California (2012) declares: “until women reach parity with men in these areas, we have not reached the vanishing point of inequality” (p. 2).

### **Latino/a Education: Then and Now**

Similar to the trajectory of women, the history of the education of Latino/a groups is characterized by oppression, namely in the forms of racism and classism. Though race is not truly a biological human quality, “racial categorization certainly foregrounds social structure and action” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 5), and that is how racism exists. Traditionally, the definition of racism is understood to be the obvious, intentional act of hurting another because of his/her race and yet the reality is that nowadays it is practiced in more covert acts committed under the guise of objectivity and neutrality (Darder, 2012; Villalpando, 2010). In schools’ quest to be more democratic in nature, there is a tendency to adopt policies and practices that appear to be “color-blind” (Darder, 2012; Villalpando, 2010). These allegedly neutral practices, however, create institutional racism (Villalpando, 2010). As Bernal et al. (2006) note, the standard is traditionally set by middle class Euro-Americans. Moreover, when schools disregard the differences of minority students in a color blind approach to education, they are essentially asking them to assimilate to the standard, thereby subordinating them to the dominant culture.

This is not the only contradiction or mechanism of oppression produced in schooling. Another is that while public education is touted as an equalizer where anyone who works hard can achieve progress and success, it also perpetuates social reproduction and thereby the domination-subordination power relationship (Darder, Torres & Gutiérrez, 1997; Darder, 2012; San Miguel & Donato, 2010). The latter is particularly significant because if students are learning to assume a particular place on the social ladder via their education, without

questioning, then there is no possibility of creating a consciousness to challenge and overturn the very structures that confine them (Darder et al., 1997; Darder, 2012). As such, classism emerges as another oppressive mechanism that Latinos/as have contended with and it becomes evident that racism is inextricably linked to capitalism (Darder et al., 1997; Darder & Torres, 2004; Murillo, 2010). Aronowitz as cited by Darder & Torres (1998) explains that the middle and upper classes in the United States are portrayed as powerful, while the growing poorer class is hardly recognized. He goes on to state: “to be more accurate, class issues are given other names: crime, especially drugs; teenage pregnancy and suicide; homelessness and hunger” (Darder & Torres, 1998). Aronowitz’s claim reiterates the tendencies to not only dismiss the needs of oppressed groups, but also to identify the problem as rooted in them; a convenient and guiltless way for the dominant culture to continue relishing their privilege and power on the backs of subordinated minority groups.

The engraining of racism, classism, and sexism in all American structures, particularly education, is therefore a daily challenge that Latino/a students confront. San Miguel and Donato (2010) posit that from the late 1800’s to the present, education for Latinos “became a means for maintaining the relations of domination that formed in the nineteenth century, and for delegitimizing and devaluing their cultural and linguistic identity” (p. 43). Further, they note that rather than ignore Latinos, schools have acknowledged their presence and worked intentionally to keep them at the margins (San Miguel & Donato, 2010). The result is often underachievement or dropping out, better named as pushing out (Murillo, 2010), of Latino/a students, stifling the academic and economic progress they can achieve.

Years after the Civil Rights Movement, minorities such as Latinos and females remain among the groups that continue to experience poor schooling conditions, lack of recognition and engagement, and inequitable access to opportunities and resources in schools (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Murillo, 2010). Murillo (2010) adds that Latinos rank as having the highest attrition rate, lower high school completion rates than Whites or Blacks, and fewer college enrollment or completion rates. Thus, much of the literature on Latino public education illuminates an underachieving Latino population and ineffective educational and social policies continuously failing them (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Murillo, 2010). While Latinos are the United States' fastest growing minority group (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Ginorio & Huston, 2001), academically their growth and progress is "lagging dangerously far behind" (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 1). Not coincidentally, systemic change also seems to be lagging because in the discussion of Latino and minority underachievement, the cause and problem are always rooted in the student (Darder, 2012; Yosso, 2005), not in an educational system that is entrenched in sustaining economic and social power for the privileged (Darder, 2012; Darder et al., 1997). While different social programs of assistance can be thrown at the "problem" in an apparent attempt to fix it, as Vaught (2011) posits, the programs are intended to aid the strugglers rather than to change the structures that are responsible for creating the struggle.

Latinos/as cannot be written off as underachievers without exploring the obstacles they face in the education system and in society in general. Their underachievement is not due to a lack of intelligence, but to a failure to analyze the values that shape theory and practice in education and to ask how certain beliefs and practices perpetuate privilege for the dominant

culture and, conversely, maintain disadvantage and oppression for those not belonging to the dominant group (Darder, 2012). Thus, the problem of Latino underachievement is inextricably linked to matters of class and as Vaught (2011) notes: “Meritocracy, the American Dream, and the achievement ideology are all reified by the colorblind attention to class” (p. 64). Further, of particular importance is how the practices of classism, racism, and sexism—most especially at the intersection of these—also privileges those who belong to the dominant group and continue to push the underprivileged to the margins. Thus, the section that follows will discuss key factors that have contributed to Latino underachievement under the guise of fairness and objectivity.

**Effects of meritocracy.** Meritocracy, as defined in the dictionary, is “a system in which the talented are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of their achievement” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2013). But who defines talent or decides what constitutes achievement? Often, it is “members of the dominant culture whose values comprise the very foundations that inform the knowledge and skills a student must possess or achieve” (Darder, 2012, p. 12) to be rewarded. While a meritocratic vision may appear fair and colorblind, that is precisely the problem. A meritocracy is not colorblind and only works to sustain those who are already privileged. Murillo (2010) elaborates on how a democracy has been confused with a meritocracy when he notes that the United States “has purported basic rights of inclusion, equal opportunity, and justice for all, yet simultaneously has systematically excluded certain groups and individuals perceived to be different from the dominant Anglo population” (p. xvi). In other words, democracy as it is practiced now seems to be rooted in a politics of assimilation and ethnocentrism.

While there is no real merit in simply being born into privilege or opportunity, enforcing a system of meritocracy in schools suggests that education provides the level playing field for anyone who is willing to work hard to advance. It ignores the real injustices that occur on a daily basis and disguises meritocracy with images of fair and objective practices, while ensuring that the dominant culture continues to hold power over how schools are structured and operated (Darder, 2012). It simultaneously ensures that the privileged sustain their privilege and power. Moreover, the meritocratic functioning of the schooling process prepares students to occupy a similar position on the social ladder (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Darder, 2012), focusing the purpose of schooling only “on the economic value of schooling as a training ground for workers and not the centrality of public education to the survival of democracy” (Giboney, 2008, p. 24).

Aside from the fact that a meritocracy masks the maintenance of privilege, it also has strong effects on the domination-subordination relationship. First, it sets middle class European Americans as the dominant culture against which everyone else is measured (Bernal et al., 2006; Darder, 2012) and it blames Latinos/as and other bicultural students and portrays them as deficient when they do not measure up to the dominant culture’s standards (Bernal et al., 2006; Darder, 2012). This type of portrayal of Latino students is particularly detrimental for Latinos/as who must live under the shadow of deficit-laden expectations. In particular, the beliefs Latinos have about attaining success can influence their achievement and inform educational practice for them. In a survey of low and high achieving Mexican-American students concerning what they believed teachers defined as a good student, Bae et al. (2008) discovered that both groups’ responses reflected academic and social behaviors such as completing timely work and respectful obedience. These students equate sheer effort and compliance with success, demonstrating a



subconscious buy-in to a meritocratic educational system and an understanding of their role in a society that holds low expectations for them. When persistent effort or compliance do not produce strong performance or desired results, students are left ill-equipped to rectify their situation. This echoes the spirit of the American Dream which Gándara and Contreras (2009) term “American mythology” (p. 6). For many Latinos the American Dream is just that—a dream. They are part of an educational system failing to meet their needs and a political system constantly pushing them to the margins of society; the increasing setbacks they experience do not facilitate attainment of the American dream or of a democratic education.

**Testing and accountability.** Intelligence testing, high-stakes testing, and standardized testing have all been culprits of portraying Latinos/as underachievers (Darder, 2012; Knight, Dixon, Norton, & Bentley, 2006; Aguirre-Muñoz & Solano-Flores, 2010). This is because as Elenes and Bernal (2010) assert, knowledge is a hierarchy that places theory and objective truth at the top and dismisses lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Often tests are riddled with biases of culture and class, placing cultural, class, and language minority students at a disadvantage (Darder, 2012; Darder & Torres, 2004) because these tests assess knowledge, skills, and ways of knowing informed by the dominant culture. Aguirre-Muñoz & Solano-Flores (2010), for example, in a discussion of tests used to assess English Language Learners, note that if assessments are to provide reliable and insightful information about what Latino students know, then the learning theory that informs the design of the test needs to adequately represent language and culture, as these are critical aspects of a Latino/a student’s identity and experience. Darder (2012) posits that all types of intelligence tests are centered on a technical view of knowledge that focuses on empirical results rather than on students’ ways of knowing. “As such,

the predefined knowledge and skills tested have been given priority at the expense of the knowledge and experience students bring with them to the classroom” (Darder, 2012, p. 13).

Contreras (2010) posits that “assessment and evaluation of student learning has historically been based on the premise that the function of testing is to improve student learning and ultimately raise achievement levels” (p. 195). However, a preoccupation on remaining a competitive nation led to a sense of alarm that the United States’ education system was lagging behind others and, therefore, led to heightened accountability measures in school reform (Contreras, 2010). In a culture of heightened accountability for education, and pressure stemming from the drive of capitalism toward accumulation (Darder, 2012; Darder & Torres, 2004), a heightened focus on objective and quantitative measures of learning has emerged, further problematizing cultural and class minority students (Darder, 2012; Darder & Torres, 2004; Elenes & Bernal, 2010). As Darder (2012) posits “the very claim of objectivity used to justify the testing of bicultural children is well steeped in the cultural assumptions and ideology of the dominant culture and class” (p. 67).

Such fixation on accountability spurs a shift and disastrous consequences in education which include teaching to the test, standardizing the curriculum and the pedagogies used, dehumanizing students (and teachers), and preventing teachers and students from creating an emancipatory education fostered through critical dialogue (Darder, 2012). For example, legislation such as *No Child Left Behind* or *Race to the Top* have limited the evidence of learning to a mere test score (Contreras, 2010; Elenes & Bernal, 2010), which does not consider that “multiple identities, languages, and modes of thinking that borderland theories call for cannot be reduced to scores on a test” (Elenes & Bernal, 2010. p. 78). Moreover, the push for heightened

accountability via high-stakes, standardized tests demands scientific, objective evidence of learning, closing the possibility for any dialogue around the conditions and practices of schools that influence learning (Darder & Torres, 2004) and pushing minority students to the margins.

While test results can provide data about student learning and areas for improvement, test design and test practices need to be looked at critically so as to not perpetuate the problem that is trying to be reformed through strengthened accountability (Contreras, 2010). Again, while test data can provide insights as to how to improve education, historically standardized tests have “functioned to systematically reproduce, overtly and covertly the conditions in schools that perpetuate a culture of elitism, privilege and exploitation” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 89). For instance, IQ tests “have rationalized student selection procedures to make them appear more democratic and to conceal their role in sustaining the hierarchical nature of society” (Darder, 2012, p. 13). And, more recent high-stakes testing results have shifted the focus to outcomes rather than to conditions. Worst of all is that testing and accountability have perpetuated the underachievement of Latinos and have left the matter un-interrogated (Contreras, 2010). Meanwhile, the results of these high-stakes tests are continuously “manufacturing destinies” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 78).

**Tracking.** The practice of academic tracking separates students most often according to ability, but also by aspirations or curriculum levels, and groups them with their like counterparts. This grouping is believed to create a more effective learning environment that can better meet the needs of a diverse student population. Tracking, therefore, is theoretically implemented to maximize learning for students and facilitate teaching for teachers (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007; Ballón, 2008; Oakes, 1980). The United States in the nineteenth century was

perceived to be the “land of opportunity” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.3) and thus witnessed a burgeoning immigrant populace (Oakes, 1980). When implementation of compulsory education followed suit, the educational landscape became one needing to serve more students as well as catering to a heightened diversity among these students (Oakes, 1980). Additionally, school practices were also influenced by the economy. Callahan (1962) argues that schools were pressed to operate more like businesses and to that end, were urged to use scientific measures, such as standardized tests, to group students and channel them into a track suited to their level. Tracking, therefore, grew out of a belief that grouping students of like abilities would facilitate teaching them, and would allow teachers to better meet their needs and maximize their learning (Akos et al., 2007; Ballón, 2008; Oakes, 1980).

While academic tracking emerged as a practice to facilitate teaching and maximize learning, historically it has primarily facilitated institutionalized discrimination and has hindered the learning potential and experiences of marginalized students, such as minority youth (Darder, 2012). Ginorio and Huston (2001) cite tracking, informal or formal, as a key factor in whether students can enroll in a certain academic program while Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) note that the educational experience of minority students, specifically Latina/o and African Americans, is laden with challenges and obstacles of inequality. Complicating matters further for Latino/a students is lack of “knowledge or ‘cultural capital’ with which to navigate and understand the tracking process in high school” (Ginorio & Huston, 2001, p. 4). Minorities continue to heavily occupy low track classes while their representation in high track classes is much scarcer (Ballón, 2008; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981). Thus, tracking “perpetuates a caste system in which the majority of children from low-income racialized communities leave

school solely prepared to enter society as the same low-income levels as their parents before them” (Darder, 2012, p. 15). Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) cite “tracking away from higher education” (p. 96) as a key challenge that stands in the way of Latinos pursuing a higher education. Thus, the inequity that tracking creates in learning and educational opportunities is unjust and appears to perpetuate privilege for dominant groups and inequality for non-dominant groups. What allegedly makes the work of schools easier only seems to further complicate the lives of minority students who are often caught in a track that denies them access to strong curricular programs and can derail their future educational opportunities and aspirations.

**Curriculum.** As was aforementioned, the American schooling system is often proclaimed to be an equalizer that does not discriminate in offering the opportunity for success to all students. However, as has been established, there are inherent problems with a meritocratic vision. And, how this plays into curriculum is one significant component of students’ educational experience. According to Darder (2012), the content that comprises the curriculum as well as the teaching methodologies implemented are undergirded by knowledge and values that the dominant culture considers legitimate. Moreover, there appears to be no room for the cultural knowledge and lived experiences that Latinos/as bring to the classroom (Bernal et al., 2006) and as Darder (2012) posits, this approach to teaching and learning pays no regard to the individuals in classrooms and is also independent of time and space. This has been particularly true with recent reform efforts that have pushed to standardize curriculum and teach to the test so that students can pass the high-stakes test at the end of the year (Darder, 2012). When they do not seem to master the curriculum, as evidenced by high-stakes tests previously discussed, they are labeled as deficient. Further, the differences they must contend with on a daily basis are

never part of a larger critical dialogue that could enlighten all involved. Instead, the differences are ignored, a curriculum that privileges the dominant culture and marginalizes minorities is implemented, and the cycle of domination-subordination perpetuates itself.

While content is one piece of the curriculum conundrum, so are educational philosophies and teaching methodologies (Anyon, 1980; Darder, 2012) that are heavily embedded with values. In her 1980 study of fifth grade classrooms, Anyon (1980) found that more than availability of resources, teaching methodologies and educational philosophies were the biggest contributors to the disparities that existed between impoverished and elite schools. In particular, she discovered that young students were already being socialized into learning their place on the social ladder via what she referred to as the hidden curriculum and defined as the “tacit preparation for relating to the process of production in a particular way” (Anyon, 1980, p. 10). Moreover, “social values associated with compliance to authority, punctuality, delayed gratification, and the system of punishments and rewards were systematically enacted within classroom life” (Darder, 2012, p. 20); and as Bowles and Gintis (1976) asserted decades ago, students of various social classes are rewarded for exhibiting the qualities they will need to secure their place on the social ladder such as obedience for the working class. As an example, San Miguel and Donato (2010) in their discussion of Latino education in the twentieth century assert that the education provided to Latino/a students has focused more on non-academic instruction than it has on academic knowledge. This sets the stage for them to transition into occupations of low skill and low wages. However, the hidden curriculum influences far more than a student’s social perception of self and their role; it has heavy ties to culture and its

relationship to power as well (Darder, 2012). Thus, as Darder (2012) asserts, the hidden curriculum is another way in which the domination-subordination relationship is sustained.

Anzaldúa (2012) notes: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (p. 81). Darder (2012) adds that engrained in a student’s language, also referred to as a bicultural voice, is the codification to express their lived experiences. Despite how intertwined language, ethnic identity, and lived experiences are, the stripping away of Latino/as language in the classroom, has adversely affected the curriculum offered to Latino students. San Miguel and Donato (2010) assert that the curriculum offered to Latinos has “constantly devalued, demeaned, and distorted the children’s linguistic and cultural heritage and systematically sought to eradicate it from the content and instruction of public education” (p. 32). In an effort to assimilate Latinos to the dominant culture, their native language is banned from classroom life. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) as cited by Darder and Torres (2004) explains that linguistic genocide, the killing of a language rather than its people—aims to “destroy potential competition for political and economic power in order to eliminate any claims to nation-state rights among indigenous and minority populations” (p. 71). Moreover, the control of Latinos/as native language has greater implications for destruction of their culture and class oppression as they become educated in the dominant discourse (Darder, 2012). The latter is not only a matter of socioeconomics. It is more so tied to knowledge production and to whose experiences are considered legitimate and worthy of contributing to knowledge production. The exclusion of Latinos/as native language in the classroom conveys that their experiences are illegitimate and that they have nothing valuable to contribute in the production of knowledge, thereby not allowing them to contribute to discussions or making it inviting for them to share their life experiences. In other words, the

bicultural voice is silenced (Darder, 2012). This in and of itself it disempowering because they are not given a forum in which they can challenge the oppression they have suffered or deconstruct the experiences they have had. Further, it literally silences them, stifling their participation in their education as well as in any critical dialogue that can challenge racist, as well as classist and sexist, structures (Darder, 2012).

**Authority.** Aside from curriculum and content, educational leaders' roles in schools also form part of the culture that molds students. Authority, as defined by Darder (2012), "is intimately linked to the manner in which teachers exercise control, direct, influence, and make decisions about what is actually to take place in their classrooms" (p. 109). Valencia and Pearl (2011) note that prior studies regarding classroom authority found that students responded best to democratic authority. Therefore, this suggests that authority is not power to be assumed, but rather power to be negotiated and to be understood as an influence over relationships and social conditions (Darder, 2012). However, as Valencia and Pearl (2011) further posit, teachers who hold deficit riddled perceptions of Latino/a students and who are unwilling to take a critical approach to authority pose a huge threat to the development of Latino/a students. Their inability to exercise democratic authority often suggests that they are ill-equipped to challenge oppression and that they do not understand power relationships (Darder, 2012).

**A lack of cultural and social capital.** Gándara and Contreras (2009) define cultural capital as "knowing how things work" (p. 30) and social capital as "having access to important social networks" (p. 30); they posit that these forms of capital are an integral piece of formal education. They further argue that given that Latino parents generally have lower levels of education, they have less ability to aid with or pass on these forms of capital to their children



(Gándara & Contreras, 2009). However, this is not to imply that they lack a desire to push their children up through higher education; instead they sometimes just do not know how to help them navigate to reach that goal (Zarate & Conchas, 2010). Additionally, as Yosso (2005) posits, when only forms of the capital that the dominant culture deems as necessary for success are acknowledged, it is only natural that the population that does not have these forms of capital, such as Latinos, are going to appear deficient and needing to be instructed in “hegemonic knowledges” (Hurtado, Cervantez, & Eccleston, 2010, p. 292). However, Yosso (2005) asserts that Latino and other students of color bring with them other forms of capital that if recognized could change the educational landscape for Latino students. On the subject of social capital, Woolley (2009) contends that adult interactions and relationships with youth help foster social capital; these interactions help youth form attitudes and beliefs about themselves, their ability, and the role that school will have in their present and future, based on certain elements of these relationships.

Without this social capital, Latino youth may struggle to navigate through their studies successfully, with how to believe in their ability, and how to self-advocate. For instance, in a study of racial differences in high school math tracking conducted by Ballón (2008), results showed that students were more likely to be in a college preparatory math track or higher if their parents had higher education, particularly because they understand the role curriculum plays in college accessibility and are more likely to advocate for a college preparatory curriculum, at minimum, for their child. To the contrary, other researchers note that Latino students generally attend schools with fewer resources and lower expectations (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Compounding the problem of fewer resources and reduced expectations is low performance. For instance, according to Perie, Grigg, and Donahue (2005) in *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005* and Perie, Grigg, and Dion (2005) in *The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics, 2005*, after Native Americans, Latinos in the fourth and eighth grade have the lowest proficiency in reading and math. Additionally, Latinos are often placed into lower-level courses (Ballón, 2008; Gándara & Contreras, 2009) which do not challenge them or prepare them for college. Ballón (2008) posits that “tracking is deeply entrenched in American schooling and upheld by strong normative beliefs about intelligence, race, and social class as well as by political clout of those who benefit from a stratified and unequal school system” (p. 273). When parents do not understand the educational system, they do not know how to challenge it or how to encourage using it for personal growth. Likewise, they cannot appropriately aid their child to navigate school and teach them how to maximize the use of resources when available to them.

**An anti-Latino sociopolitical context and its effects on self-concept.** Politics evoking anti-immigrant or anti-Latino sentiment, such as California’s Proposition 187 aiming to deny state services to undocumented individuals, Proposition 227 pronouncing English-only instruction, or the elimination of affirmative action, and the like are constantly touted, making it challenging for Latinos to develop a healthy self-concept. The racist arguments made about Latinos in the push for these policies are generalized or inaccurate (Murillo, 2010). Stritikus and English (2010), in an analysis of the various policies and legal decisions that have been made surrounding educational and language rights for Latinos, posit that the policies and decisions “are closely connected to larger social and political tensions about race, language, and resources”

(p. 411). Like many of the practices and policies that have already been discussed, the politics targeted at Latinos demand an assimilationist approach and are another attempt to maintain the domination-subordination relationship. Gándara and Contreras (2009) further argue that “for many Latino students, the struggle to reconcile the perception of others will result in their rejecting either their ethnicity or the role of a good student, neither of which augurs well for a healthy personal or psychological development” (p. 79). Thus, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment can erode cultural pride and potential pathways for attaining success. Further, the policies and legislation that are adopted naturally seep into the classroom and affect curriculum and instruction. Worse yet, it shapes “educators’ beliefs and practices and their interactions with and expectations for Latino students” (Stritikus & English, 2010, p. 411). For example, Bohon, MacPherson, and Atilas (2005) argue that teachers ignore students who do not understand English or are darker skinned; students who do not fit or cannot meet the description or expectations of the dominant norm are disregarded. Moreover, the racist beliefs that fuel the authoring of such policies and legislation permeate the educational system and it entrenches the perpetuation of privilege for the dominant norm and oppression for Latinos and other minority groups.

**Socioeconomic challenges.** While Latinos are becoming an ethnic majority in the United States, they hold minority status in areas such as economics and linguistics. It is important to note that this is not because they are any less capable or motivated, but rather because the entire political, social, economic, and educational systems are pitted against them in order to perpetuate their subordination. For instance, Shields (2004) posits that most educators come from the middle class and therefore cannot relate effectively to their students from working

or low class families. This lack of understanding leads to educators making “decisions about students’ ability, programs, and suitable career paths based on class (and some well-known correlates such as style, grammar, and tidiness)” (Shields, 2004, p. 120). Moreover, money and command of the dominant language bring with it a certain amount of agency and privilege. To be economically stable and speak English fits the qualifications of the dominant norm and as such it is set as the standard for everyone else, pushing Latinos who do not possess these qualifications to the margins. This lack of Latino voice and control has negative effects, especially in the education system, because it enables schools to ignore the differences and assets that Latinos bring with them, thereby perpetuating an oppressive education.

**Unequal opportunities.** Unequal opportunities are one impediment to access of a high quality education. Gándara and Contreras (2009) note that social and economic forces hamper the power that institutions and individuals have in changing the social context that Latinos grow up in and that inevitably shape how they experience and navigate school. While individuals can exert a certain amount of choice and control in their education, external issues of gender, race, class, and socioeconomics also highly influence individuals’ school experience. In turn, this affects academic experiences and learning as well as the possibilities of attending college, which can be one way for students to improve their quality of life.

**Adult and peer influence.** Family and friends play a key role in shaping the aspirations of Latino students (Ohrt et al., 2009; Shiu, Kettler, & Johnsen 2009). To that point, Gándara and Contreras (2009) note that parental cultural and social capital—defined as the “access to power and authority, to networks of influential and informed friends and colleagues, to the understanding of the working of ‘the system’ that allow those with privilege in society to

maintain it” (p.51)—influences Latino students’ achievement. When parents do not understand the different levels of curriculum or the benefits of taking AP courses, they do not know to encourage their child in that direction. Likewise, they cannot appropriately aid their child to navigate school and teach them how to maximize the use of resources when available to them. Woolley (2009) adds that when youth interact with adults they begin to develop social capital and these interactions influence the attitudes and self-perceptions of ability for youth. That is why educators play a crucial role in the lives of students and helping them make academic decisions that will benefit their futures (Ohrt et al., 2009). Therefore, parental influence can affect student access to AP courses.

Aside from adults, peers can also influence whether a student accesses, or seizes the opportunity of taking AP courses. For example, Riegle-Crumb, Farkas, and Muller (2006) in a study of the role of gender in advanced course taking found that females’ course selection was influenced by their friends’ academic achievement. Similarly, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, and Nagy (2009), posit that people are often integrating social comparison information into their own self-concepts. The effects of this can be positive when students compare themselves to studious, high achieving and aspiring peers. However, Gándara and Contreras (2009) note that Latino students are usually segregated and kept away from experiencing interactions with students who have different expectations and aspirations. In this case, motivation and aspirations are not fostered and despite potential strong ability, students do not aspire to gain access into the AP courses. Therefore, as Trautwein et al. (2009) highlight, these experiences with peers create a frame of reference for students that can affect short term and long term educational trajectories.

**Self-perceptions and aspirations.** A study on Latinas' access to advanced courses is incomplete if it does not also consider students perspectives, or self-perceptions, as well as how these perspectives affect aspirations. "Self-concept refers to a person's self-perceptions, and academic self-concept refers to a person's beliefs about their own academic abilities" (Sullivan, 2009, p. 259). Sullivan (2009) posits that an individual's academic self-concept is decided by an individual's frame of reference, such that a person surrounded by low-performing peers may perceive their ability to be higher or vice versa. Thus, it is important to consider self-perceptions and academic self-concepts in the discussion of access to advanced courses because not only can being granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement or Honors course affect how an individual thinks of herself and her ability for the rest of her life, but it is important to verify what Latina students frame of reference is as it may reveal important insights into the matter of access being explored.

Another reason that self-perceptions are important to consider are because as Rudasill and Callahan (2010) posit, self-perceptions of ability influence course selection patterns in high school and this inadvertently influences college major choices. While certainly valid, this argument seemingly assumes, however, that the student has complete control over her course selection, ignores the issue of tracking, and suggests that the only factor impeding access to an AP or Honors course is whether the student chooses that course or not. For instance, a strong science student may decide to exceed the minimum requirement of science credits needed for graduation and attempt to take the Advanced Placement or Honors level for each science class she takes. If her strength has always been in science, and less so in the humanities, she is likely to select a college major that calls on her science abilities. On the flip side, a student who

perceives herself as a weak science student may only take the required science courses and enroll in a college preparatory science course, if the school is college preparatory. If the school is not college preparatory, the student with the perception of a weak science background may take a remedial science course even though she may have the ability to take a regular science course instead. The latter exemplifies how self-perceptions can shortchange students, especially when parents, teachers, and advisors do not guide the student's academic decisions. Harter (2006) notes that individuals understand their ability better as they recognize and compare themselves to the ability of others, thereby supporting Sullivan's (2009) aforementioned notion of frame of reference. Moreover, it is important to recognize that self-perceptions are influenced by more than just the self. Ultimately, these self-perceptions can be an impetus or hindrance to achieving or advocating for certain goals such as placement in an Advanced Placement or Honors course, as is the focus of this study.

Aspirations linked to self-perceptions can also influence access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses. While the achievement of peers is known to influence a student's academic self-concept and course selection (Callahan, 2010; Harter, 2006; Sullivan, 2009), it can also shape a student's aspirations (Trautwein et al., 2009). Aspirations, despite ability, can drive students to advocate for the academic challenge existent in AP or Honors courses. For example, a student whose aspiration is to become a medical doctor, but is stronger in the humanities, may need to advocate for access into the Advanced Placement or Honors science and mathematics courses. Certainly there may be gatekeepers to these courses, in the form of class prerequisites or school personnel that need to be consulted, but aspirations can be the driving force behind advocacy. To that end, it is important to consider what school policies and decisions can do to a

student's aspirations. For instance, in the example used above, if the student who advocates for science and math classes in preparation for her goal of becoming a medical doctor is denied access into the advanced courses she desires, what does this do to her academic self-concept and to her aspirations? Moreover, this study on Latinas' access to Honor or Advanced Placement courses will explore both the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access into these advanced courses in hopes of understanding what school placement decisions can do to their self-perceptions and aspirations.

### **Persisting in the struggle**

Though the landscape for Latinos is dismal, they continue to persist. As evidenced in the research of Latinos in Catholic schools, they are outperforming their public school peers in academic achievement and college going rates. Additionally, the number of Latinos, in general, and Latinas, specifically, enrolling in college has increased (Pino, Martínez-Ramos, & Smith, 2012; Sax, 2009). Given the rapidly growing Latino population, Latinos have greater potential to shape American society. Despite gains Latinos have made in recent years, they continue to struggle because of oppressive social, political, economic, and educational systems that view them as intellectual, cultural, and language inferiors. These systems marginalize Latinos, measure their progress by the standards of the dominant culture, and then blame resulting problems or so-called deficits on Latinos themselves instead of recognizing that the root of the problem is in the mechanisms of marginalization. Moreover, while Latinos resist and persist, the biggest challenge they face daily is the constant reproduction of domination in systems, policies, and practices. As Hurtado et al. (2010) posit: Latinos face infinite possibilities, many obstacles.



## **Latinas**

Latinas have a strikingly low graduation rate in comparison to other ethnic groups (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; National Women’s Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Reduced levels of education compound job opportunities which in turn can affect earnings and quality of life. The National Women’s Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2009) published a report on Latinas’ challenges in completing high school; findings reveal that 1) while Latinas have high aspirations, their goals are often stifled by a lack of education, 2) obstacles such as finances, legal status, and language proficiency complicate the educational experience of Latinas, and 3) the intersectionality of gender and race generates additional challenges for Latinas to surmount. Additionally, negative perceptions about Latinos abound and Torres (2004) states that “being *Latina* nowadays in America has a very high cost in terms of the opportunities available to us and the misrecognition of our values, capabilities, and potential” (p. 124). Torres (2004) further notes that to be “*Latina* implies one of the most vulnerable combinations of characteristics for misrecognition and, therefore, discrimination” (p. 133). Furthermore, while being a female or being Latino still connotes an inferior status, to be a Latina—a woman and an ethnic minority—seems to be doubly challenging.

In comparing Latinas and Latinos, however, the data illustrates that more Latinas academically outperform their male counterparts and are graduating more often. Latinas tend to have stronger academic records as reflected by grades and they also graduate high school and enroll in college more often than Latinos (Colón & Sánchez, 2010; Sax, 2009; Villalpando, 2010). Once in college, Latinas are also more likely to complete their bachelor’s degree than

Latinos (Pino et al., 2012; Villalpando, 2010). Villalpando (2010) notes that the increase in Latina college enrollment was partially due to their increased enrollment coupled with an equal decrease in the number of Latino students enrolling in college. Thus, the college enrollment of Latino males from 1976 to the present has gone from 55% to 42%, asserts Villalpando (2010). Moreover, with an increase in the Latina population attending school, it is imperative that their needs are understood so that they can be met.

### **The Advanced Placement Program**

The Advanced Placement Program is one program in high schools that recent research argues is plagued by racial or socioeconomic imbalances (Handwerk et al., 2008; Klopfenstein, 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). The Advanced Placement (AP) program was formed in the United States sometime after World War II as a means of academically challenging high achieving students to be better prepared to undertake important leadership positions in a post-war world (Schneider, 2009). In this effort, high schools collaborated with colleges and universities to create what is now known as the AP program, which offers college freshman-level courses that students can take during high school (Handwerk et al., 2008). While the initial intention was to provide students with a rigorous academic experience (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Schneider, 2009) to sharpen their intellect, gradually universities acknowledged the added rigor and rewarded students for it in the admissions process. For instance, AP classes culminate in exams given in May of each academic year. The exam is graded on a scale from one to five. Students receiving a score of three, four, or five may potentially earn “course credit or advanced placement from participating institutions” (Handwerk et al., 2008, p. 7); this advantage may also translate into savings on tuition expenses since the student has less course work to complete.

Additionally, some universities award additional admission points during the admissions process to students who have completed AP coursework (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Thus, AP courses evolved from an incentive for college placement to a benefit during the process of college admissions (Byrd, Ellington, Gross, Jago, & Stern, 2007; Hallett & Venegas, 2011).

Consequently, AP courses are now often “perceived as a standard part of a demanding upper-secondary education and an impressive resume” (Schneider, 2009, p. 819). As the college admissions process only grows more competitive, college-minded students look to Advanced Placement classes as a way to strengthen their academic transcript (Klopfenstein, 2004) and demonstrate their ability to handle college-level courses. However, the problem is that not all students have access to these advanced courses.

### **The Access Dilemma**

Access, in the field of education, often refers to the availability of the particular opportunity being discussed (Klopfenstein, 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). The issue of access to Advanced Placement courses varies based on the school site under consideration. For example, in their study of California public high schools, Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) discovered that while Latinos comprise 38% of the high school student population, less than half attend one of the top 50 high schools (as ranked by Solorzano and Ornelas using their AP Student Access Indicator). Attending one of the unranked high schools may mean less opportunity to take AP courses simply because they are not offered. Another problem of access occurs when a school, such as the low-income high schools located in Latino and African American neighborhoods that Solorzano and Ornelas (2004) studied, offers an array of AP courses but these courses have low enrollment. When Latinos and other minorities are

underrepresented in AP courses in a high school with a diverse student population, a good selection of AP courses, and even high enrollment in AP courses, this too is a problem of access because even though the opportunity of taking an AP course exists, the opportunity is not seized for one reason or another. The latter is the problem of access that this research study will explore further.

