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Perceptions Of American Latino Families Of Their Children's Education: Stories From One Suburban Middle School

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PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN LATINO FAMILIES OF THEIR
CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: STORIES FROM ONE SUBURBAN MIDDLE
SCHOOL

Jeffry D. Prickett

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

April, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The immigration debate in the United States has been ongoing for decades. While the outcome of the debate means more for some than others, one thing is always a constant: there are families behind every story of immigration. To uncover some of these stories, four American Latino immigrant families were interviewed about their experience with assimilation and factors associated with the academic success of their children. The children of the families attended a rapidly diversifying mid-western suburban middle school. The primary research question was: what are the perceptions of Latino parents regarding their children's education in their neighborhood school? Themes that emerged from the interviews were: the "American dream" was not what the families had hoped for; opportunities for immigrants are not the same as they are for natural-born citizens; a sense of belonging is inhibited by the stigma of being an immigrant, although; an inability to fully assimilate does not necessarily hinder progress toward becoming a citizen. Because they had been born in the U.S., the families felt their children were fully assimilated into the culture of the country. However, because they were of Latino descent, the families also believed their children would never be fully comfortable calling the U.S. home. Implications and recommendations for educators include: adopting a culturally responsive school model, employing culturally responsive teaching strategies, providing professional development for teachers and school leaders to promote empathy for immigrant students and families, establishing family-friendly community/school partnerships, enacting hiring practices and protocols that take multicultural dispositions and practices into account, and continuously reviewing and updating curriculum and leadership skills to meet the needs of all incoming immigrant students.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Today the most urgent challenge for the American educational system has a Latino face. Latinos are the largest and most rapidly growing ethnic minority in the country, but academically, they are lagging dangerously far behind.

—Gandara & Contreras, *The Latino Education Crisis*

The purpose of this study is to explore how four Latino immigrant families feel public school is preparing their children for success, to discover the extent to which assimilation into a new culture impacts school success, and to determine implications for change at the school level.

As a school leader and someone who has worked in public education for the past 16 years, I have come to the conclusion that all children have a right to be educated free of racial disparities or biases; that all children, regardless of the country in which they were born, have a right to the same education afforded children native to this country. I have found that most parents, regardless of race, nationality, religion, or gender, want the same things for their children—a fair and equal opportunity in school and in life.

I have a concern, however, as the Hispanic population continues to grow, that school districts and organizations across the nation are failing to respond accordingly. As a report produced by the National Research Council (2006) pointed out,

The children of Spanish-speaking immigrants . . . are coming of age as the white majority population is aging . . . the majority of the second generation is in school; by 2030 the majority will be in the labor force. Their economic and social integration will depend on educational investments made today. (p. 3)

The report went on to say, “Perhaps the most profound risk facing Hispanics is failure to graduate high school, which remains unacceptably high” (p. 7).

Gandara and Contreras (2009) pointed out that the number of college degrees held by Latinos has not increased for more than 20 years, while the percentage of the population with degrees for all other groups has increased substantially over that period. In California, for example, due to its large and undereducated Latino communities, this is significant. Gandara and Contreras (2009) went on to report that:

The Center for Public Policy and Higher Education projected that if California does not begin preparing more underrepresented students for higher education, by 2020 the state will experience an 11 percent drop in per capita income, resulting in serious economic hardship for the state's population. (p. 5)

If we don't make investments now so that schooling meets the strengths and needs of all children, where will that leave the children of tomorrow? What will this mean for the future of America if the workforce is made up of high school dropouts?

This problem of where and how to make the appropriate investment is compounded when we look at the importance of assimilation and the fact that, as human beings, we require a natural period of time to adapt to new surroundings, before we are comfortable and feel that we are a part of something new. As immigrant parents struggle to form associations in a new land, as they struggle to find jobs, understand a school system that is quite literally foreign to them, identify who to trust, and come to grips with completely new cultural norms and societal expectations, to what extent are they thinking about their child's school experiences? Are parents worried if their children are getting a quality education or not?

Statement of the Problem

The Latino education crisis is not simply a result of immigration. In fact, some scholars have noted that on the contrary, Americanization is bad for immigrants.

—Gandara & Contreras, *The Latino Education Crisis*

For many immigrant children, the emotion of displacement in the migration of cross-border movement is a factor in the formation of their identities (Gonzalez, 2001). As Roosens (1989) pointed out, social rejection by their hosts and public commitment to their own culture and country of origin give first-generation immigrants little reason to immerse themselves in the language and culture of their host country (p. 134).

This fact is supported in other work, including a study conducted by Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008), which concluded large numbers of immigrant children, particularly those who live in impoverished urban neighborhoods, face disheartening obstacles in their schools and communities. Neighborhoods defined by high levels of unemployment, violence, and extreme racial and socioeconomic segregation tend to have crowded, understaffed schools that experience high rates of staff turnover, are poorly resourced, and perpetuate low academic expectations. Such schools are troubled by adverse peer cultures and the always-present threat of violence; it is difficult to be open and ready to learn if you have to be invariably on guard against being attacked.

Gandara and Contreras (2009) wrote about the U.S. Census Bureau's prediction that by 2025, one out of every four students will be Latino, and the population will only continue to become more Hispanic. The problem—the reason these numbers are significant as they relate to Latino immigrants in particular—is, to quote Gandara and Contreras,

For most, there has been a period of difficulty and adjustment during which both the ethnic group members and the existing society adapted to each other. And the adjustment has always been more difficult for some groups than others. Italians, for example, fared much more poorly in school than many other immigrant students, and for a time there was considerable concern about whether Jewish immigrants would be able to compete academically. Yet these groups were eventually integrated into the mainstream society and those students are at no greater risk academically than any other European-origin group. (p.17)

The difference between Latino immigrants and other groups may be the era in which significant immigrant into the United States has taken place. Regardless of the period of adjustment, which naturally occurs (and at varying rates) for anyone acclimating to life in a foreign country, immigration has meant something different for Latino groups than it did for those of European origin. With Latino immigration highlighted in the United States through tough legislation such as Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, 2010), there is a heightened emphasis on the issue.

Gandara and Contreras (2009) continued by saying:

The situation is not as hopeful this time around. Evidence suggests that there may be real reason for concern—even alarm—about the state of the growing Latino school-age population. Latino students are underachieving at high and consistent rates, and while children of immigrants, and their grandchildren, do indeed improve their educational attainment with each generation, there appears to be a ceiling effect that results in little or no improvement after the third generation for

some Latino groups. (p. 18)

Research on the socialization of Latino immigrant youth shows that in a reversal of past patterns, assimilation no longer serves as the pathway into mainstream American culture and middle-class status as it once did for European immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Evidence suggests, instead, that the socialization associated with acculturation and assimilation often results in a lowering of the academic achievement and performance of Latino students (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to research the extent to which acculturation impedes or augments the educational success and progress of Latino immigrant students, and to understand the perceptions of Latino immigrant families regarding their children's education in one American public school.

Our collective understanding of the experiences of immigrant children and youth remains narrow. This gap in our knowledge is worrisome given that immigrant children are entering the United States in remarkable numbers, making them the fastest growing sector of the youth population (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). I chose to center the study in the context of the neighborhood school because school is where youth spend the majority of their time. School is where children make new friends, discover things about themselves, study a new language, and learn the culture of American society. As Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) pointed out, "Schooling is... the first sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution of the new society" (p. 2).

Research Questions

The following research question will be addressed in this study, and is the primary question and basis on which the research is predicated: What are the perceptions of Latino parents regarding their children's education in their neighborhood school?

The following are related questions that will be addressed throughout the study:

1. In what ways and with what results does Latino culture have an effect on, or impact the education of Latino immigrant youth in their neighborhood public school?
2. What were parents' experiences in school, and how has this influenced their expectations regarding schooling for their children?
3. How do parents see their children change since moving to the United States, and what part does schooling play in that change?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the 2010 Census, 308.7 million people resided in the United States on April 1, 2010—an increase of 27.3 million people, or 9.7 percent, between 2000 and 2010. The Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010, accounting for over half of the 27.3 million increase in the total population of The United States.

—U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

Introduction

In this review of the literature, I will highlight such topics as relevant data, the importance of parental education as a predictor of a child's school success, difficulties associated with the assimilation process, and the implications of social capital and mobility. I will also examine how these topics are associated with the educational success of Hispanic school-age students. The research questions presented in the previous chapter helped shape this review.

I chose to open the chapter with the particular statistic above due to its relevance in the rapidly changing demographics of the United States. According to 2010 U.S. Census information, of the 12.8 million citizens in Illinois, 4.6 million are of minority status; this is a nearly 17% increase from 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Certainly this information must mean that we are responding accordingly as a community and as a nation. But responding to what? And responding how? Immigration is a significant human event, forcing Americans to confront the challenges and circumstances that have arrived with the massive influx of immigrants into the United States (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). Gandara and Contreras claimed we have a Latino education crisis on our hands, pointing out that the demands of American society are surpassing the ability of post-immigrant generations of Latinos to conquer the educational and socioeconomic barriers they face (2009).

So we must ask: When children and parents first arrive in the new country, do they think immediately of education? Are their immediate thoughts centered on the idea that their children will have opportunities to go to college and have a prosperous life due to the educational advancements afforded them in the new country? As Suarez-Orozco et al (2008) pointed out, “How does immigration shape the changing realities and experiences of recently arrived youth? What ambitions do these newest and youngest Americans bring with them, and how effectively are we as a society harnessing their energies?” (p. 2).

Current data looking at the academic achievements of Hispanic immigrants is not promising. Latinos tend not to reach levels of education past high school completion, with dropout rates remaining high across multiple generations. Only one in ten Latinos has a college degree; compare this to the more than one in four White Americans and more than one in three Asians that do, and it becomes clear that there is a problem. The number of Latinos with college degrees has not seen an increase for at least two decades, while for all other groups this number has increased significantly over that period (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

So what has been the experience of immigrant and second- and third-generation Latinos? Is there really an education crisis among the Latino population? If so, what perceptions do Latino immigrants carry, and what can be done about them?

The implications of a changing demographic, of a quickly growing immigrant population, are many. As the National Research Council (2006) pointed out, “The Hispanic second generation, the children of Spanish-speaking immigrants, who are coming of age as the white majority population is aging, is projected to grow to 26

million over the next 25 years” (p. 3). Today the majority of the second generation is in school; by 2030 the majority will be in the labor force. This has important implications for the nation’s future, as this generation of Latinos will play a vital role in assuming the responsibility for an aging society (National Research Council, 2006).

Education and Advanced Degrees

If, at a time when college has become the new means of entry into the middle class, the large majority of Latinos do not attend college—and those who do attend often don’t graduate—then Latinos have a strong chance of remaining the most undereducated major population group in the country (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This is significant, given that the current economic structure in the United States is extremely unforgiving to the undereducated; without a college degree jobs are scarce, thus making earning potential meager. Consider the following statistics, found in a 2012 report from the U.S. Census Bureau:

Adults with advanced degrees earn four times more than those with less than a high school diploma. Workers 18 years and older with a master’s, professional, or doctoral degree earned an average of \$82,320 in 2006, while those with less than a high school diploma earned \$20,873. Workers 18 years and older with a bachelor’s degree earned an average of \$56,788 in 2006, while those with a high school diploma earned \$31,071. (pp. 4–5)

The report also states, “Among those whose highest level of education was a high school diploma or equivalent, non-Hispanic white workers had the highest average earnings (\$32,931), followed by Asians (\$29,426) and blacks (\$26,268)” (p. 5).

Not only is there a concern over the quantity of Latino students dropping out of high school before their senior year and their associated lack of entrance into college, but there is also the matter of achievement and education factors at the earliest stages of life. Gandara and Contreras (2009) pointed out that though the educational success among Latino students remains low, it cannot be attributed solely to factors associated with immigration; rather it is the result of the conditions that they encounter upon entry into this country. We will turn to some of these factors next.

Parental Education

Gandara and Contreras (2009) stated, “Because Latinos are the nation’s largest and fastest-growing ethnic population minority group, it matters very much to everyone how well these students fare in school” (p. 4). One significant area that researchers have taken a look at in determining the causes of low achievement is the educational attainment level of a child’s mother. According to U.S Department of Education researchers, children’s academic performance increases as a direct correlation of their mothers’ education. Because Latino mothers have much less education than mothers from all other major ethnic groups, this is a factor to be considered in these children’s early low academic performance, and continues to affect achievement throughout their later education (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

Parental education has a close relationship to school readiness, performance on achievement tests, grades, drop-out rates, school behavior problems, and school engagement. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) pointed out that,

Parents with higher educational levels, when compared to parents who have lower levels of education, tend to provide more literacy opportunities, communicate

with more sophisticated vocabularies, offer more access to computers, assist to a more productive degree with homework assignments, provide private SAT instruction, offer knowledge about applying to and getting into college, as well as provide other academic supports. (p. 37)

Furthermore, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) went on to report, “It has been proven that the higher the level of education a mother attains, the better her children are likely to do academically” (p. 38). Higher levels of parents’ education lead to increased earnings, which allows parents to place their children into more favorable schools (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Magnuson and McGroder (2002) found that maternal education is associated not only with children’s academic achievement, but also their academic difficulties such as grade retention and special education placement. They noted the point made by Holloman, Dobbins, and Scott (1998), that maternal education was negatively associated with special education placement by 10 years of age, particularly for a learning disability. Specifically, children of mothers with less than a high school diploma were twice as likely to be in special education, as compared with children of mothers who held high school diplomas.

Social Capital

Another significant area that researchers think may cause low achievement among Hispanic students is the social capital of immigrants. As mentioned by Ream (2005), “Social capital can be defined as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources embedded in social networks that may be converted into other manifestations of capital, including material and human capital, and healthy civic participation and community

cohesion” (p. 203). People go through life in social networks that ultimately shape their priorities and morals. Peers usually become highly influential when one reaches adolescence. Adolescents spend nearly twice as much time with same-age peers than with family (Carnegie Corporation, 1995), and peers have an extraordinary influence on school behavior—including factors such as how much time students spend on homework, their attitudes around coming to school each day, and their thoughts about education in general (Ream, 2005).

