

# LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University

---

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 16

---


2013

## Understanding the Role of Social Capital and School Structure on Latino Academic Success

Jeremiah Gonzalez

Claremont Graduate University, [jeremiah.gonzalez@cgu.edu](mailto:jeremiah.gonzalez@cgu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/lux>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Education Policy Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Jeremiah (2013) "Understanding the Role of Social Capital and School Structure on Latino Academic Success," *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 16.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/lux/vol2/iss1/16>

# Understanding the Role of Social Capital and School Structure on Latino Academic Success

Jeremiah J. González  
Claremont Graduate University  
School of Education

## Abstract

*This paper investigates the role of social capital and school structure on the academic success of Latino students. A review of the literature on previous explanations of Latino failure, research on academically successful Latinos, and the role of social capital and school structure on Latino academic success are investigated. The research shows that the way students are tracked in school plays an important role in gaining access to school agents and other academically successful peers. These relationships give access to social capital and increase college access. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.*

---

Many American schools in urban areas are made up largely of students who are defined by a variety of risk factors (Mehan et al., 1996). Yet despite the presence of multiple risk factors, not all students at urban public high schools do fail. There are thousands of students throughout these schools who despite their risk factors are able to achieve success similar to that of the most privileged. Are these students successful simply because they work harder than their peers? Are their peers failing because they chose not to study? Or is there something else contributing to these successes and failures that we are failing to notice?

Recent research on academically successful minority youth has found that relationships with school personnel and college-bound peers can play an important role in the lives of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In particular these relationships can serve as sources of information and support that provide the resources necessary for minority youth to achieve levels of academic success that are on par with the some of the most privileged members of society. Yet in order for these relationships to develop, minority youth must be in close contact with these individuals. Throughout the country, schools create structures that either allow or deny access to these individuals. It is through the structuring of programs and classes that youth are given the access to these institutional agents and high achieving peers who are so critical to college access for minority youth.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature on previous explanations for the academic failure of Latinos and why these explanations are unable to explain the academic success of some Latino students. In order to better understand Latino academic success, this paper will explore the role of social capital on the achievement of Latino students.

Although social capital plays a determining role in the academic achievement of many Latino students, the contributing factor of how school structure allows and denies the exchange of college knowledge is also key in understanding Latino academic success (Oakes, 2005; Conchas, 2006, Gonzales, 2010). Cases demonstrating academically successful Latinos will be explored to demonstrate how school structure and social capital play a crucial role in their success. This paper will conclude with practice and policy implications regarding the role of social capital and school structure on Latino academic success.

### Significance of the Study

Latinos make up the largest group of students in urban schools in the United States. Latinos currently represent the largest minority group in the United States. Latinos are also the ethnic group in the United States that has the largest number of individuals under 18 years of age. It is anticipated that by the year 2025, one quarter of all the students in public schools will be of Latino descent (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Yet despite their growing numbers, Latinos are severely underrepresented in Honors and Advanced Placement high school courses as well as on college campuses across the nation (Ream, 2005; Ohrt, Lambie & Ieva, 2009). In addition, Latino students have the highest high school drop-out rate among all groups in the United States (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005). Across the country, a double digit disparity exists between the drop-out rates of Latinos and that of whites (Ream, 2005). When it comes to college graduation, Latinos do not fair any better. Statistics show that while 25% of whites and nearly 15% of blacks have completed a bachelor's degree or beyond, only 11% of Latinos have been able to achieve this level of education (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1998; Ream, 2005).

The achievement gap that continues to exist between Latino students and their white and Asian peers is one factor that has been found to contribute to the continued underrepresentation of Latinos in advanced courses in high school as well as in institutions of higher learning. According to records kept by the U.S. Department of Education this phenomenon is not a new one. Records show that Latino students have been consistently outperformed by whites on standardized tests for at least the past thirty years (Ream, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). This achievement gap persists over time and even widens throughout the educational careers of students. Performance differences between white and Latino students are evident as early as nine years of age. By the time students are thirteen years old, Latinos are about two years behind their white classmates in both reading and math. By the time students are seventeen years old, Latinos read on a level comparable to that of thirteen year old whites (NCES, 1998; Ream, 2005).

