2013-03-14

Stories of Success: Three Latino Students Talk About School

Carol Ann Litster

Brigham Young University - Provo

Stories of Success: Three Latino Students Talk About School

Carol Ann Litster

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Erin Whiting, Chair
Erika Feinauer
Stefinee Pinnegar

Department of Teacher Education

Brigham Young University

March 2013

ABSTRACT

Stories of Success: Three Latino Students Talk About School
Carol Ann Litster

Department of Teacher Education

Master of Arts

Latino students in the United States face significant challenges including very high student dropout rates and difficulties finding support for student academic success. This research focuses on Latino students who are successful despite these many challenges and explores how these successful students describe their experiences in school. Three successful Latino high school students describe their pathways toward academic achievement in this ethnography, which takes a narrative approach. The student stories illustrate the influence of families, peers, schools, and the interplay between ethnic and academic identity as relevant to how students achieve success. Although these students articulate very different experiences, supports and challenges, all of the students are successful in school, which encourages a reexamination of the ways schools and communities can support minority student success.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Scholars (e.g. Gandara, 2010) have pointed to a growing "Latino Crisis" within the United States educational system. Currently, Latino students are the largest and fastest growing population of students in the United States, yet they also have the highest dropout rate for any minority group at 37% compared with a national average of 15% for all students in 2008 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). The Latino crisis extends beyond the problems many Latino students face in schools, to societal consequences for not adequately educating this group of students (Gandara, 2010). Students at risk of dropping out are also at greater risk of psychosocial maladjustment, unemployment, living a lower standard of living, and living a life with diminished human potential. These broader social costs and consequences for not fully accommodating the needs of the Latino population in the United States educational system must be taken into consideration as we seek to assist these students. For society generally to thrive, it is imperative that we understand how to support Latino students and help them successfully navigate the many barriers and challenges that might stand in the way of their academic life.

Much of the work on academic outcomes for Latino students has focused on what is not going well for these students. This research has been centered in a deficit model, with a focus on the differences (and deficits) between Latino culture and mainstream, established school culture to explain the high drop out rate. A contrasting, strengths-based approach to viewing and interpreting the educational situation of Latino students acknowledges that despite potentially tremendous difficulties and barriers, 70% of Latino students are staying in school and graduating with a high school credential. This approach honors and values all of the strength and resiliency of Latino students, and seeks to understand what successful students are doing right to negotiate the majority culture and achieve academic success. More research is needed to understand how successful Latino students have come to understand and articulate their own academic journeys

1

as they draw on the resources in their lives to overcome the many obstacles they may face.

Cultural differences between Latino students and school that might be perceived as obstacles to academic success include Spanish language, family and ethnic customs, and an understanding of school culture that differs from school behaviors in the United States. For example, language differences between a student's native language and the language used in school can negatively impact student academic achievement in a variety of ways (Fuiligini, 1997; Gandara, 2010). However, language differences can also be seen as assets for these students. Being bilingual can be viewed as a tool students use to navigate and shift between home and school culture, as well as economic rewards for being bilingual in this global economy.

Family and ethnic traditions that differ widely from the school culture can also be considered barriers for Latino student academic success when Latino students are made to feel that they need to make a choice between the two. Often, due to this tension, Latino students may lack identity or connection with the school environment (Martinez, 2009). Similarly, the resources that the Latino family structure brings to the school may be perceived as a negative influence on student academic achievement. Additionally, the academic success of Latino students in school is sometimes hindered by differing parental understanding of school and how school systems in the United States work (Kao & Tienda, 1998). However, Latino families may also operate as a source of great strength and support for Latino students, drawing on the tradition of family values that is a hallmark of Latino culture (Davis, Resnicow, & Couper, 2011; Esparza & Sanchez, 2008; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Rothman, Gant, & Hnat, 1985).

There are also systemic and social factors that may operate as barriers to academic success for Latino students. Immigrant status may limit parents' job opportunities and often dictates the quality of housing, healthcare, and education opportunities of many Latino students. These can be viewed as barriers to immigrant or minority student success coming from the less than

2

desirable jobs parents receive as new immigrants or the discrimination parents of these families face as they seek adequate employment. A family's immigrant status also makes many Latino students the focus of hostility and discrimination from people in the community who rightly or wrongly fear losing jobs or prestige to new ethnic and social groups. However, the hard jobs that parents work often teaches their children about the value of hard work, and can be a source of inspiration for Latino students as they strive to create a better life for themselves and their families.