Angela Valenzuela (1999) discussed the benefits of having a strong, tightly knit social community. The social environment helps shape and strengthen the bond between friends and can even reinforce their individual and group commitment to academic achievement. Social capital in the form of strong connections also insulates young adults from the many distractions facing their peers in other mixed-generation and U.S.-born groups. These students tend to develop the confidence to build an academic identity and also to recognize the compatibility between that identity and their Mexican, Spanish-speaking selves. The high levels of social capital embedded in their web of relations make it likely that these youths will successfully negotiate their way into productive adulthood.

Mobility

One important question asked by researchers in connection with social capital is, “What role does mobility play in this context?” As Rumberger (1999) discussed, mobility can upset social systems that have been formed, as well as the social environment for peer interaction. Changing schools and/or residences can have a negative impact on an adolescent’s self-confidence and interrupt the growth and strength of secure and trusting

friendships. Student mobility is widespread, and Rumberger went on to report that the majority of U.S. school children change schools by the 12th grade, with some transferring much more frequently (1999). Student mobility, when taking these facts into consideration, can get in the way of educational achievement as well as the completion of school.

Ream (2005) suggested that the impact of student mobility on peer social capital development may be particularly detrimental to Mexican-origin youth, per the following hypothesis: “Mexican Americans learn less in school than non-Latino Whites, in part because they have less access to peer social capital due to the fact that they are more mobile during their school careers” (p. 204). Ream also confirmed the findings in other studies showing that U.S. school children in general, and Latinos in particular, are highly mobile, which can lead to a negative impact on student performance in primary grades (p. 204). Regardless of the fact that U.S. school children are highly mobile, and will probably move at one point or another during their school careers, Mexican-origin youth face the burden of socioeconomic disadvantage, which may explain why, once students reach the secondary school level, there is still a gap in 12th-grade test performance in which we see Mexican-origin youth averaging nine points below non-Latino Whites in mathematics and five points lower in reading (Ream, 2005).

Socioeconomic Disadvantage

And what exactly is the socioeconomic disadvantage facing Mexican-origin youth? How does this factor into determining whether these youth experience success in school and in life? Does the mere fact that they are of Mexican descent work against them in terms of academic success? Do these youth learn differently because they are

from a different country and speak a different language? To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the entire realm of disadvantage and what areas it impacts the most.

Hispanic immigrants' social, economic, and political well-being are critically dependent upon opportunities to earn a living, to contribute to and share in national posterity, and to become socially and politically empowered. The future of Hispanic immigrants in the United States will be shaped by the route of assimilation for newcomers, any type of money-making prospect for this emerging second generation, and the social mobility of already-established residents (National Academies, 2006).

Clustering

According to the National Research Council, two of the most significant conditions existing in the United States today that will have an impact on the Hispanic experience for many years to come are the aging of the White majority and the historic tendency of Hispanic immigrants to cluster in specific regions and in urban, ethnic neighborhoods has changed; Hispanics today are transforming the face of American cities and towns as they disperse to new destinations across the nation (National Academies, 2006). While this may not seem at first like it would be a detriment to success, where groups of people eventually gather is actually quite significant. Social scientists consider moves of any kind to be among the most stressful of events, but the stakes are higher and the process all the more challenging when it involves travel across borders and into a new country.

Upon arrival, parents must focus most of their energies on making ends meet in the new society, forging ties first and foremost with people of similar ethnic backgrounds

or immigrant status (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). In some cases, no such community exists, and newcomers must confront the challenges of adaptation by themselves. More common, however, is the arrival of immigrants into places where a community of their co-nationals already exists. Such communities can cushion the impact of a foreign culture and provide assistance for finding jobs. Help with immediate living needs, such as housing, places to shop, and schools for the children, also flow through these co-ethnic networks (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Economic Trends

Regarding economic trends, as referenced in the work of the National Research Council (2006), “Policy changes in the education and health domains have far-reaching implications for the future welfare of Hispanics” (p. 7). Increasing health insurance premiums have forced many working families to drop their health care coverage. Such increases also have taken a significant toll on small businesses, which have had to scale back benefits, increase co-payments, or cease offering insurance plans altogether. This trend is particularly detrimental to Hispanics, who are more highly concentrated in small firms than are non-Hispanics.

In the area of higher education, as further pointed out by the National Research Council (2006),

Waning federal support for low-income students to attend college has coincided with above-average tuition hikes designed to offset shortfalls in state and local budgets—just when growing numbers of students, an increasing number of them Hispanic, have been requesting financial aid. (p. 58)

These disadvantages, in the form of policy changes in both the health and education fields, are critical factors in determining the success or failure of Mexican-origin children.

Assimilation

The assimilation of Hispanic children and their families into the fabric and culture of American life is a process that takes time and can cause significant hardships on families as they attempt to start over in a new country. Many believe that to get ahead in the United States, one has to assimilate, to become American. Souto-Manning (2007), in her case study research on assimilation, referenced Valdes (1996), who wrote that children of Mexican immigrants tend to fail at high rates in American schools. Souto-Manning reflected that parents may be justified in hiding their children's identities by providing them with more American names. By not automatically associating children's names with their Mexican identity, parents try to protect them from failing in school due to their background (Souto-Manning, 2007).

This attitude and disposition is the same for many immigrant parents, who are looking for a better life for their children. Pease-Alvarez (2002), for example, interviewed parents of Mexican descent over a seven-year period to learn about parental perspectives on bilingual language socialization. All parents thought it was important for their children to be bilingual. Yet, school pressures led many parents not to "force" Spanish on their children. Many Latino children experience discrimination when they are seen as Spanish speakers by their English-speaking peers.

As families essentially reinvent themselves and their identities in a new land, it is important that they have room to envision the possibilities for their futures instead of

being forced into having to choose between American or traditional ethnic ways. This is not always a choice, however. Although there are groups who are slated for a smooth transition into the mainstream, and for whom ethnicity will become a matter of personal choice, there are others for whom their ethnicity will be a source of strength and who will force their way up, socially and economically, on the basis of their own communities' networks and resources. There are still others whose ethnicity will be neither a matter of choice nor a source of progress but, due to the color of their skin, will be a mark of subordination (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Deficit Perspective

Regardless of the rapidity at which groups assimilate, they still operate at a disadvantage—a deficit—as a natural result of having to learn a new language, and of feeling that they have to change their children's names in order for them to have a chance at success in life. Throughout the country, deficit perspectives contribute to Latino students' failure in schools (Gonzalez, 2005). Brown and Souto-Manning (2008) discussed how looking at students through what is sometimes considered a “deficit lens” means that these students come to be thought of in terms of missing certain skills or lacking pertinent background knowledge. Through these lenses, students are seen as culturally deprived. Still today, in many early childhood settings, there is a belief that in order to be academically successful, these children must have their deficiencies corrected so they can function in mainstream ways—in the American way (Valdes, 1996).

It is difficult to assimilate and have room to see the future as full of possibility when operating at a deficit, or when thinking of students as missing certain essentials. A pervasive belief that Latino students are cognitively low-functioning is widespread

(Mercado & Moll, 2000). These stereotypes and beliefs contribute to Latino students' lack of educational/academic success, which directly relates to the way society devalues the Latino race and ethnicity (Brown & Souto-Manning, 2008). Nieto (2002) wrote that many educational assumptions about Latino learners are based on stereotypes that promote the insignificance of cultures traditionally holding low status in our society.

Teacher Perception

Another common stereotype that many researchers and educators believe may contribute to Latino students' lack of educational success is teachers' perceptions of minority parents and the question of whether or not these parents value education. DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) found, in a study on pre-service and in-service teachers' attitudes toward minority parents that, regardless of courses taken to increase awareness of other cultures, participants still believed that students' home lives and their parents' lack of value for education were responsible for their students' deficient academic achievement.

DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) went on to further support this claim by revealing data from their study which found that 73% of their educator respondents disagreed with the survey item "Minority parents from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to place great value on education" (p. 45). In addition, the authors added that 83% of the participants disagreed with the survey item, "A major reason for the pattern of low achievement among poor minorities is the structure and values of the schools, *not* the home" (p. 45). Providing seemingly conflicting research, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) asserted that this perception about minority parents not caring about the education of their children—that parents are ignorant about the needs of their children—is just a myth.

Effects of Early Learning

Regardless of the perception of teachers, students, or parents, public schooling in the United States is critical not only to future occupational opportunities, but also to becoming socialized into American society. For many low-income Latino students, the schools are also the first response system for any kind of social, medical, or psychological problem or disability (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Because school is such a critical and necessary component of life—such an absolute factor if one expects to be admitted into the middle class—much attention has been placed on the importance of early educational experiences (Peisner-Feinberg, 2005; Sawhill, 1999).

Brain researchers have recently argued that preschool attendance may be most critical for children from low-income backgrounds. They contend that low-income and working-class students encounter, on average, one-half to one-third fewer words by age three, resulting in these children hearing and learning far fewer words at that early age than their middle-class peers (Hart & Risley, 1995). Other researchers have argued for the malleability of the brain—especially children’s brains—providing evidence that a fortified education early on in a child’s life can make up for a lack of mental stimulation in the home (Martinez, 2000). Therefore, preschool education has come to be viewed as a critical component of the education of low-income Latino children. Yet most do not attend preschool (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This is another serious disadvantage young Latino immigrants face as they grow up in the new country and compete for jobs with their native counterparts. This issue takes on even more serious tones when we look at the percentage of various groups of students who attend preschool.

To highlight the imbalance of preschool attendance between ethnic groups, Gandara & Contreras (2009) pointed out the following:

Fifty-seven percent of all three- to five-year-olds nationwide attend some kind of preschool: in 2005, approximately 66 percent of black children, 59 percent of white children, and 43 percent of Latino children participated in early childhood programs. (p. 89)

Fuller, Eggers-Pierola, Holloway, Liang, and Rambaud (1996) explored the reasons why Latino children are less likely than other children to be enrolled in preschool. Although the low attendance of Latino children is often depicted as stemming from a culture that does not endorse sending young children to school, Fuller and his team of researchers did not find this to be entirely the situation.

First of all, they found that fewer programs are located in their neighborhoods than in other areas. And, as pointed out in research by Gandara & Contreras (2009), “schools that serve Latino students in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are much like the students themselves—lacking in resources and the social know-how to garner more” (p. 86). Second, many parents in Fuller’s study were concerned that traditional values, such as respect for elders and authority figures, and use of the primary language, were not being taught at preschool. Therefore, if high-quality preschool programs were available, affordable, and culturally sensitive, Fuller concluded, Latino parents in general would not withhold their children from these programs (Fuller, 1996).

In more recent research conducted by Fuller and Kim (2011), Latino children were half as likely to enroll in preschool as White and African-American students. This discrepancy threatens to widen the academic divide between them, according to the

report *Latino Access to Preschool Stalls after Early Gains* (2011). About 35% of Latino four-year olds attended some type of preschool, while 66% of White children and 54% of African-American children enrolled. The study found that, since the early 1990s, the percentage of Latino four-year olds attending preschool grew substantially, having grown to 53% by 2005. By 2009, however, Latino preschool enrollment had dropped to an enrollment rate of 48% (Fuller & Kim, 2011).

Undocumented Status of Immigrant Families

There are several possible reasons for the decline in Latino preschool enrollment. One reason could be the lack of government capacity to keep pace with Latino population growth. According to a recent report by Fuller and Kim (2011), nearly one-third of all Americans will be of Latino background by the year 2050. “This population will be young and perhaps weakly schooled—all retirees will depend upon the productivity of Latino workers to finance pensions, staff medical clinics, and serve the elderly” (p. 2). Another possible reason is that many undocumented immigrant families often stay away from filling out forms with official agencies. The current political climate, with its stringent immigrant policies, may be keeping them away in greater numbers. Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of undocumented citizens, each year 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school nationwide to uncertain futures. Abrego and Gonzales (2010) discussed this issue in their research on the postsecondary prospects of Latino youth: “Immigration status issues stall and derail the educational and economic trajectories for these students and for countless others who exit high school before graduation” (p. 145).

While undocumented students make up only a small subset of the entire Latino population, the vast majority of all undocumented students come from Latin American countries. Current restrictive immigration policies disproportionately affect Latin American immigrants (De Genova, 2004; Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). It is estimated that 81% of undocumented immigrants are Latino (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

While low attendance in early education is one factor to consider in a discussion on the poor academic performance of Latino immigrants, there are other aspects that, when combined with different patterns of risk, further complicate the issue. When taken together, these issues begin to have consequences later in students' educational careers. They can keep children "tracked" in a certain level of learning. For example, the students who arrive at school ready to learn usually come from more advantaged homes with parents who have encouraged early literacy, and they tend to have attended high-quality preschools. These students are likely to maintain their advantage over students who come from less advantaged homes (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This can be due to the fact that the students from these homes are placed in lower-level reading groups and end up covering considerably less material than higher-level reading groups.

Funding and School Facilities

Another concern is the impact of inadequate school facilities on student learning (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Gandara & Rumberger, 2006; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). The evidence reported by much of this research has shown that public schools considered "very good" in terms of adequate funding and care are attended largely by White, Asian, and middle- and upper-income students; meanwhile, the inadequate schools are usually overwhelmingly attended by students of color (Oakes, Mendoza, &

Silver, 2004). Many of these school campuses postpone maintenance of building needs because of lack of funds.

