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## Assimilation concerns of immigrant high school students to the United States

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**ASSIMILATION CONCERNS OF IMMIGRANT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
TO THE UNITED STATES**

by

**Michelle Garcia**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Education**

**Major: Educational Administration**

**Under the Supervision of Dr. Laura Schulte**

**Omaha, Nebraska**

**April, 2001**

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Assimilation Concerns of Immigrant High School Students

to the United States

BY

Michelle Garcia

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ASSIMILATION CONCERNS OF IMMIGRANT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO  
THE UNITED STATES

Michelle J. Garcia

University of Nebraska, 2001

Advisor: Dr. Laura Schulte

This dissertation examined the difficulties in assimilation faced by immigrant students in our nation's public schools. One paradigm through which these difficulties might be viewed is the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance was defined as the psychological discomfort aroused by dissonant cognitions experienced by an individual. A review of the literature substantiated the fact that immigrant students are bombarded by dissonant cognitions every day in American schools as they adapt to their new lives here. Some resolve the psychological stress caused by these dissonant cognitions better than others.

While many studies have correlated immigrant student achievement with language use, teaching methods, and other factors, few had previously centered upon the difficulties high school students face when assimilating to life in their new American schools. This study concerned itself with this factor, using as its primary instrument a researcher-created survey. The survey instrument was created as the result of a brainstorming session with a small group of English as a Second Language students in a large Midwestern high school. The instrument was returned to the students for an accuracy check, and then was submitted to 10 professionals in the field of English as a

Second Language instruction for a content validity check. The survey was then piloted in three other buildings with English as a Second Language programs. Finally, 67 English as a Second Language students at the original school completed the definitive version of this survey instrument that measured the assimilation difficulties each student experienced at school.

The results were statistically analyzed and then correlated with each student's Grade Point Average. No significant correlation between survey scores and a student's Grade Point Average was established. Students demonstrated the greatest amounts of assimilation difficulties concerning the survey construct "Racism and Unequal Treatment." No significant differences in the levels of assimilation difficulties experienced were evident between male and female or Hispanic and non-Hispanic students.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Purpose of the Study	4
	Research Questions	4
	Theoretical Perspective	5
	Definition of Terms	7
	Assumptions	9
	Limitations	9
	Delimitations	10
	Significance of the Study	10
	Implications for Practice	10
	Implications for Research	11
II.	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	12
	Immigrant Students in the United States	12
	Population Characteristics	13
	The Dropout Problem	15
	Unique Problems Faced By Immigrant Students	17
	Cognitive Dissonance	24
	Definition of Cognitive Dissonance	24
	Free Choice Paradigm	27
	Belief Disconfirmation Paradigm	28
	Effort Justification Paradigm	29
	Induced Compliance Paradigm	30
	Cognitive Dissonance and Self-Concept	33
	Dissonance Causing Events for Immigrant Students	34
	Free Choice Paradigm and Cultural Determinism	34
	Belief Disconfirmation Paradigm and Immigrant Student Behavior	37
	Effort Justification Paradigm and the Value of an American Education	41
	Forced Compliance Paradigm and Self Concept	42
	Summary	44
III.	METHODOLOGY	45
	Design	45
	Sample	45
	Instrumentation	46
	Content Validity	47
	Factor Analysis	48

Instrument Reliability	49
Table 1: Factor Loadings Across the Five Survey Subscales	50
Table 2: Pilot Study Items Falling Below Factor Loading Cutoff Points	53
Table 3: Pilot Study Items Eliminated To Improve Subscale Reliability	54
Table 4: Reliability Estimates of the Cognitive Dissonance Survey and Its Five Subscales	55
Hypotheses	56
Procedures	56
Data Analysis	57
IV. RESULTS	59
Introduction	59
Hypothesis 1	59
Hypothesis 2	60
Hypothesis 3	62
Hypothesis 4	62
Hypothesis 5	63
Summary	64
V. DISCUSSION	65
Introduction	65
Cognitive Dissonance and Immigrant Students	65
Lack of Significance	68
An Immigrant Student Phenomenon	69
Racism	70
Conclusion	72
Implications for research	73
Implications for practice	73
REFERENCES	76
APPENDIX A – Survey Information	86
Letter of Consent	87
Survey of Cognitive Dissonance	88

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Few issues are as intrinsic to the self-concept of Americans as immigration. Most Americans appear to have a love-hate relationship with this topic. On one hand, our nation is almost totally composed of “the huddled masses” – as we self-righteously boast to other nations. On the other hand, we feel very threatened by those unlike ourselves who arrive in uncomfortably large numbers. This conflict of emotions is nothing new, and surfaces with renewed vigor with each successive immigration spike.

The U.S. Census Bureau (1997) reported that 7,539,000 legal immigrants have arrived in this country since 1990. It is estimated that a similar or even greater number of illegal immigrants have taken up residence here in the same time period (Branigin, 1997). While spikes in immigration are not new in the history of this country, the current one does have some unique characteristics. The percentages of immigrants compared to the entire U.S. population were much higher in the earlier parts of this century, but the present wave of immigration is more diverse. The top 10 countries contributing to legal U.S. immigration in 1990 were Mexico, Cuba, The Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Great Britain, China and Hong Kong, India, Korea, The Philippines and Vietnam (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). One can logically conclude that the immigrants arriving in the past decade are likely to have beliefs and opinions that differ radically not only from each other, but also from mainstream American citizens.

From the very beginning, the United States has relied upon its public schools as a tool to indoctrinate and acculturate generations of new American immigrants (August &

Hakuta, 1997; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Emotional debates concerning the best way to do this aside, American schools attempt this task with more programs targeted towards immigrant students than ever before (Office of Migrant Education, 2000). One factor complicates this mission, however. For the process to be effective, immigrant children must attend school and be successful there. As the review of literature will show, many are doing neither. Immigrant students have a higher rate of failure and a higher dropout rate than do other students. A recent analysis done by the U.S. Department of Commerce (2000) shows that the status dropout rate for immigrant youth is nearly three times the rate for native-born youth, at 29.1%. While immigrants account for barely over 10% of the total population for this age group, they make up over a quarter of all status dropouts (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000).

One of the best-documented examples of the lack of success experienced by immigrant students is found in the case of Hispanic dropouts. Foreign-born Hispanics have a status dropout rate of 46.2%. Foreign-born Hispanics account for 56% of all foreign-born 16- through 24-year-olds in the U.S., but close to 90% of all immigrant dropouts (Secada et al., 1997).

Theories that try to explain this discrepancy are varied. Mehan (1997) identified at least four distinct ways dropouts have been viewed over the past century. Originally, dropping out of school was blamed upon a personal pathology. This inferred that students who left school around the turn of the century were simply bad people demonstrating willful recalcitrance. The blame then shifted towards a faulty socialization of the young person. This referred mainly to immigrant students from southern and

eastern Europe who could not get accustomed to the disorganization of modern, industrialized life. From the 1930s on, the cause became increasingly medicalized. Students dropping out were perceived as having some physiological flaw. They were thought to have low IQ scores, poor nervous system organization, slow rates of development, congenital word blindness or any of a host of other learning disabilities. It is important to note that investigators concentrated their efforts where the locus of blame remained steadily within the student (Mehan, 1997).

More recently, the investigation of the root causes of high school non-achievement has begun to move outside of the students themselves. Increasingly more studies and opinion papers on the subject are framing the problem in terms of an interaction between the student and the school environment (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1996; Ogbu, 1974, 1995; Retish & Kavanaugh, 1992; Romo, 1993; Secada et al., 1997; White & Kaufman, 1997). While there are still many studies that both support and contradict the previous theories, this body of literature, which has been emerging since the late 1980s, provides support for an interaction theory.

At the same time, in the field of social psychology, a theory popular in the 1950s is again being examined as a powerful predictor of human behavior. Leon Festinger's (1957b) theory of cognitive dissonance is being used to explain the results of human interactions with the environment (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). To date, it has not been used as a framework for understanding the lack of success of immigrant students in public school settings. However, if one places the locus of immigrant student failure

somewhere in the interaction that occurs between immigrant youth and our public educational institutions, this theory appears applicable.

### Purpose of the Study

This study has continued the current trend of looking for the cause of immigrant student academic failure somewhere in the realm of the student's interactions with his or her environment. The purpose of this study was to determine if unsuccessful ESL students experience higher levels of cognitive dissonance than do their more successful counterparts at the high school level. ESL students' success rates and their abilities to assimilate dissonant cognitions were examined in order to gain a new understanding into why they are not successful in our nation's public schools.

### Research Questions

The professional literature is rich in examples of hurdles that new immigrant students must overcome before they can be successful academically (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997; Careaga, 1988; Falbo, 1996; Fuligni, 1997; Galetta-Bruno, 1995; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Gingras & Careaga, 1989; Hess & D'Amato, 1996; Jordan et al., 1996; Mehan, 1997; Retish & Kavanaugh, 1992; Romo, 1993; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1982; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996). Some of these involve being a stranger in a strange land. Other studies consider the shifting roles these students experience within their families and their communities (Journal of School Health, 1997). This led to the research question, Do ESL students experience cognitive dissonance as a result of these circumstances?

Once this was examined, the next area of study was to determine how cognitive dissonance impacted their school lives. Do successful ESL students experience less cognitive dissonance than do their less successful counterparts? Could some sort of a consistent relationship be established between the independent variable (levels of success) and the dependent variable (cognitive dissonance)? Could cognitive dissonance be used as a predictor of ESL student achievement at the high school level?

Finally, the researcher differentiated among the results on the cognitive dissonance measurement for gender and ethnic group. Do both genders of ESL students experience cognitive dissonance at approximately the same level? Do Hispanic and non-Hispanic ESL students to be included in the study experience cognitive dissonance at approximately the same level?

#### Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework for this survey study is based on Festinger's (1957a, 1957b) theory of cognitive dissonance. Since its inception, this theory has been modified and its predictive utility tested numerous times by many researchers (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963; Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Bem, 1967; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Srinivasan, 2000; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). The essence of the theory has remained the same. Festinger's theory states that there is a tendency on the part of individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs and opinions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior, one or the other must change in order to avoid psychological discomfort. The greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance. Cognitive dissonance may

be defined simply as a ratio. The dissonance ratio is equal to the number of dissonant cognitions divided by the number of the consonant cognitions plus the number of dissonant cognitions (Craig, 2000; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

It can be seen easily that almost all of us experience at least some levels of cognitive dissonance in our daily lives. Festinger offered the classic example of a smoker who learns that smoking endangers his health. He encounters cognitive dissonance because the knowledge that smoking is bad for him is dissonant with the fact that he is continuing to smoke. He then is faced with two choices. On one hand, he may reduce dissonance by quitting smoking, a behavior consonant with the newly acquired information. On the other hand, he could reduce dissonance by changing his belief regarding the effects of smoking. If he chooses to believe that smoking does not really have a harmful effect on one's health, he has effectively eliminated the dissonant cognition (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

Other examples of cognitive dissonance at work in our daily lives center around the assumption that most people want to perceive themselves as attractive, honest, and generally good human beings. Advertising and marketing executives rely upon this assumption. If it is possible to incite dissonant cognitions in persons' minds, one may well be able to affect their behavior in a way that benefits a third party (Srinivasan, 2000).

Because immigrant students to the United States over the past decade have come from so many diverse countries of origin, each with a distinct and distinguishable culture and associated cognitions, it seems logical to hypothesize that they experience even



higher levels of cognitive dissonance than do most members of the mainstream American population. They simply have more things about which to have dissonant thought.

Differences in culture, in addition to family and community role changes, have previously been mentioned as potential areas causing dissonant cognitions. In addition, especially if the immigrant student is non-English speaking, the cognition of oneself as a competent, capable human being is often threatened.

Numerous researchers over the past two decades have offered psychological and psychosocial explanations for the lack of success in American public schools. The social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance appears to possess potential for understanding the increased levels of academic failure by immigrant children. This dissertation attempts to demonstrate that constant, unreconciled cognitive dissonance may be associated with a lack of success in school.