An analysis of the American educational pipeline studied the outcomes for Latinos throughout the various levels of educational (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). This analysis revealed a severe filtering of the Latino population as it flows from elementary school to high school and from high school to college. If we follow 100 Latino elementary school students throughout their educational careers, we find that their numbers decrease as more and more students are filtered out along the pipeline. Of the 100 Latino students who begin this process, only 46 will graduate from high school. Of those 46, only 26 will enroll in college. Of the 26 college students, 17 will attend community college and 9 will attend 4-year colleges. Of the 17 community college students only 1 will transfer to a 4-year college. Of the 26 students who originally enrolled in college, only 8 will graduate with a

Bachelor's degree. Of those 8, only 2 will receive a graduate or professional degree. Only 0.2 students will ultimately receive a doctoral degree (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006).

This analysis reveals several key findings. First, Latinos are underrepresented at all levels of education when compared to their white peers. Second, Latinos who enroll in college tend to disproportionately attend community colleges (Strayhorn, 2010). Third, Latinos who attend community colleges rarely transfer to 4-year colleges (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). Alfonso (2006) and others have even argued that attending a two year versus a four year college actually decreases one's chance of graduating with a Bachelor's degree. Finally, among Latinos there are a disproportionate number of part time college students (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). These statistics show us that although a larger proportion of Latinos enroll in college than in previous decades, less than 25% graduate with a Bachelor's degree. This is less than half the graduation rate experienced by whites (Strayhorn, 2010).

Although these differences are startling, they are not only visible between groups as significant differences also exist within the Latino group itself. The Latino group is made up of a diverse representation of cultures and histories that are unified mainly by a shared language. Of all subgroups of Latinos, Mexican-Americans experience some of the worst educational outcomes. For example, Mexican-Americans drop out of school at a rate three times that of Cuban-Americans. Students of Mexican descent also score significantly lower on standardized tests than their Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Colombian-American peers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Ream, 2005). Across the United States, Mexican-Americans by far comprise the largest group of Latinos. Mexican-Americans represent about 67 percent of U.S. Latinos, while Central and South Americans make up an additional 14 percent, 9 percent are Puerto Rican, and only 4 percent are Cuban-American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). What is striking about these statistics is that while Mexican-Americans represent the largest subgroup of U.S. Latinos they have the lowest college completion rate of all Latino subgroups (Ream, 2005). These findings indicate that Mexican-Americans face the greatest educational challenge among all U.S. Latinos.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This literature review is based on the previous research of Bourdieu, Stanton-Salazar, and Conchas. Social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), institutional agents and peers (Stanton-Salazar, 2001), and school structure (Conchas, 2006) will be used to help explain academic success and failure. Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as the resources available to an individual based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support. In addition, he said that social capital relationships are useful to individuals because they allow them to achieve things that they would not be able to achieve without them. He explained that all social groups possess social capital, but that the capital of lower socioeconomic groups is not valued by the dominant group and therefore does not work to their benefit in the same way as that of the dominant group. He also found that those who have higher levels of social capital are more inclined to maintain it and continue to expand their social networks over time.

Bourdieu's theory of social capital explains in part why Latino students living in the United States have difficulty achieving success in the educational system and why so few go on to graduate from college. Bourdieu's theory explains that those who are of limited socioeconomic means have limited social capital because of their class status and class habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). However, his theory does not address why some Latinos from working class

families are able to achieve academic success and overcome the obstacles they face. Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that among Latinos who are academically successful and graduate from college many share a similar trait. Most of these successful students had an individual in their lives that took an interest in them and acted as a mentor or role model. This person was able to act as a change agent and break the cycle of social reproduction that has persisted among working class students (Bourdieu, 1973; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Stanton-Salazar argued that those students who were willing and able to seek out mentors and role models, such as teachers and other school personnel, are those who benefit from the most from these institutional agents. However, research by Conchas (2006) explains that students' willingness to seek out mentors is greatly impacted by school structure. He explains that school structure plays a crucial role in determining which students are given access to the information and resources necessary to achieve academic success and college access. School structure is defined as "the specific institutional processes at the school level that affect the daily performance of youth" (Conchas, 2006). These structures include school size, class size, curriculum, pedagogy, and tracks. Tracks are often not clearly defined or explained in schools, but are more easily seen as the sequence of courses students take. Frequently, schools have a sequence of courses designed to guide students towards high school graduation and another series of courses designed to prepare students for college. Conchas argues that schools structure failure and success by the classes that students are placed in. In many cases, minority students are the ones who suffer the greatest negative consequences of these school structures. Students are often counseled to determine which classes they should take. This leads students to enroll in courses that are seen as the best option for them based on their previous coursework and performance. What is often unclear to the students is that these different courses prepare them for different future options. However, in many large urban districts where most schools are made up almost entirely of minority students, some minority students are inevitably tracked for success, while the remainder are placed on the track that does not provide access to the resources and information necessary for academic success (Conchas, 2006).