According to Sirotnik (2004), “Responsible accountability systems must attend to whether students have adequate and equitable opportunities for learning. Although monitoring what students learn is certainly important, it cannot be the sole element of a responsible accountability system” (p. 83). To be responsible, he argued, a system of accountability must also pay careful attention to whether students have adequate, equitable opportunities for learning. He also argued that irresponsible accountability systems do not even bother to correct inequities in resources and opportunities, and even go so far as to hide the fact that students who don’t have adequate resources at school usually learn less (Sirotnik, 2004).

States with very large Latino populations, such as California, Texas, and Arizona, are all in similar situations in terms of underfunded education. Texas, with the second largest school-age Latino population, ranked 34th in the nation in per-student spending in its K-12 schools, and 32nd in its compensation of teachers (Gandara, 2008). Arizona, which is one of the two fastest growing states in the nation, and serves a student population that is one-third Latino, is positioned 50th in per-student spending (Gandara, 2008).

Gandara and Contreras (2009) pointed out that “it has been difficult to establish a firm link between the quality and condition of school facilities and the educational outcomes for students” (p. 94). They attributed this difficulty to the quality of school facilities being highly correlated with the wealth of the students and communities that the schools serve (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Even given this reality, however, there is

significant agreement that it is difficult to teach or learn in abhorrently inadequate facilities (Earthman, 2002). Insufficient and unsafe working conditions can, and have, led to higher teacher turnover in school systems where these circumstances are prevalent. Given the fact that it is exceptionally difficult to bring about school reform without a stable foundation of teachers, it is hard to deny the important, albeit indirect, role that school facilities play in student achievement.

Certainly, policy must play a role in some piece of this immigration puzzle, and could explain why some schools have been allowed to fall into disrepair while others thrive with everything they need. Does policy, however, impact whether students achieve, families assimilate, parents earn a decent wage in order to support their families, and post-secondary students have access to—and graduate from—college? The policies that dictate how states handle immigration have changed over the years, with perhaps the most stringent of policies occurring recently. This review of the literature would not be complete without a look at how native-born and foreign-born Latinos feel about, and look upon, immigration policy.

Attitudes and Perception Toward U.S. Policy

In 2007, researchers from the Pew Hispanic Center conducted a survey of approximately 2,003 Hispanic adults, which focused on their views surrounding the immigration debate, as well as their attitudes toward illegal immigrants and perceptions of discrimination (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). The researchers reported that most Hispanics surveyed disapproved of the new policies and stepped-up enforcement measures to fight illegal immigration. Hispanics were most negative about local police taking an active role in identifying undocumented or illegal immigrants. By comparison,

the non-Latino population in this country had a very different take on this policy. The research showed that approximately 45% approved of local police taking an active role in immigration enforcement, as compared to a 14% among Latinos.

Among Latinos themselves, there is a difference on this issue, especially between the foreign-born and native-born. Foreign-born Hispanics are more opposed to enforcement policies than are native-born Hispanics. The survey found that 83% of the foreign-born population did not support active involvement by local police in immigration enforcement, compared with 74% of native-born Hispanics.

This feeling of negativity has had varying levels of impact. Sixty-four percent of Hispanics surveyed believed that that debate over immigration policy and the failure of Congress to enact a reform bill has made life more difficult for Hispanics living in this country. Slightly more than half of all Hispanics surveyed (53%) reported at least one negative impact from the heightened attention to immigration issues. Approximately 12% of all Latinos reported that, as a result of increased attention to immigration issues, they have had more trouble in recent months getting or keeping a job, while 15% of all Latinos said they have had more trouble finding or keeping housing (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007).

Another focus of the survey was on perceptions of discrimination, which can be seen as a major reason why Hispanics don't succeed in this country. According to the survey, just over half of the nation's Hispanics (54%) say that discrimination is a major problem preventing Latinos from succeeding in America. This number has risen substantially since 2002, when 44% of Hispanics felt this way. The survey found that foreign-born Latinos are more likely than those born in the United States to believe

discrimination is a major problem, and that these perceptions are related to nativity, language usage patterns, and educational attainment (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007).

Culturally Responsive Schools and Pedagogy

In order to properly address the needs of immigrant children attending school systems in the United States, schools and the educators who work in them need to understand the importance of being culturally responsive—including what teaching and learning look like in a culturally responsive school—and how cultural responsiveness can work to the advantage of both the students and the school system itself.

Defining Culturally Responsive Schools

Gay (2002) defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). In addition to this definition, Gladden (2016) set out a few beliefs that schools must encompass if they are to embrace what it means to be culturally responsive. He wrote that,

Schools that strive to be culturally responsive believe that there is no one right “set” of experiences, beliefs, and values. They know that each student’s cultural set is his or her self-identity. Most importantly, they understand that students are far more likely to fully engage in the learning process when their self-identity is understood, accepted, and valued. They are committed to building trust with and among their students, and they know that trust is built through respect. (Creating Culturally Responsive Schools, para.1)

The advantage one group of students might have over another early in their educational career may disappear if schools are culturally sensitive places where (a) learning occurs at a pace that makes sense to the immigrant learner, (b) there is mutual trust that has been built through relationships, and (c) students are fully engaged in the learning. At the very least, this would decrease the opportunity gap between groups.

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Classrooms

In order to be a culturally responsive school, educators need to understand what culturally responsive teaching actually looks like within a school's walls. As discussed by Hammond (2015), when teachers talk about culturally responsive teaching, it is usually only mentioned or used as a strategy to motivate at-risk students to take their learning more seriously. She discussed the importance of making learning more culturally responsive by ensuring that it mimics the student's own cultural learning process. For instance, many students from diverse cultures—including Latino communities—have strong oral culture traditions. It is important to intentionally plan lessons that would incorporate those oral traditions in some way.

Culturally responsive teaching can be thought of as an advantage to the brain's memory systems and information processing structures, using memory strategies to make learning stick. An example of this might be connecting what needs to be remembered to a rhythm or music, or by reciting it in fun ways like a poem, riddle, or limerick (Hammond, 2015, para. 6).

Additionally, there are classroom techniques that benefit culturally diverse student populations and satisfy culturally responsive teaching. These strategies could include, among others:

- Match classroom instruction to cultural norms for social interaction to enhance students' social skills development and problem-solving ability.
- When asking questions or giving directions, adjust wait time for students from different cultures to enhance classroom participation and the development of critical thinking skills.
- Be sensitive to the cultural shifts that immigrant students, or other students with minority family and community cultures, must make as they move between school and home (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 16).

As schools think about implementing some of these shifts in instruction and training teachers in the strategies and potential programs that will have a positive impact on diverse sets of learners, it is good to remember that many of these strategies are good for *all* students. In addition, the professional development that school leaders plan during Institute and School Improvement days needs to take into account the need to offer professional development to teachers on these strategies and programs.

Much has been written on the importance of culturally responsive, culturally relevant curriculum, teaching, pedagogy, and schools. As Noguera (2006) wrote, for example, “Through constructing culturally relevant educational practices, programs, and pedagogy, we can assist Latino immigrant youth to avoid the pitfalls that often beset this vulnerable population” (p. 313).

Preparing Teachers for Culturally Responsive Education

Additionally, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (2006) said the following about the need for culturally responsive schools and pedagogy, offering a possible glimpse into where the Center feels educators need to start:

Despite the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations in schools, not all teacher education programs (TEPs) readily embrace multicultural education or culturally responsive teacher education pedagogy. (p. 4)

The Center went on to provide some suggestions for teacher education programs, so that teacher educators might be better able to prepare thoughtful professionals who are able to relate to immigrant students and instill a culture of care in their classrooms for future students and their families. These suggestions, provided by the National Center for Culturally Responsive Education Systems (2006), include the following:

- Develop cohesive and comprehensive multicultural curricula in general and special education TEPs
- Infuse multicultural principles throughout to prepare teachers to respond to the needs of diverse learners and their families
- Identify critical teaching behaviors and essential best practices for diverse students (p. 5)

Helping Teachers Develop Empathy

TEPs incorporating multicultural education content into teacher preparation programs is one step. However, if public schools themselves are to become bastions of hope for immigrant learners, then educators and all those interested in assisting Hispanic immigrant students and their families, according to Olsen, “must at the minimum demonstrate a capacity to understand the difficult choices transnational families face” (as cited in Noguera, 2006, p. 314).

Noguera (2006) went on to talk about the need to reduce the stress and strain associated with being separated from family members left behind in the home country, while at the same time attempting to reduce the learning loss that is a byproduct of prolonged absences from school. This, he pointed out, “is an important pedagogical consideration for schools that serve large populations of Latino immigrant youth” (p. 314).

DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2007) identified a number of culturally responsive, key fundamentals that can assist in meeting the needs of students who have experienced this potential learning loss because of a move to a new country. They include, among other things:

- Committed and well-trained teachers who have received some type of training in at least one approach to teaching ESL
- A well-planned program that includes a team of professionals familiar with specific resources that are available both in school and out in the community
- A commitment to educating the whole child, understanding that these students may bring with them psychological and social problems that are the direct result of having been suddenly and unexpectedly displaced from their everyday household surroundings (pp. 40–46)

Understanding that there is a need to be culturally sensitive and culturally responsive on a systemic level by paying attention to and implementing ideas such as these offered here can help educators and other professionals to piece together a true

picture of the vast and varied challenges associated with educating this population of students.

Family/School/Community Partnerships

Another equally important facet to consider when looking at students' success—especially in keeping with the cultural needs of Latino immigrant students—is the connection the family has with the teacher and school. There are undoubtedly many strategies for connecting and engaging with families. Ladson-Billings (1995) discussed a couple of innovative strategies, with one being insightfully relevant to merging cultural responsiveness with teacher attitudes and behaviors in the classroom.

In this example, a parent who was known in the community for her delicious sweet potato pies did a two-day residency in the classroom. She taught the students how to make pie crust and brought them the supplies so that they could try their own hands at crust-making. In addition, she had them conduct additional studies and do reports on George Washington Carver's sweet potato research, and devised a promotional plan for selling the pies. These types of lessons show respect for the culture of a group of students, and encourage parents to engage in the process of learning.

Summary

This research will add to the body of literature about the experiences of Latino immigration and continue the discussion about the role and place of schooling for all students. This dissertation addresses the gap in the literature by providing a voice to four families whose experiences are critical to understanding the issues inherent in immigration and public schooling. It is important that we are cognizant of the issues

around Latino immigration and the implications they hold for future generations of Americans.

The multitude of factors that lead to an immigrant student's success or detriment are many and complicated. The extent of a parent's education, the social capital a family is able to acquire, and the extent to which a family is able to assimilate into a new country are all facets of the immigration experience; all of these considerations contribute to the overall picture, which makes up a very complex dynamic.

In chapter 3, I outline the methods used in this study to learn about the experiences and perceptions of those directly involved.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Nature of the Study

This study implements phenomenology, a qualitative research method that seeks to describe basic lived experience. Phenomenology asks, “What is this or that kind of experience like?” It is the study of the lifeworld: the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it (van Manen, 1990).

It is important that the individuals studied and interviewed are able to describe life as it happens to them, relaying the significance of their lives in real time, expressing what the experience of education is like, and talking freely about the struggles they face in a new country.

The purpose of this study is to gain a detailed account of the experiences of immigrant families and if they think schools are preparing their children for success despite the challenges posed by their immigration status. The study sets out to accomplish this in particular by focusing on the question, “What is it like to be an immigrant in an American public school?” An additional goal of this research is to discover possible effects the process of assimilation has on families. This study has been informed by the Husserlian principles of phenomenology, and implemented by using the methodological procedures researched and developed by Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2008), and Max van Manen (1990).

Phenomenology as Method

The methodology of phenomenology works here because it is anchored to the careful description, analysis, and interpretation of lived experience (Thompson, 2007). In

considering this approach, I carefully reviewed the literature on the topic and discovered that, while there is much written on immigration and academics (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008), as well as an abundance of research on the concept of acculturation (Ogbu, 1988), there are not as many qualitative studies that delve into the everyday experiences of today's immigrant youth and what it is like to be an immigrant in an American public school. Through observations and interviews, this study takes a close look into the lives of four families in an effort to discover the cultural values, family traditions, and deeply held beliefs that can have an effect on academic performance. As van Manen (1990) pointed out,

In phenomenological research the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience. The point of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole human experience. (p. 62)

Intriguing to me is the description of phenomenology as the study of the lifeworld: the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it (van Manen, 1990). As Husserl saw it, phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of our everyday experiences (as cited in van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience (Sokolowski, 2000). This research will offer a look into the lives of Latino immigrant families in an effort to understand deeply the meaning of their everyday

experiences. No other methodology could better put into perspective the goals this research will reveal.

Although it has tendencies toward a case study, where this research differs is in the methodological approach. Whereas a case study looks at the characteristics of the case, provides a rich description of its context, and has multidisciplinary roots, the main purpose of the phenomenological approach is to describe individuals' experiences with a phenomenon and provide a rich description of those experiences. Sokolowski also added that the goal of phenomenological research is to study the participants and the perspectives of their life experiences, and attempt to describe in detail the consciousness of the participants in order to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experience and understand their essential meaning (Sokolowski, 2000).

Richard Rodriguez, in his autobiography *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, discussed, at some length, the pain of getting an education in America after his family emigrated from Mexico. He described the separation from his parents that occurred as he became more educated in American literature and American history and his parents did not; he eventually had nothing else to converse with his parents about (Rodriguez, 2001). Through this research, I will look to discover to what extent this same phenomenon is occurring every day in the school community in which I work, and what implications it may have for how educators are serving students from this population.

The research that guides this work takes a look at the experiences of Latino immigrant students and their families as they navigate through life in an American public school; it also asks the question, "What is it like?" I am highly curious as to the

motivations and desires of the Mexican immigrant population. It is important that educators have a window into the lives of the immigrant population so that they can understand more fully their experiences and the challenges they face as they try to traverse their way through a new land.

