

Latino Students' Perceptions of Their Schooling Experiences

Guadalupe E. Barajas

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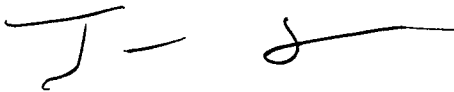
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Abstract

Latino Students' Perceptions of Their Schooling Experiences

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This project utilizes a qualitative design to study Latino students' perceptions regarding their schooling and life experiences based on environmental forces and factors which aide in molding their individual character. More specifically, the study asks the following questions:

1. What are the participating Latino students' perceptions of their schooling experiences and nature of their learning environments?
2. What social, cultural, and family influences have helped shape their (participants') perceptions on schooling and learning environments?
3. What school policies and practices affect the learning environments for Latino students and how do they perceive them?

4. How have their perceptions of schooling affected or not affected their self identify formation?
5. What suggestions do the participants have on how to improve Latino academic achievement in their school?

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to Amador, age eighteen

Alexis, age twelve

Armando, age ten

Arisbeth, age four

I dedicate this work to each of you in the hopes that my work will positively affect your educational experiences as Latino students in American schools.

I have seen your faces with every page I have written.

With love, Mom

Chapter 1:

Introduction and Overview

The large population increase of non-mainstream students in the United States has made many school districts re-evaluate or look for alternative ways for delivering services to better meet the needs and demands of the population growth. For example, Latino student enrollment in the Washington state's K-12 public schools has more than doubled since 1990 (Seattle Post Intelligencer, 2003). The ERIC clearinghouse on Urban Education (2001), reports that the number of Latino students in public schools in the U.S. is steadily increasing. Currently, one third of the Latino population is under the age of 18. Latino students comprise 15 percent of K-12 students overall, a proportion projected to increase to 25 percent by 2025.

This sudden non-mainstream population growth has taken many school districts in the U.S. by surprise, and, therefore, has made schools look for alternative ways of delivering educational services to best meet the needs of their population growth (Olsen, 1988, 1989, 1997; Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Some schools tend to be better equipped and prepared than others for providing programs and services for these students and their families, while less prepared districts are still grappling with ways of improving learning opportunities for these students (Pugach, 1998; Valverde, 2006; Olsen 1989, 1997). This sudden population increase has also created much turmoil and

tension within districts, which are less equipped or trained to provide adequate services for their student body.

In the face of this complexity of needs, many schools in the U.S. are actively involved in trying new approaches, in scrambling to find new solutions. Many others are aware of the need for “something different” but feel frustrated about what they could or should be doing, particularly in light of their lack of clear models. All, however, face a massive challenge in changing the structure and curriculum of schools to make them more responsive to and appropriate for the rapidly increasing populations of students, especially for students with special needs and those who are learning English as a non-native language (Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002).

School districts which have been affected by large non-mainstream student enrollments are working on bringing about system changes in their schools to better assist the new minority population’s needs, including changes to school policies and practices as well as programs and service (Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Valverde, 2006; Soto, 2007; Papalewis & Fortune 2002). All districts have the flexibility to make system changes based on their school population needs. In most cases, changes are made by planning teams, which most often consist of building and district level administrators, support service providers, and mainstream teachers. The planning team members generally assume that they know the needs and interests of their students. The team then makes suggestions for improvement, implementation, and adoption of programs and services based on their perceived notions of needed changes for the school. Schools which are

most effective in educating non-mainstream students incorporate students, administrators, support service specialists, as well as mainstream teachers in the planning teams (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002, Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990:2:7).

These schools and district activities that support learning opportunities for ELL students are often prompted or supported by the state or federal funding systems. The funding agencies therefore enforce strict policies and regulations in order to assure that funds are adequately used for the purpose of educating all students as stated in the individual schools' annual improvement plans. Ultimately, the state and federal agencies somehow direct or play a major role in determining which programs and services get funded or not funded based on availability of state and federal funds.

Non-mainstream students who are affected by these system changes are not typically part of the planning team, and their needs and interests are not necessarily understood or taken into consideration, which leads many of them to develop negative attitudes towards the school (Carter, 1970; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7). The lack of communication between student and school most often creates additional barriers and challenges for the mainstream student. Non-mainstream students may also experience a sense of "disconnect" (feeling of not being part of the school) or lack of ownership in their school (Valenzuela, 1999; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1997). Non-mainstream students, like mainstream students, are able to express their needs and interests if given the opportunity to contribute to school changes that affect their educational careers. Students' perspectives on system changes are vital for the success of all parties involved (Olsen,

1988, 1992:7; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002).

Incorporating student voice into the planning of school changes is only one way of making a positive educational difference for non-mainstream students. There is, in fact, a need to look at the entire range of elements in the institutional culture of schools—the constraints and barriers to teacher ingenuity as well as the educational priorities set by building principals and in teacher education programs (Olsen, 1988, 1997; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Hamann, 2003; Pugach, 1998). The work of professor and author Diaz-Greeberg (2003), in a study of Latino high school students, was to elicit Latino student voices in their school setting and to make them experts in their schooling experiences. This was meant to actively engage students themselves in the research process and, thus, make them more aware of their personal and social changes. She comments,

The purpose of my study is to elicit from Latino students what they consider to be factors that silence their voices in the classrooms; to explore how they perceive their linguistic and cultural reality within the school system; and to learn what viable pedagogical alternatives they propose that will aid in the emergence and legitimization of voice. (p.37).

There are also issues of inequality and access to opportunities for ethnically diverse students in schools (Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Carter, 1970; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Obiakor, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Ford, 2002). As one scholar puts it, “The fact is, the school system still effectively marginalizes minority youth with respect to access to

instructional opportunity, access to an academic core curriculum and so on....our educational institutions are not genuinely multicultural or integrated even at those formally desegregated institutions” (MaCarthy, 1992). Grant (1984) argues that the organization of the curriculum at the desegregated school concentrates African-American and Latino students in dead-end, non academic tracks, which not only contributes to minority failure but structurally facilitates the disorganization of minority identities by selection and labeling these students as ‘underachievers’ and ‘at risk’.

Educational scholars researching issues of inequality and access to opportunities among ethnically diverse students have found that schools which provide more culturally and linguistically responsive learning environments yield better learning opportunities and learning outcomes for non-mainstream students (Obiakor & Ford, 2002; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Poplin & Weeres, 1994, Nieto, 1992; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Teel and Parecki (2001) suggest designing a more academically and culturally supportive classroom environment, by using a non-competitive classroom structure and effort-based grading, multiple performance opportunities, increased student responsibility and choice, and validation of culture and heritage, while shying away from the typical inappropriate teaching strategies, which tend to rely on reading as a whole source of information, an emphasis on formal writing skills to the exclusion of other ways of demonstrating knowledge (e.g., skits, models, oral presentations, or artwork), and ethnocentric curriculum that excludes different cultures and heritages. Pugach (1998) and Olsen (1988, 1992:7) recommend that in order for Hispanic students and immigrants to perform well in their institutions, school should develop a strong program of dual

language learning (for bilingual students), an institutionalized appreciation for linguistic and cultural variety, creating culturally supportive educational environments that actively honor the bicultural character of the students and their families, ongoing training and staff support involving all teachers in the preparation for planning of programs for students with different learning needs, and attempts to build a shared school-wide vision which includes non-mainstream students and brings equity issues to the table. In addition, Pugach (1998) and Hamann (2003) suggest for schools in the bordering regions and other states in the U.S. to launch structured teacher and student exchange programs with Mexico.

Teaching non-mainstream students is also more productive when educators have a thorough knowledge of their culture, experiences, and contributions, and then use the knowledge to guide their educational decision making and instruction (Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Valdes, 1996, 2001, Nieto, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Portales & Portales, 2005; Valverde, 2006; Anzaldua, 1987; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Obiakor & Ford, 2002). Olsen (1992) suggests that in order for districts to provide the most benefits for non-mainstream students in their schools, there needs to be a site district leadership team actively involved in advocating for non-mainstream students, not only the designated ESL Chair or counselor in charge of overseeing the special programs, as has been the norm. There also needs to be a school-wide emphasis and shared responsibility for students. Effective site leadership is critical if a school is to envision an overall program for these students by assessing their academic needs and developing a whole-school response.

Along with having a strong leadership role in advocating and enforcing policies that assist in improving achievement for non-mainstream students, there is also the need to look for positive models of schools that are producing gains in the area of student achievement for ethnically diverse students. For example, Papalewis & Fortune (2002) identified thirteen schools in California that exhibited high achievement for two populations that traditionally do not perform well on standardized tests. Their main purpose was to promote higher achievement, especially for African Americans and Hispanic students in their schools. The thirteen schools displayed strong administrative leadership that was tied to a high degree of attention to instructional practices. The teachers and administrators of these schools fostered high expectations; the schools were safe and orderly (even in the most extreme urban settings); student progress was routinely monitored and focused on curriculum; statewide standards, basic reading, writing, and mathematics subjects took precedence over all other school activities. District leaders took on the responsibility to assess their social and cultural environments, and then collectively devised practices that engaged their teachers, students, and parents to achieve high-expectation standards for all students.

In summary, learning environments that help Latino students succeed are those that: foster culturally and linguistically responsive learning opportunities for non-mainstream students; have educators who have a knowledge of their students' culture, experiences, and the contributions they bring into their schools; have a strong site-based emphasis on student achievement, and educational leaders taking a leadership role in advocating for ethnically diverse students; have ongoing teacher support and training for

work with ethnically diverse populations; incorporate students' voice along with teachers, administrators in the planning teams; and bring to the table issues of inequality and access to opportunities. These tend to be learning environments that promote higher student achievement for all students, especially for students from non-mainstream ethnic groups.

Study Focus and Rationale

Taking into consideration the need for future research in areas of schooling for non-mainstream students, I have selected to research Latino students, one of the less voiced populations, and which research also demonstrates has a large number of students consistently failing in American schools in comparison to mainstream students. By most available measures (e.g., standardized tests, college enrollments, dropout rates), it is still the case that educational institutions are not meeting the needs of Latino students (e.g., Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Nieto, 1992; Soto, 2007; Valverde, 2006; Portales & Portales, 2005; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Olsen, 1988, 1996:7; Anzaldúa, 1987; Pugach, 1998). This population is often relatively "invisible" and their views, thoughts, and response to school are not "typically heard." By conducting this research, Latino students' voices will be heard as they comment on their schooling experiences here in the U.S. and also share insights of challenges they might have endured or are enduring in their educational lives. The students' psychological, social, cultural, and academic areas will be researched to gain a broader

picture of their learning experiences and of their lives. Valdes (1996) argues that, in order to understand how school failure comes to be constructed in the United States for and by the newly arrived groups, one must have an understanding of the worlds from which these individuals come. Latino working-class families bring to the United States goals, life plans, and experiences that do not help them make sense of what schools expect of their children.

The purpose of this study is to give Latino students an opportunity to voice their perceptions of their schooling experience and also express their needs and interests regarding their schooling. Specifically, case accounts will be constructed and analyzed of a small number of Latino students in a single school that has experienced an increase in its Latino population. The analysis, both within and across these cases, will highlight how the students view and understand what the school is doing to educate them, what effects their schooling is having on them, and what they need to support a productive learning experience. My analysis will improve understanding of their perceptions of their schooling experiences and the extent to which the school system provides or meets their individual schooling expectations.

What This Study Will Offer

Overall, the study highlights differences between the way the school staff and the Latino students themselves perceive their schooling needs. Schools, especially schools with large Latino student enrollments, will be able to utilize the final case studies document as a tool to better understand Latino students' perceptions of their schooling

and to consider changes to programs and services that would better meet their educational needs. The student cases will also provide the participant school district with a clear understanding of some of their Latino students' social, cultural, and educational lives, which can be utilized as a "road map" for implementing programs and services that will better serve their Latino student's needs. But most importantly by reading the stories of these students and their families as they unfold their experiences in their schools helps policymakers and practitioners to examine their existing assumptions about Latino students and families and to start questioning the implementation of large-scale education programs designed to help students become more mainstream.

Assessing students' perspectives on existing school policies and practices can be an essential tool in assessing the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of all or certain school components. Educators can learn a great deal from student input regarding the effectiveness of programs and services. Who best to evaluate the "end-product" (curriculum, programs, and services) than the actual consumers, in this case the students? Kordalewski (1999) states:

Acknowledging the importance of student voice in the classroom means acknowledging students' active role in the learning process. Teaching practices that engage student voices can enhance learning. In the current public education environment, they may have the added benefit of better equipping students to meet the standards that have been established by state tests makers and others. They also may provide a source of challenge to the legitimacy of those standards.

(p.3)

Schools could benefit from knowing more about the students and their families' experiences, as well as about students' views of school and how it could be improved (Olsen, 1988, 1996:9). Finding ways to involve the students in the school climate will also benefit the school and student. Non-mainstream students, like other students, need to feel like they belong in their school, "making minority students feel part of their school is the first step in helping them succeed academically and become productive citizens in their communities" (Pulido, 1991, p.12).

Assessing the school's current ways of delivering instruction, programs, and support services from the student perspective could provide additional insight and possibly solve some implementation problems or account for the school's effectiveness or lack of effectiveness with this student population (Olsen, 1988, 1990:2:6:7:9; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998). Student support services could be defined as academic services and programs, which are used to provide additional learning support like Bilingual instruction or ESL (English as a Second Language) services. Other components related to academic support could assist in the improvement of student learning (tutorial, mentoring) as well. Support services also include home and family support services (Adult ESL, GED preparation, computer, or parent training courses, etc.). Every year, schools spend extensive amount of time, dollars, and energy on planning and implementing support services and programs for all students but rarely do they consult the actual students for feedback and interest or lack of interest in established services.

A better understanding of Latino students' viewpoint on their schooling could also improve their "access" to learning opportunities. Not all students have "equal access" to school programs and services, nor are all students in the school made aware of these opportunities (Olsen, 1988, 1990:2:7; Valenzuela, 1999; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998). Hearing what students perceive about issues of access or perceptions of not having "equal access" will better inform school policies and practices related to building and establishing programs that will address this issue—this could also help account for success or lack of success of programs and services (Olsen, 1988, 1990).

Most important, school administrators especially could benefit from students' perceptions of school policies and procedures (Olsen, 1988, 1990). Latino students are sure to comment and provide much feedback on the school policies and procedures, especially if they feel they will not be identified or singled out. By developing anonymous cases of students, an inquiry like this can give them the chance to voice their concerns, and important issues in relation to school policies or procedures can be explored that otherwise could have been silenced or not voiced before. Most of the time students are better able to express more honest responses if they know that the information shared will not affect them or their identity.

Much research has been done on teachers' perceptions of student learning but less attention has been paid to documenting student's perceptions and especially Latino student's perceptions of learning and their learning needs (Pugach, 1998; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Nieto, 1992:4; Valenzuela, 1999; Anzaldua, 1987). Nieto (1994) points out that many times

student perspectives are missing or get left out of debates about important school issues like school failure and success, and especially perspectives of students from disempowered and dominated communities. Much research points out effective ways of incorporating student voice into classrooms for building effective teacher-student relationships, therefore, increasing student learning, but less has been written on incorporating student's perspectives for planning and implementation of programs and services as perceived by their needs (Kordalewski, 1999; Olsen, 1988; 1990; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003).

Documenting student voice on educational issues is also crucial for improving student achievement, in this case, Latino student achievement. When students' community voices are underrepresented or devalued in the curriculum, they will feel silenced in classroom activities and are likely to perform less well in their studies (Kordalewski, 1999; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988; Nieto, 1992).

The student case studies will include students' reactions to school and family life styles, their values and beliefs, dreams and struggles, newly discovered expectations and serious misunderstandings, and insights into what students like or dislike about their school. Also, cases will shine a light on some of the challenges and barriers that Latino youth are experiencing in their social, cultural, and academic lives. My interest in recording actual student cases is not to provide a "how to work with Latino students manual" because not all Latino students have the same lifestyles or needs. I am more interested in writing about individual stories and assessing individual needs. I hope this

study will spark interest in educators who want to learn about Latino students' lives and in return will use the knowledge they acquire to advocate for equal access to educational opportunities for this most often unvoiced group of students.

Analyzing students' attitudes toward school could really help schools get a better sense of how students feel about their school (Olsen, 1988; 1990; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999; Valdes, 2001; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Pugach, 1998). Issues of school climate will surface that could lead to better implementation of support services if not already in place. Do students feel safe and secure in the school? Questions like this could be used to assess student's attitudes. In a three-year ethnographic study of immigrant and Mexican American students at a Houston (Texas) high school, Valenzuela (1999) concluded that the Mexican Americans (non-college-bound) in the study felt that the school was not meeting their academic needs; schooling was a process that excluded them from important social and cultural services, which in turn made them more likely to experience school failure. Students also commented on the absence of caring relationships between teachers and students. Another investigation (Finn & Voelkl, 1993) explored how student engagement in school and class activities affected successful achievement outcomes, and how, in turn, engagement levels can be affected by characteristics of the school environment.

Primary Study Questions

The student case studies will thus include information on how students perceive their schooling; how social, cultural, academic, and family influences affect their

attitudes and experiences of their school; and how school policies and practices affect—or could affect—their experiences, identity formation, and individual student success.

This research study will attempt to answer the following questions.

1. What are the participating Latino students' perceptions of their schooling experiences and the nature of their learning environments?
2. What social, cultural, and family influences have helped shape their (participants') perceptions of schooling and learning environments?
3. What school policies and practices affect the learning environments for Latino students and how they perceive these environments?
4. As the students see it, how has their experience of schooling affected their self-identify formation?
5. What suggestions do the participants have for how to improve Latino academic achievement in their school?

Significance of the Study

This study explores how Latino students perceive their cultural, social, family history, and their home experiences within the educational system, and in relation to their actual school experiences and responses to school policies, practices, school personnel, and organization. The study aims to actively listen to the silent voices of Latino students and learn from them by accepting their words as untapped and rich source of thoughts and feelings that can serve to create wise knowledge for school district educators and

students. These Latino student voices serve as an essential tool for analyzing overall Latino students' perceptions of their schooling experiences by: (1) drawing out, exploring, and documenting how Latino students perceive their cultural, social, and academic experience of schooling; (2) taking into consideration how the different cultural, social, and academic factors affect the individual Latino students' and their life choices; (3) examining the role that family, cultural, social, and academic factors play in each Latino students' identity formation; and (4) developing insights into the ways shared student experiences, language, and culture can shape as well as impact both the Latino student and emergence of voice. This study also seeks to provide individual student cases and cross-case patterns that focus on students' perceptions of social, cultural, family, and academic experiences as well as configuring how school policies and practices affect their individual schooling experiences. The Latino students' voices need to be elicited, heard, and legitimized, and educators and administrators will crucially benefit by actively engaging in dialogue with Latino students, who are typically marginalized within the educational system by peers and teachers alike.

Overview of this Document

This remainder of this document is as follows. Chapter Two focuses on what literature related to this study, have to say about the pattern of failure in American schools, how schools explain and respond to the pattern of failure, and how non-mainstream students experience schooling. Using key ideas from these literatures, the chapter offers a conceptual framework that indicates what a meaningful learning

environment looks like and also the school policies and procedures related to linguistic diversity. Chapter Three focuses on the methodology which I used in this research study. Chapters Four and Five present the study's main findings, in two main sections. Chapter Four focuses on the Latino students in family and cultural context, both through portraits of four Latino students to illustrate their individual school and life experiences, and through additional insights from the full sample of the Latino student into their family history and backgrounds, language choices, and life endeavors which have shaped them to be who they are today. Chapter Five deals with students' responses to school and their peer group—how they perceived and interacted with their academic and social environment, including ideas on the social organization of the school, school safety, reorganization of school into Academies, curriculum and classes, and other ideas which shine a light on teachers, teaching, learning, and the learning environment. Chapter Six offers concluding remarks and reflections on what the study means for practicing school leaders and others concerned with serving this segment of the student population.

Chapter 2:

Framing Ideas and Related Research

In the past decade the United State has experienced profound demographic changes. People from different continents, representing different cultures and speaking hundreds of different languages, have made America their home.

Immigrant research scholar Junn (2000) writes,

Within the next decade, nearly one-third of the United States population will be classified as a race other than white. That proportion is projected to rise to 47 percent by 2050. At present immigrants and their second-generation of offspring constitute almost one fifth of the U.S. population and of these, more than three-quarters are from Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Asia (p.187).

One of the fastest growing ethnic groups making America its home are the Hispanic people (Fonder, Rumbaut, & Gold, 2000; MacDonald, 2004; Westwood & Phizachlea, 2000). Westwood and Phizachlea (2000) argue that the “Latinos will outnumber the black population in the next ten years (as they do currently in twenty-one states) and they comprise 27 percent of the workforce and 14 percent of the population, some 20 million people, and continuing to rise. It is also, clear that this population is an increasingly diverse population” (p. 61).

A Pattern of Failure in American Schools

Demographic changes in the U.S. have also affected American schools. In recent years American schools have experienced large enrollments of students that come from different parts of the world and speak many different languages, who have come to join an existing diversity of cultures, language backgrounds, national origins, and ethnicities (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Caravantes, 2006; Sampson, 2003; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto, 1992; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Valdes, 1996, 2001). The non-mainstream student population in American schools tends not to perform at par with mainstream students. Multiple factors including culture and class contribute to the academic failure of non-mainstream children (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Caravantes, 2006; Sampson, 2003; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto, 1992; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Nieto (1992) identified structural, linguistic, and cultural factors that all contribute to school failure because of their capacity to result in unfair treatment of students who are not members of the dominant group in a given school or school district. African American educational researchers (e.g., Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Obiakor & Ford, 2002) have associated low academic achievement among African American students with psychological and environmental disadvantages of poverty, including its effects on family life and structure, misplacement due to assessment criteria used in the early schooling years, and disempowerment caused by a history of discrimination as

African Americans in the U.S. In addition, they point to the Eurocentric curriculum in schools, and also to the fact that African American students are not validated or acknowledged in the curriculum design and practice, as contributors to a pattern of low performance.