It is important to note that the perceived problems or challenges facing Latino students do remain rooted in a variety of cultural differences and social constraints. Yet, it is similarly important to note that some Latino students find ways to use what may be perceived as deficits to reach success, despite various obstacles and challenges. Unfortunately, it is also true that many of these obstacles and barriers contribute to the incredibly high drop out rate for Latino high school students. This thesis, therefore, asks successful Latino students to articulate the ways they have drawn on various resources to effectively overcome these difficulties.

This paper looks at three Latino high school students who found ways to be academically successful while confronting many of the same obstacles their less successful peers faced. All of the students in this study were involved in a school program called Latinos in Action (LIA), which is a cross-age, peer mentoring program in which Latino high school students mentor Latino junior high and elementary students at neighboring schools. These were academically successful students with strong academic, bilingual, and leadership skills required to be a member of this school LIA group. This research explores how these academically successful Latino high school students in LIA negotiated the barriers to academic success within their school context. Specifically, this research study asks: How do academically successful Latino students in the LIA program articulate the supports and the challenges they encounter in their

pathways to success?

To answer this question, I will examine the stories of three Latino students and how they articulate their own academic experiences. I will explore how this fits in with their ethnic identity and experience. I analyze student stories about the ways these Latino students have negotiated barriers, retained a sense of belonging to their ethnic group, and been academically successful, while at the same time many of their peers have abandoned school. Allowing students to tell their stories of academic success in their own voices enables them to be more directly a part of the discussion and conversation about the challenges associated with Latino education in the United States. This research question is relevant for educators who seek to support Latino students in academic achievement, finding ways to strengthen and create a place for Latino students, and to recognize the many contributions they make in the school setting.

As an educator, I recognize that all students have potential. I have seen the struggles students face, and I can only imagine the untold stories they live outside of school. Yet, I have also seen student success, and I want to explore that success. Much of the research about Latino education has been oriented toward a deficit perspective and looking at poor student performance. In contrast, this study has been structured to explore more carefully the experiences of successful students in order to uncover factors that support and lead to success.

It is imperative to explore the dispositions, actions, supports, experiences, and mentoring that contribute to Latino student success. We cannot continue to overlook those Latino students in the United States who are successfully navigating their way through school despite the odds. These answers can come through deeper conversation with these very students. Indeed, creating experiences, programs, and practices within institutional settings that serve Latino high school students can have enduring benefits for increasing students' academic success.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I review empirical research on the experiences of minority students in the U.S. educational system looking specifically at the influences of family, school, peers, identity, and academic engagement on academic experiences. I specifically look at the ways Latino students draw on these resources within these spheres of influence that help overcome potential barriers to academic success. I examine the factors within the social structures for Latino students that often act as both supports and/or challenges to their academic achievement.

Family Influences

Family relationships are particularly meaningful in mediating Latino students academic experiences. Parents can help provide the physical and emotional resources that students need to succeed in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lopez, 2001). Specifically, parental support and their expectations toward their child's academics are significant predictors of student academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Fuglini, 1997; Hill & Torres, 2010). Familism, parental academic involvement and aspirations, and family socioeconomic factors can be protective or challenging factors for Latino students.

Familism for Latino students. Familism, as a cultural value, is an important concept for understanding Latino family relationships. Familism speaks to the ways that a person privileges his or her family system and relationships over individual goals and orientations (Davis, Resnicow, & Couper, 2011; Esparza & Sanchez, 2008; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Rothman, Gant, & Hnat, 1985). Rothman and associates (1985) found "Mexican Americans are more firmly rooted in the family as a source of identification than either black or Anglos" (p. 201). They further found familism to be a primary support for Latinos in connecting a person with their identity during times of crisis (Rothman et al., 1985). Lugo Steidel and Contreras (2003) specifically studied the level and degree of familial obligations for Latino families and

separated familism concepts into familial support, familial interconnectedness, familial honor, and subjugation of self for family. Across these factors of familism, they also found that the more involved in the mainstream culture an individual was, the less tied that person felt to their families, and the cultural value of familism (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003).

Familism has been shown to be an important motivating factor for academic success for some Latino students. For example, one study of successful Puerto Rican high school students indicated that these students recognized their parents' sacrifices which motivated them to do well in school. They described feeling pressure to get good grades so their parents would be proud of them (Garrett, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Velez, 2010). In this way, students may feel a sense of "compensatory achievement" where their feelings of responsibility to do well in school are based on guilt about their parents' sacrifices (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995, p. 157). This may be particularly true for Latino students who feel a strong sense of connection to their families through the shared cultural value of familism.