### Definition of Terms

Immigrant student. A student who was born in a country other than the United States, and who has emigrated from that country to the United states. The student will have continued or begun his or her education upon arrival.

ESL student. Any student, regardless of his or her country of origin, who has been evaluated and placed in an English as a Second Language program for the purpose of developing English language skills.

Successful. Students will be judged to be successful if they have earned a cumulative G.P.A. of at least 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. This is in line with one local school district's recommendations that teachers should not consider students to be

successful unless they have earned at least a grade of a “3” (a “C”) in a particular class.

Unsuccessful. Students will be judged to be unsuccessful if they have earned a cumulative G.P.A. of less than 2.0 on a 4.0 scale, per district guidelines.

Cognitive Dissonance. Festinger’s (1957a, 1957b) theory states that there is a tendency on the part of individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs and opinions). Where there is an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior, one or the other must change in order to avoid psychological discomfort. The greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance. Cognitive dissonance may be defined simply as a ratio. The dissonance ratio is equal to the number of dissonant cognitions divided by the number of consonant cognitions plus the number of dissonant cognitions.

Cognition. This refers to virtually anything related to a mental activity, such as thoughts, remembrances, learning, attitudes or beliefs.

Voluntary Minority. A student who aligns himself or herself with members of a minority group that view themselves as having immigrated to the United States of their own free will. Generally, they believe that they have reasonable chances for success in this country, and in any case, are willing to make certain short-term sacrifices and suffer a certain amount of indignities in order to achieve success in the long-term.

Involuntary Minority. A student who aligns himself or herself with members of a minority group that view themselves in one of two ways:

1. As having been forced to immigrate to the United States, such as in the case of African slaves.
2. As a member of a population of conquered people in this country, such as in the case of the original Hispanic inhabitants of the Desert Southwest.

Generally, these students do not have much hope for success, as they feel that society is unfairly against them. Therefore, any efforts they might make to be successful would be fruitless.

#### Assumptions

The most important assumption of this study was that all ESL students experienced some level of cognitive dissonance in their daily lives. In addition, it was assumed that cognitive dissonance affected ESL students in the same, measurable manner that it did others.

#### Limitations

The limitations of this study were mainly concerned with the sample that was being studied. This study used a convenience sample of those ESL students who were studying in a high school ESL program in a Midwestern public school district during the Spring semester of 2000. Many of these subjects were current or former students of the researcher.

#### Delimitations

In order to better focus this project, the researcher employed certain delimitations. First, the immigrant students studied in this dissertation were limited to

English as a Second Language students. Second, the English as a Second Language students studied were limited to high school students.

### Significance of the Study

The intent of this study was to suggest a direction that educational professionals might take to increase immigrant student achievement. It has provided a different or additional focus for school reform programs, educational policy makers and researchers.

Implications for practice. The new knowledge gained concerning the challenges faced by new immigrant students carries a number of different implications for educational practice. For example, it gives support to the argument for the need for the numerous “Newcomer Centers” that are forming across the country (Short, 1998). Furthermore, the knowledge gained from the results of this study may help shape the curricula of such centers.

This study has implications concerning how and what we teach new immigrant students. This may begin a new dialogue in the immigrant education community about what newly arrived immigrant adolescents need in order to “make it” in American public schools, and ultimately in America itself.

It is hoped that this study will suggest a point of departure for combating the immigrant student dropout problem. In spite of numerous reform efforts and a heated debate concerning the merits of bilingual education versus English as a Second Language instruction, immigrant student dropout rates remain alarmingly high. This study could help shift the focus from the ESL versus bilingual education stalemate onto more productive research paths.

Implications for research. Finally, this study has significant implications for both the direction of future research and immigrant education politics. A positive correlation between cognitive dissonance levels and academic achievement, in effect, distributes the responsibility for poor educational performance evenly between the student and his environment. This could serve to remove the excuses that some have used not to seriously invest time, money and effort into combating the immigrant student dropout problem.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

This literature review will be based upon the following outline. First, a discussion of immigrant students in the United States will be presented. This will begin with their demographics and how these populations are changing. Next will follow a discussion of the unique difficulties that complicate immigrant students' success in American schools. Second, the theory base of cognitive dissonance will be examined. This will include an examination of the original 1957 theory that provides a framework from which we may understand the special difficulties faced by immigrant students. It will also consider how the original theory has expanded over the years, giving it even greater power. Third, specific examples of dissonance-causing events for immigrant students will be examined. This will begin with the dissonance caused by having to adapt to a new ethnic identity. Fourth, a theory concerning the nature of voluntary and involuntary minorities will provide additional examples of dissonant cognitions for immigrant students. Fifth, differences in school expectations will be explored for further instances of dissonance causing events.

#### Immigrant Students in the United States

This section will review how immigrant students have grown to represent a special population in our nation's public schools. Their general characteristics will be examined, as will their changing demographics. Finally, the unique difficulties that ultimately impede their success in American schools will be discussed.

### Population Characteristics

It should be no secret that immigration to the United States has been increasing once again in recent years. The U.S. Census Bureau (1997) has estimated that approximately 25,779,000 persons of foreign birth currently live in the United States. The majority of these persons have arrived since 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Exact figures conflict, but somewhere between 8,555,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997) and 9,500,000 (Council of Great City Schools, 1995) immigrants arrived during the 1980s alone. This number represents almost 60% of the nation's entire immigrant population. Furthermore, the settling of the immigrant population has been relatively concentrated, with 93% locating in metropolitan areas (Council of Great City Schools, 1995).

This withstanding, many more immigrants remain relatively invisible because of their legal status. It is estimated that approximately 5 million illegal immigrants have taken up permanent residence within the United States. It should be noted that this figure was revised upward from the 1992 figure of 3.9 million. Furthermore, the Immigration and Naturalization Service believes that an additional 275,000 permanent, but illegal immigrants arrive each year (Branigin, 1997).

In addition to the considerations generated by the sheer numbers of immigrants arriving into this country, the increased diversity they represent is also a factor. The following countries have over 500,000 persons currently residing on a permanent basis in the United States: Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Great Britain, China and Hong Kong, India, Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam (U.S. Census Bureau,

1997). No longer can the immigrant population of the United States be characterized as coming from a handful of nations. Truly, all four corners of the globe are represented within our borders.

The inevitable result of the increase in this population is an additional stress placed upon our nation's school systems. It was calculated that in 1990, about 5% of all students in the United States were immigrants. These youngsters enrolled in American schools at about the same rate as their native-born peers (Schwartz, 1996).

This increase in special school populations has translated into an increase in special programs to service their unique needs. The U.S. Department of Education reported 16,609 different programs in operation in 1997 across the 50 states addressing the needs of migrant K-12 students alone (Migrant Education Program, 2000). English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education programs are also in place to serve immigrant students. Many of these programs are filled to capacity, however. Nationwide, ESL classes serve 1.8 million people each year (Immigration Forum, 2000). In some metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations, programs actually have had to turn away potential students or to place them on lengthy waiting lists. Washington, D.C. was forced to turn away 5,000 immigrant students during the 1993-1994 school year, while New York resorted to a lottery system for those wanting English classes. Other cities were forced to give up on waiting lists when these became so long as to be rendered pointless (Immigration Forum, 2000).

As can be expected, this high demand for special services comes with an equally high monetary price. President Clinton's Immigrant Provisions budget proposal for fiscal



year 2001 called for an appropriation of \$2.5 billion over 5 years. Of this amount, \$460 million is earmarked for bilingual and immigrant education. This figure includes a \$54 million increase over fiscal year 2000. Seventy-five million dollars is reserved to support ESL and Civics classes for the more recent immigrants (Stateserv, 2000).

### The Dropout Problem

Clearly, the cost in dollars of educating immigrant students is significant. Equally high, however, are the human costs of not being able to educate immigrant students well or at all. Unfortunately for us all, the dropout rate (especially among certain segments of this population) for immigrant students is higher than one would expect for the American student population as a whole.

In understanding this dilemma, however, a basic understanding of the problem is necessary. Namely, what is a dropout? This is a deceptively simple question that, unfortunately, is not clarified in much of the current literature. The term dropout may, in fact, refer to three different categories of non-students, as identified by the Hispanic Dropout Project (Mehan, 1997). The first group identified by this project is referred to as status dropouts. The consensus is that this term refers to any person 15 to 24 years of age who is not enrolled in school, despite the fact that he or she does not possess a high school credential. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, the status definition for dropouts will be used.

The U.S. Department of Commerce (2000) indicated in the report "High school dropouts and completions, by race/ethnicity and recency of migration" that the status dropout rate of 29.1% for immigrants is nearly three times the rate of native-born youths.

While immigrants account for barely over 10% of the total population for this age group, they make up over a quarter of all status dropouts in this country. Even when considering the argument that many immigrant young people come to the United States in search of employment, not an education, these figures are alarmingly high.

One of the best-documented examples of the problem that immigrant dropouts present is found in the case of Hispanic dropouts. Foreign-born Hispanics have a status dropout rate of 46.2%. Foreign-born Hispanics account for 56% of all foreign-born 16- through 24-year-olds in the U.S., but close to 90% of all immigrant status dropouts (Secada et al., 1997). Hispanic immigrants are about seven times more likely than non-Hispanic immigrants to be dropouts (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000).

However, the status dropout rate for Hispanic students who have at one time enrolled in American schools drops considerably to 23.7%, according to the report "Immigration, participation in U.S. schools, and high school dropout rates" (1998). This figure still does not compare favorably with the statistic for the American population as a whole, but it does suggest that Hispanic rates using the status dropout definition may be somewhat deceptive in nature. It appears that the problem is encouraging Hispanic immigrants to enroll in school in the first place. One analysis (Schwartz, 1996) has shown that immigrants in general account for 5% of all students, and enroll in U.S. schools at about the same rates as native students. It would seem that this is not true when considering Hispanic immigrants.

The available data are inconclusive about the success of immigrants in American schools. For example, the percentage of Hispanic immigrants who have not obtained a

high school diploma has also declined in the past 15 years, from 60% in 1979, to 50% in 1996, according to the press release to the National Center for Educational Statistics entitled "Dropout rates remain stable over the last decade" (1997). One limitation in the data is that Hispanic immigrants are not always differentiated from long-time residents or citizens of Hispanic origin in many data reports. Detailed data analyses of other immigrant groups are not readily available, being mainly limited to secondary sources. Despite the overall shortcomings in the available data, it remains clear that the outlook for the scholastic success of immigrant students is bleak.

#### Unique Problems Faced by Immigrant Students

The high dropout rates for all immigrant students are not too surprising, considering the considerable challenges they face. All too often, these challenges prove to be insurmountable, and result in academic failure and dropping out of high school. Specific, problematic issues faced by immigrant students in the United States include: Family issues, high mobility rates, infectious diseases and malnutrition, and psychological problems. Language use may possibly be detrimental as well. Other problems that have to do with cognitive processes will be considered later.

Sometimes the families of immigrant students influence them in ways that educators consider to be less-than-desirable, considering the context of American schools. Jordan et al. (1996) found this to be true in the case of Hispanic females. This group was much more likely than any other group studied to give "family reasons" as an excuse for dropping out of school. Hispanic females were often obligated to care for ill adult family members, younger siblings, or their own children instead of attending

school. Furthermore, researchers observed that grade school siblings of dropouts reported having much lower expectations with regard to their own eventual graduation due to negative factors in the family environment (Hess & D'Amato, 1996). Many researchers have found family composition characteristics associated with dropping out of high school (Fuligni, 1997; Hess & D'Amato, 1996; Velez, 1989; White & Kaufman, 1997). Generally speaking, the fewer parents and the greater number of siblings immigrant students have in the home, the greater the chances of not graduating from high school.