A parallel pattern is in place for Latino students, and has been for years. More than three decades ago, the literature clearly demonstrated that, in general, Mexican Americans, “as a group, tend to: (1) do poorly in schools by any measure, (2) drop out (of school) early, (3) speak Spanish, and (4) be poor... Mexican Americans do poorly in school because they are poor, speak Spanish, and are culturally Mexican, or Mexican Americans continue to be poor, speak Spanish, and carry a traditional folk culture because they do poorly in school” (Carter, 1970, p.3). In overall terms, this pattern is still true today.

There is much research on the relative lack of school success for Latinos in the United States in relation to other groups (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Anzaldua, 1989; Soto, 2007; Portales & Portales, 2005; Sampson, 2003; Valverde, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Nieto, 1992). Hispanic students often tend to be immigrants, are English language learners (ELL), are highly mobile and often from economically vulnerable households, and usually are of Mexican birth or descent (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Nieto, 1992; Carger, 1996; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Pugach, 1998). One researcher summarizes the overall pattern as follows:

Hispanic dropout rates remain stubbornly above 25 percent since 1980, at the same time, the non-Hispanic white dropout rate has declined from 11.4 percent to 7.7 percent in 1998, and the African American dropout rate has fallen from 19.1 percent to 13.8 percent....Hispanics are also less likely to attend colleges, less likely to stay in college long enough to obtain a degree, and more likely to be in lower track classes, including special education, and that these trends have persisted overtime” (Hamann, 2003, p.11).

For non-mainstream children in the United States, particularly Hispanic children, the fact is that school success has been elusive. To this day, non-mainstream children (including the disadvantaged, the at-risk, and the underprivileged) continue to fail in American schools in large numbers. According to various measures (e.g., dropout rates, standardized test scores, college enrollment), it is still the case that educational institutions are not meeting the needs of all children (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Anzaldua, 1989; Soto, 2007; Portales & Portales, 2005; Sampson, 2003; Valverde, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Nieto, 1992; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; MacDonald, 2004; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Carter, 1970).

How Schools Explain and Respond to the Pattern of Failure

The fact of persistent failure by certain social groups begs to be understood, and scholars and educators alike have sought to address this matter over the past three

decades. Carter (1970) argues that American educators, pressed to explain the failure in schools of low status and minority-group children, rely heavily on the theory of “cultural deprivation,” in which the fault is seen to lie in the socialization afforded by the home and neighborhood, and it is assumed that the child (or the home or neighborhood) must be changed, not society or its educational institutions. Furthermore, many educators and observers believe that a person from a lower-class segment of American society is incompetent and leads an unsatisfactory life, and that the conditions of his life are somehow negative and bad. This negative reasoning for school failure is evident in schools across the U.S.

Yet these explanations fail to appreciate how the school’s response to Latino students may not be effective, nor responsive to the cultural interaction that is taking place in daily life at school. Clearly, another reason for school failure among minority children reflects the school’s inadequacies in bridging the children’s home culture and the school culture.

Another consequence of the school’s inadequacies is the familiar culture conflict between home and school. Teachers drill minority group children to accept middle-class norms of achievement, individual responsibility, and good manners in order to gain a good grade or the acceptance of the teacher. Culturally different children do not see the symbolic reward of a higher grade as a significant incentive. The norms taught may deviate from at home and derogate the family and the peer group. Children learn one culture (language,

values, expectations, and roles) in their home or from peers, and the school enforces another and different culture. In order to stay in school, the child is required to drop the “bad” culture he has learned at home and at least outwardly manifest the cultural characteristics expected by the school. Many cannot do this and ultimately drop out—mentally in the primary or intermediate grades and then physically as soon as local law or practice permits. Others reject their home culture, still others cannot cope with the situation at all, and are caught between two sets of norms; they may be subject to personal disorganization (Carter, 1970, p.129).

Inadequate placement in school programs and services may also account for the low academic achievement of non-mainstream students in American schools. The school’s efforts in placing non-mainstream students at times fall short of the students’ actual needs (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Carger, 1996; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1997). Olsen (1989) found that schools in California were unprepared for incorporating and educating the complex mix of cultures, languages and nations represented in the student population. Furthermore, California like other states is experiencing a severe shortage of teachers who possess the language skills and training needed to teach children whose first language is not English. Also, there is a critical shortage of both curricula and texts written in different languages and training materials and resources for teachers who work in

multilingual, multinational, and multicultural classrooms. Many educators are unaware of the needs of their non-mainstream students; others, well aware that current groupings, pedagogy, and instructional approaches that are not appropriate for the new diversity in the schools, are unsure of what to do differently and feel stymied by time and resource constraints. Some are, frankly, hostile and resist doing anything considered “extra” for the foreign-born child:

They (immigrant students) are most often met by schools with haphazard efforts to address their English language needs or their academic skill development needs, social environments which are ambivalent if not openly hostile to the immigrant, provided no orientation or support in making transition to the new culture, and cut off too soon from supports which might make it possible for them to fully partake in the school program. Immigrant children are, for the most part, left to sink or swim on their own in school. Some swim, and their success and achievements are an inspiration and testament to their hard work, luck, strengths, and survival skills. But the majority of students still appear to be sinking (Olsen, 1988, p. 96).

Along with inappropriate placement, categorization, identification, and the lack of adequate instruction, the literature also points to tracking of non-mainstream students in institutions as another reason to explain low achievement among non-mainstream students (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto,

1992; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Carter (1970) found that tracking and other practices that isolated Mexican American children not only discouraged equal status interaction between them and their Anglo peers but also serve to reinforce the stereotypes each group holds of the other. The tracking system reinforces teachers' stereotypes as well, and affects their work. Their expectations are lowered, and they may therefore make less effort, have lax achievement standards, and offer less encouragement.

How Non-Mainstream Students Experience Schooling

There is a rich and growing body of ethnographic depiction of the schooling of non-mainstream students in different communities in the United States (e. g., Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003). Educational researchers are interested in documenting the stories of non-mainstream students living in rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods in the United States, who most often share similar schooling experiences (e.g., Valdes, 1996, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Carger, 1996; Pugach, 1998; Hamann, 2003; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001). Some non-mainstream students come from rural, isolated villages, as well as major urban industrialized centers and face innumerable pressures and challenges in their academic, social, political, and cultural lives. They arrive at the schoolhouse door with a multitude of specific needs—for some, to learn English quickly and fluently, to access and learn their academic subjects in a language they can understand, and to adjust to a new culture and

schooling system (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Caravantes, 2006; Sampson, 2003; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto, 1992; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Some non-mainstream students have been enrolled in American schools for extended amounts of time and still are performing lower than mainstream students (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Nieto, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988; MacDonald, 2004; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001).

Non-mainstream students also experience struggles while trying to become full participants in the school organization. Referring to this as the “politics of belonging,” Westwood and Phizacklea (2000, p.12) state that

There are those, too, who still occupy spaces at the margins, forging lives with rural employment and bringing the skills of barrio organizations and land invasions to the Texas landscape; again, seeking to make a home within what has been a hostile environment that seeks persistently to remind the new migrants that home is elsewhere and cannot be imagined within the U.S.

The ‘politics of belonging’ metaphor poses a crucial issue discussed among various educational scholars as it relates to minority people forging their way in the American world and also for students trying to fit in or belong in the American school culture (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Olsen, 1988, 1989, 1997; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Valdes, 1996, 2001). In the process of becoming participants of the American institution many non-

mainstream students experience “culture clash” while trying to gain access to or becoming a member of their institution. Many non-mainstream students have to literally cross various boundaries, borders, and frontiers before ever gaining full participation in their institutions (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Caravantes, 2006; Sampson, 2003; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto, 1992; Heath 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Valdes, 1996, 2001). These students face walls erected between their reasonable dreams and unreasonable worlds, and the struggle to breach those barricades (Pugach, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 1996, 2001). Carger (1996) writes about a student who embodies many characteristics seen as challenging to educators; urban Mexican-American, of low and threatened economic income, having very little parental schooling or literacy at home, bilingual yet not possessing a strong development of either first or second language, having special learning needs and significant literacy difficulties. This is a detailed account of growing up poor and Mexican in a crowded barrio on the margins of one of the most splendid cities in the richest country of the world. She tells about the story of contrasts, contradictions as well as connection, of borders and boundaries, but also of bridges. The protagonist of this story shares similar characteristics among non-mainstream students in rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods in the U.S. and also who struggle on day-to-day to become participants in their American community and school (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Pugach, 1998; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1997; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 1996, 2001).

Pugach (1998) poses the “metaphor of borders” as symbols of potential.

It is a metaphor for forging new individual identities, for blending discordant parts of one’s life, for cultural crossing, and for personal and cultural creativity. Borders can be found everywhere; this is a view that is meant to transcend place, one that enables us to take the concept of border with us no matter where we are located.

Carter (1996) writes about the student’s struggle to cross the U.S.-Mexican border as well as the border of literacy. The border metaphor is important because it speaks to the fact that most, if not all, non-mainstream students experience the ‘crossing of borders’ throughout their educational and personal lives. Valdes (1996) documents the stories of immigrant families who have traveled the long and short distance between Mexico and the United States, to better their lives and that of their children. She describes the challenges these families endure on a daily basis; of obtaining low paying jobs, solving every-day problems associated with immigration threats, going about their business of surviving and learning to succeed in their new lives. The borders can be psychological, academic, social, and cultural frontiers or boundaries to be crossed. For example, non-mainstream students experience crossing the borders of: attaining literacy, learning a new language in a foreign country, fitting in both socially and academically in a different school system, managing the cultural struggles of balancing the native culture with the new acquired culture, and weathering the political battles associated with not being American (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Pugach, 1998;

Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Carger, 1996; Olsen, 1988; Anzaldua, 1987). Borders can be found everywhere, not only for students literally living in towns near the U.S.-Mexican border neighborhoods but for all non-mainstream students who struggle daily to overcome political, social, academic, and cultural boundaries and borders in their quest to gain full participation in American society and schools (Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Carger, 1996; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Anzaldua, 1987).

While enduring the long journey of “crossing borders,” most non-mainstream students experience feelings of confusion, sadness, loneliness, and difficulty making the transition to school (Pugach, 1998; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Caravantes, 2006; Sampson, 2003; Portales & Portales, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1992:7; Nieto, 1992; Heath, 1983; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Valdes, 1996, 2001). This is especially so for immigrant students enrolling in the American schools. For most non-mainstream students the challenge of becoming “American” means having to leave behind their native language and cultural identities (Olsen, 1997; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Poplin & Weeves, 1994; Carter, 1970). “For most immigrants, Americanization means leaving behind their fuller national cultural, and language identities, and abandoning hope that others will see and accept them in their full humanness....They begin to see that to become American is to take one’s place on the ‘racial map’ of our nation” (Olsen, 1997, p.11).

Olsen (1988, 1990) records the stories of various immigrant students enrolled in California schools who experience feelings of being laughed at and made fun of for speaking their native language and for not being able to speak English properly, being picked on, being frightened by other students in the hallways, having their lockers broken into or food thrown at them in the cafeteria, being called dirty names, feeling sad for not knowing where to sit or where the bathroom is or how to eat American food which is so different from their homeland, and also experiencing the fear of being deported back to their country of origin. Immigrant students experience different social customs and the attitudes of U.S. students. Many U.S.-born children of color and poverty experience similar educational, social, and economic barriers faced by immigrant children. In addition, she also found that most immigrant children, like most non-mainstream students have tremendous needs not addressed by the schools. Immigrant children face barriers of language, culture, health, and mental health that prevent their full participation in school and as adults, in the job market, and in public affairs.

Children often arrive in the U.S. with large academic gaps, compounding the task of leaping cultures and tongues and often leading to school failure and unacceptably high drop out rates—close to 70% (Olsen 1989, p.4).

Carter (1970) argues that the negative experiences which students face causes them to reject the institution of the school, and since it is often their first and most intensive encounter with an institution of the larger society, they are more likely to transfer their rejection to society as a whole. When teachers' behaviors or

institutional producers encourage a negative social climate within the school, the learner's general reaction will tend to be negative also. Through a certain degree of negativism toward school is common to all groups or classes of children, segregation and isolation of certain groups of children tend to aggravate it. Negative attitudes toward school are particularly noticeable in segregated schools among students assigned to low tracks. The individual child attempting to persevere and retain a positive view toward school finds it extremely difficult to counter the attitude of his relatively homogeneous peer group.

In conclusion, literature regarding the education of non-mainstream students in the United States makes it clear that they have endured unpleasant schooling experiences in American schools (Olsen 1997; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Obiakor & Ford, 2002; Teel & Parecki 2001; MacDonald, 2004; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Heath, 1983). These students tend to not have the same academic success as "mainstream" students. Psychological, social, academic, cultural, and political forces impede non-mainstream students from succeeding (in relation to mainstream students) in their institution (Olsen 1997; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Obiakor & Ford 2002; Teel & Parecki 2001; MacDonald, 2004; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Heath, 1983). In urban, rural, and suburban areas of the U.S. school failure is the norm among non-mainstream students. African-American and Hispanic students, in particular, have higher numbers of students with 'low academic achievement' (Olsen 1997; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Obiakor & Ford 2002; Teel & Parecki 2001;

MacDonald, 2004; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Heath, 1983).

Conceptual Framework

For the many reasons noted above, the improvement of Latino student learning is a huge challenge and of great interest to many educators and researchers interested in working on solutions to this matter (e.g., Valdes, 1996, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; MacDonald, 2004; Nieto, 1992). To better understand this challenge and help educators in a particular school site imagine how to respond to it, this study constructs individual student cases and cross-case patterns that will focus on students' perceptions of the social, cultural, and family influences on their identity development, school policies and practices, and their attitudes toward their school and school experiences. To provide a framework for understanding these students' experiences, I discuss below: (1) what a meaningful learning environment for Latino students would be like; (2) school policies and practices as a potential influence on these students' schooling experiences; (3) the students' family, cultural, and social environments; (4) possible links to these students' identity formation; and (5) possible effects on these students' learning and success in school.

Meaningful Learning Environment for Latino Students

Latino students, like all other students, will benefit greatly if they are educated in a meaningful learning environment (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1992, Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Olsen (1992) and Pugach (1998) refer to a meaningful learning environment as a

culturally supportive environment or institutionalized appreciation for linguistic and cultural acceptance. A meaningful learning environment is one in which all students feel they are treated with respect and valued as individuals; some students need more personal attention than others to learn and should be able to receive the attention they need. Students need to feel they belong and have a sense of ownership of their school and their surrounding environment (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003, Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Pugach, 1998). They also need to feel they are cared for as individuals and also as part of the larger society.

Students will also benefit from a culturally supportive learning environment that provides adequate programs and services based on their individual needs and abilities. This could include classroom support services, student support services for mental and psychological needs, and family support services (Olsen, 1988, 1990:2, Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003). The classroom support services could include “enriched” curriculum and materials suited to foster language developmental skills and improvement of learning, supplemental services like ESL (English and a Second Language), and/or bilingual instruction (Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003, Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003). Student support services could include student counseling services, health or clinical assistance, and also extra curricular activities like sports, clubs, and homework centers or tutorial assistance (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002). Family support services

could include adult ESL, literacy, USA citizenship preparation, parenting training, computer courses, and other support programs based on the needs assessment of the families the school serves (Valdes, 1996; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Olsen, 1988; Carger, 1996; Anzaldua, 1987).

Latino students, like other students in the school, need to feel they have equal access to programs and services. They will be more likely to sign up for school programs and services if access issues are not present or a factor (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001). Many times students of color are hesitant about signing up for school programs because they feel that the programs are not for them, or other times students are not even made aware of programs or services that exist in the school (Valenzuela, 1999; Obiakor & Ford 2002; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988). Students are more likely to participate in school programs and services if they are informed and encouraged to participate. Because students of color also tend to participate less in school activities, it's important to encourage them to get more involved in their schools (Valenzuela, 1999; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990). Making students aware of the importance of getting involved is the first step in making a difference. Students involved in school activities are also more likely to be successful and less likely to lose interest in school (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Pugach, 1998).

Students will benefit from attending a culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment where they feel they have equal learning opportunities

(Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 2001; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Pugach, 1998). A friendly productive learning environment such as this could mean a learning environment where all students feel they are valued for who they are, feel comfortable and safe, and enjoy coming on a daily basis. This type of learning environment also fosters learning and challenges their minds and abilities (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1999:2:7:9; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 2001).

School Policies and Procedures Related to Linguistic Diversity

At the same time that a culturally and linguistically meaningful learning environment shapes the student's perceptions of schooling, so, too, do the policies and procedures in the school. They do this by imposing rules and regulations that are sometimes not understood or recognized by all students especially the immigrant students who are not familiar with the American schooling system (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carger, 1996; Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987). School policies and structures should provide an atmosphere of support and encouragement for all students (Olsen, 1988, 1990). School policies could include classroom, school building, and district policies and procedures, which define the ways in which things are done in a particular school district, school, and/or classroom. Kinds of policies that affect student life in the school and attitudes toward school could include: transportation, academic and graduation requirements, student grouping—ability

grouping, tracking, promotion and retention, attendance, discipline—detentions, suspension, expulsion, targeting students for services, and sexual and racial harassment. Choices on curriculum policies, hiring, and staff assignments (like teachers who are assigned to teach ESL classes versus mainstream teachers) also affect the learning environment for Latino students (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Often, students of color lack the knowledge of American school policies and procedures and are also not well informed of school and classroom rules. This creates confusion and anguish on the student's part (Carger, 1996; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Dietrich, 1998). Not understanding the policies and procedures of the school could eventually lead to discipline issues both in and out of classroom (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Dietrich, 1998).

Most often students of color have educational experiences which differ from others in the educational system here in the United States. These students lack the “cultural capital” or school cultural knowledge which is needed to help them survive or succeed in their educational endeavors (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Hamann, 2003; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Heath, 1983; Obiakor & Ford 2002; Teel & Parecki, 2001). When students lack school cultural knowledge, they are less likely to participate in school activities and therefore not be active participants of their school. When students are not active in school activities, they

tend to look for alternative ways of being noticed or occupying their free time (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). These students often tend to be the students in the principal's office because they often tend to challenge existing rules and practices and most often fail at the attempt by getting into trouble by school personnel (Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Carger, 1996; Teel & Parecki, 2001).

Students' Social, Cultural and Family Influences

Students' overall schooling experiences help shape how they perceive certain aspects of their schooling very much like their social, cultural, and family influences affect their identity formation (Valdes, 2001; Dietrich, 1998; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carger, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Anzaldua, 1987; Teel & Parecki 2002; Obiakor & Ford 2002). As one scholar puts it, "Young people face innumerable personal, social, and political challenges, not to mention massive economic structural changes not even dreamed about by other generations of youth in the twentieth century" (Nieto 1994, p.355). Social influences could include "peer pressure" which can have both positive and negative effects on building student identity (Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carger, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Anzaldua, 1987; Teel & Parecki 2002; Obiakor & Ford 2002; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). Older school-age children depend greatly on "peer pressure" (Dietrich, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 2001; Flores-

Gonzalez, 2002; Teel & Parecki 2002). It is beneficial to be aware of what some of the peer influences are so as to provide better support services for students. Stanton (2001) in his research found that social support networks based on interviews with students and families in the San Diego and San Francisco areas document numerous constraints and social forces that prevent many low-status youth from constructing relationships and social networks that could provide important social support.

Cultural and family influences that help shape individual identities include family values, beliefs, and traditions associated with students' culture. Latino students often experience cultural conflicts, which can arise while students go through different stages of their culture formation (Valenzuela, 1999; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Dietrich, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987). Students go through a transition from their immigrant state, as they assimilate into the new American culture (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Hamann, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Pugach, 1998).

Many of the Latino students who enter the U.S. schools are students who have little or no schooling experience. Most of them come from very poor and small rural villages of Mexico, South America, or Central America (Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Carter, 1970; Anzaldua, 1987; Carger, 1996). Because many of these villages lack schools, poor parents without financial means are less likely to send their children to school (Carter, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999; Hamann, 2003; Flores-

Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987; Dietrich, 1998). Students who have no prior school experience are confronted with culture shock in the U.S. schools because they are not accustomed to being in a school setting, and are also not sure how to cope with the new changes of the learning environment and other challenges brought out by the new American life (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Anzaldua, 1987). Students experience a new life very different from the life back in their small towns (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Anzaldua, 1987; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 2001). Most often, students are accustomed to knowing and learning from everyone in their hometown, the parents and elders help educate and raise the children. When students arrive here in the U.S., they have to face total isolation and loneliness. Students have a difficult time transitioning from their immigrant life to their new American life (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Valdes, 2001; Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Anzaldua, 1987).

During the transitioning phase some students often experience culture clashes when certain values they have come to accept are challenged. When this occurs, students experience confusion and alienation, which builds rejection of both cultures, and ultimately to performing non-acceptable behaviors, poor academic achievement, problems of absenteeism, and/or disruptive behaviors (Pulido 1991; Olsen, 1988, 1990:2:7; Pugach, 1998; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002, Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996). These negative outcomes are more likely when schools fail to

understand minority students' cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, or the roles students play in a particular culture, for example, differences in gender, family, and religious roles. These are only some of the roles played out by Latino students (Griggs 1995; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Dietrich, 1998; Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987). Social and cultural influences thus affect not only the students' identity development at home and elsewhere, but also their experiences in school (Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Carter, 1970). The family, thus plays a central role in this process.

Identity formation

Not only do Latino students' academic, social, cultural, and family influences play an important role in shaping their perceptions of their schooling experience, it also shapes their identity formation (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Carter, 1970). How do Latino students get to be who they are? By "identity" I am referring to- who they perceive themselves to be in relation to their social and cultural background, to their academic and occupational futures, and to their place within a family system. Therefore, their academic, social, cultural, and family influences help mold their identity development (Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Carger, 1996; Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987). All

students have faced different life experiences which have molded them into the individuals they are today. All students are also at different stages of their identity formation (Carter, 1970; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Carger, 1996; Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987). Some students are getting to know themselves as learners, while others are recognizing what it is to be Latino/a, and others might be grappling with the idea of citizenship or immigrant status issues. Some students are also learning how to be productive citizens of their school and community (Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Carter, 1970; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970).