Phenomenological Reduction

One principle of phenomenological research, which is used in this study, is called *phenomenological reduction* (Sokolowski, 2000). First-person reports of life experiences are what make phenomenological research valid. The suspension of any pre-suppositions needed for these first-person reports is essentially a reduction, or withholding of judgment. To expand, when we enter into this viewpoint, we suspend any external beliefs. This is also called *epoche*, which, as Sokolowski pointed out, is a term taken from Greek skepticism. The Greeks said we should refrain from judging until evidence is clear. Epoché is simply the deactivating of natural intentions that occur when we contemplate those intentions (Sokolowski, 2000). In essence, it is setting aside prejudgments and approaching the research with an unbiased, receptive outlook.

The first step in the phenomenological reduction process is the concept of *bracketing*. Through bracketing, we suspend our beliefs—we bracket the world and all the things in it. Bracketing retains exactly the modality and the mode of manifestation that the object has for the subject in the natural attitude (Sokolowski, 2000). The researcher sets aside, or brackets, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand. This allows the researcher to more fully understand the experience from the participant's point of view.

Throughout the research, I will use the process of phenomenological reduction to bracket out my own experiences and preconceptions, which will lead to the formation of a rich, accurate, and complete account of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants in the study. The answers gleaned from the research will help to provide an understanding of the meanings and essences of the Mexican-American immigrant journey through American public schooling.

Research Questions

The following research question is addressed in this study, and is the primary question and basis on which the research is predicated: What are the perceptions of Latino parents regarding their children's education in their neighborhood school?

The following are related questions, and will be addressed throughout the study:

1. In what ways and with what results does Latino culture have an effect on, or impact the education of Latino immigrant youth in their neighborhood public school?
2. What were parents' experiences in school, and how has this influenced their expectations regarding schooling for their children?
3. How do parents see their children change since moving to the United States, and what part does schooling play in that change?

Context

The site for this research project is a small suburb of Lake County, Illinois. According to 2010 United States Census Bureau information, the population of this suburb was 18,289. Of this number, 25.3% were Hispanic, 55.0% were Caucasian, and 4.5% were African-American. I have worked in this community for nine years, and have

developed personal ties to the families in the community. I am invested in the success of the students and families in the community through my work as a principal with the local school district and my involvement with a neighborhood nonprofit that empowers Latino immigrants through job skill development and other acculturation-related issues.

Participants

Because phenomenologists recognize that the “data” of human science research are human experiences, the most straightforward way to go about this research is to ask participants to write their experiences down (van Manen, 1990). However, it is sometimes easier to talk than to write about a personal experience, because writing forces a person to adopt a more reflective standpoint, making it more difficult to stay close to an experience as it is immediately lived. The investigator collects data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon; typically, this information is collected through long interviews (Creswell, 1998). This study consists of three to four students and their families. Each participant in the research study was purposefully selected. A qualitative researcher purposefully selects the participants or sites that will help to understand the problem and research question (Creswell, 2003).

There are several requirements for involvement in this study. Participants had to be the following:

- a) Students currently attending the school where the research is taking place
- b) Part of a family unit where at least one parent is an immigrant
- c) Part of a primarily Spanish-speaking home

In addition, participants had to agree to sign a consent form to participate in the study.

A local family resource center that works with immigrant families in the neighborhood agreed to assist this researcher in conducting the study. Many of these families have children who attend the local school where the research takes place. I posted flyers at the center notifying families of the research study. The families, once they were chosen and met the outlined criteria, had the option of being interviewed at their home, at the resource center, or at the school. Ideally, the participants should be comfortable with the interview process. As an issue of validity, trust comes into the discussion. Having worked in the community for nine years, I have come to know a majority of the children and their families on a personal level. Even though language remains a barrier, avenues of communication have been established over the years, and the families are familiar with interpreters who are available to help with communication.

Data Collection

The data collection method used in this study is in-depth phenomenological interviews with four Latino immigrant students and their families. The purpose of the interview is to “capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences” (Patton, 2003, p. 348). A secondary purpose of the interviews is to look for commonalities and themes within the answers to the questions. Data collected by “qualitative interview studies have provided descriptions of phenomena that could have been learned about in no other way” (Weiss, 1994, p. 12).

As interviewer, I use the informal conversational approach to ask open-ended questions that flow from the interaction. All interviews and conversations were recorded using a digital recorder, and were transcribed as soon as possible after each interview

session. The individual interview sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes. Follow-up interviews were conducted where necessary to verify specific responses.

As an observer, I paid close attention to the nonverbal forms of communication such as body language, mode of dress, and personal interaction with others. I took field notes on verbal and nonverbal communication, the interview setting, and interpretations of the interview. The interviews were held at locations and times convenient for the interviewee, so that the interviewee felt comfortable and safe.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with a thorough reading of the interviews. The text was searched in an effort to isolate thematic statements using the approach outlined by van Manen (1990). In this approach, which he called “the detailed or line-by-line approach,” the researcher looks at every single sentence or sentence cluster and asks, “What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). In this way, lived-experience descriptions are studied and themes begin to emerge. Research participants are included in this process of looking at emerging themes to better understand the meaning of certain phrases, and to verify that interpretation of meaning is accurately understood by the researcher. A color-coding system identifies significant words and phrases in the transcripts. Categories of information are formed, and codes are attached to these categories. The categories and codes form the basis for the emerging story to be told by the qualitative researcher (Creswell, 1994).

To ensure accuracy of information, analytical triangulation was accomplished by returning the transcripts and interpretations to the research participants and having them

review the findings for validity and accuracy, as well as having another researcher experienced in qualitative methods read the study to determine credibility of the research (Creswell, 1994).

Boundaries

There is a chance that the data will reflect a particular perspective that applies only to the individuals chosen for the sample. Phenomenological studies are generally limited by the small sample size and are not supposed to be representative of a large sample population. Therefore, studying a small number of participants will serve to illuminate the research question, “What is it like to be a Latino immigrant in an American public school?” with the hope of generating in-depth understandings of the phenomenon rather than generalizations (Patton, 2003).

The purpose herein is to describe the experiences of Latino immigrants to discover what their lives have been like. In order to encourage participation and safeguard against problems for the subjects, adequate measures to ensure anonymity and privacy to all participants were observed at all times. The objective of this research is to obtain data to understand better the challenges Latino immigrants face when immigrating to the United States.

The results of this research will hopefully provide insight into the world of immigration (legal and illegal). Policymakers might be able to benefit from resources that could help them make adequate decisions to manage this topic. Addressing this issue provides numerous benefits that bring potentially critical effects on policy and policy-making decisions.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

For this study, I interviewed four families of Hispanic immigrant descent, with at least one parent born in a country other than the United States. In all cases, this country is Mexico. At least one of the four sets of parents did not require an interpreter, and all of the students involved in the study attended the same middle school at the time of the interview. In addition, all four families have lived in the area for at least eight years; their children have attended school in the same district for that time. As the interviews were completed and data reviewed, the following common themes emerged, and will be discussed through the experiences of each family:

- The “American Dream” was not all that families had hoped for.
- Opportunities are not the same for immigrants as they are for natural-born citizens.
- A sense of belonging is inhibited by the stigma of being an immigrant.
- The ability to fully assimilate does not necessarily hinder progress as an immigrant.

Family Biographies

The themes will be explored in detail here, using the stories of each family to reach a little deeper into the lived experiences of being a Mexican immigrant in the United States. I begin with a short biographical description of each of the four families interviewed to provide historical context, and then move into the interviews and stories of the families.

The Morales Family

The Morales family is made up of two parents—a mother and a father—and two daughters, Esther and America. The sisters are one year apart from each other, and they both attend the same middle school. I have known the family for eight years, which led to a certain comfort level in the room. Both Esther and America have always loved school, and they both go to great lengths to maintain good grades and make their parents and teachers proud. Although they both attempt their best, Esther is stronger academically. America has always struggled and was in bilingual classes from kindergarten through third grade.

The Astudillo Family

The Astudillo family is made up of a single mother and her two children, Alejandra and Jesus. Alejandra is in eighth grade and does the translating for her mother. Jesus, who is in the third grade, comes along to the interview but does not take part. There is no mention made of the father, except to say that he is not a part of their lives. Alejandra is a straight-A student and is a member of the National Junior Honor Society (NJHS). She is a quiet student, and sees the social worker on a weekly basis for help with working through some anxiety issues.

The Hernandez Family

The Hernandez family consists of Ruben and his mother and father. Like with the Morales and Astudillo families, Ruben does most of the translating for his parents. Mrs. Hernandez is comfortable doing a lot of her own responding, but slips into Spanish frequently, which Ruben quickly translates for me. Mr. Hernandez speaks broken English, but due to years in the workforce, he has learned and practiced enough to be

understood by the interviewer for most of the interview. Ruben is an active, intelligent eighth-grade boy who loves to talk and have a good time. He is an only child and has a strong motivation to succeed in school. He likes to be involved in many activities at school, including track and cross-country.

The Garcia Family

The fourth family is the Garcia family. They consist of four children and two parents. On the day of the interview, two of the siblings—Tito and Angelica, along with Angelica’s husband—participate, along with Mr. and Mrs. Garcia. Mr. Garcia came to the United States many years ago, and told many stories about a very dangerous and arduous journey to get his entire family here. Angelica was placed directly into a suburban Illinois school upon arrival in the States, and spent her first formal years of schooling immersed in English. Tito, on the other hand, was placed in a Bilingual classroom for the first two years of school, and then into mainstream English from third grade until the present. Tito is a very popular boy who claims not to try very hard to do well academically, and usually receives above average grades regardless.

All four families agreed to come to the school to conduct their interview sessions, and each came together as a family unit. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

Theme One: The “American Dream” was Not All Families had Hoped For

As the interviews began, one of the first topics we engaged in was the family’s personal reasons for leaving their home country and coming to the United States, and whether or not their own personal definitions of the “American Dream” had come to fruition. Mrs. Morales spoke (through her interpreter) of her early experiences and the

reason why she first came to the United States. She explained that she came initially for her husband, “because when she met him they wanted to come here so they can have a better life and everything. And then maybe go back.” The Morales parents had a very specific, intentional plan when they first decided to leave their home country. Mrs. Morales spoke of their plan to come to the United States and stay for five years to work and save money, after which they would return to Mexico. When they decided to start a family three years into the journey and gave birth to their first daughter (Esther), their plans changed due to Esther’s medical needs, and they ended up staying in the United States.

As Mr. Morales reflected on his wife’s thoughts, he mentioned that their first mistake was coming to the United States with no intention of going to school and studying. Their original goal, instead, was to find work and make money, which unfortunately did not work out like they thought it would. As many Hispanic immigrants experience, the American Dream they so desperately seek starts out with some harsh realities. Things were not quite as the Morales family expected they would be upon first arriving in a new land, which is supported through research done by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008). The authors wrote that migration is not for the faint of heart, as it involves feelings of dislocation, difficulty communicating, and perhaps most significantly, leaving behind loved ones. This is also in direct correlation to the research done by Gonzalez (2001), which stated that for many immigrant children, the emotion of displacement because of cross-border movement is a factor in the formation of their identities.

Significantly, Mr. Morales made poignant mention of one of the main reasons he felt things did not turn out as planned for them at first: “I don’t speak English very well. It’s very bad, my speaking. So speak English bad, no money.”

Mrs. Morales agreed with her husband and explained:

Many Mexicans think they are going to come to the United States and make a lot of money; I don’t think this is the right choice though. If people come and go to school and study and that is important to them, and they learn English, then they will find better jobs.

Perhaps an unintended consequence of this singular goal of figuring out how to survive in a new land is the lack of attention parents tend to place on their children. This is consistent with research that discusses the fact that, upon arrival in a new country, parents must first focus their energies on making ends meet and forging ties with people of similar ethnic backgrounds or immigrant status (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). At multiple times throughout the interview, the Morales parents pointed out that due to an immigrant family’s sole focus on making money when they initially immigrate, they tend not to pay attention to their children as much as they should. Upon further discussion around this idea, Mr. Morales talked about doing things out of necessity: “We think that we make more money and we are going to give better to our kids. But they’re not getting the attention that they need sometimes.”

We discussed that this, perhaps, is not exclusive to simply immigrant families, and Mrs. Morales expanded the point by saying that regardless, the problem is still the same. She explained:

When we don’t have a better job, we get less money for probably work 10 hours

every day for \$8.25 an hour. So it's not enough. If just study or get a profession, you need probably work less but much money. So that's the best here is to study, right?

Regarding the American Dream, when Mr. Morales first heard this phrase he vowed never to come to the United States. He says that over time, that idea changed; now he is not sure that he would ever go back. When I pressed him on the issue he revealed, through the interpreter, that his daughter has medical needs and that, "He is thankful having came here, because he thinks that if we were in Mexico when she had the problem she probably wouldn't be alive right now."

Upon interviewing the Astudillo family, I discovered that Mrs. Astudillo had strong thoughts on the American Dream as well, and shared reasons why she feels families leave their home country. When I asked her about her own family's particular situation, she responded that she is only here because of her family, and that she does not necessarily want to live in the United States. Through her interpreter, she spoke freely:

So her opinion is that . . . and this is just hers. No offense. She doesn't like living in the United States. She's here because of her family. But she finds that some other families think that by coming to the United States, and working, and just getting money, and just using . . . that they just slide by every day. That's the American Dream. She doesn't think that's the way it is. 'Cause she knows that in Mexico, the poor, like they're really poor to the extreme. Compared to here, when you're here you have more things. So she thinks that a lot of families believed that the American Dream is just coming to work and get money. But school is not one of the main priorities. So that leads to a lot of the students enjoying games and

other things. Just being out in the streets, not in school.