## **Background**

Despite the many obstacles they face, every year thousands of Latino students find their way into Advanced Placement courses and appear on college campuses throughout the country (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). These students are seen as the success stories. These are the students who despite the grim statistics and consistent trends have found a way to defy the odds. Although thousands of Latino success stories exist, the literature examining these individuals remains limited. Educators, policy makers, and parents would benefit from a deeper investigation into the factors that result in these Latino success stories so that they can be replicated in the next generation of Latino students.

School structure has been found to have an impact on Latino success (Conchas, 2001; Conchas & Clark, 2002; Conchas, 2006; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Gonzales, 2010). How students are assigned to classes and how students are tracked throughout their educational experience has a tremendous impact on who their friends are, what they learn, and the preparation for and information about college that they receive (Oakes, 2005). Each of these factors has an immense impact on the future educational outcomes of students. Research has found that most academically successful Latinos complete honors and AP courses and/or participate in programs designed to prepare students for higher education (Solorzano & Ornelas,

2002; Kimura-Walsh et al 2009). Although a body of research exists that explores the benefits of social capital on academic success, little research has been done on how school structure impacts access to social capital for Latino youth (Conchas, 2006, Gonzales, 2010).

### **Research Question**

Previous research has demonstrated that access to information and resources play an important role in college access. For working class students, access to information and resources is largely dependent on access to school personnel (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). This following sections will explore how school structure plays a critical role in determining which students receive resources and information and those who do not (Conchas, 2006; Gonzales, 2010). Access to these resources and information has been shown to be crucial in the academic success and college access of Latino students. This paper explores the question: How do school structure and social capital influence access to college information and resources for Latino students? In addition, this paper will explore the question: What are the common experiences and opportunities of academically successful Latinos that contribute to their academic success?

### **Literature Review Academically Successful Latinos**

A significant body of research exists that explains why Latinos have experienced difficulties in accessing higher education and achieving academic success (Gandara, 1995). Much of the initial research focused on deficit models to explain this phenomenon. Researchers suggested that Latinos did not achieve at high levels due to a variety of deficiencies including a lack of English language proficiency, a lack of motivation, as well as a lack of family support. However, more recent research has attacked the problem from a different angle. Instead of looking at the deficiencies of Latinos, researchers have begun to explore Latino success stories.

One of the first researchers to investigate these individuals was Patricia Gandara (1995). In her study she investigated a group of Mexican-American professionals, who had come from low income families, but had flourished in the educational system and achieved terminal degrees in their area of expertise at some of the most selective universities in the country. Gandara (1995) found that academic success for Mexican-Americans is due to a variety of factors including home influences, family stories as cultural capital, schools and neighborhoods, peers, and personal attributes and individual differences.

In another study, Arellano & Padilla (1996) investigated 30 undergraduate Latino students that attended an elite university. They sought to uncover the factors that allowed these students to excel while others from their same background had failed. They attributed the success of these students to a variety of factors. They found that all of the individuals in the study had parental support and encouragement. Although most of the parents of the participants did not complete their education, they supported their children by encouraging them and giving verbal encouragement. The participants in the study also shared an optimistic outlook and a desire to not let their parents down. The students also used their own ethnicity as a source of pride and strength. These students benefited from the notion of positive acculturation which gave these students the ability to function in mainstream society without giving up their cultural identity and heritage (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Phinney et al, 2001).