The unbalanced relationship of inequality and privilege remains prevalent in public education through this problem with access (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004) to strong curricular programs and enriching academic opportunities. To date, minority groups such as African Americans and Latinos are highly represented in low tracks and underrepresented in high tracks (Ballón, 2008; Darder, 2012; Flowers, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981; Valencia, 2011). Additionally, when examining high tracks, it is white, middle- class students who have largely benefitted from the Advanced Placement (AP) program sponsored by the College Board (Klopfenstein, 2004), a program allowing high school students to take advanced courses that culminate in an examination which could earn them college credit (Handwerk et al., 2008) or entrance into elite schools (Conger et al., 2009). Minority students, such as African Americans and Latinos, are most often underrepresented in AP programs and even when they are in the program, minorities on the whole, have a lower score average on AP exams (Flowers, 2008). While performance in AP courses serves as a strong predictor of academic achievement in high school and college and even in labor outcomes (Conger et al., 2009; Flowers, 2008), a problem exists if only a select few have access to these courses.

In the discussion of access to AP courses, it is necessary to also discuss class formation. The issue of class formation is central to AP classes, both in terms of who is allowed to enroll in

the classes and reap the benefits as well as who is deemed suitable to participate in knowledge production. First, regarding students who are eligible to take advanced classes, there are campuses who do not have open enrollment and instead select students who they believe are eligible for handling advanced course work. Eligibility is often determined by grades or performance on standardized tests which may suggest that a student has potential for advanced course work. However, as was aforementioned in the discussion on testing and other quantitative measures used to determine student ability, quantitative objective measures are often culturally biased and perpetuate racism.

Curriculum covered in AP courses as well as the design of the AP exams are subject to the same downfalls that schools in the US have around the issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessing students' many ways of knowing. A review of the College Board's website which contains information on AP courses reveals a lot of promotion around how AP courses prepare students for college and immerse students in more than fact memorizing. However, the reference to preparation for college is more in lines with being able to keep up with the academic demands, rather than with learning how to challenge content and practices that marginalize students. Thus, a structural divide that supports privilege is created in two ways. First, students may gain the benefits such as saving time and money or advanced college standing because of AP work they complete in high school, but only if they are allowed to complete advanced work. And, as the research shows, minority students are often underrepresented in the high tracks such as AP courses (Ballón, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981). Secondly, the gains of AP work come at the expense of promulgating hegemonic knowledge and dominant ways of knowing, thereby sustaining the privilege of the dominant culture.

## **The reality of Latinas/os Access to Advanced Placement**

Much of the research on Latinas access to Advanced Placement classes in public schools highlights a problem of access (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). This inequality in society points to the myriad factors that influence access, which unfortunately, Latinas and other minorities seem to experience. As a result of this, “black and Hispanic students enroll in AP at just half the rate of white students and low income students participate at approximately one-third the rate of students who are not low income” (Klopfenstein, 2004, p. 8). Further, Latino students continue to be outperformed by White students not only in terms of their academic achievement, but also in terms of the quality of the schools they attend and the courses they take (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Focusing in on Latinas specifically, findings reveal that Latinas have less likelihood of enrolling in an AP Math or Science course, take fewer AP exams overall in comparison to their White or Asian counterparts and actually represent the lowest percentage of females in a group taking AP exams (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Thus, the reality of Latinas’ access to Advanced Placement courses is that it is inequitable; Latinas/os are often underrepresented and even when they comprise a majority of the school population, they are disproportionately represented in AP classes (Ohrt, Lambie & Ieva, 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

While a lack of access is problematic for many reasons, a large setback is the spiral effect that lack of access to quality curriculum creates. For example, Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez (2005) note that the unequal access to academic preparation in schools can also limit accessibility to college. This in turn affects employment opportunities. If the opposite were true and access to AP courses was more equitable for Latinas, the results might be different as the research shows

that Latinos who engage in challenging courses have a greater chance of pursuing higher education and remaining persistent in comparison to their peers who take coursework that is less rigorous (Martinez & Kloppot, 2005). Additionally, denying access can convey a negative message of low expectations. Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) posit that low expectations can produce in Latino/a students the “internalization of failure, resignation on potential success, and fulfillment of negative self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 98). Moreover, while the academic struggles of Latinos cannot all be blamed on the problem of access, as much of their underachievement is caused by structures intended to sustain the power and privilege of the dominant culture, the reality is that inequitable access to advanced courses, such as AP or Honors courses, is one problematic factor with far reaching consequences.

### **The Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses**

While the initial intention of the Advanced Placement (AP) program was to provide students with a rigorous curriculum (Hallett & Venegas, 2011) to enhance their academic abilities, the benefits stemming from participation in the Advanced Placement program are far more numerous. For instance, research has demonstrated that students who participate in the AP program have a more satisfying high school experience (Flowers, 2008). Additionally, participation and success in AP classes serves as a good predictor of college readiness (Shiu et al., 2009) and AP participants have better odds of attending graduate school (Flowers, 2008; Shiu et al., 2009). According to Ginorio and Huston (2001), the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute in California “notes that the University of California campuses rank the number of AP courses and performance in them as the fourth criteria for selecting prospective students, so that students who are not given an opportunity to pursue these intensive courses are at a disadvantage” (p. 6).

Research also highlights the benefits that access to AP classes has for minorities, such as Latinos and African Americans, provided that, as Hallett & Venegas (2011) note, the classes are AP not only in title but in quality. For example, Flowers (2008) posits that in a comparison of Latino AP program participants and non-participants, results indicate that the Latino AP program participants score higher on college entrance examinations and are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree and often seek more advanced degrees. Moreover, Van Tassel-Baska (2001) as cited by Flowers (2008) states: "While Advanced Placement coursework may not be for every college-bound student, the program puts those students who choose it on a deliberate path toward the accrual of educational advantage in key areas of learning that can only over time enhance individual and societal educational progress" (p. 129).

### **Conclusion**

The review of the literature on the Catholic school advantage and single-sex schools as well as on Latinas' education and their challenges with access to high level learning illustrates a need for a study that looks beyond quantitative achievement data to assess what Latina students experience in a Catholic single-sex high school. Therefore, this study will assume a different approach by qualitatively exploring the issue of access for Latina students in an all-female Catholic single-sex high school. In so doing, the study aims to understand Latina students' experiences and perspectives regarding access to AP or Honors courses and to determine, in light of this, how the Catholic single-sex high school is meeting the needs of Latina students. Demographic projections estimate the Latino population will grow three times as much in the next four decades (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; US Census Bureau, 2011) and currently Latinas are the largest minority group (Ginorio & Huston, 2001) in the United States. To ignore this rapidly



growing group is not only unjust but foolish, given the inevitable impact such a large group will have on society. The information from this literature review will be used to craft the interview and focus group protocols that will be used for data collection and the theoretical framework of Catholic social teaching and Chicana feminist theory will be the lenses through which the data is analyzed. Chapter three will present the research questions, methodology, and data collection methods, and will also discuss how validity and reliability will be established.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

Much of the research on Catholic education, single-sex education, and Latina students' access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses is quantitative in nature and centered around achievement data (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993; Chouinard et al., 2008; Conger et al., 2009; Flowers, 2008; Higareda et al., 2011; Karpiak et al., 2007; Litton et al., 2010; Riordan, 1990; Sax et al., 2009; Shiu et al., 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004; Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). While this research is important, examining achievement data alone neither tells a complete story nor allows for the voices of the students attending these schools to be heard and documented. Moreover, this study gathered and examined different data by listening to the experiences and perspectives of Latina students with the intention of contributing insights to the existing research. The main purpose of this case study was to examine Latina students' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school by investigating the experiences and perspectives of students who have either been granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses. To that end, this study used a qualitative methodology and relied heavily on interviews to collect data that could give definition to Latina students' experience in Catholic single-sex education.

While this study contributes to the existing research, it also aimed to address matters of social justice. For one, Catholic schools at all levels have a mission of social justice that is grounded in the principles of Catholic social teaching (Byron, 1998). Recent research on the benefits of a Catholic education, especially for Latinos/as, is often based on achievement rates (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk, 1993; Higareda et al., 2011; Litton et al., 2010). These rates tell a

story about the Catholic education experience for students, but they do not tell all. Studies on Catholic education have not looked at whether all students have equitable access to the diverse academic levels, such as college preparatory or Advanced Placement/Honors courses, in the core curriculum. It is this relevant issue that needed to be examined in order to assess the Catholic education experience more wholly and a social justice mission more specifically. Likewise, some studies on female single-sex high schools reveal advantages, particularly for low-income minority youth (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Mael et al., 2005; Riordan, 1990; Sax et al., 2009). For instance, Riordan (1990) conducted a study on the effects of single-sex education on ethnic minority students and found that students in single-sex schools had higher achievement than their counterparts in coeducational settings. Similarly, Sax et al.'s (2009) study found that alumna from female single-sex schools exhibited higher self-confidence, social and political activism, and aspirations than their peers who graduated from coeducational schools. While high achievement and qualities such as improved self-confidence are notable, they do not speak to a school's ability to implement a mission of social justice via academic practices. This research study, however, examined whether Latinas have equitable access to high levels of learning, such as AP or Honors courses, in a Catholic single-sex high school. By addressing this issue and examining Latina students' experiences and perspectives on the subject, this study assessed how the Catholic single-sex high school is aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and AP advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access into the AP/Honors courses.

This chapter will begin by presenting the research questions, describing the research site, and discussing the overall design of the study. Then, the methodology, sampling method,

participants, site, procedures, and data analysis techniques will be detailed to provide a comprehensive description of how the research study will be conducted.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this study are:

- 1) What are the experiences of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
- 2) What are the perspectives of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?
- 3) How is one Catholic female single-sex high school aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course?

### **Research Site**

St. Mary's is a Catholic female single-sex high school located in the western United States and has an enrollment of 428 female students, 76% of whom identify as Catholic. While the geographic context in which the school is located is 40% Latino, St. Mary's Latino population is 18.9%, a number that indicates growth of the Latino population in the school in comparison to recent years, according to the schools "Student Community Profile" updated in 2012. St. Mary's has had a 100% graduation rate in the last five years and 91.7% of students are accepted into four-year colleges and universities. Students at St. Mary's are all enrolled in a regular program while Advanced Placement or Honors courses are also offered in different subjects. Specifically, the Advanced Placement program at St. Mary's is comprised of 20 AP courses. While most of these offerings are held on campus, five of the AP courses are made

possible through an online school with which St. Mary's has partnered. Given the highly specific type of participant required for this study—a Latina student in a single-sex high school who has appealed for access into an AP or Honors course—St. Mary's was selected as the research site because of the researcher's knowledge of students who meet the criteria that is under study.

## **Design**

### **Qualitative**

This investigation used a qualitative methodology which, according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), is “suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 7-8). Qualitative research, then, is an approach centered on discovery that facilitates the gathering of descriptions to understand meaning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Merriam, 2009). To date, much of the research on Catholic education is quantitative and focuses on achievement data (Bempechat et al., 2008; Bryk et al., 1993) which does not lend itself to documentation of student voice, specifically in areas of education that cannot be quantified yet add important dimensions to students' academic experiences. “Research approach follows research problem” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 7). The research problem in this study is that there appears to be no research on Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses in any sort of Catholic high school as well as documentation of their experiences. Thus, this study explored Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses in a Catholic female single-sex high school and documented the experiences and perspectives concerning their being granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses. As such, the voices of Latina students in this study need to be heard. A quantitative approach would not have effectively captured the rich

data that can emerge from qualitative techniques such as interviews. To capture this critical feedback, a qualitative approach was implemented. Specifically, testimonios were collected through the interview process.

**Testimonios: storytelling and naming.** Anzaldúa (2012) posits that the dark-skinned woman has been silenced and made invisible through the conquests of Spaniards, Anglos, and even her own people; consequently, women of color have had a similar anonymous experience where they are often not treated as subjects who can define their own realities or are subjected to the will of others, a paradigm Chicana feminist theory overturns (Flores, 2000). Excluding the history of women of color from texts and curriculum and dismissing their experiences in the conversation conveys a message that their stories do not matter and also prevents others from learning from them. Barring women of color from the typical means of creating and communicating knowledge has forced them to find alternatives, such as using narratives or storytelling to document and share their stories (Flores, 2000). Moreover, Anzaldúa (2012) posits that a Chicana identity is rooted in a history of resistance that dates back to the Aztecs; she notes that wailing “is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse” (p.55). Testimonios as storytelling is one way that resistance is exercised because as Córdova (1998) asserts: “To speak is to oppose. To give voice to emotions is to expose the sham of complicity. The act of deconstructing and reconstructing Chicana images is a subversive move against years of ideological mistreatment” (p. 382). In the act of sharing narratives in the native language, not only is language reclaimed, but the boundaries of the dominant and the other challenged (Bernal, 2001; Flores, 2000). The “center and margin positions are put into question when the language of the culture is inaccessible to

outsiders....when marginalized groups maintain their languages in their stories, they claim power” (Flores, 2000, p. 692).

Testimonios are a genre that is a cornerstone in the storytelling realm; they are rooted in Latin American oral tradition and human rights struggles (Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). Reyes & Rodríguez (2012) add that testimonios elicit a “conscientized reflection that is often spoken” (p. 525) and intended to be shared in order to illuminate wrongdoing or to incite collective action (Saavedra & Pérez, 2012; Soto et al., 2009). Testimonios, then, allow for those who are marginalized to name their reality and in so doing, to become empowered and create a greater consciousness (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). The heightened awareness that is created in naming and sharing this reality is both for the person sharing the testimonio as well as for the person listening to it or reading it. Therefore, testimonios are both political and intentional in nature (Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012; Soto et al., 2009) as its approach “elicits solidarity” (Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364; Correa & Lovegrove, 2012). In other words, to offer a testimonio and engage another in listening to it facilitates a partnership or solidarity. It is dialogical in nature. As Bernal et al. (2012) notes, “this type of interdependent solidarity allows people to connect across social positions, across differences, across language, across space, and across time” (p. 368).

The Spanish word “testimonio” when translated into English is defined as a testimony or something used as evidence. However, in a Chicana Feminist framework, a testimonio is not only a product, it is also a process (Bernal et al., 2012). The notion that the translated word loses some of its accuracy and potency illustrates that testimonio, a methodology not from the dominant culture, is powerful because it draws on the voices that have been shunned to the

margins. Its power lies in not adhering to Western ideas of dominant voice and individuality. Rather, when testimonios are used as a methodology, participants collaborate in knowledge construction by engaging their individual and collective identities (Bernal et al., 2012; Correa & Lovegrove, 2012; Soto et al., 2009); their flesh becomes theory (Moraga, 2002). In doing so, the testimonio challenges objectivity and assumptions and re-centers the story of marginalization compiled by the collective experiences of oppression (Bernal et al., 2006; Bernal et al., 2012; Soto et al., 2009). Additionally, because it counters traditional definitions of what truth and legitimate experiences are, insights emerge regarding how marginalized communities unite and respond to the cultural, political, historical, and individual oppressions (Bernal et al., 2012) they experience.

It is important to note that these testimonios capture the routine or everyday experiences of being a Chicana (Elenes, Gonzalez, Bernal, & Villenas, 2001; Flores, 2000) and yet have the power to challenge the pejorative dominant discourse because through the act of offering a testimonio or storytelling the storyteller is able to create a story with the elements she wants remembered—allowing Chicanas to produce knowledge, do without reliance on traditional means of sharing knowledge, and leave behind a story that previously was not acknowledged (Flores, 2000). Further, as Anzaldúa (2012) notes, the deconstruction and reconstruction of stories allows meaning to be established and therefore allows for transformation; of equal importance is Anzaldúa's (2012) idea that stories or testimonios are enacted each time they are told and because they are living, they create new life. As such, testimoniando or storytelling becomes a way to leave behind a counterstory and provides liberation from the falsehood of the dominant discourse (Flores, 2000).



**Cultural identity: An ongoing production.** By being relegated to the borders, Chicanas' identity development and Chicanas themselves are often hampered (Anzaldúa, 2012; Blea, 1992; Flores, 1996). Elenes (1997) posits that the concept of borderlands, the space of intersection between the multiple identities Chicanas possess, helps Chicanas construct their own concept of subjectivity and identity which is essential given the frequent marginalization they experience. First, using voice to give testimonios and tell their counternarratives is a decolonization practice that allows Chicanas to become the subjects of their stories instead of being subjected to a story that an outsider might craft about them (Flores, 1996; Flores, 2000). Like a Venn diagram, the point where the Chicanas multiple oppressions meet becomes the center of the story, counteracting colonial practices that have worked to push Chicanas to the margins of their boundaries or to make Chicanas invisible (Flores, 2000). Secondly, when Chicanas become the storyteller and the focus of the story, they begin to shape an identity, a mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2012), and their stories include the details they find relevant and accurate, allowing them an opportunity to eradicate essentialist dualisms (Flores, 1996; Flores, 2000).

### **Case Study**

Specifically, a case study approach was used for this investigation. Case studies examine a modern phenomenon in context and within delineated boundaries (Hatch, 2002), the latter of which Merriam (2009) posits is the most defining aspect of a case study. Additionally, a case study has more variables of interest than data points, uses several sources of evidence in order to achieve triangulation, and uses prior theoretical developments as a guide during the data collection and analysis process (Yin, 2009). The phenomenon under study was the examination

of Latina students' access to Advanced Placement or Honors courses in one Catholic female single-sex high school as well as the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to these courses. The boundaries of this study included examination only of Latinas who are current students or recent graduates of St. Mary's, the study of access to Advanced Placement or Honors courses for these Latina students, and a study of this phenomenon in only one Catholic single-sex high school. Further, through the use of multiple sources of evidence including a review of school documents and interviews with one administrator and two teachers, the researcher sought to achieve triangulation.

### **Process**

For this study, the researcher conducted research at St. Mary's, a single-sex Catholic high school for females in the western United States. This investigation relied primarily on semi-formal focused interviews, which are interviews that carry a conversational tone and are led by the researcher at a pre-determined date and time, usually tape-recorded, and semi-structured through the use of guiding questions from the interview protocol developed (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2009). Interviews are critical to case studies because interviewees can proffer important insights about the situation being studied and yet they should only be considered verbal reports which should be corroborated with data from other sources (Yin, 2009). To that end, the descriptive data that was gathered was used to corroborate and delve deeper into information gathered in interviews. Triangulation, establishing "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2009, p. 115), was achieved by using multiple methods of data collection and multiple data sources (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Specifically, the researcher interviewed eleven students (current or alumna), two teachers, and an administrator and compared unobtrusive data, namely the school's mission and

philosophy as well as printed material such as a course catalog, with information gathered during the semi-formal interviews. Additionally, the researcher compared or cross-checked “interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). The aforementioned methods were used to collect data that helped address the research questions and were implemented in phases. Each phase is described in the section that follows.

### **Phase One**

As a way of answering the main research questions, descriptive statistics were gathered in the first phase of the case study. These descriptive statistics focused on the number of AP and Honors courses offered at St. Mary’s, the number of Latina students enrolled in those courses in the last five years, as well as a breakdown of the ethnic composition of the school currently. This information was gathered by reviewing St. Mary’s course catalog, AP and Honors course rosters, and demographic data.

### **Phase Two**

In phase two of the study, the data needed to answer the research questions was collected by interviewing 11 students from St. Mary’s who followed the required AP or Honors admission procedures, were denied admission and then appealed this decision, and based on this appeal were either granted or denied access into the desired AP or Honors course(s). The student participants included both current students and alumnae as far back as the Class of 2006. Since each student’s trajectory and story varied, all 11 participants were interviewed once individually. The interview focused on each student’s experience of seeking access into an AP or Honors course and having been granted or denied access, as well as their perspectives regarding the

outcome for them. Following, an interview of the school principal who oversees academics at the school was conducted in order to learn about the procedures to gain access to Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors courses.

### **Phase Three**

In phase three of the study, two teachers who have granted and/or denied access to an AP/Honors course were interviewed. The information from these interviews was used to corroborate information on the procedures followed to gain access into advanced courses as well as to gain further context on the issue of access to AP/Honors courses for Latina students. Data from these interviews was used to triangulate data gathered from the student interviews.

### **Phase four**

After coding my data, it was evident that participants had not answered many of the interview questions with a Latina lens, an issue which will be discussed in Chapter five. In an attempt to give them another opportunity to bring their Latina consciousness to the fore, all eleven Latina participants were contacted again for a second interview. Alumnae were contacted initially via email and were invited to respond either via email or phone. Latina participants currently attending St. Mary's were invited for a second interview via email with a follow-up written invitation. Both groups were given a week to respond. One alumna responded requesting a phone interview and five of the current St. Mary's students scheduled a face-to-face interview. The remaining participants did not respond to the email invitation.

During the second round of interviews it was explained to participants that the initial interviews provided a wealth of information regarding their experiences and perspectives, but that the information did not necessarily reflect participants' Latina consciousness. Moreover,

they were told that this second round of interviews was being conducted to allow them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and perspectives through a Latina lens. Latinas were asked the following questions:

- 1) Do you think being a Latina student at St. Mary's impacted your experience with the AP/Honors process in any way?
- 2) Do you think being Latina impacted why you appealed for AP/Honors courses?
- 3) Do you think being Latina impacted how you went about appealing for AP/Honors courses?
- 4) Do you think that your being Latina impacted the ultimate decision on your placement?
- 5) How would you describe your experience of being a Latina at St. Mary's, which is predominantly a White, middle-class school?

The data in Chapter four reflects both entries into the field as does the discussion in Chapter five.

### **Gaining entry**

Since the researcher is an administrator at St. Mary's, the site where the research will be conducted, in order to gain access to St. Mary's high school the researcher first shared with the school principal her research interests. After some conversation, the researcher presented the principal with a formal request explaining the researcher's desire to interview and observe Latina students who currently attend or are alumnae of St. Mary's and who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses so that the researcher might examine their experiences and perspectives on having been granted or denied access. The principal was

assured that the name of the school would not be used and that the results of the study would be shared with the principal.

### **Participants**

Merriam (2009) posits that purposive sampling functions under the logic that the researcher wants to “discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). The researcher looked for Latina students who sought access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses by following the required procedures, were denied access, appealed this decision, and based on that appeal were either granted or denied access to the desired AP or Honors course. Given the specificity of the type of research participant needed and the researcher’s knowledge of students at St. Mary’s who fit this profile, purposive sampling was the method used to identify potential research participants. With the exception of the administrator and teachers to be interviewed, the participants for this study were Latinas who attend or have graduated from St. Mary’s Catholic female single-sex high school and who appealed for access into an Advanced Placement or Honors course. Additionally, much of the research on the benefits of Catholic education points to benefits for low-income minority youth. While class is not a factor examined specifically in this study, St. Mary’s diverse student body allowed the researcher to reference class during data analysis to see if any trends could be identified along those lines. This was done by reviewing what students reported as their family’s socioeconomic status on the personal data sheets that were completed prior to the interview, as well as any references they made to class or that could be inferred during interviews.

## **Participant Selection**

The process for identifying the research participants was challenging given the specific parameters set around using only participants who are Latina and who have appealed to be in an advanced course coupled with the fact that St. Mary's does not keep any records of student appeals for access into an advanced course. Additionally, freshman students were purposely excluded from the study because they are barely growing accustomed to the school and its practices and because of the limited amount of Advanced Placement courses that are offered at the freshman level, which further restricted the selection pool of participants. However, given the researcher's knowledge of students who met the criteria for this study the researcher first compiled a list of eligible students who were currently in attendance at St. Mary's and have appealed for access into an AP course. With a sample of only three Latina students who had appealed for an AP course, the researcher decided to contact the former Assistant Principal for Academics, current school principal, and current school advisors to solicit the names of any other Latina students they believed met the criteria of having appealed for an AP course; this did not yield any additional participants. Moreover, knowing that in years past students had appealed for Honors courses as well, the researcher expanded the criteria to include students who appealed for Honors courses, which have similar effects to AP courses, as well as to include alumnae of St. Mary's as far back as the class of 2006. This generated a sample of 11 students who fit the delineated description.

An invitational letter (Appendix A for students; Appendix B for alumna; Appendix C for Teachers/Administrator), which doubled as the Student Assent Form, a Parent/Guardian Consent Form (Appendix D), Alumna Consent Form (Appendix E), and Teacher/Administrator Consent

Form (Appendix F) were drafted to invite participants to this study. The informed consent letter explained the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection and the timeline for that, as well as the confidentiality the researcher would observe. Two copies of that letter (one for parent's, administrator, or teacher's records and one for the researcher's records) were mailed or emailed to each participant and were accompanied with a submission deadline. Consent forms from each participant were collected by the researcher before any data collection was initiated. Once received, the consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. To gain participants' trust, prior to beginning the interview the researcher reminded participants of the purpose of the study and informed each participant that they did not have to respond to any question they were uncomfortable with or that they did not want to answer. Additionally, the researched informed participants that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

### **Data collection method**

Prior to data collection, an extensive review of literature was conducted to understand the problem; the methodology emerged from the literature as the best way to find answers to the research questions and hence, potential solutions to the problem. However, as Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) argue "the literature is not data to be collected" (p. 67). Instead, data will be collected through descriptive statistics, personal data sheets completed prior to interviews, interviews, and the researcher's journal. Varied resources were consulted and diverse data collection methods used, which has been proven to strengthen triangulation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Gay et al., 2009; Yin, 2009). It should be noted that since the researcher knows the participants' identities, confidentiality was maintained by not disclosing the participants'



identities (Gay et al., 2009). Rather, in an effort to maintain the lowest risk to participants, participant-selected pseudonyms were used. Likewise, interviews were conducted at times most convenient for students so as to not impact their academic schedule.

### **Descriptive Statistics and Data**

To create a detailed context for the research study, the researcher used descriptive statistics and data. “Statistics is simply a set of procedures for describing, synthesizing, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative data” (Gay et al., 2009). Moreover, the researcher collected descriptive statistics on the ethnic composition of the entire campus and the representation of Latinas in the AP and Honors classes offered at St. Mary’s High School. While the overall ethnic composition of the campus was determined by reviewing the school’s most recent Student Community Profile, the researcher had to access course rosters and demographic data to determine the ethnic composition of AP and Honors classes. Given that information regarding ethnicity was recorded in the school’s online school information system beginning with the Class of 2010, the Latina representation in AP/Honors courses for students in the Class of 2009 was determined by using students’ last names as well as the researcher’s knowledge of Latina students in the Class of 2009. For the Class of 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, the information students self-reported concerning their ethnicity was available through the online school information system so this was used as AP/Honors course rosters for each of these classes was reviewed. The descriptive data that was gathered was related to the number of AP/Honors courses offered and the procedures students must follow to gain access into an AP/Honors course. Some of this information was gathered through documents such as the school’s course catalog while other information was collected from the administrator and teacher interviews.

**Personal data sheets.** Merriam (2009) notes that there are six types of interview questions that can encourage conversation between an interviewer and interviewee, and one of those involves questions regarding background or demographic information. This type of information can also be gathered through personal data sheets which facilitates arranging this information into a demographic matrix (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), as shown in Appendix H. Thus, prior to beginning the interviews each participant was asked to complete a personal data sheet. The data sheet asked information pertaining to ethnicity, age, grade level, socioeconomic status, family background, and parent/guardian education background. The information gathered from personal data sheets was used for students to self-identify as Latina, to verify information, as well as to provide a better understanding of where each participant was coming from. A sample personal data sheet can be found in Appendix G.

**Interviews.** Each of the 14 participants (11 current students alumnae, one administrator, and two teachers) were scheduled for an individual one-hour long interview with the researcher. To minimize interruptions to the participants' academic schedule and to facilitate attendance, the interviews of current students were scheduled for a school day after dismissal and some were pushed into the summer months when students were on vacation because this allowed students to sit for an interview without the stress of their school demands. Interview of participants who were alumnae were conducted over the summer at a mutually agreeable date and time. Most alumnae interviews, with the exception of one, had to be conducted over the phone as these participants were in a different part of the state due to college or work commitments. The administrator and teacher interviews were scheduled during a free period that these adults had so as to not impact their work schedules. Since the researcher is an administrator at the research

site, the interviews took place in the researcher's office. Prior to beginning the interview the researcher asked the student/alumnae participants to complete a personal data sheet. Then, focused interviews, following pre-written guiding questions took place. These guiding questions, while creating some structure, allowed for the interview to be open ended and conversational in tone (Yin, 2009).

The interviews were recorded with a digital audio-recording device, provided that the participant, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) deem necessary, had granted permission to be recorded. All participants, including the school officials, were asked for their permission to audio record the interview prior to beginning the interview. Recordings "provide a more accurate rendition of any interview than any other method" (Yin, 2009, p. 109) and allowed the researcher to create a transcription that is exact. Additionally, during the interview as well as immediately after, the researcher recorded any thoughts, questions, or reactions in the researcher's journal (Hatch, 2002). Following each interview the researcher transcribed the interview by listening to the audio recording and typing out the transcription verbatim using Microsoft Word. Once all interviews were transcribed the researcher began coding. The interview protocol used with students/alumna, teachers, and the administrator can be found in Appendix I, Appendix J, and Appendix K, respectively.

**Researcher's journal.** The researcher kept a researcher's journal throughout the course of the study. In this journal the researcher recorded notes, thoughts, insights, questions, and reactions during the data collection process. The researcher journaled during and after the document analysis process as well as during and after each interview. Doing so aided the researcher in remaining as objective as possible during the data collection process because rather

than allowing the insights or reactions that surface to develop into leading questions during the interview, the researcher kept those thoughts to herself without influencing what participants might say.

### **Data analysis**

Hatch (2002) defines data analysis as the “systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others” (p. 148). The researcher began data analysis by first transcribing all interviews. As has been aforementioned, the transcriptions of each interview were verbatim to allow for the most complete data set possible. Following the transcription, each interview transcript was read so a coding system, as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), could be established. Such a coding system required that the researcher read through the data to identify any patterns or topics and to write down words or phrases, also known as coding categories, to represent these patterns or topics; the researcher then created a key containing a list of all coding categories or themes established (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Next, interview transcripts were read again, this time coding units of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Then, the researcher began to synthesize her analysis.

### **Validity**

#### **Triangulation**

Yin (2009) proposes that a distinguishing strength of case study data collection is the use of several sources of evidence; multiple data collection methods are also linked with effective means of triangulating data (Merriam, 2009). This case study relied on school documents, 11 Latina students who attend or are alumna of St. Mary’s as well as one administrator and two

teachers who have granted/denied access to advanced courses as its sources of evidence. The methods by which data was collected also varied and included document analysis and interviews. The researcher not only hoped to gain a clear understanding of the context, but also to corroborate information through the use of several different sources and methods to strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Merriam, 2009).

### **Member checks**

Member checks, which is the sharing of the findings that are emerging with some of the research participants (Merriam, 2009), help ensure internal validity. To that end, interview transcriptions were shared with the research participants for their verification of accuracy. The researcher emailed each participant a copy of their individual interview transcript and asked them to verify for accuracy as well as allowed them the opportunity to add or delete content. Each participant was given a deadline and the researcher noted in her email that if no response was received by the deadline, this confirmed that their check was verified.

### **Peer debriefing**

Peer-debriefing, interacting with other professionals to assess the soundness of insights throughout the research process (Gay et al., 2009), was used to strengthen interpretive validity. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), in their discussion of peer-debriefing, state: "This process involves asking a colleague to examine your field notes and then ask you questions that will help you examine your assumptions and/or consider alternative ways of looking at data" (p. 77 & 78). To that end, the researcher asked a colleague at St. Mary's and who is also a colleague in Loyola Marymount University's doctoral program with her, to function as the peer that she could debrief with throughout the research process.

## **Positionality**

“Qualitative researchers attempt to seek out their own subjective states and their effects on data, but they never believe they are completely successful. All researchers are affected by observers’ bias” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such, the researcher finds it imperative to disclose her biases which may affect the interpretation of data in the section that follows.

First, the researcher is a Catholic Latina who attended Catholic coeducational elementary school and high school. Overall, her experience within the Catholic school system was positive, though there were instances that in retrospect have caused her to question whether her experience or that of other students was truly equitable. While the researcher is a proponent of Catholic education, particularly because of the quality of education offered to and the values instilled in students, she also believes that Catholic schools need to be viewed through a critical lens so as to consistently assess whether they are upholding a mission of social justice to the fullest extent. Additionally, the researcher has spent the last nine years working at the research site which is a Catholic single-sex high school for females. Beginning her time at St. Mary’s as a teacher and now currently serving as an administrator there the researcher has gained an appreciation for the single-sex experience and is a proponent of single-sex education for females. Lastly, as a Latina who understands the experience of being a female ethnic minority working to defy stereotypes and challenge deficit-laden statistics, the researcher has a vested interest in ensuring that Latina students attending St. Mary’s receive a quality education complete with equitable opportunities that can facilitate their success.

## **Limitations**

While steps were taken to ensure validity and reliability, this study also has obvious limitations. A limitation is a factor that the researcher cannot control yet may negatively affect the study; it is imperative that such limitations are openly and honestly disclosed so that readers can determine for themselves the degree to which these limitations impact the study (Gay et al. 2009).

The limitations of this study include sample size, site demographics, and the role and positionality of the researcher. In reference to the sample size in the study, while the proposed sample includes 11 student or alumnae participants, if any participant denies participation or drops out part way through the research study, this creates a reduced sample of participants from whom to collect data from. Another limitation is the school site demographics. Since St. Mary's is comprised of a predominantly middle to upper middle class Caucasian female population the generalizability of the results can be limited. Lastly, the researcher serves as the Assistant Principal for Academics at the research site which may have influenced how students or teachers responded to the researcher during interviews. To minimize the interference that this can have on student and teacher response, the researcher followed a script and interview questions from a protocol to create a more standardized approach to all interviews. In a related manner, the researcher's positionality, as has been aforementioned, may also be a limitation. However, the researcher disclosed this information to be transparent about how her biases may influence her interpretation of data.

## **Conclusion**

The first three chapters presented here constituted the researcher's proposal. As such, background to the study was provided, an extensive literature review conducted, and a methodology established. While this proposal underwent committee review and recommendations, the core aim of the study which was to explore the issue of access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses for Latina students attending a single-sex female high school remained intact.