While Mrs. Astudillo did not make her reasons for being here clear, other than stating it was for family reasons, she does not feel the American Dream is realized by families due to their misconceptions of what this might look like before it is actually experienced. Mrs. Astudillo's comments about being in the new land for family reasons—as opposed to financial ones—are interesting, especially in light of research done by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008), which made the argument that immigration is not just a financial decision, but a profoundly social undertaking. These researchers pointed out that there is an emphasis on social networks. The presence of family members and friends in the new destination lowers the costs associated with one's arrival and makes it easier to find jobs, establish a residence, locate schools, and generally settle into the new land (p. 56).

The Garcia family echoed what the Astudillo and Morales families had mentioned. Mr. Garcia talked about having come from a very poor family. His father wanted him to go to school and receive further education in Mexico, but didn't have money to pay for the necessary textbooks. Mr. Garcia's highest education, therefore, is the eighth-grade level. Mrs. Garcia only reached the fourth grade. It is interesting to note that the Garcia children's motivation to do well in school, coupled with their overall high academic marks thus far, would appear to be in contradiction with the research done by Gandara and Contreras (2009), which stated that,

Latino mothers have much less education than mothers from all other major ethnic groups. Thus the lower educational background of Latino youngsters' parents appears to be a significant factor in these children's early low academic

performance, and continues to affect their achievement throughout their later education. (p. 19)

To add further to the claim that a lack of preparation, lowered aspirations, and little understanding by Latino families of the connection between grades and a parent's educational background, the report goes on to say that,

By the eighth grade, scores for all groups drop, but Latinos remain significantly behind most other groups; 39 percent of white students score at or above proficient, whereas only 15 percent of Latinos are able to reach this level of reading competence. (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 21)

It is important to note that not all Latinos are educationally disadvantaged. Some Latinos in horrible situations perform at exceptionally high levels, while others who may appear ambitious and have involved, caring families fail to achieve. It is worth further discussion—perhaps research that is beyond the scope of this work—to determine just what would happen, were it possible, if all Latino immigrants had schooling and education at the top of their priority list.

Speaking through an interpreter, Mr. Garcia spoke further on the hardships of his early educational career and the hope that was promised in a new country.

At that time books were 300 pesos. Which nowadays, if you look at it, it's about \$30, currently. My dad would give me 30 pesos for the whole week. Just \$3. It wasn't enough. I see that it was more than often that I would hear people say that there's money in the United States. There's money.

As the discussion proceeded, I asked Mr. Garcia if the promise of a better education played into the equation of whether to move to a new country, if there was any

talk of the education system in the United States compared to that of Mexico. He answered that he didn't know, that all he knew was that he was going to have to find a job—whatever that was going to be—and work. All he knew was that there was money. Interestingly, and similar to what the Morales and Astudillo family reported, Mr. Garcia noted that the promise of more money never really came. The only thing that did come, he realized, was a future for his children. Commenting that they had learned a new language, now speak two languages, and can “basically do any job you want,” he was very thankful for the chance to be able to give these gifts to his children, especially given the rough start the family experienced at the outset of their lives in the United States.

The Hernandez family had very different reasons for coming to the United States. Mrs. Hernandez left Mexico for the first time when she was 25 years old. Her father and older brother came over first to establish a home and work, and then she came with her mother and sisters a few years later. No reason was given as to why they chose to leave Mexico for good. Mr. Hernandez, on the other hand, was “looking for something different.” In Mexico, he had worked in the fields with his grandfather. When he first arrived in the United States, he knew no English and found employment in a factory working nights.

When discussing the concept of the American Dream, Mr. Hernandez said, in his limited English, that, “When we came here in United States, we believe in a lot of things. But some of those things are real, some of those things are not.” I asked either one of the Hernandez parents to expand this thought a little further. Mrs. Hernandez explained that she feels a lot of people think that having the American Dream means just speaking the language; she understands it to be much more than that. Mr. Hernandez took the thought

a little further, explaining that it is what you make of it, and it takes more than just coming to a new land and expecting to find something without putting forth the effort. As he explains:

What decisions you make . . . It's usually in the past so that they come up with leading you to the American Dream. So it's all been a lot of things, not just work. It's just all depending what you did before. You make a bad decision then you don't get it.

That money was a central reason for the decision to leave their home country, with schooling and further education secondary, is not surprising; it actually coincides with the question Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) asked in their research, when they wondered, "What ambitions do these newest and youngest Americans bring with them, and how effectively are we a society harnessing their energies?" (p. 2).

Because schooling has emerged as the decidedly surest path to well-being, status, and greater economic security, it is worth discussing why obtaining a great education shouldn't be the number one reason why a family decides to emigrate.

Theme Two: Opportunities for Advancement are Not the Same for Immigrants as They are for Natural-Born Citizens

Another theme that emerged through questioning and conversation was the idea of having opportunities for advancement, and whether being a Mexican immigrant impeded progress toward a family's desired goals.

The Morales parents spoke of their frustrations with not being able to make the money they assumed they would be able to make, and mentioned multiple times that their plans had to change after being here for a while. At one point during our conversation I

asked them, now that they had been in the country for a number of years, if they felt that opportunities for advancement and success are the same in Mexico as they are in the United States. Mr. Morales responded that he felt it is very different. Interestingly, he referred to *himself* and how there would be more opportunities—even with his low level of education and lack of English language skills—for him in Mexico, but not necessarily for his children.

Mrs. Morales echoed her husband's sentiments, but also wondered if this issue might be the same everywhere; if you do not continue studying, you will not be prepared and will not be able to find a successful career. Absent from this conversation, interestingly, was any discussion around the issue of advancement opportunities specific to those who consider themselves to be Mexican-Americans. All of the talk, rather, revolved around advancement as a result of proper parenting and family environment which, when encouraged and valued, promoted success.

Mr. Morales, for example, mentioned his parents, what life was like for him growing up, and how things have been different for his own children:

The principal problem is . . . I don't know . . . my parents do not know how to read or write or anything. So they just worked. So I have four brother and five sister in my family. It's big, big family. They did not know how to read and write. They said it is better work and get money instead of go to school . . . In Mexico, if you don't push your kids they not going to do it. For my children, I try to push to what I wanted to do 'cause for me is too late to go back and do studying.

In addition to conversation around advancement and opportunity, a common underlying concern that came up with all four families was wanting something more for

their children than what the parents themselves had when they were growing up. It never even seemed to cross their minds that being from a different country could prohibit them from having opportunities. Mrs. Morales said that the potential opportunities here in the host country outweigh any possible hardships, and that this motivates them to push their daughters to continue studying and planning to go to college at some point.

Nonetheless, when asked directly if they have ever felt that being from another country makes it difficult for kids living in the United States to get a good education or good job, they responded that it can be difficult. Mr. Morales mentioned that maintenance jobs seem to be the easiest to get, and that tend to pay better than most other jobs available to him and others like him, due to his minimal education.

The Hernandez parents took very different viewpoints on the issue of advanced opportunities. Mr. Hernandez felt certain that his son would have many opportunities regardless of his heritage, and that this mentality—that of racial prejudices—is a thing of the past. Mrs. Hernandez, however, believed strongly that because of her son's Mexican heritage, he might face difficulty and even discrimination trying to make the most of his life.

Ruben chimed in on the topic as well, speaking about his views on racial prejudices, and was remarkably optimistic about his future:

I don't necessarily think that I see it at this school. Not much because we're like a giant majority. 'Cause if you look around there's a majority of Mexicans. So . . . but I've seen why at school is where the Mexicans were the minority, I could see how some people would look at it differently. But for me personally, since I've always lived in a Latino-rich community, I never really felt that way 'cause we're

just so many of us.

When discussing this concept of opportunities for advancement with the Garcia family, the idea was brought about a little differently, and Mr. Garcia and I ended up having the following exchange:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think that . . . do you think that your experiences in school in Mexico are different than the experiences your children are getting here in the United States?

Father: Yes, it's very different in Mexico, because the children here have the opportunity. When they go to school they have bus, they give some food in school so the parents don't make them, and in Mexico you have to walk. You get to drink a cup of coffee at six o'clock in the morning, and come back to eat again at three o'clock, and you're walking the whole way.

Interviewer: That's a lot different than many experiences.

Father: Very.

When I interviewed the Astudillo family, both mother and daughter felt that the only thing that could possibly keep an immigrant from achieving and being successful in a new country revolved around the stereotypical idea that Mexicans don't want to achieve. They spoke more about perceptions of Mexican immigrants, and the stigmas created that surround the Mexican people. There were mixed feelings amongst the families, with the Astudillo family—especially Alejandra, the daughter—having the strongest emotions on the topic.

Just as it is difficult to assimilate and see the future as full of possibility when operating from the stigma of a deficit perspective, it is equally difficult to achieve and be successful when there is a pervasive belief that Latino students are cognitively low-functioning (Mercado & Moll, 2000). Stereotypes and beliefs that contribute to Latino students' lack of educational/academic success are directly related to the way society devalues the Latino race and ethnicity (Brown & Souto-Manning, 2008). Nieto (2002) wrote that many current educational assumptions about Latino learners are based on stereotypes that promote the insignificance of cultures that traditionally hold low status in our society.

**Theme Three: A Sense of Belonging is Inhibited by the
Stigma of Being an Immigrant**

Regarding the stigma—this apparent mark of disgrace—that surrounds and is associated with Mexican immigrants, the notion was especially strong with the Astudillo family. I had the following exchange with Alejandra, the eighth grader who attended the middle school at the time of the interview:

Interviewer: You achieve at a very high level and you're very motivated. Where do you think that you get that motivation to do well?

Daughter: I think because . . . I honestly think people think bad of Mexican people. Because as you said, they really have numbers dropping out. So I feel like I don't want to be classified in that stereotype. I want to overcome that. I want to have a job. I don't want to be working like at McDonald's or something. No, I want to get a degree. I want to work. I think that's my motivation. I don't want to fit in that stereotype "Oh, she's

Mexican, she's not gonna do anything."

Interviewer: So you think that is a real stereotype?

Daughter: Yeah.

Interviewer: You said that "Oh, she's Mexican, she doesn't want to do anything."

Daughter: No, well, "She doesn't do anything. She's probably dropped out. She's probably gonna go get pregnant at 16 or something."

Interviewer: Wow. I mean those are some very strong feelings.

Daughter: Yeah. 'Cause I don't want to do that.

Interviewer: So do you feel like it makes it harder for Mexican-Americans to achieve because that's the expectation?

Daughter: Kind of. Maybe they . . . I don't think that. Maybe some feel like "People already think that of me. Why would I prove them wrong?" Or anything. "I might as well just live up to them." It's like what they're saying.

Interviewer: But not you?

Daughter: No.

This conversation led to some further discussion on the importance of feeling welcome in the host country, the United States, and if negative feelings in this regard could possibly be a reason for a family not reaching goals or progressing to a desired level. I continued the conversation with Alejandra and her mother; Alejandra did most of the talking for her mother, and offered her thoughts when I asked her as well.

Interviewer: Do you feel, because of the stereotype about Mexican immigrants, personally welcome in this country? Like the United States of America is

your home? Do you feel like this is your home?

Alejandra (answering for her mother): She may sound a little racist but she does not agree with the way Mexicans act. You know?

Interviewer: Act?

Mother: What they do.

Interviewer: Okay? How so?

Alejandra: What she agrees to is the way, in this case, White people feel [Americans]. She says that we Mexican people come to a country that is not our country. And the way we act, things that we do are not correct or not right. Not everyone, but she finds that thanks to the things that other Mexican people have done, which is probably a larger percentage than the ones that haven't, that have been good. Thanks to that, she believes that all these laws are coming out in the end. So she believes that it's just a consequence to the way other people act. So she finds that these are just consequences because of the things that other Mexican people act on. Basically, what I told you before.

Interviewer: Okay. You have an opinion about that?

Alejandra: About if I feel unwelcome?

Interviewer: Yeah, if you feel welcome. This is your home, right? Have you thought about it?

Alejandra: Yeah, but like I don't honestly feel welcome.

Interviewer: No?

Alejandra: Yeah, like if they see you as being Mexican, they automatically start

to think like . . . few of my friends, they've actually told me, like, "You're Mexican, so are you illegal?" I'm like "No." They like right away assume you're illegal just because you're Mexican. Or maybe not basically you but your parents, because they didn't know how you're born here and stuff. Yeah. So they automatically assume you're illegal and it doesn't make me feel welcome. It just makes me feel like an outcast.

In addition to social rejection by their hosts and public commitment to their own culture and country of origin, this feeling of not being welcome confounds efforts to assimilate into one's new surroundings and does not give first-generation immigrants much reason to immerse themselves in the language and culture of their host country (Roosens, 1989). Although the students in this study may be an exception due to their motivation and good grades in school, this could point to a disturbing trend, especially when faced with research that says that the socialization associated with assimilation can result in lower academic performance among Latino students (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

When I asked the same questions of the Garcia family, Mr. Garcia continued a familiar refrain—that whatever had happened to them, he was thankful for his opportunity. The following is an exchange between he and I, followed by a conversation I had with his adult daughter, Angelica, in addition to her husband. (Angelica also acted as the Garcia family interpreter.)

Interviewer: Earlier in our conversation, we talked about the fact that this country was built on immigrants. Do you think that makes people feel welcome in this country, like this is your home? Do you feel welcome?

Father: I feel alright because they're giving us the opportunity to be here. We know that this isn't our country.

Interviewer: But it is. But it is.

Father: They gave us the opportunity to be here so I feel good. But if I didn't have residency, I wouldn't come.

Mr. Garcia repeated this notion of being thankful multiple times throughout our conversation and it became obvious that it was something he felt strongly about; he seemed to use it to drive his family to succeed. Angelica understood her father's meaning about being thankful as well, as she was born in Mexico and had lived through their difficult journey to the United States as a child. She had strong emotions and thoughts on being considered a citizen, however, including whether she felt welcome in the country.

The following is part of our discussion on the idea of belonging, the thought of being both Mexican and American, and the stigma attached to a Mexican immigrant.

Angelica: I feel like I'm both, but that definition doesn't fit me.