The final and perhaps the most relevant characteristic shared by the students in this study was the presence of role models and mentors outside of the family (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). These mentors included teachers, counselors, and program personnel who assisted these students in gaining college access. This effect was particularly important for individuals whose parents had less than a high school education. It is presumed that those whose parents completed more advanced studies did not identify a mentor from outside the family because they were able to receive guidance from their parents and siblings who had achieved higher levels of academic success.

A more recent study by Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh (2005) consisted of interviews of Mexican-American college students and the individuals they identified as their mentors. Similar to the findings of Arellano and Padilla (1996), the students identified their parents as significant sources of motivation. However, the students also reported individuals outside of the home who played important roles in the academic success of these students. The researchers concluded that although parents play an important role in motivating and supporting academic endeavors, their lack of institutional knowledge limits their ability to assist in the process of accessing higher education. As a result many Latino youth seek guidance and assistance from individuals from outside the home to provide this type of college knowledge (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Another study examined Latino undergraduate students who had been identified by their receipt of a Latino student award (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). These students were sent a series of open ended questions regarding their experiences that resulted in their academic success. The study found that two types of assistance played an important role. The first type of assistance was sponsorship, which provided financial support and networking opportunities. The second type of assistance was mentoring by family members, teachers, and counselors. The researchers concluded that both sponsorship and mentoring play an important role in the academic success of Latino students.

Another more recent study focused on differences between the experiences of high-achieving and non-high achieving Latinas in an urban majority Latino high school (Kimura-Walsh et al, 2009). The study involved both qualitative and quantitative data from surveys and interviews with sixteen Latinas. The study found that while Latinas reported their families as sources of encouragement and motivation, their lack of experience with higher education limited their ability to help their daughters with college preparatory information. As a result, high-achieving Latinas used extracurricular programs to enhance their college knowledge and supplement the limited college preparation they received at school. These extracurricular programs included college preparatory programs such as Upward Bound and other local programs designed to assist working class students in accessing college information.

In another series of studies, researchers investigated academically successful youth in an effort to address the lack of research surrounding success among Latino males (Antrop-Gonzalez, Velez, & Garrett, 2005 & Garrett, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Velez, 2010). These studies involved looking at success factors for Puerto Rican male high school students. The researchers also found that while parents played a role in supporting and encouraging students, social capital from outside of the family was also a significant factor in academic success. They found that the influence and support of school staff played an important part in college access. However, they also found that social capital from other sources such as church and community based extracurricular activities was also significant.

## The Role of Social Capital

Research on academically successful Latinos tends to conclude that the reason some Latino youth are able to achieve academic success while others do not, is due to the social capital they receive from institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) as well as from extracurricular organizations (Strayhorn, 2010). Since most Latinos come from families with limited experiences with higher education, they tend to lack access to many academic resources that are most often available to middle class students. Due to their lack of institutional knowledge, Latinos can benefit tremendously from relationships with institutional agents and others who can serve as bridges to academic success (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

In his book, *Uprooting Children: Mobility, Social Capital, and Mexican American Underachievement*, Robert Ream (2005) investigated the impact of social capital on educational outcomes. He looked specifically at Mexican-Americans to uncover why this group of Latinos was particularly unsuccessful in attaining academic success. He claims that while most Latinos are limited educationally by their lack of institutional knowledge and social capital, Mexican-Americans are particularly handicapped due to their higher rates of transiency. According to Ream, when families move frequently it limits their ability to build bonds and relationships with others in the community that can help to build social capital. Among all groups of Latinos, Mexican-Americans have some of the highest transiency rates due to the fact that many are employed as migrant workers and must move in order to work at each harvest. In addition to migrant workers, many Mexican-American families relocate frequently due to economic factors (Ream, 2005). Each time a family moves bonds are broken and new bonds must be formed in the new community. Such constant relocation makes it difficult for families to build the social capital that more stationary families are able to develop.

Although Ream's (2005) theory of mobility as a reason for the lack of Mexican-American social capital explains some of the difficulties that are faced in the educational advancement of this group, it does not address the issues of why other working class groups face similar limitations. While Mexican-Americans do participate in migrant activities at a greater rate than many other groups of Latinos, they are not the only Latino subgroup to experience difficulties in gaining college access. In addition, not all Mexican-Americans are migrant workers. Some Mexican-American communities are very well established and do not have the high transiency rates that are evident in migrant communities. However, many of these communities experience the same lack of social capital that prohibits Mexican-American students from gaining access to college. While these students do not relocate as much as others, they are still limited by their social class.