This is not to say that all researchers have found families to be a negative influence upon high school completion, however. Baca et al. (1993) found that family factors are not significant with respect to the high school graduation of immigrant students. Fuligni (1997) studied 1,100 adolescents from Latino, East Asian, Filipino and European origins. He found that the family, in fact, exerts a positive influence upon high school completion. He discovered that a strong familial emphasis on education counteracts the negative effects associated with low socio-economic status. White and Kaufman (1997) also found this to be true for immigrant students. The key seems to be in the employment of social capital. Living with both immigrant parents, and having both parents monitor schoolwork have significant effects upon students' chances of staying in school.

Another factor that has been shown to impact immigrant students' success in school is mobility. For many reasons, immigrants tend to be a highly mobile group. Some follow their displaced communities, while others (such as migrant laborers) change

residences frequently as they chase after employment prospects. Clearly, an already difficult task becomes even more so as the continuity of students' educations are interrupted repeatedly. Unfortunately, many become so discouraged that they eventually drop out of school. The negative effects that high school mobility has upon school achievement and graduation rates have been well established in the literature (Baca et al., 1993; Careaga, 1988; Gingras & Careaga, 1989; Velez, 1989).

Immigrant students have unique medical histories and concerns. Many of these conditions have been shown to have an adverse effect upon school performance, and can be linked, at least in part, to the reasons why students leave school without a diploma. Fewer and fewer immigrant students are coming from Europe and other well-developed countries in the world fortunate enough to possess good medical infrastructures. The greater majority of immigrants are coming from Third World nations where disease and malnutrition are commonplace. Immigrants are exposed to serious health problems in their home countries, and then carry these problems with them to the United States.

The Journal of School Health ("Coping With," 1997) recognized that epidemiologically, immigrants represent a special population. Malnutrition and infectious diseases are known to occur more frequently among immigrants than in the general population. Students who are not well miss school. Students with certain diseases (such as tuberculosis) may even be excluded from school for a time. To make matters even worse, many immigrant children residing in the United States have only limited access to health care. A recent study reported by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2000) found that one in every four uninsured children in this country

lives in a non-citizen family. These factors complicate the already difficult task of earning a high school diploma. Until health issues are resolved, school becomes secondary in importance.

Immigrant students may face health problems that are not merely physical in nature. They also demonstrate specific mental health concerns. As the physical health problems often go untreated in the home country, so do the mental illnesses. In many of the cultures present in our immigrant population today, mental conditions carry a heavy social stigma. In many cases, these problems may not be diagnosed or treated for fear of negative reaction from peer groups. In other instances, these conditions may simply be the least of the family's problems at the given moment. Daily survival needs such as food, shelter and clothing must be met first. Even once family members are able to seek help, they may not know where to turn for assistance. The end result is the same: those suffering from mental health problems frequently go untreated.

The very conditions experienced by immigrant students as they begin their lives in this country put them at risk for mental health problems. All students suffer from economic, social and environmental dislocation. Once in the United States, immigrant youngsters face a multitude of psychological tasks associated with their new lives. The Journal of School Health ("Coping With,"1997) identified the following as being such tasks:

- Acculturation and assimilation into a new culture
- Reconciling the differences between acceptable home and school behavior
- Dealing with culture shock

- Resolution of ethnic identity issues
- Dealing with racism
- Responding to intergenerational conflicts
- Redefining familial and generational boundaries
- Responding to a lessening of parental authority. (p. 98)

The first five items on this list refer to those tasks necessitated by being a stranger in a strange land. Some of these are anticipated by the immigrant students and their families, but many are not. An example of an unanticipated task is learning to confront racism, especially by black immigrants. Many believed upon their arrival that racism was not a real problem in this country, and that it could be overcome by hard work. Other immigrants did not anticipate being lumped together with ethnic groups or supernationalities that they never would have been associated with in their home countries (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996).

The last three items on the list refer to the shifting nature of the family structure and relationships experienced upon arrival in this country. Many times, parents find themselves working long hours outside of the home. This makes it necessary for high school-aged children to assume a more adult role in the household, by caring for younger siblings, taking care of household needs, and even working themselves. Parental supervision decreases, and traditional methods of discipline may be termed “abusive” in this country. Difficulties also arise when the young people see their American peers having much more personal liberty than they themselves are allowed by their families.

Finally, families may experience role-reversal as the adults rely upon their children's greater English fluency (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996).

As if this were not enough, the very conditions experienced along the journey to the United States may cause emotional problems for some young immigrants. Many suffer from trauma due to the loss of virtually everything familiar, the harsh conditions of travel, difficulties finding food and shelter, dangerous illnesses and the possibility of losing one or both parents. This psychological trauma is not unlike that experienced by soldiers returning from war ( "Coping With," 1997; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996).

To date, there has been very little research done with regard to the psychological effects of immigration upon students, or what to do about these effects. One study conducted by Galletta-Bruno in 1995 examined, among other things, the effects of a small group acculturation-counseling program. This program had a positive effect upon the school completion of a small group of newly arrived immigrant students in a suburban high school. This intervention was successful with 33 of the 35 participants.

One of the more obvious barriers that most immigrant students must overcome is a language barrier. The population of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in the United States is, and will continue to be, a very diverse group. Studies in the mid-1990s identified over 100 distinct languages spoken by students in the United States (Garcia, 1993; Waggoner as cited in Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996). In addition, as we enter the new millennium, the number of LEP students in our nation's public schools is expected to reach 42% of the total enrollment (United States Department of Education, 1993).



Language is tied very closely to the native culture. For this reason, language use is a very emotional issue. Adding fuel to the fire, there is no clear-cut consensus in the literature as to the long-term negative effects of foreign language use, either by the student or by his or her family. On one hand, Canales and Bush (1992), Careaga (1988), The Council of Great City Schools (1995) and Gingras and Careaga (1989) all found that limited English proficiency was closely linked to at-risk status. In fact, LEP students are among those most likely to drop out of school. On the other hand, some researchers feel that while this may be true, foreign language use is better thought of as a characteristic, not as a root cause of dropouts. A study of 150 Mexican immigrant students in a Los Angeles high school found that students entering U.S. schools after the second grade had lower completion rates than those entering in earlier grades. It was determined, however, that this had no relationship to English proficiency (Baca, Bryan, & McKinney, 1993). Likewise, White and Kaufman (1997) found that English language usage alone does not appear to increase the probability of high school completion. In fact, they found that bilingual students had a lower dropout rate than did monolingual English-speaking students.

The literature regarding school achievement and completion does have one major limitation in many cases. It assumes that all bilingual or foreign monolingual students are immigrants, when in fact it appears that only 43% of all bilingual students in this country are true first-generation immigrants (Feder, 1997). This may partly account for the discrepancy in research findings.

To summarize, immigrant students in the United States form a rapidly expanding special population. Their unique characteristics contribute to special problems in our nation's public schools, not the least of which is dropping out of school. Some of the most pressing issues faced by immigrant students include family issues, high mobility rates, infectious diseases and malnutrition, and psychological problems. While English language proficiency is certainly a barrier to be overcome for most immigrant students, the professional literature is inconclusive as to the long-term negative effects of initial non-English fluency. This is but one level of problems faced by immigrant students in this country. The next section will lay the foundation for understanding why cognitive dissonance may form even more serious barriers to immigrant students' academic success.

### Cognitive Dissonance

One of the central theories of social psychology during the past 40 years has been that of cognitive dissonance. Since being published in 1957, Leon Festinger's theory has undergone many tests of its predictive power. Some minor adaptations and variations have been subsequently introduced. This section will begin by detailing the specifics of the cognitive dissonance theory and its implications. Several pivotal studies will be discussed, and the section will conclude with an examination of newly emerging adaptations of the original theory of cognitive dissonance.

#### Definition of Cognitive Dissonance

Since 1957, the essence of the theory of cognitive dissonance has remained relatively unaltered. Dr. Festinger's theory concerns itself with the relationship among an

individual's cognitions. There are three possible ways that pairs of cognitions may relate to one another. They may be consonant, dissonant or irrelevant to one another. The theory of cognitive dissonance particularly examines the second case. It states that there is a tendency on the part of individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., that which is related to a mental activity, such as thoughts, remembrances, learning, attitudes or beliefs) (Festinger, 1957a).

When there is an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior, one or the other must change in order to avoid psychological discomfort. Generally speaking, the greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance. Cognitive dissonance may be defined simply as a ratio. The dissonance ratio is equal to the number of dissonant cognitions divided by the number of the consonant cognitions plus the number of dissonant cognitions (Craig, 2000; Festinger, 1957b; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

Cognitive dissonance may cause varying levels of distress within individuals. Its strength depends upon the number and relative importance of a person's cognitions that are consonant or dissonant with the original cognition in question. Clémence (1991) illustrates this point with the following mathematical formula:

$$\text{Dissonance Strength} = \frac{(\text{importance}) * (\text{number of dissonant cognitions})}{(\text{importance}) * (\text{number of consonant and dissonant cognitions})}$$

Dr. Festinger envisioned four main sources of cognitive dissonance in his original theory. The first of these is logic. This refers to the incongruence between two thoughts

or beliefs. The second potential source of dissonance is cultural. It refers to the dissonance that arises from a discrepancy between a particular behavior and a cultural norm. Third, Festinger refers to the agreement between the specific and the general aspects of a matter. This is best visualized as the discrepancy between a singular opinion or behavior and a set or series of opinions and behaviors. Finally, Festinger identifies the dissonance that results from discord between past and present experiences, or expectation and the realization of that expectation (Clémence, 1991; Festinger, 1957a).

The overarching human motivation is to actively avoid the psychological discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance. The greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater the desire is to reduce the accompanying psychological discomfort. One of Festinger's early students likened this discomfort to other basic human physiological motivators like hunger or thirst (Massaro, 1997). However, like hunger and thirst, it will at times become impossible to avoid dissonant cognitions and the subsequent discomfort they cause. The subject must overcome (or at least reduce the strength of) the resulting cognitive dissonance. Under these circumstances, a person is faced with several choices. He or she may choose to avoid information that is likely to cause dissonance or otherwise remove dissonant cognitions, add consonant cognitions, reduce the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increase the importance of consonant cognitions (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

Cognitive dissonance research has manifested itself in literally hundreds of related studies since its inception in 1957. Early experiments carried with them certain inherent limitations. The majority of these first experiments were conducted in a sterile laboratory

environment where the research subjects were university students. These early researchers were accused of gross oversimplification of complex social situations. In spite of this, the groundwork was laid for inferences about social processes and later, more sophisticated theories and subsequent experiments. Today, cognitive dissonance is seen as contributing to virtually all situations regarding attitude formation, change, decision-making and problem-solving (Clémence, 1991; Festinger, 1957a, 1957b; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

The literature review at this point will limit itself to cognitive dissonance as it applies to four main paradigms. These include: The free-choice paradigm, the belief-disconfirmation paradigm, the effort-justification paradigm and the induced compliance paradigm. While numerous studies and analyses broaden Festinger's original theory far beyond the scope of the aforementioned paradigms, these paradigms are generally viewed to be the most faithful to the original theory and the most central to the understanding of what Festinger meant by cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

Free choice paradigm. The free choice paradigm refers to the dissonance that is aroused surrounding decision-making. Once a decision is made, many cognitions (both consonant and dissonant) inevitably follow. This is because the essence of making a decision about anything involves rejecting one or more options, while at the same time, embracing another. The resulting consonant cognitions emanate from the positive aspects of the embraced choice and the negative aspects of the rejected one. Conversely, the dissonant cognitions come from what one might have missed – that is, the positive aspects of the rejected choice and the negative aspects of the accepted option. The

mathematic formula presented earlier demonstrates that a difficult decision should generate higher levels of discomfort than an easy decision. The individual's only choice is to lessen the discomfort by focusing on those aspects that are likely to reduce dissonance – in effect, to convince himself that he was right all along.