Interviewer: Why not?

Angelica: Because I was born in Mexico. And the definition of Mexican-American when it comes to mind, it's like you were born in this country of Mexican parents or Mexican descent. So to me, I feel like I'm Mexican-American; I can tell myself "I'm Mexican-American" and I can say that. But then people are like "Were you born here?" and I have to tell them I was born in Mexico. Then I'm first generation, because I was not born here. He's [referring to her brother] second generation because he was born here. So to me, as I've grown up, like when I was younger, when I

was his age, when I was seventh or eighth grade, it was very hard. I was like, “But I’m American.” “No, but you’re Mexican.” And it was that identity crisis that you go through. And now that I’m older, it’s like I can embrace being Mexican and I can embrace being American. Because if I go to Mexico, I’m not Mexican enough. But I’m in this country and I’m not American enough because there’s a little color in my skin.

Husband: Sometimes it’s confusing. Sometimes you don’t even know where you belong to.

Interviewer: You feel that as well, Angelica?

Angelica: Yes.

Interviewer: Like you don’t know where you belong?

Angelica: Yes.

Husband: The question that you asked about what’s the feeling that you live in Mexico and now you live in here. And you just asked if you feel like you belong to this country. To me, sometimes it’s hard. Even because I came when I was 15. Now, I’m an American citizen. But sometimes, even though I’m an American citizen, sometimes I feel like I do not belong to this country. Because I still have my accent. I feel like I don’t have enough invitation to belong to this country to go do the job that I really want to. Because I know I’ve tried hard. And if I get the job that I want to, I’m gonna feel like I don’t feel like that’s but 100% because it’s like I have my accent. Or sometimes even though on the street, they look at you like you do not belong to this country. Because of your color and your accent.

Angelica: I feel that.

Interviewer: You feel that from people?

Husband: Yeah.

Interviewer: In the United States?

Husband: Yeah.

Angelica: See, and I feel that too.

Husband: And I like the way you said that we are here and we belong to this country because we are here. But unfortunately not now.

Interviewer: I know.

Husband: Like you. A lot of people judge the way I look, like I don't belong to this country. Even though they don't know that I'm American citizen. They think that I do not belong to this country. You know what I'm saying?

Interviewer: I do.

Husband: So sometimes . . . And it's really sad because, like I said, sometimes you do not belong to this country and you do not belong to Mexico either. Because like she said, when I go back, I feel like I do not belong there anymore. And then I'm here and I feel like I do not belong here either.

The phenomenon of belonging to one place or another can often be exacerbated by the fact that many families come to the country one member at a time, leaving behind loved ones who sometimes never end up making the trek themselves. Immigrant families are changed by the process of migration. In many cases, families migrate one or two members at a time, and in stages. Traditionally, fathers would migrate first, establishing

themselves while sending financial support home, only sending for the wife and children once they felt more secure. They also point out that reunification of the entire family often takes many years (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2008).

Having dual citizenship and belonging to two cultures can prove to be challenging, especially when learning to assimilate into a new country and attempting to understand the means of survival. It has caused some researchers to explore the topic further and add to the growing body of work that questions whether or not assimilation continues to serve as the pathway into mainstream American culture and middle-class status, as it once did for European immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

On this topic, there was an especially interesting contrast between the Garcia and Hernandez families. While the Garcia family clearly felt torn and had confusing sentiments about where they fit in or if they even fit in at all, as I got into the same line of questioning with the Hernandez family, it became clear that this small family of three all felt fairly confident that they belong in the United States and that it is a place they can call home. Even so, Mrs. Hernandez had strong feelings on some of the animosity she feels is still directed at Mexican immigrants by natural-born American citizens.

Interviewer: Was it difficult for any of you to leave? Obviously it is difficult to leave family behind, but does it make it difficult to feel the United States is your home, knowing that you still have family in your home country?

Father: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is it difficult feeling like one or the other is your home?

Mother: For me, I feel like Mexico is my home, but I'm very happy here because there's many opportunities. I worked and the salary they pay over there is

not enough for much. I'm happy I didn't leave family behind. Everyone was here.

Interviewer: Yes, that is different.

Mother: Maybe that's why I feel good because my family is here, my brothers.

Interviewer: Even though you like Mexico better?

Mother: I like going to Mexico but not to stay there.

Interviewer: But not to stay? Okay.

Father: No, I think eventually after so many years, something started like—I guess we can call it love or something. So eventually this is your house. It's your home. So even when you're going to different countries, you see that American flag and it's like something that telling you that you're here. So I would say yeah. It's like you're starting a new life but you start where you're with.

Interviewer: Do you feel like strict laws, like those we've seen in Arizona in recent years, make it difficult to feel accepted in the United States?

Mother: Yes. It's like they only attack because they don't understand where people are going through. They're not understanding them. They think we come to take things away but that's not true. Everyone that works in landscaping in the fields are Hispanic. I do feel like they're being attacked but they have to understand.

Father: I don't feel that way. I think that's just a few people trying to do change. It's not the whole country. Because if it's the whole country they can change things. But as you can see that it's only a few people in the

congress trying to stop or . . . But not everyone here.

Mother: Many ask why we come over here. But we come because of the dream.

Because this is a country of immigrants. There's people from many countries. They come from Europe, they're White, but they're immigrants. They come from the same that we come for.

Interviewer: It is a country of immigrants, that's very true.

Mother: I know people that have family roots traced back to Poland, Germany . . .

But why do they attack us, the Latinos?

Interviewer: Why is that such a big issue? Is it?

Father: Probably yeah. But I don't know. I mean . . .

Mother: It's just like I'm not that technically wrong, but you walk by someone and it's like . . . yes, it's all because of the color.

The Morales family had similar things to say. While they did not see being an immigrant as an obstacle to advancement, finding a sense of belonging in the new country was a little more nebulous. Both parents stated that they have always felt welcomed in the schools their daughter attended. If there was any one reason why they did not get more involved over the years, it is because their lack of command of the English language made them uncomfortable in a predominantly English-speaking setting. When asked if they felt that Mexican immigrants as a people are accepted in the United States, Mr. Morales commented that he did not really feel anything, and that he did not really ever notice any racism, especially where he works. Below is part of the conversation I held with Mr. and Mrs. Morales, with the help of their interpreter, as I pushed for a little more clarity on this issue of belonging.

Interviewer: Do you feel that, keeping in mind your experiences as an immigrant, Mexican immigrants are accepted in the United States as a whole?

Father: (Spanish)

Interpreter: He says that there's not . . . No, that he doesn't really feel like that has a lot of weight. Like no one is racist to them or anything. And yeah. So he doesn't feel like that.

Interviewer: (To Mrs. Morales) Do you feel different or the same?

Mother: It's the same. That kind of the state I think. Probably in Arizona it's so hard. California, it's not really. But . . . California, it's most hard for get a job if you are illegal. So here we have more of us villagers here in Illinois than in California.

This concept of being “villagers” in any one particular area, as pointed out by Mrs. Morales, is referred to by some researchers as *clustering*. The tendency of Hispanic immigrants to cluster in specific regions and in urban, ethnic neighborhoods has changed in recent years; while this may not seem at first like it would be a detriment to success, the locations where groups of people eventually gather is actually quite significant. Moves of any kind are considered by social scientists to be among the most stressful of events, but the stakes are higher and the process all the more challenging when traveling across borders and into a new country. Immigrants who enter into “social chains” are offered companionship and a social support network, which help newcomers adjust to the new environment (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Upon arrival, parents must focus most of their energies on making ends meet in the new society, forging ties first and foremost with people of similar ethnic backgrounds

or immigrant status (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). In some cases, no such community exists, and newcomers must confront the challenges of adaptation by themselves. More common, however, is the arrival of immigrants into places where a community of their co-nationals already exists. Such communities can cushion the impact of a foreign culture and provide assistance with finding jobs. Help with immediate living needs, such as housing, places to shop, and schools for the children, also flow through these co-ethnic networks (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), making success in the new country and feelings of belonging seem more likely.

**Theme Four: The Ability to Fully Assimilate Does Not Necessarily Hinder Progress
as a New Citizen**

In addition to where immigrants cluster and if people feel like they belong in a new land or not, there is much discussion around the concept of assimilation and whether it is necessarily the path to a brighter, more successful future in a new country. In other words, can one be successful in a new land without fully assimilating? Part of this discourse revolves around the question of why Hispanic immigrants fail at larger rates than native-born Americans, and if this is tied to the degree to which one is able to, and desirous of, assimilating successfully into the new culture. As mentioned in chapter 2, Souto-Manning (2007) reflected upon parents who hide their children's identities by providing them with a name deemed more American in nature. By not automatically associating children's names with their Mexican identity, parents try to protect them from failing in the American school due to their background (Souto-Manning, 2007). Will this "hiding" of identity, this attempt at not wanting to be known as Mexican, have an effect on overall achievement? Could this somehow speed up the assimilation process? We may

never know, but a further exploration into the reasons why Mexican immigrants tend to fail is warranted.

Experts say that the reasons Mexicans fare so poorly in the United States are complicated. But the root of the problem is no surprise:

Many Mexicans are here illegally, depriving them of rungs on the economic ladder and the opportunity to gain citizenship. As Vigdor mentioned:

There are certain jobs or certain services you just can't get [as an illegal immigrant] . . . There are plenty of indications here that for those Mexican immigrants who are interested in making a more permanent attachment to the United States, their legal status puts very severe barriers in that path. (as cited in Schulte, 2008)

Perhaps part of the Morales family's sense of belonging can be attributed to their thoughts on assimilation and retention of native culture. At one point during the interview, I asked the family what their feelings were on retaining their heritage, as well as whether it was important to them that their daughters had an understanding of their Mexican culture despite living in a different country. Mr. Morales responded that he felt it was highly important because they are still Mexican, even though they are also American.

Interviewer: Do you feel like it's important as parents to make sure that both Esther and America keep some of their . . . understand their heritage?

Father: Yeah. (Spanish)

Interpreter: He says yeah. It's important for us to understand our heritage too, 'cause we're like, half-American and more like half-Mexican.

The question of whether or not it is necessary to fully assimilate in order to be successful in a new country seems, for the Morales family, difficult to answer—at least from the student’s points of view. They are, after all, successful students with seemingly bright futures ahead of them. Both girls earn high academic marks in most content areas. The difference between these two and their parents, as it is with many Mexican immigrants, is that they were born in the United States while their parents were born in Mexico. The girls are also experiencing more academic learning than their parents. While these factors are not necessarily a guarantor of future success, early accomplishments certainly would seem to be a favorable advantage for the Morales sisters.

In speaking with the Astudillo family, the mother was not able to expound to any great length on the idea of assimilation. It may have been difficult for her to understand the concept; it’s also conceivable, based on our time spent together, that as her family reinvented itself here in the United States, they could more easily envision the possibilities for their future. The following is the brief interaction I had with her on the topic.

Interviewer: So do you think assimilation is a good thing or a bad thing for immigrants in a new culture?

Mother: Real quick to get used to.

Interviewer: Do you feel . . . Is it important for you that your kids understand and value their Mexican culture? Their heritage?

Mother: It is important but the culture from United States comes first because they were born here. But it is important for her too that they’re aware and know their culture from Mexico.

Interviewer: Is there anything that makes that difficult because it's kind of living in two places, living in two cultures?

Mother: Yes.

It is interesting to note that Mrs. Astudillo felt learning the culture of the new country was more important than retaining their heritage. It wasn't that it didn't matter; it was more that there was a certain level of respect for the opportunity of starting over in a new land that brought with it a need to understand and recognize what was possible. As the interview with the family progressed, it became clear that they really had not given the concept of assimilation much thought at all, and really did not feel it was worthy of consideration. In pressing Mrs. Astudillo and her daughter on whether or not they had a sense of belonging in either Mexico or the United States, it was clear that they did not necessarily feel a sense of belonging, but that this really didn't matter. What mattered more to them was shattering the perception that all Mexicans are illegal and that all Mexicans are lazy and do not want to work or go to school. Alejandra's passion on this point was very evident through her answers.

The Garcia family, on the other hand, had a lot to say on the topic of assimilation, and the discussion began with reflections of Esther's own experiences in school, having been dropped off and left to fend for herself at a very young age. She reminisced:

I mean, what I see is like, I walked into first grade, and it's like "there you go."

And I didn't know a single word of English. He [father] left me in the office and walked away. He dropped me off and walked away. It was like, "Uhh, what am I doing?" I remember copying. Like I don't know it was cheating and I was copying somebody else's paper. I copied the name. I copied the name and teacher

caught me. And he's like, "Esther." And I see it now that I'm working in the school and it's like how kids are with their bilingual program, I'm like, "Aaah." And it just gets to them and I think like, "No, no, no, no. It's not that." Like when people say "learn English." I'm like, "No, don't tell them to learn English. Let them be; they have to go through a silent period." "You're here to learn English." "Yes, they will get the language when they understand it." It's very... It gets me. 'Cause I went through it.

Esther's experiences are indicative of what many newcomers go through when first encountering public school. While not always pleasant experiences, public schooling in the United States is critical to becoming socialized into American society. As Gandara and Contreras (2009) pointed out, for many low-income Latino students, schools are also the first response system for any kind of social, medical, or psychological problem or disability (p. 86).

Contrary to Esther's thoughts and feelings on assimilation, it has been a different experience for her younger siblings who were born in the United States (much like the Morales girls). Even though they are still considered immigrants from another country, the United States feels like home for them because this is all they know. Mexico, for them, is the place to visit when they go "on vacation." While one of the siblings, Tito, was in attendance at the interview, Esther did most of the talking for him.

Interviewer: Do you feel like there's a separation because the children, as students, are becoming assimilated into the academic culture but parents are not?