Much of the research on academically successful Latino students points to the role of mentors as important in accessing information and in contributing to their academic success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Perez, 2009; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). In a study of Mexican-origin adolescents in San Diego, Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) found that mentors played an important role in the success of resilient youth. The research team found that these resilient youth sought and found assistance from others in helping them navigate the institutional practices of secondary and higher education. The mentors these youth found fell into one of five categories: older siblings, extended family members, family friends, community- or university-based informal mentors, and role models. Stanton-Salazar and Spina found that in some cases youth who were on a downward path educationally were able to reverse the trend as a result of a positive relationship with an informal mentor. Although this study found that help



seeking on the part of resilient youth can result in significant positive relationships with mentors, it also found that these relationships are not common and are only available to a small, fortunate group of Latino youth.

This research sheds an important light on the differences in the educational experiences of academically successful and unsuccessful Latino students. The research on social capital shows that once Latino youth understand what it takes to achieve academic success and social mobility, they will actively seek out institutional agents and form relationships with them that allow them to succeed. However, what this research leaves out is why some students seek out these relationships while others do not. In addition, it does not explain why these educational agents are available to assist some students, but not others.

### **How Schools Structure Success and Failure**

Although mentors can play a tremendous role in the academic success of working class students, what role do schools and institutions play in facilitating or impeding this process from occurring? Possibly the way our schools are structured and the way students are tracked could play an important role. Throughout the United States schools are structured so that students are grouped based on certain characteristics. Schools have long held the belief that homogenous groupings promote efficient teaching and learning (Oakes, 2005). However, research has shown that tracking leads to educational disadvantage for those on the lower track. In addition, students on lower academic tracks are often locked out of Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses as well as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs and often are not able to take courses needed for college preparation (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). In addition, Latino students are also often counseled away from Advanced Placement courses or face additional barriers in accessing college preparatory courses as compared to their white and Asian American peers (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al, 2009). Higher level courses such as those previously mentioned not only prepare students with the proper educational foundation to succeed in high and beyond, but they also provide opportunities for working class students to access the social capital and institutional knowledge that their parents are often unable to provide (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003).

Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan (2000) investigated the effects of an in-school mentoring program designed to put students in closer contact with social support systems. The students in the study came from a group who had shown academic potential based on standardized test scores, but mediocre performance in school. The students were placed in a program called Advancement Via Individual Determination or AVID. This is an example of how students are placed in tracks based on their previous courses and academic performance. In their analysis on the program, Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan found that the program was successful in teaching students skills (such as critical thinking and organizational skills) that lead to better education outcomes and the teachers in the program were able to intervene on behalf of the students within the school. Teachers were also able to act as bridges between high school and college. The AVID program was able to assist these students by providing them with the cultural capital that is passed to middle class students implicitly by their parents, through explicit instruction and teacher intervention. This study illustrated the recognition that school structure can play a role in putting Latino youth in contact with institutional agents.

Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz (1996) conducted an investigation into the benefits of the AVID program in increasing college access for Latino and African American youth in San

Diego. They described the support systems provided by institutional agents as part of the AVID program as social scaffolding. Social scaffolding involves giving students the knowledge of how to be successful in school. It involves the explicit teaching of what is often the implicit academic culture of schools. Social scaffolding helps students acquire the skills to be able to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college. They explain how social scaffolding promotes positive academic motivation and engagement among minority youth. In addition, programs such as AVID provide Latino and other working class youth with the knowledge that assists them in navigating the opportunity structure and achieving social mobility. Overall they found increases in college attendance as well as college persistence for minority youth who participated in the AVID program compared to those who did not. However, in order for systems such as AVID to be successful, the researchers argue that students should begin at an early age and remain in the program for at least three years to ensure that students benefit the most from the guidance they are given so that they can navigate the system on their own.