One of the most famous experiments to illustrate this point was Brehm's 1956 experiment involving housewives and household products. Under the guise of performing market research, Brehm asked the women to rate eight products according to their desirability. He then offered the subjects a choice between two of the products. Sometimes the choices were between products of similar desirability, and sometimes they were between products of widely differing desirability levels. After the final decision was made, the subject was asked once again to rank the desirability of the products. Almost always the scores increased to reflect a greater satisfaction with the chosen product, and a decreasing esteem of the rejected product. Furthermore, the net score increases and decreases were greater when a "difficult" decision had taken place.

Belief disconfirmation paradigm. Similarly, the belief-disconfirmation paradigm demonstrates how individuals accommodate dissonant information into their belief systems. The choice in this circumstance is to change one's belief or to find some other way to support the original belief and thereby lessen the psychological distress. As before, this may come about by eliminating or somehow discrediting sources of dissonant opinions, finding more or better sources of consonant cognitions or by some combination thereof. A few corollaries follow. The stronger held the belief is, the greater will be the effort to substantiate it, even in the face of significant disconfirming evidence. Also, the

greater the evidence against a belief is, the greater the effort to support a strongly held belief.

This interpretation of cognitive dissonance is abundantly evident in what was nicknamed “Mrs. Keech’s Doomsday Cult” study of 1954 (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, as cited in Cognitive Dissonance, 1999; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). In this particular study, Dr. Festinger and his colleagues studied a religious cult-like group as participant observers. This particular group held the belief that the world would come to an end because of a great flood on December 21, 1954. This study was unique in that circumstances presented the researchers with what appeared to be a case of irrefutable belief disconfirmation. The world did not, in fact, end on the day of December 21. Amazingly, the group still managed to find a way to not only hold onto, but also strengthen their beliefs. (Group leaders insisted that their goodness was the reason that God spared the earth.) The members began to proselytize energetically, even though they had never particularly engaged in this activity before. What they were doing, consciously or unconsciously, was engaging in a dissonant cognition-reducing activity. More believers meant more consonant cognitions for the group members.

Effort justification paradigm. Another paradigm used to explain cognitive dissonance is the effort-justification paradigm. As its name implies, this paradigm reconciles the dissonance caused by performing a relatively disagreeable task by believing that the results will be “worth the effort.” This paradigm also helps us envision one of the major unresolved controversies of the cognitive dissonance theory: Is it necessary to have some level of aversive consequences in order to create cognitive

dissonance? (Cooper & Fazio, as cited in Cognitive Dissonance, 1999; Harmon-Jones, 1999; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

The first, and possibly the most illustrative, experiment to demonstrate this paradigm was conducted by Aronson and Mills (1959). This experiment required two groups of women to go through an initiation process in order to gain access to an organization. Depending upon the group assignment, the initiation was either mild in nature, or required the women to perform moderately embarrassing tasks. In the end, the organization turned out to be rather dull. In spite of this fact, the women who suffered through the more demanding initiation rated the organization as more desirable than those who performed the milder initiation rites. These women sought to lessen the cognitive dissonance generated by the unpleasant initiation rituals by increasing the value of membership in the organization in their own minds. It was a case of the ends justifying the means.

Induced compliance paradigm. The fourth cognitive dissonance paradigm is the induced-compliance paradigm (initially referred to by Festinger as “forced compliance”). This paradigm relies upon the premise that one experiences dissonance with regards to previously formed cognitions (which often take shape as the result of lived experiences). Logically, if these previously formed cognitions suggest negativity towards a particular behavior, this behavior is to be avoided in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. The exception to this is when one is induced to disregard or alter these previously formed cognitions in order to accept even greater consonance-causing cognitions. Examples of these latter types of cognitions typically include rewards or the avoidance of punishments



and embarrassing situations, etc. As before, the greater the number or importance of the new, consonant cognitions, the greater the resulting cognitive dissonance and the greater the pressure is to resolve the ensuing psychological discomfort (Clémence, 1991; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). For example, let us suppose that experience has taught students that responding to a question incorrectly in Teacher X's class frequently results in public ridicule. Volunteering responses to difficult questions in this class should generate significant amounts of cognitive dissonance, as common sense tells the students that public humiliation should be avoided whenever possible. Students could be induced into responding to difficult questions in this class, however, under the threat of low grades for class participation. In this case, receiving a bad grade presumably would generate greater levels of cognitive dissonance than would public ridicule.

One of the first experiments ever conducted concerning the theory of cognitive dissonance illustrates this point. Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) set appointments with subjects in a laboratory-type environment. Each subject individually performed a boring and tedious task for one hour. Upon completion of the session, the subject was informed that there were two test groups. He or she (subject 1) belonged to the group that received no introduction before performing the task. The other group, however, was told that the task was extremely enjoyable. The experimenter continued to say that the person who normally informed the next subject (subject 2, actually an accomplice of the researcher) about her good fortune was unavailable. Subject 1 is offered either \$1 or \$20 to tell Subject 2 that the task is enjoyable. After having done so, Subject 1 rates the actual task

he or she performed. Those paid only \$1 ranked the task as being more enjoyable than did those who were paid \$20.

In effect, the less money received for relating the supposed pleasure of the task, the more highly the subject rated the actual task itself. In terms of the cognitive dissonance theory, this makes sense. Those who were paid a relatively large amount of money experienced less cognitive dissonance than did those who received only \$1. They felt justified in fibbing to the next "subject" because of the substantial reward involved. (The reward provided more and more important consonant cognitions.) On the other hand, those receiving only \$1 in compensation experienced a great deal of cognitive dissonance. This was not a substantial enough reward to counteract the effects of experiencing the task as boring and tedious. In order to reconcile this state of dissonance, these subjects were induced to change their opinion about the tedious task itself (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Girandola, 1997; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

More recently, a researcher revisited this classic experiment. Girandola (1997) reenacted a version of this experiment employing a double forced compliance technique. French subjects individually participated in a short "instructional" session where they were acquainted with the procedures for turning buttons attached to a board. After the instruction as to the nature of the task, they were asked if they were still willing to participate in the experiment. After securing free-compliance from the subject, he or she was instructed to turn buttons for 15 minutes. Following the longer button-turning session, one half of the subjects were instructed to tell the next "subject" (in reality, the

researcher's colleague) the truth – the task was very boring. Both groups of people then completed a short questionnaire concerning their enjoyment of the task.

It was hypothesized that the group that performed the task and then told someone it was boring would experience the most dissonance. This appeared to be the case, as this group subsequently rated the task higher than did their counterparts who merely had to perform the boring task. The group members who related their experiences were forced to adjust their opinions favorably in order to counteract two doses of dissonant cognitions – those coming from the boring task itself, and those coming from relating their experiences (Girandola, 1997).

#### Cognitive Dissonance and Self-Concept

The interaction between cognitive dissonance and self-concept is easily understood when we consider the role one's self-concept plays in cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance assumes that people want to believe themselves to be honest, smart, competent, and overall good human beings. In this way, the theory assumes some of the characteristics of Self-Perception theory (Cognitive dissonance, 1999). To this end, Bem (1967) suggested that we infer our own attitudes from our behavior. Smart, self-actualized people generally do not perform tedious tasks for no good reason. Above all else, they do not admit to others that they have performed such tasks. These subjects decreased the numbers of dissonant cognitions by convincing themselves that the task at hand perhaps was not that bad after all. Therefore, they rated the task higher than those who merely performed the task without revealing their true feelings publicly.

### Dissonance Causing Events for Immigrant Students

The first section of this research review substantiates that the lives of immigrant students in the United States are not easy. The learning tasks precipitated by being a stranger in a strange land are many and arduous. This is with the understanding that school is but one of the difficult aspects of the new lives of immigrant students in the United States. Everything that immigrant students knew is seemingly no longer true, valid, or even valued. Previously existing cognitions conflict with the new information they receive in their adopted country. This may result in the psychological discomfort previously referred to as cognitive dissonance. This section will use as a framework the four traditional paradigms of cognitive dissonance explored in the last section.

#### Free Choice Paradigm and Cultural Determinism

The free choice paradigm of cognitive dissonance states that individuals tend to commit more to choices that they have made of their own free will. They reduce dissonance by adjusting their attitude and cognitions in a more positive direction, thereby favoring any decision they have made free from coercion. The free choice paradigm applies to immigrant students to the United States in one very important way. It shows the implications of cultural determinism and identification.

Much of the groundbreaking work along this line of thought was done by Anthropologist John Ogbu (1974, 1995). Through a series of ethnographic studies involving immigrant and other populations, he established that real cultural differences do confront all minority (and especially immigrant) students. His experimentation and observations led to a theory that divides all minority groups in the United States into two

categories: voluntary and involuntary minorities. Immigrant students may fall into either category. Chinese immigrants, for example, would be considered voluntary minorities. Most came here of their own free will, and have reasonable hopes for success in America. Hispanic immigrants, however, may be considered involuntary minorities. Even though their personal decision to emigrate may have been made free from duress, many members of their ethnic group already here did not experience such liberty. Ogbu (1995) argues that once Hispanic immigrants take up residency in the United States, they join other longer-established Hispanics in the relegation of the role of a conquered people. They mentally align themselves and are mentally aligned by mainstream American society with the conquered populations of the American Southwest. The same scenario applies to African and Haitian immigrants, among other groups.

This relates directly to immigrant students' success in American schools. Those who accept their identification with an involuntary minority group frequently adopt an oppositional cultural frame of reference. It is theorized that those who see themselves as members of a voluntary minority accept the difficulties associated with schooling in the United States as barriers to be overcome. Involuntary minorities are thought to be more likely to see these same difficulties as needlessly imposed upon them by the majority population. Behaving in ways encouraged by the school is equated with "selling out" to the oppressors. For many, dropping out of school seems to be the only option.

Several studies done within recent years seem to support this line of thought. Research shows that there is a large difference in attitude, performance, and ultimately, school retention between new Hispanic immigrants and those who have been here for

longer periods of time. Fuligni (1997) finds that, for Latino students, aspirations decrease the longer they are in the United States. Students who are second or third generation immigrants demonstrate the least amount of goals for the future. Studies done by Rivera-Batiz (1996) and White and Kaufman (1997) discovered a direct relationship between immigrant dropouts and the amount of time each student has lived in the United States. Ogbu's (1974) theory suggests that these groups of immigrant students enter the country ready to learn, but as they become aware of their caste in this society, many become discouraged and give up. Ogbu's 1995 study identified six different areas in which immigrant and minority students experience difficulty with American school systems: cross-cultural misunderstandings, language and communication barriers, differences in conceptual knowledge, differences in teaching and learning styles, cultural hegemony, and differences in cultural frames of reference.

The free choice paradigm of Festinger's (1957a, 1957b) theory of cognitive dissonance can be associated with the cultural determinism aspects of Ogbu's work. This is especially true as cognitive dissonance relates to the concepts of voluntary and involuntary minorities. Immigrant students in a new country may reduce the psychological discomfort produced by the dissonant cognitions that bombard them constantly in two different ways. If the circumstances surrounding their immigration and current situation in the United States more closely parallel a free choice paradigm, they will likely adjust their attitudes to favor the decision they or their families have made (to immigrate to the United States.) Difficulties are to be expected and endured. On the other hand, if a free choice paradigm cannot be applied, then it can be hypothesized that

the students will only be able to reconcile the cognitive dissonance that they experience by shifting their attitude in a negative direction – that is, adopting an oppositional frame of mind toward the majority culture of their new country.

The manner in which immigrant students view their situation in American society is but one source of cognitive dissonance in their new lives. In a school environment, much of this situation depends upon the balance of power, and the immigrant student's understanding of the power structure. Delpit (1995) identifies five aspects of power that must be understood:

- 1) Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
- 2) There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
- 3) The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
- 4) If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
- 5) Those with power are frequently the least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

#### Belief Disconfirmation Paradigm and Immigrant Student Behavior

This paradigm is concerned with the manner in which individuals accommodate dissonant information into their belief systems. Individuals may choose to change their beliefs or to find some other way to support the original beliefs, and thereby lessen the

psychological distress. There is overwhelming evidence from immigrant students that they value education once in American schools. A recent survey of immigrant students in San Diego found that 90% agreed that a good education was essential to upward mobility in the United States ("Immigrant Children," 1997). This contradicts the U.S. Department of Commerce (2000) figures that show that 29.1% of all immigrant youth in this country leave school without a high school diploma. There appears to be a contradiction between what immigrant students verbally commit to and their subsequent actions regarding their education.