As educators, it is essential for us to know where students come from and their cultural experiences because this will provide much detail as to who the students are and what their educational experiences might entail (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Hamann, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Carter, 1970; Pugach, 1998). Immigrant students, for example, have student experiences that are very different from students born and educated here in the United States (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Hamann, 2003; Valdes, 2001). They have the experience of being educated in different learning environments under different living conditions. These experiences have assisted them in knowing more about themselves and about their educational goals (Olsen,

1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

Identity formation occurs at different levels within each category of their development; for example, immigrant students experience different levels within immigrant status (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carter, 1970; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Hamann, 2003). They might be a first year or newly arrived immigrant student with no prior education, very little educational experience, and with a substantial amount of prior education. Latino students born here in the United States are also at different stages of their identity formation. Some might be first generation U.S.- born Latino students while others are second or third generation. Some might be bilingual and/or migrant students while others might be in mainstream English instruction classes (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Valdes, 2001).

Latino Student Success

Both separately and together, all of the elements in this framework discussed so far—meaningful learning environments; school policies and procedures related to linguistic diversity; students’ social, cultural and family influences; and students’ identity formation—have important implications for Latino student success or lack of success. Literature points to Latino students not succeeding in the educational systems in the United States as compared to mainstream students (Carter, 1970;

Valdes, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004). Learning some skills to assist Latino students to perform better in school can be very beneficial for students and school personnel (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Pugach, 1998; Hamann, 2003). Some successful school strategies can include behaviors and methods that successful students often use unconsciously or learn easily. Among the helpful strategies or skills are those that clarify the misunderstood or unclear school expectations and study skills (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Pugach, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). Teaching students these academic strategies or approaches to learning can help less successful students find handles that make school more understandable and more workable for them (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002). At the same time Latino students bring a wealth of cultural/social capital to their school experiences and if acknowledged and utilized by the school and by them they can have more productive learning experiences.

School expectations include written rules and unwritten rules, which can be very unclear and in some instances troublesome to students of color (Carter, 1970; Valdes, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002). Written expectations include classroom and school

rules concerning turning in homework, late work, making up assignments, being tardy to class, absences, being respectful, and being prepared for class. Most often written expectations are written in handbooks which are provided to all students in the beginning of each academic year. Many school expectations are not written down, especially those that reflect the cultural norms of the country, community, or school. Students of color often have a difficult time understanding the “unwritten rules” (Carter, 1970; Valdes, 2001; Hamann, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994). For example, teachers expect students to be looking at them to make sure students are paying attention and listening (“all eyes on me”) in class or while teacher is directing a conversation at them, while in other countries students are not expected to look at teachers because this could be a sign of being defiant and could be a reason for punishment. Informing and helping students to recognize the written and unwritten rules can help them to be more successful learners (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

Students are more likely to be successful learners if they are aware of the written and unwritten school expectations, as well as having knowledge of study skills and learning approaches (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Pugach, 1998). There are many ways of studying but most often students are not taught how to study effectively. Study skills

and learning approaches could include test-taking skills, reading and writing strategies, graphic organizers, and organization strategies, which could be essential learning tools for successful learning. Test taking skills could include teaching students the different ways of taking tests. Many times students are not sure of the different forms and tests used here in the U.S. schools. For example, immigrant students most often lack skills needed to succeed in a fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice test because they are not familiar with this concept (Olsen, 1998, 1990). Students also benefit from being introduced to different reading strategies so as to make them better readers and to aide in understanding what they have read (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Teel & Parecki, 2001). These reading strategies could include: previewing, setting a purpose and plan before reading, asking questions while reading (like: Has something like this every happened? What do I think of this? How I feel about this?), or after reading, using pause, reflex, reread, and remember information read. Writing strategies that aide students in writing more effectively could include: writing outlines, rough drafts; self correcting by using a writing rubric, and proofreading,

Teaching students to use graphic organizers and organizational strategies will also assist them in becoming more successful learners. Some of the graphic organizers include; Venn, clustering, and web diagrams; idea mapping; timelines; and cause and effect charts. Organizational strategies that could be used to assist students in being more organized and prepared for classes could include: daily planners, which contain calendars for writing in homework assignments, school rules and policies,

and also using a notebook binder with subject dividers to keep track of all class assignments. Students will be more successful learners if they are provided with adequate tools and essential approaches to learning (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Teel & Parecki, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990).

School and District Context

Having an understanding of Latino student success and what affects it must take account of the conditions of the school and district context (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). Not only do these contextual conditions shape the actual interplay of forces affecting these students' education, but also they color the way students perceive their school and district experience. Conditions within a school that may affect the students' perceptions toward their schooling may be issues related to the school's reform history, size of building; FTO(s) (number of full time students) served, diversity population, and staff make-up (special services and mainstream). Assessing their community and students needs will benefit the schools in gaining an understanding of what is working and not working, what needs and interests are not being met and what populations are being left unheard (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Pugach, 1998; Hamann, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

District contexts that may affect how students perceive their educational experiences could be issues like curriculum practices (selection and adoption of curriculum and materials), funding, fiscal, community housing and employment needs, health related issues, and other concerns. Also, ways of interacting with school personnel and community partnerships, and nature of community are also crucial issues to take into consideration for assessing students' perceptions.

Communication process used between schools, community, and especially with parents with diverse language needs is a condition that could also affect students' overall perceptions on schooling (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Pugach, 1998; Hamann, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Dietrich, 1998; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

Discovering how Latino Students Perceive

Their Schooling Experience

Together, the matters discussed in the conceptual framework above frame how Latino students experience schooling in public schools within the United States. But for schools to improve the quality and outcomes of that schooling, they will need to get a better sense from the students themselves of how these influences are playing out in individual students' lives (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). Even though these students share a common heritage and language background, they differ from one another in many ways, and the various forces that affect their schooling experience may influence them differently. It is too easy for mainstream educators to see Latino students as an undifferentiated population of students, or a needy segment of the students who all need the same thing (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter,

1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

To understand how the students experience schooling and how to make that experience a better one, educators will need to take steps to get at the students' perceptions. Doing so will "give voice" to a segment of the student population that is often "invisible," and hence poorly understood, if they are understood at all (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). This dissertation is an attempt to bring those perceptions into full view, and to see what can be learned from them about the way schooling can be made to work better for this growing segment of the public school population in the United States.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

This study was done with a design and research methods that were well adapted to getting personal information from high school students who were from Latino backgrounds. To explain my design and approach, I describe below the tradition of research and why it was sensible for this project, the choice of the setting and the student participants, data sources and procedures, analysis and reporting, and approach to minimizing bias and error.

Tradition of Research and why it Makes Sense for My Study

The research methodology used in this study relies on qualitative, not quantitative traditions. Qualitative researchers are ones who might be interested in understanding how a particular phenomenon interacts or the nature of that phenomenon. Qualitative researchers are also interested in understanding the meanings people have constructed—that is, how they make sense of their world based on their own experiences (Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2003). In this study, I am interested in understanding the Latino students' perceptions of their schooling experiences. I will do this by interviewing, observing, and reviewing documents, which enable me to record students' actual feelings, ideas, and desires as they relate to their life experiences.

Merriam (1998) discusses the characteristics associated with qualitative research. One characteristic is the ability to understand the phenomenon from the participant's perspective and not the researcher's. This is referred to as the "emic", or insider's perspective, versus the "etic", or outsider's view point. A second characteristic is that the researcher is the primary tool or instrument for data collection and analysis. Third, qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher has to physically go to the phenomenon being studied—people, institution, program, or school site to observe the participants in their natural setting. Fourth, qualitative research work generally employs an inductive research strategy. This is done by building abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories from patterns in the data itself rather than starting with theories, deriving testable hypotheses from them, and then going to find data that will enable these tests to be made. Finally, qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding in the phenomenon being studied.

A common form of qualitative investigation in the educational research field is case study. In case study research the phenomenon under study is referred to as the "case". Merriam (1988) defines case study in terms of its end product: "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). Therefore, a case could be a person like a student, a teacher, an administrator, a district, a particular school, a program, a policy, or a community. Furthermore, case studies describe, interpret, build theory, or evaluate the phenomenon being studied. Case study also gets as close to the topic of

interest as possible, by means of direct observation in natural settings, thereby, accessing actual feelings, thoughts, and interests (Merriam, 1998; Mills, 2003).

Case study methods are an especially appropriate approach to studying the topic of my research. It allowed me to get close to the people I wanted to study—Latino students in high schools—and understand their perspectives on their schooling, based on their life experiences, goals, desires, feelings, and interactions with self or others. Each student becomes a “case” embedded within the larger case of the single school that I was studying. Through fieldwork in this setting, and drawing on interview, observations, and document review as a means of data collection, I was able to investigate my topic in a naturalistic setting and in the terms that the participants experience their lives in and out of school.

Setting and Sample

The setting or site is the place where the research will take place and the sample are the participants within that setting. For the purposes of this study, my research site was a single suburban high school in the state of Washington, which has experienced an increase in the number and proportion of Latino students within its student population. I chose to perform my research in a high school setting because high school students are better able to articulate and share their feelings and ideas about their educational lives, thereby making my research study more interesting and insightful. Also, having worked in a high school setting before, my prior teaching experiences and interests in this grade level contributed to my ability to do this

research work effectively. The setting included the school community—the larger environment in which the students’ families, community partnerships and organizations, and various out-of-school activities could contribute to the overall learning of the participating students.

The sample included fifteen Latino/a students enrolled in the school district who had an interest in being part of the research study. The administrator and school counselor generated a list of possible Latino students interested in participating in the study. The school administrator introduced me to individual Latino students and, if students agreed to participate in the study, they were later contacted and then were informed about the details of study participation and also asked to sign an assent form prior to the study which confirmed their interest in participating in the research study. Next, students’ parents were notified of the study via phone or mail and a parent consent form was signed.

Students were selected based on the following criteria; (1) Latino/a background, (2) interest in being part of the study, (3) willingness to share insights and perceptions of schooling experiences, and (4) interest in Latino student issues. I did not use gender, grade level, academic achievement, learning abilities, language ability, or family financial status as criteria in selecting the sample. As a consequence, the student sample ranged from high and low performance in school, and had varied learning abilities, family and immigrant status, Spanish/ English-speaking language abilities, and socioeconomic status. Having a wide range of

individuals in the sample enriched the research study and also contributed to the overall study findings.

Data Sources and Procedures

My key modes of data collection were the following (1) participant observation; (2) semi-structured interviews with individuals; (3) informal focus group interviews with a group of students; (4) and document review. This approach allowed me to access students' perceptions of their schooling experiences and also assisted in finding connections or reasons for their thoughts or perceptions (Merriam, 1988; Mills, 2003). Surveys could not be used in this study because I was not planning on gathering large volumes of data, and pre-dictated surveys (having anticipated questions and rating scales) might fail to capture subtle differences in students' schooling experiences (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). The more impersonal nature of surveys can also discourage students from sharing their thinking freely.

Participant Observations

As a participant-observer, I immersed myself in the school site (as a volunteer) and in related community affairs; I recorded observations for a three-month period of time (from February through April, 2004). This time frame allowed me to capture a sufficiently long period leading up to the WASL examination period and other spring-time school activities, which could pose a scheduling challenge for data collection plans. I documented my findings in a field journal, which included

field notes, thoughts, and reflections regarding day-to-day observation, and other notes on any conversations held by Latino students, administrators, teachers, parents and/or community members.

I also participated in or observed numerous school and community functions. These functions included assemblies, rallies, clubs, sport events, faculty meetings, and PTSA (Parent Teacher School Association) meetings. Some of these school events included: Open House, parent-teacher conferences, curriculum nights, and parent training programs. The purpose of observing these events was to see what kind of activities students participated in and why and how students engaged in out-of-school activities with peers, other staff, and family.

To get community input on this study, I attended community meetings like local church meetings, school board meetings, and other functions where community leaders met. Meeting community leaders was very crucial for accessing different thoughts and opinions regarding Latino student achievement. I also met some of the participants' families and informed them about the study and asked them to contribute any insights they had about their child in relation to the study. These contacts with families provided a wealth of knowledge about the participants' background and culture. I was also able to build rapport with the participants' and their families during the research work.

As a Latina woman and educator, I was able to gain relatively easy access to community events by informing individuals in charge of my study plans and interests. Community members interested in student achievement and related issues were more

cooperative and willing to share valuable and insightful information with an investigator who was of the same culture and in a professional field, Latino women scholars have found in studying Latino student achievement and their families in their communities (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Nieto, 1992, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Anzaldua 1998).

I wrote some of my daily observations in my journal and recorded some of the conversations of meetings and other conversations with students, parents, community leaders, or school personnel. I read and reflected on my observation journal writing and looked for related themes within the journal entries on a continual basis.

Group and Individual Interviews

The group interviews were conducted with different groups of students either during their lunch break or during their participation in after-school clubs or activities. The group interviews ranged from different size configurations. The group interviews lasted anywhere from a half-hour (lunch period) to an hour (after-school activities). The interviews were conducted in either English or in Spanish, whichever language was favored by the participating individual student or group of students at the time of the interview. Follow-up individual interviews were also conducted with students who wanted more time to contribute additional insight(s) on a particular matter. These group and individual interviews focused on preferences or dislikes of before or after-school activities; perceptions of school policies, personnel, organization, subjects, or classes; interactions with peers, teachers, and others; and

the social, cultural, or academic pressures or challenges students were facing in their lives.

Individual students were interviewed using a semi-structured format so that I could elicit a wide range of students' perceptions in a flexible way. A format or set of anticipated questions (lead questions) and additional questions (probes) were used that could prompt a response when the student participants were unsure as to how to answer a particular question.

Some teachers and school personnel were also interviewed, to get a broader picture of how the school staff perceived the Latino students in their school. The interview questions were intended to focus on teachers' attitudes toward teacher and learning, and overall performance of Latino students. The questions also served to inform me whether teachers and school personnel perceived Latino students were performing up to their individual learning capacities and also how they were performing in comparison with non-Latino students. The interview questions also provided the teachers and school personnel opportunities to express what they saw as similarities and differences they observed with Latino students as compared to other non-Latino students in the school.

Individual and group interviews were recorded, and transcribed within four weeks after the interviews, and thereby became the primary data record for analysis.

Documentary Evidence

I also collected and reviewed documentary data, including the school newsletter, memos, notices, handouts, archival information (with school approval). These documents were stored in a three-ring binder for easy access and referral. Reviewing school documents helped me get a better understanding of the school culture and atmosphere. Reviewing school literature also aided in staying active in the day-by-day school events and functions. The researcher also examined student work with teacher and students' permission, which gave some light on students' lives or educational experiences.

Matrix of Research Questions by Data Sources

A matrix grid, Table 1, shows how these data sources can be mapped onto the research questions. The matrix grid was used both as a planning tool and as a guide to triangulating answers to the research questions. Specifically, the grid provided me with a visual guide and tool to better assess and assure that I was not relying solely on one particular data collection source and also to make sure that all study questions got represented throughout the study by at least one data collection source.

Table 1: Matrix of Research Questions by Data Sources

Research Study Questions	Principal Interview	Group and individual student interviews	Teacher Interviews	Observations	Documents
1. What are the students' perceptions of schooling and the nature of their learning environment?	X	X			
2. What social, cultural, and family influences have helped shape these perceptions?	X	X		X	X
3. What school policies and practices affect the learning environment for Latino students and how they perceive their schooling experiences?	X	X	X	X	X
4. As the students see it, how has their experience of schooling affected their self-identify formation?	X	X		X	
5. What suggestions do the participants have for ways to improve Latino academic achievement in the school?	X	X			

Analysis, Interpretation, and Reporting

I reviewed and interpreted the research data daily to identify common themes or ideas, which could provide additional insights or future areas of focus related to the research study. The audio-taped individual and group interviews were transcribed

soon after the interviews to ensure that the richness of the interview data was not lost or forgotten. I used documentary data to develop additional insights about school culture or environment and to get student data that could be used to explain some of the findings about the participants' perceptions. The participants' interview responses were used to find associations among their responses to different questions and also to find common themes or ideas for the final writing stages of the research. The interview question responses were grouped based on different responses or similar responses, common themes, ideas or interests based on students' schooling experiences.

Approach to Minimizing Bias and Error

Because effective researchers need to make sure that their own personal biases are not reflected in the study, I worked hard on eliminating my personal bias throughout the study. This can be difficult and troublesome but essential for producing a study that is "true" to the phenomenon being investigated. Being Latina, I possessed the participants' cultural knowledge and life experiences, and also as an educator, I had academic knowledge of students and schooling. My personal knowledge proved a benefit for pursuing this particular research topic and at the same time could pose problems because it was quite easy to try to make personal assumptions about the meaning of what I was hearing or observing throughout the study. Because any personal views or bias could really off-set my overall research findings, I took extra precautions to minimize my opinions and premature

interpretations throughout the research work. My goal was to use prior cultural and life experiences as a tool for assessing and constructively interpreting the Latino students' schooling experiences without trying to impose my own personal biases, much like other Latino researchers have done in their research work (e.g., Valdes, 1996, 2001, Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Nieto, 1992, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Anzaldua, 1987).

I also attempted to minimize error and bias by using triangulation, so as to not rely on any single source of data, interview, observation, or data collection instrument (Mills, 2003). Thus, I triangulated the data collected from participant interviews, active participant observation, and documentary reviews, aided by a triangulation matrix grid, which helped assure that I was not relying solely on one particular data source. I also triangulated within each data source so that multiple points in the data source acted as a way to cross-check or reinforce the patterns emerging from the data. The triangulation matrix grid contained the research questions and the data collection sources used in the data collection process.

Another potential device for minimizing biases and error was multiple time frames throughout the research work. I interviewed various student participants and also observed them at different times throughout the data collection period. For example: I observed at different times of day, and different days of the week, also observed different classes, at different periods throughout the school day, and observed student participants during various before- and after-school activities as well—all across the three-month period of data collection. This method of relying on

multiple modes and times of data collection guided me in not making false assumptions about the meaning of any particular incident, class, or occurrence observed or heard about during the interview process.

My ultimate goal as the researcher was to obtain the most accurate and unbiased data possible. Therefore, I recorded field notes on a daily basis, tape recorded interviews, and provided research summaries to the participants for systematic checking. The field notes were recorded in a writing journal that was maintained and updated on a daily bases. The writing journal contained mostly the observation finding notes, thoughts and reflections on particular matters, and other questions or insights related to the study. Another means used for obtaining accurate data was the method of tape recording participants' interviews. Tape recording the interviews assured that all information was accurately and completely transcribed and participants' voices got included and represented in the study. Systematic checking with participants also ensured accuracy and aided in understanding different aspects of the data collection process. This included providing the student participants with a written summary drafts throughout the data collection process for previewing before actual analysis and interpretation of data occurred. Providing a written summary rough draft of observation findings to the participants gave the students, teachers, and parents an opportunity to add additional thoughts, ideas, and insights regarding the study. The written summaries drafts at times included responses from participants' interviews, and/or other summaries of overall findings of the school and/or of the individual participants of the study. Using various modes of systematic checking

assisted in assuring and maintaining the most accurate, complete, and unbiased process possible for collecting and analyzing the data.

Final Product

The final product of this research study consists of a document that can be shared and used by interested schools, especially schools which are impacted with large populations of Latino students much like the research site. This document contains Latino student portraits and individual student insights into their academic and personal life environments, which shed some light into their everyday life challenges and struggles in schooling. The document also presents a cross-case analysis that highlights common themes and differences among the individual Latino student cases. Each Latino student case is interpreted in different ways and shows varying aspects of school policies and practices which seem to make the most significant difference in these students' academic lives. The document also sheds light on many other factors or forces including cultural and social barriers or obstacles that Latino students currently face in schools throughout the U.S.

The research envisions this document to be used as a tool to assess Latino students' perspectives on school climate, attitudes, and experiences towards American schools. This document's findings can also be used for assessing future planning of programs and services so as to better meet the needs and demands of the existing Latino student population.

Chapter 4

Findings I: Latino Students in Family and Cultural Context

This chapter and the next chapter present findings from the analysis of Latino students' responses to their schooling experiences. I present the findings in two ways. First, in this chapter, I offer portraits of four students—Jaime, Bianca, Juanita, and Sergio—to illustrate the range of ways that Latino students with different life experiences and family backgrounds encounter school. To place these students in their cultural context, I also review findings across all students that capture the influences of family and culture on their schooling experiences. This set of influences concerns the way family and culture shape and molds the individual Latino student through the language spoken at home, family activities, and parent background. Understanding these influences helps to identify where these Latino students and their families came from and what kind of life challenges and barriers they have endured along the path.

In the next Chapter, I analyze and present the students' responses to school and their peer group. First, I lay out in considerable detail how the students perceived, and interacted with, their academic and social environment in school. Students expressed ideas about many particular aspects of the school environment including the social organization of school, other students, and school safety; the reorganization of school into Academies; teachers, teaching, and learning; curriculum and classes,

homework and tests, and improving learning opportunities; changes in personnel, the physical surrounding of the school, the organization of time and the school calendar. They also commented on changes Latino students wanted to see incorporated into the academic environment. Second, concerning their interactions with peer groups and friends, my analysis highlighted the kinds of people Latino students decided to hang around with and what led to those decisions, and also how the peer groups and friends impacted the Latino students' social and academic lives. The following themes were explored in this Chapter: academic factors affected which students hang around with whom; cultural factors shed light on the realities of cultural pressures, as well as the concept of gender issues and differences; and lastly social factors explained why students chose to hang around or not with particular peers, depending on interests and choices they shared in common with other peers. The Chapter also explores the effects of social networks and their involvement in activities, and eventually how the relationships they developed with peers affected or impacted the Latino students' lives.

Portraits of Latino Students

The Latino students interviewed had interesting and vivid life stories which illustrate the interactions between their cultural and family backgrounds and their experiences in school. Four portraits will assist us in getting a better picture of the Latino students who so graciously shared their time, interests, culture, family history, academic and social happenings, and their educational and life endeavors. These

Latino students come from a variety of cultural, family, and environmental settings, and have endured numerous barriers and challenges throughout their life span. While not a representation of all Latino students interviewed or of all Latino students in the school, these four offer a means of visualizing how the different aspects of their home and community lives and school lives fit together.