Loyola Marymount University's School of Education goals have at their core a mission of social justice that recognizes and respects the value and dignity of each individual, and as such promotes cultural responsiveness (LMU Dissertation Guide, 2010-2011). Therefore, this study aimed to fulfill the same goals. This study sought to examine what the experiences and perspectives are of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses. In so doing, young women who are often marginalized because of gender and race were able to share their voice, creating an understanding that can illuminate educational practices and foster greater equity moving forward.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study has been to examine Latinas' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses at St. Mary's High School, a Catholic female single-sex high school located in Southern California. Specifically, this study explored what Latinas experience when they are granted or denied access to AP/Honors courses, what the perspectives of Latina students are after having been granted or denied access into AP/Honors courses, and how the Catholic single-sex high school under research is aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course.

This chapter will begin with a presentation of the descriptive data collected. Descriptive data includes the philosophy of the school, with emphasis on how it applies to AP/Honors courses, AP/Honors course offerings, as well as school and course enrollment data, with particular data highlighted on the ethnic composition of both. Additionally, information regarding the procedures for admission into AP/Honors courses and appealing to get into such courses will be presented. Following, participant descriptions, based on data reported on the personal data sheet participants completed, will be provided prior to presenting the qualitative data gathered from participants. The chapter will conclude with a presentation of the findings regarding Latinas' experiences and perspectives based on whether they have been granted or denied access into AP/Honors courses and a discussion of how, according to the data gathered, St. Mary's aligns to the Catholic, single-sex, and AP advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access into AP/Honors courses.

## **Descriptive Data**

To understand St. Mary's landscape regarding AP/Honors courses, and to be better able to fully inform the research question regarding students' experiences, several phases of data collection were implemented and analyzed. In phase one, unobtrusive data such as the school's mission and philosophy as well as printed documents were collected and studied. Additionally, descriptive statistics concerning overall enrollment and ethnic composition of the school as well as enrollment and Latina representation in Advanced Placement and Honors courses were gathered. Lastly, the school's principal, the person responsible for overseeing the academic program of the school, was interviewed in order to learn about the procedures to gain access to Advanced Placement (AP) or Honors courses.

### **Philosophy of AP/Honors Courses**

St. Mary's mission is rooted in a Catholic Christian tradition and as such promotes a commitment to Catholic social teaching (CST). According to St. Mary's 2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook, the school's mission, inspired by the mission of the founding religious order, as well as the school philosophy, encourage its young women to reach for excellence in all areas of their lives so that they might use this excellence not only for their own benefit but for the betterment of the world and the lives of others. In the philosophy of the school there is a clear call for young women to not only master subject matter, but to inquire beyond the superficial, as well as for the entire St. Mary's community to uphold the Catholic practice of valuing the dignity and potential of every human life (St. Mary's 2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook).

According to St. Mary's 2012-2013 Course Catalog, the St. Mary's course of study centers on traditional college preparatory courses as well as a number of elective courses in performing, visual, or practical arts, physical education, or particular academic areas. Aside from regular courses (there are no remedial courses offered), St. Mary's offers Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors levels of education. Central to all the levels of education that St. Mary's offers and to the placement of students at these various levels is the intention of seeking out "the full potential of every student" (St. Mary's 2012-2013 Course Catalog). Specifically, at advanced courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors are intended for students who have exhibited a strong foundation in basic skills and an affinity and aptitude in a particular subject area (St. Mary's 2012-2013 Course Catalog). With AP courses in particular, the objectives of engaging in such a level of study include participating in an educational experience that can enhance intellectual inquiry and prepare students to be able to conduct independent investigation, gaining exposure to a college-like culture of studying, having the opportunity to earn advanced standing at the college level by passing AP examinations that fulfill lower division requirements, and being able to present a stronger academic record when applying for college admission (St. Mary's 2012-2013 Course Catalog).

In regards to advanced course offerings, St. Mary's offers 16 Honors courses and 20 AP courses. Five of the latter are made possible through a special partnership that St. Mary's has with an online school. The 2012-2013 AP and Honors course offerings, as illustrated in Table 1, all receive an additional grade point when calculated into a student's grade point average (St. Mary's 2012-2013 Course Catalog).

Table 1

*2012-2013 Advanced Placement and Honors Course Offerings*

Subject	Honors	Advanced Placement
English	English I H	AP English Language and Composition
	English II H	AP English Literature and Composition
Mathematics	Algebra I H	AP Calculus AB
	Geometry H	AP Calculus BC
	Algebra II/Trigonometry H	AP Statistics*
	Calculus H	AP Computer Science*
Modern Language	French I H	AP French Language
	French II H	AP Spanish Language
	French III H	AP Spanish Literature
	Spanish I H	
	Spanish II H	
	Spanish III H	
Performing Arts		AP Music Theory*
Science	Biology H	AP Biology
	Chemistry H	AP Chemistry
	Physics H	AP Physics B
Social Science	World History/Geography H	AP European History
		AP United States History
		AP Government and Politics
		AP Macroeconomics*
		AP Psychology*
Visual Arts		AP Drawing Portfolio
		AP 2-D Design Portfolio

*Note.* Courses marked with an \* are courses provided through the online school. H=Honors; AP= Advanced Placement

**Enrollment and Ethnic Composition for the School and AP/Honors Courses**

St. Mary's High School resides in a demographic area that has a 1.8 million population of which 40% is Latino, 41% is White, 11% is Asian, 3% is African American/Black, and 5% is

other or a blend of 2 or more races (St. Mary’s High School WCEA/WASC 2012 Focus on Learning Report). The 2012 Census Report for St. Mary’s High School indicates that the school is comprised of 428 female students, of which 77.1% are Catholic and 22.9% are non-Catholic. School enrollment broken down by grade level and ethnic composition can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

*2012 School enrollment by grade level and ethnic composition*

Grade	Ethnicity	% enrolled
9	Native American	0%
	Filipino	1%
	Asian	4%
	African American	2%
	Hispanic/Latino	17%
	White	75%
10	Native American	0%
	Filipino	7%
	Asian	0%
	African American	3%
	Hispanic/Latino	21%
	White	69%
11	Native American	2%
	Filipino	2%
	Asian	3%
	African American	4%
	Hispanic/Latino	19%
	White	72%
12	Native American	0%
	Filipino	0%
	Asian	7%
	African American	4%
	Hispanic/Latino	19%
	White	71%

*Note.* Percentages are rounded up and therefore total % enrolled may not equal 100%.

As can be seen in Table 2, while next to Whites, though Hispanic/Latinas comprise the largest ethnic group at the school (exceeding 15% at every grade level for 2012, but only exceeding 20% at grade 10), it still does not represent the demographic area where the school resides.

A review of enrollment data illustrated that it was not often that Latina enrollment in the Honors or AP English, Science, Social Science courses reached even 15%, which is a clear deficit considering the average 19% enrollment for the school as a whole. For example, across all five graduating classes, from 2009-2013, Latina enrollment in AP/Honors English courses exceeded 15% only for the Class of 2012 (see Table 3). And, the Class of 2012 started at a mere 2% Latina enrollment in the English I Honors course even though Latinas comprised 17% of the students in that grade level that year. While Latina enrollment spiked to 20% for English II Honors in 2009-2010 for the Class of 2012, it dropped to 17% and 18% for AP English III and AP English IV, respectively.

In Science, as shown in Table 4, Latina enrollment exceeded 15% occasionally, but not consistently for every graduating class or for every subject offered. For example, the Class of 2011 started off with a mere 4% of Latinas in Integrated Science Honors. In the Class of 2011's sophomore year, Latinas comprised 5% of students enrolled in advanced Biology. And, while there was a spike of Latinas in the Class of 2011's junior year where Latinas were 10% of the total advanced science classes in that year, that quickly plummeted to 4% of Latinas in advanced science in that class's senior year. Similarly, for the Class of 2012, Latina student enrollment in the freshman Integrated Science course began at 29% and in this class's sophomore year, while Latinas represented 21% of the total advanced Biology enrollment, the 8% decrease in Latinas enrollment in advanced science is significant. Additionally, Latinas in the Class of 2013

comprised 19% of the total advanced Chemistry enrollment. However, their enrollment in advanced science courses in years prior or following was below 15%. Further, Latina enrollment in advanced science courses for the Classes of 2009 and 2011 never even reached 15%.

Table 3

*Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement English courses*

Class of	School Year	Course	% of Latinas in course	% of Latinas in grade level
2009	2005-2006	English I H	12%	14%
	2006-2007	English II	10%	13%
	2007-2008	AP English III	8%	14%
	2008-2009	AP English IV	6%	15%
2010	2006-2007	English I H	11%	19%
	2007-2008	English II H	10%	16%
	2008-2009	AP English III	13%	16%
	2009-2010	AP English IV	14%	16%
2011	2007-2008	English I H	7%	14%
	2008-2009	English II H	10%	15%
	2009-2010	AP English III	10%	14%
	2010-2011	AP English IV	10%	15%
2012	2008-2009	English I H	2%	17%
	2009-2010	English II H	22%	16%
	2010-2011	AP English III	17%	17%
	2011-2012	AP English IV	18%	18%
2013	2009-2010	English I H	13%	15%
	2010-2011	English II H	10%	19%
	2011-2012	AP English III	13%	18%
	2012-2013	AP English IV	13%	19%

*Note.* H=Honors; AP= Advanced Placement

Table 4

*Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement Science courses*

Class of	School Year	Course	% of Latinas in course	% of Latinas in grade level
2009	2005-2006	Physical Science H*	10%	
		Chemistry H*	0%	
	2005-2006	Total advanced science	10%	14%
	2006-2007	Chemistry H*	11%	
	2006-2007	AP Chemistry*	0%	
	2006-2007	Physics H*	0%	
	2006-2007	AP Physics*	0%	
	2006-2007	Total advanced science	10%	13%
	2007-2008	Biology H*	7%	
	2007-2008	AP Biology*	0%	
	2007-2008	AP Physics*	11%	
	2007-2008	Total advanced science	7%	14%
	2008-2009	Physics H*	7%	
	2008-2009	AP Physics C*	11%	
2008-2009	Total advanced science	9%	15%	
2010	2006-2007	Integrated Science H	7%	19%
	2007-2008	Biology H*	17%	
	2007-2008	AP Biology*	17%	
	2007-2008	Total advanced biology	17%	16%
	2008-2009	AP Chemistry*	50%	
	2008-2009	Total advanced chemistry	18%	16%
	2009-2010	Physics H*	17%	
	2009-2010	AP Physics B*	22%	
2009-2010	Total advanced physics	19%	16%	
2011	2007-2008	Integrated Science H	4%	14%
	2008-2009	Biology H*	8%	
	2008-2009	AP Biology*	0%	



Class of	School Year	Course	% of Latinas in course	% of Latinas in grade level
	2008-2009	Total advanced biology	5%	15%
	2009-2010	Chemistry H*	6%	
	2009-2010	AP Chemistry*	0%	
	2009-2010	Physics H*	50%	
	2009-2010	AP Physics B*	0%	
	2009-2010	Total advanced science	10%	14%
	2010-2011	Chemistry H*	25%	
	2010-2011	AP Chemistry*	0%	
	2010-2011	Physics H*	0%	
	2010-2011	AP Physics B*	0%	
	2010-2011	Total advanced physics	4%	15%
2012	2008-2009	Integrated Science H	29%	17%
	2009-2010	Biology H*	20%	
	2009-2010	AP Biology*	22%	
	2009-2010	Total advanced biology	21%	16%
	2010-2011	Chemistry H*	14%	
	2010-2011	AP Chemistry*	0%	
	2010-2011	Total advanced chemistry	13%	17%
	2011-2012	Physics H*	7%	
	2011-2012	AP Physics B*	30%	
	2011-2012	Total advanced physics	14%	18%
2013	2009-2010	Integrated Science H	11%	15%
	2010-2011	Biology H*	13%	
	2010-2011	AP Biology*	17%	

Class of	School Year	Course	% of Latinas in course	% of Latinas in grade level
	2010-2011	Total advanced biology	14%	19%
	2011-2012	Chemistry H*	17%	
	2011-2012	AP Chemistry*	25%	
	2011-2012	Total advanced chemistry	19%	18%
	2012-2013	AP Physics B*	25%	
	2012-2013	Total advanced physics	13%	19%

Note. H=Honors; AP= Advanced Placement

<sup>a</sup>Students from the Class of 2009 were mixed in to AP/Honors science courses at all grade levels. Beginning with the Class of 2010 this mixing no longer happened.

<sup>b</sup>There are different AP/Honors courses available yearly. The “Total advanced science”, “Total advanced Biology”, “Total advanced Chemistry”, or “Total advanced Physics” categories provide the total number of Latinas enrolled in AP/Honors science courses for a given year.

<sup>c</sup>Courses marked with an asterisk were combined to determine the total number of Latinas in an advanced course for that subject area (Ex: Latina enrollment for Biology H and AP Biology were combined to determine the number of Latinas in “Total advanced biology”).

Lastly, enrollment data for Social Science courses, as shown in Table 5, illustrates that Latina enrollment in Honors or AP Social Science courses for the Class of 2012 was consistently over 15%. Likewise, Latina enrollment in AP US History reached 17% and in AP Government/Economics 18% for the Class of 2013. However, Latina representation for the Class of 2013 in the courses that preceded the aforementioned began with 11% in World History and Geography Honors and 14% in AP European History. And, while the Class of 2012 and 2013 saw some improved representation of Latinas in advanced Social Science courses, the Classes of 2009, 2010, and 2011 consistently did not. Moreover, as this data illustrates, Latinas are underrepresented in AP/Honors courses more often than not. Of particular concern are the points in the data where Latinas begin high school sorely underrepresented in the advanced courses or where their enrollment decreases from one year to the next.

Table 5

*Latina students' enrollment in Honors or Advanced Placement Social Science courses*

Class of	School Year	Course	% of Latinas in course	% of Latinas in grade level
2009	2005-2006	World History/Geography H	12%	14%
	2006-2007	AP European History	10%	13%
	2007-2008	AP United States History	11%	14%
	2008-2009	AP Government and Politics	11%	15%
2010	2006-2007	World History/Geography H	12%	19%
	2007-2008	AP European History	12%	16%
	2008-2009	AP United States History	12%	16%
	2009-2010	AP Government and Politics	13%	16%
2011	2007-2008	World History/Geography H	7%	14%
	2008-2009	AP European History	13%	15%
	2009-2010	AP United States History	10%	14%
	2010-2011	AP Government and Politics	7%	15%
2012	2008-2009	World History/Geography H	17%	17%
	2009-2010	AP European History	19%	16%
	2010-2011	AP United States History	17%	17%
	2011-2012	AP Government and Politics	19%	18%
2013	2009-2010	World History/Geography H	11%	15%
	2010-2011	AP European History	14%	19%
	2011-2012	AP United States History	17%	18%
	2012-2013	AP Government and Politics	18%	19%

*Note.* H=Honors; AP= Advanced Placement

Another finding highlighted by the data on Latina enrollment is that in Science when there was an option between an Honors or AP science course for a given year, 6 out of the

sixteen times when this was possible there were more Latinas in the Honors Science courses over the AP Science courses. For example, in the freshmen year for the Class of 2009, Latinas comprised 10% of enrollment in Honors science courses. While other freshmen had enrolled in Chemistry Honors, Latinas were enrolled only in the lower level Physical Science Honors, the traditional freshmen level Honors Science course. No Latinas were in the most advanced freshmen science course. Further, in the sophomore year for this class, while there were sophomores taking AP Chemistry and AP Physics as well as Chemistry Honors and Physics Honors, Latinas comprised 11% of enrollment but all for Chemistry Honors, once again the lowest level of advanced science class. In the junior year for this class, Latina juniors were only represented in the Biology Honors option at 7% with no Latinas taking AP Biology; here again Latinas were not enrolled in the most advanced classes. Similarly, for the Class of 2011, there were more Latinas enrolled in Honors than AP science courses. For instance, in 2008-2009 for the Class of 2011, Latinas comprised 8% of the Biology Honors course although there were 0% Latinas in the AP Biology course. In 2009-2010, there were 0% Latinas in both the AP Chemistry and AP Physics B courses. And, in 2010-2011, the Class of 2011's senior year, Latinas were 25% of Chemistry Honors students, but again were not represented at all in the AP Chemistry, Physics Honors, or AP Physics B courses.

This saturation of Latinas in Honors versus AP courses was not as marked in the English courses or the Social Science courses. The only exceptions were for the Class of 2009. In this class, Latinas were 12% of English I Honors and 10% in English II Honors and then dropped to 8% in AP English III and 6% in AP English IV. Similarly, for the Class of 2009 Latinas were 12% of the World History/Geography Honors course and then were 10% of AP European

History, and 11% of AP US History and AP Government/Economics. While the drop in Latina enrollment from Honors to AP Social Science courses may not be as striking, it is still important to note that Latina enrollment was higher in Honors than AP for the Class of 2009.

### **Procedures to Gain Admission into AP/Honors Courses for Current Students**

School documents including the 2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook and the 2012-2013 Course Catalog, which provide academic information and details on school policies and procedures, were reviewed. This review did not turn up any written record of the procedures followed in order to determine AP/Honors placement for current students currently in college-preparatory courses and seeking placement in advanced courses for the following year. Moreover, the lack of published information regarding the placement and appeals procedures supports students' belief that this information was hidden. For instance, Susan noted that while she spoke to numerous adults about trying to get into the advanced English course: "there was no appeals process for it or at least I wasn't told about the appeals process" (Susan's Interview, p. 4). And, when Monica was asked if she believed it was well known that students could appeal their placement decision she stated: "I could be totally wrong but I'm not sure if the teachers would like the students to know that they could do that" (Monica's Interview, p. 17).

Given the lack of published information, information on the procedures that are followed in order to determine which students obtain placement in AP/Honors courses was gathered from what the teachers, both of whom have granted and denied access to an AP/Honors course to students in the past, said in their interviews. This was triangulated with what the school principal, the primary overseer of the academic program of the school, said in her interview as

well as my own personal knowledge and experience as the Assistant Principal for Academics at St. Mary's High School.

When asked to describe the levels of curriculum that St. Mary's offers as well as how student placement is determined, Mrs. O'Sullivan, the school principal, first stated that the school provides a college preparatory curriculum to all of its students. Additionally, she noted that courses in more advanced levels, such as Honors, are available for most core curricular areas for students who meet certain criteria. According to Mrs. O' Sullivan, student placement is reviewed when students begin to select their courses for the coming year. For those students interested in transitioning into an AP or Honors course for the following year, she says:

We do have placement tests that are given by various departments, not every department, but various departments and then the conversation regarding the student and the student's current work—their scores in the classroom, their work habits, and their results on that placement test—play into their ability to be placed into an Honors program. (Mrs. O' Sullivan's Interview, p. 1)

As an administrator at the school I can verify that not all departments require placement tests and that this can change from year to year. For instance, English, History, and Science departments have consistently required a placement test, while Mathematics and Modern Language departments have vacillated between requiring a placement test or not. Ultimately, the decision to require or not require a placement test is made by individual departments. Additionally, there are some inconsistencies. First, determining what test is given is a departmental, and sometimes teacher, decision. An example of this is the English department who traditionally selects a practice SAT reading comprehension passage and couples that with a

writing component. However, the passage and writing prompt varies for placement into English II Honors, AP English III, or AP English IV and decisions about assignment of these passages and writing prompts to each level is made by the department chair in conversation with the respective grade level teacher. Conversely, in the Science department the Biology teacher, Chemistry teacher, and Physics teacher each write and give their own tests. This is true in the Social Science department as well. Secondly, while teachers review the placement test results and make recommendations as to who should be moved into the advanced class and who should not, occasionally the department chair and/or myself, as the Assistant Principal for Academics, overturn teacher decisions. Thus, there is no uniform process that St. Mary's uses for determining student placement into AP/Honors courses.

The lack of uniformity that exists in the procedures to determine student placement in AP/Honors courses was confirmed by the teachers varied perceptions on what is involved in the placement procedure. For example, Mrs. Crawford, a science teacher, noted that in her department aside from the placement test, the department also reviews a student's "performance in the class the previous year" (Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 1). Further information considered includes recommendations from the previous math and science teacher, sometimes even from the English teacher who can attest to the student's reading skills, and the grade in the current class, noted Mrs. Crawford. Similarly, Mrs. Smith, a teacher in the English department, expressed that the placement test is one way that students may try to move up. While she did note that her department's goal is to open the opportunity up to everyone who has a chance of passing the AP test in later years, she also added: "they have to have a fairly rigorous score in that out of 20 testing we probably accept four or five. So, it's not a shoe in just by taking this placement test"

(Mrs. Smith's Interview, p. 1). Thus, seeking admission into an AP or Honors course any time after freshman year is like trying to hit a moving target since the criteria needing to be met varies and changes by department and sometimes from year to year. Is the procedure followed for the placement of incoming freshman more consistent?

### **Procedures to Gain Admission into AP/Honors Courses for Incoming Freshman**

The principal indicated that the initial placement of incoming freshmen is determined during the admissions process by members of the admissions committee, which include the principal and Assistant Principal for Academics. This is later confirmed with the student and her family during registration. To gain a fuller sense of this picture it is important to understand the admissions process. As a member of the admissions committee at St. Mary's I am aware that any student interested in attending St. Mary's High School as a freshman must submit an application to even be considered. Once the application is submitted, a file for that student is created and over the course of a few weeks the student is required to submit a record of her baptismal certificate and to have her junior high transcripts mailed to St. Mary's along with rating forms from two of her junior high teachers (which are also signed off by the junior high principal). Additionally, that student must take the High School Placement Test (HSPT) offered on St. Mary's campus on a designated day and complete an interview with a St. Mary's school official. When the results of the HSPT are mailed back to St. Mary's the "admissions process" begins and entails a committee of four or five St. Mary's administrators reviewing each student's individual file and test results in order to determine if the student is accepted into the school.

Once a decision has been made to accept a student into the school, the next step becomes determining her course sequence—regular courses or AP/Honors courses—for the coming year.



So how does a student qualify for the advanced courses? According to Mrs. O' Sullivan, "placement is done based on their entrance exam scores coupled with their seventh and eighth grade record and conversation with the student and her family at the registration table" (Mrs. O' Sullivan's Interview, p. 1). Mrs. Smith provided more specifics on the process and noted that incoming freshmen scoring in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile on components of the test applicable to a specific subject matter, such as verbal ability, reading comprehension, and vocabulary for an Honors English class, receive "an automatic in to freshman honors" (Mrs. Smith's Interview, p. 1). This, Mrs. Smith said, is almost a surefire guarantee into the AP English courses available in a student's junior and senior year. Moreover, meeting the defined criteria for placement appeared to be the starting point for the placement process.

A review of the 2012-2013 Admissions Criteria and Ninth Grade Honors Placement Criteria confirmed that to qualify for Honors courses incoming freshmen need to score in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile on the entrance exam and have a strong seventh and eighth grade academic record; this is information that validated what the principal and English teacher reported. However, the 2012-2013 Ninth Grade Honors Placement Criteria document also noted that in some cases departmental approval is required or that the student must also pass an additional proficiency test. This information was not shared by either the principal or teacher and revealed another layer of criteria.

From my experience as administrator and admissions committee member at St. Mary's, I can attest to the fact that the reference to departmental approval comes from the procedure that was followed up until 2011-2012. Prior to that, after the admissions committee reviewed all files and determined who was accepted into the school and who was not, the test results for all

students who scored a composite score in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on the HSPT were given to individual department chairwomen/men. They then reviewed the scores to identify students who earned an 85% or higher on the areas of the test that were relevant to their subject matter. For instance, English, Modern Language, and Social Science department chairwomen/men looked at verbal ability, reading comprehension, and vocabulary scores and if the student averaged an 85% or higher in those areas she qualified for Honors courses in those disciplines. Math and Science department chairwomen/men looked at the cognitive quantitative and math scores and if the student averaged an 85% or higher in those areas she qualified for Honors courses in those disciplines. However, students scoring below an 85% average in those areas, even if they were at an 84%, were often not considered for Honors. For example, in a review of 2008, 2009, and 2010 High School Placement Test Results and current AP/Honors course rosters, it became evident that five Latina students who are currently in an AP/Honors course were not initially placed into Honors. As matter of fact, a recent Latina graduate scored an 88% on the verbal section, an 88% on the language section, and a 47% on the reading section of the test. The latter score pulled her overall average score in those areas down precluding her from the Honors English, History, and Modern Language courses in her freshman year. Similarly, a current junior who earned an 89% on the reading section, a 96% on the language section, and a 47% on the verbal section of the test was also kept out of the English, History, and Modern Language courses in her freshman year, particularly because of the 47% that brought down her overall average. Given how cut and dry this practice was and its effects of overlooking potentially eligible students, in 2011-2012 the admissions committee decided to place students into their courses as part of the admissions process. This allowed the committee to consider students who

may not have had an exact 85% in certain areas of the test, but whose academic record otherwise showed great promise, an opportunity to take Honors courses.

The reference to passing an additional placement test, another layer of criteria, refers to the Math department specifically. Once it is decided if a student qualifies for Honors Math, an Algebra Proficiency test is taken to determine whether the student belongs in Algebra I Honors or Geometry Honors. If the student with Honors designation passes the Algebra Proficiency test with a 70% or higher she can move on into Geometry Honors. Otherwise, she must retake Algebra I Honors. Moreover, while attempts have been made to make the placement process for incoming freshmen less ambiguous and to decrease the control that individual departments have on making placement decisions, there are still some stacked criteria which inevitably leave some students out of the AP/Honors courses in their freshmen year.

### **The Appeals Process for Current Students and Incoming Freshmen**

Given the ambiguity and ever-changing nature of the procedures followed to determine student placement in the AP/Honors courses, there are naturally students who do not meet these criteria from year to year. So what options do they have to appeal the original decision and pursue placement into AP/Honors courses? If the answer relied solely on written information published in the documents reviewed then the answer would be that students do not have any options. In the review of the 2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook and the 2012-2013 Course Catalog there is no information on a formal appeals process. Rather, the information gathered on how students can appeal came from the interviews of the school officials as well as my personal knowledge as the administrator who oversees academics.

When Mrs. O’Sullivan spoke about students taking the placement tests to try to get into the advanced course(s) for the following year, she noted that students who did not get into the Honors course they desired could “come back and go back to their advisor or to the Assistant Principal for Academics to discuss it again and have it reviewed by the department” (Mrs. O’Sullivan’s Interview, p. 1). When asked if it was common knowledge that students could challenge the decision if they were unhappy with the outcome she said:

We don’t advertise it and actually we really don’t know if the advisors say it to them up front. I would doubt that they do but I would hope that the students are comfortable enough with their advisor when they’re sitting in course selection that they’re able to say ‘You know I really would like to have that course’ and then the advisor prompt them to say ‘Well then you need to go to the Assistant Principal for Academics’. That’s how I would hope it would go. (Mrs. O’ Sullivan’s Interview, p. 1-2)

While the document review indicated that a formal appeals process is not published, Mrs. O’Sullivan’s response revealed that a formal appeals process is also not promoted. Instead, the action of appealing comes from individual student initiative to do so.

When a student decides to appeal, Mrs. O’ Sullivan noted that traditionally the appeal will start with the Assistant Principal for Academics who then “would start a conversation with the department chair who would then involve the teacher of the course and then the conversation would take place among all of them” (Mrs. O’ Sullivan’s Interview, p. 2). However, student interviews revealed that the appeal starts essentially with whomever the student decides to approach with this request. Participants in this study began their appeal with different St. Mary’s school officials, which included administrators, advisors, and/or teachers. Additionally, while

there are no documented procedures to be followed when a student appeals, from experience I know what certain departments do. Below is a summary of procedures that the English, Science, and Social Science departments follow when a student appeals her placement decision:

- English:
  - the department chairwoman will speak to the student's English teacher for a recommendation and to review performance in the current class and assignments
  - the department chairwoman may speak to the student's grade level advisor and/or the Assistant Principal for Academics to gather her feedback about the student's ability and also to review standardized test data that may be on file
  - the department chairwoman may review other writing assignments of the student to gain a sense of the student's writing ability
  
- Science
  - the department chairwoman will speak to the student's current Science teacher for a recommendation and to review performance in the current class and assignments
  - the department chairwoman may speak to the student's grade level advisor and/or the Assistant Principal for Academics to gather her feedback about the student's ability and also to review standardized test data that may be on file
  - the department chairwoman will speak to the Assistant Principal for Academics to review the student's current and prior math classes and grades

and/or will consult with the student's former and current mathematics teacher to assess student's ability in mathematics

- Social Science
  - the department chairman will speak to the student's current Social Science teacher for a recommendation and to review performance in the current class and assignments
  - the department chairman will consult with the English department and if they have accepted the student, he will too. Conversely, if the English department has not accepted the student who is appealing, then the Social Science department will also deny the student admission into AP/Honors Social Science

In a similar fashion, when an incoming freshman decides to appeal her placement, traditionally a call is made to the Assistant Principal for Academics or to the principal of St. Mary's. Then, the student's admission file is reviewed again and sometimes additional information such as a writing sample or junior high teacher recommendation (from the teacher of the subject the student is appealing for) is requested. Occasionally the department chairwoman/man is also consulted in this process. When all is said and done, it is evident that a lack of consistency exists in terms of procedures followed when a student appeals. What is also clear is that without a formal written procedure, students remain unaware of the fact that they can appeal; and, those who do appeal do so because of their own volition.

Does the absence of a written procedure for appeals, however, suggest that St. Mary's High School does not welcome appeals? To understand this, it is important to return to the

mission of St. Mary's High School because the mission of a school drives its actions. St. Mary's mission "encourages young women to strive for academic excellence and to grow in confidence, integrity and faith" (2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook, p. 3). Mrs. O'Sullivan supported this by noting that when students appeal the decision of their placement she gets excited because she believes this shows "a desire for achievement and a desire to be challenged....it's a sign of maturity" (Mrs. O' Sullivan's Interview, p. 2).

Mrs. Crawford also voiced a willingness to give students an opportunity to move up in course level, although she tempered her response with a caveat, when she stated:

well most of the time I mean I'm always open to an appeal, you know, we can always relook and perhaps talk more with the English teacher and look at their whole, their whole study skills, for instance...(Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 2)

In an earlier comment, a student's respective English teacher was consulted by Mrs. Crawford and her department members to assess reading skills. While Mrs. Crawford expressed that she is always open to an appeal, her remark about talking with the student's English teacher to gain an understanding of the student's overall study skills now appears to add another layer of criteria for a student to meet. This also begs the question of why a student's science teacher would not be able to attest to these same skills, rather than having to take the discussion outside of the content area being appealed for and creating another hurdle for students. Further, as Mrs. Crawford wrapped up her thoughts on what she thinks about students who appeal their original placement decision she said: "students always think 'next year I'm going to do much better', right, but definitely study skills are important..." (Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 2). Ingrained in this

remark is incredulity about a student's own belief in self and the ability to perform better when given a fresh start—a mindset contrary to what is expressed in the school's mission.

Mrs. Smith, after being asked what she thinks about students who appeal the original placement decision, said:

Well, we'd always like to say that it's perfect justice and that everybody has an absolute equal shot. But, truth be told, as with almost everything else in life, the persistent person, the person who comes back...and can keep, sustain interest in really, really, really wanting to get in, we have taken them in the past. (Mrs. Smith's Interview, p. 2)

While this bodes well for the student who is outgoing and persistent, it is a flawed process that overlooks adolescents who may be quiet, compliant, do not think to challenge a school decision, or for bicultural students who are struggling to find their voice. Further, based on the principal and teacher comments, only students who can meet each of the criteria delineated—and apparently any new criteria that appears to be added in at a department's will, which makes this a moving target for students—can make the transition from a regular to an Honors or AP course. This practice does not give every student an equal opportunity to appeal and be considered for an Honors or AP class.

If there is any doubt that the process is rigid, all one needs to do is look at the selection and poignancy of the words used by the principal and teachers to describe this process. For instance, when asked what are the usual reasons that a particular department may decide to give a student an opportunity to try the advanced course or conversely what are the reasons a department will not give a student an opportunity, Mrs. O'Sullivan, the principal, responded by saying that the departments are often holding certain criteria and they “try to hold a firm line on



things without crossing that line” (Mrs. O’ Sullivan’s Interview, p. 2). Similarly, Mrs. Smith, in her explanation of the procedure for how students gain admission into AP/Honors courses, described the process by using phrases such as “an automatic door into the AP classes” (Mrs. Smith’s Interview, p. 1) and indicated that when placement into an advanced course does not happen automatically for incoming freshmen, there is “another window open” (Mrs. Smith’s Interview, p. 1).

By detailing the procedures that current students and incoming freshmen must follow to gain admission into AP/Honors courses as well as the procedures followed when a student appeals for placement into an AP/Honors course, the nebulous landscape they must negotiate becomes apparent. With this understanding in mind, I now proceed to ask what Latinas who have been granted or denied access to AP/Honors experience.

### **Experiences**

The collection and study of unobtrusive data and descriptive statistics, as well as information on the procedure students follow to try to gain access into AP or Honors courses, can only partially answer my first research question: What are the experiences of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses? For that reason, in the second phase of this study, 11 current and past St. Mary’s students were individually interviewed.

Table 6, which compiles a description of the participants based on the information they provided on the personal data sheet completed prior to the interview, identifies participants by their pseudonym, and provides information on the highest level of education the participant has reached, as well as the participant’s age and ethnicity. Lastly, the highest level of education

reached by each of the participants' mother and father as well as the participants' self-reported family socioeconomic status is provided. As is evidenced in Table 6, each of the participants self-identified as Hispanic or Latino or as a specific ethnicity that fits under those broader categories and all but one self-reported middle class, though income levels were not reported. Additionally, with the exception of one participant, all others had at least one parent who attended college; however, three participants had at least one parent that did not complete college, and six participants had at least one parent whose highest level of education was high school or lower.