In another study of an urban high school in California, Conchas (2001) examined the differences in academic achievement of Latino students. The study consisted of interviews, focus groups, and observations of twenty-six Latino students in the tenth through twelfth grades. Students in this study were placed in either a general academic track or in one of the school's career academies. He discovered that academic success was positively associated with close relationships with a high-achieving peer network. His findings also revealed vast differences in the experiences of Latino students in different academic tracks. He learned that students in the general academic track did not experience the effects of association with a high-achieving peer group. In addition, he found that these students were given little guidance and support from institutional agents, such as counselors and teachers. As a consequence, these students had few adult mentors to whom they could turn for assistance in help.

In contrast to the experiences of the students in the general track, students in the career academies had very different experiences. The career academies are magnet programs that are created like small schools within the school. Each career academy had a career focus that was designed to attract students who were interested in future careers in a specific field. Most of the students enrolled in AP courses at the high school were found to belong to one of the career academies. Conchas (2001) found that in the career academies teachers knew all the students by name and students were provided career mentors and postsecondary student coaches. He found that the career academies were successful in structuring a learning environment that linked academic rigor with strong relationships based on collaboration among students and teachers. This structure provided an opportunity for close interaction and the formation of strong relationships between students and teachers as well as with other high achieving peers who assisted students in achieving educational mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Another study that explored the effects of social capital and school structure on Latino youth involved life history interviews from 78 Mexican-origin youth in southern California (Gonzales, 2010). This study focused on undocumented immigrant Latino students and explored their high school experiences and examined the ways in which school structures shape access to resources needed for academic success after high school. In his study, Gonzales looked at two subsamples which he referred to as "positively tracked" and "negatively tracked" to compare their experiences in high school. He found that the positively tracked group students took Honors and Advanced Placement classes and were part of specialized programs. These students reported that they were in smaller classes, had positive relationships with teachers, and had

frequent contact with college counselors. In contrast the negatively tracked group consisted of students in a regular track that tended to experience larger class sizes and less diversity within their classes. Students on the general track also reported little contact with college counselors.

Gonzales (2010) found that undocumented Latino students who were positively tracked reported benefitting from smaller learning environments, having access to teachers and other adults, as well as access to college information. By having smaller classes and being exposed to ongoing college counseling, positively tracked students were placed in closer proximity to teachers and other school personnel. In contrast to the experiences of positively tracked students, students who were negatively tracked reported an inability to form relationships with teachers that shut them out of many opportunities.

The way American schools are structured leads students down two very different tracks. The general education track is one that tends to be wide and made for the masses. Those that are on this track often hope that it is leading them to their desired destination, but they have little idea of where it is actually leading them. For those who become lost along this track there is little guidance offered and the other travelers are unable to give directions as they are just as lost. In contrast to the general track, the positive track is much narrower. It is made to accommodate fewer travelers. Those who journey on this path know exactly where it is leading them. Along the way there are many who offer assistance and even fellow travelers are able to explain the journey and provide shortcuts. Although it may be possible to change from one track to the other, the track you are on is usually determined very early on in one's academic journey and the further along one goes the harder it is to change tracks.

## Discussion

Since at least the 1980's, educational researchers have sought to explain the achievement gap that continues to exist between Latino students and their white and Asian peers. However, despite the continuing presence of the achievement gap a more empowering line of research has developed. This research investigates those Latino youth who despite the statistics have been able to achieve academic success. These students have very effectively helped combat the belief that there are inherent deficiencies in Latino students and in their homes that do not allow them to succeed academically. Their success has caused researchers to wonder what factors have allowed these students to achieve success while vast numbers of their peers are unable.

Over the past two decades, researchers have taken a closer look at trying to explain the variations in the levels of academic success among Latinos. Although researchers have been able to attribute much of the academic success of some Latino youth to the social capital that is attained through relationships with institutional agents, these types of relationships are still very rare (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Institutions of secondary and higher education should look into ways to increase these mentor opportunities for Latino and other working class students. As research has shown that mentees are able to more easily relate to mentors who are the same gender, race, and ethnicity as they are, institutions should look to increase the number of Latino teachers and counselors who serve in schools with a primarily Latino student population mentorships (De La Cruz, 2008).

High schools and colleges should also look for ways to provide mentors for a greater number of students and not simply provide mentors to the highest performing students. One way to increase the access to mentors by all students is by establishing programs like AVID at America's urban high schools (Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 2000). These programs

teach working class students about how to navigate institutions of secondary and higher education. In addition, these programs provide students with access to teachers who can serve as mentors and provide support to students in navigating high school as well as in applying for and preparing for college.