These students differ in a number of respects from each other. First, their family circumstances differ. Second, their assimilation into society in the United States varies, as some are well accustomed to life here, while others are in the process of learning the social and culture norms of the American school system. Thirdly, they differ greatly in their academic interests and experiences—most shared having very little success in school, while only one of the four shared having much success and motivation in advancing future educational goals. Lastly, their past experiences differ, which have aided them in molding their character and self into the type of individuals they are today and into what they envision themselves to be in the future. Their differences bring sharply into focus their aspirations for a good education and for a future that depends on it, yet at the same time the struggles they currently have in making school work for them. The sources of their struggle are varied—sometimes in the way they are treated in school, sometimes in the organization or learning opportunities within it, sometimes in their family and community experiences.

Jaime's Story

Jaime was very shy at first but when we started the interview questions he started warming up and was enthusiastic about sharing his life experiences. He and his family came from a small town called Las Varas, Nayarit, Mexico. He has lived in the U.S. most of his life with the exception of four years in which he moved back to Mexico to go live with his grandmother. He is the oldest of four children. Jaime's birth father was in prison for many years and after prison he apparently became mentally ill and had to return to live in Mexico. His family recently moved from Idaho because his stepfather was having problems with the police. He really liked his school in Idaho and misses his friends from there. He feels that the students in this school are not as friendly as students from the school in Idaho.

He shared that certain students at the school, especially one in particular, made fun of him because of his weight. One of his friends protected him and told the bullying student to stop teasing him. Jaime doesn't participate in any activities outside of school or community events. Negative comments about his weight may have affected his self-esteem and therefore he is not interested in getting involved in activities. He believes that school is a good learning resource and that everyone should take advantage of it, even though his friends think that school is incredibly annoying and they dislike attending it. Jaime's friends feel that, since they are Mexicans, school opportunities are not as good for them as for non-Mexican students. Some of his friends who do not have legal documentation feel that high school are not exceptionally useful to them because they will not be able to attend a college

placement after graduation and, therefore, pay very little attention in school and also try the least to succeed.

Jaime has a little more positive view of education and what it may do for him, though he is not sure that the public school system he is in now will do it for him. Jaime feels that the school here could use more security measures like cameras so that it will make it more difficult for students to fight or smoke outside of the school buildings. He also feels that the principal could be walking around more often and checking up on the security guards to make sure they are doing their job.

Jaime would like to drop out of high school to attend a community college so that he can work on improving his GPA score, which now is very low. He hopes to be able to attend a college or university in California because he wants to experience the idea of living and working on his own. His dream profession is being an artist. He wants to attend a four-year university so that he can get a degree in art and therefore have more job opportunities. Jaime would also like to be a Spanish music singer because he enjoys listening to and singing Spanish music.

The most important figures in Jaime's life are his grandmother, who lives in Mexico, and his mother. He feels these female figures are very strong-willed and have also helped him to be who he is by constantly giving him advice. Jaime feels that his grandmother is a fantastically good teacher who showed him how to be a hard worker. He is especially grateful to his mother for assisting him in coping with all his problems, worries, and bad behaviors when he first came back from living in Mexico.

He worries constantly about his father's well-being and hopes that he will be normal some day.

Bianca's Story

Bianca is a shy girl who preferred to be interviewed in Spanish because she felt that her English language skills were not very good yet. Bianca and her family came from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. She has four sisters. Her dad works at the Safeway store in town and mom works at Wendy's restaurant. Both parents have limited elementary school experiences.

Bianca, much like Jaime, shares mixed views of school. Since she is dreadfully shy, she dislikes her leadership class because it focuses on presenting speeches and projects in front of the class. Yet she admires the school in general and feels that it is nice and spacious. She really appreciates the cafeteria the most. Bianca participates in homework club sometimes after-school. She feels safe and secure in this school because no one teases or bothers her. She also participates in soccer in and outside of school and is involved in a dance group. Bianca hangs around with many friends who like to have fun during school time but outside of school she hangs out with friends who she considers are boring. Some of the activities she does for fun with her friends include going to the movies, park, and dancing. School in general is extraordinarily boring to her, and she feels that it is awfully difficult because of the reorganization of the school into Academies. Bianca's friends also feel that school is boring. One suggestion Bianca

had for the school as a way to improve was to get rid of the Academies, which she really dislikes. She would prefer to return to the traditional way of organizing the school.

Bianca, much like Jaime, would like to graduate and attend college. She dreams of becoming a pediatrician because she prefers to study medicine and loves children. When asked what suggestions she had for improving Latino student education she had no comments. One of her main worries was that she was not going to be able to graduate from high school with her friends because she was lacking many credits.

Her family is wonderfully important in her life. She was unable to select one important person figure in her life at first but when prompted she was able to share that her grandmother was important to her. She commented that her grandmother was an important figure in her life but she did not want to grow up to be like her because her grandmother had suffered too much and Bianca did not want to suffer like her.

Unfortunately, a few days after the interview Bianca's parents withdrew her from school because she was exceptionally behind in credits and therefore was not going to graduate with her class. Her parents felt that she was only wasting her time in school and they insisted that she drop out of high school and instead was going to have to obtain a job to help with the family's finances. Bianca's parents were apparently terribly upset about her not being up to grade level and about her missing numerous school days (she had skipped many times with her friends during the academic year, which her parents were unaware of). The parents were assuming she was going to graduate with her class but were notified by the school counselor that Bianca was lacking too many credits to be able to graduate this year. Therefore, Bianca had to either attend summer school or

register for the upcoming school year in order to get caught-up in credits to be able to graduate. She was dreadfully depressed about having to leave school because she no longer was going to be able to see her friends from the school and was also not going to be able to graduate with her peers. Bianca felt that this was the end of her educational opportunities.

Juanita's Story

Unlike Bianca and Jaime, who were very shy and shared very little about their life, Juanita was very social and demonstrated a great interest in voicing her ideas and sharing her life experiences. Also unlike Jaime and Bianca, Juanita enjoyed school very much and she put great interest in getting good grades and taking advantage of the educational opportunities offered to her. A whole book could have been written solely on her interview responses but for the purpose of this study I have only included a snapshot of her life and experiences. Juanita was born in Los Angeles, California, and her parents were born in Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan, Mexico. Juanita and her family had lived in California until she was ten years old, when they moved here to the Seattle area. Her family speaks both Spanish and English to communicate at home. Her mother speaks more Spanish because she still has an accent but prefers to have them speak to her in English so she can practice her English language skills. Juanita likes to use more English also when she has English-speaking friends visit because she does not like to have them not being able understand what is being said. Juanita lives at home with her brother, mother, and stepfather. Her birth father lives somewhere in California but is not really

involved in her life because he has another family and also does not visit often. She has one brother and many half brothers and sisters. She knows that she has other brothers and sisters from her dad but she doesn't know them. She would prefer to have her father be more involved in her life but has managed to understand that he may choose not to. Juanita and her brother became exceptionally independent after their parents divorced. Her parents divorced when she was six or seven years old, so, she has lived most of her life only with her brother, mother, and stepfather.

Unlike Jaime and Bianca, school is working well for Juanita, and she is making the most of the educational opportunities offered. Juanita really admires her biology class; she thinks biology is interesting because it has many hands-on activities, experiments with animals, and lab work. She also feels that the biology class, especially the projects and tests, challenge her mind. She really dislikes her P.E. class because she feels she can live without it. She cherishes all her teachers and enjoys the school building but dislikes the school Academies because she feels that everybody is segregated and separated from friends now. Juanita commented that under the new arrangement the students were only able to socialize with students within the same Academy, therefore, that separation had created a lack of school spirit. There were also no more school pep assemblies which she felt used to be a time for friends to meet and a place to build school spirit. Juanita disliked school lunches because she felt the school cafeteria served the same dull lunch day-after-day and also served mostly fatty foods.

Juanita, unlike Jaime and Bianca, is a marvelously active student who participates in various school activities like tennis, TATOO Club (Kids against Tobacco), FBLA

(Future Business Leaders of America), and volleyball, and she would like to participate in wrestling because she dreams of wrestling boys in her grade level. She wants to be a class officer next year and is working on improving her grades so that she can also get into the National Honor Society. She is also planning to work with her junior class on preparation for senior prom. At home, she mostly baby sits her younger cousins and sometimes goes out with her friends but mostly has to stay at home because she has very little freedom to go out with friends.

Juanita's active participation in school life coincides with a changing pattern of relationships with friends. When asked what kind of kids she hung around with, Juanita commented that she used to hang around with primarily newly arrived Spanish-speaking Latino students before but now she prefers to hang out with a mixture of friends from different ethnicities and most of them being students whom are involved in sports and other school activities and interests like herself. She responded that she no longer hung around with primarily Latino students because she felt they were not at her level any more and that, unlike her, they seemed to settle for low grades and expectations. She also felt that they were unable to challenge themselves like she does. She also wants to put more effort into her schoolwork and work on increasing her GPA unlike many of the Latino students in her school. The friends she now hangs around with tend to stay away from illegal activities like drugs and alcohol and are also extremely active in school activities like sports and clubs.

Juanita feels that her mother is incredibly strict and doesn't understand her at times. She can't understand why her mother doesn't let her go to her male friend's house

even though other friends will be there. She feels that her mother is exceptionally old fashioned and strict because of her Mexican cultural background and also because of the way she was raised in her own family. Her mother lectures her by expressing that Latina girls should not be allowed to be going out with boys because the girls can get into trouble. Juanita thinks that her mother does not trust her at times and this causes conflict and misunderstandings in their relationship. She also feels that her mother is always getting on her case for coming home late after her school commitments. Juanita gets good grades and gets involved in school so she doesn't understand why her mother does not trust her and let her go out with her friends. She notices that her American girlfriends have more freedom to go out than she does. She also feels they are trusted more by their parents than she is trusted by her mother.

Juanita and her friends get together to go to the movies, hiking (to work on biology class projects), hang out in the biology classroom after school, and go to each others' houses, or just likes to hang out. Overall, Juanita has many school commitments, which limit her from socializing with friends and balancing time with her boyfriend. She feels that school is a place to get students more involved and more educated and without school people would be ignorant. She also appreciates the fact that school provides different learning opportunities like honors classes and regular classes. Unlike her friends, who think that school in general is stupid, Juanita admires school.

If Juanita could change something about her school she would prefer to have three-day weekends because she feels she could use the extra days off to catch-up on her school projects. She comments that those students who want to work on getting straight

A's would use the three days to do their schoolwork while the rest of the students could use the time to hang out with friends if they were not interested in advancing in schoolwork. She also feels the school could give students at least an hour for lunch because since they let students leave campus for lunch the half hour lunch break which they have now is just not enough. She comments that students now have to run after lunch so they are not marked tardy in their fifth-period class which is right after lunch.

Juanita feels safe in her school and no one bothers or teases her. She exclaimed that nobody bothers her because she is nice to all people unless they do something to her, but she feels she can be intimidating to some people at times even though she tends not to be. She also teases with friends but they don't tease people to be mean or to pick-on them they only tease each other to have fun and to kill time during school.

Juanita's brother has affected or influenced her because she feels she can go to him for academic advice and support. She feels that he understands her more than her mother and can relate to her needs and academic problems. She also feels that her Latino culture has affected who she is because some of her American friends are able to go out more often but she is limited in the things she can do. She believes that her friend's parents trust them more in many things. They can come visit her and go out after 8:00 p.m., while she is not allowed to go out, especially at night. Her friends are also able to spend the night at her house but she is not allowed to spend the night at their houses. Reflecting her mother's strict and traditional upbringing, Juanita is also is not allowed to visit her friends unless her brother accompanies her to make sure she does not get into trouble. Juanita comments that since her mother was raised in this manner, she feels she

has to raise her daughter the same way and also feels that all Mexican families raise their girls in this fashion.

Juanita plans on attending the University of Washington because she feels it is a well known prestigious University and would look really well on resume. She also feels that the University of Washington is one of the best universities in the state of Washington and she prefers it over others.

Her suggestions for improving Latino student education included providing additional teachers to help Spanish-speaking students so they can have someone to talk to them in Spanish and to also to help them in their schoolwork. She feels that the ESL classes do not meet all of their educational needs and feels they need additional time with their regular classroom teachers' after-school so that they can get extra assistance.

She also responded that Latino parents don't really want to get involved in their child's school like in teacher/parent conferences and thinks parents need to not punish kids for wrongdoing but instead they should look for programs to help them work better in school like a learning center. She also remarked that punishing them for their wrongdoing only creates additional problems or makes things worse. She suggests that Latino parents also need to set higher standards for their children and not just settle on their low grades and expectations.

For Latino students, she recommends, that they should not settle for only getting a high school diploma or getting a regular low-paying job. They should put more effort in their everyday schoolwork and get involved in other school sports besides soccer because

everybody tends to categorize them as soccer players. Also, she urges them to not be easily influenced by friends to go skipping classes.

Some of Juanita's concerns include getting all A's in her classes and wanting to balance her academic, social, and personal life without cheating anyone out in the process. She prefers to have her friends, parents, and boyfriend happy but at the same time understands that it's impossible to make everyone happy. She also worries that her mother will not approve of her going out with her boyfriend. Juanita is also concerned that her mother works a lot because she wants to save up enough money to purchase a new home. Having to move to a new house might mean she would have to graduate from another high school because her parents might want to buy a home in a different city or neighborhood where they can afford to purchase a home and where it will be cheaper to live.

Another important person in her life includes her uncle Joey, who has been like her father and has been very involved in her and her brother's lives. She feels she can talk to him about anything and he will understand her. Even though he has two children of his own, he still makes time to help her and her brother. Her uncle Joey is one of the persons she would like to invite to her high school graduation ceremony. She prefers to be like her uncle Joey in many ways but unlike him she plans on graduating and going to college; he didn't have the same educational opportunities growing up so, that's why he didn't get to graduate from high school. She's proud of him though because he is now trying to develop himself by getting his own automobile business. She admires her uncle because he seems to balance his family life and also make time for her and her brother.

She also would like to eventually get her own place to live and a family but still be able to help support her mother and brother.

Sergio's Story

Sergio is a senior this year, but because he is lacking enough credits to be able to graduate with his class, he is planning on enrolling in summer school. Sergio was born in California and his parents are from Yucatan, Mexico. His family has lived in many different states in the U.S. for reasons of relocating for better work and life opportunities. Since his family has migrated often, Sergio has had to attend various schools.

Sergio remarked that the school here is much cleaner, safer, and much smaller than other schools which he had attended in other states. Some of the previous schools in California and Nevada were enormous—about three times larger than this school and had four to five hundred more students. The schools and neighborhoods in California and Nevada were also much rougher in his comparison to this school and neighborhood. He responded that in his middle school in Las Vegas, Nevada, the principals had to patrol the school grounds in a golf cart and had to have a full-time police officer on campus because the school grounds were massive and many fights occurred on a daily basis. A large number of students also carried either guns or knives for protection. He felt that the school here was dreadfully boring because he had not witnessed a fight in ages.

Sergio is not actively involved in any after-school activities but is involved in volunteer work, through which he is currently helping to rebuild an old church in Burien. In addition, he enjoys boxing with his cousins at home.

Regarding the type of friends he hangs around with now, he replied that he has changed substantially the kinds of friends he used to go out with in his younger years. He used to hang out with his “homies” or buddies who used to be in the same gang. All of

his “homies” disliked school and tended to skip classes or not go to school at all. They consumed drugs and alcohol, got into many fights, stole things, and got into trouble with the police many times. As a result most of his friends eventually dropped out of school, some got arrested and put in jail, others not so lucky ended up getting hospitalized for some injuries, and others eventually killed.

When asked to comment on some of the reasons that contributed to his affiliation with a gang he responded that while he was in middle school he lived with his uncle in Las Vegas while his parents lived in Mexico, so, he had lots of time to hang out with his buddies and witnessed many violent situations. Then his family moved to San Bernardino, California. While living in San Bernardino, his parents both had double jobs which meant that he and his brothers were left home alone all the time. He replied that he hung out with his older brother and their buddies most of the time. They started getting into trouble and had observed many “drive-bys”, violent fights in the city parks, and robberies. Once his parents had noticed that they were getting into trouble, they decided to move here to Washington State so that they could get away from the gangs and violence. They also had relatives living here in Washington, which invited them to come and live over here because it was much safer and calmer then in California.

He announced that a special event in his life had helped him realize that what he was doing and the type of friends he was hanging out with were not taking him to any thing pleasant in life. Sergio exclaimed that the turning point had occurred one time when he was called by one of his friends or “homies” on the telephone who told him that he needed him to go right away with his gun because they were going to “get” (injure)

another gang member. He was in such a hurry that he forgot his gun on the bed. All this time his mother, who was at the time pregnant, found the gun and got exceptionally worried and sorrowful. When Sergio returned home his mother was mournful and at the same time dreadfully angry with him. She talked to him and tried to convince him to stop hanging out with friends and also refused to give him back the gun. This incident really made Sergio think twice about all his bad doings and he refused to see his mother depressed and especially because she was getting so close to delivering her baby. He also added that his mother really meant a lot to him and that he adored her so he felt bad to see her so upset. At that point in his life he started making better choices and made new friends.

Now he only hangs out with a girl who has helped him to stay out of trouble and to make better decisions. Sergio met his new friend in a youth church meeting and since then became good friends. She is currently attending Highline Community College and is an honor student who tends to stay away from using drugs and alcohol. She has motivated him to do better in school and to stay out of trouble. Now he prefers to engage in positive activities like going out with his new friend to watch drag car races or attending family gatherings at the park for barbecues. Sergio remarked that he still goes to visit his “homies” in Las Vegas but that he tends to stay away from trouble now. He also feels he’s exceptionally lucky because many of his old buddies are either in jail, dropped out of school, or so some have died in street violence.

When asked to comment on the school in general he replied that he admired the fact that many students from different ethnicities attended the school while other schools

he had previously attended only had a large number of Latino students. He liked having friends from different countries and appreciated seeing so many different ethnicities being represented in one school. Regarding the classes he was currently taking, he stated that he enjoyed this computer class but disliked Washington State History because he felt that what he was learning was not very interesting to him at the time. The organization of the school into Academies was also not to his liking. He had been under the impression that the Academies were going to reduce the number of students in the classes and therefore teachers would be able to better assist and get to know the students, but he has not seen these results happen at all this year. The school lunch in his opinion was also very nasty and he preferred to eat off campus when ever he had the chance.

For the most part he felt that the teachers in this school just did not care like teachers he had had in other schools in California and Nevada. He commented that teachers in California were better prepared and trained to teach students and tend to their needs. He expressed that teachers in his old school seemed to cared more about the students; they wanted to help and also get to know the students in a personal way, unlike the teachers here who he felt only yelled at the students and never made time to get to know them. (One of his current teachers, in particular, he disliked because she only handed the class a packet a day without explaining it and expected the students to do it and not ask any questions or assistance from her.) An ideal teacher to him was one who supported and understood the student's needs while at the same time only judged them for their bad actions. He announced that a good teacher is one who tries to understand their problems and can also relate to their difficult life issues.

Sergio's family motivates him to graduate from high school and to also attend a college program. He added that he would be the first one in his family to graduate because his older brother dropped out of high school in his senior year as well as all his cousins of the same age. He would like to go into the Air Force after he graduates from high school so that he can become a traffic controller. He has done his research his career choice and understands that he will need to attend a college placement for three years and three years of training in the field. He stated that before he was interested in becoming a police officer but felt he would not be a good officer. He was not aware that most of the successful police officers or detectives today had life experiences very similar to his life experiences or "street experiences". He appreciated the fact that his street experiences would be able to assist him in becoming a successful police officer or traffic controller. He wants to attend Green River Community College so that he can get his traffic controller training.

Some of his life worries included the fact that he is not going to march or graduate with his class and therefore will need to return to summer school to make- up the credits he needs to graduate. He is also worried about his older brother who is possibly going to serve five to ten years in prison for a crime he committed. The brother has been going to his court hearings but will eventually need a superior lawyer to be able to assist him in his final trial. Therefore, his family will need to get the money to pay for the lawyer fees, and this worries him because his family is very poor and will not have the means to pay for these fees.

Summary

To sum it up, the student portraits are vivid representations of individuals who have experienced extraordinary challenges and barriers throughout their lives but at the same time have used their experiences to guide them in making more positive decisions and astonishing life choices. Next, we will see how family and culture influences have played a role in shaping and molding each individual Latino student into the type of person he/she is today-by examining the language spoken at home, their family immigrant background, and parents' background. These important themes help us to get a better understanding of where these students and their families come from, what language(s) they prefer to use at home, what some of their worries and concerns are regarding their family, and the role culture plays in their everyday life.

The Influence of Family and Culture on Latino Students'

Lives and Schooling Experiences

The four students whose portraits have just been presented reflect a set of family circumstances that they and many of their Latino schoolmates share. Examining the students' family and culture reveals reasons why Latino families chose to migrate or move to this country and this particular community, as noted in a stream of studies on this topic (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). Through students' responses, we learn about the parents themselves and try to understand their employment roles, education experiences, and family status. All of these factors potentially affect the students' perceptions of family, culture, and eventually of themselves (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). We also glimpse the power of family in these students' lives. The students' comments indicated the importance of female figures in this culture and its cultural norms. They also shared some of their worries concerning their families. Family and culture weave together to influence the students' destinations, aspirations, and life choices, and sometimes predetermine the range of possibilities open to them. The students commented primarily on three family and cultural influences—the language spoken at home, the family immigration background, and the parents' background.

Languages Spoken at Home

Spanish was the primary language used in the homes with the exception of some homes where English and Spanish were used. The students preferred to use Spanish at home with their parents because the parents did not understand English and in some cases were working on their English language skills, preferred to be spoken to in English only. One student did mention that her family used “Spanglish” a combination of Spanish and English in the same sentence or interchanging languages within sentences. This immersion in Spanish-speaking home culture meant that the Latino students came to school with different cultural ideas active in their lives.