Table 6

*Participants Description based on Student/Alumna Personal Data Sheet Information*

Pseudonym	Highest Level of Education Reached by Participant	Participant Age	Participant Ethnicity	Education Level Reached by Mother/Father	SES
Kim	HS/Jr.	16	Hispanic	C*/C*	Middle
Maria	C/Soph.	20	Latina	C*/HS	Middle
Al	C/Jr.	20	Hispanic	C/C	Middle
Gato	HS/Sr.	17	Mexican	C/C	Middle
Leia	C/Sr.	22	Mexican/Irish	HS/HS	Middle
Susan	C/Gr.	23	Hispanic/Asian	C/JHS	Low
Monica	HS/Sr.	17	Mexican/Cuban	C/C	Middle
Clarice	HS/Sr.	17	Mexican/Ecuadorian	C/C	Middle
Rebecca	HS/Soph.	15	Hispanic	C/HS	Middle
Cristina	HS/Jr.	16	Hispanic	C/HS	Middle
Alexandra	HS/Soph.	15	Mexican	C*/HS*	Middle

*Note.* JHS=Junior High School; HS=High School; C=College; Soph.=Sophomore; Jr.=Junior; Sr.=Senior; Gr.=Enrolled in Graduate School;

\*=indicates that a level was not completed; SES=Socioeconomic Status

The participants were interviewed because they fit the following criteria: They had 1) taken the placement test needed to be considered for an AP or Honors class, 2) were denied

admission and then appealed this decision, and 3) based on this appeal were either subsequently granted or denied access into the desired AP or Honors course(s). Thus, the story they had to tell and the insights they had to offer were critical to truly understanding this issue. Additionally, two teachers were also interviewed. The findings for this research question are presented thematically.

### **The Experience of Feeling Not Good Enough**

Although the participants in this study all appealed for access into an AP/Honors course, some participants' requests were denied while others were accepted. Both of these participant experiences are captured in this research study. Throughout the study, what became clear in listening to Latina alumnae and current Latina students was a disheartening experience when they sought access into an Advanced Placement or Honors course via the traditional placement test and/or through appeal. These experiences of feeling not good enough will be detailed first for students whose appeal was denied and then for students whose appeal was granted.

**Latina students whose appeal was denied.** To illustrate the level of demoralization when Latina students were not granted admission into the advanced course, a look at student word choice describing their circumstances is in order. It should be noted that the degree to which Latina students expressed being disheartened varied across a spectrum. For instance, a few Latinas noted that they were "upset", "unhappy" or "disappointed" to learn they were not accepted into the AP or Honors class either after taking the placement test and some even after they appealed. For instance, Kim, a current Latina student, shared about her attempt to get into English II Honors and AP European History. She, too, followed the procedure of taking the placement test for each subject and thought she had done well enough on the exams to have

“gotten into” (Kim’s Interview, p. 5) those classes. When she learned that she did not make it into the class, she appealed the decision. She shared that she was “upset and disappointed” (Kim’s Interview, p. 5) when she learned that even after appealing she was not granted access into either course. Though her word choice seemed mild, her voice cracked as she told her story; it became apparent that her experience had been traumatic.

The severity of Kim’s experience was confirmed when she was asked how not being allowed to take those desired AP/Honors classes had affected her. With tears in her eyes she explained that she enrolled in “regular classes” (Kim’s Interview, p. 6). Continuously referring to them as regular suggests that she saw them as ordinary, or not good enough, perhaps an indication of how she is feeling. In a second interview, as Kim explained how being Latina played a role in her desire to take advanced courses, she revealed “I just wanted to be part of that small group that actually gets into the classes and to see that Hispanics can be in those classes too” (Kim’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). Kim set out to prove that Latinas like her could also be successful in those classes. However, being denied access into those advanced courses demoralized her and hindered her ability to prove this.

Cristina, a Latina student who chose not to return to St. Mary’s after her sophomore year because she was not allowed to take the AP European History course she desired, said that when her mother and uncle inquired as to why, they were told that her “grades weren’t high enough” (Cristina’s Interview, p. 1). A review of her freshman grades which were considered for this decision revealed that she had maintained a B average in English and an A average in History. Therefore, even though her history grade was high, it was the English average that excluded her from the opportunity. After she appealed this decision she received the same response and was

not allowed into the class. As she discussed what a major setback this was for her, I asked her if she felt that not being allowed into the AP class said anything about her. She responded: “I mean, you question yourself, like what could I possibly have done better?” (Cristina’s Interview, p. 6). Cristina echoed a feeling of deficiency as if what she did to prepare to get into the class was “not good enough”.

Several Latina students when discussing their experience in the appeals process used harsher descriptors. Some of them indicated that they felt “shot down” or “written off”. When Susan, an alumna of the school who while at St. Mary’s repeatedly tried to gain admission into an advanced English course, was asked to speak to why she had appealed, she shared that as an incoming freshman she was placed into an English I course, despite having won the English award for holding the highest grade in English at her middle school. When she appealed this decision by approaching an administrator to explain that she was not a good test taker, which might explain her performance on the entrance exam, she says she was “shot down” (Susan’s Interview, p. 3) and told that the test results were not something they could “fight with” (Susan’s Interview, p. 3) so she “decided to back down” (Susan’s Interview, p. 3). Susan described her appeal as a fight or struggle in which she is the defeated one who is forced to walk away with an unfulfilled request to be reconsidered. In a second interview, Susan was asked if she believed that being Latina impacted the outcome of her placement. She responded that she thinks if she would have been supported by one of her parents in her advocacy or if she would have been a White student that would have made a difference. She is careful to note that while she does not know whether it ultimately would have changed the outcome, indeed she does believe her request would have at least been taken more seriously. Thus, Susan’s response suggests that

there is something about being an adolescent, and an adolescent Latina no less, which caused the adults at St. Mary's to perhaps disregard her experiences as legitimate.

Similarly, Al discussed not being admitted into AP English and explained that she felt like her "capabilities were just shot down" (Al's Interview, p. 6). As she shared what her experience in a regular English class was like, she noted that she remembers being frustrated. Then she said of this experience: "I just felt like the school didn't believe in my potential" (Al's Interview, p. 6). Here, St. Mary's made Al feel inadequate because by denying her request the school suggested that her potential was not good enough for the AP class.

Regardless of the expressiveness of the words students chose to communicate their experiences around the appeals process, the point conveyed is that often this was a disheartening process for them. Mrs. Smith even acknowledged that she had heard from students that "they feel kind of demoralized if they're not part of some of the AP classes, especially if they are very bright" (Mrs. Smith's Interview, p. 4). While the above focused solely on students whose appeal for an advanced class was denied, as the section that follows will show, the sentiment is the same even for students whose appeal was granted.

**Latina students whose appeal was granted.** Although students whose appeal was accepted were generally grateful for the opportunity to be allowed to try the advanced class, they still expressed a level of dejection about not having been good enough to be placed into the class without having to appeal for it. For example, Monica, a current Latina senior at St. Mary's, thought that for a student who wants to be in an advanced class and knows that she has the wherewithal to do well in it but is told no it is a "real big letdown" (Monica's Interview, p. 2); she emphasized that this is particularly sad when the student knows she can do it but everyone

else does not see that. Given that the discussion is around a school decision, Monica suggested that when “everyone else”, or rather school officials, do not see the same potential a student sees in herself, a student’s belief in self can be deflated.

Leia, who scored the highest score on the AP English placement test but was still denied access into the class, described her experience of appealing for AP English:

I felt a little written off because, you know, because I also felt like I had a close enough relationship to most of the teachers where the teachers at least maybe knew who we were...a little bit written off at first thinking that they couldn’t maybe know me or ask for like my other teachers or engage my ability. (Leia’s Interview, p. 4)

Moreover, while some students in earlier cases were denied because their placement test scores were not allegedly strong enough, here Leia’s score was at the top of her class.

When interviewing Clarice, a Latina student who has had to appeal for several of the advanced courses she has enrolled in, I asked if she felt that when teachers were making the decision the most weight was given to the placement test. She remarked:

...in the first round, kind of, that’s where the majority of it comes from, especially Math or English. That’s where if you do well enough to reach the caliber of student that they’re looking for then you get in but if not you don’t get in. (Clarice’s Interview, p. 5)

Her mention of caliber and being selected in the first round suggested that students like her who are not selected in the first round are of less caliber simply because of their performance on the placement test.

## **The Experience of Feeling like an Outsider**

Encountering blocked access into a higher level course brought about powerful experiences for the students interviewed and in most cases, aside from being demoralized, these students often felt like outsiders. This outsider sentiment will be explored first as it presented itself with participants whose appeal for advanced courses was denied and then as it existed for those students who were allowed into the AP/Honors course only after appeal.

**Latina students whose appeal was denied.** The Latina students who were denied admission into the AP/Honors course were quite literally outside of these classes and this became particularly evident as they relayed their experiences of feeling like outsiders. Susan, when questioned about her thoughts regarding the results of her appeal, said that every time she approached an administrator (and she approached the principal and two others) the conversation was ambiguous and she did not feel that she received any resolution. She added an interesting aside and said that she did not even recall being encouraged to take any of the AP courses and then noted that she thinks she had been conditioned to think: “you can’t fight this. You started off on the wrong foot so you aren’t going to even be able to make it or be competitive in an AP course” (Susan’s Interview, p. 4). Susan’s story highlighted the fact that despite her courage as an adolescent to approach several adult administrators, she was treated like an outsider and was not given a clear or appropriate response. Worse yet, at such a formative age she was conditioned to think that her advocacy was pointless and that her ability was not good enough for an advanced course. Further, her continued use of fighting language illustrates the tension of her resistance against the oppression of being placed in regular classes as well as how strong her



emotions are as she negotiates her desire to be in the advanced class with the fact that she is not being allowed into the class.

Tears welled up in Kim's eyes when asked about what role she believed not being allowed to take English II Honors or AP European History had on her and her overall high school experience. She began to cry as she said: "I just kind of feel average now" (Kim's Interview, p. 6). The decision to not allow Kim an opportunity to try the advanced courses, despite her appeal, which in and of itself was an expression of her desire to challenge herself more, left her broken and feeling ordinary as a student. Additionally, it left Kim feeling like an outsider because in essence she was outside of the exclusive AP/Honors courses when she was forced to take regular sophomore English and History. When Kim was interviewed a second time, she said she wanted to take the advanced courses to prove that Latinas could do it too. When she was asked if she believed she was receiving a contrary message, she noted: "I think there's a belief that there's such a small minority of Hispanics being in those types of classes like AP/Honors...I feel it's mostly given out to people who are already in Honors classes and who are of a different race than I am" (Kim's 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). Thus, Kim's sense of being on the outside is compounded by the fact that she is Latina and throughout the AP/Honors placement process she sees students of other ethnicities receive admission into those courses while Latinas are often kept out.

Cristina spoke of her motivation for appealing to take AP European History. Aside from a true interest in the subject matter and a desire to improve her grade point average in preparation to potentially apply to an Ivy League University, she said: "I was challenged with the classes that I had...It's just I felt that I needed a little bit more" (Cristina's Interview, p. 3). While Cristina

was responsibly searching for ways to make herself a competitive college applicant and maximize her learning while in high school, she was denied the opportunity of even being able “to try it out” (Cristina’s Interview, p. 3) in order to see if she could prove to herself that she could handle the increased rigor. Gato, a current Latina senior, asserted that by the time a student is in high school she knows herself well enough to decide whether she is up for a challenge or not. She, therefore, found it unfair that other factors not including the student, such as a placement test or a teacher recommendation, could keep the student out of the advanced course even though the student herself desired it and believed that she could do it. While Al, a Latina alumna of the school, was eventually allowed into the AP Art class she appealed for, she appropriately captured the experience of being denied after an appeal as she explained what it was like to simultaneously be an adolescent and an outsider in this process. When elaborating on what advice she would give to the adults involved in the decision-making process she said:

I mean it’s an awful feeling, being dismissed by an adult, when you’re trying to be an adult. And, you feel these amazing things and you want all of these amazing things for yourself and when someone tells you that you can’t have it and that you’re not capable of doing it, you know, it definitely, it doesn’t really leave a nice taste in your mouth. (Al’s Interview, p. 7)

Al touched on the idea that St. Mary’s promotes in its philosophy—to transform young women into adults who lead others and make the world better—and highlighted a contradiction. She talked of being an adolescent woman trying to act maturely and responsibly who was met with doubt and disregard by the adults who were supposed to encourage her. Most powerful, however, was the bitter feeling she explained she was left with; a feeling that can taint future

choices and experiences. As adolescents in an institution run by adults, adolescents at St. Mary's seemed to be given little credibility and these students whose appeals were denied felt like outsiders whose school did not believe in their potential.

**Latina students whose appeal was granted.** Despite eventually being accepted into the AP/Honors course, students whose appeal was granted also conveyed feeling like outsiders. For instance, Rebecca, currently a sophomore at St. Mary's, attempted to get in to Algebra II/Trigonometry Honors by taking the placement test offered in the spring of her freshman year. While she noted that she had a 96% in regular Geometry—the mathematics course prior to moving into any form of Algebra II, she said that she was told that her score on the placement exam was not high enough to get her into the class. Deciding to appeal, Rebecca said she was nervous because as she noted: “I really, really wanted to get into that class so I was just like scared that they were going to say no and that I wouldn't get another chance” (Rebecca's Interview, p. 3). Alexandra, a Latina sophomore who recently had to withdraw from St. Mary's because of financial circumstances, said of her appeal to get into the English II Honors class: “I felt it was like, you know, bribery?” (Alexandra's Interview, p. 2). Bribery entails the gifting of money or presents in exchange for something, and while Alexandra did not offer either of these to her teacher, she feels that because she had to approach her teacher about reconsidering her for English II Honors, in a sense she was using the rapport she had with her teacher as a way to elicit a reconsideration for the advanced English course. She added:

I wasn't really good enough to be in English Honors because I really didn't pass the test. Like I was on the edge but didn't make it. So, I feel that without that edge if I was in the class I would be like the dumb one. (Alexandra's Interview, p. 2)

Alexandra perceived her appeal as a negotiation and credited her eventually being allowed to take English II Honors to her ability to work the situation out with her teacher rather than to her academic ability. Further, although she said she did not pass the test, she then clarified that she did not meet the cut off score on the placement test. Consequently, because she was not accepted into the Honors class initially, she felt inferior and “dumb,” or like an outsider to the class.

In a similar fashion, Monica explained that in her experience of appealing (she had to appeal to get into several of the AP/Honors courses she has taken over the years, despite having a proven record of success) she found that sometimes, once she was allowed into the class, she second-guessed herself. She acknowledged that if she had been admitted into the advanced classes without having to appeal her mindset would be different. She added: “...since I’ve had to work my way into that class I think oh, maybe they were right, maybe I was wrong, maybe this is too much for my schedule, maybe I’m not fit for this class” (Monica’s Interview, p. 3). Moreover, while Monica admitted that she always pulls through and does well in her course work, the fact that she had not been admitted into the class without having to appeal made her feel like an outsider that was not fit for the class and this caused her frequent self-doubt. This is similar to Maria, who after having been accepted into AP European History, indicated a sense of self-consciousness and pressure to perform well as she said: “I really need to step up, because everyone is going to be looking at me with a magnifying glass as now opposed to, you know, in comparison to the other girls” (Maria’s Interview, p. 5). Maria’s feeling of an outsider came from her assumption that everyone, teacher and classmates, would look at her differently because she was not initially accepted into the class. To feel that she was being scrutinized with a

magnifying glass illustrated how intensely she felt she was being watched, with little opportunity for her to misstep. Further, there was a clear sense of her versus the “other girls,” which emphasized that Maria did not feel that she belonged to the group; she was an outsider.

Though Leia was grateful that her appeal for AP English was accepted, she spoke about the potential students that might be overlooked. She said:

there could be a lot of talent that is sort of wasted or a lot of, a lot of great thoughts that aren't properly cultivated because the teaching structure isn't working for them...And, if they don't have the ability to go up and say 'hey, this works better for me' then they go through, you know, the high school experience under a little bit more stress or under a little bit more duress about their abilities. (Leia's Interview, p. 6).

Leia's remark offers a glimpse to what her experience was like when she was in regular English. Additionally, it sheds light on the idea that students can often feel like outsiders when they do not have a voice or forum to express that their needs are not being met.

### **The Experience of Feeling Competitive**

Despite feeling disheartened and like outsiders, Latinas also touched upon the experience of feeling competitive or comparable in ability to their peers who were in the advanced class. While often these students acknowledged that they had to work hard in the AP/Honors course they were admitted into, the bottom line was that they performed well. For instance, as Monica shared that she believes she had to work much harder because she understood that she was not supposed to be in the class, she also stated: “we are all equal on our working skills” (Monica's Interview, p. 6) and “we're all willing to work to get that A no matter how much effort one

person has to put in than the other” (Monica’s Interview, p. 6). Monica later revealed that she earned an A in Chemistry Honors and she said:

even though it was a struggle, being able to get that A, thinking, well, in the beginning I thought there was no way that I could get this, ‘why do I even belong here?’ It just feels so good. It’s just kind of like you’ve proven to yourself that ‘wow, I really can do this.’ (Monica’s Interview, p. 7)

Despite having to appeal for Chemistry Honors, through her hard work Monica earned an A, the highest mark possible at St. Mary’s High School.

Similarly, Clarice shared that she found herself challenged in the AP/Honors courses, which she says was precisely what she wanted when she was seeking admission into the advanced courses. Yet, she clarified that the challenge was one she could meet when she remarked “but in the end I was able to have an outcome that I was happy with” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 7). “If I struggled I went in for tutoring or I would ask a friend for help, but in the end I ended up on top, which was a nice feeling” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 7). In a second interview, Clarice shed light on why her success in the advanced courses was satisfying. As she explained whether she thought being a Latina at St. Mary’s impacted her experience with the AP/Honors process, she suggested that in some ways it had because as she said: “the stereotypical Latina, or should I say Mexican, is...doesn’t really aim high, doesn’t have a very profound impact on the world or let alone have the confidence in order to want to accomplish something in their life” (Clarice’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). She then added: “I wanted to overcome that stereotype” (Clarice’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). Thus, by both securing placement into the advanced courses and then performing well in them, Clarice doubly defied the stereotype.

When Gato was asked how she felt she compared to the students in the English II Honors class for which she appealed, she recalled a peer editing exercise where a student told her “You’re a wonderful writer” (Gato’s Interview, p. 4) after reading Gato’s essay draft and remembered being thanked for the writing advice Gato offered her as well—a nod to her writing capability being on par with her peers. In regards to her performance in the English II Honors class she noted: “I was right along there with them” (Gato’s Interview, p. 4) and added: “I did feel like I felt I was where I was supposed to be” (Gato’s Interview, p. 5). Gato’s success in the English II Honors course is particularly important because one of the reasons she wanted to take the course was initially to prove that she was strong in both English and Spanish, her home language. When I asked her who she wanted to prove this to, she said:

Society? I don’t know. I just feel that often times if I go somewhere and they ask me ‘oh, where are you from?’ I mention that I’m not American and they say ‘Really? Well, what are you?’ and I say ‘well, like I’m Mexican’ and they’ll say ‘Oh really? You don’t look Mexican’...There’s just such a stereotype about what we’re supposed to look and act and say and sometimes even sound like and not everyone matches up. So I’m just trying to break the label, I guess. (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2)

Thus, Gato was able to defy the stereotypes she believed exist about Mexicans by getting into the advanced course and by performing comparably to her peers in the class. Like Clarice, Gato’s success made her a statistic in favor of the success Latinas can have.

When Rebecca was asked how she felt she compared to her peers who were accepted into Algebra II/Trigonometry Honors she acknowledged that she was a bit behind when she started in the class, but this was because she missed a week of class as she waited to hear the results of her

appeal. She added that once she was accepted into the Honors math class: “it took a weekend for me to catch up. But, I asked for help from one of the other girls in the class who was initially there in the beginning and now we are all at the same pace” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 9). Lastly, Leia, in discussing the role that being allowed to take AP English had on her high school experience, said that it helped her realize how truly able she was. Leia said:

I am just every bit as smart as the girl who, you know, came from money and had tutors her whole life and worked hard to do well or were constantly being taught how to study so that they could do well...I was every bit as smart as they were and capable. (Leia’s Interview, p. 7)

Moreover, although Leia acknowledged that she came from “a different set of circumstances” (Leia’s Interview, p. 8), the fact that she was able to perform just as well as her peers, without the additional support that some of them received, is a testament to how competitive Leia was as a student in the AP English class.

While the aforementioned are all students whose appeal for access into the advanced course was accepted, Susan, who was not granted access into the AP English III class she desired, also conveyed a similar experience of feeling comparable to the students in the AP/Honors courses. Susan said of her experience in the regular English course:

I really felt I was too good for the course sometimes. Like, it was very easy, I definitely felt like the students around me had much more of a difficult time with it than I did. So English was actually a breeze. (Susan’s Interview, p. 7)

Unfortunately, because Susan was not granted access into the AP English course she wanted, she was forced to take the regular English class which she expressed did not challenge her



sufficiently. Having heard from the other students whose work ethic helped them achieve in the advanced courses and hearing Susan's story suggests that perhaps Susan's passion, work ethic, and innate knack for English would have been enough for her to succeed in the AP English course if she had been given the opportunity.

### **The Experience of Feeling Prepared for the Future**

Students whose appeal for the advanced course was accepted also shared the positive benefits, or advantages, of being allowed to take an AP/Honors course. Namely, the benefits were related to feeling prepared for the future. For example, when Al was asked how being allowed to take the AP Art course she appealed for affected her high school experience, she said that it had a great impact and then added: "it started my focus into what I wanted to do" (Al's Interview, p. 4). Thus, Al credited her experience in this AP Art class with helping her decide to attend an art school for college. Monica said: "it's kind of helped my confidence academically, a lot" (Monica's Interview, p. 4). When she discussed what role these advanced courses have had on her long term goals she stated: "Before high school I never really thought about college and now I'm striving for Ivy Leagues...it's definitely kind of shaped how I want to go with my future" (Monica's Interview, p. 4). For Monica, this pursuit for academic success is important because as she commented on how being Latina influenced why she appealed for advanced courses she said:

just having my parents background story, I guess, wanted me to just push myself further because they were always, they didn't exactly have the same opportunities that I had...My parents have always told me, you know, 'the next generation always needs to be better than the previous one.'(Monica's 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1)

Moreover, while there is a natural benefit that stems from feeling academically prepared for college, for a Latina like Monica there is also the reward of knowing that she is paving a better way for her family and the generations to come by maximizing the opportunities that her parents sacrificed to give her.

Similarly, in reference to being in the advanced courses, Gato expressed: “I think they’ve exposed me to the type of student that I am” (Gato’s Interview, p. 7) and “I think those classes have also taught me what you said—how to prioritize my life” (Gato’s Interview, p. 7). Further, Gato said of her advanced classes: “they kind of show me what classes I actually truly enjoy. So, I think that’s been important to see what subjects I’m actually truly passionate about and has opened, I guess majors that I’d never really considered” (Gato’s Interview, p. 9). Later on Gato revealed another way in which as a Latina she has gained preparation for the future. She commented on how she has experienced a clash of cultural values in some of her classes and noted: “The American perspective is very self-sufficient, independent, liberty, justice, equality. They’re all very good qualities but I think my Latina roots, they touch more into the family and the feelings and that we’re all interconnected” (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). Though she has experienced this contradiction, Gato commented: “I was a little timid in offering my point of view and like I said before, often times it can be very different to my classmates’ point of view...but I think I’ve grown comfortable in the class a little more” (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 3). Even though Gato experienced a clash of cultural values, she refused to assimilate and learned to overcome her timidity in speaking up for the legitimacy of her Latina values. This firmly rooted inner strength and pride in her culture will be valuable as she transitions into higher education. Moreover, Al, Monica and Gato, expressed the experience of the AP/Honors courses defining the

direction of future goals or plans and also noted particularly how this benefit has a unique effect given their Latina background.

Latina students also expressed feeling more prepared for their future studies as a result of having taken AP/Honors courses. For instance, Al noted that when she started art school she felt like she: “had a leg up. From like having to do due dates and then having a short amount of time and then extending the amount of time to do larger pieces for each class” (Al’s Interview, p. 5). Similar to Al’s allusion to time management, Maria noted: “All those extra hours to be studying to go to class, you know, at different hours when friends were out partying I had to be in class” (Maria’s Interview, p. 3). Thus, Maria’s experience in AP European History and the amount of time she invested into studying prepared her for what she would encounter in college and she said of this experience “I feel like I apply that to myself today” (Maria’s Interview, p. 8). Therefore, time management appeared to be a skill that Latina students in the advanced courses were grateful for having developed because they felt it helped them in college. Academic preparation was also a benefit these students felt would aid them in their future. For instance, Alexandra believed being in the English Honors course she appealed for would allow her to develop her writing and she said: “I would have better writing skills, like on my essays and for college and a better way to present myself through writing” (Alexandra’s Interview, p. 3). Gato expressed that she believes her experience in AP/Honors courses will make her transition from high school to college a smoother one. And, perhaps this is because as Rebecca noted about the advanced course she is taking: “by taking this class obviously I’ll be learning even more and, I’ll be more challenged so I think I’ll get better at it” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4). Thus, students who were allowed to take the AP/Honors courses after appealing expressed sharpened time

management skills, better developed skills, and greater academic preparation that they believed would help them in college.

Greater opportunities for creative and independent learning were also noted as benefits that students felt prepared them for their future. Leia, for instance, believed the benefits of her experience in AP English had to do more with having more academic and creative freedom. She said about the AP English class: “there wasn’t that much, you know, like rigidity in the actual, in the actual writing process and because of that I felt a lot more comfortable and that led myself to produce better essays” (Leia’s Interview, p. 10). Further, Leia added: “it totally helped me really sort of broaden my horizons in what I was capable of. It exposed me to more artists...” (Leia’s Interview, p. 10). As she elaborated on the experience of her AP English class, Leia noted: “I don’t think it was the teaching method, I think that was just the actual structure of the class and how that was set up for AP students versus the regular curriculum” (Leia’s Interview, p. 11). Separately, aside from feeling more confident in her academic abilities, Monica noted that particularly her experience in Chemistry Honors helped her thinking skills. She said of her Chemistry Honors teacher “sometimes she would just let us be on our own for a little bit and let us work on our own for a little bit and that kind of definitely helped” (Monica’s Interview, p. 6). Having less hand-holding in the teaching and learning process taught Monica to “be an independent thinker and not have to rely on someone” (Monica’s Interview, p. 6). Thus, the structure of the advanced classes as well as the teaching approach seemed to allow students the opportunity to develop their creative and academic abilities, which can help them be more innovative thinkers as they move ahead in their education.

Moreover, both students who were denied and granted access to advanced courses shared the experience of feeling not good enough. Whether allowed into the advanced class or not, these students all shared an experience of feeling like outsiders. Even those students who were granted access to the advanced course described initially feeling like they needed to prove themselves though later they were able to experience feeling competitive and comparable to their peers who were accepted into the class without having to appeal. While findings for question one flesh out Latina students experiences, in the section that follows the Latina students perspectives will now be detailed.

### **Perspectives**

Research question two: What are the perspectives of Latina students attending a Catholic female single-sex high school who have been granted or denied access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses?, was also answered with the data collected during participant interviews. In the section that follows, findings for this question will be reported thematically.

#### **Latinas' Perspectives on the Decision to Appeal**

As part of the interview participants were asked to speak to why they appealed for an AP/Honors course. Often, their responses illuminated students who appealed for an AP/Honors course because they felt they had the capacity in the subject area, were driven and wanted a challenge, or wanted exposure to content and skills that would prepare them for college. Moreover, their reasons revealed insights about the type of students that these young Latinas were.

**Capacity.** First, when asked why they appealed for a particular AP/Honors class the participants often cited a pre-existing strength or interest in the subject. For example, Rebecca

stated simply: “I really like math” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 1) as she explained why she appealed for the Algebra II/Trigonometry Honors course. Her comment suggested that she has a natural capacity in mathematics. Al shared that initially she did not want to take AP Art at St. Mary’s because she thought an art class might detract from the pleasure of creating art at her leisure. She then recalled speaking to the Art department chair about not taking an art class in her junior year and instead just taking AP Art in her senior year but said:

I realized when she turned me down that I had to take it in my junior year. So, I really loved what I was doing, I really enjoyed making art at school so I decided to continue in my senior year. (Al’s Interview, p. 2)

Moreover, although a capacity or passion for art always existed for Al, she decided to appeal for the AP Art class because she enjoyed her experience in the art class the year before.

In addition, other participants while noting a strength or interest in the subject also expressed not feeling like they were being sufficiently challenged with their current regular course in the subject matter. Clarice, for instance, said in regards to appealing for AP English: “I mean, I love to write so I feel like I wasn’t necessarily challenged enough in a regular college course or preparation course” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 3). And, Leia said of her decision to appeal for AP English:

I’ve always been a big reader. I’ve always been very much into literature. I was raised around books and I was always raised around books both in English and Spanish and I think that really strengthened my understanding of the English language as well as Spanish and I’ve always taken an interest in literature and I think because of that it’s

always been my strong suit in school. And, I think at that point in my life I felt like I wasn't being challenged material-wise. (Leia's Interview, p. 3)

Thus, for Clarice and Leia, appealing for an advanced English course stemmed from their enjoyment of and ease with English. Further, they both expressed a desire to be challenged and openly claimed that their current placement in regular English was not developing their capacity in the subject.

While participants highlighted their capacity in the subject matter, some also commented on how having proven their ability before served as the impetus to appeal for a particular AP/Honors course. For instance, Leia mentioned that one of the reasons why she was compelled to appeal for AP English was because she was told she had the highest performance of her class on the placement test. Leia said:

...the real spark for me to get going and fight for it was the fact that I did so well. I think it made me realize that I have even more potential than even I give myself credit for and that it would be such a waste to sit around and say 'well, I got the best score of everyone but I didn't do anything about it.' And what I really wanted to do was to challenge myself. I really wanted new material, I wanted to see what, what options were available to me at St. Mary's. (Leia's Interview, p. 4)

Whatever doubt existed in Leia's mind prior to taking the placement test was disconfirmed by the results of her placement exam which affirmed that she was able; in fact, she was the top scorer. She refused to waste an opportunity to receive what she knew she needed—a greater academic challenge which would cultivate her skills more aptly—and therefore resisted the original decision by appealing. Similarly, as Monica explained why she decided to appeal for

Calculus Honors and AP Spanish for her senior year she said: “Because I, in my head, know that *I can do it*” (Monica’s Interview, p. 2). When I asked her if the belief that she can do it is something that is just in her head or something that she has actually proven through her academic record she said: “my record, well in my opinion, it’s really good. And also my mindset. If I want to do it, I will do it (slaps her hand on her other hand for emphasis)” (Monica’s Interview, p. 2). Given what Monica shared throughout her interview—about the several AP/Honors courses she has appealed for and achieved high marks in—it was clear that indeed she had a proven track record of academic success and that she does achieve what she sets her mind to. Thus, for both Leia and Monica, having an affinity for the subject as well as prior success in it served as a motivating force to appeal for the advanced course.

**Driven.** When participants shared why they appealed for an AP/Honors course, they also revealed a perspective of being driven and self-motivated. For instance, as Kim discussed her reasons for appealing for English II Honors and AP European History for her sophomore year she expressed that she wanted more of a challenge. She then added: “And I wanted like to take, not like a better course, but something that would give me a challenge for me to like actually push myself” (Kim’s Interview, p. 2). While Kim did not express that she was not being challenged in her current course work, she did express a desire to further stretch her abilities. Similarly, Maria shared that in coming to St. Mary’s it was in her plans to maximize her educational opportunities. One of the ways in which she could accomplish that, said Maria, “was to get a really good education and to challenge myself. And so, when, I knew that taking any AP’s would be an amazing opportunity for me” (Maria’s Interview, p. 2). She then added about her initial placement decision: “I wasn’t admitted in but I thought that I could really, step up to



the challenge. I wanted to challenge myself 100%. And I knew that if I took that it would be a new experience that I could learn from” (Maria’s Interview, p. 2). Alexandra shared: “I was more worried about college because I didn’t want to be behind” (Alexandra’s Interview, p. 3); therefore, she was self-motivated to be competitive.

Further, Monica suggested that when she commits to something she invests herself wholeheartedly as she stated:

I just really have that drive. (more intensely) And I really want to do it, I want to prove everyone wrong, I know I can do it...I know I can and I will go through with it and I will get that A, whatever it takes. (Monica’s Interview, p. 2)

When asked if she believed being Latina affected the outcome of her placement Monica added: “I think Latinas in general are, they need to get done what they need to get done, they’re just very motivated. I think that’s just something that comes with being Latina” (Monica’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Thus, Monica believes that being driven is innate in most Latinas and she exemplifies that in her personal approach to seeking advanced courses. This is not unlike Clarice, who when asked why she appealed for each of those various courses, stated: “I just felt like, not like it was my responsibility to, but a desire to further promote myself whether academically or to put myself in a higher applicant pool” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 3). Clarice, like several of the other participants, had a precise plan for her future which included knowing her college major of interest and what high school courses she needed to prepare her for that major so that she was a competitive and competent applicant. The fact that Clarice noted that she appealed not out of a responsibility, but out of a desire to make herself more competitive was telling of the type of driven and prepared student that she is. When Clarice was asked if there

was anything more beyond wanting to enhance her academic record which compelled her to seek advanced courses she responded: “my parents and the past that they’ve had...with them telling me how their childhood was or what they did or what they don’t have...it’s really sort of that kind of driving me to push harder” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 3). In a second interview Clarice fleshed this detail out more when she shared that her Mexican father grew up in East Los Angeles surrounded by gangs. Clarice, therefore, seemed mindful of her parents’ struggles and expressed a desire to not want to take their sacrifice in vain. Thus, behind several students’ appeals for an AP/Honors class was a drive and self-motivation that fostered a perspective of embracing challenges for the benefit of personal growth.

**Exposure.** Participants also expressed appealing for an advanced course because they desired the exposure to higher learning that could prepare them for college or give them greater options in their future. Some participants shared that they desired an advanced course because of some of the immediate benefits it could bring them while in high school. For example, Susan discussed why she was hoping for an advanced English course and she stated: “I was hoping to take Honors, at least an Honors [class] in order to be on track to take an AP exam” (Susan’s Interview, p. 2). In anticipation of applying to college and wanting to be a competitive college applicant, Cristina said that she wanted to take AP European History to improve her grade point average. Feeling like she was missing out on valuable material, Leia explained why she appealed for advanced English and she stated:

there were other books and things like that and projects and essays that I wanted to really write that I wasn’t being presented with in my regular class and I had friends in AP

classes and it just sounded like it might be a little more up to par with what really my capacity in English was. (Leia's Interview, p. 3)

Maria noted that based on her observations of prior students who had taken AP European History she was aware that "there was a lot more to study and more material to be learned, more tests, or more difficult tests than usual, and then the AP test of course" (Maria's Interview, p. 2).