Certain behaviors have been documented as reliable predictors of future high school dropouts. For newly-arrived students, one of the best indicators is truancy. Studies by Canales and Bush (1992) and Retish and Kavanaugh (1992) each confirm that a large percentage of immigrant dropouts has truancy and high absenteeism in common. It would seem that students who are pushed or pulled away from school in the short-term, eventually stay away for good.

Another predictor of immigrant student dropouts is the number of suspensions and expulsions students experience. Jordan et al. (1996) identified having been suspended or expelled as the third most important factor in the eventual decision to leave school. Canales and Bush (1992) track this trend back to in-school suspensions at the elementary level. Others have found similar relationships between student gross misbehavior, suspensions and eventual dropouts (Gingras & Careaga, 1989; Velez, 1989). Truancy and school misbehaviors may be seen as steps in a general trend toward school alienation.



Certain school achievement measures also predict high school graduation. There is a very strong correlation between grade retention at any point in a student's academic career and non-completion of high school (Canales & Bush, 1992; Falbo, 1996). In fact, Falbo (1996) found that school practices in general, including tracking, were primary causes for dropping out. Test scores are also predictors. English and math scores, globally low scores, and non-mastery of key subjects were all identified as factors (Canales & Bush, 1992; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1982).

All of the preceding examples of lack of success in the school environment frequently serve to create an insurmountable rift between the immigrant student and his or her education. More and more, researchers are beginning to look at school alienation as a root cause for leaving school. Tellez and Walker de Felix (1993) tested this suspicion with immigrant Latino students. They found overwhelming evidence that "dropping out is more a function of disempowerment within a hostile environment than a lack of academic or language abilities" (Tellez & Walker de Felix, 1993, p. 9).

Similar results were also found by Jordan et al. (1996), Retish and Kavanaugh (1992) and Worrell (1996). The latter warns, however, that researchers should use caution in assessing a school's climate. The results may be deceptively negative depending upon the timing of the measurement. Worrell's study showed far more negative attitudes for those surveyed after dropping out than for those surveyed prior to leaving school.

On the other hand, students who are not alienated from school show higher graduation rates. For example, those involved in extra-curricular activities graduate at a

higher rate than those who are not involved (Canales & Bush, 1992). It appears that it is absolutely essential that immigrant students make and maintain a connection with their new schools. The more involved they are, and the more they feel part of the school, the lesser the chance that they will not complete their studies.

Returning to the discussion of the belief disconfirmation paradigm of cognitive dissonance, it appears that all too many immigrant students are feeling themselves compelled to make adjustments in the manner in which they view education in the United States. The belief disconfirmation paradigm suggests that when individuals are confronted with information that is incongruent with their belief systems, they will either change their beliefs or find some other way to support the original beliefs. This is obviously happening in the case of American immigrant students. While they espouse the belief that education is essential to success in the United States, they are proceeding to leave school in record numbers. This seemingly illogical chain of events must generate large amounts of cognitive dissonance. The belief about the importance of education in this country appears to remain constant. This suggests that immigrant students are finding other ways to support their previously espoused beliefs. When faced with rejection by American school systems, a logical amendment to an immigrant student's belief system would be that American schools are the key to success for those lucky enough to be accepted into the system. The apparent lesson learned is that American schools are not meant to be accessible to all students. Hence, neither is success in American society.

### Effort Justification Paradigm and the Value of an American Education

The effort justification paradigm is concerned with the cognitive dissonance that is caused by performing an unpleasant task. In order to reconcile the dissonance caused by performing the undesirable act, an individual may elect to cease performing the action or to exaggerate the desirability of the outcome of the action. This latter method works by adding the support of increased consonant cognitions.

Even a quick perusal of the professional literature demonstrates that the American school experience is frequently an unpleasant one in many aspects for immigrant students. Poor communication between the school, students and their families (Delpit, 1995), community politics that ostracize newcomers (Diaz-Soto, 1997), and the low social status afforded immigrants (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1974, 1995; Trueba, 1989) each play a part in making immigrant students uncomfortable in their new educational surroundings. Furthermore, American schools differ in their readiness to adequately accommodate non-English speaking students (National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 1997).

It is evident that the dissonant cognitions produced by the unpleasant nature of the schooling task are high. In order for immigrant students to complete the task, i.e., receive an American high school diploma, the consonant cognitions produced by the beliefs surrounding the rewards of an American education must be high. Unfortunately, for many immigrant students, they are not. The income expectations for high school dropouts in this country are such that they can expect to earn \$14,413 a year as 18-to 24-year olds (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). In contrast, the average yearly income in Mexico

is \$8,300, Vietnam \$1,700 and El Salvador \$3,000 (Countries of the World, 2000). (These last figures are actually PPP, or purchasing power parity, figures. This involves the use of a standardized international dollar price weight that is applied to the Gross Domestic Product figure produced by any given economy. The data obtained from the PPP method provide a better comparison of economic well being between countries than conversion at official currency exchange rates.)

It is all too obvious that even if immigrant students fail in our educational system, they may still be able to reasonably expect a better life here than in their own countries. This upsets the balance of consonant and dissonant cognitions in such a way that the promises of benefits for suffering through an American education must be even greater than one would at first expect.

#### Forced Compliance Paradigm and Self Concept

The forced compliance paradigm suggests that one is inclined to keep future behavior in line with past attitudes and beliefs. In order for an individual to perform a task he or she has previously identified as undesirable, it is necessary to provide some sort of an incentive. If the incentive is large, cognitive dissonance dissipates because the "ends justify the means". If the incentive is small, however, actual changes in perception or attitude may occur as the subject seeks to avoid apparent hypocrisy and justify the action in his or her own mind. As the previous section has established that the rewards of a high school education in the United States are not necessarily perceived as being that great, this section will concentrate on the small incentive scenario.

Playing a role in the forced compliance and self concept discussion is the belief on the part of most people that they are decent, worthwhile human beings worthy of respect. All too often, immigrant students find this attitude increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of the American educational system. One well documented example is the case of “Steeltown,” described by Diaz-Soto (1997). She conducts a thoughtful qualitative study concerning the education of immigrant children in an eastern industrial town. She describes dismal conditions and the gross mistreatment of the mainly Puerto Rican immigrant students in the town’s public schools. The schools with higher numbers of immigrant students have noticeably fewer resources than do those attended by mostly white majority students.

In addition, even in the high-immigrant ratio schools, there are few role models and the students are treated noticeably different from the white students. Her own son describes the pain of constantly being stopped for a pass in the hall, while white students walk on by unchallenged. Even more lamentable are her descriptions of ethnic slurs and students being punished for speaking their native languages. She further relates the example of an entire class being tested for a special gifted program – all but the two Hispanic minority students, who are asked to leave the room.

Clearly, immigrant students do not have good chances for success in this school or others like it across the United States. Because it was previously established that the expected rewards for obtaining an American high school diploma are relatively small in many immigrants’ minds, one may only conclude that the shift in attitude that occurs is one away from a healthy self-concept and towards one that does not favor success in

American public schools. A great deal of damaging cognitive dissonance is at work in this situation.

### Summary

This research review has described the rough road many immigrant students travel before and after arriving in this country. Many of the problems and difficulties they face are circumstances particular to the situation of being a stranger in a strange land. Many more are byproducts of the psychological discomfort called cognitive dissonance, which is produced by trying to reconcile two or more dissonant cognitions. It should be evident that immigrant students have a nearly limitless supply of cognitions about which to have dissonant thought, both within and outside of our nation's public schools. This study will examine whether the ability to reconcile cognitive dissonance has any predictive power on achievement in a public school setting.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

#### Design

The present study utilized a survey procedure to determine the relationship between cognitive dissonance and immigrant student achievement.

#### Sample

After receiving IRB approval (IRB# 223-00-EP), this study began with the administration of the Cognitive Dissonance survey (see Appendix A) to a sample of 67 ESL students who were enrolled in an English as a Second Language program in a Midwestern public high school during the spring semester of 2000. This sample was a convenience sample of this building's ESL student population, and in the opinion of the researcher demonstrated many of the same difficulties in assimilation that were described in the literature review of this dissertation. A participation rate varying between 52% and 57% was achieved. (The total ESL student population vacillated between a minimum of 118 students and a maximum of 128 students during the study period.) By definition, these students were receiving continued instruction in English as a Second Language, and had varying levels of English fluency. They ranged in age from 14 to 20 years, and were enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Their individual accumulated years of education were between 0 and 13 years. They came from an assortment of approximately 13 foreign countries, including Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Benin, Sudan, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Japan, China, Argentina, Guatemala, India, and Kenya. The exact percentage of students

participating from each country cannot be given, as this information was not available from the district's mainframe computer system.

### Instrumentation

The instrument was a researcher-created survey. The instrument creation process began with a brainstorming session with 11 immigrant students enrolled in an English as a Second Language program in a large Midwestern high school during the spring semester of 2000. This focus group pinpointed school-related items that they perceived to cause cognitive dissonance among their immigrant student peers. The session took place outside of class time, and the participants were personally invited to participate by the researcher. The subjects participated on a volunteer basis and were given no incentive to participate beyond a small snack. The students participating in this brainstorming group came from Texas (1), Mexico (7), Benin (2), and Guatemala (1). The length of their experience in the United States ranged from 8 months to a lifetime, in the case of the student from Texas.

The brainstorming session lasted for approximately 50 minutes. At the beginning of the session, the following introduction was read to the students:

"I have asked you here today to help me make a survey to give to other ESL students. I am curious about what students from other countries think about American schools. Can you remember what you thought or how you felt when you first started going to school in the United States? I would like to make a list of the things that were different, and maybe caused you stress, or were difficult for you to get used to."



The researcher checked for understanding and answered questions about the study and the previous instructions. The group then brainstormed a list of potentially dissonant cognitions that American schools generate for immigrant high school students. The list was initially recorded on a chalkboard for all to see, comment on, and correct or refine, if necessary. The list was subsequently converted into potential survey items (in the form of statements) by the researcher. This list of statements was returned to the members of the focus group in order to check for accuracy. No revisions were necessary at this point.

Content validity. The original Cognitive Dissonance survey containing 54 items was then examined by 10 educational professionals in the area of ESL to check for content validity. They were asked to rate each question as to its appropriateness using a Likert scale. In this case, the lowest rating (1) corresponded to the opinion that the item was very inappropriate, and should not be included in the final version of the survey. The highest rating (3) corresponded to the opinion that the item was very appropriate, and should definitely be included in the final version of the survey. The ESL specialists were also asked to write comments for any item that they rated lower than a "3". The ratings for each item were then statistically analyzed, and any item receiving a mean rating of less than 2.0 was supposed to be automatically eliminated. This did not prove to be necessary. Some survey items were improved (without significantly altering their original content) however, in response to written comments from the ESL professionals reviewing the survey. The result of this process was a survey instrument containing 54 items.

The researcher then permanently recorded the list, and used it to generate a Likert survey instrument. The instructions for the survey asked the respondents to rate each of the items on a 5-point scale according to how much they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement. The lowest rating (1) indicated strong disagreement, while the highest rating (5) indicated strong agreement. An isolated ranking of (9) was offered as an option to indicate that a particular item was untrue, and therefore could not be responded to with an expression of the level of cognitive dissonance it generated. The finished survey was then returned to the participants of the focus group so that they could check to see if their ideas were represented accurately. No refinements of the instrument were necessary.

Following this step, 60 more ESL students from other sites participated in a pilot study. These subjects were selected on a volunteer basis. Their responses were analyzed to obtain a measure of reliability.