Family Immigrant Background

The majority of students interviewed were Mexicans or Mexican Americans, with the exception of three students from El Salvador. They come from rural villages in states within Mexico, which are located within some of the poorest Mexican states like Sonora, Nayarit, Michoacan, Jalisco, and Mexico City. These Latino families seemed to migrate to the community mostly to seek better employment opportunities for parents and educational opportunities for their children with the exception of families from El Salvador, who migrated to this country to escape repercussions from the war. All families come from underprivileged homelands where poverty and hunger are the main enemies. Migrating to the United States in most cases seemed to be the only avenue for escaping third-world living conditions, everyday challenges with poverty and health issues.

Migrating to the U.S. in most cases only added new struggles and challenges for families, like the issues of immigration and legal versus illegal status. Many students interviewed had concerns over legal status, which would eventually determine if he or she would be able to attend college or not and in some cases remain here in the U.S. or be returned back to their homeland. Being illegal aliens or having family members, who were not legal residents, also posed worries for students because they feared for their safety and well-being. For example, Jaime commented that he was worried that his brother who was in prison would eventually get deported to Mexico because he was illegal, while another male student expressed that his older brother was living in El Salvador with relatives because he had been deported back to his country for getting into trouble with the law. While several other students mentioned that they wanted to go to college after graduating from high school but that they saw this to be impossible because they did not have legal status or visas. They felt that the legal status issues only limited their access to furthering their educational goals. As one male student stated, "If we are Mexicans, you can't study college, and if you want to be somebody. If you don't have papers, you can't go to college, prepare for college; they can't go to college because they don't have papers." The student pretty much had predetermined notions of students without legal status or documents will not go to college anyway so there was no reason in his mind to study and to do his best in this school work. As one junior male student shared, "Why study if I'm going to do the same thing as my parents if I don't have papers." He, like many other Latino students, felt hopeless because they lacked the legal documentation to be able to attend a college placement after graduation. Most students

pretty much give in to the fact that it's impossible or useless to want to change their fate, which in most cases is to eventually get minimal paying jobs like their parents. Another girl, when asked whether her friends liked or disliked school, commented:

Well, some don't really like it and some are like me, they like it, like my friend Ya, Ya, (nickname), she goes to OIC. She's really into school but because of certain things.....cuz her like status and stuff like that she's not going to be able to go on to college and stuff.

This girl was concerned about the limited opportunities offered to her and her friend beyond high school graduation due to not having the legal documentation. Several Latino students shared their worries about not being able to pursue a college placement due to not having the legal documentation to be able to attend a college in the U.S.

Even though some were already first generation U.S. born citizens, these students continue to have strong ties to Mexico or El Salvador. They talked about wanting to return to visit their parents' hometown to see family members, who they either knew or wanted to meet. One student, in particular, confessed that she wanted to go meet her brother, who lived in El Salvador. Her parents had migrated to the U.S. to find work and had left her brother with their grandparents to care for him but when they finally got the opportunity to return for him, many years had passed and he refused to return and leave his grandparents and his life over there. She added that she was very nervous and eager to meet him but at the same time was having strange feelings to have to meet him.

Parents' Background

The students' came from a variety of home situations. Some lived with both parents or with one parent, while others lived with other relatives or in some cases with friends. Many students interviewed mentioned that they lived with their parents with one being a stepparent, generally a stepfather. These students talked about their struggles due to their parents' divorce, abandonment issues, feeling of loneliness, and resentments towards birth fathers.

The majority of students' parents' schooling was limited. Most students commented that their parents had first or second grade schooling experiences due to poverty and economic issues, and lack of educational resources and opportunities in their farm villages. In most cases their parents were required to work at a young age to help support the home while cutting short their educational experience.

Since most parents possessed limited schooling experiences in their native language, it was even more difficult for them to obtain employment opportunities in this country. Most of the students' parents worked in low paying employment that required them to put more time and energy into work, which meant they had less time to assist their children with homework assignments or school activities, and were less likely to have extra time to socialize and spend time with their children. Most of the parents worked in minimum wage jobs like: restaurant positions (mostly dishwashers, waiters or bellboys), housekeeping in hotels, working in stores, cleaning construction sites, clean houses. Sergio, the senior student, who had turned his life around from gang life, commented that both of his parents worked two jobs in order to have enough money to

pay their financial debts in California, so he and his brothers were practically left alone most of the time. This vast amount of free time contributed to his involvement with gang members and eventually to making unwise life choices, which led to juvenile crime and violence.

The Latino parents' backgrounds and life choices dramatically affected and influenced the Latino students' self-being and identities in uncontrolled ways. These factors seem to have helped to mold the Latino students into the type of individuals they are today and also the paths they hope to endure in their future endeavors.

Chapter 5

Findings II: Latino Students' Responses to School and Peers

Understanding the life story of different Latino students and appreciating the differences among them, in the context of their family and cultural backgrounds, sets the stage for understanding how they respond to school and experience the academic environment that schools provide them. Here, the findings can be grouped in two main categories. First, the students had much to share regarding their school: they commented on school in general, on the social and organization of the school, and expressed numerous responses ranging from other students, school safety issues, and the reorganization of school into the Academies, to issues regarding the teachers, teaching and learning, curriculum and classes, homework and tests, and the improvement of learning opportunities for Latino students. They had comments as well about changes in personnel, ideas about the physical surrounding and the organization of time, suggestions about school facilities, school lunch and lunch periods, and even ideas on how to plan the school calendar. Second, their personal stories and their interactions with schooling are also profoundly shaped by the peer groups they chose to associate with—peer networks that are in part a product of, and in part an influence on, their school experience (Valenzuela, 1999; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988).

Community and School Context

The prestigious stigma of the school and the community lends itself to paint a clear picture of the learning environment in which these Latino students are forced to experience on a day-to-day basis. The school environment has much to offer this population sector but based on the students' perspectives on their schooling experiences, there tends to be a disconnect or a lack of communication from the school to the students and vice versa

About the Community

Cascade (a pseudonym), is an urban, transient community located in the state of Washington of approximately 17,110 people of diverse backgrounds, located south of Seattle. Incorporated in 1908, the city offers a blend of businesses, churches, parks, and abundant single and multi-family housing available to all income levels in an attractive, urban atmosphere. The school district serves approximately 2,640 enrolled in five schools located within the limits of historic Cascade. The teacher-student ratio averages 1:25. Students in the district are predominately low-income- Seventy-one percent are eligible for free/reduced school meals. Students represent many cultures and ethnic groups and speak approximately 45 different world languages. Roughly, thirty percent of students qualify for English Language Learner services. More than sixty percent of the students represent students of color. Students struggle with academic performance. Across all grade levels, Cascade School District students perform below the statewide average on Washington's Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

Cascade School District, located in the city of Cascade, has been a district profoundly affected by this Spanish-speaking population increase. According to the Seattle Times, the Hispanic population in the city of Cascade is roughly 2,329, which equals thirteen percent of the county or city population. In the last four years the Spanish-speaking student population has increased to roughly twenty-eight of the district's total student population. The district's three elementary schools are the ones most currently impacted by this increase. Their estimated Spanish-speaking student percentage is roughly fourteen whereas the district's high school has about ten percent Spanish-speaking students. Roughly, seventy-five percent of the Spanish-speaking students in CSD come from rural villages from the states of Jalisco, Michoacan, and Oaxaca, Mexico, where they and their parents were accustomed to a very different educational system and cultural lifestyle. The schools in the U.S. have many laws and regulations that are common in the Latin American schools; however, shorter schools, no transportation, no food services, and no truancy laws are only some differences between U.S. and Mexican school systems. Most often, the students come unable and unprepared to learn in a school system which is in many ways is unlike the schooling system they are accustomed to from the native homeland. The students have to endure many struggles and challenges while trying to learn and assimilate in a new culture and school system.

About the School

Cascade High school is an AIA design award-winning building completed in 1992. The school building is maintained clean with beautifully manicured yards and sports fields. The school benefits from state of the art technology which has local and wide-area computer network and voice mail linking system in all of the school and administration offices. A computer is available for every 2.6 students in the district. The recent school published school announcement flyer states that the Cascade School District strives for; Caring, Challenging, and dedicated learning environments for all Cascade students. "Cascade Schools-Just the right size to personalize education-Big enough to foster diversity-Small enough for everyone to know everyone else-We value diversity."

In the winter of 2001, Cascade High School was one of 16 schools in the state of Washington to receive a large grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The purpose of the grant is to reorganize Cascade High School into smaller, personalized learning communities (SPLCs) or academies that will increase academic achievement of all students by allowing each student to be known well by a set of peers and teachers over their entire high school experience. The SPLC's options include; English Language Learners Academy, Experience Academy, Choices Preparatory Academy, Discovery Academy, and the Arts Academy. Students enroll in one of the academies and remain in that academy throughout their high school experience.

Responses to School and Academic Environment

The Latino students experience the school's academic environment in different ways, and find some aspects of it engaging them more than others. What they said about their schooling and how they experienced it clustered around four main themes: (1) responses to schools in general; (2) responses to students and the social organization of the school; (3) responses to teachers, teaching, and learning opportunities; and (4) responses to physical surroundings and the organization of time.

Within these themes, students' comments offer both a descriptive picture of the schooling as they see it, and ideas about how that schooling could be improved. For the most part, they had positive ideas as how to improve the school environment; their suggestions ranged from having changes in the school structure like enforcing tighter school security measures, shortening the required five-days-a-week school schedule, and adding longer lunch periods, to personnel and school activities changes including adding more Spanish-speaking teachers to assist the Spanish-speaking students, hiring more "good" teachers, having the school work more focused on preparing students for college, adding more fun activities for Latino students to participate in during and after-school, and improving parent and Latino student involvement in school.

Responses to School in General

Several students stated the importance of attending school and using it as an avenue for preparing them for life choices which in some cases meant finding the right high paying job or profession or simply the way out of being ignorant in life. As one senior girl stated,

I think it's really necessary cuz now with the technology getting so big that you need to know stuff and you can't...I mean if you don't, if you don't go to school your not going to get a good job that you might want or something like that so I think that in order to succeed at least you have to finish high school because if you don't your opportunities aren't going to be that great, so yeah.

She suggested that in order to succeed in life students should get educated so that they can find a job or career, which they will enjoy in the future. But most importantly, she emphasized the importance of getting some education and finishing at least high school and not dropping out, which is very common in some cases with Latino students. She also stated that the role of technology is also affecting the way students need to be educated in order to be better able to compete in this ever changing new technology era.

Juanita commented on the importance of attending school as an avenue for gaining greater learning opportunities. She said, "I think it's a good opportunity for kids to be more involved and be more educated, you know, I like the fact that

we have school and there're different levels of honors classes. School in general—if we didn't have it, people would be pretty ignorant.” Juanita sees school as a learning resource or tool for gaining greater learning opportunities especially those students, which in general get more involved in school clubs and activities like herself. She also sees school as a path out of being an ignorant person. Overall, Latino students stated the importance of attending school as an avenue for improving their educational and life opportunities, a pattern consistent with other studies of this student population (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005; DeStigter, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Responses to Students and the Social Organization of School

Other people—especially other students—and the social organization of the school played an important role in the Latino students' everyday routines. Clearly, a central part of school for these high school students was the other people they met on a daily basis—in particular, the other students who were their classmates. Consequently, a first way of experiencing school was in terms of the kinds of relationships they formed with other students—or they wished they were able to form under differing ways of organizing the school. Here, several themes emerged from the data—first, concerning the relationships with other students; second, concerning how safe they felt in school, a function of the kinds of interactions among students they witnessed on a daily basis or experienced first

hand: and third, concerning the effect that the organization into Academies had on student relationships.

Responses to schoolmates. Latino students I interviewed had generally positive experiences to share regarding students in the school and student relationships. Most students found the multicultural nature of the student population comfortable, with students from different ethnicities represented throughout the school. Those students who had attended schools in other states where the majority of the students were of Latino descent, as in California, Nevada, and Texas, enjoyed having students from different ethnic backgrounds represented. In general, students did not have any problems with other students in the school. When asked to comment on the students in his school, Sergio commented, “Yeah, I don’t know, they’re [students] really friendly here; it’s cool.” In this respect, Sergio found the students in this high school really different from students in other schools he had attended. He was also puzzled why students in this school were not interested in picking fights as in other schools which he had attended in other states and felt that the students here were much calmer and easier to get along with than students in his previous schools. Juanita also mentioned that all the students were nice and respectful. She added that “if you show respect to others you will get respect and I pretty much respect everyone because I want them to respect me back the same way.” Being respected in the school environment was an important concept for her. Juanita liked the idea that most students seemed respectful and treated her well.

Overall, most students seemed to have no problems with other students in the school and everyone seemed to get along with others. Most enjoyed having many students from many ethnicities present in the school and announced that most students in the school were nice, friendly, easy to get along with, and respected others.

Responses to school safety. The positive responses to other students seemed to be accompanied by a general feeling of safety in the school environment. Overall, the students thought that the school had exceptionally calm, paced atmosphere because they rarely witnessed fights or school crimes. They felt the school was a nice place to work and that the school environment was not intimidating and threatening. Jaime was one student in particular who felt he at times was not safe in his school. Jaime expressed,

Sometimes I do (feel safe) and sometimes I don't feel safe. The reason I don't feel safe is when I see kids fighting. I don't like fighting. I like to be laughing with friends, but I'm a serious kid. I'm serious about school and I don't like fighting. For example; there's this one kid who hates me but I just say I don't want to fight, that way I feel safe.

In this special instance Jaime felt that other students and especially one particular student made fun of him because of his weight, teased him, and also threatened him verbally at times. Jaime also mentioned that it did bother him a lot that somebody had threatened and teased him because he did not want any trouble or want to fight anyone, as he was afraid of getting suspended from school for

fighting on school grounds. Towards the end of the discussion Jaime did confess that the student no longer bothered or teased him; one of his friends had talked to the bullying student and asked him to leave his friend alone.

Overall, students seemed to feel safe in the school because they did not feel threaten or bullied by others. They felt that the “weapon free zone” policy provided a nice safe educational setting. Many students like Sergio who had attended schools in other states in particular felt that schools in Washington State were much calmer and safer regarding crimes and violence. Sergio expressed, “Yeah, and over there in (Las Vegas) even middle school was kind of threatening cuz most kids would have guns and knives and here (at this school) you don’t see that stuff.” Sergio commented that he had attended a school in an urban city in California where the principals and the police officers where always patrolling the school grounds on golf carts because the school campus was much bigger. The school grounds where always being patrolled and keep safe from student violence and intruders. This same student thought that the security measures at this school were a joke and very weird compared to what he was used to in California and Nevada and was dreadfully surprised about the peacefulness and safeness of this school’s atmosphere. Sergio also added that his family had moved from various urban cities which had very high crime rates and he was glad to have settled in this state because everybody here in Washington State were much nicer and the area was much calmer and free of violence and crimes.

However, a small number of students announced that the school would be a much safer place if more security cameras were installed everywhere so that way the school would be more secure and students would not want to fight or smoke on school campus. They also suggested having the school principal and the security guard patrolling around the school building more often because the way it is now too many students go skipping and do not get caught.

During the interview several students confessed to having skipped various times throughout the school year and no one had asked them any questions or had taken them to the school office (in some particular instances some of the students skipped classes to join me for the interviews and no school personnel questioned their disappearance). Students that had attended schools in California, Texas, or Nevada commented on how laid back the security system was here in this school. Jaime suggested that the school could provide a pre-mediator program after-school, which could assist students with skills and resources on issues like fighting, smoking, or drug-and-alcohol use as a mean of improving the safety measures in the school.

In general, most students felt that other students in the school pretty much kept to themselves and didn't bother others. They did share they had witnessed a small number of fights this year at school but also added that the number of fights compared to other years was much less. To some students, the school was way too calm and quiet—that is, kind of boring at times because not much excitement had occurred throughout the year (meaning that there had not been any fights or

violent scenes). In the most part, students enjoyed the tranquil safe school environment.

Responses to the reorganization of the school into Academies. While the Latino students I interviewed seemed to have common, positive views regarding how safe they felt in the school environment, they held opposing and generally less enthusiastic views of the school's reorganization into separate Academies. The main issues were that this way of organizing the school altered their free access to a full range of relationships with other students. Most students seemed to dislike the school Academies concept and had many negative things to comment in disfavor of the school change. Some felt that they had been misled by all the nice things they had been promised by the school administration prior to the change of the regular school model to the new Academies model. A group of students questioned that many great things were promised but very few of the promises had actually been carried out. One student commented that he had joined the Experience Academy in hopes of experiencing new and exciting things and also because he was promised that the group would go on many field trips throughout the academic year to explore and learn new ideas. However, he had only been to two field trips throughout the school year, while another friend in the Discovery Academy had already gone on five trips. Several students had also mentioned that they were told that the new Academies concept would also assist in the reduction of students per classroom so that each class would be able to have smaller classes and at the same time provide greater teacher-to-student assistance.

Students noted with dismay that the classes were just as crowded as previous years and that, teachers still didn't have time to assist all students in the classes. Sergio responded, "It's the same thing [number of students in the classes]; well, it's practically smaller but teachers don't really care. Well, in my opinion, my experience, it's the same thing as it was before, the last few years." In this case Sergio expressed that the classes were smaller but then changed his mind and cried that it was not much different from the last few years. In his opinion, the change to Academies had not made a big impact on student-teacher contact ratios and at the same time thought that teachers did not care about the students in general.

A large number of students also disliked how the Academies Model had impacted the school schedule. They did not favor the Academies Model change because they felt the duration of classes were much longer and more work was being assigned per class. Students also disliked the idea of having students divided by Academies. For example, students in the Discovery Academy could only take classes in that Academy and therefore were unable to take classes outside of their Academy core. Some students felt they were being separated or divided from their friends and classmates in their grade level. When asked to share her ideas about the Academies, Juanita stated,

..like, well, I really don't like the Academies now that I think about it because everybody is segregated like we socialize sometimes and sometimes we are distant from each other, and sometimes we can't help

each other study because we aren't in the same course and we used to before like all sophomores with the sophomores and we have been divided by professors...

Juanita, in particular, confessed that the Academies had created a separation from her and her friends from last year and that she was unable to work with them on schoolwork assignments as she had done last year. In most respects, students expressed that they were also unable to socialize during school time because they had different class schedules than their grade level friends. Also, since the Academies Model posed different lunch schedules, many friends were unable to have the same lunch break and they were unable to see each other. Many students in general felt that the Academies Model had created a great barrier or division among students and therefore had feed in them the lack of demonstrating their school spirit and pride. Many students commented that the Academies Model had also created a boring atmosphere were students didn't seem to have school pride or spirit, at least not like the previous year. Juanita also commented,

....The school spirit I think has gone down somewhat because we don't have Pep assemblies, not like last year. We just see each other but I don't oh, think there's a lot of spirit compared to last year there's not much school spirit.

Overall, the lack of school spirit had affected many students who had enjoyed the fun days with Pep assemblies and time to socialize with classmates in

the same grade level. At the same time it was affecting much of their school morale.

Overall, most students favored not having the Academy Model and preferred instead the traditional model as it was the previous year. Also, students felt that the Academy Model was not what they had been promised, and most were dissatisfied with the implications of the school change.

Responses to Teachers, Teaching, and Learning Opportunities

The Latino students' responses to other students and the school's social organization represented only one major dimension of their school experiences. They were well aware that the "business" of schooling was academic work, and they had specific reactions to the curriculum and classroom experiences, homework and tests, which formed a large part of their learning experience, and the ways in which they could imagine improving the learning opportunities they encountered. They also had distinct impressions about their teachers and ideas about how changes in personnel might alter their schooling experiences.

Responses to curriculum and classes. While the Latino students shared similar responses regarding the Academies, their comments related to the curriculum and classes were more mixed. Students tended want more challenging curriculum but at the same time having it being fun and interesting. Most preferred the "hands on" approach curriculum, which gave them the opportunity to be more actively engaged and working on projects, labs, and experiments

versus the older traditional “paper and pencil” model in which students were only given a worksheet packet after another and also never given the opportunity to engage with the curriculum in other ways. When asked to comment on his classes, Sergio stated,

I didn’t like it in my Social Studies class, the teacher, she every day we get there she would give us packets to do. She wouldn’t explain it; I mean it was just boring because we’d go to class everyday and she’ll say, “Here is your packet; answer the questions,” and then the tests, like we’d had a test every two weeks. We didn’t really talk to the teacher or nothing; it was just boring.

Basically, Sergio preferred a different type of curriculum approach, one that was more engaging and interesting for the students and at the same time incorporated more teacher participation or teacher engagement with the students and the curriculum. Students in general expressed the desire to go beyond worksheet packets and working on engaging more deeply with the curriculum as some of their favorite classes like History, Biology, and Medical Careers courses had done. As one junior girl stated, “I like my U.S. History class because I just learn a lot more in that class. The teacher goes beyond what’s in the textbook and stuff. So I really get something out of it.” This student, in particular, felt that her U.S. History teacher was going beyond the older traditional model of just teaching out of the textbook and using more updated and interesting curriculum materials, teaching strategies, and engaging the students more in classroom. Those students

who had a favorite class in which they were more engaged and doing “hands on activities” were more likely to comment positively on certain aspects of their class than those students that did not have such a class. Juanita, in particular, commented about her favorite class,

My favorite class is Biology because it’s interesting, it’s not like my other classes. We get to experiment; it’s a lot different from what I’ve studied before, and we get to see animals, like I get to play with the mice, I’ve learned a lot from the labs, and every time I know it’s a lot of work, but I can get it done. I don’t mind doing all that work.

Juanita’s Biology class was fun and interesting to her and at the same time seemed challenging. She seemed to enjoy the idea of having hard and challenging materials, working with the lab animals, and lab experiments.