One limitation to the research on mentors is a methodological one. Although a growing number of studies exist examining which factors played a role in the success of academically successful Latinos, very few of these studies are quantitative in nature. The vast majority of the studies that have been conducted use a qualitative design and involve interviews of students which ask students to recall the factors that had the greatest impact on their education (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Conchas, 2001; De La Cruz, 2008; Gonzales, 2010; Olivo, 2009; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Some of these studies do involve surveys as part of their investigations; however these surveys tend to serve as a means of gathering demographic information and participant opinions rather than as tools to measure academic achievement (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Kimura-Walsh et al, 2009; Olivo, 2009; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Although these types of studies do shed light on the topic and are perhaps better at retelling the stories of these youth, they lack the empirical data that gives measurable statistics to this topic. Future research should look for ways to study this topic using a quantitative design. Studies using an experimental design would be particularly beneficial (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, Alessandri, 2002). This is one suggestion that could add further evidence to the impact of mentors and give researchers a more concrete way to isolate mentors as a key factor in Latino academic success.

Another problem with the current research on Latino success is that most studies focus on factors that influence Latinos in either high school or college (Oakes, 2005). Almost no research exists to investigate Latino success in elementary or middle school. Although research on tracking and school structure has found that tracking in high schools leads some students to be tracked for success and others to be unintentionally tracked for failure, almost no research investigates tracking in elementary and middle school as the source of this problem (Conchas, 2001). If practitioners and researchers hope to find ways to reduce or eliminate tracking in schools, then more research is needed into the origins of tracking in the primary grades. By drawing attention to these early origins of tracking perhaps more could be done to prevent its future consequences.

Despite the fact that there is a broadening body of research on academically successful Latinos, these success stories are still exceedingly rare. Policy makers and practitioners need to work to find ways to replicate these success stories with a larger number of Latino students. One way to achieve this goal is to find ways to de-track America's schools so that Latino students are not unintentionally trapped in lower tracks and shut out of higher college preparatory tracks. Programs such as AVID demonstrate one way to de-track America's schools. Another way to provide greater opportunities for Latino students is to make sure that adequate numbers of AP and honors classes are available at schools in urban centers where the majority of students are from minority backgrounds (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Although significant gains have been made in the numbers of Latino students who enroll in college, there is still a large discrepancy in the educational outcomes of Latino students when compared to other groups. Latinos still graduate from four year universities at a rate less than half that of whites and the numbers of Latinos in AP and honors courses are still very disproportionate. If researchers, practitioners, and policy makers want to achieve equity for Latinos in education, then more must be done to ensure that Latinos have access to educational

agents and peers who can provide them the social capital they need to achieve academic success and gain access to college.