Maria later stated: "it could just prepare me for college" (Maria's Interview, p. 3) and this was a sentiment that several other participants shared—college and career preparation. For instance, Rebecca noted that aside from enjoying mathematics, she believed the Honors class could help her in her future and she stated: "I want to be a doctor so I need to do really well in math and Algebra II/Trig obviously looks better, I think" (Rebecca's Interview, p. 1). Alexandra expressed that her appeal for English I Honors stemmed from a desire "to do something in English for college" (Alexandra's Interview, p. 2). Similarly, Clarice noted "the core like reading, writing, and arithmetic are really important for engineering, the major I want to be in" (Clarice's Interview, p. 3). Thus, participants suggested that being exposed to advanced course content and skills offered them advantages while in high school, in college, and even in their careers.

### **Latinas' Perspectives on the Process of Appealing**

In exploring Latina's perspectives on the process of appealing, it became evident that while their approach was similar in the sense that they approached an adult, who they spoke to—teachers, counselors, or administrators—varied among participants. Additionally, though all students who participated in this study appealed their original placement decision, not all students were granted admission into the AP or Honors class after they appealed. In the section

that follows, the perspectives of Latina students whose appeals were denied will be explored first, followed by the perspectives of Latina students whose appeals were granted.

**Latina students whose appeals were denied.** Cristina was denied admission after appealing for an advanced history course. When Cristina was asked to talk about how she appealed her placement decision, she noted that her mother and soon-to-be-uncle, who is a counselor at a prestigious urban university, came to St. Mary's to question why she was not allowed into the course. They were told that her grades were not high enough. When asked what her grades were in those courses she said she said: "History I had an A in it and English I had like a high B" (Cristina's Interview, p. 2). From Kim and Cristina's remarks, it is evident that they tried different avenues by approaching a teacher, a counselor, and/or an administrator regarding their appeal. It is also evident that they received vague encouragement and responses as they were told they did not have high enough grades, though they either had A's in certain courses they were appealing for or were very close to receiving an A.

Susan's efforts were similar in that she also approached several adults, unfortunately to no avail. As she described how she went about her appeal she stated: "I would just come in before class or I remember going in during a lunch period and I would just go in and speak to individuals in the administration office" (Susan's Interview, p. 4). She added: "I went as an individual to the office and tried to talk to people about what I could do about it but they didn't have an exact answer for it" (Susan's Interview, p. 4). In discussing whether she felt that being Latina impacted why she decided to appeal the decision she expressed that to an extent it did. She then added: "it's also very paradoxical because at the same time that I have been taught not to question authority I felt this, I don't know, something...I came in knowing it was something I

wanted to fight for” (Susan’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). When I asked her if she felt heard or if she was given guidance or options she stated:

No, not at all. I think that’s because there was no structure established. I hope that by now they have something set up. I think they were at a loss, like maybe they don’t want anyone questioning their test results so, I definitely don’t think I was, I think I was considered but I don’t think anyone really made an effort to follow up with me or say ‘Hey, maybe this student has a point’ or anything like that. (Susan’s Interview, p. 4)

Moreover, Susan expressed that she found the adults who she approached unhelpful and yet could not blame them “because they were just cogs in a bureaucratic wheel” (Susan’s Interview, p. 4). Susan’s understanding of schools as bureaucratic institutions and her experience with her appeal for advanced English while at St. Mary’s is something that she acknowledged had prepared her to be a better advocate for herself now. However, this came to her as a young adult preparing to go to law school; she admitted she was not a strong advocate for herself while at St. Mary’s. Thus, Susan’s story suggested that the appeals process is nebulous largely because as she stated more than once, “there wasn’t a set process” (Susan’s Interview, p. 11).

**Latina students whose appeals were accepted.** Like the students whose appeals were denied, the students whose appeals were accepted essentially followed the same steps: different adults on campus were approached and a request was made by the student to have their placement decision reviewed. Additionally, the same lack of clarity in the process appeared to exist for these students. For example, when asked to discuss how she went about her appeal, Leia said that she appealed directly to the English department chairwoman at the time and explained to her that she had just started working and was finding balancing her duties as an

employee and a student challenging. She said: “I basically promised that if she gave me a chance that I could show her that I could not only do well in her class but that I could bring my grade up in the, in the time left” (Leia’s Interview, p. 4). Leia, however, did not emphasize the fact that she had been the top scorer on the placement test. Maria only recalled fragments of how she appealed for AP European History. While she could not remember in what order she followed certain steps, she did remember that she had a discussion “with Mr. Cooper about everything that this class would entail” (Maria’s Interview, p. 4). She also shared that she took the placement test and discovered she had not made the course and then she stated:

I don’t know if it was directly with him or if I talked to Ms. Ford and said something about it, that I wasn’t accepted and she said ‘you know if you really want it, go ahead and have a discussion’ or how exactly it went about, but I do remember that I did have a discussion later on with him. (Maria’s Interview, p. 4)

Moreover, though the order of steps followed was unclear, what is clear to Maria is that she found herself talking to her current history teacher as well as the teacher of the AP European History course she was trying to get into during the appeals process.

Rebecca described how she went about her appeal and noted that she bounced between the mathematics department chairwoman and her grade level advisor. She stated:

I talked to Ms. Stone and then Ms. Stone said she would talk to the rest of the math department, I think. And then, so I was kind of talking to Sr. Stacy and Ms. Stone just kind of going back and forth and then, finally Sr. Stacy called me in because she’s my homeroom teacher so she talked to me and said that I think that like everything was talked about and stuff so I could take the exam on a Friday, I think it was, and I took the

exam and then Ms. Stone talked to me and told me that I could go into the Algebra II/Trig class. (Rebecca's Interview, p. 2)

Although Rebecca later noted that she had already taken the placement exam the year before and had a 96 in the regular Geometry course she was enrolled in the year before, for her appeal to be considered she needed to retake the placement exam and wait for the mathematics department to make a decision on her placement. Alexandra explained that she appealed to her English teacher about being in English II Honors; her case was re-evaluated and she was allowed in to the class. However, Alexandra expressed an interesting perspective about the appeals process when she stated: "It's kind of like if you're told no and then later you're told yes, it's like, 'well you said no, why did you say no before?'" (Alexandra's Interview, p. 2). Alexandra's comment suggested that perhaps her re-evaluation was approached differently, which made her an eligible student the second time around.

Clarice, a current St. Mary's senior, noted that she appealed for several courses and that often it was the score on the placement test which prevented her from initially being placed into the class. She then said about waiting for a decision on each of her appeals: "I was very patient" (Clarice's Interview, p. 4) and then later added: "I didn't really have a problem waiting because I was confident knowing that I had a pretty good chance of getting in" (Clarice's Interview, p. 4). This was Monica's experience too as she said about the appeals process: "if you end up not being let into the class, I always go into you, Mrs. Ramos, and you know, see if any changes can be made" (Monica's Interview, p. 2). She later added: "usually I'm let into the class" (Monica's Interview, p. 3). Despite having a fairly impeccable academic record and prior proven success in

an advanced course, Clarice and Monica appealed for advanced courses several times throughout their high school career.

Both Clarice and Monica also made remarks about how being Latina may have influenced their perspective on the appeals process. For instance, when Clarice was asked if she felt that being Latina impacted how she approached the appeals process she stated that she was not too comfortable approaching teachers and coincidentally the Assistant Principal for Academics was Latina. She then added: “that maybe might have appealed a little bit more because I kind of feel like that was sort of maybe some common ground as far as, you know,...maybe not been in that world where you’re constantly put down, but you understand it more than somebody else would” (Clarice’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). When Monica was asked if being Latina has impacted her perspective on this process she stated: “I’ve realized that the other Latinas who were in a similar position to me, we all congregated together” (Monica’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). As she explained what that meant in more detail she mentioned that students like Clarice and her “motivated each other and stuck together” (Monica’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Additionally, regarding the actual appeal she noted: “Just you being Latina made me feel comfortable coming to you. I think if you weren’t I wouldn’t have felt as comfortable coming to you and asking to be put into those classes” (Monica’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Moreover, aside from Latina students working together to successfully complete the advanced courses, both Clarice and Monica remarked that they felt a level of comfort and understanding when they appealed to the Assistant Principal for Academics who is Latina and who they believed would at least understand them.



## **Latinas' Perspectives of Rationalizing the Results of Their Appeal**

After appealing for an advanced course, students were eventually given a decision on their placement. In the interviews, what became apparent was that students tended to rationalize their denial or acceptance into an AP/Honors course.

**Latina students whose appeals were denied.** When Kim was asked what she thought about the results of her appeal, she expressed feeling disappointed. She then added: "English, I thought my writing was really good, I just kind of wish I got into those classes" (Kim's Interview, p. 6). Then, when asked what her year was like being forced to take regular history, Kim indicated that she had an A the entire semester. Further, she noted that she frequently thought to herself: "If I'm doing so well in a regular class then I think I could have done good in AP Euro" (Kim's Interview, p. 9). Kim's comments suggested that she had not lost faith in her ability, but was trapped in thinking about what the possibilities could have been for her if she had been allowed to take the advanced courses. However, she tried to make herself feel better by focusing on the present as she said about her placement in history: "I mean, that's fine. But, I thought I did well in her class, but, I mean that's fine. I'm doing good in Mrs. Vincent's" (Kim's Interview, p. 9). Kim went back and forth between thinking she was okay and thinking about "what if" as she tried to rationalize why she was not allowed into the AP/Honors courses she appealed for. Later in a second interview Kim was asked if she believed being Latina influenced her thoughts about the placement and appeals process and she remarked that to some extent it does. As she noted that she feels that White students are given the AP/Honors classes she added: "I have this belief that some of them appear smarter and stuff and they're just given respect because they're the same race too. And I feel like not all people, but some people look at

Hispanics and they have to like earn their respect, rather than just like everyone has it automatically” (Kim’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Thus, Kim has rationalized the results of her placement as stemming from a perception that because she is Latina she is not as intelligent as her White peers. Additionally, she seems to feel that she has to work harder than her White peers to earn the respect and treatment they receive without trying.

Susan noted that when she was forced to take regular English courses she just thought: “oh well, I’m losing a chance to skip college writing...I didn’t have that sense of urgency because I really probably didn’t understand the , sort of the great benefits of an AP course” (Susan’s Interview, p. 5). This comment conveyed a clear frustration with the system. A frustration, however, that was converted into resignation and hopelessness rather than used to fuel further challenges of the broken system. While Susan acknowledged that perhaps at the time she did not understand the multiple benefits of an AP class, she also said:

I always felt I knew I was a good writer so that was a conviction I always carried and not being in an AP course was definitely kind of like an injury, like you know it was kind of insulting, but I don’t think it hindered my uh confidence in my writing skills. (Susan’s Interview, p. 5)

Describing her denial into AP English as an injury or an insult suggested that this was hurtful but also something from which Susan could recover and something that she saw as someone else’s loss and not hers; this is how Susan rationalized being denied into advanced English courses. Her unshakeable confidence in her abilities allowed her to continue through her educational trajectory successfully, not allowing others to put a damper on her plans insofar as those plans fit in the workings of the school. Moreover, while Susan felt she could not change how school

decisions were made, she worked on sustaining and developing what she could control—herself and her talents.

Learning that she would not be allowed to take the AP course she desired, Cristina could not rationalize returning to St. Mary's without being given other options. She stated that she came in to speak to Mrs. O' Sullivan about concurrently taking college courses at a local community college. However, she stated:

Mrs. O'Sullivan then said that if I took any college courses I would not be allowed to play basketball. And, again, I'm an athlete and staying there at St. Mary's without playing basketball, I need to balance my life, and so, instead of taking those courses and staying at St. Mary's in regular classes, I decided to leave.(Cristina's Interview, p. 4)

Regarding her decision to leave St. Mary's High School, Cristina added: "Now, I'm in independent studies and I'm taking courses" (Cristina's Interview, p. 4) at a local community college. Recognizing that St. Mary's was not going to provide her with the opportunities she wanted and needed to become a more competitive college applicant hoping to get into an Ivy League, Cristina chose to resist and pursue her endeavors by finding a schooling opportunity that would allow her this chance.

Kim, Susan, and Cristina each had a unique way of rationalizing their denial into the advanced course they appealed for. While Kim still questioned how she could have performed in an advanced class, Susan tried to focus on her writing strengths and chalked up her denial into the advanced class as the school's loss. It was Cristina, however, who could not come to grips with the school's decision and therefore decided to change schools so that her needs could be better met.

**Latina students whose appeals were accepted.** Students whose appeals were accepted generally rationalized the school's decision in a more positive light. However, contrary to Kim, Susan, or Cristina, who did not blame themselves as part of the rationalization process, the students whose appeal was accepted did occasionally place blame or responsibility on themselves at least for being denied access into the AP/Honors course initially. For example, when asked to describe what the whole appeals process was like for her, Maria stated:

I thought it was going to be initially very intimidating...but I really feel that it was something that was very well-organized, very liberating in a way, because I thought, you know, I went in with so many ideas of it and came out with everyone being so gracious about it. (Maria's Interview, p. 5)

Maria added that she found her conversation with the teacher of the course for which she was appealing refreshing because it made her ponder whether she was truly ready for the challenge. As she simulated her thought process at the time, she stated: "okay, am I really ready for this? You know, there was a reason why I, you know, initially didn't qualify for AP Euro but am I willing to take an extra step and commitment?"(Maria's Interview, p. 5). This process forced Maria to assess whether she truly desired the challenge of a more demanding course. It also seemed to make her believe that she was deficient in some way which is why she was not initially allowed into the class and the reason why she needed to "take an extra step and commitment". When Leia talked about the appeals process and the result of her placement, she expressed that while initially she felt a bit written off, in retrospect she was grateful that she was required to improve her grade because it was a lesson for her. She stated: "St. Mary's did a great job of giving me an opportunity to, to fight for that" (Leia's Interview, p. 4) and then added:

“they gave me an opportunity to do well” (Leia’s Interview, p. 4). This appeared to be important for Leia and her family because she later stated: “coming from a Latin background and stuff like that, honors classes and AP classes are always, it’s always a very proud moment for the family when you say that and when you can come home with any kind of accolade” (Leia’s Interview, p. 7).

Rebecca attributed her initial denial into Algebra II/Trigonometry Honors to her overconfidence. For example, Rebecca shared that in eighth grade she found Algebra an easy class and then she added: “so like, I felt a little cocky to take the other exam earlier in last year or at the end of my freshman year and I guess I didn’t study as much as I should’ve” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4). When given the placement exam a second time, as a result of her appeal, her approach to improve her performance on the exam was to “take it more seriously” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4) and to “actually study more” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4). When asked if she had any suggestions to improve the appeals process she stated: “no I think they did everything so well that I don’t know what to say, cause all you need to do is ask and they’ll help you” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4). Thus, Rebecca seemed to think highly of the appeals process and the individuals involved in its decision-making. When she was asked if the fact that she was not accepted into the advanced math course last year but was being accepted this year ever raised a question in her mind she did not assign any blame or criticism to the process or to the school officials. In contrast, she did assign blame to herself as she stated: “I think it has a lot to do or had to do with the attitude that I had taking both tests. I don’t think it was really them, it was me” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 4). Similarly, after Rebecca shared the story of her grandmother and mother emigrating from Peru partially serving as the impetus for her to push herself, I asked her

what being able to take the advanced mathematics class meant to her and her family. She stated: “it was a ‘good job,’ you know, because they kind of expect a lot from me so it wasn’t like a huge celebration because they thought ‘you should be in that class’” (Rebecca’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Therefore, contrary to Leia whose family relished in her honors placement, Rebecca’s family had set advanced courses as the standard expectation.

As Clarice explained the results of each appeal she went through, she noted that when she appealed for the first time she did not feel like her request was asking too much. She said: “I knew the class I was asking for wasn’t necessarily like reaching out there. I was only asking for one class and it was Spanish and I did well freshman year” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 4). When she was initially denied access into some of the AP courses she eventually appealed for she rationalized her rejection by believing she had the ability yet had to wait to see if she would be given the chance. This became evident when she stated:

when I started asking for like more or tougher classes like AP’s or like the Math’s that get harder and harder, it kind of became more like I didn’t doubt that I did have the ability to, you know, perform well in the class, it was more like kind of finding out whether or not I will or won’t get into the class. (Clarice’s Interview, p. 4)

As Clarice got further into this rationalization she then noted: “on standardized tests I’m not the strongest. So, I mean it wasn’t necessarily surprising that I didn’t get into the class” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 5). However, she added that her outlook on her appeal was positive precisely because the initial placement decision is based largely on the test. She was confident that when her “whole outlook was reviewed once more” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 5) she would be allowed an opportunity to try the class. While Clarice went through this appeals process several times for

different courses, the fact that she was eventually allowed into the advanced courses seemed to color her perspective on the appeals process as she stated about placement: “it’s based off the test, but when you want to get into the class it’s possible” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 5).

Regarding whether Clarice felt that being Latina impacted the ultimate decision of her placement she said she did not believe it had directly. She then added that her rationale for attending St. Mary’s was because as a female she would fit in, and noted “being Latina I could somehow, I could somehow be absorbed into the community, but not lose who I am. Because I’m around all girls and there are so many ethnicities that being a Latina, again, I wanted to stand out of the bunch” (Clarice’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Moreover, while Clarice does not believe that being Latina impacted the decision on her placement, she does seem to think that the fact that she has been allowed to take the advanced courses has helped her distinguish herself as a Latina at St. Mary’s.

Monica’s rationalization started off similar to Clarice’s. She noted about the current placement and appeals process: “the way it’s going now it kind of works because you can still try and if you get denied you can still come and ask and try it out, if you convince the teacher that you can do it” (Monica’s Interview, p. 16). However, in the same breath she seemed to experience dissonance as she added:

But then again, if there were no boundaries and no need to take a test and the student just got in to the class that they wanted to take, maybe they could be different. Maybe the classes, I don’t know. Maybe the teachers wouldn’t be as successful because there are some students who don’t care as much and some students who care a lot more. (Monica’s Interview, p. 16)

Though Monica tapped into the idea of having a truly open enrollment system, she quickly reverted to the idea that the current system worked and was successful because the system, as it existed, allowed teachers to essentially weed out students “who don’t care.”

Thus, the students whose appeal for an AP/Honors course was accepted also had a unique way of rationalizing the decision. For the most part, these students concluded that the appeals process that they followed worked well and they even expressed gratitude for what they were asked to do (improve grades, ensure their commitment, etc.). Further, these students also placed some blame on their initial denial into the AP/Honors class on themselves and noted a sense of redemption when their appeal was accepted because they would be allowed to prove themselves and their ability with this opportunity.

### **Latinas’ Perspectives of Looking Back**

Engaging these students in a conversation about their participation in the appeals process to seek placement into an AP/Honors course allowed them each an opportunity to look back. The alumnae, given their additional experience of now being in college and in the work force, seemed more retrospective about the appeals process. Likewise, the students who withdrew from St. Mary’s and are now attending another school also expressed a unique perspective on the appeals process. The common factor that existed between the alumnae and the current students was the fact that they presented their appeal to adults they felt could grant them access to advanced courses. Additionally, most participants in this study expressed a resilient attitude regardless of the results of their appeal.

**Former Latina students and alumnae.** For those students whose appeal was denied, they continued to work hard and maintain good performance in the regular class to which they



were assigned. Such was the case with Cristina, who prior to withdrawing from St. Mary's, noted that once she was denied from AP European History she still "had an A the whole year" (Cristina's Interview, p. 3) in the assigned class. Additionally, she expressed satisfaction with her current work at the local community college now that she is no longer at St. Mary's.

However, as she reflected on the entire appeals process she noted that while the placement test was acceptable, what she felt was missing was that "teachers don't know each student, they don't know them personally" (Cristina's Interview, p. 4) and this potentially hindered the quality of student recommendation they could offer. While Susan was denied into the advanced English course, despite her appeal to numerous adults, she noted: "I don't like to think of it as a big disadvantage in my life or professionally because at the end of the day I did make it work for myself" (Susan's Interview, p. 5). She added: "My perspective was always 'I'm good enough to take that course'" (Susan's Interview, p. 6); Susan shared that it was this mindset of hers that propelled her through college and she said "throughout high school I didn't see it as a fault of my own. I saw it as the fault of the school and the administration" (Susan's Interview, p. 6).

Moreover, the key for these students who were denied access into the advanced class was to make their current situation work to their advantage by excelling and maximizing their learning in it. And yet, it is clear to them that the appeals process is broken.

As alumnae looked back regarding the appeals process, alumnae also stressed how decisions can affect motivation and how pre-judgment can affect opportunities. For instance, Al, who was accepted into AP Art on appeal, was denied into AP English after taking the placement test. While she never appealed the decision for AP English, she expressed her opinions on this decision. For example, when Al was asked if being denied into AP English affected her

motivation or aspirations in any way she noted: “Yeah, it just kind of killed, it killed English for me. And then, I just really wasn’t that excited. It became one of those classes like ‘just get through it,’ you know?” (Al’s Interview, p. 12). This denial affected her motivation. In addition, when Al spoke about feeling rejected, she noted that she thought some of these decisions were made based on “the perception the adult has of the student” (Al’s Interview, p. 7) and whether they believed that student would work hard or slack off. Al expressed that she believed the decision about her placement into AP English was likely influenced by the perception that existed regarding her group of friends as she noted: “I wanted to learn things. It’s always difficult like hanging around with certain people so, like people automatically think things of you” (Al’s Interview, p. 7). Leia highlighted the importance of considering students input when they appeal because as she noted, every student should have “the right to decide what works for them” (Leia’s Interview, p. 6).

**Current Latina students.** Similar to the students whose appeal was denied, students who were granted access into the AP or Honors course also demonstrated resilience. For example, Gato explained that at first she was nervous about being Latina and taking a full load of advanced courses at St. Mary’s. As she explained why she shared that she had attended a predominantly White elementary school where did feel there was a hierarchy and she seemed to be at the bottom of it. She then added about her experience in AP/Honors classes at St. Mary’s: “I probably subconsciously thought that I had to gauge how they felt about me being a Latina before I could really feel comfortable or more comfortable because of my past experiences” (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 4). She noted that even though she initially felt like an outsider in her

English II Honors class, to this day her peers seek her out so that she can peer edit their English essays because her abilities in English are so strong.

Clarice remarked that even though she may have had to work harder than others in the advanced class, she still did well. She noted: “there was never a point where I was just so like, so hopeless” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 10). And, she emphasized that while she had to appeal for the class she was still able to do well and make her parents proud. Clarice stated: “being able to show them these grades that if I didn’t get into the class initially but being able to show them that first of all I was able to get into the class and then to be able to show them the grade I got, they’re so proud of me” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 10). However, as Clarice discussed what compelled her to appeal she noted: “I don’t have the qualifications to just say ‘Oh, I should be in this class.’ So there’s definitely a higher power that I have to go to in order for them to speak on behalf of me” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 11). This contradicted what Leia, an alumnae, had noted about students knowing themselves well enough to be able to decide what they need out of a class. However, it also pointed to a resourcefulness that students who appealed exhibited; a resourcefulness in speaking to individuals with “higher power.”

As aforementioned, there was a level of resourcefulness demonstrated in who these young women appealed to and how they went about their appeal. For some, the appeal started with their current teacher of the subject matter for which they were appealing. For most, however, the appeal was initiated with a school official with more power such as a department chairperson, a counselor, or an administrator. Susan, for example, shared that she spoke to several administrators and a department chairperson on numerous occasions. When she felt unheard by one person she tried another, demonstrating her resourcefulness in trying to get

approval for the advanced class. Additionally, Clarice and Monica stated that when they had been rejected from AP/Honors courses they appealed to the Assistant Principal for Academics. While it may seem more natural for students at St. Mary's to feel comfortable approaching a teacher or a counselor to make their appeal since they work with them on a regular basis, it is interesting to note the level of comfort some of these participants demonstrated in appealing to an administrator. It may reveal something of the rapport that students at St. Mary's have with their administration, but it is also highly indicative of their resourcefulness in knocking on all doors in an attempt to gain admission into an Advanced Placement or Honors class. As Monica noted so aptly, "There's no harm in asking. What's the worst that can happen? That I won't be let in? I already wasn't let in so it's not a difference" (Monica's Interview, p. 9).

### **Latinas' Perspectives on the Sisterhood at St. Mary's High School**

At St. Mary's High School, since all students are females, often they described the friends they have made as sisters. Beyond this familial type of bond, however, the reference to a sisterhood suggested a sense of solidarity and singularity. When recruiting new students or marketing the school to prospective families the idea of a sisterhood is sold as a way of demonstrating inclusion. Likewise, students often tout this sisterhood as one of the great benefits of the single-sex education provided at St. Mary's. While this notion of a sisterhood may seem distantly related to the AP/Honors appeals process, during the interviews students mentioned this notion. Though in most cases the sisterhood was discussed as a positive, it was not in all cases. And, when it was discussed as a negative it was because students felt outside of the sisterhood culture. In other words, though Latinas may have experienced a gendered solidarity, the other aspects of their identity that made them different were not recognized or celebrated.

**Sisterhood: working together and encouraging each other.** The perspective that St. Mary's has a loving community manifested in the form of a sisterhood was held by those students who felt included in the sisterhood. For example, as Monica discussed the elements she has found beneficial of a single-sex education she noted: "I guess just because girls, in general, are very, I don't know, are just very sisterly and loving, it's just, there's community here and sisterhood here" (Monica's Interview, p. 11). She then goes on to share how she and a good friend, who is not Latina, both appealed for Chemistry Honors and worked together, as a team, the entire year. She said of this experience: "we both excelled in that class just by working together and both encouraging each other and by pushing each other and making sure that neither one of us got left behind or gave up" (Monica's Interview, p. 11). Earlier on, however, Monica had also commented that the Latinas who had a similar experience to hers came together to work together. Clarice echoed this sentiment of working together when she indicated that the sisterhood she had with her friends who were in some of the same classes was helpful because if they were struggling they "would help one another out" (Clarice's Interview, p. 8). Similarly, Gato expressed that when she first enrolled in the honors class she had appealed for, her peers "were actually really accepting" (Gato's Interview, p. 4). Later on, she added that "the relationship between your girlfriends" (Gato's Interview, p.16) creates a strong bond and that this is one of the benefits of attending an all-girl school. Moreover, those who feel a part of the sisterhood expressed a sense of belonging and partnership. These students felt supported in their academic work and while they all appeared to be driven, as Monica noted about the sisterhood, "We're all still very encouraging and want each other to succeed" (Monica's Interview, p. 18).

**Sisterhood: masking differences.** One student in particular did not feel part of the sisterhood, specifically because she felt that singularity could not exist among a diverse group of students. As my interview with Alexandra came to an end, I asked her if there was anything more that she wanted to add to the discussion. Earlier on she had suggested establishing a Latinos Unidos (United Latinos) club like the one she has at her current high school and she decided to revisit this idea because she said at St. Mary's "they're just kind of like 'oh yeah, you're sisters' but that's not culture" (Alexandra's Interview, p. 7). Alexandra noted that the sisterhood that is promoted at the all-female high school masks the focus on culture. When I asked her to elaborate on that comment she said:

I feel like they're like 'yeah, you're all sisters, you're all equal but then again, it's like, you do in the back of your mind feel a little secluded because you're like 'I'm not that race' and the majority of the race is kind of white...sometimes people forget like where they come from. I feel like they kind of get brainwashed into society, like they're a little sister school, and they forget where they come from. (Alexandra's Interview, p. 7)

Alexandra's remark touched on two key points. First, she highlighted the fact that Latinas neither feel a part of the fabric of the school nor do they feel equal to the other students. Second, she echoed the sentiment that formation of a sisterhood creates superficiality to relationships that prevents all those in the school's environment to really appreciate and even interrogate matters of racism or cultural responsiveness.

### **There are More Blondes: The Perspective of Weak Latina Representation**

The first point made by Alexandra, that Latinos do not always feel included in the school, was a point that was suggested by several participants, including school officials, when they

were asked about the diversity of the advanced classes. Feedback from the school officials will be explored first. When Mrs. Smith was asked if she believed her department's AP/Honors classes appropriately represented the Latina students on campus she said: "I would probably have to say no. There's more blondes, I hate to say it, but it really is true" (Mrs. Smith's Interview, p. 5). Mrs. Smith used a stereotypical image to differentiate White and Latina students, but her comment suggested that there are more white students in the advanced classes and that Latina students are not well-represented. Mrs. Crawford's response to the same question was similar; she first said that everyone has a chance because when her department offers the placement test "the last name doesn't matter" (Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 5) and then as she thought further she said: "I don't think I've gotten too many Latinos in my class...It's mainly oriental, white, Filipinos" (Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 6). While Mrs. Crawford initially emphasized a placement test and process that is "open" for all students, she arrived at a contradictory conclusion which is that at least in her classes Latinas do not always seem to be well-represented. Moreover, the teachers perception that Latinas are not well-represented in the advanced classes is likely a contributing factor to why Latinas do not feel included in the school—because they are often missing from a selective level of courses.

The teachers' perceptions were also echoed by most of the participants. Gato, a current junior at St. Mary's, was asked if based on her experience in AP or Honors classes she thought Latinas were represented equally in those classes, and she said "I don't think there was, many Latinas or of Hispanic background that were in them" (Gato's Interview, p. 11). Gato's response was reflective of what most participants noted. However, often this type of comment was preceded by a comment similar to Rebecca's: "we don't have many Latina students at St. Mary's

so obviously there would be less in each class compared to other students” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 9). Even when asked about whether Latinas are proportionately represented students skirt around the issue and seem to excuse it by making the statement that there are not many Latinas at the school. One student, Monica, even stated that she did not think there were enough Latinas in the advanced classes but she was quick to add: “I wouldn’t say it’s intentional, I wouldn’t say it’s anybody’s fault” (Monica’s Interview, p. 15). Gato, on the other hand, while not blaming anyone for the low Latina representation, was able to recognize its effects on her. She stated:

I think the fact that I didn’t have people with a similar upbringing...like people that supported what I believed in as well because of the traditions and customs, they probably kept me at bay as well...I had to find that within myself and kind of be that example, I guess, if anyone else felt that way. (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 5)

Such responses suggested that Latinas do not see themselves as a well-represented ethnic group and most of them make excuses for the dominant culture, with the exception of Gato who did recognize the adverse effects she had to overcome because of the dominant culture.

### **Going Back into the Regular Classes: The Perspective of Compliance**

A perspective of compliance also emerged from some of the participants in this study. As Alexandra explained how she approached her appeal for English II Honors, she noted that she did not directly tell her teacher that she wanted to be in the advanced class. Even though Alexandra expressed that she was bothered by the fact that another student who had weaker writing skills than her was let into the English Honors class, instead of arguing her case she stated: “I kind of hinted at her that I wanted to be in English Honors” (Alexandra’s Interview, p. 2). As Kim shared the response she received from her history teacher regarding why she was not



allowed into the AP European History class, she shared that her teacher told her she did not have an A in the previous class. Kim then added: “so that was just her response” (Kim’s Interview, p. 8). As she discussed the role that not being in the Honors classes has had for her she stated: “Well, I went back into the regular classes...the regular English and history” (Kim’s Interview, p. 6). This is similar to Rebecca who noted that when her initial placement into Algebra II/Trigonometry Honors was denied she “started off with Algebra II” (Rebecca’s Interview, p. 3). Therefore, Kim and Rebecca seemed to accept the decision for their placement. Rebecca, however, noted that she protested further the following school year after she attended a few classes of Algebra II and found that she could be more challenged. Gato shared that while her teacher recommended that she take the placement test for English II Honors, she was not accepted. Regarding her reaction to this she stated: “at first I was okay with that because I figured all Honors was going to be a little stressful” (Gato’s Interview, p. 2). Thus, several of the students interviewed expressed a level of compliance regarding their placement decision.

Based on responses in the student interviews, it appeared that there are several reasons that students complied with the school’s decision. First, some of the compliance appeared to be due to a lack of information for as Susan noted: “I was a little bit naïve about the whole benefit of an AP course” (Susan’s Interview, p. 6), “I really didn’t understand what, what weight was carried by having taken the AP versus just the regular or the honors” (Susan’s Interview, p. 7). Secondly, students did not feel they had agency to speak for themselves or complied out of respect for authority figures. Clarice, for instance, noted about appealing: “I don’t have the ability to do it, I just, like it has to be like an official or a qualified representative that has to like speak on behalf of me” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 11). She justified this by adding: “I need

someone who has a higher power to talk to the teachers as well and see if like, and then have me put in the class” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 11). As Alexandra elaborated on her compliant acceptance of her placement and decision to simply hint at her desire to be reconsidered for the advanced class, she said that she felt badly approaching her English teacher to appeal and she added: “I feel that’s not how you’re supposed to do it. Like I feel like you just get in there if you’re supposed to be in there” (Alexandra’s Interview, p. 2). Alexandra demonstrated compliance to the rules because she seemed to trust school officials. Further, Susan explained that part of why Latinas may comply with decisions is that Latinas are “raised in a sort of culture that says ‘respect authority’ . . . and authority and people in positions of power are always right” (Susan’s Interviews, p. 9). Therefore, lack of information or power and even a mindset that challenging authority is inappropriate were all reasons that participants offered as reasons for their compliance.

### **The Squeaky Wheel Gets Oiled: The Perspective of Non-Compliance**

Some students also expressed a sentiment of non-compliance and often this was tied to an adult in their lives who had taught them to self-advocate. For example, Cristina refused to let her denial into AP/Honors classes at St. Mary’s dictate her future and as she shared, she decided to withdraw from St. Mary’s and instead enroll in a local junior college. Interestingly, Cristina was also the only student who had a parent and/or other adult get directly involved in her placement discussion by coming to the school and asking why she was not allowed into the advanced history class. Likewise, when Monica was asked how she knew she needed to challenge her placement decision by appealing she indicated that her mom had recommended that she appeal since her mom had called on Monica’s behalf regarding a class in her freshman year. She stated

about her mother: “my mom’s the type of person that if she wants something she’s going to get it and I never really was that person...once I learned how easy it was I thought ‘you know, maybe I could ask” (Monica’s Interview, p. 9). Leia also credited her mother with instilling in her the value of speaking up for herself as she stated: “my mom always told me ‘it’s the squeaky wheel that gets oiled” (Leia’s Interview, p.5). She added: “I really took from that experience in my life to show myself that, you know, speaking up for what you want intellectually, or whatever it may be, you can get what you want doing it that way” (Leia’s Interview, p. 5). While it was evident that a supportive adult figure can influence students to self-advocate and not comply with decisions they find unjust, Susan noted how challenging it can be in the absence of having an adult supporting a student’s appeal as she expressed: “if I had approached particular teachers to kind of help be an advocate for me I might have been able to push through” (Susan’s Interview, p. 3). However, as Susan proceeded to explain, she “went in independently to the administrators” (Susan’s Interview, p. 4) and therefore believed her appeal held little clout.