To sum it up, most students in the study expressed that they preferred classes in which they were given the opportunity to do fun and interesting activities like field trips or activities outdoors, experiments, labs, or other “hands on activities” and doing less paperwork or textbook work. Also, most of the students did not mind being challenged or given difficult school tasks instead they preferred more difficult schoolwork because it helped the students to be more involved and interested in the class, echoing a strong theme in literature that touches on this aspect of Latino students schooling experiences (Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999;

Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

Responses to homework and tests. Much like their views of curriculum and classes, students had differing views of homework and tests. Some students in some instances commented that the homework and tests were “all right” or just “okay” while other students commented on them being “difficult” or “challenging”. One Spanish-speaking student commented, “*Los examenos son dificiles*” (The exams are difficult). To this student certain tests were more challenging or difficult for him, because they were written in English only and he spoke very little English; the language barrier was a major stumbling block in being successful in his tests. The same student commented on favoring his math tests over other school tests, which required more written English language abilities. He added that most of the time he performed much better on his math tests than other tests. On the other hand, other Latino students felt that the tests were not difficult and if they had failed some of the tests it had been basically their own fault for not studying or not trying hard enough.

Most students commented on spending at least one to two hours working on homework or spending additional time on homework when projects, writing assignments, and or other larger assignments were assigned. They also commented on getting no assistance on their homework assignments from their parents. The majority of students pretty much did their homework on their own. Students confessed that their parents were unable to assist them on homework

tasks because they were either working or too tired to help and in most instances lacked the English language skills to understand the assigned homework assignments.

For the most part, students were very understanding of their parents not being able to assist them on homework. They commented on the fact that they preferred doing the assignments on their own because they knew that their parents were tired of working long hours or in some circumstances were working double shifts and not home when they worked on their homework. Most students also added that they knew their parents could not understand the homework materials so they would not even ask them for help in the first place. Juanita commented that she would not interview her parents on interview assignments which were assigned for her to do because she knew that her parents worked two jobs and she also knew all the responses to the interview so she would just answer the questions on her own.

In general, most of the Spanish-speaking students were very honest and said they spent very little time working on homework assignments or sometimes didn't even do the assignments. When asked to share his ideas regarding homework Jaime mentioned, "I'm not going to lie to you. I don't like to do homework. I do homework when I feel like it; sometimes I don't remember I have homework and I just go somewhere else." Jaime also commented on the fact that his family did not push him to do his homework so he felt he didn't need to do it.

Responses regarding improving extracurricular learning opportunities.

Students had various ideas about how to improve learning opportunities for the Latino students in their school, but their comments concentrated on extracurricular activities. Students commented that the only activity in which Latino students participated was the soccer team. Students used to participate in the Latino Club, which had existed in previous years, though not any more, because it got canceled due to funding issues, not having enough student interest (according to the administrator), and lack of a club advisor to take full charge of the club. The students commented that they wanted a club advisor who would motivate the group in activities and in participation. Most students commented that they would like the school to provide more activities in which they could come together to socialize, learn new ideas, and at the same time be able to maintain and share their cultural knowledge and skills, much like they did in the Latino Club. Some wanted to see more Latino students participate in school assemblies and activities like in cultural festivals and “Cinco de Mayo” (May 5th) celebrations. Juanita expressed that the school needed to offer other activities for Latino students to participate in during and after-school besides soccer, since Latino students only tended to participate in soccer throughout the school year. Juanita felt that the school’s lack of providing additional learning opportunities for the Latino students only reinforced the stereotypical concept of Latino students in the school. She also added that she knew that many of the Mexican

students in the school were really great at playing soccer but at the same time felt that they could also play and excel in other sports.

Responses to teachers. The Latino students I interviews had pointed observations and perceptions of their classroom teachers throughout the curriculum: they felt the need to have well trained, qualified, and caring teachers teaching at the school. Latino students wanted to see more trained teachers working at the school so that the teachers could better prepare Latino students for high school graduation, college, or for post-graduation pursuits.

Some students favored some teachers more than others, while others mentioned teachers whom they disliked and were also able to express their reasons why they disliked a certain teacher. Sergio, in particular, commented on the notion that he felt that most of the teachers in the school did not care about the Latino students. He went on to share,

Well, it's just like um, if you miss a day or something, supposedly they have smaller classes so they can get to know you better and be involved with you and they're like "it's your responsibility and all this other stuff and just if you like you ask them a little question if they say it to the whole class and then you don't hear it you'll ask it again, they're like 'I'm only going to say it once if you weren't listening then it's your problem,' just like little stuff like that.

Sergio's statement underscored that he felt that his teacher did not care about him, in this case by not taking the time to explain the assignment again or by not

restating it in a manner that would have been more easily understood by him. In some sense, Sergio was also suggesting another type of teacher-student relationship that goes beyond the norm to one where the student is actually cared for and understood at a deeper level of relationship building. Latino students, in particular, favor caring and nurturing teachers who go beyond the regular student-teacher relationships.

In certain cases, where the students were unable to build strong student-teacher bonds, tensions and frustrations tended to build and students resorted to extreme ways of showing their frustrations either by not attending their classes, skipping class whenever possible, or by acting out in class so as to get sent to the office or kicked out of class. As one sophomore girl who always skipped classes commented, "...I get frustrated with the teachers and I just find something wrong and I can't even go to that class anymore." In this case, this girl felt disconnected from her classes and her teachers. She constantly found excuses for not attending her classes and felt that her teachers just did not care enough about her and therefore she was not willing to spend her time in the classroom. She also expressed the fact that many teachers had "ticked her off" and that she would rather walk around the school campus than attend their classes.

On the other hand, some Latino students indicated they did like the teachers in the school. One sophomore male Spanish-speaking student in particular commented that he liked the teachers in the school and that he felt they were incredibly good teachers. This same student also added that in one of his

classes he did have difficulty understanding his teacher because the teacher spoke too fast for him to comprehend all she was explaining but even though they had the language barrier he still felt she was a very nice teacher.

To summarize, Latino students shared mixed feeling toward teachers in the school. Some favored teachers which were more caring and nurturing in character while others preferred teachers that were better trained and prepared to deal with a variety of Latino student issues. As various studies have suggested, these students had a clear picture of teachers who could work better with Latino students who normally tended to not perform well in school, yet did not always find such teachers in their classrooms (Sampson, 2003; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987; Soto, 2007; Carter, 1970).

Responses to changes in personnel. Several themes emerged from the Latino students' ideas for ways to improve personnel in the school so as to better assist the Latino students' needs. Several students suggested adding more Spanish-speaking teachers or assistant teachers to better assist the Spanish-speaking student population. The Latino students felt that adding more Spanish-speaking personnel would be exceptionally beneficial for all Spanish-speaking students, especially for those who were currently struggling in their classes or with other problems or issues that could impede them in succeeding in school. Most Latino students commented that they remembered how difficult it was for

them to learn the English language and therefore understood or could relate to the challenges and struggles, the newly arrived Spanish-speaking students face on a daily basis. These same students also suggested that the school could provide more educators that were bilingual in Spanish and English, so that the Spanish-speaking students could have an easier time learning the English language and also transitioning into the American culture. Many students also declared that the Spanish-speaking students needed someone who could understand their needs, assist them in all their classes and subjects, someone they could go to whenever they needed help, and especially someone that would be better able to communicate with them in their language and also aide them in communicating with other school personnel when needed. Several students stated that they felt that the ESL classes did not offer enough assistance for the newly arrived Spanish-speaking students and that having a one-on-one Spanish-speaking person to assist them would benefit them better. Currently the school had only one Spanish-speaking teacher assistant that helped all the newly arrived Spanish-speaking students; as the students saw it, more bilingual teacher assistants or other bilingual personnel like him were desperately needed. Many of the Latino students offered positive comments about the Spanish-speaking teacher assistant who had helped them survive in their first, difficult years in the school environment.

Several students also suggested having more bilingual Spanish-speaking educators hired to assist the Spanish-speaking students, while others felt that the

school would benefit better if more, well-trained, “good” or qualified teachers were hired. One male senior student commented that he would like to see more “good” teachers working at the school—a good teacher to him was one who helped students with their assignments, actively engaged students in learning, and not only assigned the schoolwork but also explain it as well. Other students announced that they did not have many teachers in their school which they felt cared about them. Sergio commented on wanting a teacher who would be able to give him advice about his life issues and problems but not judge and reprimand him for his wrongdoings. He also added that he would replace all the teaching staff with new teachers if he had the chance:

I would say different teachers, cuz the teachers they’re, I don’t think they’re trained to deal with all the students cuz in Las Vegas all the teachers you know with all the little kids they knew how to control them and stuff and that was all the little kids, you know it’s even harder to control high school kids and they [the little kids] would listen and they would actually make them do their work and be all interested in school.

Sergio was suggesting that there be more trained teachers working with Latino students and their issues who would motivate and keep them interested and involved in school. This student in particular responded that not just any teacher could be a “good” teacher, but only the well-trained ones who would go the extra mile to get to know each individual student.

For some students hiring well-trained caring educators was an important aspect of school change, while for other Latino students it was simply important to have teachers trained to prepare them for life beyond high school. One student in particular commented that teachers needed to assist students in preparing them for college, especially the Spanish-speaking students, by talking to them about college early on in high school and giving them college material to work on. He also felt that if students were better informed about college life, then maybe more Latino students would get a spark of interest to attend college, thereby reducing the normally large rate of Latino students dropping out of high school.

Many of the immigrant students without U.S. legal documentation believed that, since they did not have legal U.S. status, they would be unable to attend college after they graduated from high school; consequently, they were less motivated to do their best on their schoolwork. In general, students interviewed felt that most Latino students could benefit if more teachers would work to better prepare them for college, provide needed information regarding college requirements, and at the same time provide them with more challenging curriculum instruction so as to better prepare them for college or post-high school life choices.

In conclusion, students preferred to have more trained, qualified, and caring teachers hired. They also wanted to see more bilingual Spanish-speaking teachers and teacher assistants in the school to better assist the Spanish-speaking

students and their families and teachers who were more trained in preparing students for high school graduation and for the world post-graduation.

Responses to the Physical Surrounding and the Organization of Time

The Latino students expressed thoughts about the school facilities, shared their feelings regarding the school lunch and lunch periods, and also added ideas about ways to change the traditional school calendar.

Responses to school facilities. Students for the most part tended to like the school building because they thought it was beautiful, kept clean and in an orderly fashion. A Spanish-speaking freshmen student pointed out, “*Si, si, me gusta todo, todo esta bonito de la escuela.*” (Yes, yes, I like everything; everything is beautiful about the school). This student did not comment on a particular aspect of the building but made a general comment that everything in the school to him was nice and beautiful, while others had a bit more to comment on the actual appearance of the school or school building. Some students responded on the size of the cafeteria, the appearance of the lawns, and the size of the building as compared to other schools, which they had attended. One sophomore girl expressed, “The school is pretty good everything is kept clean and neat. Everybody tries to keep it maintained. The lawns are nice; we get around.” Some students who had attended other schools replied that the school building was much nicer and cleaner. Sergio, who had attended schools in California and Nevada, said, “I like it [the school building] because it’s clean, and I’ve been to

other schools, and it's just been not good." The other schools which Sergio had attended had been much older and larger; to him this school was nicer, much smaller, newer, and cleaner. Another student commented that she felt that the school was a nice place to work in and a nice clean environment. So overall, students shared positive comments about the school building and the facilities.

Responses to school lunch and lunch periods. While the majority of the Latino students liked the school facilities, an aspect of school that they did not find to be so engaging was the school lunch. Most Latino students felt that the food served in the school cafeteria was mostly greasy and not so appealing, and they also commented on seeing the same dull food day-after-day. As one junior girl commented after being asked if she liked the school lunch, "No, it sucks [laughs] because it's the same thing every day even though I get free lunch, but I don't like it; sometimes I like the spaghetti and mashed potatoes but having it every day gets kind of boring." She was able to list off a few favorite foods but still felt the school lunch was the same boring meals because it was being served day-after-day. Several students preferred to go off campus to eat elsewhere because they felt the school lunch was "nasty" or "not very appetizing". For the Latino students, the school lunch in most cases seemed to be very different from what they were accustomed to eating. As one girl put it, "School lunch, school lunch sucks. It's not like home with tacos and homemade tortillas."

Ideas about the reorganization of school time. When asked about possible improvements to the school calendar or organization of their time in

school, students offered relatively few ideas, mostly concerned ways to increase their “free” time. One student urged that the school change school attendance schedule to a three-days-a-week rather than the usual five, to permit her more time to study, complete projects, and otherwise do homework. Others, with a less academically inclined motivation, mentioned adding longer lunch periods. A large number of students felt the longer lunch periods would give them more time to go eat off campus and still have enough time to return to school without having to be rushed back to campus like they normally do. With the usual thirty-minute lunch schedule many students declared that they had to run back to school after lunch so that they would not be tardy to their fifth-period class, though they eventually ended up being late anyway. Some Latino students felt that the longer lunch break would also provide them with more time to socialize with friends and grade-level classmates, which were not in the same Academies as them. The Latino students who disliked the school lunch felt that having the longer lunch break would allow them more time to run home to have lunch instead of having to eat the not so favored school food. The longer lunch period would also allow time to socialize with friends and classmates who students would normally not see throughout the school day, thereby improving the school atmosphere and environment.

Interactions with Peer Groups and Friends

Analyzing the Latino students' responses regarding school and the academic environment is incomplete without considering how interactions with peer groups and friends affect the individual Latino students' friendship connections, and indirectly their interaction with schooling. Doing so sheds light on the kinds of peers Latino students selected to interact with—or cared not to be associated with—in and outside of school. Below, I review the academic, cultural, gender, and social forces that helped shape the students' personal choices of peers and friends; the analysis underscores the importance of relationships in molding the identity of each student. These relationships may later influence them in positive or negative ways, thereby paving the way for their future goals and life endeavors (Soto, 2007; Sampson, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

Academic Factors Affecting Peer Networks: Organization of School and School-based Activities

Many aspects of the school environment contributed in the selection of peer groups or friends which whom the Latino students associated, in particular, school and class size, class and lunch schedules (driven in part by the Academy

structure), multicultural richness of the student population, and after-school activities.

Many of the students commented that they enjoyed the small size of the high school campus, especially students who had attended other schools with large campuses. And despite their objections to the Academy structure, the small school model it embodied seemed to make it easier for students to get to know each other. They also saw class sizes as quite low in comparison to other schools with which they were familiar. As a consequence, the small classes allowed students better opportunities to get to know each other and to build friendship relationships.

The students' schedules also played a crucial part in determining which groups or individuals the students were able to hang around with during the school day. As noted earlier, the organization of the school into Academies had affected many of the students' lunch schedules, therefore making it difficult for them to see their friends during the lunch break. Some students commented that they did not have any time to see their friends during the school day due to the fact that they had been tracked or scheduled in a different Academy. The Academy structure was not the only aspect of the school that separated Latino students into distinct groups that did not mingle with each other. The ELL (English Language Learners) department, for example, grouped the ELL students together throughout the whole day. They were destined, therefore, to build

friendship relationships only with other ELL students, in most cases robbing them of opportunities to building relationships with other peers in the school.

After-school activities and interests also facilitated Latino students in providing opportunities for building friendship relationships. Students who participated in sports or clubs formed friendships with students involved in the same activities, and tended to remain friends even after the activities ended.

Cultural Factors Affecting Peer Networks: Cultural Pressures and the Recency of Arrival

Cultural forces, much like academic forces, played an important role in either determining or affecting friendship relationships. Latino students tended to associate primarily with other Latino students both in and outside of school, although a relatively small number of students chose to associate with students of other ethnicities (in this respect, the multicultural richness of the school enabled new kinds of friendship connections for Latino students, even though relatively few took advantage of this opportunity). These cultural forces include; home language, family background, cultural beliefs, and gender role differences,

In understanding the cultural forces which drive Latino students to select their peer groups and friends, one must try to understand the difference between “free choice” and “cultural pressure or demands.” The longer a Latino student has lived in the U.S. and has assimilated to the American culture, the more likely he or she is to move from feeling he or she must act according to “cultural

pressures and demands” to exercising “free choice” in activities, friendships, and other aspects of daily life. For example, in order to survive in the new American school environment or culture, newly arrived Spanish-speaking Latino students will need to associate with primarily with other Spanish-speaking students, due to the language and cultural likeness they share, as well as similar academic challenges that they face, as a growing body of research indicates (Soto, 2007, Sampson, 2003; Valverde, 2006, Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). On the other hand, Latino students who have mastered the English language and the American culture are not required to hang out with any particular group of students as a means of survival like the newly arrived Latino students. He or she has “free choice” as to whom to associate with. At this stage, many cultural subgroups or categories may start to form. Some students may decide to hang around with other Latinos, while others do not mind socializing with friends from other ethnic backgrounds (Valenzuela, 1999; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988; Poplin & Weeres, 1994). Cultural and language barriers can thus play a significant role in determining a student’s peer and friend relationships.¹

¹ Students from other backgrounds also tend to go through similar stages in forming peer relationships, while learning and adapting to the new American culture and school life (Soto, 2007; Valverde, 2006; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

In ways predicted by these research-based patterns, the ELL students in this school, especially the newly arrived ones, tended to hang out with each other due to the similarities in language and culture. They grouped themselves as a means of coping or surviving in the new school cultural environment. During the lunch breaks the newly arrived ELL students tended to group themselves at the same table for pretty much the duration of the school year while, other Latino students grouped themselves separately. Latino/a students who had lived longer in the U.S., or were U.S. born, seemed to associate more freely with peers of other cultures or ethnicities. They also tended to be more selective as to whom they preferred to hang around with or whom they did not care to associate with.

Some students mentioned that they wanted to distance themselves from newly arrived Latino students because they felt that they were different and wanted to be at a different level than them. They did not think that they were better or smarter than the newly arrived students; they simply felt that they had moved on in life and had already experienced the challenges that newly arrived students were experiencing. Juanita comments,

I hang out with good students. I used to hang around with Latino kids before but now it's a mix, most of them are involved in sports-it seems like I have changed with the friends I've hanged around with-they were primarily Hispanic before but I don't know, it's not that I'm saying they're dumb but they don't, they're not the same level as me and they settle for their low grades. I want to put more effort into my schoolwork

Juanita comments on her level of change and her gradual shift of first hanging around with primarily Spanish-speaking friends to now associating with students of different ethnicities, who tend to get better grades and not settle for low grades, and with students who tend to have more knowledge of the English language and the American culture. She clearly states her transition from being in the “cultural pressure or demand” state to now being in the “free choice” state where she can freely decide who she wants to associate with and who she cares not to associate with throughout her day.

Gender Roles and Culturally-based Beliefs Affecting Peer Networks

Related to cultural factors, cultural beliefs about gender roles either assisted or hindered students in forming peer relationships. The Latina girls in particular, were less likely to associate with friends (especially male friends) after school due to cultural belief about what was proper for girls. Consequently, the Latina girls felt that they had less freedom to go out and spend time with school friends than their American girlfriends. In one instance, a Latina girl was told by her parents, “We are Mexicans, and Mexican girls don’t just go out and hang around with friends; we just don’t do that.” The Latino boys, on the other hand, tended to have more freedom to go out with friends, and they were able to stay out longer time after school, while the Latina girls had many restrictions and rules to adhere to due to culturally-based beliefs about gender roles.

Specifically, Latina girls felt that a lack of trust from their parents prevented them from spending time with their friends. In certain cases Latina girls who had been raised in the U.S. but still had strict Latino parents found it extremely difficult to accept the fact that they were not granted opportunities to build relationships with other peers or friends. Their parents simply did not allow the girls to socialize outside of school due to cultural beliefs, and in some cases, because they feared for their safety. Several girls commented that they wanted the opportunity to spend time with their friends and boyfriends outside of school, but that was totally out of the question as far as their parents were concerned. The girls added that they envied their American girlfriends, who were freely granted permission to go out with friends of the opposite sex or to have friends visit their house whenever they wanted and to have friends spend the night as well.

On the other hand, male Latino students shared no concerns over parental permission to associate with peers or friends. This is very typical in the Latino cultural where the males are granted more freedom to choose friends, or to go out with ease, and are not bound to certain home or cultural rules regarding who they can socialize with and when. Age is also not a consideration in this cultural belief; young male Latino students, in some cases, may have more freedom than their older female siblings.

Social Factors Affecting Peer Networks: Students' Interests and Choices

Much like academic, cultural, and gender factors, the students' interests or choices also impacted, or were intertwined with, the opportunities students had to establish friendships. In short, students tended to socialize with other students who had similar interests. Those who were interested in sports primarily associated with other students who were involved in sports. As noted earlier, many Latino students I interviewed participated in soccer: the Latino boys tended to socialize with other male soccer players, while Latina girls tended to associate with other female soccer players. The same groups would socialize together in activities outside of school as well.

Another group of students disliked school in general and enjoyed skipping classes together. These students would meet in the morning and either skipped classes all day or would leave the school grounds after lunch. For some of the Latina girls, this was the only time they could get together with their boyfriends or male friends.

There were also a small number of studious students who wanted to earn good grades by doing their schoolwork and performing well in their classes. These students gathered after school to work on additional assignments or projects, and at times got together to go on camping or hiking trips. These students tended to socialize mostly with American students, and they purposely disassociated themselves from the low performing Latino students who chose to skip classes. One junior girl stated, "I used to hang around with Hispanic friends;

now I hang out with friends who are also involved with sports and school.” This same girl commented that she saw Hispanic students settling for low grades. She felt totally isolated because she wanted to put more effort into her schoolwork, and she felt that newly arrived Hispanic students were no longer at her level in thinking and acting. This particular girl wanted to disassociate herself from Latino students because she believed hanging out with Latino students would only hinder her success in school.

Effects on Social Networks and Involvement in Activities

Knowing that the organization of school and school-based activities, along with cultural demands and gender roles, had great influence over the people with whom Latino students associated gives us a better idea as to why these students do or don’t cultivate new friendships.

The type of activities students selected as a means of interacting and socializing with peers depended on many of the variables already mentioned. The majority of students went to the movies, dances, mall, and park, drag car races, or simply stayed at the house watching television together or playing video games with friends. Students who were involved in after-school sports often got to get together with other students to play sports at the parks, school campus, and their homes. The Latina girls who were not allowed to go out with friends talked about the fun times they had spent while skipping classes with friends. They simply

enjoyed socializing and spending time together no matter what activities they did during their skipping adventures.

How Interactions with Peers and Friends Influenced

Latino Students' Lives

Once Latino students had been granted opportunities to interact with peers, they began to worry about being able to balance all social and academic demands without cheating any particular person or thing in the process. The more social and interested in school the individual student was, the more evident this concern became.