Factor analysis. The results of the pilot study were analyzed using the principal axis factoring method followed by varimax rotation of the five factors extracted, using a factor loading cutoff value of .400. The factors included: General Student Misbehavior (eigenvalue = 11.24, percent of variance = 20.81), Respect (eigenvalue = 5.81, percent of variance = 10.76), Racism and Unequal Treatment (eigenvalue = 3.93, percent of variance = 7.28), Structure of the School Day (eigenvalue = 3.51, percent of variance = 6.50), and Language Difficulties (eigenvalue = 3.11, percent of variance = 5.76). These 5 factors accounted for 51% of the total variance of the Cognitive Dissonance items. As a result of the factor analysis, seven items were eliminated: four for falling below the factor

loading cutoff point on all five subscales (original survey items 9, 19, 24 and 49), and three to increase instrument reliability (original survey items 18, 36, and 44).

Two items were placed on scales different from what their factor loadings would indicate. This was because the factor loadings were, in fact, quite similar between the two scales, and common sense indicated that the items were more applicable to the scale with the second-highest factor loading. Item number 15 should have been included with the scale "Respect" (factor loading = .523). The item read "It bothers me that there are so many fights in American schools." It seemed more logical to include this item under the scale "General Student Misbehavior" (factor loading = .471). Likewise, item number 29 loaded with the scale "Language Difficulties" (factor loading = .515). The item stated, "It bothers me that in American schools I have less time to spend with my friends between classes than in my country." Therefore, the item was placed with the scale "Structure of the School Day" (factor loading = .472).

The result of these analyses was the definitive version of the survey instrument, containing 47 items (see Appendix A). Table 1 indicates which items loaded on which subscale. Table 2 shows the pilot study items that were eliminated for falling below the factor loading cutoff point on all five subscales. Table 3 lists the items that were eliminated in order to increase instrument reliability.

Instrument reliability. The reliability of the survey instrument was estimated using coefficient alpha. The reliability of each of the 5 subscales, and of the total Cognitive Dissonance survey is detailed in Table 4.

Table 1

Factor Loadings Across the Five Survey Subscales

Original Survey Item Number	Final Survey Item Number	Subscale 1: General Student Misbehavior	Subscale 2: Racism and Unequal Treatment	Subscale 3: Structure of the School Day	Subscale 4: Respect	Subscale 5: Language Difficulties
1.	1.	.199	<b>.477</b>	.443	-.338	.165
2.	2.	.200	.145	.323	<b>.430</b>	.112
3.	3.	-.171	.011	<b>.686</b>	.058	-.054
4.	4.	.050	-.105	<b>.695</b>	-.071	.138
5.	5.	-.300	.014	<b>.469</b>	.253	-.029
6.	6.	.017	<b>.543</b>	.318	-.011	.222
7.	7.	-.059	.278	<b>.595</b>	.228	-.108
8.	8.	.211	<b>.599</b>	-.099	.128	-.411
9.	--	.225	-.008	.268	.103	-.221
10.	9.	.198	.251	.083	<b>.617</b>	-.092
11.	10.	.204	.103	.109	<b>.468</b>	-.077
12.	11.	<b>.471</b>	.189	.268	.184	-.049
13.	12.	.380	.023	<b>.592</b>	-.002	.110
14.	13.	<b>.563</b>	-.145	.111	.366	.046
15.	14.	<b>.471</b>	.346	-.021	.523	-.153

16.	15.	.098	<b>.636</b>	.080	.166	-.022
17.	16.	.235	.290	<b>.678</b>	.060	-.118
18.	--	.408	.325	-.003	-.029	.284
19.	--	.332	.369	.071	.301	-.371
20.	17.	.184	<b>.742</b>	.250	-.276	.102
21.	18.	.359	-.064	<b>.501</b>	.055	.110
22.	19.	.114	.048	<b>.607</b>	-.043	-.139
23.	20.	.311	<b>.515</b>	.262	-.114	-.198
24.	--	-.178	.180	.398	.389	.099
25.	21.	<b>.800</b>	.182	.052	.161	.015
26.	22.	-.174	<b>.699</b>	.160	.244	.111
27.	23.	.236	.239	<b>.453</b>	-.138	.421
28.	24.	<b>.781</b>	.026	-.128	.173	-.020
29.	25.	-.152	-.095	<b>.472</b>	-.058	.515
30.	26.	-.060	.223	<b>.745</b>	.095	.023
31.	27.	.310	-.051	.035	<b>.508</b>	-.106
32.	28.	.246	-.149	.062	<b>.691</b>	-.037
33.	29.	.009	<b>.706</b>	.133	.178	-.001
34.	30.	<b>.560</b>	.242	.109	.344	.013
35.	31.	<b>.661</b>	.018	.236	-.051	.158
36.	--	-.166	.183	.268	.454	.231

37.	32.	.189	.216	-.002	.163	<b>.741</b>
38.	33.	<b>.599</b>	-.002	.077	.099	-.005
39.	34.	.307	-.238	-.042	<b>.670</b>	.290
40.	35.	.379	.323	.145	<b>.465</b>	-.374
41.	36.	<b>.491</b>	.397	.031	.482	-.089
42.	37.	.301	.114	.103	-.314	<b>.500</b>
43.	38.	.258	-.050	.220	.138	<b>.753</b>
44.	--	-.182	.072	.356	.179	.479
45.	39.	<b>.682</b>	-.013	-.071	.365	.101
46.	40.	.173	.040	<b>.763</b>	.023	.187
47.	41.	<b>.572</b>	.203	-.045	.251	.083
48.	42.	.287	<b>.496</b>	-.131	.023	.199
49.	--	.050	-.285	.250	.251	-.228
50.	43.	.121	.049	-.047	<b>.626</b>	.123
51.	44.	.280	.156	.096	.421	<b>.612</b>
52.	45.	<b>.658</b>	.083	.001	.316	.239
53.	46.	-.062	<b>.623</b>	-.229	.219	.412
54.	47.	.215	.115	-.076	<b>.719</b>	.171

Table 2

Pilot Study Items Falling Below Factor Loading Cutoff Points

Original Survey Item Number	Item
9.	The confusion of changing classes every hour bothers me.
19.	It bothers me that American schools do not seem to have many rules.
24.	It bothers me that in American schools I have less free time than I did in schools in my country.
49.	I worry more about getting into a fight in American schools than I did in my country.

Table 3

Pilot Study Items Eliminated To Improve Subscale Reliability

<b>Original Survey Item Number</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Subscale Reliability Including the Item</b>	<b>Subscale Reliability Excluding the Item</b>
18.	It bothers me that people do not understand me in American schools.	$\alpha=.8767$	$\alpha=.8774$
36.	It bothers me that Americans look down on me.	$\alpha=.8000$	$\alpha=.8164$
44.	It bothers me that in American schools I have less time to relax between classes than in my country.	$\alpha=.8159$	$\alpha=.8163$



Table 4

Reliability Estimates of the Cognitive Dissonance Survey and Its Five Subscales

<b>Subscale</b>	<b>Factor</b>	<b>Reliability Estimate</b>
Subscale 1:	General Student Misbehavior	.8774
Subscale 2:	Racism and Unequal Treatment	.8539
Subscale 3:	Structure of the School Day	.8531
Subscale 4:	Respect	.8164
Subscale 5:	Language Difficulties	.8163
	Total Cognitive Dissonance Survey	.9183

### Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. ESL students experience no significant levels of cognitive dissonance as a result of their unique experiences.
2. Successful ESL students (as determined by G.P.A.) experience amounts of cognitive dissonance similar to those of their unsuccessful counterparts.
3. Cognitive dissonance cannot be reliably used as a predictor of immigrant student success.
4. Both genders of ESL students will experience cognitive dissonance at approximately the same level.
5. Both Hispanic and non-Hispanic ESL students will experience cognitive dissonance at approximately the same level.

### Procedures

Once the resulting instrument was determined to have adequate validity and reliability, the evaluator administered the survey to 67 subjects selected from one of the ESL programs at the high school level in this metropolitan public school district. The subjects rated their psychological discomfort regarding aspects of American schools that were expected to cause cognitive dissonance. They also provided access to basic demographic information in the form of their student number. This allowed the researcher to access an accurate G.P.A. for each subject from the district mainframe computer. Anonymity was protected, as the identifying information was available only to the researcher, and it was immediately destroyed once the data were collected.

The subjects were current or former students of the researcher. This was seen to have affected the study in a positive manner, however, as there were several advantages to this arrangement. First, in many cases, the researcher spoke the native languages of the subjects. This was an advantage in case a subject did not understand a particular question. Translation, by its very nature, is a very subjective process (Gunnars, 1997; Waldman, 1994). This is even true in the case of "machine" or computer-generated translations (Freivalds, 1999). Because precisely direct translations rarely exist between any two languages, it is nearly impossible for an interpreter to interpret an utterance without inserting some of his or her own cognitions. Because the person administering the survey was the same one who developed it, she was able to re-explain the questions, or if necessary, translate them while maintaining the original intent of the survey item. This resulted in much greater accuracy. Second, because the researcher already had a relationship with the subjects, she was able to spot check the items for honesty and comprehension.

Once the subjects completed the survey, the survey results were statistically analyzed. These results were then correlated with each subject's G.P.A., obtained from the district's mainframe computer.

### Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1 was tested using the data generated by the survey instrument. A Total Cognitive Dissonance score was calculated by averaging the scores for every item. Separate averages for each subscale were also calculated. These data were then evaluated by computing single-sample t-tests, the values of which were compared to a mean of 3.

Hypothesis 2 was tested by classifying each survey respondent as either “successful”(G.P.A. greater than or equal to 2.0) or “unsuccessful” (G.P.A. less than 2.0). These groups were then evaluated using mean Total Cognitive Dissonance scores and subscale scores and independent-measures t-tests.

Hypothesis 3 was tested by correlating students’ G.P.A.’s with their Total Cognitive Dissonance scores and subscales using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients.

Hypothesis 4 was tested by comparing the Total Cognitive Dissonance scores of male and female students, as well as their mean scores on the five subscales. Independent-measures t-tests were used.

Hypothesis 5 was tested by comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic students’ Total Cognitive Dissonance scores, as well as their mean scores on each of the subscales. Independent-measures t-tests were used.

Because multiple statistical tests were conducted, for all of the above statistical tests, the level of significance was set at  $\alpha=.01$  to control for Type I errors.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Introduction

Each hypothesis was statistically tested according to the methodology described in the previous chapter. The results were largely mixed. Only one hypothesis generated statistically significant results outright. This chapter presents the results of the statistical tests for each of the five hypotheses.

#### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that ESL students experienced no significant levels of cognitive dissonance as a result of their unique experiences. As was described in the last chapter, a Total Cognitive Dissonance score was calculated for each subject by averaging the numeric responses for all questions. Non-responsive answers and scores of "9" (indicating a belief that the statement was false, and therefore not applicable) were not included in the calculations. The results indicated that the null hypothesis should be rejected. A single-sample t-test indicated that the Total Cognitive Dissonance scores ( $M=2.49$ ,  $SD=.84$ ) were significantly lower than a score of 3.00 ( $t(66)=-5.007$ ,  $p<.0005$ ).

Average Cognitive Dissonance scores were calculated individually for each of the five factors represented in the survey: Factor 1: General Student Misbehavior, Factor 2: Racism and Unequal Treatment, Factor 3: Structure of the School Day, Factor 4: Respect, and Factor 5: Language Difficulties. One of the five factors, Racism and Unequal Treatment ( $M=2.82$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ), failed to demonstrate significant differences when tested

at the 3.00 level ( $t(66)=-1.441$ ,  $p=.154$ ). Items demonstrating the highest levels of cognitive dissonance included the following:

- Question 17 ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.49$ ): “It bothers me that people of my race are not treated as well as others in American schools.”
- Question 22 ( $M=3.30$ ,  $SD=1.59$ ): “The amount of discrimination in American schools bothers me.”
- Question 29 ( $M=3.18$ ,  $SD=1.63$ ): “It bothers me that not all races are treated equally in American schools.”
- Question 42 ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ): “It bothers me that some people are racist in American schools.”