**Rocking the boat: financial circumstances and fear of non-compliance.** Though Leia discussed where she developed her skills to self-advocate and not comply with decisions she disagreed with, during the interview she also expressed a fear of non-compliance. Susan expressed a similar fear and for both Leia and Susan, this fear of non-compliance was tied to their financial circumstances. Leia, for example, noted that she had already had to “speak to the principal and say ‘this is my financial situation” (Leia’s Interview, p. 7) and added “I think having to be an advocate for my family and myself in that way also taught me, you know, when this incident came around, like it was just one more thing I had to advocate for” (Leia’s Interview, p. 7). As Leia elaborated on her explanation, however, she discussed how for some

time it seemed to her that it was always the same girls in the advanced courses and she did not know if that was because those students had been groomed that way. She noted that she had to work harder because her circumstances were different and then noted: “I felt like I had different obstacles to overcome and I felt like for a long time those things held me back and stopped me from doing things” (Leia’s Interview, p. 8). Thus, her financial circumstances hindered her until she realized that even though she may not have the same background as other students in the advanced courses, in her words it “didn’t inhibit me from doing well as everybody else” (Leia’s Interview, p. 8).

Susan’s fear of non-compliance is layered. When asked if being Latina at St. Mary’s impacted her experience with the AP/Honors placement and appeals process she said that to an extent it did because as she noted: “I am a person of color and I think in my class I was definitely a minority. And in addition I was coming in to St. Mary’s with a scholarship and so I had that double burden or I felt that double barrier of speaking up to authority” (Susan’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). As she discussed her appeal specifically, she stated: “I don’t know if it was fear or just respect towards the administration I just felt like what they said was the final word” (Susan’s Interview, p. 4). Later on Susan added:

In addition, I’m on scholarship and so I’m kind of timid and I’m afraid. I’m sort of aware that I’m there on scholarship and to rock the boat is a little bit not something I ever wanted to really do. I wanted to kind of follow the rules, be a good student, you know, reach expectation, or exceed them. (Susan’s Interview, p. 9)

Thus, Susan feared not complying with her initial placement decision because she did not want to be problematic. She suggested wanting to stay under the radar particularly because she was at St. Mary's on a scholarship.

### **Blend in and don't be a Nuisance: The Perspectives on Race and Class.**

The issue of race and class was also brought forth by some students, though it took a second round of interviews to encourage a more firm expression of participants Latina consciousness. The first note made was that while there are benefits to an all-female learning environment, there are other factors that can overshadow these benefits. For instance, Kim acknowledged the benefits of being able to focus more in a single-gender school but then said: "um, sometimes I just feel like I'm just part of a small group here cause of my ethnicity" (Kim's Interview, p. 11). She then shared how even in her Spanish Honors class there are more non-native speakers than native speakers in the class. Moreover, while Kim recognized the value in not being distracted by males in the learning environment, what did seem to distract her or at least weigh on her was the fact that she felt Latinas were a small group on campus and an even smaller group in the advanced classes. In a sense, as a female she fit in perfectly in an all-female environment, but as a Latina she felt like an outsider because she did not feel well-represented.

Participants also expressed what it is like to be labeled or pigeon-holed into a racial stereotype. For instance, Clarice shared that in a discussion of socioeconomic status and crime rates some of her classmates were quick to link Mexicans to gang-related crime. While she noted that she does not take these comments offensively, she also added that she does not hesitate to confront people when they make such remarks. In a later interview Kim expressed that she feels that her classmates rely on racial stereotypes less now that they are older, and then

added: “there are like people of the White race who don’t understand our stuff and they feel like, I don’t know, like Mexicans are just like all of us, but really we all have different races. Like, we’re Peruvians, Guatemalans...we’re not all the same” (Kim’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 3). Thus, as a Latina Kim also seems frustrated by the fact that people clump all variations of Latinas together and label them without taking the time to acknowledge that there are great differences among them. Susan added to this perspective by stating:

we are the minority in the school, our concerns are minority concerns um, and our issues are very different from the average St. Mary’s high school student...I didn’t feel empowered or encouraged to highlight the differences. Um, instead I was encouraged to blend in. (Susan’s Interview, p. 12)

Again, while there are advantages to an all-female environment, Susan believed those advantages were limited. She suggested that this is because typically the benefits that exist are benefits to the gender, which do not take into account issues of race and class. And, as Chicana Feminists argue, women of color do not experience life only through their gender, but rather at the intersection of gender, race, and class (Blea, 1992). Susan also noted that at this all-female high school she was encouraged to “blend in,” almost as to become part of the sisterhood which was previously discussed, while ignoring the fact that stark differences exist among the students which prevent them from being a seamless, singular group.

While there were participants, such as those discussed above, that challenged the notion of being asked to blend in, there were also participants who seemed to think that being Latina did not influence their experiences or perspectives. For example, during the second interview Rebecca was asked if she believed that being Latina at St. Mary’s impacted her experience with

the AP/Honors process in any way and she responded “No” (Rebecca’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). When asked to elaborate on her answer she said: “I don’t really see what it has to do with it” (Rebecca’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview). Additionally, when Monica was asked the same question she said: “I would say no because, to be honest, I don’t think a lot of people realize that I am Latina. So I don’t really think it plays that large of a role” (Monica’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). Moreover, for Rebecca and Monica, their being Latina does not appear to bear much weight on their experiences and perspectives with the AP/Honors placement and appeals process.

Aside from race, class also seemed to play a role in the experience of Latina students. For example, as Al shared about her experience in an all-female high school, she said she remembered “white girls and daddy issues and daddy’s money kind of thing” (Al’s Interview, p. 10). Earlier in her interview Al had noted that at St. Mary’s money and the ability to have certain material items seemed important and that is not how she was raised. Moreover, when she brought up “daddy’s money,” she reasserted that she does not come from a family where money and ease are handed to her, and this seemed to affect her experience in a majority white, majority middle-class single-sex high school. Regarding class, Clarice mentioned that some of the teachers at St. Mary’s have a stereotype of the type of student that attends and she said “so like when they refer to us as, not even being White, but having money, I’m kind of, I just think that’s not me because I’m on financial aid and my mom works two jobs” (Clarice’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 2). Susan also noted an issue of class when she elaborated on her previous remark about being encouraged to blend in. She said: “I always felt indebted because I was able to go to St. Mary’s on a very nice scholarship. So I had less reason to try to rattle the cages or to offend anybody or, um, to be a nuisance” (Susan’s Interview, p. 12). As a person of color on a scholarship, Susan

expressed a need to please and to comply, even when there was a need to challenge. This way of living is sharply opposed to the mission of single-sex education for females. Moreover, as the comments of Kim, Susan, and Al illustrated, race and class are issues that go unrecognized at St. Mary's and yet they have a direct impact on the experience and perspective of these students to the point that this can detract from some of advantages of an all-female learning environment.

### **Perspectives to be considered for the future**

**Advice to Latina peers.** In terms of advice to other Latina students, some of the participants focused on encouraging fellow Latinas. Kim, when asked what she would advise Latinas met with the same denial she experienced, stated: "I'd just tell them to keep going....go on and keep doing good" (Kim's Interview, p. 7). Gato advised Latina students to appeal to take the classes that they were passionate about because as she noted: "the passion itself will drive you to the success of doing well" (Gato's Interview, p. 12). Leia advised: "if it's something you love...it's important to advocate" (Leia's Interview, p. 9). The other piece of advice offered to Latinas by the participants was around persistence. Alexandra expressed that if students believe they should be in honors then "they should go for it" (Alexandra's Interview, p. 3). Monica stated: "And, while in that class never doubt yourself and just, be just as determined as you would in a college placement class" (Monica's Interview, p. 8).

Advice centered on the notion of power was also offered. Rebecca recommended to other Latina students to talk to "someone you know will, or can talk to other people" (Rebecca's Interview, p. 5), stressing the importance of talking to someone who has connections or power. Susan had a slightly different perspective. Her advice was to advocate and to not "let people intimidate you or scare you just because they're in positions of power" (Susan's Interview, p. 8).



She was adamant that students should not give up on this and stressed: “even if it means putting yourself on the wrong side of certain arguments or being terribly aggressive to certain administrators...don’t be intimidated by them saying no or shutting the door in your face” (Susan’s Interview, p. 7-8). Moreover, the advice these students left behind encouraged an appeal and highlighted the importance of not accepting no for an answer.

**Advice to decision-makers.** The participants also offered advice for the decision-makers in the placement process to consider. In so doing they demonstrated a level of thoughtfulness in the issues they brought to the fore and in the advice they offered to improve the appeals process.

**Placement tests.** Regarding the idea of requiring a placement test, several students expressed that the one-time shot approach to the placement test makes the situation unnerving for students and that the placement test results are not always reflective of a student’s true ability or potential. Maria stated: “just because I bombed a test one day doesn’t mean that I’m not a good student” (Maria’s Interview, p. 12). Adding to the advice that a placement test does not always accurately reveal a student’s ability, some students shared that they do not perform well on tests. For instance, Gato shared: “I don’t like standardized tests. I don’t think they test students well, I think that personally I’m a terrible test taker” (Gato’s Interview, p. 12). Thus, a test does not always assess a student’s knowledge and potential accurately.

**Grades and improvement.** Aside from considering the results of the placement test, some participants suggested taking a more thorough look at other pieces of quantitative evidence, namely grades, which may reflect a student’s ability. Clarice offered the following advice to the decision makers: “maybe the ones you kind of tossed aside because they didn’t do so well, maybe you should check the grades to make sure that you have a firm decision” (Clarice’s

Interview, p. 7). Alexandra expressed that when reviewing grades the decision-makers should: “look to see if they’ve improved” (Alexandra’s Interview, p. 4). Therefore, Alexandra expressed that growth over time can also highlight important qualities that reveal a lot about a student’s potential. In regards to quantitative measures, some participants expressed that hand-in-hand consideration of placement test results, student grades, and student improvement could improve the placement process.

*Considering qualitative data.* Other participants emphasized the importance of considering more qualitative measures. Maria, for instance, believed that encouraging teachers to have conversations about particular students could highlight a different perception of the students that perhaps is not represented in a test or a grade. While having these conversations may take additional time, Maria’s bottom line is that “a teacher should try, if there are those students, to see if there is a certain possibility” (Maria’s Interview, 12). In other words, potential is worth an opportunity. Susan added that “letters of recommendation or maybe a resumé” (Susan’s Interview, p. 10) could be obtained for students desiring to move into an advanced course.

The other piece of qualitative data that participants believed should be given significant consideration is what the student herself thinks about her potential to be successful in an AP/Honors course. Al said that she would have the adults “consider whether or not the student actually believes they can pass” (Al’s Interview, p. 6). Conversing with the student to learn more about them, their goals, and their drive seems reasonable, but there needs to be a willingness to actually believe in what the student says. Leia expressed that it is important “to take notice in the kids who maybe do take a genuine interest in the material and to see if there is

any way that you can cultivate that” (Leia’s Interview, p. 10). In other words, both Al and Leia confirmed that it is important that teachers believe in the idea that students do know themselves and know what they want.

***Consider underrepresented experiences.*** The final pieces of advice that participants offered to decision makers centered on treating students as individuals as well as on heightening awareness about the fact that students can appeal placement decisions. Regarding treating students as individuals, Susan suggested that the adults who make the advanced course placement decisions take an approach similar to college admissions counselors where they consider “underrepresented experiences, underrepresented challenges” (Susan’s Interview, p. 9). She said of her time at St. Mary’s: “I don’t think at the time people in my administration at St. Mary’s really took into consideration diverse backgrounds” (Susan’s Interview, p. 9). Given that individual students function differently, it cannot be expected that all students will know that they can appeal the decision about their placement. As such, some Latina participants suggested that an appeal process be set in place. Monica expressed that “on the lists that are posted on the teacher’s door letting students know whether they got into the class maybe there can be a side note saying ‘if any questions please come talk to Mrs. Ramos’” (Monica’s Interview, p. 17). Therefore, while more attention needs to be paid to diversity, a formal appeals process also needs to be established and promoted among students.

### **Alignment with the Catholic, single-sex, and AP advantage**

Given the research there seems to be a triple advantage for low income and/or ethnic minority students who attend a Catholic, single-sex high school and are enrolled in advanced courses. Therefore, the data collected from the teacher, administrator, and participant interviews

was also used to answer the third research question: How is one Catholic female single-sex high school aligned with the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors course? While participants were readily able to note advantages related to the AP/Honors appeals process and being in a Catholic and/or single-sex high school, they appeared to have a more challenging time speaking to the advantages of being in AP/Honors course. This difficulty may have stemmed from how the interview question was worded. Additionally, because the interview question asked them to respond to the research claim that AP courses facilitate college admissions and are good predictors for future success, in light of their experience with the appeals process, participants who are currently still students at St. Mary's had a more challenging time responding to the question because they had not yet gone through the college experience. While some of the students interviewed were seniors who had submitted college applications, at the time of the interview they had not yet received acceptances and therefore had not yet experienced the potential benefits cited in the research. Further, students who were denied the opportunity to take the AP/Honors class struggled to answer this question because of the simple fact that they did not have an opportunity to experience the course. The findings that follow are presented by type of advantage and then subsequently presented by theme.

### **Catholic School Advantage**

Using their experience at St. Mary's High School of appealing for an AP/Honors course, participants of this study were asked to respond to the research argument that Catholic schools are advantageous for low-income and/or ethnic minority youth. Most often, student responses cited the school's size as well as an ethic of care as the most notable advantages.

**The benefits of being a small size.** Most participants noted that there were multiple benefits to attending a Catholic school because of its small size. One important advantage cited by participants was the rapport that is developed between teacher and student, which allows for more individualized attention. Maria noted that because of St. Mary's small nature, teachers know their students well and she says: "And those professors are able to give actual, actual feedback about the student itself. Rather than at a school 'oh, you know, is Maria a good student?' and they flip open the grade book" (Maria's Interview, p. 16). Moreover, Maria's comment suggests that being in a small school allows teachers to get to know students on a more personal level, allowing them to offer more genuine feedback regarding a student's ability and potential, which is valuable information when a student's appeal is being reviewed. A small campus also seems to foster a strong student to student rapport. According to Gato "there is more of the feel of wanting to help one another" (Gato's Interview, p. 15) in a small, Catholic school. Therefore, participants recognize the small nature of their Catholic school as an advantage.

Another important advantage related to small size and knowing teachers and peers well is the sense of community that is established. For instance, Gato asserted that the desire to help one another is due to St. Mary's "foundation of Catholicism, of helping one another, being kind to one another, and loving one another" (Gato's Interview, p. 15). Rebecca noted that at St. Mary's "they just make you feel at home, for everyone, not just, it doesn't matter if you're Catholic or not" (Rebecca's Interview, p. 6). This comment about students feeling at home suggests that they feel part of a community. As evidenced, some participants perceived the school's small size as the reason that a sense of community could be established.

**Care.** The existence of care is another advantage that participants discussed when responding to the research claim surrounding the Catholic school advantage. One way in which they saw this manifested was in teacher availability to provide additional tutoring. Such was the case with Kim who earlier on had expressed strong disappointment about her appeal for advanced courses being denied. Despite this disappointment, when asked how she would respond to the research claim regarding the Catholic school advantage, given her experience with the appeals process, she stated: “I would agree with it because I do get help from here and school is really helpful with all the teachers...I feel I do have an advantage being here, because the teachers do care about you” (Kim’s Interview, p. 10). Monica said about her teachers: “they talk to you very encouragingly” (Monica’s Interview, p. 3). Care also appeared to emerge in the way teachers encouraged students once they were accepted into the AP/Honors class for which they appealed. Leia, for example, stated: “I just felt an overwhelming support from my teachers and respect for not only me speaking up for what I believe in but I think also for following through” (Leia’s Interview, p. 5). Moreover, teacher encouragement and belief in the students was also evidence of an ethic of care.

The administrators and teachers expressed a similar view to the students regarding care. For instance, Mrs. O’Sullivan noted that as a Catholic school “there is an openness in mindset to all possibilities with all people” (Mrs. O’Sullivan’s Interview, p. 4). Her remark echoes the sentiment of teaching as Jesus did, viewing everybody’s potential as limitless and caring enough about every person to make opportunities available to them. Mrs. Smith noted that because Catholic schools are committed to social justice and believe in the whole person, “they tend not to just let somebody languish and be ignored in their school, but they seek them out and we try to

go after each student and see if we are doing the best for them” (Mrs. Smith’s Interview, p. 6). However, she and Mrs. Crawford also expressed not wanting to overburden students with a course that is too challenging for them. Mrs. Smith stated: “it is not good for students to sit day after day and be asked to learn material that’s above their head” (Mrs. Smith’s Interview, p. 4). Moreover, students at St. Mary’s seemed to believe that their teachers cared about them and the existence of such care was also expressed by school officials in their attempt to pay attention to the needs of each individual student.

### **Single-Sex Advantage**

When participants were presented with the research regarding the claimed advantages of single-sex schools for low-income and/or ethnic minority females and were asked to respond to this claim given their experience with their appeal, a few themes emerged. The first theme emphasized the idea that without males present in the learning environment females become the priority not only for school officials but also for themselves. Secondly, participants expressed a comfort and confidence in being authentic; particularly in regards to academics they noted that at an all-female high school it was acceptable to be smart.

**Girls are the priority: the boys can’t take over.** As noted by participants in this study, the first advantage of attending a female single-sex high school is that in the absence of males, females become the priority for their teachers and for all opportunities, and for themselves, in the sense that they are better able to focus on their studies and their personal development. Gato supported this idea when she expressed that at “an all-girls school, obviously, girls are the priority, a girl’s education is the priority for a teacher, and there’s no gender, kind of favoritism” (Gato’s Interview, p. 16). Without male students vying for teachers’ attention, Gato believed

that teachers are dedicated to the development of females. Her comment, however, does not clarify whether she believes the lack of gender discrimination is due to the fact that males are not part of the learning environment or to the possibility that the teachers employed at an all-female high school are hired for their belief in gender equality. Clarice added that without males in the learning environment, as a female “you have the opportunity to really be hands-on” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 14) and females in a coeducational setting might not “have the opportunity to be the leader” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 14). Therefore, she suggested that an all-female learning environment encourages young women to take initiative and lead, rather than to defer to or rely on a male to take the lead, maximizing females’ willingness to seize opportunities. This is a notion Mrs. Crawford also expressed about an all-female education when she stated: “that’s the very, the big advantage for us to be in an all-girls school because we can especially gear towards their way of learning, labs, they have to manipulate the things, the boys can’t take over” (Mrs. Crawford’s Interview, p. 6). So, based on participant responses, when females are the priority they also tend to seize opportunities that encourage learning and leadership.

**Away from the distractions: being able to focus more.** According to the participants interviewed, another advantage of an all-female learning environment is a heightened ability to focus on academics and personal growth. For example, Monica agreed that there is an advantage to a single-sex environment and admitted that in a coeducational environment she probably would not have pushed herself to be in the AP classes she has taken because she would have been distracted by male students and the focus on socialization with them. She noted: “having that one sex just really determines, encourages you and pushes you to do your hardest even when you’re sometimes low they bring you back to your up point and it’s just very helpful” (Monica’s



Interview, p. 11). In Monica's case, not only did she express that having male students on campus would be a distraction that would divert her attention away from her academic focus, it seemed that in an all-female environment she felt more encouraged to seek and give her personal best, and she felt that her peers supported her and believed in her even when perhaps she did not. Thus, not having males in the classroom seemed to allow female students to focus on their academic and personal development and gains in these areas seemingly built their self-confidence.

**Greater confidence in self: you don't have to dumb yourself down.** With sharpened focus and confidence, students in an all-female learning environment also found that it is acceptable to be smart and to openly express that. For instance, Gato noted that in an all-female learning environment "you don't have to dumb yourself down" (Gato's Interview, p. 16), suggesting that females in a coeducational environment feel the pressure to impress or be liked by the male students and therefore may pretend to be less intelligent so that the males can take the lead. Her comment also indicated that she believes that females in an all-female learning environment embrace their intelligence and are encouraged to share it. Additionally, Susan remarked that an all-female school allows students to "explore um, and to be as geeky as you want" (Susan's Interview, p. 13). Through encouragement to explore, students at an all-female high school reach self-discovery and confidence in themselves, without consideration or concern for how it might be perceived by others. In other words, students are not concerned about acting in a way that will make them popular or cool, and instead they take pride in the unique interests and talents that make them who they are.

Several participants shared real life experiences they have had as evidence that they are self-confident in who they are as intelligent women. Leia noted that being in a single-sex environment allowed her to feel comfortable in using her voice and being herself and then she said:

I was able to develop, self-confidence in my, in my intellect as well as my personality and so when I actually did get back into, you know, an environment where I was learning around both sexes it didn't matter that boys were there, it didn't matter because I had already cultivated and, and grown these things and had confidence in them. So I never stifled my voice, I never did anything like that because I had already sort of tested it out on people I was comfortable around. (Leia's Interview, p. 14)

Clarice shared a similar experience she had recently while at a university summer camp for high school students interested in engineering. She noted that students were put in mixed gender groups and stated: "I wasn't in charge but I was able to get more of what I wanted to say into the conversation without being fearful of 'oh, I shouldn't say what I'm thinking'" (Clarice's Interview, p. 14). She later commented that one of the males in her group remarked "that he had never been around girls who kind of, who are proportional to what his learning capabilities are or his thinking or his creative skills" (Clarice's Interview, p. 14). Moreover, through a greater focus on academics and personal developments, students seem to foster their self-confidence which enables them to not be intimidated to show their intelligence.

### **Advanced Placement Advantage**

While participants noted some benefits to taking AP courses, often the AP advantage that they talked about had little to do with facilitated college admissions and even less to do with AP

courses as good predictors for college and future success. Rather, the AP advantage that they referenced centered on increased academic preparation for college, a better defined direction for pursuit of future interests, development of a strong work ethic, and the savings of time and money. Moreover, participants tended to reject the claim regarding the AP advantage for Latinas. This was so because first, not all participants interviewed were allowed the opportunity to take the AP courses for which they appealed. Secondly, even for participants who were allowed to take the advanced course after appealing, their position was that the score on an AP exam or the grade in an AP class does not always reveal what a student has in work ethic or has accomplished in her learning.

**Laying the foundation: academic preparation and motivation.** Latina students who are still enrolled at St. Mary's and therefore only have the high school experience to base their remarks on speculated about how the AP advantage will manifest itself when they transition to college. In essence, they saw the preparation for college that an AP course offers as the greatest advantage. Rebecca, for example, stated that while as a sophomore she is not entirely sure about all that colleges are looking for in a student, she thinks they would "want someone who is more knowledgeable" (Rebecca's Interview, p. 7). Rebecca suggested that AP and Honors courses make students more knowledgeable than the average student and this can make students more appealing college candidates. Clarice noted that students going into a challenging college should have experience with AP classes because as she said: "you need to have an insight as to what to expect" (Clarice's Interview, p. 15). Based on Rebecca and Clarice's comments, it appeared that in the eyes of a high school student college admissions are facilitated for students in the

advanced courses because they have proven that they can handle college-like work already, thereby increasing their chances of transitioning to college seamlessly and successfully.

Gato noted that the benefit of taking advanced courses for her, particularly in history, is that details and reasons are explored from multiple perspectives. She commented about studying the Mexican-American War: “You had to get into the complexity of all the issues that involved it. And, nothing is black and white, so it makes sense when you have to know the detail to discuss both points of view” (Gato’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). For Gato, the benefit existed in being able to discuss historical events from multiple perspectives other than just the traditional dominant perspective. Additionally, when Clarice was asked if being Latina played a part in the type of student she is, she commented: “nowadays just in general there is a wanting for women to be higher up... maybe my ethnicity would maybe have an impact of wanting me to be in the class because there’s not enough representation of Latinas out there” (Clarice’s Interview, p. 12). Therefore, Clarice noted that part of the benefit of being in advanced courses and pursuing further study in engineering when in college is due to her being Latina and to the fact that Latinas are not well-represented in either; this is her opportunity to contribute towards changing those statistics. While Gato noted an AP advantage of being academically informed of the importance to understand other perspectives besides the dominant one, Clarice noted that being a Latina in courses and a field of study where Latinas are typically underrepresented was a motivating factor for her.

The Latina alumnae of St. Mary’s, with their college experience underway or completed, also believed that an AP advantage existed for them to an extent. Al, for instance, shared that taking AP Art motivated her to do what she is doing now—attend art school. Thus, aside from

sharpening Al's interest in art, taking an AP Art class also made her a competitive applicant for art school. Maria expressed that taking an AP course motivated her to work harder and she said: "I think that that carried on, way past high school" (Maria's Interview, p. 7), therefore suggesting that the advanced course she took instilled in her an arduous work ethic which she exercises in study and employment. Additionally, Leia commented that taking AP English exposed her to many authors, fostering a "bigger interest in Latino authors" (Leia's Interview, p. 9) and she added: "it has laid the foundation for what I'm going to do for my profession and the rest of my life. So, just one little decision does have a butterfly effect" (Leia's Interview, p. 9). Thus, current students and graduates both highlighted a few of the benefits that often lead to the results of what is termed the AP advantage, namely focusing on how the advanced courses motivated them by defining their future direction of study as well as giving them the necessary preparation to be successful.

**Denied the AP advantage: wasting time and money.** Latina students who were denied admission into the AP courses after they appealed also discussed an AP advantage, but they discussed it as something they missed out on. Cristina, for example, noted that not being able to take the AP European History course she wanted affected her goals for college. She stated: "You need a pretty high GPA to get into any of the Ivy Leagues or anything, and, my GPA wasn't enough" (Cristina's Interview, p. 3). Thus, for Cristina, she missed out on the AP advantage of facilitated college admissions made possible through a more competitive grade point average (GPA). Susan who was also not allowed to take the AP course she appealed for, acknowledged that there is an advantage to taking AP courses for college. Susan noted: "if you didn't pass the AP course, you learned a lot more and if you did pass the AP course you have a

head start, because you have an extra semester...to do something else” (Susan’s Interview, p. 14). While this AP advantage is not related to facilitated college admissions or the prediction of college performance, it is related to learning, and to the saving of time and money when AP credits allow a student to skip out of certain introductory level college courses. However, even this advantage only existed for students who were granted the opportunity to take AP classes. Since Susan was not allowed into AP English, she noted: “I did have to take college writing as a freshman” (Susan’s Interview, p. 5). She then added: “on an education level I did have to make an effort to show up to those courses and it did take up a slot in which I could have been taking another course” (Susan’s Interview, p. 5). Similarly, Kim remarked that if she had been allowed to take AP European History she could have received college credit and then commented: “it would have saved me time in college too” (Kim’s Interview, p. 6). Kim then explained that she hopes to become a veterinarian which she estimated will take her eight years of study, so any time saved would have been a benefit to her. In Kim’s words: “I feel if I would have taken a college class it would have saved me a year maybe” (Kim’s Interview, p. 6). Moreover, students who were denied access into the AP courses they appealed for noted that they missed out on an AP advantage. However, the AP advantage that they discussed had more to do with saving time and money in college more than it did with what the research claims about facilitated college admissions and AP performance being a good predictor for college and career success.

**Consistency and work ethic: revealing more than AP scores or grades.** Aside from defining the AP advantage in a different way, some of the Latina participants in this study also plainly rejected the AP advantage claim around the notion that performance on AP exams or in AP courses are good predictors for college and future success. For example, Leia explained that

she was in an AP class with students who she felt knew how to study or knew how to get the A but were not always the most intelligent. Regarding AP courses as an indicator for college and future success she agreed that they are an indicator but noted: “there are many factors that come into a class that’s not just the ability to understand and comprehend and to perform. It’s also the consistency and the work ethic” (Leia’s Interview, p. 15). Similarly, Maria said that she believes it comes down to “your work ethic and it really falls on your motivation, your goals, and just how far you are willing to go to get it” (Maria’s Interview, p. 18). Maria added that she does not believe using performance on the AP exam as a predictor for future success will yield accurate results and she stated about her own performance on the AP exam:

I did not do that well. But, you know of course it hurt because I thought I did what I had to do but again it only motivated me even more. And going to college, it’s just, I always had that in the back of my mind. (Maria’s Interview, p. 17)

Despite not having scored well on the AP exam, Maria does not let that performance interfere with her decision to attend college. Seemingly work ethic and drive, from the perspective of those students whose appeal was eventually granted, reveal more about a student’s potential for success than does a score or grade on the AP exam or in an AP class, respectively.

The perspectives from students whose appeal was denied are also important to consider in assessing whether work ethic and drive are more accurate predictors of future success than performance in an AP class or on an AP test, particularly because these students were denied the possibility of taking an AP course and availing themselves of the advantages such an experience presents. When Kim responded to the research claim about the AP advantage, namely about facilitated college admissions, she said that hearing that makes her want to take the AP classes in

high school to avoid wasting time and money. She added: “it just makes me want to take an AP class only you get declined which makes you feel like you are an average person and you have to go through the same thing as everyone else” (Kim’s Interview, p. 13). When responding to the piece about AP performance being a good predictor for college and future success, Kim did not agree. When asked to expound on why, she cried and remarked about being denied the opportunity to try the advanced courses, and she said “the people that look down on you don’t have the same faith as you and that motivates me to prove them wrong” (Kim’s Interview, p. 13). Cristina echoed this sentiment when she said that telling her no just makes her work harder and she elaborated by saying “I just work harder to prove to them that I can do it and to show that I am capable of doing what I want” (Cristina’s Interview, p. 6). Thus, while a grade in an AP class or a score on an AP test may reveal something about a student’s future potential it does not always capture the personal qualities of a student such as their work ethic and determination which can lead them to success more readily. Further, grades and scores on an AP do not reveal anything about the practices and policies that bar potentially eligible students from reaping the benefits that advanced courses provide.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, both those Latinas whose appeal was granted as well as those Latinas whose appeal was denied expressed having an experience of feeling not good enough. Likewise, both groups of students expressed an experience of feeling like outsiders. For those students whose appeal was eventually granted, they found that they were comparable in ability to the other students in the class and they also had the experience of feeling prepared for their future as a result of their experience in the AP/Honors course. In terms of perspectives, most Latinas’



perspective on why they decided to appeal the decision of their placement had to do with their feeling that they had the capacity for advanced work, their driven nature, and their desire to be exposed to more learning. Regarding the process of appealing, most students found it nebulous. And, how Latina participants rationalized the results was highly influenced by the actual outcome of their placement. Perspectives also emerged concerning the school's sisterhood and its influence on issues of race and class. In terms of St. Mary's alignment to the Catholic, single-sex, and Advanced Placement advantage for Latina students who have appealed and have been granted or denied access, only some of the advantages were confirmed by participants. Moreover, the data collected in the various phases of research helps to create a more detailed picture of what students' experiences and perspectives are when they are granted or denied access into an advanced course. Additionally, the data illustrates that while participants seemingly agree that there are advantages to a Catholic, single-sex education and to taking AP courses, there are factors that can sometimes overshadow these advantages.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The major findings of my study are related to the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an AP/Honors course. Through the process of conducting individual interviews, however, other issues were brought to the fore by participants. Though seemingly unrelated to the AP/Honors placement phenomena under study, these issues were important because they revealed whether students felt excluded or included in the culture of the school. The major findings of this study will be discussed first followed by recommendations from the findings.

#### **Critical Biculturalism and Chicana feminist theory**

##### **The AP/Honors Placement Process: Setting up Borders that Create Outsiders**

Having an open placement process where annually students can attempt to transition into an AP/Honors class for the following year by meeting certain criteria seemingly supports the notion that there is openness to student growth and a desire for these young women to achieve and demonstrate self-confidence in their abilities. At second look, however, the process which is intended to allow for able students to transition into advanced courses in future years presents itself as restrictive. Several of the administrator and teacher comments illustrated that the specific criteria that needs to be met in order to gain placement into an AP/Honors course is multi-layered, often evolving or changing, and in many ways functions as a border that students can cross only if they have jumped each of the hurdles in the delineated process. However, failure to meet even one of the criteria is enough to bar the student from being able to cross that border that separates a regular course from an AP/Honors course. Student comments revealed

that the border that has kept them out of the advanced class has often been either the placement test or the grade in their past or current classes in that subject. Moreover, the process appears to be less about reviewing individual circumstance and student potential and more about ensuring that students have met the alleged “objective” targets, which have a tendency to change from time to time, established by the individual departments. Thus, the AP/Honors placement process is more of a tracking practice that keeps students initially placed into those courses moving along in that track and keeps all others out. The little movement—students occasionally moving out of or into AP/Honors—that occurs is perceived by school officials as a sign of their openness to consider all students when in reality it is a sign of an entrenched tracking system that institutionalizes discrimination that marginalizes minority students (Darder, 2012).

The push for heightened accountability measures in education has created a fixation on being able to assert claims of scientific authority, which detracts from the critical conversation of interrogating schooling practices and procedures that should be occurring (Darder & Torres, 2004; Darder, 2012). The AP/Honors placement process at St. Mary’s appears to be no different. Allowing all students interested in transitioning into an AP/Honors course to take a placement test feeds into the notion of a meritocracy. This opportunity to take the test inadvertently tells students: if you want it, you can have it. The power is in *your* hands. And this meritocratic belief appeared to be endorsed by Mrs. Crawford, the science teacher, who when asked if Latinas were well-represented in advanced science courses, responded by first defensively saying that last names do not matter. In other words, Mrs. Crawford argued that her department does not grant students the opportunity to take the placement test based on their last name, suggesting that they do not discriminate based on ethnicity. However, what this mentality fails to recognize is

that practices based on the vision of meritocracy, while under the semblance of objectivity and fairness, do indeed discriminate and perpetuate mechanisms of marginalization based on race, class, and gender because they do not acknowledge that students do not begin life on a level playing field and they do not assign any responsibility to school systems (Darder, 2012; hooks, 1994). Kim's remark about feeling like the advanced classes are offered to students who are already in Honors courses and to students who are of a different race than hers casts light on how the AP/Honors track breeds an exclusive, primarily White class of its own, much like the caste system created by tracking and ability grouping practices (Darder, 2012). It further supports the notion that schooling prepares students to enter existing class structures (Buetow, 2002; Carpenter, 2005) and debunks the myth that students can control which class structure they enter based on their hard work and effort (hooks, 1994).