The studious girls tended to be more concerned with balancing social and academic demands than boys. Some girls wanted time to go out with their boyfriends and peers, but worried about having enough time to work on schoolwork and their jobs as well. Some also worried about having ample time and energy for family, friends, and also school and employment demands. In general, the Latina girls who had the most restrictions or rules were the most concerned about balancing their loads. They had to balance their actions carefully because they feared that their families would discover their boyfriends or find out about forbidden social gatherings, which meant strict punishments.

Students concerned with balancing social and academic life also worried how the influences from their peers had affected them personally. In some cases, student relationships were positive influences, which encouraged them to become

better students. In other cases, bad influences inhibited their success in school due to negative effects of poor decisions.

High school students tend to be easily influenced by peer pressure, which in some cases could be either positive and or negative. Cultural and academic demands work together in some ways in determining the types of measures posed by peers and friends. For instance, the Latina girls who had more restrictions skipped classes more frequently to “free” themselves from rules imposed by their parents.

The lower performing students also skipped classes because they were already behind and did not feel that they could catch up, no matter what they did— because they assumed another day would not make a difference, they no longer cared. These students looked for others who shared their interests, made the same choices, and therefore reinforced each other’s negative behaviors and poor decisions. On the other hand, students who liked school and wanted to perform well on their studies would look for other students who also wanted to perform well. They would look for peers or friends who influenced them in positive ways for their own betterment.

For example, Sergio in particular was able to recognize the vast difference between bad and good peer influences once he decided to turn his life around. Having been a gang member who used drugs, participated in drive-bys, skipped classes, and got into trouble with the law numerous times, he became a completely different person by selecting new friends, ones who provided him with

positive influences. He started to attend church youth services, improve his grades, attended classes more regularly, and formed life goals and aspirations, all with the help from a church-going female friend. The same student said that he did not hang out with his “homies” anymore because they only got him into trouble and unsafe situations. Instead, he began volunteering to help construct a new church in his community, and said that he was thinking about joining the Air Force after he graduated because he wanted to become a traffic controller. In this particular case, the student was able to recognize the damage caused by his bad choices and friends. Most of his old acquaintances were not so fortunate and many lost their lives to gang violence, while others were serving jail sentences due to unwise life choices, which scarred their lives forever.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Recommendations

I feel many of the [Latino students] have no vision. I know many have come from poverty and that their parents have gone through many troubles to get them here to the U.S., and I feel they are very ungrateful. I feel they do not want to take advantage of things the school offers them. --A
suburban middle school assistant principal

This middle school assistant school principal, interviewed during a pilot study for this dissertation, expressed views of this student population that are all too common in contemporary U.S. schools. He commented that the Latino student body population in his school was increasing along with the number of discipline and office referrals obtained by Latino students. He was not sure why they (Latino students) were always in the office and getting into trouble. He added that the school was very supportive and wanted to help them, but he and the school staff were unable to find ways to better serve them and their needs. The administrator did comment that they provided many school activities for all students, but that the Latino students still did not want to take advantage of these opportunities.

This school administrator is expressing ambivalent views towards Latino students in his school and a lack of understanding of this segment of the student population. At first, he comments that he feels that the Latino students do not have a vision, or in other words, are unaware of their dreams or desires for their futures. He does add that he is aware of the troubles which their families have

endured here in the U.S., but then changes his mind by expressing that the students are ungrateful to their families and that they lack the drive or motivation to take advantage of the support services which are offered to them by the school. At the same time, he tends to feel sorry for the students for all these same reasons.

This viewpoint does not accurately reflect the students who I interviewed for this study, either as individuals or as a group. While on the surface many appeared not to be taking full advantage of the school's offerings (there were a few exceptions), the Latino students I met had clear visions and desires for their futures. They expressed an interest in graduating from high school and pursuing a college path post-graduation. They also expressed a sincere understanding and empathy for the challenges and struggles which they and their families had endured and also demonstrated a true feeling of being grateful to their families for all their hard work and dedication, a finding that is echoed by a number of other studies (Soto, 2007, Sampson, 2003; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). Latino students commented that they disliked the fact that their parents had to work several low paying jobs in order to pay their financial obligations. They also hoped for better life opportunities for them and their families. The students added that they wanted to get involved in their school but lacked the school support and opportunities related to their choices and interests.

The conversations I had with a range of Latino students in the high school I studied suggest a different pattern: a more varied and rich array of motivations, interests, and capabilities that the school did not always nurture or support (DeStigter, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). For example, some students expressed a desire to pursue culturally relevant activities in school but were disappointed when school personnel were not supportive of their desires (Valenzuela, 1999; Dietrich, 1998; DeStigter, 2001; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). For example, many students mentioned that they had wanted to start a Latino club but the school would not provide any funding for the activity, so, no faculty member was interested in taking this responsibility without school funding or support. One para-educator commented that he wanted to start a soccer tournament so that many of the Spanish-speaking students could join an activity with which they were familiar but he was told that there were no fields available for the competitions to take place due to the fact that other sport activities occupied the fields. The para-educator got discouraged and stopped advocating for the soccer tournament. Many other educators like the para-educator while faced with lack of administrative support stop fast at their tracks in trying to make changes or advocating for the needs of Latino students. They find it much easier to not get involved or question the system due to not wanting to fail in their quest (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Soto, 2007; DeStigter, 2001; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Olsen, 1988).

Latino students I interviewed felt they needed additional activities tailored to their needs and interests. Some wanted to see Latino clubs offered, others wanted to see more Spanish-speaking personnel around the schools, and some commented on having homework assistance or mentors to help the low-achieving Latino students (Soto, 2007; Sampson, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001). In short, these students are not everyday common students they are individual people who have hopes and dreams in life, face many everyday life challenges, struggles, and concerns, and in some cases are entangled with extreme forces which limit their access to educational and life endeavors (Sampson, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999; Soto, 2007; Pugach, 1998, Anzaldua, 1987; Carter, 1970; Carger, 1996; Hamann, 2003; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 2001).

What the Study Found

The findings of this study reveal many interesting patterns which aide us in discovering how the different factors within the Latino students' social, cultural, and academic life affect or contribute to each individual Latino students' experience of schooling, and through that to their self-identity, well-being, and educational success.

Understanding Latino Students' Individual Lives

First of all, the study highlighted the unique character of individual Latino students' lives, through the portraits I constructed of four of the students I interviewed. The student portraits served as a foundation or groundwork which paved the way for eventually grouping and synthesizing all the Latino students' responses into patterns that represent all students in the study. Each student portrait revealed a unique story of an individual Latino student, which placed the students' interests, aspirations, and approach to schooling in the context of the student's cultural and family background. The portraits also demonstrated that each Latino student in the study shared common challenges—like that of immigrant status issues, family worries and concerns, and academic uncertainties, noted above. The Latina girls, in particular, shared the same cultural challenges of being Latina girls with strict Latino parents who were mostly raised in traditional homes and who anticipated raising their Latina daughters with the same cultural upbringing and beliefs in which they were raised (Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). The portraits also gave some insight into the students' aspirations for better educational opportunities compared to that of their parents. Latino students expressed the desire, to continue their educational careers in hopes of obtaining a career or, in some instances, a better paying job than what their parents had at the time, in was that paralleled the findings of previous research (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Poplin &

Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996; Soto, 2007; Sampson, 2001).

Cultural and Family Pressures

One set of patterns concerning the role of family and culture highlighted the role that the language spoken at home, immigrant background status, and parents' background and experiences had on the students' responses to school and schooling. The majority of Latino families preferred to speak mostly Spanish at home because a large number of the parents only spoke Spanish. Some of the households used a combination of English and Spanish spoken at home because one or both of the parents had some English language background experience or they were either taking ESL courses and therefore needed to practice their English language skills.

The Latino families' immigrant statuses were at different stages and degrees. Some of the students commented on fearing that they were not going to get equal learning opportunities post-graduation due to their illegal immigrant status. The issue of not having legal immigration status also contributed to a lack of motivation to perform well in school because Latino students without legal documentation assumed they were not going to continue a schooling track beyond high school, therefore, they mentally shut down and in some cases purposely worked on failing in school. While some Latino students were U.S. born, their parents were still working on obtaining their legal immigration documentation; in

such instances, the students still worried about their parents' lack of job opportunities due to their legal immigration status, about close friends who did not have legal immigration status were not going to be able to continue an educational career, and about relatives who were either detained in jail and were in the process of possibly of being deported back to their native homeland because they were without legal immigration status.

The Latino parents' backgrounds, much like their immigration status, also varied in degrees. The majority of the parents came from poor rural villages in Mexico with the exception of a few who were from El Salvador. A large number of Latino parents also came to the U.S. with limited educational experiences; most tended to have no education or either limited early elementary schooling. The Mexican families tended to have migrated to the U.S. for the purpose of obtaining better job opportunities for the parents and more and adequate schooling experiences for the siblings. The families from El Salvador tended to have migrated to the U.S. for similar reasons as that of the Mexican families, but in addition they tended to also want to escape from the horrors of the war in their country. A large number of the Latino parents tended to work in low paying labor extensive employment opportunities. In some instances, because both parents had to work in order to financially make ends meet, the children had to stay home for long periods of time without adult family supervision.

The Students' Responses to School and Academic Environment

Though their family circumstances often complicated their relationship with school, in general, the Latino students I interviewed felt that school was very important and a crucial learning tool needed for them to succeed in their life endeavors. Many of them indicated that they understood the importance of doing well in high school in order to graduate and continue a post-graduation track. The Latino students also shared that they wanted to take advantage of the educational opportunities which were offered, unlike the limited opportunities which had been available to their parents. Therefore, in some instances the Latino students felt they needed to do much better in school so they could eventually make their families proud of them for succeeding.

The social organization of the school was a central force in shaping the students' responses regarding the relationships with other students and their overall thoughts about the school environment. The Latino students, in general, commented that they liked the fact that the school contained a rich culturally ethnic student body population in their school. They liked having friends from different countries and with different ethnic backgrounds. The students who had attended large urban schools in other U.S. states tended to comment positively on this school because of the variety of students from different cultures represented throughout the school (these students tended to have moved from large urban schools with large Latino or African American student populations, unlike this school which contained students with at least 30 different ethnicities). The Latino

students also had many positive comments to share regarding the students' friendliness or easy friendly manner in the school, and what they saw as a relatively safe school environment. Most Latino students commented that they felt the students in the school were very nice, friendly, and respectful therefore, they were more likely to build positive relationships and friendships with other students in the school.

While the overall social environment in the school was thus a positive one, the more specific organization of the school into separate "Academies" was not so positively viewed by my informants. Many of the Latino students commented that they felt they had been misled into believing that the school change to the Academy model would provide more and better benefits for the students. On the other hand, most of the students shared that they had been promised smaller class sizes, more field trip opportunities, more time to interact with the curriculum, and more teacher-student contact time. Yet they had not witnessed much of what the school administration had promised. At the same time, students commented that the Academies model had created a negative atmosphere in school where students were divided and not granted time or opportunities to connect with one another across Academy boundaries.

The students' responses to teachers, teaching and learning opportunities were more varied than the widely held opposition to the Academies. The Latino students shared that they preferred to have more challenging curriculum offered in their classes which was fun and interesting, and more hands-on activities in the

classes and also more opportunities to engage with the curriculum materials.

Latino students viewed homework differently; some, like Juanita, spent many hours working on homework assignments while other students spent very little time on homework assignments or sometimes did not even do it. Students noted that they got very little or no assistance on homework assignments from their parents who either worked many hours or were not able to assist the students because of the English language barrier issues or the limited schooling experiences. The Latino students commented that the tests tended to be not very challenging, though for some the language of the test was an issue.

Students' suggestions for improving the school and its support for their learning

The Latino students had many constructive suggestions for improving learning opportunities for them, and also for all students in their school. Some of their suggestions focused on extracurricular activities. The nature of the teaching staff and the relationships these staff had with them was a greater focus of my informants' commentaries and suggestions. In particular, they wanted to see better trained and qualified teachers hired, who would be better able to work with this student population, who worked on building positive, nurturing, and caring relationships with the Latino students. In their view, given more of this type of staff, more Latino students would want to succeed better in school. Overall, they wanted to see more teachers that would spend time teaching the students,

engaging with them in the curriculum, and at the same time using challenging and motivating curriculum materials.

Physical surroundings and the organization of time also was a target of the students' commentaries and suggestions. The general responses to the school facilities seemed positive: the students liked the building, thought it was nicely kept, and found the building beautiful, especially in comparison to other schools which some had attended. The school lunches, on the other hand, were not favored by the students. They commented that the food was mostly fatty food and not very appetizing, unlike what they were used to at home. Here, their views also reflected the limited opportunities to socialize over the lunch break.

Interactions with Peers

Interactions with peer groups and friends, in and out of the school, contributed to relationship and friendship building, guided by academic and cultural factors along with gender roles derived from culturally based beliefs. Together, these factors played a major role in the kinds of relationships or friendship bonds the Latino students chose to build or were destined to build. For example, students tended to group themselves based on common interests and in other times the school Academy schedule or the cultural pressures determined the kind of peer groups the students would be able to associate with throughout the academic day.

Students tended to group themselves based on interests and commonalities. Students that participated in sports tended to group themselves

with other team players in this particular student group the majority of them tended to participate in soccer therefore all soccer players tended to hang around with other soccer players. The students that disliked school tended to find others who disliked school and then found ways to avoid being at school. The more studious students tended to group themselves for the purpose of helping each other succeed in the classes.

The organization of the school and school-based activities shaped the kinds of opportunities the Latino students had to build relationships with their peers. The size of the school and the school's organization of the Academies schedule pretty much drove the kinds of social groups the student could associate with. Students who were assigned to participate in an Academy track had all classes and activities with the same group of students throughout the academic day, thereby limiting their opportunities to make friendship bonds with students in other Academies. The Academy schedules also determined what lunch break the Latino students had therefore, limiting their options for meeting and socializing with friends.

The newly arrived ELL students were also tracked much like other students in the different Academies. The ELL students pretty much had the same classes and same lunch break throughout the academic day with the exception of elective courses. This tracking system made it very unlikely for ELL students to build relationship bonds with other students in the schools.

Opportunities for Latino students to build relationship and friendship

bonds also depended on cultural forces and pressures, experienced most acutely by the newly arrived ones. The newly arrivals tended to associate with an assigned group of students due to cultural factors and language barriers, thereby limiting their opportunities to build other relationships and friendship bonds with other non-ELL students. Over time, the cultural pressures and demands diminished, and students were able to exert more free choice of peer and friend networks. In other words, the more time a student had remained in the U.S., learned the American culture and the English language, the closer they were to achieving the “free choice” of who they want to hang around and the less compelled they felt to group themselves with like individuals in order to survive in the school atmosphere. In some cases, the U.S.-born Latino students who wanted to succeed tended to distance themselves from other Latino students who had not quite acquired the “free choice” status and tended to build relationship and friendship bonds among students from other cultural and ethnic groups.

Culturally-based beliefs about gender roles also played a significant role in determining opportunities to build the peer and friend relationships bonds especially for the Latina girls in the study. Unlike the Latino boys, Latina girls in the study were not able to go out and associate with peer and friend groups especially with male friends. The Latino parents had very strict cultural rules or norms to which the Latina girls were required to adhere, while the Latino boys had no restrictions even if they were younger than the Latina girls. This strict

cultural norm conflicted with the beliefs held by U.S.-born Latina girls or those who had been largely raised in the U.S. These girls shared that their parents did not trust them or understand them. They wanted to be able to freely go out and socialize with friends much like their American friends, who were granted more freedom and trust from their parents. The Latinas' cultural and gender role differences limited their capacity to effectively build peer relationship and friendship bonds.

Finally, students' interests and activity choices affected the peers with whom they socialized, because these choices meant selecting other students who cared to do the same activities both during and after school. The students who were involved in sports activities preferred to associate with other students who were also involved in the same sport or in other school sports. There were also the students who cared very little regarding school and preferred to skip school altogether. This group of students would prefer to meet at a designated area of the school and plan out their skipping scheme. They would either skip the whole day or a number of classes. The students who selected to skip classes tended to hang around with each other not only for the purpose of skipping classes but also for the purpose of sharing other similar interests and choices. On the other hand, the studious students tended to group themselves for the purpose of working on school projects together, studying for tests, or simply working on homework or assigned schoolwork. This group, much like the students who skipped, also grouped themselves based on similar interests and choices. The students in this

group tended to share many common experiences and tended to share common academic goals and interests.

How interactions with peers and friends influenced Latino students' lives depended on the kinds of friends they associated with and on the kinds of activities which they decided to participate in at the time. Students who were more involved in school and cared to associate with students who also cared about school were more concerned with making positive choices and balancing their social and academic lives. These positive choices influenced these Latino students' lives in positive and impactful ways. They tended to worry about working on school projects, getting good grades, graduating with honors, and eventually going on to college. By contrast, the less studious students interacted with other students who also cared less about school and were not a bit worried about their schoolwork or any school related tasks. This group of students concentrated their worries on things unrelated to school, had more concerns about being able to socialize with certain individuals, and wanted more free time to go out with boyfriends or girlfriends. Then, there were also the students who had learned their lessons from prior unpleasant experiences which had either put them or their friends in danger (e.g., participation in gangs).

What This Study Reveals About Latino Students'

Experience and Self-identity

This study reveals that Latino students, like mainstream students, have hopes and dreams of becoming productive citizens of their school and community. They also desire to graduate from high school, as numerous studies have documented (Valenzuela, 1999; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994, Olsen, 1988, 1990; Dietrich, 1998; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Valdes, 1996). Many expressed the desire to continue their education beyond high school either by attending a two-year community college placement or a four year university track placement. The Latino students recognized the importance of school and education in their lives and also as using it as a tool to improve their life and life style (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Soto, 2007; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carger, 1996; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Valdes, 1996).

In other words, Latino students such as these have a clearer and stronger self-identity than many educators may suppose. Like any other young adult, their hopes and dreams were quite specific. Some Latino students commented on wanting to be the first member in their family to graduate from high school, others commented on wanting to be artists, musicians, aircraft controllers, architects, pediatricians, while others had not really made up their minds but they did think of making better life choices based on their life experiences, cultural and family pressures (along the lines revealed by a growing body of research , e.g., Soto, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez,

2002; Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996; DeStigter, 2001). The students that planned on graduating from high school also planned on attending either technical or community colleges so that they could advance their career endeavors. One male student commented,

I would like to go to the longest [meaning university or four-year degree] college because I want to be something important in life. When I was younger, I wanted to be an artistI do want to be an artist....I want to sing.

Another student added that she wanted to be a pediatrician because she was taking classes in the skills center at the community college and that she enjoyed it so much that she wanted to continue this career track. A few of the male students anticipated joining the military or attending college. One of them commented, "I mostly want to go to college or the military, the army. Well, I can try to be a soldier.....I'll like to be like a fireman, that would be kind of cool, or an architect." Some students simply admire the idea of gaining some form of life stability in the future. One girl declared, "I would like to be like my uncle Joey when I grow-up ...stability is what I want to achieve in life, like the kind of stability that my uncle Joey has in his life. But I only favor more educational advantages which were not granted to him in his life." This student desired the same kind of stability which her uncle seemed to balance well in his life but at the same time recognized the need to advance in obtaining better educational opportunities in order to succeed in life.

Accompanying their picture of their futures, most of the Latino students commented that they saw much value in, and understood the importance of,

school, consistent with the findings of many researchers who have studied this segment of the student population (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996; DeStigter, 2001). Many commented that they saw school as an important tool in life. Only a few felt that school was not for them because they already had made-up their minds about not succeeding or pretty much had given up. For example, during the study one young girl who skipped most of her classes commented that she only came to school to see her friends and to get out of her house and away from her mother, with whom she had constant disagreements and battles. The cultural and family pressures were so overwhelming that she just shut herself off from learning and succeeding in school. Her cousin, who I also interviewed, commented,

Some students [meaning her cousin] just don't see the way of succeeding in school because they have their mind set on, oh, well, I'm going to get married and my life's there, you know, and that's not really how it will have to be because yeah, you might get married but that might end and he may leave you, then what are you going to do?

This girl was expressing that many Latina girls give up pursuing their dreams because they think that they will eventually get married and that their husbands will take care of and nurture them. They see no reason to work for a better future or life choices. She went on to question what will happen to these girls with this short-sighted mind-set if their husbands decided to leave them and not take care of them. What is to happen to these girls then? Before this study was completed, her cousin eventually ran away with her boyfriend and dropped out of school.

This incident did not come as a great shock to her because she figured that it was her cousin's destiny and there was no other way to escape her destiny.

The study also underscored that, while Latino students have several everyday worries and pressures much like any other young adult their age, they also have additional challenges and struggles and are still yet required to overcome, all and be the equal with other students. This finding adds an additional instance of a widely established pattern (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Pugach, 1998; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Carger, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Anzaldua, 1987; Dietrich, 1998; DeStigter, 2001; Valverde, 2006; Soto, 2007; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Some students are struggling with family immigration issues, fears of having to either be deported back to their homelands or of not having legal documentation to enroll in a college or university. Others cope with challenges that arise from poverty and have to start working, not only to provide for their personal needs but to help their families pay for the everyday financial obligations. Many worry about a range of family conditions and dynamics that their circumstances as a minority in a dominant society solidify.

A study like this helps to see the various dimensions of these students' lives, and shows their similarities with others, while noting the additional layers of concern and the special conditions of their lives that make schooling a greater challenge for them.

Interpreting the Study's Findings

There are various ways to interpret this study's findings, which in some ways are often overlapping and sometimes complementary. Others are alternative ways of making sense of the actual student voices and their thoughts behind their ideas. The value of listening to students and the necessity of listen to them carefully and critically is also underscored by this research. Students were so generous in wanting to share their ideas and thoughts in regards to changes which they felt would improve and compliment their existing school; some of the students' ideas regarding school changes were very wise and possible suggestions; like adding more Bilingual teacher staff to work with Spanish-speaking students, incorporating more learning opportunities for Latino students, incorporating more culturally relevant curriculum, while other ideas were very unrealistic and not possible, for example changing the normal five days a week of schooling to three days of schooling and changing the regular lunch schedule to a longer lunch schedule so that students could have enough time to go eat lunch off campus. Such changes might work for some students, while creating the occasion for others to go astray.