The remaining four factors each demonstrated scores significantly lower than the established test level of 3.00:

- Factor 1: General Student Misbehavior ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ); ( $t(66)=-2.73$ ,  $p=.008$ ).
- Factor 3: Structure of the School Day ( $M=1.99$ ,  $SD=.98$ ); ( $t(66)=-8.41$ ,  $p<.0005$ ).
- Factor 4: Respect ( $M=2.46$ ,  $SD=.94$ ); ( $t(66)=-4.65$ ,  $p<.0005$ ).
- Factor 5: Language Difficulties ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ); ( $t(66)=-3.23$ ,  $p=.002$ ).

### Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 stated that successful ESL students (as determined by GPA) experienced similar amounts of cognitive dissonance when compared to their

unsuccessful counterparts. The subjects were assigned to one of two groups: successful (n=46) and unsuccessful (n=21) based upon the cumulative high school GPA. Subjects were categorized as "successful" if district mainframe computer records indicated that they had a cumulative GPA greater than or equal to 2.0. Per standards established by this particular school district, the students were judged to be "unsuccessful" if they showed a cumulative GPA of less than 2.0. Once grouped accordingly, the groups were compared using independent-measures t-tests. This test failed to establish any significant relationship between a subject's mean Total Cognitive Dissonance score and the subject's status as an academically successful ( $M=2.49$ ,  $SD=.74$ ) or unsuccessful ( $M=2.49$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) student ( $t(65)=-.017$ ,  $p=.987$ ).

Similar results occurred when each subscale was analyzed. This test failed to establish any significant relationship between a subject's mean Cognitive Dissonance score on the General Student Misbehavior subscale and the subject's status as an academically successful ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD=.94$ ) or unsuccessful ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) student ( $t(65)=-.011$ ,  $p=.991$ ). This was also true for the Racism and Unequal Treatment subscale, where successful ( $M=2.78$ ,  $SD=.96$ ) and unsuccessful ( $M=2.90$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) students failed to score differently ( $t(65)=-.449$ ,  $p=.655$ ); the Structure of the School Day subscale, where successful ( $M=2.02$ ,  $SD=.97$ ) and unsuccessful ( $M=1.94$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) students failed to score differently ( $t(65)=.295$ ,  $p=.796$ ); the Respect subscale, where successful ( $M=2.53$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) and unsuccessful ( $M=2.31$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ) students failed to score differently ( $t(65)=.913$ ,  $p=.364$ ); and the Language Difficulties subscale, where

successful ( $M=2.43$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ) and unsuccessful ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ) students failed to score differently ( $t(65)=-.949$ ,  $p=.346$ ).

### Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 stated that cognitive dissonance could not be reliably used as a predictor of immigrant student success. According to the results of this study, this null hypothesis must be retained ( $r=-.138$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.264$ , two-tailed). Individual student GPAs did not prove to be significantly correlated with their Total Cognitive Dissonance scores using this instrument.

Similar results were observed when the individual subscales were considered. The correlations between mean Cognitive Dissonance subscale scores and GPA were non-significant: General Student Misbehavior ( $r=-.146$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.238$ ); Racism and Unequal Treatment ( $r=-.136$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.273$ ); Structure of the School Day ( $r=-.129$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.296$ ); Respect ( $r=-.087$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.482$ ); and Language Difficulties ( $r=-.051$ ,  $n=67$ ,  $p=.684$ ).

### Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 stated that both genders of ESL students experienced cognitive dissonance at approximately the same level. Total Cognitive dissonance scores for both male and female students were compared using an independent measures t-test. Accordingly, the null hypothesis was retained. It could be concluded that gender does not make a difference, as male ( $M=2.56$ ,  $SD=.91$ ) and female ( $M=2.40$ ,  $SD=.74$ ) students failed to demonstrate significant differences in Total Cognitive Dissonance scores ( $t(65)=.778$ ,  $p=.440$ ).



An analysis of the Cognitive Dissonance scores on each of the subscales further supported the retention of the null hypothesis. No significant difference was observed on the General Student Misbehavior subscale between male ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ) and female ( $M=2.58$ ,  $SD=.84$ ) scores ( $t(65)=.619$ ,  $p=.538$ ); on the Racism and Unequal Treatment subscale between male ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) and female ( $M=2.74$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) scores ( $t(65)=.537$ ,  $p=.593$ ); on the Structure of the School Day subscale between male ( $M=2.04$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ) and female ( $M=1.94$ ,  $SD=.18$ ) scores ( $t(65)=.426$ ,  $p=.672$ ); on the Respect subscale between male ( $M=2.57$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ) and female ( $M=2.33$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) scores ( $t(65)=1.013$ ,  $p=.314$ ); or on the Language Difficulties subscale between male ( $M=2.63$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ) and female ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=.21$ ) scores ( $t(65)=.844$ ,  $p=.402$ ).

#### Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 stated that both Hispanic and non-Hispanic ESL students experienced cognitive dissonance at approximately the same levels. Total Cognitive Dissonance scores for both Hispanic and non-Hispanic students were compared using independent-measures t-tests. The conclusion resulting from this test was to retain the null hypothesis. It could be concluded that a student's Hispanic status did not make a difference in the amount of cognitive dissonance experienced by that student. Hispanic ( $M=2.45$ ,  $SD=.78$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.54$ ,  $SD=.91$ ) students failed to demonstrate statistically different scores on the Cognitive Dissonance Survey ( $t(65)=-.443$ ,  $p=.659$ ).

This was also true of 4 of the 6 subscales. On the General Student Misbehavior subscale, Hispanic ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=.91$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.84$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) students failed to demonstrate statistically different scores ( $t(65)=-1.31$ ,  $p=.194$ ). In addition, no

significant difference was demonstrated on the Structure of the School Day subscale between Hispanic ( $M=1.80$ ,  $SD=.84$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.24$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ) student scores ( $t(65)=-1.87$ ,  $p=.07$ ); on the Racism and Unequal Treatment subscale between Hispanic ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=.99$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.53$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) student scores ( $t(65)=2.104$ ,  $p=.04$ ); on the Respect subscale between Hispanic ( $M=2.36$ ,  $SD=.88$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.59$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) student scores ( $t(65)=-.957$ ,  $p=.342$ ); or on the Language Difficulties subscale between Hispanic ( $M=2.70$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ) and non-Hispanic ( $M=2.30$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) student scores ( $t(65)=1.363$ ,  $p=.178$ ).

### Summary

As was alluded to in the introductory paragraph to this chapter, the results of the five hypothesis tests varied. There was some evidence that ESL immigrant students did experience some levels of cognitive dissonance, especially where the factor of Racism and Unequal treatment is concerned. It could not be conclusively stated that this study provided any evidence that would link a student's GPA, academic achievement (using the standards set by the school districts), gender, or Hispanic status and his or her cognitive dissonance score. The following chapter will examine the implications of these findings.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

#### Introduction

This study provided a number of lessons for school personnel and others interested in the success of immigrant students. Some of these lessons were a direct result of the statistical tests of the hypotheses. Others were gleaned almost serendipitously from the process employed in the development of the cognitive dissonance survey instrument. Many of the so-called lessons generated more questions than answers. The most conclusive recommendation is one for further research regarding immigrant students and their special circumstances. This chapter seeks to elucidate the findings of this study, and to make an argument for further research regarding the affective aspects of immigrant education.

#### Cognitive Dissonance and Immigrant Students

This study provided some preliminary evidence that the special circumstances surrounding the daily lives of immigrant students do, in fact, cause them to experience cognitive dissonance. This study established that this sample experienced cognitive dissonance at the level of 3.00 (corresponding to the survey choice "This bothers me a little. I think about it sometimes.") in the case of the questions pertaining to the factor Racism and Unequal Treatment. (This will be discussed in greater detail, later in this chapter.) The overall finding was that this sample did experience some degree of cognitive dissonance, but not at the levels anticipated.

There are several possible reasons for this. This study was unique in that it attempted to link cognitive dissonance and immigrant students. It was also unique in that it employed a survey instrument to measure cognitive dissonance, as almost all of the previous cognitive dissonance studies used experimental formats (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963; Aronson & Mills, 1959; Brehm, 1956; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). It bears recognizing that the data used in this study, while valid, were limited in scope. First, the survey instrument was generated from the students' point of view (although it was presented to ESL professionals for a content validity check.) However, lessons learned by Festinger (Festinger, 1957b; Festinger et al., 1956) and others suggest that many subjects do not necessarily recognize circumstances under which they experience or reconcile cognitive dissonance. For this reason, further research is needed using instruments generated from other points of view (for example, from that of ESL classroom teachers, immigrant student families, social workers dealing with newly-arrived immigrant students, Assistant Principals in charge of student discipline, etc.)

This survey is, in effect, a prototype for measuring cognitive dissonance among immigrant students. There are undoubtedly several aspects in which this instrument might be fine-tuned for further investigations. One of them includes controlling for the time immigrant students have a) spent in the United States and b) spent in American schools. Those students who have spent greater amounts of time in the United States and who have attended our schools for longer periods have had more time to both experience and reconcile cognitive dissonance than have newcomers. It would seem logical, therefore, that newcomers would experience cognitive dissonance differently from their

more experienced peers. Reliable data regarding subject longevity in American schools and their length of residence in the United States was not available at the time of this study. This school district did not keep any records with respect to a student's entrance date into the United States. In addition, many of these students had attended more than one school in the United States, often in different states. To date, there exists no uniform method for the sharing of student information between schools in different districts. School districts differ in what information they record, what they do with this information after a student leaves, and with whom and how they will share this information after a student leaves. When we factor in the high mobility rate of this group of students, it becomes virtually impossible to accurately calculate a student's longevity in the U.S. based upon school records.

Student-provided information proved to be another unreliable option. In this particular program, it was a policy not to ask these types of questions that touch upon immigration issues so as not to chill a student's desire to attend school. This consideration aside, even when students were willing to provide such information, in many cases they simply were unable to do so. Many had crossed the border numerous times, resulting in stays of various lengths of duration. Sometimes these students matriculated in a school; sometimes they did not. Sometimes they were too young to remember exactly how long they stayed in the United States before returning to their native country. It was impossible to outline any fair, meaningful criteria to help determine the length of student residence in the United States. When faced with this dilemma, the decision was made not to include any longevity data over the inclusion of

assuredly flawed data. Perhaps in the future, with a very select population these difficulties might be overcome. In this case, further investigation taking into account these factors would seem to be appropriate.

#### Lack of Significance

The analysis of the data indicates that there was no significant link between a student's GPA (or his or her status as a "successful" student) and his or her Cognitive Dissonance survey scores. This conclusion very well might be accurate, but it should be regarded with a certain degree of caution. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, it is possible that the standard for success used in hypothesis number two is flawed. More than a few of this district's teachers have argued that using a grade of "3" (equal to a "C" or a GPA of 2.00) is arbitrary and unfair. They argue that a "4" (equal to a "D" or a GPA of 1.00) is considered to be a passing grade. No two students are alike, and a "4" for some students might truly represent success in terms of effort put forth and student aptitude.

A second possibility exists. In this study, there was an innate inability to differentiate between newly arrived immigrant students and those who have attended U.S. schools for longer periods of time. This proves to be important when we consider the typical academic programs of students from both sets. Newly arrived ESL students lacking in English language skills typically studied such subjects as beginning ESL English and Reading, Physical Education, Art and similar subjects that demanded less extensive fluency in English. As might be expected, the "heavier" courses were studied later on in a student's program. A student nearing graduation would typically have had a

schedule including upper-level ESL English, mainstream English at his or her grade level. Geometry, Chemistry, World History, American Government, and Developmental Reading. Few would argue that a student GPA of 2.00 was equivalent between the two programs. Once again, the standards of success proved to be relative in nature, and untestable in any fair manner. Further studies differentiating between beginning and advanced students are necessary to clear up this confusion. This school district may also want to investigate the fairness of using its rigid standard of success, as major educational decisions are based upon it.