Being able to determine student placement based on a number or a letter grade is further support that education practices at St. Mary's seem to focus more on the quantitative and scientific (Darder & Torres, 2004) and that they operate under a belief of meritocracy. It allows the adult who is determining student placement to tell a student that they did not meet the score or grade requirement, placing the blame on the student and allowing the adult to make a decision "under the guise of objectivity, fairness, and thus democratic selection" (Darder, 2012, p. 12), as is typical of a meritocratic vision. Further, because it is an alleged objective and scientific reason, it makes it almost impossible to challenge the decision further. As Darder & Torres (2004) note: "in this closed system of accountability, there is no dialogue related to the very conditions under which schooling functions, its unexamined assumptions, and its effects on students, as such questions are deemed irrelevant or scientifically irrational" (p. 81). It is no

wonder that students like Susan and Leia expressed feeling shot down or written off. Likewise, it is no surprise then that participants largely rejected the AP advantage as it is noted in the research. For them, the AP advantage, particularly the one tied to performance in AP courses and exams serving as a predictor for college and future success, largely does not exist. And, it is because it focuses on a grade or score. For the Latinas in this study, grades and AP exam scores do not reveal all about a student's potential, ability, or life circumstances that may influence the grade or score they receive. Perhaps this belief is supported by their very ability to withstand the appeals process and regardless of the decision, be able to find success in their course work. The qualitative and humanizing information students had to share about themselves regarding their strengths, potential, interests, and dreams had no place in a system that only considers quantitative measures as valuable. Yet, students note this as an important factor in their experience and in their motivation.

In the administrator and teacher remarks, references to a firm hold suggest inflexibility and indications of a line that needs to be crossed illustrate the metaphorical border that stands between students and their placement in a more advanced course. Anzaldúa (2012) posits that “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (p. 25). The description of the placement process by the principal and teachers interviewed suggests that there is a definite border that serves to limit or bar entrance into the advanced courses. Consequently, the Latinas who are denied access into the advanced courses, even those who are eventually accepted after they appeal, are otherized. They are not part of the mainstream that are automatically transitioned into the advanced courses and therefore feel a psychological or emotional stigmatization as outsiders. Further, given that Latina representation is particularly

weak in some advanced courses more than others, for some of the students who were accepted on appeal, cultural citizenship (Bañuelos, 2006) seems to be lacking in their experience. In other words, part of feeling like an outsider may be caused by Latinas feeling like they do not belong in the space of advanced course work. A space that is largely White and that they had to fight their way to get into.

The notion of Latinas being blocked from access to advanced courses was clearly present in the qualitative information gathered in this study. However, the exclusion of Latinas in the advanced courses is also evidenced in the quantitative data on Latinas enrollment in AP/Honors English, Science, and Social Science courses which revealed that Latina enrollment in these courses did not often reach 15% even though Latina enrollment at the school is between 17% and 21% at each grade level. Though Latinas are underrepresented in advanced courses at St. Mary's, the statistics are better than that of Latinas/os in public schools who enroll in advanced courses at half the rate of White students (Klopfenstein, 2004). Further, while Latinas who are not enrolled in an AP/Honors course are still receiving a college-preparatory education while at St. Mary's, this finding confirms what the latest research on high tracks of education argue, which is that often minority groups are not well-represented in those tracks (Ballón, 2008; Darder, 2012; Flowers, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Oakes, 1981; Valencia, 2011). The effect of this at St. Mary's is that once more Latinas are the "others" who do not reap the benefits often associated with advanced course-taking. And, while this is about missing out on certain academic preparation and exposure for college, the repercussions are also tied to capital and class. As students such as Kim and Susan pointed out, without the credits for AP courses, Latinas end up having to spend more time and therefore more money in college in order to

complete their degrees. Worse yet, the research on tracking illustrates that because schools socialize students, students learn to internalize their academic placement as defining their position in life, thereby perpetuating the maintenance of a “hierarchically structured labor force, which is designed to keep in place the inequality of the status quo” (Darder, 2012, p. 12).

Based on qualitative data gathered in the interviewing of school officials and students, the AP/Honors placement process emerged as being closed. This was supported with the quantitative data regarding Latinas low enrollment in the advanced courses. A meritocratic vision and tracking practices that marginalize Latina students and perpetuate oppressive practices, namely based on race and class, also surfaced. These obstacles prevent St. Mary’s school officials from having a critical discussion that interrogates their schooling practices and procedures and the effects it has on students. Moreover, the testimonios that the Latina students offered are critical in shedding light on an issue that until now has gone ignored.

### **On the Outside Looking in: The testimonio of the Outsider**

Bernal et al. (2012) posit that a testimonio is a genre that allows an individual to reflect on their silenced personal experience and to weave it into a narrative that unveils an individual’s personal and sociopolitical realities. The testimonios that the Latina students interviewed for this study shared largely reveal a personal experience of feeling like an outsider and contradict a few important tenets of St. Mary’s school philosophy which encourages young women to strive for excellence and to look past superficial inquiry. As such, the testimonios the Latina participants offered serve as a counternarrative that challenges the dominant discourse and brings some important discrepancies that need to be addressed to the fore.

One of the findings that contradicts the philosophy of the school encouraging young women to strive for excellence is that in the placement and appeals process, Latinas experienced feeling “less than.” As aforementioned, often in the process of seeking an explanation as to why they were not allowed into the class after taking the placement exam or after appealing, Latinas were often met with responses regarding their grade or their placement test score not being good enough or high enough, suggesting that they were deficient in some way. I question how this is to promote excellence? Instead of providing feedback on areas of growth, considering other measures of student success beyond a test score or grade in a course or being open to other ways of knowing, St. Mary’s school officials opted to tell students that they were not good enough. Kim, for instance, discussed that as a Latina student at St. Mary’s she wanted to prove that Latinas could be in those classes and be successful in them. Denying her this opportunity in a sense conveys to her that she has been wrong in her thinking. It was only when students appealed that other factors such as participation and work ethic were sometimes considered. Alexandra had raised the question of how she was good enough to be in the class the second time around if she was not good enough the first time. Moreover, her comment indicates that the damage of not feeling good enough is done at the outset of the denial into the advanced course. It further illustrates the importance of considering how school policies, practices, and decisions can affect students’ perception of self and potentially their aspirations, both of which can affect their high school and college academic decisions and experience (Rudasill & Callahan, 2010).

Meanwhile, the adults presented themselves as infallible, never stopping to consider that perhaps their self-created placement test did not accurately assess student knowledge and ability or never stopping to interrogate their practices or consider the setback that a one-time test can



have on a student's entire high school career if they do not receive the score that they deemed the necessary score. The tenacity these participants demonstrated when appealing, as evidenced in their approach of a teacher, a counselor, and/or administrator in hopes of being heard by a school adult who might see their determination and give them an opportunity, reveals a lot about their desire to take the course as well as their drive and effort—qualities that would likely transfer into their coursework and would allow them to be successful. While they did their part in striving for this excellence, the adults who were supposed to help them reach that excellence did not.

Instead, they devalued student's work ethic and performance in a class over the course of a year by basing a student's placement decision on the results of one placement test or by claiming that the A or B+ that a student had in their current class was not sufficient to make the transition into a more advanced course. Similarly, individual circumstances that can affect a student's education, such as financial challenges or reasons for wanting to take the advanced courses (such as preparation for a potential major in college), were never investigated or considered. Thus, by erring on the side of caution and objectivity, St. Mary's school officials caused the Latina students appealing to get into these courses to feel less than everyone else.

Another contradiction of school philosophy that emerged during the study is that while St. Mary's promotes a mission of empowering young women and helping each one reach her potential, there were also certain points noted in the interviews that suggested that students actually were not encouraged to advocate for themselves. For example, Monica discussed the "boundaries" (Monica's Interview, p. 16) that exist in the placement and appeals process and when I probed a bit further and asked her if she thought that the fact that students could appeal a decision was well known, she says:

I don't think so at all...I could be totally wrong but I'm not sure if the teachers would like the students to know that they could do that...I think if there's a placement exam, in general that means they are selective about who gets into their class...I don't know, I think I'm wrong. (Monica's Interview, p. 17)

After speaking so openly, Monica appeared to retract her statement, perhaps in an attempt to not offend or criticize school officials. However, noting that she does not think the teachers would appreciate students knowing that they could appeal suggests that school officials do not like to be challenged, particularly because they value having power and a selective process for choosing students. This suggests that their understanding of authority is not dialectical and rather hierarchical (Darder, 2012; Valencia & Pearl, 2011). So, if they do not like to be challenged, how are students supposed to become empowered and learn to self-advocate? Seemingly, St. Mary's encourages young women to be empowered, find their voice, and to be advocates for themselves and others when they enter "the real world" but while within the confines of the facility school officials want to uphold order and authority at the expense of silencing student voice and perpetuating oppressive practices (Darder, 2012). Further, by keeping the appeals process vague and veiled the boundaries are unclear and students are disempowered by a purposeful lack of knowledge.

Another way in which St. Mary's has disempowered Latinas in the AP/Honors placement and appeals process is by not treating them as mature and credible individuals who have valuable insights to offer regarding what is best for their academic success. Al talked about the frustration she experienced as she was trying to make adult decisions for herself and being told by someone else that she could not have the opportunity or was not able enough for it. Susan expressed a

keen perception that requests made by adults or by White individuals appear to be taken more seriously when she commented that she believes the appeal regarding her placement may have been taken more seriously had she brought a parent to support her or if she had been White. In this statement she reveals the advantages that are often attached to cultural and social capital. While there could have been myriad reasons for why Susan's parents did not join their daughter in making the appeal, Susan suggests that she would have found it beneficial to have an adult role model who understood and knew how to navigate the education system and could guide her through it or at the very least could challenge school leadership on the decision.

Ballón (2008) noted that this type of role modeling and guidance can aid Latino students in securing a college preparatory academic experience. In Susan's case, however, this was not true. Cultural capital is often linked with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Sullivan, 2009) or from the dominant culture and since Susan was the only student who self-reported being from a low socioeconomic background, perhaps her parents did not fully understand how the system worked. Being in a predominantly White, middle to upper-middle class school environment only exacerbated the situation because she did not have many peers that she could use as guides. Susan also made reference to the notion that she was raised in a Latino culture where she was taught to demonstrate compliance to authority. Moreover, it could have been that compliance or trust in authority that kept Susan's parents from supporting her in her appeal. In the absence of perceiving authority as dialectical from both the school leadership and parent end, Susan was left frustrated and alone. Susan's remark also asserts that being White brings with it a set of privileges such as automatic respect or attention. The fact that Susan believes this also suggests that she does not believe her request was taken

seriously because she was an adolescent Latina, two qualities that apparently do not merit due adult attention. The notion of having receptive, accessible adults on campus was also a point made by Leia who noted that without a forum to speak up, students' voices are silenced and their ability to advocate for their needs is hindered. As Bernal et al. (2009) asserts: "talking back often shifted students into in-between spaces of empowerment and powerlessness" (p. 574) and the in-between space the student is relinquished to has much to do with the adult response she receives.

When Mrs. Crawford spoke her thoughts about students who appeal their placement decision, she expressed that students always seem to think that next year they will perform better. Her comment and manner of expression suggested her doubt in students and their belief in self. Perhaps worse than this, however, is that seldom were students consulted about what the opportunity to take the advanced class means to them. For instance, although Rebecca was eventually allowed into the class she appealed for, while the high-stakes decision-making was happening she was on the outside looking in, at the mercy of someone else who never consulted her about her thoughts or her goals which included wanting to take the Honors math class because of the preparation it would offer her for college and in her future aspirations to be a doctor. Like Rebecca, several of the other Latina participants interviewed had a greater goal in mind when seeking placement in the AP/Honors course; they were striving for personal and academic excellence and yet this piece of their story never factored in to the decision-making.

As a result of being disempowered, some Latinas in this study viewed their eventual acceptance into the advanced classes more as a gift than a right. This mentality often clouded their engagement in decolonization and prevented them from being able to see the deeper

meaning about the AP/Honors placement process and practices. For instance, Leia shared how she went about appealing for the AP English class. She explained to the English department chairwoman her circumstances of having to balance a part-time job and her academic responsibilities and she indicated that she negotiated for an opportunity to take AP English by promising to raise her grade in her current class. Leia's circumstances are commendable—a working St. Mary's student is not the norm—and while they are used by Leia to inform the situation, she does so in a way that makes her look like she is the one who needs to work harder rather than the school leader and the school needing to be the ones who are more receptive to giving able students opportunities. Approaching a school leader demonstrates courage and is indicative of how seriously Leia wanted this opportunity. However, when Leia talked with the English department chair she did not discuss the injustice being made by disallowing her from the AP class because of her current grade and ignoring the fact that she recently had earned the highest score on the placement test—a test which is supposed to measure students level of mastery of required skills for the advanced course. Similarly, Clarice noted that she appealed not out of a responsibility, but out of a desire to make herself more competitive. However, her comment disregards the school's responsibility in helping her do this by offering her opportunities to stretch herself.

For Latina participants who were denied the opportunity to take the advanced course even after appealing, the disempowerment they experienced forced them to quietly return to their regular courses. For example, despite having a solid A in the first semester, a nod to her work ethic and determination to perform well (qualities that would have likely transferred had she been placed in an AP course), Kim does not challenge her placement decision any further and

instead remains in regular history constantly wondering “what if?” she had been given the chance. Susan, too, concludes that it is the school’s loss and not hers and feels like there is nothing more that she can do to change her placement.

A Chicana Feminist epistemology aims to ask “what and whose history, community, knowledge, and voice prevails?” (Bernal, 1998, p. 1). Based on the testimonios of the Latina participants interviewed, it is suggested that the knowledge and voice of the dominant culture, as well as that of the adult school officials, is the one that prevails at St. Mary’s. Despite this, Latinas demonstrate resiliency as will be discussed later in the section on mestiza consciousness. For now, however, a look at what it is like for Latinas who live at the intersection of several oppressions will be discussed.

### **Living in the Borderlands**

The space that Latina participants in this study occupy at the intersection of gender, race, and class, influences their unique experience and perspective on the issue of the AP/Honors placement process. Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito (2009) call this point in the intersection a borderland and they posit that a borderland analysis allows for an understanding of how groups negotiate these boundaries to emerge. For Latinas who have sought placement into an AP/Honors course at St. Mary’s by appealing, one of the spaces they occupy is that of feeling excluded or like an “outsider-within” (Bernal et al., 2006, p. 99). As is evidenced by the details of the placement and appeals process and procedure, AP/Honors courses are exclusive. It is no wonder then that when Latinas are allowed into the advanced courses after they appeal they feel like outsiders. Several students talked about feeling like they had to prove that they belonged in the advanced class once they were placed in the AP/Honors class or that they self-doubted at

times. Again, they seem to view their placement in the advanced class as an opportunity for which they have to prove their merit, rather than as an opportunity they deserve and have earned. This means that aside from the natural challenge inherent in an AP/Honors course, the Latina students whose appeal was accepted also had to contend with an additional pressure to perform well for fear that failure to meet expectations might confirm what they had already been told: that they were not good enough.

Much like the original feminist movement that focused on eradicating the oppression of the female gender, St. Mary's seems to have a positive effect on the young women who attend the school insofar as boosting their self-confidence and making them see their worth as females. However, the sole focus on gender does not adequately nurture the young Latinas whose race or class do not fit the dominant white middle class norm. As such, race emerged as an important factor in the Latina participants' borderland experience, particularly for those students who felt like outsiders because of the small Latina population at St. Mary's.

Attempting to defy racial stereotypes was one way in which Latinas in this study encountered the tensions that can surface when one does not belong to the dominant culture. While the stereotypes were not necessarily authored on St. Mary's campus, they did appear to drive the participants to pursue advanced work, which suggests that the stereotypes may have been held to a certain extent. For example, as Clarice discussed wanting to defy the stereotype of Mexicans not being ambitious, she noted a few times that she wanted to "stand out of the bunch" (Clarice's 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview, p. 1). There appeared to be a need for Clarice to distinguish herself and to prove that she is ambitious and successful. Though Clarice did not mention that teachers conveyed holding these stereotypes she did allude to her classmates making

stereotypical comments such as linking Mexicans to crime and gang membership. Additionally, while Clarice remarked that she does not take these comments offensively and that she does not have a problem confronting people when they make such comments, the fact that she has to confront such stereotypical and ignorant thinking adds an additional layer to what she has to negotiate in her school life at a predominantly White school. Similarly, Gato expressed frustration that a stereotype exists around what a Mexican should look, talk, and act like. She talked about wanting to “break the label,” by being successful in a course centered on the dominant culture and language—advanced English—which again illustrates the need that Latinas feel to prove themselves as able or worthy. Gándara and Contreras (2009) posit that the tension students feel when they have to reconcile the perception others have of them with their lived reality, particularly in regards to an anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment, can sometimes cause them to reject their ethnicity or the role of being a good student. Fortunately, both Clarice and Gato used the stereotypes to fuel their motivation to prove the stereotypes wrong, while remaining proud of being Latinas. However, the fact that they had to confront these stereotypes is evidence of the conflicts and experiences Latinas have in the borderlands.

To gain greater perspective on the racialized space that Latinas occupy at St. Mary’s, it is important to also understand an important mantra of this Catholic, single-sex school. A review of the school crest illustrated on the 2012-2013 Parent/Student Handbook reveals a Latin phrase that when translated conveys the message of “oneness.” While the goal of the school, as indicated on this crest, may be to strive for unity, the isolation and forced assimilation that some students felt revealed that the school has confused this for uniformity or singularity. For instance, Kim shared that in her advanced Spanish class she noticed that non-native speakers



outweigh native speakers. In the eyes of St. Mary's school officials, this detail is not problematic because placement into the advanced classes is based on seemingly uniform objective measures and everyone has a chance to meet these measures. Even though offering an AP/Honors course to Latinas who are native Spanish speakers seems like an easy way to expose these students to an advanced track and to acknowledge the cultural values and knowledge they possess, these students are robbed of that opportunity. Instead, the opportunity for advanced learning of the Spanish language and culture, and the opportunity to earn additional grade points and potentially even college credit linked to AP/Honors courses, is given to students who are already privileged by belonging to a dominant race and class. In other words, privilege sustains privilege.

Susan also noted that St. Mary's ignores the fact that the experiences and circumstances of Latinas are different and instead of capitalizing on these differences as an opportunity to learn and embrace diversity, she felt like students who were different from the dominant norm were encouraged to blend in. Her comment reveals that at St. Mary's students are encouraged to assimilate and that challenging assumptions or bringing differences to the fore to enter into dialogue is not invited. With this viewpoint of assimilation, significant cultural differences and the dynamics of power in the classroom are ignored (Darder, 2012) and Latina students are left to feel like outsiders who must sacrifice their cultural values and adopt those of the dominant norm if they want to fit in (Darder, 2012). While this may be done with the intention of creating a unified student body, the means do not justify the end and it is evident that the mark is being missed. Gato shared another example when she discussed the clash she experienced between American values such as self-sufficiency and independence with the Mexican values she grew up

with such as family and being in touch with feelings. Since her courses, for the most part, did not recognize her Mexican values, she explains that at first she was timid to share her point of view for fear of standing out. It took her some time before she felt comfortable asserting herself as proudly Mexican. Therefore as it stands, at St. Mary's it is the White voice that prevails and the White culture which is held as the standard and students who do not fit the part are simply encouraged to blend in rather than to highlight and celebrate the differences. However, differences do not need to be silenced in order to establish unity. To the contrary, differences need to be understood and appreciated in order for individuals to band together and be truly unified.

While there were Latina participants in this study who felt excluded from the culture at St. Mary's, there were also Latina participants who, while they acknowledged that Latinas were a small group at St. Mary's, did not question this reality. For some students like Rebecca, it made logical sense that since the overall Latina representation at St. Mary's was small so too was the Latina representation in AP/Honors courses. For others like Monica, it was just reality and she did not see any intentionality behind it. Rebecca and Monica also seemed to believe that being Latina had nothing to do with how they experienced or perceived the AP/Honors placement and appeals process. Their responses might be an indication of how well integrated they feel. However, the fact that other participants noted otherwise is concerning and suggests that Rebecca and Monica are so accustomed to the hegemonic culture that they no longer question it. Moreover, while I was pleased to hear that these Latinas felt included at St. Mary's, I was concerned with their lack of questioning. To me this suggested that their voices had been silenced for so long, likely even before they began at St. Mary's. It also suggested that they had

already sacrificed their cultural values and adapted to those of the dominant norm, and worse yet, that they were accustomed to this type of experience to the degree that they viewed it as normal. This was something that Gato echoed in a second interview as she shared that having attended a White middle school where a hierarchy seemed to exist, she entered high school subconsciously trying to assess how people would react to her being Latina before she felt comfortable enough to be herself. Moreover, the more a situation like this seems normal, the more this feeds into compliant behavior which only serves to perpetuate assimilationist values and practices that marginalize and oppress minority students.

Class was another factor that colored the experience of Latina students at St. Mary's. Al, for instance, made comments about white girls and their money, but also linked it to "daddy," as if to suggest that the majority of White students at St. Mary's were handed a life of ease by their parents. She also emphasized that at St. Mary's these students seemed to place importance on having material items. In acknowledging that she was not raised this way, Al's expression of this information suggests that she does not feel she fits in with the typical middle class, White student because not only has she not been handed every opportunity, but she also has not lived a life basking in material abundance. Similarly, Leia discussed how she felt some students in the advanced courses had been "groomed" to function in those classes. The grooming is likely in reference to receiving tutoring and additional preparation to support students' academic performance, all of which is facilitated by money to pay for these services. This, in and of itself, creates a privileged class of students because only those who can afford it can reap the benefits of it. However, further analysis also suggests that the grooming is also in reference to possessing the cultural values and knowledge that are perceived as superior and as necessary for success.

Susan highlighted the issue of class when she explained that she felt she needed to be cautious in how much she rattled the cages, or challenged the system, since she was attending St. Mary's on scholarship. Her sense of indebtedness because of her scholarship forces her to temper her resistance. Although Susan was a student who challenged her placement decision several times, the issue of class seems to doubly overcome her. First, her rejection from the AP English course suggests that she is not qualified to participate in knowledge production. Secondly, the fact that she is constantly dismissed and ultimately denied from the advanced course forces her to eventually resign and comply with the school's decision. Thus, class influences the varied experiences that Latinas have at St. Mary's and because of class differences these Latinas recognize that they are coping with different circumstances and yet feel they are not understood, do not belong, and are at a disadvantage.

The borderland experience, therefore, reveals that at the intersection of race and class Latinas at St. Mary's are a marginalized group. Racially they are still outnumbered by a White majority. In regards to class, while all but one perceive their families to be middle class according to what they self-indicated on the personal data sheet, based on what was expressed in the interviews, they do not feel they have the same ease of life and privilege that money can buy. Further, they are not included in the production of knowledge, as their ways of knowing are not considered and they are discounted as not good enough for the advanced courses, and are encouraged to assimilate to the dominant norm. As such, they often feel isolated or encouraged to adapt to the dominant norm.

### **Mestiza Consciousness: Defining Reality and Challenging the Discourse**

A Chicana Feminist epistemology is characterized by a mestiza consciousness, which is defined as a consciousness that allows a Chicana to live with contradictions and ambiguity; in essence, a mestiza consciousness allows a Chicana to balance a life of oppositions (Anzaldúa, 2012; Bernal, 1998). One way in which the mestiza consciousness of these Latina students was evidenced is in how they resisted being subjected to the will of others: a Western dichotomy that Bernal (1998) defines as subject versus object. For instance, even though every Latina participant in this study was initially denied placement into an AP/Honors course they were seeking access to, the students' perspective, every time, was that they should appeal the original decision about their placement because they desired to be challenged and be prepared for college. This illustrates their forethought regarding their schooling and driven nature as well as their resistance to having their future squelched by someone else. And, while every participant had that self-motivation in common, the degree of the resistance exerted varied by individual.

### **Tolerating Ambiguity and Contradictions: Degrees of Resistance Exerted**

Though all students demonstrated their resistance by appealing the original decision which denied them admission into the AP/Honors course they tried for, only Cristina took what would be considered extreme action once she received the denial to her appeal as she decided to withdraw from St. Mary's. This decision seems to have been made more feasible because of the adult support Cristina had and the outside advice she was able to solicit from an uncle who understands the competitive college admissions process, confirmation that Latinas aspirations can be heavily influenced by friends and family (Ohrt et al., 2009; Shiu et al., 2009). All other participants were more tempered in their resistance. Susan's repeated appeals directed at various

adults on campus are one example of this resistance. Additionally, Clarice and Monica appealed their placement on several occasions, demonstrating their resistance or refusal to believe that they were not qualified for more advanced courses. Being seemingly unbothered by the fact that they appealed their placement several times even though they had done well in every course they appealed for is illustrative of how tempered these students' resistance actually was. Like Clarice and Monica, many students resisted by appealing the placement decision, but did not create a ruckus as they had a right to do since they had a fairly impeccable academic record which warranted at least an opportunity to try the advanced course. Their behavior resembled Sandoval's (2000) equal-rights tenet of oppositional consciousness, which at its core demands assimilation—to be treated and integrated the same as the dominant group. Moreover, the key to this tempered resistance seems to lie in the mestiza consciousness itself. Because of the borderlands experience that Latinas have, they learn tolerance for both contradictions and ambiguity (Anzaldúa, 2012) and similar to differential consciousness, depending on their needs Latinas can use their subjectivity in a calculated manner to get what they need (Bernal, 2006; Sandoval, 2000). In this case, while the placement decision contradicted what these Latinas knew to be the best placement for themselves, they found a way to survive. In essence, by appealing, these participants demonstrated a subtle resistance, as well as a persistence to salvage an academic pathway that would be most beneficial to them and their future.

### **La Facultad: Challenging and Transcending Objective Truth**

Challenging Western dichotomies such as “objective truth versus subjective emotion” (Bernal, 1998, p. 4) is also characteristic of a Chicana Feminist epistemology. One major way in which the Latina participants of this study have demonstrated this ability is in their negotiation of

what school officials perceive to be fair, scientific, and objective truth and what students know by intuition and emotion, which is more subjective in nature. In other words, although the Latina participants were frequently told that their grades or test scores were not good enough, they did not let this permanently affect their performance. As Monica discussed why it was such a letdown to initially be declined the opportunity to take Chemistry Honors, she mentions that largely the disappointment was caused by the fact that she “in her head” knew that she could do it. She talks about possessing the drive and the will to do whatever it takes to succeed, and always “pushing through” which indicates that she is a determined and invested young lady, though none of this seemed important when the initial decision regarding her placement was made. However, Monica persisted in appealing for several AP/Honors courses throughout her high school career and proved that her intuition or “*facultad* (knowing through experience and intuition” (Bernal et al., 2006, p. 4) as well as her belief in self could be trusted as she earned A’s in each course for which she appealed. Thus, not only does her repeated insistence to appeal illustrate her rejection of the perception the so-called objective measures create about her as a student, but her repeated success confirms that her belief in self are accurate and that the reality is that she truly is qualified for advanced course work. In other words, Monica’s *facultad*, one of her ways of knowing, proves to be legitimate. Clarice noted that often she was not placed into the advanced courses she sought because of her performance on the placement test. However, she also discussed that with effort and a willingness to ask for additional help when needed she was able to succeed in the classes that she appealed for when she was given the opportunity. Similarly, Leia acknowledged that while money can facilitate additional support such as tutoring, which she did not have, being in the AP English class made her realize that she was just as smart

as the students with whom she was enrolled. Although she was not initially placed into AP English because of her grade in her current English class, even though she had the highest score on the placement test, Leia's situation again confirms that alleged objective measures are not infallible. Her grades did not reflect her ability and more importantly, her passion for the subject, which can fuel motivation and spur improved performance. Further, she illustrated how commendable being in advanced courses can be for Latina students like her; in the absence of additional support or tutoring she managed to succeed in AP English through her own merit.

Students' belief in self transcending the objective was also evident in the Latinas who were forced to remain in the regular courses. Kim and Cristina, for instance, explained that when people do not believe in them, or do not have the same "faith" that they have in themselves, they use the doubt of others to fuel their motivation to prove others wrong. Kim, in particular, noted that despite being denied the opportunity to take AP European History she maintained an A in the regular history class she was enrolled in, proving that she can achieve and that she will not allow what others think of her and her potential to dictate her performance. Likewise, Susan talks about her placement in regular English being a "breeze," which suggests a natural talent in this area. However, this aptitude and affinity for English which Susan tried to make known repeatedly to the adults at St. Mary's were not reflected in the measures that were used to determine student placement. Given how Kim, Cristina, and Susan performed in the regular classes they were forced to enroll in and what they said about how their belief in self drives them to success, it seems that their intuition revealed more about their potential than the information that was used to deny them access in the advanced courses.



## **Sobreviviendo: Negotiation, Fight, and Resistance**

To sobrevivir or to survive multiple oppressions is a significant testament to a Chicana's strength and ability to live in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2012; Villenas, 2006). The very act of surviving breaks through invisibility. Anzaldúa (2012) notes that "the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions...she will survive the crossroads" (p. 103). These young Latina women who participated in the study were or are currently part of a primarily white discourse and stand at the intersection of race and class. In telling their story they moved from the margins to the center (Flores, 1996; Flores, 2000) and engaged in decolonization, negotiating their multiple identities and resisting essentialist dualities (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 2000; Sandoval, 1991; Soto et al., 2009; Villenas, 2006). As such, they had valuable advice to offer for any other Latinas who might have to appeal for advanced courses like they did and therefore may encounter the same challenges. For one, some participants noted that they would encourage other Latinas to appeal for a class if they are passionate about it and are willing to commit to the additional work it might entail. The reference to passion, in particular, is notable because passion is subjective; it cannot be measured with a test. Yet, participants seem to believe that a combination of passion and commitment are enough to drive a student to success in an advanced course. Thus, the objective versus subjective dichotomy surfaces again and through their advice these Latinas demonstrate that indeed they have a hybrid identity that allows them to "challenge dichotomies that offer opposition without reconciliation" (Bernal, 1998, p. 4). Moreover, negotiating the objective with the subjective is a theme that emerged in the advice Latinas offered and is an illustration of how a Latina's mestiza consciousness aids in survival.

The Latina participants also offered advice centered on persistence and fight, which reveals great insight into how these Latinas have survived in a white dominant culture. Some Latinas insisted that an appeal should be sought because as Leia asked: “what do you have to lose?” In this urgency to advocate is a sense that enough has been taken away. Latinas have been colonized and stripped of land, language, and more. It seems that these Latina participants feel that they cannot lose anything more by trying. In their insistence is also a recognition that self-advocacy is key in stopping others from treating Latinas as objects that they can dominate and whose futures they can dictate. Monica’s advice, which encourages other Latinas to not self-doubt, is another illustration of how Latinas fight against being objectified. To believe in oneself is to challenge the deficit-laden belief system that exists about Latina students. Susan’s advice is also centered on persistence, but of a different kind. In her advice, she suggested that authority figures are not infallible and therefore if a decision they made needs to be challenged, it should be. Thus, Susan encouraged students to persist in their challenge and opposition by advising them to not be intimidated or deterred by doors being shut in their face. Persistence in challenging practices that treat Latinas as objects that decisions are imposed upon, therefore, is another quality of these Latinas’ mestiza consciousness that has allowed them to survive in a society that is continually trying to subjugate them. This persistence is a form of resistance and testament to a Latinas unwavering endurance to fight and survive (Anzaldúa, 2012; Flores, 2000).

As these resourceful and resilient Latina participants live on through their story and academic trajectory, they also help other Latina students in similar positions to them survive by leaving behind advice for them. This advice can, in turn, help them better navigate the process

and hence, becomes a source of empowerment. The advice the Latina participants offer to Latinas who might be in a similar predicament to theirs in the future is to challenge the dominant culture by resisting objectification and colonization. The fighting diction that some of the Latinas used, such as feeling “shot down” or “fighting with” test results, illustrates just how powerful and violent the experience of being objectified and colonized is for them. Survival in the borderlands is a daily fight but as Martínez (1999) asserts, while a mestiza consciousness is where the Chicana will encounter the most fierce of her battles with multiple oppressions, “paradoxically, it is also the place of her greatest strength” (p. 47). The advice the Latina participants offered is a clear indication of the opposing dualities that Latinas face as their cultures clash as well as an illustration of how a mestiza consciousness facilitates survival and helps Latinas live with contradictions and ambiguity.

### **Catholic social teaching**

#### **Valuing the Dignity of Every Human Person**

Using a Catholic social teaching lens to view this research allowed other important data to emerge in the analysis and offered a different perspective with which to view the findings. In particular, the tenet within Catholic social teaching of valuing the dignity of every human person is something that the school adults expressed, in some way, and was something the participants also touched upon as they discussed the Catholic school advantage.

Byron (1998) notes that the principle of human dignity gives individuals the rights to belong to a community, beginning with the community of the human family. In talking about the placement procedures that the school follows, Mrs. O’Sullivan noted getting excited when students appeal their placement decision because she sees it as a sign that they want more for

themselves and that they are maturing. This suggests that she appreciates that some students know what they want and go out and seek it. Also, the notion of being open to an appeal suggests that she thinks students should be able to voice the potential and interest they believe they have and that this should be considered. Moreover, Mrs. O' Sullivan seems to believe that students are an integral part of the school community and as members of it they have a right to contribute to its development through feedback. This mindset, perhaps, is best reflected in her comment that in Catholic schools there is an openness to all possibilities for all people.

Additionally, Mrs. Smith's remark about working to allow every student who has the ability to pass the AP test into the class illustrates that she recognizes how valuable of an opportunity taking advanced coursework can be for students. Moreover, it seems that the educational leaders at St. Mary's have intentions of being open and giving students the opportunity to try advanced classes and do not realize how limiting the process is currently and how it has marginalized Latinas. However, if their endorsement of valuing the dignity of every individual is sincere, then this mindset invites having a critical conversation about the issues that currently exist with the process. After all, as Hall (2002) asserts, fighting for social justice involves eradicating practices and policies that exclude or marginalize others based on differences.