Esther: Maybe when I was younger. When I was going through adolescence. Like

I see it in them and it's like, "Oh, they don't understand." And to me, I find it very rude when I come over and they start speaking English to me. And I automatically, I answered in English. And my parents do something like, "Speak Spanish; you see, we have nothing to hide."

Interviewer: How do they feel about that?

Father: I feel fine, because you guys understand each other and you speak your language.

Mom: I feel proud.

Esther: But I do. I think it's just me then. Because I do feel the separation.

Interviewer: People feel differently. I've heard from parents who feel they don't have anything in common with their kids anymore.

The Garcia family's experiences and thoughts on the topic of assimilation centered mainly around Esther's school experiences, in addition to their varied feelings on the topic of how different levels of assimilation across family members create separation. It is typical, especially for a child born in a native land but raised in a host country, to have a different experience than siblings born and raised in the United States—to naturally view Mexico not as their homeland, but as a place to visit.

The Hernandez family, with one school-aged child and an adult child—both born in the United States—had a very laissez-faire attitude toward the whole idea of becoming Americanized and the different experiences that can lead to—or detract from—assimilation.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel a separation from Marco because he's learning English and becoming Americanized to a greater degree than you?

Mother: We simply try to tell about our roots. I understand that he's here and he has to. And I tell him he still needs to speak Spanish, not because I don't speak English, but he has to.

Interviewer: That's good.

Mother: I (inaudible) dad because he started speaking more English. Dad speaks more English than Spanish. Sometimes he doesn't know how to say some things in Spanish to me. Now, he speaks more English because his dad speaks more English.

Marco: I think that's the main thing because my dad uses it more. Because he's always interacting with English speakers. And my brother . . .

Mother: He needs to speak Spanish well because when we go to Mexico, he has to speak to family.

Marco: My grandpa doesn't speak English.

Mother: He understands Spanish but sometimes he doesn't know.

Marco: To me, it's not an option with my mom with English. I can understand Spanish very nicely, but I can't speak it very fluently.

Interviewer: You need both.

Marco: I do need both. I understand that and I try.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you're saying that it's important that he understands his culture and his roots and where he came from. Is that important to both of you?

Mother: Yes.

Father: I'll say it's important. It's something that you can't explain what it is. But

yeah. It's just at the point where we're trying to keep it.

Mother: He says they get a lot of our roots that aren't even from here. Like Easter.

To us, it's religious. It's just pure religion.

Interviewer: Not in America?

Mother: No.

Interviewer: I mean, for a lot of people . . . It's the Easter Bunny.

Mother: So why are you gonna take something that's not even from here?

Marco: Or Christmas. It was . . . In Mexico it's all pure religion. They didn't really talk about Santa. But then . . . And then he explained to me, they don't really get presents on Christmas. They got them on . . .

Father: January 6th 'cause of Three Kings.

Marco: Three Kings. And that's when they get presents. Not when Santa came. It's very different over there.

Mother: Because of religion. Christmas is just commercial here.

Interviewer: And Easter?

Marco: And Halloween.

Interviewer: Easter, Halloween.

Mother: We don't have those customs, those traditions.

Interviewer: So in that sense do you feel like Americanization is bad for him? Or is it okay to have both cultures?

Mother: I don't think it affects him.

Interviewer: No effect?

Mother: Just don't that he loses his roots. Where he comes from. His heritage.

It is as if, in this last exchange with the Hernandez family, they feel that assimilation is simply something that happens to someone over time. Mr. Hernandez couldn't quite put his finger on it to explain what happens, but understood the importance of retaining native roots. Contrast this to the Morales family, who talk about how Esther feels the separation, how she feels it is rude for them to speak in English when they are native Spanish speakers, how this is a big deal for her. However, the Hernandez family does not feel this separation, but feels that retaining their culture is a big deal because of the differences between the values, cultures, and traditions in Mexico and the United States.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented four themes that emerged from interviews conducted with four immigrant Latino families. The purpose of the research and the interviews was to gain a better understanding of these families' perceptions of assimilation and their children's educational experiences in the United States. As such, this was a phenomenological study. As a research methodology, phenomenology seeks to draw out and uncover meanings individual participants make from lived experience. To provide structure and coherence, interview transcripts are analyzed and collectively shared; meanings, cutting across all participant groups, are identified and constructed. According to van Manen (1990), "All interpretive phenomenological inquiry is cognizant of the realization that no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight beyond challenge" (p. 7). That said, looked at collectively, while each one of the participants in the study viewed living the immigrant experience from a different perspective, there were commonalities and marvels in each participant's story that captured a broader meaning of the experience.

The primary research question and basis on which the research methodology was predicated was: What are the perceptions of Latino parents regarding their children's education in their neighborhood school?

The following related questions were also explored in the study:

1. In what ways and with what results does Latino culture have an effect on, or impact the education of Latino immigrant youth in their neighborhood public school?

2. What were parents' experiences in school, and how has this influenced their expectations regarding schooling for their children?
3. How do parents see their children change since moving to the United States, and what part does schooling play in that change?

Analyzing the data from these four overarching research questions yielded four interrelated themes, as presented in the previous chapter. One theme revealed that the “American Dream” these immigrant families had been yearning for turned out not to be everything they had originally thought. A second theme that surfaced was that Latinos don't feel that opportunities for advancement are the same for immigrants as they are for natural-born citizens. Third, there was a perception that real assimilation and a true sense of belonging in a new country is inhibited by the stigma that goes along with being an immigrant. And finally, even given all of the above, the fourth theme was that the challenge of assimilating into a new culture as an immigrant does not necessarily hinder progress—neither academically nor economically—as a new citizen.

In this chapter, I address each of the research questions put forth in the beginning of the study, beginning with the primary question, followed by the three related research questions. The interpretations of the questions presented are interwoven and supported by the thematic findings in chapter four. Implications for this research and a personal reflection on the experience of conducting the study are also included.

Primary Research Question: What are the Perceptions of Latino Parents Regarding Their Children's Education in Their Neighborhood School?

During the interview process with families who participated in the study, their thoughts on cultural assimilation and how it relates to their children's education became

evident. Three of the four families came to the United States with hopes of making more money and thereby creating better futures for their loved ones. Only one of the four families (the Astudillo family) claimed to have left their home country because the rest of the extended family was here in the United States. Interestingly, none of the families mentioned that they had come to the United States in search of a better education for their children.

All four of the families felt that, because their children had all been born here in the United States, that their children were fully assimilated into the culture of the country. There was a perception from all four families, however, that because their children were of Latino descent, they could never fully be comfortable calling the host land “home.” This perception had more to do with feelings around acceptance here in the United States, and the feeling they occasionally got from natural-born, Caucasian citizens, that the immigrant families do not belong here in the United States.

For all of the families involved, there was a concern related to finding a balance between full assimilation into the United States and maintaining ties with their home country (Mexico, in all cases). This concept of having dual citizenship and the feeling of belonging to two countries was confusing for some. In speaking with the Garcia family in particular, Angelica and her husband, who are both first-generation immigrants, felt very strongly that they have had to struggle with belonging. They discussed the idea of not having “enough invitation” to belong here in the United States and that, being first-generation immigrants, there is an identity crisis they had to go through. This correlates with research into the reasons why first-generation immigrants have little reason to immerse themselves in the language and culture of their host country. The author stated

that efforts to assimilate are compounded by feelings of not being welcome (Roosens, 1989).

Related Research Question One: In What Ways and With What Results Does Latino Culture Have an Effect on, or Impact the Education of Latino Immigrant Youth in Their Neighborhood Public School?

Participants in the study shared stories of coming to America and the immigration experience itself. This opportunity to hear stories about the experience of crossing a border led to rich insights into Latino culture and the values and morals held by each family.

When speaking with the Morales family about Latino culture and whether or not it had an impact on the education of their children in a country different than their homeland, they first responded that they did not feel their Mexican heritage had anything to do with opportunities afforded to their children through their education. Rather, they thought it was an issue that all families had to face regardless of culture and race, and asserted that opportunities and education had more to do with family upbringing than anything else. Notably, Mr. Morales pointed to his parents and how they raised him and his siblings to work hard. This trait has remained with him and is something he has passed on to his daughters.

The Hernandez parents had differing viewpoints, with Mr. Hernandez of the opinion that it didn't matter if his son was of Latino descent or not; he would be afforded opportunities through hard work and perseverance and that this would be the cause of his success. Mr. Hernandez felt that nothing could get in the way of this, and that one's success is more of a personal endeavor. Mrs. Hernandez, however, thought while her son

had experienced a great amount of academic success, that he would probably face some resistance and even racial discrimination as he gets older and becomes an adult.

Interestingly, their son Ruben took a neutral stance on the issue, stating that while he recognized people may have different viewpoints on Mexican immigrants, and pointing out that he felt racial discrimination was a very real phenomenon, it never entered his thoughts that his own future would be impacted by the fact that he was born into a family of immigrants.

It is interesting to note the perceptions of study participants around the concept of whether or not Latino culture helped or hindered success, and I couldn't help but wonder why it appeared to contradict research highlighting a lack of academic success in students of Hispanic descent. In particular, what came to mind was the research by Brown and Souto-Manning (2008), which discussed the fact that popular, negative stereotypes and beliefs about Latinos contribute to their lack of educational/academic success and directly relate to the way society devalues Latinos. In addition, Nieto (2002) wrote that the many educational assumptions about Latino learners are based on stereotypes that promote the insignificance of cultures traditionally holding low status in a society.

Though the research seems to be at odds with them, it never even seemed to cross participants' minds that being from a different country could prohibit them from having opportunities in life, or that being of Latino descent could have a negative impact on their children academically. This sentiment appeared in all four families.

The difference in responses from families was significant and varied, depending upon experience, both here in the United States and in previous life history in Mexico. Mr. Morales, for example, focused on opportunities for himself and his wife, stating that

he thinks it would be easier for him in Mexico; this is primarily due to his limited English-speaking ability and the resulting job opportunities that he has been able to secure.

The Astudillo family had a much different stance on the issue of advancement and the impact of being Latino, believing that any missed opportunities are solely the responsibility of the individual, regardless of where you are born. Mrs. Astudillo spoke through her daughter, who translated for her that day, and wanted to make sure I understood that she did not apologize for her way of thinking; she firmly believed that Mexican immigrants, if they experienced any discrimination or hardships in the way of financial advancement, brought this on themselves and did much to give Mexican immigrants, as a whole, a bad name.

Related Research Question Two: What Were Parents' Experiences in School, and How has This Influenced Their Expectations Regarding Schooling for Their Children?

In response to the question of parents' own experiences in school, the answer varied based on the family's experience and circumstances. The question was designed to discover if the education of immigrant students' parents had any impact on their academic achievement in a U.S. public school setting. While this question may not have revealed much in the way of viable data that is useful and pertinent to the stories and backgrounds of these particular students, it is important to take a look at the research around early education and a parent's level of educational attainment. What this means to the families involved in this research study is compelling.

For the Garcia family, in which Mr. Garcia completed formal schooling through the eighth grade and Mrs. Garcia only through fourth grade, this should have meant that their children were destined to achieve at low academic levels. Pointing to research done around the educational attainment level of a child's mother in particular, Gandara and Contreras (2009) found that academic performance of the child increases as a function of the mother's education. Likewise, Suarez-Orozco et. al. (2008) showed through their research that the higher the level of education a mother attains, the better her children are likely to do academically.

This makes sense when one considers the fact that more educated families tend to provide more literacy opportunities, communicate with more sophisticated vocabularies, offer more access to technology, assist to a more productive degree with homework assignments, and offer knowledge about applying to and getting into college, among a host of other academic supports (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). What doesn't make sense is when we look at the upward academic trajectory the Garcia children have been on from the very beginning of their academic careers; we have to ask why they have succeeded where others have not. Especially when, according to Gandara and Contreras (2009), the demands of contemporary American society are outpacing the ability of post-immigrant generations of Latinos to overcome the educational barriers they face.

The success of the Garcia children, as well as the children from the other three families in this study, appears to be a result of factors other than the educational attainment of the children's mothers. Brain researchers recently argued that preschool attendance may be most critical for children from low-income backgrounds. They contend that low-income and working-class students encounter, on average, one-half to

one-third fewer words by age three, resulting in these children hearing and learning far fewer words at that early age than their middle-class peers (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Ironically, all of the students who were a part of this research study happened to attend pre-school, thereby putting them at a slight advantage over their other lower-income peers.

Regardless of the parents' level of education, or the experiences they had in school, all the parents expected that their children would perform well in school, and would make getting a good education a high priority. Mr. and Mrs. Morales both expect that their daughters will remain on the honor roll every semester, and both parents attend every activity related to the girls' academics. While Mr. Morales was only able to estimate that he has around an eighth-grade education, Mrs. Morales finished high school and entertained the thought of college at one point. Their high expectations and support, regardless of their own educational attainment, has had a tremendous influence on both of their daughters.

The Garcia parents, as supportive as they are of their children's education and future well-being, admitted that they have not been as outwardly supportive as they could be. They don't, for example, attend academic or family events at the school. Though both Mr. and Mrs. Garcia had lower educational attainment levels in school while growing up in a poor Mexican farming village, and despite the fact that there is a lack of outward support in terms of actual attendance at school events, the Garcia parents have had a significant influence on their children's success. Angelica is currently attending college and plans to be a teacher, while Tito has maintained an A average throughout elementary and middle school and is a part of the National Junior Honor Society.

The same results came out of the interview with the Hernandez family. When I asked Ruben for his perception on parental influence and expectation, he explained that he could sense this from early childhood. As he explained:

I always felt that since I was very little. They would educate me. And I remember me and my mom was having a discussion like in the car, at home, about my roots. And that's just always been in my life.

It makes sense, therefore, that though there is much research pointing to the benefits of a mother's educational attainment level, there are other factors related to the child's own success in school and in life. For all four of the families in this research study, there is a high correlation between parental expectation and support, and the motivation to succeed in their children. All four families discussed wanting better outcomes for their families and children, and all of the children in the study were able to understand the connection between their success and that of their parent's sacrifice, expectations, and support of their endeavors.