### Reference List

- Alfonso, M. (2006). The impact of community college attendance on baccalaureate attainment. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(8), 873-903.
- Arellano A. R., & Padilla, A. M. (1996). Academic invulnerability among a select group of Latino students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 18(4), 485-507.
- Antrop-Gonzalez, R., Velez, W., & Garrett, T. (2005). ¿Dónde están los estudiantes Puertorriqueños exitosos? (Where are all the academically successful Puerto Rican students?): Success factors of high-achieving Puerto Rican high school students. *Journal of Latinos and Education* 4(2), 77-94.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In Brown Richard (Ed.), *Knowledge, education and cultural change* (pp71-112) London: Tavistock.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J.G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp.241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Ceballo, R. (2004). From barrios to Yale: The role of parenting strategies in Latino families. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 26(2), 171-186.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, supplement, S95-S120.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). Social capital. In *Foundations of social theory* (pp.300-321). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Conchas, G. Q. (2001). Structuring failure and success: Understanding the variability in Latino school engagement. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71(3), 475-504.
- Conchas, G. Q., & Clark, P. A. (2002). Career academies and urban minority schooling: Forging optimism despite limited opportunity. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 7(3), 287-311.
- Conchas, G. Q. (2006). *The color of success: Race and high-achieving urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- De La Cruz, Y. (2008). Who mentors Hispanic English language learners? *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7(1), 31-42.
- Gandara, P. (1982). Passing through the eye of the needle: High-achieving Chicanas. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 4(2), 167-179.
- Gandara, P. (1995). *Over the ivy walls: The educational mobility of low-income Chicanos*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Garrett, T., Antrop-Gonzalez, R., & Velez, W. (2010). Examining the success factors of high-achieving Puerto Rican male high-school students. *Roepers Review*, 32, 106-115.
- Gibson, M. A., Gandara, P., & Koyama, J. P. (2004). *School connections: U.S. Mexican youth, peers, and school achievement*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gonzales, R. G. (2010). On the wrong side of the tracks: Understanding the effects of school structure and social capital in the educational pursuits of undocumented immigrant students. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 85, 469-485.
- Gonzalez, K. P., Stoner, C., & Jovel, J. E. (2003). Examining the role of social capital in access to college for Latinas: Toward a college opportunity framework. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 2(1), 146-170.
- Jacobi, M. (1991). Mentoring and undergraduate success: A literature review. *Review of Educational Research*, 61(4), 505-532.
- Keating, L. M., Tomishima, M. A., Foster, S., & Alessandri, M. (2002). The effects of a mentoring program on at-risk youth. *Adolescence*, 37(148), 717-734.
- Kimura-Walsh, E., Yamamura, E. K., Griffin, K. A., & Allen, W. R. (2009). Achieving the college dream? Examining disparities in access to college information among high achieving and non-high achieving Latina students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(3), 298-315.
- Lee, S. J. (1996). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Matute-Bianchi, M. E. (1986). Ethnic identities and patterns of school success and failure among Mexican-descent and Japanese-American students. In J. U. Ogbu & M. A. Gibson (Eds.), *Minority status and schooling* (pp. 205-257). New York: Garland.
- Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., & Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ohrt, J. H., Lambie, G. W., & Ieva, K. P. (2009). Supporting Latino and African-American students in advanced placement courses: A school counseling program's approach. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(1), 59-63.
- Olivo, C. (2009). *Social capital and Latino achievement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate University.

- Perez, P. A., & McDonough, P. M. (2008). Understanding Latina and Latino college choice: A social capital and chain migration analysis. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7(3), 249-265.
- Perez, W. (2009). *We ARE Americans: Undocumented students pursuing the American dream*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Phinney, J. S., Horenczyk, G., Liebkind, K., & Vedder, P. (2001). Ethnic identity, immigration, and well-being: An interactional perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(3), 493-510.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Randolph, K. A. & Johnson, J. L. (2008). School-based mentoring programs: A review of the research. *Children & Schools*, 30(3), 177-185.
- Ream, R. K. (2005). *Uprooting children: Mobility, social capital, and Mexican American underachievement*. New York: LFB scholarly Publishing LLC.
- Sanchez, B., Reyes, O., & Singh, J. (2005). Makin' it in college: The value of significant individuals in the lives of Mexican American adolescents. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 5(1), 48-67.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Ornelas, A. (2002). A critical race analysis of advanced placement class: A case of educational inequality. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1(4), 215-229.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of U.S.-Mexican youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68(2), 116-135.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Spina, S. S. (2003). Informal mentors and role models in the lives of urban-origin adolescents. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 34(3), 231-254.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., Vasquez, O. A., & Mehan, H. (2000). Engineering academic success through institutional support. In S.T. Gregory (Ed.), *The academic achievement of minority students: Perspectives, practices, and prescription* (pp.213-247). Lanham, MD: University Press of American, Inc.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2010). When race and gender collide: Social and cultural capital's influence on the academic achievement of African-American and Latino males. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33(3), 307-332.



- Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suarez-Orozco, M. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1998). *Current population survey*, series P20-513. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (2002). *Annual demographic supplement to the March 2002 current population survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1998). *The condition of education, 1998: Issues in focus. The educational progress of Hispanic students*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Yosso, T. J., & Solorzano, D. G. (2006). Leaks in the Chicana and Chicano educational pipeline. *Latino Policy & Issues Brief*, 13. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.
- Zalaquett, C. P., & Lopez, A. D. (2006). Learning from the stories of successful undergraduate Latina/Latino students: The importance of mentoring. *Mentoring & Tutoring*, 14(3), 337-353.