Several participants also noted that given that St. Mary's is a small school they feel they have greater opportunity to receive more individualized attention. Maria's remark about teachers being able to provide valuable feedback on a student during the appeals process rather than just spewing out a grade or a number suggests that teachers get to know their students well because the school is smaller. While previous comments by participants suggested that qualitative information about a student was not considered, or perhaps not weighted as heavily, the

intersection of this contradictory information points to a problem of a benefit not being used to its fullest. Given that St. Mary's is a small school and teachers do get to know their students well, a proper forum for them to be able to weigh this type of humanizing information just as heavily as a placement test or a grade is necessary for the placement and appeals process to be more inclusive. Participants also cited the existence of a level of care that they experienced from their teachers once they transitioned into the AP/Honors courses if they were accepted. From participant comments it seems that the teachers are well-intentioned and do want students to succeed. However, it appears that they have not interrogated their practices and policies to assess whether they are serving all students in the best way possible.

A good student-to-student rapport and a sense of community also appear to be made feasible through the small school size. Participants such as Clarice and Gato discussed being able to rely on their peers and commented on the general willingness that exists to help one another out. Other students such as Rebecca, Maria, and Leia remarked about the sense of community that exists and the comfort derived from such a homey feeling. While these participants noted a strong student-to-student rapport and sense of community, much of their insights did not reveal their Latina consciousness regarding this matter. So, to a degree, this is similar to the idea of a sisterhood. In the sisterhood that was cited by several participants, those who felt a part of it highlighted feeling like their peers were sisters and a greater sense of unity amongst their classmates, not unlike the aforementioned insights regarding the benefits of a small school size. Thus, through a purely adolescent female lens these young women felt connected and supported. What was only perceived by a few participants, however, was that the unity stemming from the sisterhood was being implemented as singularity. In other words, some

participants felt they had to assimilate or sacrifice a piece of their identity in order to fit in and be united with the other students. The latter, however, is an example of students working in an interstitial space (Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000); a space where they move in and out of a sense of belonging (Bernal et al., 2009) and where they begin to challenge oppressive structures and practices.

Moreover, while I believe that a sisterhood does build community and strong relationships, based on the data collected I also believe a sisterhood can be a double-edged sword that can mask recognizing other critical matters such as questions of inequality. And, I share this perspective regarding student rapport with each other and the sense of community. While the participants interviewed, particularly the ones who did not respond with a Latina lens, may have been friends with students of all ethnicities who did not have to appeal to be placed into the advanced courses, their belief in a sisterhood or in a strong sense of community may have prevented them from questioning why they, as Latina students who had demonstrated success and achievement in prior course work, had to appeal for the same opportunity.

Thus, I view the perceived peer rapport and sense of community to be an area of further growth. Since this connection exists based on gender, I believe that it can be improved upon to include other elements of a student's experience such as race, class, and sexuality. In this way, students may come to a fuller appreciation of who their peers are and what they have to negotiate on a daily basis. With this understanding, students may be less likely to engage in stereotypical thinking about their peers who do not belong to the dominant norm. After all, to treat every individual with dignity requires an understanding of their unique circumstances and needs. It is an acceptance of who they are, not a forced concealment of who they are not.

Moreover, the small school size lends itself to a lot of personalization between students and school officials. Currently, it appears that the benefits stemming from being a small school are not being maximized. In other words, while rapport, community, and care are all qualities students cited as part of the Catholic school advantage, they seem to be practiced only on a superficial level. For a more authentic existence of these elements and in order to derive greater benefits, the entire school community needs to engage in a critical discussion about race, class, sexuality, and other elements that color the life experience of the people who live in community on a daily basis at St. Mary's High School.

### **Human Equality**

In Catholic social teaching, according to Byron (1998), the principle of human equality is defined as treating everyone fairly and not discriminating against individuals and their rights, especially because of their social and cultural differences. By putting the education and development of females at the fore, single-sex schools create the opportunity for females to recognize their worth and potential as women and their inherent, though often disregarded, equality with men. Several participants commented that the single-sex advantage, as they perceived it, was that “girls are the priority” (Gato’s Interview, p. 16) and therefore all opportunities are offered to them and their teachers’ focus as well as theirs is solely on them as growing and maturing young ladies. Learning to embrace one’s intelligence and self in adolescence prepares young women to behave this way innately and comfortably so that beyond high school they are firmly rooted in their person and confidence (Salomone, 2003; Sax et al., 2009; Streitmatter, 1999; Tsolidis & Dobson, 2006). In a society that still exercises gender

discrimination, this advantage of an all-female learning environment seems helpful in preparing women who will not allow the view that they are inferior to men to be imposed on them.

Where this idea of human equality seems deficient, however, is as it pertains to gender, and more specifically to students who live at the intersection of race and class. Those who oppose single-sex education argue that such an environment perpetuates gender stereotypes (Datnow & Hubbard, 2002; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Karpiak et al., 2007; Riordan, 1990). Repression of women is common in a patriarchal society and is something that school officials at St. Mary's need to be cautious of when exercising authority. As was discussed earlier, students respond best to democratic authority (Valencia & Pearl, 2011) and it makes sense to practice such authority in an all-female learning environment so that young women learn that power and authority do not have to be hierarchical or assumed by males and so that they learn how to negotiate such relationships with power. Thus, adult interaction with students, in general, is another area where a greater focus on human equality is necessary, particularly with students who are of an ethnic minority.

Darder (2012) posits that both a loving community and culturally democratic practices and processes that invite students to dialogue and respond with genuine listening are necessary for a bicultural student to feel comfortable exercising their voice. However, students must be encouraged to talk and also welcomed to talk back (Darder, 2012; hooks, 1989) if they are to learn how to exercise their voice and self-advocate. The fact that several students felt dismissed or "shot down" based on their experience during the appeals process suggests that equality is not being practiced because they are not being listened to. This is further complicated by the participants' compliant behavior, which in part can be interpreted as a survival mechanism.



Given a history of colonization, Latinas sometimes learn that if they comply and do not create commotion, then they can deflect attention. In pretending to play the colonizer's game, Latinas go by unnoticed, all the while working quietly to emancipate themselves. And, while the former can be one way of gaining liberation, most often in the absence of truly listening to student feedback, students will likely continue to feel like they do not have a voice or that what they say does not matter. Additionally, much like valuing human dignity requires understanding and accepting individuals' differences rather than asking them to assimilate, so too does the Catholic social teaching principle of human equality. Several student comments pointed to an assimilationist school culture where they felt discouraged to highlight their cultural or class differences. Their quality of life was affected by a burden to assimilate and a deprivation of freely expressing themselves, qualities that contradict Catholic social teaching (Massaro, 2008). Moreover, while St. Mary's single-sex environment provides opportunities to practice the principle of human equality across multiple levels, it is currently not being practiced to its fullest extent.

### **Recommendations**

While the AP/Honors curricular offerings seem strong, school leaders should review whether the program is truly tapping into the potential of all students that it serves. Additionally, equity of access to the advanced courses should be reviewed for students of all ethnicities. Reviewing the demographic breakdown of advanced courses in light of the school's overall ethnic composition is one way to begin the dialogue around this issue. However, it is also important to consider elements such as class which can also affect students' academic

performance and experience. Making use of the various reports the College Board publishes yearly, such as the report on AP Potential, would provide data that can inform these discussions.

Creating a uniform set of requirements that students must meet and establishing a common procedure to be followed by all departments would clarify what the procedures are that students must follow in order to gain admission into an AP/Honors class. When a student who is pursuing academic excellence is not granted access into an AP/Honors course, she has no recourse other than to accept or appeal the decision. However, there is no written information on how an appeal should be conducted, who a student should appeal to, and how the student receives a response. While students who appeal do so in the manner they find most appropriate, there are other students who may not know they can appeal and never do. Therefore, a formal appeals process needs to be authored and delineated in school documents that parents and students receive.

Given the perspectives participants shared regarding their decision to appeal, student interviews are suggested to be a part of the appeals process that is created so that students have a formal forum where they can voice information that is not reflected in a grade or test score. However, this interview should not be conducted simply as a formality. The information that students disclose should be sincerely considered in the decision-making process.

Care should be taken to ensure that placement decisions are made as accurately as possible the first time around so that students do not have to appeal. As was evidenced by the Latina participants, part of what contributed to them feeling like outsiders even once they were allowed into the AP/Honors class was the fact that they viewed themselves as second-rate since they were accepted into the class on appeal. Regarding the notion of feeling like outsiders,

Bañuelos (2006) study on cultural citizenship found that the more these Latinas mentored each other, the more they cultivated a sense of belonging or strengthened their cultural citizenship.

Therefore, aside from making decisions carefully, school leadership would benefit from examining all structures and practices that can potentially exclude students and make them feel like outsiders. For instance, Alexandra's promotion of a "Latinos Unidos" club suggests that there is a need for a counterspace that does not force Latinas to assimilate in order to belong. This club could be rooted in a politics of difference that celebrates the different "Latinidades" (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006) that Latinas offer. Additionally, to increase Latinas sense of belonging, it is recommended that a Latina mentorship program is established so that older Latina students who have learned to negotiate their various identities with studying on a primarily White, middle-class campus can lend a listening ear and guidance to Latina students who are only beginning their high school careers. Soto et al. (2009) note that Chicanas have a history of working collectively and "our strength comes from our unity—from the consejos we receive from our mothers, sisters, friends, aunts, and grandmothers" (p. 762). Creating a *sitio y lengua*—a language and space—where Latinas can share these stories and advice with one another strengthens their agency. In a similar vein, a program for first-generation high school and future college students and parents of these students can be established as a means of sharing with them what the high school experience entails and how parents can be a resource to their child. In particular, differences in the levels of courses offered, the benefits of advanced course work, and preparing for college could be some of the information highlighted. The benefits of such a program go beyond orienting students and parents and providing them with academic information. In reality, the school could use this group as an entry point to acknowledging

different lived experiences and the issues Latino families/students confront. By entering in a dialogue where the authority to share information that influences decision-making is mutual, parent involvement is redefined (Hurtado et al., 2010), and Latino families/students and the school can work collectively to create a more just and culturally responsive education.

Regarding curriculum and student life (extracurricular activities, clubs, etc.), school leaders need to facilitate the creation of a bicultural pedagogy, rooted in critical pedagogy, that challenges meritocratic and assimilationist beliefs and values cultural knowledge. As Darder (2012) posits, this type of pedagogy offers optimism by creating a space for dialogue amidst the ambiguity, contradictions, and tensions that stem from being bicultural in a dominant culture. One practical way in which this can be achieved is by incorporating culturally relevant texts “whereby students can engage in reading, writing, speaking, listening, questioning, and challenging texts that connect to their cultural experiences, histories, and knowledge” (Bernal et al., 2006, p. 53). These texts can be in the form of literature read in English classes to guest speakers/presentations offered to the entire student body during the year. However, as Bernal et al. (2006) cautions, integration of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogies cannot remain in the periphery and offered as extra credit. Rather, it must be intentionally and purposefully integrated into the fabric of the school.

In this way, the singularity promoted by the sisterhood can be exchanged for solidarity in diversity. Additionally, while one of the intentions of single-gender schools and certainly the mission of St. Mary’s High School is to empower young women, it appears to be proclaimed more than it is actually practiced. While school documents promote helping young women grow in confidence and find their voice, a level of compliance was observed in how some participants

responded to the decision of their appeal. Moreover, enacting empowerment is necessary in curriculum and student life, as well as any other areas that are used to supplement a student's academic experience.

Another recommendation for creating a school culture that is responsive to Latina students is to reframe the lens through which Latinas are viewed, which is typically in comparison to Euro-American, middle-class adolescents. Bernal et al. (2006) posits that understanding Latinas ways of knowing and being (such as *la facultad* as knowing based on intuition and experiences, *testimonios*, and *borderlands*), including their mestiza consciousness or oppositional consciousness, can help school leaders to understand the aspects of their identity that Latinas must negotiate. Further, it can help “create school and home partnerships that truly respect and work from the power of relationships, commitment, wisdom, and sensibilities born of a life's work of straddling fragmented realities” (Bernal et al., 2006, p. 5).

hooks (1994) as cited by Darder and Torres (1998) notes that being a Latina, particularly in a position of power, is a privileged standpoint. The privilege does not stem from the authority, but rather from being able to remember what the experience is like (Darder & Torres, 1998). A couple of participants made reference to a slight increase in level of comfort to appeal because the administrator they were approaching was Latina. They expressed feeling that she might have a greater understanding of their experiences, perhaps having undergone similar challenges and in a sense, remembering them. Moreover, a recommendation is to hire more Latino/a teachers and staff and to find “strategies for transculturating non-Latino/a teachers to become more responsive to the increasing number of Latino/a students” (Hurtado et al., 2010, p. 291) so that Latina students on campus have greater opportunity for role models and people that they can connect

with on several levels. Further, with increased Latino/a personnel, the possibility of entering and sustaining a dialogue around critical issues is more likely.

Regarding confronting the singularity that some participants felt the sisterhood promoted or the issues of race and class that tend to be masked, a dialectical approach to unpacking these issues is suggested. Darder and Torres (1998) posit that “A solidarity of difference challenges us to actively struggle across human differences within the ever- present dialectical tension of inclusionary/exclusionary personal and institutional realities and needs” (p. 140). The school needs to be honest with itself about how it is and is not meeting the needs of diverse groups of students and rather than shying away from the differences, needs to be willing to accept the differences as legitimate and move from there. Instead of promoting a superficial sisterhood grounded in singularity, finding class-building activities and opportunities in the curriculum that foster a dialogue about the differences, assumptions, and stereotypes that exist allows an opportunity for students to engage in critical dialogue that could emancipate both the oppressor and the oppressed. “Our greatest challenge is to negotiate the ongoing construction and reconstruction of relations of power and material conditions that both affirm and challenge our partialities in the interest of cultural and economic democracy, social justice, human rights, and revolutionary love” (Darder & Torres, 1998, p. 140). The constant negotiation, construction/reconstruction suggest that there needs to be a fluidity and true understanding of difference in school functioning if there is to be a shift to true inclusion.

### **Future Research**

Future research may be beneficial in the following areas:

1. Conducting a study on the access to AP/Honors courses for other minority groups should be considered to determine whether other groups are being marginalized in the all-female learning environment.
2. A study on Latina/o students' access to AP/Honors courses in Catholic co-educational schools.
3. It is suggested that access to advanced courses is studied in a Catholic, all-female high school where Latinas are the majority and Whites are the minority to determine whether underrepresentation of minorities in advanced courses occurs even in cases where they are the majority population.
4. A study on the access that minorities have to other school opportunities such as student government is also suggested. Extracurricular opportunities are an important component of a student's academic experience and further research is needed to determine whether marginalization happens in other areas beyond academics.
5. A comparative study between all-female versus all-male schools and the issue of empowerment and compliance is suggested. Determining whether females and males are taught to comply or if the single-sex environment promotes compliance would be important questions to answer.
6. A study on Catholic, single-sex schools and whether compliance is learned through the religious aspect of the school, the single-sex environment, or both.
7. A study on the effects a bicultural pedagogy has on Latina students' identity development is recommended. Studying whether providing them with curriculum, pedagogies and

texts that allow them to connect and also assert their experiences as legitimate impact their view of self would be essential in this type of study.

8. It would be interesting to replicate this study in a Catholic, single-sex environment of lower socioeconomic status where Latinas are the majority and Whites are the minority of the school to see what Latinas experiences and perspectives are then.
9. A study on how Latinas' identity development is influenced in a college/university setting can provide further information on how the education pipeline influences Latinas' identity development.



## CHAPTER SIX

### EPILOGUE

As a Latina myself, I know through both research and experience that the odds are often against us. Almost daily Latinas encounter structures and practices that oppress them—keep them out in some way—because of their race, gender, and class, among other elements of their identity. Recognizing that I am in a privileged position as a Latina educator and scholar, I wanted to use this research opportunity to help other Latinas. I chose to do this by focusing on bringing Latina students experiences and perspectives to the fore.

Narrowing in on the specific topic of access to AP/Honors courses was something that was spurred on by my work experience. For years I have witnessed the disappointment of students who are not granted admission into the AP/Honors courses for which they test. And, I have always been particularly concerned with the AP/Honors placement process potentially marginalizing Latina students. I was concerned that this experience might affect Latina students' educational experiences and perspectives in high school and in future. Simultaneously, I have been working with educational leaders who did not think there was a problem with the AP/Honors placement process because everyone has a chance to try for AP/Honors courses. As one of the teachers interviewed put it: “everyone has a chance...when we do the placement test and we look at their grades and everything, the last name doesn't matter, right?” (Mrs. Crawford's Interview, p. 5). This attitude is most illustrative of how rigid, meritocratic, and thereby racist such thinking and practices can be. Thus, what embarking on this study meant for me was being able to provide Latina students a forum in which they could challenge the

dominant discourse through their testimonios and for us as a Catholic school to challenge ourselves to be Catholic in name and action.

What the findings of this study made most clear is the marginalization of Latina students in a fairly subtle way. In other words, the school promotes a mission grounded in Catholic social teaching and the practices set in place, such as offering a placement test to all students interested in transitioning to AP/Honors courses for the following year, seem objective, fair, and inclusive of all. But, therein lies the farce and danger. By setting up practices and structures based on a meritocracy, the guise of fairness and objectivity veils the reality of perpetuating privilege for the dominant culture and sustaining oppression for bicultural students. Further, the critical dialogue about culture, power, and privilege that should be taking place is never brought to the fore and these notions are never challenged. This sort of subtle marginalization seems more dangerous than blatant oppression because it is harder to identify and overturn. Under the semblance of social justice and without critical questioning, even the most well-intentioned students, parents, and teachers alike fall for the trap and instead participate in perpetuating these injustices.

In recent years there has been a big push to enroll Latino students in Catholic schools. This push comes at a time when the country's Latino population is burgeoning and simultaneously, enrollment in Catholic schools is declining. Given that Catholic schools need Latino student enrollment in order to remain open, it is imperative that Latinos use this opportunity to make demands of what they need from a Catholic education. Likewise, it is a perfect opportunity for Catholic schools to look more introspectively and critically at their practices to assess if they are truly in line with Catholic social teaching. It is not enough to work

hard to recruit students simply to boost enrollment. As Catholic educators, we need to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the students we bring in.

Ultimately, Catholic schools need to ensure that they practice Catholic social teaching and do not just preach it. From this study, it became evident that even educators with good intentions and values can become complicit in perpetuating injustices. By enforcing the latest educational trends and definitions without question, such as relying on testing as an objective measure of a student's ability or abiding by certain notions of fairness and equality, for instance, educators become part of the problem rather than the solution. Therefore, it is important to return to theoretical underpinnings of the Catholic education system. These principles of Catholic social teaching rely on basic yet powerful truths, beginning with the understanding that all humans have dignity that should be respected as well as intention of including all humanity, most especially those who are disenfranchised. Moreover, using these principles as a rubric against which educational practices are assessed and dialogued about critically in Catholic schools offers one way to initiate what needs to be a continuous discussion about how Catholic schools are just. Committing to such a continuous assessment of how Catholic schools live out the doctrine of Catholic social teaching in all aspects of schooling and dialoguing about areas to be improved as well as acting to improve them is one of the biggest steps that Catholic schools can take to ensure a true mission rooted in Catholic social teaching.

*Appendix A*

Invitational Letter to Students/Student Assent Form

Dear (insert student's name),

I hope that your second semester is going well and that you enjoyed a restful and enjoyable Easter vacation. As you may already know, I am working on my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership for Social Justice through Loyola Marymount University. As part of this process I will be conducting a research study focusing on Latina students' experiences and perspectives around having been granted or denied access into an AP/Honors course they appealed to get into. Through this study I hope to determine how the school's mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you fit the profile of the type of participant needed for this study. As a Latina student who currently attends \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of high school) and who has appealed to take an Advanced Placement/Honors class, you have an important story to share, and I hope you will.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in an individual interview as well as in a focus group interview, both of which will be scheduled to be convenient for your schedule. All information that you share is confidential and accepting or declining to participate has no consequences. Also, please know that you are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time with no penalty.

If you agree to participate, I ask that you and your parents complete this form and return it to me along with the enclosed informed consent form which is required to participate. If you are younger than 18 years old, the informed consent form must be signed your

parent(s)/guardian(s); otherwise, your signature gives your consent. Please return the informed consent form to me by \_\_\_\_\_(insert date).

I hope you will decide to participate as your story will offer great insight into the issue being studied. If you have any questions please feel free to email or call me at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005.

Regards,

Mrs. Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to participate in this study.

(print your name)

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix B*

Invitational Letter to Alumna

Dear (insert alumna's name),

I hope that this letter finds you well. As you may or may not know, I am working on my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership for Social Justice through Loyola Marymount University. As part of this process I will be conducting a research study focusing on Latina students' experiences and perspectives around having been granted or denied access into an AP/Honors course they appealed to get into. Through this study I hope to determine how the school's mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you fit the profile of the type of participant needed for this study. As a Latina student who graduated from \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of high school) and who appealed to take an Advanced Placement/Honors class, you have an important story to share, and I hope you will.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in an individual interview as well as in a focus group interview, both of which will be scheduled to be convenient for your schedule. All information that you share is confidential and accepting or declining to participate has no consequences. Also, please know that you are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time with no penalty.

Enclosed you will find an informed consent form which is required to participate. If you agree to participate, I ask that you please return the signed informed consent form to me by \_\_\_\_\_ (insert date).

I hope you will decide to participate as your story will offer great insight into the issue being studied. If you have any questions please feel free to email or call me at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005.

Regards,

Mrs. Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar

## *Appendix C*

### Invitational Letter to Teachers/Administrator

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of teacher or administrator),

I hope that the second semester is going well for you and that you enjoyed a restful and enjoyable Easter vacation. As you know, in these last two years I have been working towards an Ed.D in Educational Leadership for Social Justice through Loyola Marymount University's doctoral program in the School of Education. I am at the stage in the program where I am now preparing to begin the formal research of my dissertation.

My dissertation will be a case study examining Latina students' access to Advanced Placement/Honors courses at \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of high school) and will explore Latina students' experiences and perspectives around having been granted or denied access into the advanced course(s) after they appealed to be allowed into the course. Through this study I not only hope to document the stories of Latina students, but I also aim to assess how the school's mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses.

You have been selected to participate in this study because of your work in determining whether students are placed into an AP/Honors class or not. As a teacher/administrator at \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of high school) who understands the school's academic expectations and mission, you have important insights to share regarding this matter.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in an individual interview, which will be scheduled to be convenient for you. Please note that all information that you share is confidential and that you are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time with no penalty.



Enclosed you will find an informed consent form which is required to participate. If you agree to participate, I ask that you please return the signed informed consent form to me by \_\_\_\_\_(insert date).

I hope you will decide to participate as your story will offer great insight into the issue being studied. If you have any questions about the process or the research please feel free to email or call me at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005.

Regards,

Mrs. Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar

*Appendix D*

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

(insert date)

**Loyola Marymount University**

Topic: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?

- 1) I hereby authorize Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate to include my child/ward in the following research study: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?
- 2) I have been asked to participate in a research project which is designed to address the following question: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course? The study will last from approximately April 2, 2012 through May 31, 2012.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a parent/guardian of a Latina student at St. Mary's High School who has appealed to gain access into an AP/Honors course.
- 4) I understand that if my child/ward is a participant, she will participate in: filling out a personal data sheet that asks for basic demographic information, an individual interview with the researcher and in a focus group interview with other current students or alumna from St.Mary's High School who have had similar experiences to hers. The investigator will use the data collected from the individual interviews and focus groups, research and

literature related to the study's topic, as well as school documents analyzed, to write the dissertation paper. The dissertation will be submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of Loyola Marymount University's Ed.D in Educational Leadership for Social Justice. These procedures have been explained to me by Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate, and researcher in this study.

- 5) I understand that my child/ward will be audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my child's/ward's identity will not be disclosed. Transcriptions of these audio recordings will be protected by being saved on a password protected computer and having hard copies of these transcriptions stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: Students may get emotional in recalling and discussing their experiences of having appealed for access into an Advanced Placement/Honors course. Another risk is that while focus group confidentiality will be requested, it may not be followed by other members of the focus group. In both cases, if the participant experiences emotional discomfort, she will be referred to her grade level advisor.
- 7) I understand that participation in this study does not guarantee any direct benefits. However, the possible benefits to St. Mary's High School include: 1) gaining a greater

understanding for what Latina students at St. Mary's High School experience when they are granted or denied access into an advanced course, 2) understanding what the perspectives of these Latina students after they have been granted or denied access into the advanced course, 3) as well as assessing how the mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses so that if any improvements need to be made, this study can inform the changes.

- 8) I understand that Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar who can be reached at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005 will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to my child/ward's school experiences (ex: grades, opportunities, etc.)
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact John Carfora, Ed.D Chair, Institutional

Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles  
CA 90045-2659 (310) 338-4599, [John.Carfora@lmu.edu](mailto:John.Carfora@lmu.edu) .

15) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject is a minor (age \_\_\_\_\_), or is unable to sign because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix E*

Alumna Consent Form

(insert date)

**Loyola Marymount University**

Topic: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?

- 1) I hereby authorize Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate to include me in the following research study: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?
- 2) I have been asked to participate in a research project which is designed to address the following question: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course? The study will last from approximately April 2, 2012 through May 31, 2012.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a Latina who graduated from St. Mary's High School and who appealed to gain access into an AP/Honors course during my high school career.
- 4) I understand that if I am a participant, I will participate in: filling out a personal data sheet that asks for basic demographic information, an individual interview with the researcher and in a focus group interview with other current students or alumna from St.Mary's High School who have had similar experiences to mine. The investigator will use the data collected from the individual interviews and focus groups, research and literature related to the study's topic, as well as school documents analyzed, to write the

dissertation paper. The dissertation will be submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of Loyola Marymount University's Ed.D in Educational Leadership for Social Justice. These procedures have been explained to me by Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate, and researcher in this study.

- 5) I understand that I will be audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. Transcriptions of these audio recordings will be protected by being saved on a password protected computer and having hard copies of these transcriptions stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: Students may get emotional in recalling and discussing their experiences of having appealed for access into an Advanced Placement/Honors course. Another risk is that while focus group confidentiality will be requested, it may not be followed by other members of the focus group. In both cases, if the participant experiences emotional discomfort, she will be referred to one of St. Mary's High School advisors.
- 7) I understand that participation in this study does not guarantee any direct benefits. However, the possible benefits to St. Mary's High School include: 1) gaining a greater understanding for what Latina students at St. Mary's High School experience when they are granted or denied access into an advanced course, 2) understanding what the

perspectives of these Latina students after they have been granted or denied access into the advanced course, 3) as well as assessing how the mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses so that if any improvements need to be made, this study can inform the changes.

- 8) I understand that Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar who can be reached at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005 will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact John Carfora, Ed.D Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 338-4599, [John.Carfora@lmu.edu](mailto:John.Carfora@lmu.edu).



15) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix F*

Teacher/Administrator Consent Form

(insert date)

**Loyola Marymount University**

Topic: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?

- 1) I hereby authorize Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate to include me in the following research study: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course?
- 2) I have been asked to participate in a research project which is designed to address the following question: What are the experiences and perspectives of Latina students who have been granted or denied access to an Advanced Placement/Honors (AP) course? The study will last from approximately April 2, 2012 through May 31, 2012.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am a teacher at St. Mary's High School who has granted/denied access into an AP/Honors course.
- 4) I understand that if I am a participant, I will participate in an individual interview with the researcher. The investigator will use the data collected from the individual interviews and focus groups, research and literature related to the study's topic, as well as school documents analyzed, to write the dissertation paper. The dissertation will be submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of Loyola Marymount University's Ed.D in

Educational Leadership for Social Justice. These procedures have been explained to me by Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar, M. Ed, Ed.D candidate, and researcher in this study.

- 5) I understand that I will be audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. Transcriptions of these audio recordings will be protected by being saved on a password protected computer and having hard copies of these transcriptions stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risk(s) and/or discomfort(s): The teacher/administrator may experience discomfort in answering some of the questions; if this occurs, the teacher/administrator can decline to answer without penalty.
- 7) I understand that participation in this study does not guarantee any direct benefits. However, the possible benefits to St. Mary's High School include: 1) gaining a greater understanding for what Latina students at St. Mary's High School experience when they are granted or denied access into an advanced course, 2) understanding what the perspectives of these Latina students after they have been granted or denied access into the advanced course, 3) as well as assessing how the mission of social justice fares in terms of Latinas' access to AP/Honors courses so that if any improvements need to be made, this study can inform the changes.

- 8) I understand that Jennifer M. Pérez Aguilar who can be reached at [jperez6@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:jperez6@lion.lmu.edu) or (818) 346-8812 ext. 1005 will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.
- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact John Carfora, Ed.D Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 338-4599, [John.Carfora@lmu.edu](mailto:John.Carfora@lmu.edu).

15) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the “Subject’s Bill of Rights”.

Subject’s Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Appendix H

Sample Participant Demographic Matrix

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Participant's highest level of Education</b>	<b>Highest level of Education for participant's mother/female guardian</b>	<b>Highest level of Education for participant's father/male guardian</b>	<b>SES</b>
SMHS01	Jessica	Hispanic/Latino	15	High School/10 <sup>th</sup>	High School	Junior High School	Middle
SMHS02	Melissa	Hispanic/Latino	17	High School/11 <sup>th</sup>	Elementary School	Elementary School	Low
SMHS03	Christina	Hispanic/Latino	16	High School/10 <sup>th</sup>	College	College	Middle
SMHS04	Rebecca	Hispanic/Latino	21	College/Sr	Graduate School	College	High
SMHS05	Francesca	Hispanic/Latino	18	College/Frosh	Junior High School	High School	Low
SMHS06	Adriana	Hispanic/Latino	16	High School/10 <sup>th</sup>	College	Graduate School	High
SMHS07	Ariana	Hispanic/Latino	17	High School/12 <sup>th</sup>	High School	High School	Low
SMHS08	Alexandra	Hispanic/Latino	22	Graduate School	Junior High School	Elementary School	Middle
SMHS09	Juliana	Hispanic/Latino	24	College/Sr.	Elementary School	Junior High School	Middle
SMHS10	Andrea	Hispanic/Latino	16	High School/10 <sup>th</sup>	High School	Elementary School	High

## *Appendix I*

### Interview Protocol for Student

#### **Script:**

Hi, (insert name of participant). Thank you for coming today and for agreeing to be part of this research study. I'm honored to be able to hear your story and learn from you.

Today I would like to take some time to talk with you and ask you some questions. But, I want you to know that if any question makes you uncomfortable or you would rather not answer it, you can decline to answer. Prior to starting the interview, I have a data sheet that I would like you to complete (give participant data sheet and a pen). So, go ahead and take a moment to fill out this form. (allow time to complete the personal data sheet)

(once data sheet is complete) Before we get started, I'd like to know if I have your permission to audiotape this interview? You can simply answer yes or no.

Now, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask before we begin the interview? (allow time for questions)

Okay, well let's go ahead and get started.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

1. Can you speak to why you appealed for \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of class) and how?
2. What was your experience with appealing to take the course?



3. What do you think about the result of your appeal?
4. What role has being allowed/not allowed to take \_\_\_\_\_(insert name of class) had in your high school experience and any of your short term/long term goals?
5. Is there anything more you would like to add to this conversation?

Thank you for your time and for sharing such a personal story with me. I appreciate the insights you have offered into this matter!

*Appendix J*

Interview Protocol for Teacher

**Script:**

Hi, (insert name of teacher). Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

Today I would like to take some time to talk with you and ask you some questions regarding AP/Honors placement. But, I want you to know that if any question makes you uncomfortable or you would rather not answer it, you can decline to answer.

Before we get started, I'd like to know if I have your permission to audiotape this interview?

You can simply answer yes or no.

Now, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask before we begin the interview? (allow time for questions)

Okay, well let's go ahead and get started.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Please describe the ways in which a student can seek admission into an AP/Honors course.
2. What data is used to make the decision about placement and who makes the decision?

3. What are your thoughts on students who appeal the original decision made about their placement?
4. What data is taken into account in reconsidering the initial decision about placement and who makes the decision?
5. If a student is denied/granted admission into an AP/Honors course after she appeals, what are the usual reasons for this?
6. In reviewing students who have appealed their placement in \_\_\_\_\_(insert name of course), I recalled that \_\_\_\_\_(insert student name) had been granted/denied admission into \_\_\_\_\_(insert name of course). Why did you make that decision?
7. How did you feel about making the decision?
8. Looking at the class that \_\_\_\_\_ (insert student participant's name) is in currently and knowing what her performance is, what do you think about the decision you originally made?
9. Why do you think \_\_\_\_\_'s (insert student participant's name) performance is such?
10. Do you believe the current procedures allow for a diverse group of students to try to get in to an AP/Honors course? Please explain.
11. Is there anything more you would like to add to this conversation?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate the insights you have offered into this matter!

## *Appendix K*

### Interview Protocol for Administrator

#### **Script:**

Hi, (insert name of administrator). Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

Today I would like to take some time to talk with you and ask you some questions regarding AP/Honors placement. But, I want you to know that if any question makes you uncomfortable or you would rather not answer it, you can decline to answer.

Before we get started, I'd like to know if I have your permission to audiotape this interview?

You can simply answer yes or no.

Now, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask before we begin the interview? (allow time for questions)

Okay, well let's go ahead and get started.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

1. Please describe the levels of curriculum that your school offers.
2. How is student placement determined at each grade level?
3. If a parent/student wishes to challenge the placement that the school recommends, what options are available?

4. Are these options public knowledge?
5. When students have come to you to appeal, what reasons do they give you for wanting to be in the AP/Honors class?
6. What are your thoughts on students who appeal the original decision made about their placement?
7. What data is taken into account in reconsidering the initial decision about placement and who is involved in the reconsideration?
8. If a student is denied/granted admission into an AP/Honors course after she appeals, what are the usual reasons for this?
9. Do you believe your school's AP/Honors classes are a representation of the diverse student population that exists? Please explain.
10. Is there anything more you would like to add to this conversation?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate the insights you have offered into this matter!

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