Related Research Question Three: How Do Parents See Their Children Change Since Moving to the United States, and What Part Does Schooling Play in That Change?

The final question asked the parents involved in this research study to reflect on whether or not their children had changed since moving to the United States, and what part schooling in the new country played in that change. While all of the families had different perspectives on this topic, the research overwhelmingly showed that parents did not feel as if there were significant changes in their own children since coming to the United States. All of the parents, however, made some reference to the differences

between teenagers living and going to school in Mexico and teenagers living and going to school in the United States. The Garcia family, in particular, had some especially poignant reflections when asked if there was a specific difference in adolescents between the two countries. Mr. Garcia commented:

I think there are differences, yes, because Mexico, there's no money. They get involved with drug dealers. And the adolescents, they don't understand. They don't let parents talk to them. I think they're underage and just because they have a thousand pesos, they're like "Okay" and they leave.

Tito, teenage son of the Garcia family, was born here in the United States. He is considered a second-generation immigrant, and doesn't understand these differences. He has, however, been to Mexico to visit his parent's native land a small number of times, and talked during the interview about having been made fun of by cousins for his ability to speak English fluently when he visits. Tito's brother-in-law, Angelica's husband, is seen as having an accent and having a little too much tint in his skin here in America, and when he goes back to his native Mexico, he is not "Mexican enough" anymore. Angelica asserted that she has felt the same way.

The Hernandez family had some interesting answers to this question, which shed some light onto the topic of whether or not they had seen any differences in their child or even other children. Mrs. Hernandez discussed that the real difference lies with the parents. On Mexican families raising second-generation immigrant children in the United States, she said,

The difference is a lot of people I know, they have their children and their parents worked too much, they don't pay too much attention to the kids or tell them

school is important. They think that their mission is to work and send them to school. And people, there's a lot of people that come with low resources, low income, they didn't have the education, so that's why they don't push them because they didn't have the opportunity. That's what I feel. That's what I see. After a lot of people have been come, work, make money, have your house, but don't focus in their children have to deal with like go to school. Sometimes the children have achieved because they themselves do it. They see it. Even though my parents didn't go to school as much, they always pushed me to go to school. For my dad, it's very hard. They were four siblings so we went to school and over there you have to pay to school. But he always told us that they sacrifice to send us to school.

Mrs. Hernandez went on to point out that, although she feels there is not much of a difference in teenagers between countries, schools in Mexico are stricter than they are here in the United States. She referenced the fact that there are more advancements and more technology here in the United States, whereby in Mexico, "we just used our head."

A common thread across all four of the families interviewed for this research study was that it is difficult to raise immigrant children—whom they defined as any child raised in another country, learning another language and culture—due mainly to language. If there was any one change in their children, and in that of others, it was that the children are receiving an education and learning the new language at a steady pace while being immersed in the public school setting, and their parents are not. This makes it difficult for parents to help with school work, seek assistance for their children if they

begin to struggle in school, and simply maintain the day-to-day lifestyle—a foreign lifestyle—that their children are living and learning.

Implications for Education and Educators

This research was undertaken to gain and understand the perceptions of Latino families living in America about their children’s experiences in their local community schools. There is a need for educational leaders and teachers working in American public schools to understand, as Latino immigrants come with varying degrees of English language understanding and comprehension—in many cases, little to no understanding at all—that they are also facing many more obstacles than we are incapable of understanding without having experienced them ourselves. Below are six areas of impact the findings of this research suggest:

- Culturally responsive schools
- Empathy
- Family/community/school partnerships
- Culturally responsive teaching
- Hiring
- Leadership and curriculum development

Culturally Responsive Schools

During the 10 years that I have spent working in this community, I saw four different superintendents lead the district, at least seven different assistant superintendents walk through the central office doors, and an English Language Learner (ELL) department that saw three different directors at the helm of a 75% Spanish-speaking population of learners. One of the most surprising things to me over the course

of those 10 years was that not one of those adults spoke of the need for a culturally sensitive curriculum, an awareness of culturally responsive teaching pedagogy, or any type of training to build the capacity of our mostly White teaching staff in their understanding of the needs of this very fragile population of Latino immigrant learners. We operated in this fashion regardless of the fact that we knew, as pointed out by Bazron, Osher, and Fleischman (2005), that,

During the last 10 years, U.S. schools have experienced a rapid growth in ethnic and racial diversity. In the near future, the young people now filling classrooms will be paying taxes, working in the public and private sectors, and consuming goods and services that fuel our economy. (p. 83)

Still, we taught them and thought of them and looked at them the same way we looked at every student who came through the school-house doors. While, from the outside looking in, this could be viewed as having high expectations for every single learner, it also meant that no one was talking about the obvious—that we should have been looking at things differently and asking some hard questions of ourselves, as educators, as to why there was such a tremendous gap in the achievement of our White, natural born citizens, and that of our children who came from Latino immigrant families. This gap was especially prevalent at the elementary level. We should have recognized the fact that, as Brown pointed out (2007),

Researchers have asserted that the academic achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds would improve if educators were to make the effort to ensure that classroom instruction was conducted in a manner that was responsive to the students' home cultures. (p. 58)

By responding to the research and taking action on the strategies made available within, schools and districts are able to take a close look at the way classrooms are structured, as well as modify their policies and procedures to enhance the learning environment for all students.

Empathy

Immigrants face many hardships as they make the trek from Mexico to the United States, and youngsters need assistance in processing some of these obstacles. Many times, they arrive in our schools having left behind a mother, siblings, or other family members. Due to the nature of the Mexican culture, where oftentimes extended family members live together in the same household, these new living arrangements can be quite a change from what the children are used to. Because children and adolescents depend on their families, living arrangements may be especially important in shaping the ways in which immigrant families are integrated into the social and economic living structures of the United States (Landale, Thomas, and VanHook, 2011).

It is important for educators who are receiving these children to be culturally competent—to have the ability to empathize with people from diverse cultures and incomes. These are necessary skills if we are to close the achievement gap between native- and immigrant-born students (Finley, 2014). It is also critical to understand that they are, quite probably, waking up in the morning in a strange bed, without the usual family members surrounding them, and without many of the comforts of “home.” Additional supports and resources are needed for these children if we are going to expect them to perform academically in the midst of adjusting to their new surroundings.

Family/Community/School Partnerships

Operating under the philosophy of a culturally responsive school, educational leaders can and should create programs that are sensitive to the needs of immigrant children and their families. The stronger and more intense the supports are for immigrant families, the more successful the children in these families will hopefully be. In addition to involving outside community organizations and human resources to provide services to immigrant families, it may also be valuable for schools to look into creating a “welcome center” within the school itself. As mentioned by Beck and Pace (2017),

Establishing a Welcome Center creates an opportunity for school systems to engage with the family to understand their circumstances and provide for their students’ educational needs while simultaneously addressing some of the family’s basic needs through community resources. (p. 14)

The center could be a room outfitted with literature written in Spanish. It could provide resources for immigrant families as they concentrate on getting their households set up and their children settled in the new school, or help with finding work to be able to support their family. The center can help with understanding the community of which they are now a part, and the resources available to them as they work to manage all of the priorities of running a household and family in their new land.

In addition to creating physical welcome centers and building awareness amongst educators around the plight that many immigrants endure, professional development is needed to educate school leaders and teachers on the experiences—the actual feelings and emotions—of immigrants assimilating into their new country. If immigrants are feeling unwelcome here in the United States, and if some of that feeling could be a result of

teachers working from a deficit perspective—where students are seen as “missing” certain skills or lacking background knowledge (Brown & Souto-Manning, 2008)—then educators are creating an even wider gap with which to work.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

As important as it is to provide professional development to the school community, it is equally important to understand what culturally responsive practices look like in the classroom. At Quincy Elementary School in Boston, Massachusetts, for example, the workshop model of teaching reading and writing is used in all grades and classrooms (Gagnon, 2011). This model utilizes a shared approach to instruction and creates a heavier focus on writing. It involves the following cycle: a 15-minute mini-lesson, small-group work or discussion, independent work, large-group time, and finally, revision. A main emphasis of the model is to have students read their own writing in an effort to have them engage with language as often and as much as possible. This model has the potential of benefitting ELL students by allowing them more time to interact with the English language, thereby affording the teacher observation of student responses, as well as providing plenty of attention to the students who may need it.

The workshop model at Quincy Elementary is one example of culturally responsive teaching that benefits students. It is important that school leaders and educators understand and keep in mind cultural norms and traditions while planning for these students. Culturally responsive practices are respectful practices; they show students and families that schools value where their students have come from, and that their learning styles are significant and important.

In addition to keeping in mind cultural norms and traditions, Montgomery (2001) offered the following five guidelines for classrooms teachers to respect when readying their classrooms:

1. Conduct a self-assessment to establish understanding of students' cultures
2. Use various culturally responsive instructional materials and approaches
3. Create a classroom setting that will respect the cultures of individual students
4. Create and promote a classroom environment that is interactive
5. Utilize continual, culturally aware assessments of student skill and ability

Hiring

One of the most important jobs of school leadership is the hiring of quality teaching candidates. The cultural competencies prospective teachers possess can be explored through the interview process, and should be a priority when looking at staffing a school that is culturally responsive to the needs of students and their families.

According to Consuegra, Craft, and Scott (2010), hiring considerations could include the following:

- What is their personal experience with adversity?
- What is the candidate's familiarity with culturally responsive teaching techniques and practices?
- Is the candidate familiar with multicultural education?
- Questions should encourage the candidate to discuss social justice, race, and socioeconomic status during the interview.

School leaders are accountable for ensuring that the learning happening in their schools is of high quality, and that educators are doing their best to empower parents who live in diverse neighborhoods. We need to understand, as culturally responsive school leaders, that the only way to effect change and create better places to live for the families we serve is to become activists for those very families.

As Nieto (2003) discussed, taking a close look at school policies and practices, including curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher hiring practices, can either promote or obstruct learning among students of diverse cultures.

It makes sense, then, that through hiring teachers who have a solid understanding of our students' cultural needs, we can ensure that the children in our care have the best possible chance of achieving all that is available to them.

Leadership and Curriculum Development

It is critical that leaders prepare teachers and other building administrators to work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds. In order to ensure that educators have a solid understanding of the plight of students, the needs of families, and how immigrant families can best be served, proper training and development needs to occur both at the beginning and throughout the school year. In this way, we can work to continuously improve at reaching all learners, no matter their origin or background.

Too many teachers are insufficiently prepared to teach ethnically diverse students. Some teacher preparation programs still debate whether to include multicultural education, in spite of the fact that students of color continue to perform poorly. Other programs are trying to decide what the most appropriate place and "face" for it would be. A few programs are embracing multicultural education enthusiastically. The

inconsistency among teacher preparation programs can lead to irregularities in readiness for culturally responsive teaching, which debates that explicit knowledge about cultural diversity is essential if we are to meet the varied needs of culturally diverse students.

There is no shortage of quality information available about multicultural education. It just has to be located, learned, and woven into the preparation programs of teachers and classroom instruction (Gay, 2002). Even with the research on this topic, and regardless of the information available, there is still concern that, as DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho (2005) pointed out, participants in pre-service and in-service teacher programs still believe that immigrant parents place little value on their children's education. If this perception is not addressed and proven false, it is possible that immigrant students in our teachers' care may have less of a chance to succeed than their native-born peers.

Gay (2005) identified a few very specific areas in which ongoing development and awareness is needed if educators are going to be successful with immigrant students.

These include:

- Developing a cultural diversity knowledge base
- Designing culturally relevant curricula
- Demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community
- Cross-cultural communications
- Cultural congruity in classroom construction

While Gay's recommendations are not inclusive, and their exploration is not developed within the confines of this research, they do offer a place for educational leaders and institutions to start. She made a point of saying:

This can be done by all teachers' being culturally responsive to ethnically diverse

students throughout their instructional processes. But they cannot be reasonably held accountable for doing so if they are not adequately prepared. Therefore, teacher preparation programs must be as culturally responsive to ethnic diversity as K–12 classroom instruction. (p. 114)

Final Reflection

Our sole purpose in schools is to make students and families feel wanted. We know that students need to feel welcome, safe, and appreciated in order to learn. The families involved in this study, the ones I spent time with and came to know personally over the course of many years, have changed how I've come to view children and the places they've come from. Further, they have informed my perspective on how we need to interact with them on a daily basis, and how we need to operate differently—on a systemic level—if we are to ever even come close to reaching all students. The research presented here has had a profound effect on my life personally, as well. The experiences I've lived through over the course of this study—the lessons I've learned from these families—have caused me to see human life through a different lens. It is a more compassionate lens, a more understanding lens, a more culturally responsive lens.

As Suarez-Orozco et al. (2008) pointed out, our understanding of the experiences of immigrant children and youth remains limited. They go on to say this gap in our knowledge is troubling because of the rapid pace at which immigrant-origin children are entering the United States, thereby making them the fastest growing segment of the youth population. If we want to reach high levels of academic achievement with all students, we must take into consideration the findings and implications presented in this research study.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little about your child.
2. What were your experiences/memories of school; do you think that it's different for your child than it was for you?
3. Do you see a difference between schooling in Mexico and schooling in the USA?
4. Does being from another country make things difficult for your child?
5. What are the perceptions of Latino parents regarding their children's education in their neighborhood school?
6. Talk about parental involvement in school. I would like to see more parental involvement from the Latino community; how would I go about doing that?
7. Do you feel that the Latino culture, and being of Latino descent, impacts the education of your children in any way?
8. What were your experiences in school, and how has this influenced your expectations regarding schooling for your children?
9. How have you seen your children change since moving to the United States, and what part do you feel attending an American school has played in that change?