On the other hand, students at first commented on liking everything about the school, that the school was a good place to be, but when prompted on some of the responses, students tended to actually not like the school as much as they thought. For example, one of the Spanish-speaking boys commented that he liked the school and that he would not change anything about it, but when asked to

share his ideas regarding the tests, he commented that the tests were very difficult to him because they were written in English and he did not read English very well. Many students seemed to have contradictory views when asked to comment on the school academies model, the students' first thoughts were for liking the academies and then when they got into answering the additional questions regarding the organization of the school, their thoughts tended to change and they eventually ended up not liking the academies because they either felt they were not being granted all that had been promised by the administrators as a result of the academies, or some felt that the academies had stripped them of time to socialize with other peers, they felt they had no opportunities to select their choice of classes like they had been able to do before the academies, and they also felt they had had less school assemblies due to the academies which eventually lead to a lack of school spirit and motivation.

Students also expressed conflicting viewpoints on how they felt about the overall school. When asked with the particular question, "What would you change about your school to make it a better school?" Most of the students commented that they would not change much about the school because they felt the school was fine and okay just the way it was. On the other hand, students contradicted themselves by expressing many interesting suggestions added to their responses as possible ways to change the school curriculum, facilities, personnel, and organization. They had many helpful insights as how to change

many school aspects ranging from the school schedules, calendar, curriculum and materials, cafeteria food, school personnel, and overall school appearance.

As an outside researcher, I am also curious to see if the depth of the information would have been any different if I had been a person whom the Latino students trusted more, or even had had built a better rapport with, if this would have changed the students' responses or stories which were shared in this study. As a Latina, I feel the students had a little bit of confidence and believed in me enough to write their stories, but if the students had had additional time getting to know me better in different faucets and situations then maybe I could have built a better, stronger rapport where the students' trust level could have been much broader and also students would of had more willingness to open-up and share their life stories. The student portraits were a good example of this because Juanita and Sergio seemed to trust me a bit more and were better able to share many interesting things about their lives while Bianca and Jaime seemed to be tiny bit more reserved in what they wanted to share about their life story. Bianca was the one who least wanted to share her story because she felt she did not have a story to tell, she had a very interesting life and had endured many life challenges, and eventually had to drop-out of school which will be another story tell later on in life. If given more time to build a positive and caring rapport with each of the Latino students, I feel I could have documented an even more interesting and rich document.

In short, a study like this gives successive layers of understanding students' lives—more than most educators ever take the time to reach, but not as much as might be most helpful in appreciating fully who these young people are and how their circumstances as well as the nature of the school are shaping what school can provide them.

What Leaders Can Learn From This Investigation

School leaders, like the middle school principal quoted at the beginning of the chapter, can learn much from this investigation. The close examination of these students' lives and responses to school suggest ways to better improve teaching and learning opportunities for Latino students in their schools.

1. Listen to students' life stories and learn to listen "between the lines."

All Latino students come with very interesting and challenging life stories. Many of them have endured battles and challenges beyond recognition and have so much to share with other school personnel and especially with school leaders. Students are eager to share their stories and to be able to take part in improving teaching and learning opportunities. The students who were interviewed for this investigation expressed a sincere interest in lending their time, ideas, and stories for the betterment of student learning. This suggests that Latino students like other students, care very much to see more and better learning options for all students in their school. Seeking out and listening to Latino student stories and

“reading between the lines” of each story will give school personnel ideas as how to shape and tailor learning opportunities for individual learning needs, particularly those of the Latino student needs. The portraits in this investigation give some clues about what might lie “between the lines” of these students’ life stories, as do other studies that pay close attention to this group (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Hamann, 2003; Pugach, 1998; Carger, 1996; Dietrich, 1998; Anzaldua, 1987).

2. Look for “cultural translators” or “cultural stakeholders” and other people who can help you listen to Latino students’ needs.

The more we learn about and understand other peoples’ cultures and needs, the better able we are to relate to them and also to provide for their needs (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Soto, 2007; DeStigter, 2001; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Poplin & Weeres, 1994). An essential way to start building cultural knowledge is by looking for bicultural individuals within the school who can relate to the Latino students’ experiences and can serve as “cultural” translators and teachers of the school staff. These individuals can also better work with the Latino students and also with the school staff on bridging communication barriers, reducing the cultural knowledge gap, and also providing ideas and suggestions for building better student-school personnel rapport. This suggests that having a positive and caring rapport with Latino students will assist in improving Latino student learning outcomes, better relationships with Latino parents, and interested community members. People with good knowledge of the

Latino culture can greatly facilitate the building of this rapport (Valenzuela, 1999; Olsen 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001; DeStigter, 2001; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Dietrich, 1998).

3. *Enrich the school staff with people who can relate and share the Latino students' cultural background and/or Language.*

While not all “cultural translators” are themselves Latino, the Latino students are more likely to succeed in school knowing that they have more Latino personnel, especially teachers and other school staff who share their cultural experiences (Valdes, 1996, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Olsen, 1988, 1990). The students in the investigation suggested more Latino staff members could better understand their needs and could understand their language. Juanita, in particular, suggested that the school should hire more personnel to work with the newly arrived Spanish-speaking students because she, like them, could relate to the challenges and struggles one endures while learning a new language and culture. She commented that she felt sorry for them because the school currently had limited resources to provide for their needs and interests. Hiring more skilled and trained bilingual and bicultural Latino personnel could enhance Latino student teaching and learning opportunities, improve student success, and also provide newly arrived immigrant and nonimmigrant students an easier transition into a new culture, and a new school atmosphere (Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 1996, 2001; Carger, 1996; Dietrich, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Anzaldua, 1987).

4. *Reexamine the school curriculum to see how it can connect with Latino students' learning needs.*

Based on the investigation, adjustments to the curriculum may make it more relevant and engaging to the Latino student segment of the school's population (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Diaz-Greensberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005; Hamann, 2003). For example, my informants wanted more hands-on curriculum because they felt they could relate to it better and that it would provide them with an assortment of learning activities and possibilities. The students cared little for the traditional paper and pencil approach to learning because this curriculum model provided them with less teacher-student interaction, and student-to-student interaction. The Latino students who encountered hands-on curriculum—as in the biology and science classes—experienced extended laboratory learning opportunities and other activities and projects in which students could expand on their learning and thinking capacities. The students also expressed an interest in having curriculum which was not only interesting but also challenging. Most students preferred to be challenged more in their classes as a means of knowing or sensing they were learning in that class. In addition, many students wanted to see more classes in which they were taught more about Mexican history and other aspects of about Latino culture and people.

In short, this investigation suggests that the nature of the curriculum itself may hold clues to the apparent lack of engagement of Latino students in schooling, and by making it more challenging, interesting, culturally relevant, and hands-on, along with better learning strategies and approaches, schools may better

serve the Latino student needs and ultimately produce enhanced learning success for Latino students (Hamann, 2003; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001).

Along with reexamining the curriculum, Latino students will more likely perform better in school if more learning opportunities were offered based on individual needs and interests (Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Poplin & Weeres, 1994; Pugach, 1998; Olsen, 1988, 1990:2). These changes can be in both teaching and learning opportunities that will best tailor the needs of the Latino student body. Students in the study favored classes which were tailored to their interests. They wanted to have more activities which provided opportunities to enhance cultural knowledge and academic life—for example, school assemblies geared to the Latino student body, where their Latino culture could be represented and validated, more time provided to socialize with peers, and building positive school morale.

Student support services geared to the needs of Latino students could also help students engage with the curriculum. Such services include student counseling services, health or clinical assistance, and even extra curricular activities like sports, clubs, and homework centers or tutorial assistance (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002).

5. *Establish multiple ways of teaching and reinforcing the school or district policies and procedures as well as the unwritten school norms.*

Though all Latino students may benefit, recently arrived students are in special need of explicit help with what is expected of them, both formally and informally in their new school surroundings. Most often immigrant Latino students enroll in American schools without having a clue about the American schooling system and their different classroom, school, and district policies, procedures, and norms. The schools would better prepare these immigrant students—and perhaps all Latino students—by teaching, informing, and reinforcing school and district policies and procedures, while finding various ways to explicitly communicate school norms throughout their first few years of schooling in different areas (Olsen, 1988, 1990; Carger, 1996; Pugach, 1998; Valdes, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003). The school policies and structures should provide an atmosphere of support and encouragement for all students in all facets of school life, including classroom, school building, and district as a whole. Kinds of policies that affect Latino immigrant student life in the school and attitudes toward school could include: transportation, academic and graduation requirements, student grouping (ability grouping and tracking), promotion and retention, attendance, discipline (e.g., detentions, suspension, and expulsion), targeting students for services, school dress codes, and sexual and racial harassment. Often, immigrant students lack the knowledge of American school policies and procedures and are also not well informed of school and classroom rules, both those that are codified and those that

are unwritten. Explicitly addressing this knowledge gap can reduce the confusion and anguish on these student's parts, not to mention reducing discipline issues both in and out of the classroom and other matters of "fitting in" to school life (Papalewis & Fortune, 2002; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Dietrich, 1998; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005).

6. *Augment the array of extra- curricular activities that are likely to attract Latino students.*

The students in the investigation expressed an interest in having more extra-curricular opportunities in which they could participate besides soccer, in which most Latino students currently participate. The Latino students shared the idea of reestablishing the Spanish club which terminated due to lack of administration and teacher support so they could participate in an activity which validated their culture and language. They also expressed an interest in learning more about their cultural roots and doing activities geared around it and also having more learning opportunities which enabled them to build social connections and relationships with school staff and students. Ultimately, Latino students wanted to see other extra-curricular activities offered where they could have learning opportunities to expand their social, cultural, and academic lives.

Overall, this pattern suggests that students are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities which are geared toward the interests and needs of the Latino student body and which provided opportunities for building social ties and connections with other school personnel and students. Having more students

involved in extra-curricular activities also reduces the number of students with too much “free time” on their hands and also assists students in establishing a sense of connection to and ownership of their school (Papalewis & Fortune, 2001; Olsen, 1988, 1990; Valdes, 1996, 2001).

7. *Seek out and include Latino student voices in planning and implementing of curriculum, learning opportunities, extra-curricular activities, and other aspects of schooling.*

The Latino students favored wanting to have a voice in the planning and implementation of changes in curriculum, addition of new learning opportunities or extra-curricular activities, and any other school changes which would ultimately change their academic lifestyle. For example, when the school changed from the normal period day to the Academies, students did not feel they had had much voice and choice in changes which had so deeply affected their academic life.

This pattern suggests that when students are included in the planning and implementation of school decisions they are more likely to feel more ownership of their school and are more likely to feel the need to work harder on making the changes more worthwhile and useful. These same students will also more likely want to share their success with other Latino students and use this desire to aide them in pulling them toward success (Olsen, 1988, 1997; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Hamann, 2003; Pugach, 1998).

Limitations of the Study and Unanswered Questions

While there is much that can be learned from this study, it faced specific limitations which may have affected the extent and applicability of its findings. More time spent with the participating students could have provided me with richer and more valuable data, even though the time spent with my informants was productively spent. Having more time with the student participants would have also aided me in having more time to build a better working rapport with the Latino students in the study. The Latino students interviewed shared their stories with me and also allowed me to shadow them in some of their classes but if given more time I could have shadowed them in other aspects of their lives and also had more time to possibly engage in more of their real life situations. The duration of the study could also affect how the students felt about me and the rapport they could build in the long run. This rapport with the students may also have some change in the ways students could more freely express their thoughts, feeling, and aspirations, regarding their schooling experiences. Being able to include the Latino students' parents and families voices in the study could also have enriched the study even more by providing their insights and stories which could compliment the Latino students' stories and experiences regarding their lives.

To have done such a study would have meant a more full-blown ethnographic investigation, which was beyond the scope or resources available for this dissertation research. Nonetheless, what I learned underscored the subtle

culturally based dynamics of these students' responses to school, that more ethnographic work could illuminate.

It is also noteworthy that my insights derived from a single school located in suburban area that was relatively free of some of the conditions to beset larger urban high schools serving large concentrations of Latino students. While the main points of my findings—concerning the nature of individual Latino students' lives, the role of cultural and family pressures, the interaction with peers—probably would still hold true, there are different dynamics, perhaps more negatively experienced in larger urban settings that I c simply cannot comment on.

Unanswered Questions for Future Study

There are several questions that could be explored more deeply as a result of this study. There are questions that as a researcher I would want to further pursue, as an educator I would want to be made better aware of, and as school district leader I would want to be informed of. Researchers and educators can use these questions as a learning tool so as to work more efficiently on making learning improvement efforts to assure that learning opportunities for this student population are improved.

Researcher Questions:

- 1) How can a researcher build a more productive rapport with Latino students in consideration of the short amount of research time- to make

assure that students demonstrate trust and faith in the study and share their rich history in a more truthful and honest fashion?

- 2) How can the researcher get more involved in the students' social and family activities to view and document all the events without intruding and interfering with the results? Being able to get more involved with the students in different contexts could also aide the researcher in documenting the social interactions of peers, and also the parents' point of view in relation to the Latino students' lives.
- 3) As a researcher, to balance the social, cultural, and academic aspects of each individual Latino students' lives so that one can get a true replica of each individual student and to document their stories without cheating someone out in the process.
- 4) How would documenting and incorporating the school personnel's' (administrators, teachers', para-educators, counselors) perceptions of the Latino students' in the school would change or affect their learning outcomes- to assess if they are meeting the Latino students' interests and needs, to see if they are aware of the Latino students' lives and experiences, to analyze if school personnel are aware of the needs and interests of the Spanish-speaking families?, what actions or next-steps are being taken to assure that the Latino students needs and challenges are being met in the school curriculum? And to see what efforts the school

personnel is making to build a more productive working rapport with the Latino student population they serve?

- 5) If time allowed, how would more observation of teacher-student interactions affect the research-having more time to observe teachers and students at work would of possibly facilitated more evidence to demonstrate the students academic challenges, correlation between the Latino students perceptions of their academic needs and challenges and that of teachers' perceptions of working effectively with the Latino student population, and also between the lack of knowledge of how to work more effectively with this diverse student population.

Questions for School Personnel and School District Leaders

- 6) How is the school curriculum meeting the needs and challenges of this diverse student population-is the curriculum relevant to their needs and interests?, is the curriculum both challenging and motivating?, is the curriculum culturally relevant to the Latino student population, can students read about other Latino students and Latino cultural role models in the everyday literature?, and is the curriculum preparing students for different educational and life endeavors?
- 7) What school-wide reform efforts can be made to assure that the needs, challenges, and interests of this student population are being made in the school system or ultimately, how can the school better serve this ethnically diverse student body?

- 8) Does the school environment provide a culturally, linguistically, and supportive learning environment that honors the bi-cultural character for Latino students.

School Leaders' Questions:

- 9) How is the district or school involving the Latino student voices throughout the planning and implementation of school-wide curriculum?
- 10) What district-wide reform efforts are being made to assure that the Latino student population and their families' needs, challenges, and interests are being met?
- 11) What can a school leader do when people they want to help, (students at-risk of dropping out of school, failing grades, numerous discipline issues, family challenges) but you're unable to help?
- 12) What policy reform efforts would best benefit and improve Latino student learning improvements?- For example the academies concept, why was this policy implemented (in the research study most students disliked the policy change)?, assess student responses regarding policy changes in each planning and implementation phase (assess how students feel about the academies in two years and in three years, to see if their opinions have changed regarding the policy change), and if students still dislike or disagree about the policy implementation changes, what efforts will be made to improve or change the policy changes.

- 13) Are Latino students' voices incorporated in the planning and implementation of policy changes throughout the school and district- what opportunities do Latino students' have to voice their opinions on school and district-wide issues, what happens to the students' opinions and ideas regarding school changes?
- 14) What advocacy group/s advocates for the needs and interests of the Latino student population in the classroom, school, district, and in the community?-what current student learning improvement discussions are being made?
- 15) What community collaboration efforts are being made in regards Latino student improvement efforts in the community?
- 16) How deeply committed and involved are you as a school leader willing to get to help and support the Latino students and their families in your school?
- 17) How far are you as school leader willing to go to get school personnel to buy-in and commit to working and supporting Latino students more productively in the school environment?

Conclusion

Finally, this research study offers only a glimpse of Latino students' perceptions of learning, teaching, and the schooling process. Using students' perceptions about their schooling experiences will aid educators and researchers

in discovering new and profound ways of seeing learning and teaching in a more meaningful, and student-friendly manner. Latino students are quite observant, sincere, and honest when it comes to sharing their knowledge, ideas, interests, and perceptions about schooling and life experiences. They are evaluative and can make different meanings of their learning interactions and can serve as valuable partners in the planning and implementation of the teaching and learning system, which can enhance the improvement of schooling for students which typically tend to be marginalized, voiceless, and most often not benefiting the schooling system. No one better than the actual Latino students can provide firsthand insights and perceptions on their schooling.

In general, much has been done to improve learning opportunities for ethnically diverse students but much more is needed regarding the specific learning opportunities available to Latino students. Unless we include Latino students' views and perceptions on schooling, we will continue to limit their learning opportunities and in some instances be unable to prevent them from failing completely, if for no other reason than that we fail to appreciate and understand them as individuals with rich and interesting, if difficult, personal histories, as well as good ideas about the world in which they live and work. But if their views and opinions regarding schooling improvements are taken into consideration, they may help to drive a new and more powerful direction of school change and improvement and success.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: STUDENT

Preamble:

My name is Lupe Barajas I am a graduate student from the college of education at the University of Washington. I am doing this interview for a school project which focuses on providing Latino students, like your self, an opportunity to voice their ideas about their schooling experiences. I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. Before I begin the interview I would like to tell you that your participation is totally voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions. You also have the right to stop the interview at any time. The information obtained from this interview will be kept private. If I decide to use some of the information your name with not be used. I may tape-record the interview.

Do I have your permission to tape- record you? ____no ____ yes.

1. What classes do you have?
What are your favorite classes?
What are your least favorite classes?
2. What do you like most and least about your school?
*subjects, homework, tests, building (cafeteria, library, gym), students, lunch
3. What activities do you participate in during school?
*student government, teacher assistant
4. What activities do you participate in outside of school?
*sports, clubs, homework sessions, tutorial
5. What kind of kids do you hang around with?
What kinds of kids to you hang around with outside of school?
What kinds of kids do you hang around with in school?
6. What activities do you and your friends do?
What do you and your friends do for fun?
7. What do you think of school?
What do your friends think of school?
What would make your school a better school?
8. Do you feel safe at school?
Does anyone bother, tease, or threatens to hit you?
9. What country is your family from?
In what country were you born?
What country did your parents/guardians come from?
What language do you and your family use at home?

10. Tell me about your parents/guardians?
What do they do? Do they live at home with you?
How far in school do your parents want you to go?
Did your parents go to school? If so, to what grade did they attend?
11. How much time do you spend working on your school work everyday?
How much time do your parents spend helping you on your homework?
12. Do you have brothers and sisters?
What are their ages?
Do they go to school? What grades are they in?
13. What nationality do you see yourself as?
Can you tell me why you see yourself as.....(Hispanic, Latino/a. Mexican)
14. Describe some groups you associate with?
Neighborhood group(s)
Church group(s)
Community group(s)
15. What makes you be who you are?
Family influences?
Social influences?
Cultural influences?
16. What high school do you want to transfer to?
Why do you want to transfer to.....?
17. What do you want to do when you grow-up?
Do you want to go to college?
What profession(s) interests you?
18. What suggestions do you have for improving Latino student education?
*suggestions for your school, family, friends, or other people who are
interested in helping Latino students
19. What worries or concerns to you have in your life at this time?
School, friends, or family worries or concerns.
20. Tell me about some important people in your life?
Who is important in your life? Why?
What adult people are important in your life?

Do want to grow-up to be like this person or not grow-up to be like this person?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS INTERVIEW

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: STUDENT GROUP

[In the group interview, which will consist of 3-4 students at one time, will be much more guided by the students than with the individual interviews, I will start students off with a “trigger” question and ask them to take the conversation wherever they want to. If the conversation strays too much from the topic of their perceptions of schooling, I may ask them another question or re-direct them back to the original question.]

Preamble:

My name is Lupe Barajas I am a graduate student from the college of education at the University of Washington. I am doing this interview for a school project which focuses on providing Latino students, like your selves an opportunity to voice their ideas about their schooling experiences. I would like to thank you guys for participating in this interview. Before I begin the interview I would like to tell you that your participation is totally your choice and you have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions. You also have the right to stop the interview at any time. The information obtained from this interview will be kept private. If I decide to use some of the information your names will not be used. I may tape-record the interview.

Do I have permission to tape-record you guys? _____no _____ yes.

1. Tell me about your school?
 - What do you guys like or dislike about your school?
 - What classes do you guys like most or least?
 - What activities do you guys like to do at school?
2. Do you guys feel safe in your school?
 - Does any one tease you guys or call you guys names?
 - Do you see many fights in your school?
 - What do you think happens to students who fight?
3. Tell me what a typical day in your school is like?
 - In your classes, during lunch, and before and after-school
4. Describe what a fun day at school would look like?
5. What activities would you like your school to offer?
 - Sports, clubs, additional classes, before or after-school activities
6. Would you guys recommend your school to other friends?
 - What would you guys say about the school?

VITA

Lupe Barajas was born in Tepalcatepec, Michoacan, Mexico, and grew up in Wapato, Washington, located in the Yakima Valley. She now resides in Everett, WA, and works for the Mount Vernon School District as the Migrant and Bilingual Education Coordinator and also works as SPELL (Schoolwide Preparation for English Language Learners) facilitator at the University of Washington. She earned a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Spanish and minors in Bilingual Education, ESL (English and a Second Language), and English, from Central Washington University in Ellensburg, WA. She earned a Master of Arts degree from Heritage College from Toppenish, WA, with a major in Educational Administration. In 2007, she completed her Doctor of Education degree at the University of Washington in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with a major in School District Leadership.