#### An Immigrant Student Phenomenon

This study provided further evidence that the difficulties and stresses experienced by ESL and immigrant students are exactly a function of their status as young immigrants. Independent t-tests demonstrated that there was no significant difference between the way in which male and female or Hispanic and non-Hispanic immigrant students experienced cognitive dissonance. Again, further studies analyzing other differences between students would be helpful. This is in line with other recent studies that have also argued against the misconception that certain immigrant student groups are more susceptible to difficulties than are others solely based upon race (Careaga, 1988; Schwartz, 1996). On the other hand, this finding would seem to contradict the findings of White and Kaufman (1997) who found that Hispanic females were especially vulnerable.

In the meantime, this study does seem to support the general notion that there is a particular psychological phenomenon experienced by immigrant students. A number of studies have been conducted and a number of academic papers written concerning this

general type of phenomenon (e.g., Bunz, 1997; Gaw, 1995; Hogan, 1983). Most commonly, it has been referred to with the term “culture shock.” The University of Nebraska at Lincoln’s Study Abroad Office in the Department of International Affairs (2000) defines culture shock on its web page as “...the stresses and strains that accumulate from being forced to meet one’s everyday needs (e.g., language, climate, food, cleanliness, companionship) in unfamiliar ways.” With regard to this definition, however, it would seem that cognitive dissonance might offer a more parsimonious explanation for this phenomenon. Surely a major part of the “stresses and strains” referred to in the previous definition were due to the psychological stress that occurs when one is forced to reconcile cognitive dissonance.

Again, however, the recommendation must be made for further investigation in this area. As was alluded to earlier in this dissertation, extensive searches of ERIC, EBSCO and FIRSTSEARCH databases, as well as general internet searches revealed no previous studies that linked cognitive dissonance and immigrant students. Even when the more nebulous term “culture shock” was introduced into an ERIC search, it generated a mere 221 documents – none of which specifically dealt with immigrant students in a pre-university setting. Suggesting a rather ethnocentric perspective, most dealt with American students studying abroad and their psychological adjustments.

### Racism

The most conclusive finding and recommendation generated by this study concerns racism towards immigrant students in our schools. It bears noting that this was the only construct that generated a cognitive dissonance score at the 3.00 level



(corresponding to the survey choice “This bothers me a little. I think about it sometimes.”) This topic also generated heated, and sometimes painful, discussions among students as they participated in the survey instrument development sessions. Clearly, the immigrant students included in this sample felt that racism directed towards them was one of the most distressing aspects of their daily lives. Unfortunately, this is in line with what other researchers have already discovered (Delpit, 1995; Díaz-Soto, 1997). Still more research in this area is necessary – especially regarding the manner in which racism negatively impacts immigrant students and their academic progress.

In the more immediate future, American schools must take a tougher stance against the unfair treatment experienced by the immigrant students under their roofs. For too long, too many unpardonable insults have “slid by,” perhaps as Díaz-Soto (1997) suggested, because this group of students lacks the power to force school officials to act upon their grievances. Anecdotal evidence supported what the statistics have already demonstrated. During the survey development session, students related the numerous times that they had been insulted, referred to with ethnic slurs, made fun of and otherwise subjected to a hostile environment within the schoolhouse walls. Several expressed the opinion that this type of treatment was severe enough as to prevent their full participation in the high school experience. To make things worse, many of the racist incidents occurred in front of school personnel – apparently without consequences. For example, one student complained to an Assistant Principal after two Caucasian students shouted “La Migra!” (“Immigration Officers!”) into her ESL classroom. There were no apparent repercussions for these students. Another recounted how a Spanish-speaking friend was

denied participation on the Junior Varsity soccer team because the coach felt that he had “communication problems.” The coach was later forced to allow him to practice with the team, but the student soon quit the team due to what he perceived to be a hostile environment directed towards him.

Unfortunately, accounts like these are not unique. Racism, as Wynne described it in the title of her 1999 article, truly is the “Elephant in the Living Room” of American public schools. It is hard to miss, but too many people are willing to pretend that it is not there. This situation simply must not be allowed to continue. However, this is much easier said than done. Putting an end to racism in our schools begins with a truly effective program of multicultural education for staff and students. Serious research efforts must be dedicated towards discovering what such a program looks like. Even this is not enough, however. We cannot afford to be so naïve as to believe that racism will be erased from our schools any time soon. In the meantime, professionals in the field of education must take action to mitigate the negative effects that racism has on immigrant students. As one Mexican student suggested during the survey instrument brainstorming session, immigrant students should be educated about racism and ways to resolve the cognitive dissonance it generates.

### Conclusion

The topic of cognitive dissonance and immigrant students is a promising line of research. For several decades, professionals concerned with the education of immigrant students have concentrated their efforts on language-learning approaches and national policy issues. While commendable, this simply is not enough. Serious efforts in both

research and educational practice must be directed toward the affective aspects of immigrant education. If immigrant students are to learn successfully in our schools, they must be able to assimilate into the school community.

Implications for research. Cognitive dissonance provides a fresh schema through which we may understand the particular challenges faced by immigrant students. This study demonstrated that this sample, in fact, did experience some levels of cognitive dissonance with respect to the construct of Racism and Differential Treatment. Further research is necessary to determine the causes of this sensitivity. As was addressed earlier, peculiarities with this sample may have masked other significant findings. Precisely for this reason, replication and extension of this study are necessary to confirm its findings and to attempt to discern differences among subgroups of immigrant students, if indeed they exist.

For now, this study provided no evidence that there were differences in the manner in which Hispanic and non-Hispanic students or male and female immigrant students experienced cognitive dissonance. This furthers the argument that there is a particular psychological phenomenon affecting immigrant students in our country's schools.

Implications for practice. Cognitive dissonance was most clearly demonstrated concerning the construct of racism. The students who participated in this study clearly felt that racism was one of the most distressing parts of their American high school experience. In this case, recommendations cannot be limited to further research. While this is necessary and advisable, immediate action is also imperative. Educators and

immigrant communities must work together to put an end to the hostile environments experienced by these students in the school setting. The immigrant students themselves must be educated in methods of dealing with racism and the cognitive dissonance it causes.

It is imperative that this type of education start from the moment that an immigrant student enters into an American school system. The perfect place for this type of education might be in a Newcomer Center, such as those described by Short (1998). While many of these centers currently concentrate on providing an emerging language base, the findings of this study would suggest that affective issues should be dealt with as well. Just as important as the language skills necessary for academic success are the inter- and intra-personal skills necessary for survival in a hostile environment.

A conversation that took place during the survey instrument development session illustrated the value and implications of this study. Not too long into the session, several students questioned me concerning the reason for this study. I explained (in simplified terms) that this study was required for my program at the university, and that I wanted to help people who work in schools to understand how to teach them better. The students accepted this explanation, and remained silent for a few seconds. Finally, one Mexican student responded. His words seemed so perfect to me that I wrote them down, verbatim. He said, "You know what, Miss? Thank you. This is very good that someone does this so that people know about us. But I think that you should also write a book for us. For the students, I mean. We suffer a lot when we come here to school, and we need to know that we're not the only ones who feel this way." Hopefully, with further research and the

joint efforts of educational professionals and immigrant communities, such a book will no longer be necessary.

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APPENDIX A  
Survey Information



# Consent for Participation in a Research Study

April 15, 2001

Dear Sir or Madam:

I will soon be doing a research study about ESL students and how they do in American schools. I will be asking a number of ESL students to complete a survey that asks about their feelings about American schools. They will be asked how much they agree or disagree with a sentence. I will then compare their answers with their Grade Point Averages.

I am the only person who will know who the participants are. I believe this study could help American schools learn how to teach ESL students better. The results of this study will be available to anyone interested in seeing them. No school district is conducting or sponsoring this study.

While I hope your student chooses to participate, he does not have to if he does not want to. He or she may also choose to quit at any time. There will be no consequences for those who do not finish the survey. If you have any questions, you may call me, Michelle Garcia, at XXX-XXXX. (Se habla español.)

Sincerely,

Michelle J. Garcia  
ESL Department Head

STUDENT NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_

**Cognitive Dissonance Survey**

**Directions:** Please circle one number 1 – 5, depending on your opinion. If you think that a question is not true, please write in “9.” If you are not sure what a question means, raise your hand and a teacher will help you.

1 = This does not bother me at all. I never think about it.

2 = This hardly bothers me. I hardly ever think about it.

3 = This bothers me a little. I think about it sometimes.

4 = This bothers me. I think about it a lot.

5 = This really bothers me a lot. I think about it almost every day.

**9 = I do not think this is true.**

1. It bothers me that some students are treated better than others in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

2. It bothers me that American students do not show much respect to adults in school.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

3. It bothers me that the number of classes per week is different than in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

4. It bothers me that schools in America are so easy.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

5. It bothers me that schools in America do not seem to ask as much of their students as schools in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

6. It bothers me that not all students are treated the same way in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

7. It bothers me that the school day is longer than it was in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

8. It bothers me that rich students are treated better than other students in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

9. It bothers me that American schools do not make students follow the rules.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

10. It bothers me that some students arrive late to American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

11. It bothers me that I do not have enough time to study outside of school.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

- 1 = This does not bother me at all. I never think about it.  
 2 = This hardly bothers me. I hardly ever think about it.  
 3 = This bothers me a little. I think about it sometimes.  
 4 = This bothers me. I think about it a lot.  
 5 = This really bothers me a lot. I think about it almost every day.  
**9 = I do not think this is true.**

12. It bothers me that some students do not have to attend school all day long in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

13. It bothers me that many students do not pay attention in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

14. It bothers me that there are so many fights in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

15. It bothers me that I do not have the same schedule as other students in my grade.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

16. It bothers me that there are more classes in American schools than in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

17. It bothers me that people of my race are not treated as well as others in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

18. It bothers me that there is so much competition in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

19. It bothers me that some students are allowed to leave school early in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

20. It bothers me that some students are treated differently from others in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

21. It bothers me that so many students in American schools talk about using drugs.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

22. The amount of discrimination in American schools bothers me.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

23. It bothers me that I have to work and go to school at the same time.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

24. It bothers me that so many students in American schools talk about drinking alcohol.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

25. It bothers me that in American schools I have less time to spend with my friends between classes than in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

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 5 = This really bothers me a lot. I think about it almost every day.  
**9 = I do not think this is true.**

26. It bothers me that American schools are not as challenging as schools were in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

27. It bothers me that many students in American schools do not follow the rules.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

28. It bothers me that American schools do not punish students hard enough for breaking the rules.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

29. It bothers me that not all races are treated the same in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

30. It bothers me the way that American schools are divided into elementary school, middle school and high school.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

31. It does not seem right that some students are allowed to come late to American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

32. It bothers me that Americans think badly of me because I do not speak English perfectly.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

33. It bothers me to see pregnant girls in school.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

34. It bothers me that many American students are not polite to their teachers.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

35. American class schedules do not seem to be very well organized.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

36. It bothers me that American schools do not have a lot of discipline.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

37. It bothers me that people do not speak my language in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

38. It bothers me that I have a hard time making people understand me in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

39. It bothers me that so many students in American schools seem to be in trouble with the police.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

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 5 = This really bothers me a lot. I think about it almost every day.  
**9 = I do not think this is true.**

40. It bothers me that I spend more time in school than I did in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

41. The amount of violence in American schools bothers me.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

42. It bothers me that some people are racist in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

43. It bothers me that there are fewer classes in American schools than in my country.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

44. It bothers me that people do not try to understand me when I talk in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

45. It bothers me that students in American schools do not help each other very much.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

46. It bothers me that white students are treated better than other students in American schools.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

47. It bothers me that students in American schools are so competitive with each other.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5