However, this might not always be the case. In a study focusing on resilient Latino youth who were staying in school and doing well, Esparza & Sanchez (2008) did not find significant associations between familism and student GPA. Rothman and associates (1985) also note that stresses and challenges can stem from familism for Latino students as they become more assimilated into the majority culture. Differences in levels of how involved family members were in mainstream culture (e.g., heritage and majority language use and proficiency) can lead to difficulties and tension within an immigrant family. For example, there can be a value conflict for Latino families when some expect obedience and compliance to the family in contrast to pressures from the mainstream society, which promotes individualism (Rothman et al., 1985). Esparza & Sanchez (2008) suggest that familism and positive "attitudes alone do not equip

6

students with the skills necessary to achieve higher academic success" (p. 198). These studies show how the value of familism can operate as a type of support, as well as present possible challenges for Latino students as they negotiate their academic lives.

      Parental involvement. A common deficit assumption about minority parents is that they do not contribute to their children's education because they do not participate in the school system in expected ways. Yet parental involvement in the schools and parental educational aspirations can be important factors for Latino student success. Parents are seen to participate in schools in many ways including volunteering in the classroom, being a member of a parent-teacher organization such as the PTA, attending parent-teacher conferences, and assisting in learning activities at home (Epstein, 1995). However, this kind of parental involvement may not always be possible for many minority parents due to demanding or inflexible work schedules and/or language barriers that can exist between parents and schools.

    Many minority parents are active in their children's education in ways that are often less visible. Minority parents may provide physical and social supports for their children rather than directly interacting with the school system in more expected ways (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lopez, 2001). Delgado-Gaitan (1992) notes that physical supports provided by parents in their homes include creating spaces to study, establishing a consistent bedtime, and providing physical rewards for academic success. These physical supports show the many ways parents participate in their children's education.

    Parents can also be involved in their children's education through their example of hard work and physical labor in their occupations. This can be a powerful way to be involved in motivating their child academically (Lopez, 2001). Specifically, some Latino parents use their "own lives of physical labor as examples of what not to do" (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999, p.

53). Many immigrant and minority parents work physically demanding jobs, because of limited educational backgrounds or opportunities in the United States. Parents may point out to their child that doing well in school is what can make a difference in having a better job than they have. One parent describes teaching his children they could work hard in school or hard in the fields, promoting a strong work ethic (Lopez, 2001). This can motivate and encourage students to do well in school so they can escape from the manual labor they see as part of their parent's struggles.

Parental involvement may also include drawing on the social supports found in Latino communities. Family participation in their communities can foster the educational socialization, and academic success, of their children as much as the more physical supports mentioned above (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Social networks in the Latino community often operate as primary resources for parents when they have questions about their children's school system, or how to best interface with their children's school or teacher (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). These social connections facilitate the learning of cultural capital (Bordieu, 1974) for Latino parents enabling them to expand their involvement beyond what they would typically be able to do for their children on their own. Thus, the social and community relationships within Latino communities are an important resource for parents as they seek to further their involvement in, or become more engaged and familiar with, their children's education.

Parental educational expectations and aspirations. The educational aspirations parents hold for their student's success is another key factor in family support for academic achievement. Parental educational aspirations for their children may often be related to parental involvement. Fan and Chen (2001) analyzed literature on parental involvement and student academic achievement and found parental academic expectation or aspiration was more influential than

8

parental supervision or parenting styles on student academic achievement. In another study on parental involvement, Hayes (2011) found that the level of parent involvement, "regardless of SES, is directly linked to the educational aspirations parents hold for their students" (p. 160). Specifically, parents with these higher aspirations focus on supporting their student's education by participating in school activities and encouraging their student with learning-focused activities in the home. For many parents, education is viewed as a means for social mobility for their children (Hayes, 2011).

Interestingly, minority students' perceptions of their parents' academic expectations or aspirations can be an important aspect of parental influence on academic achievement and can translate to increased motivation to do well in school (Garrett et al., 2010). Plunckett and Bamaca-Gomez (2003) found Latino youth who believed in their parents' ability to help them academically had higher academic motivations in school. The educational aspirations or expectations of parents and the ways they enact these hopes support student academic achievement, but language barriers and cultural differences can also limit that support.

Parental aspirations, however, do not always facilitate academic achievement for Latino students. For example, when minority parents have a limited understanding of the majority culture's school system, they may not hold realistic expectations of their children in terms of their educational outcomes. For many minority and immigrant families, mentoring for academic success is difficult if parents do not have a background in the U.S. educational system or educational experiences themselves from their home country. Parents may also lack the ability to mentor their children through the educational experiences they face in the U.S. school system, because they may hold conflicting expectations of what schooling is for (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Language and cultural differences may also

make it difficult for parents to effectively play a facilitating role for their children, despite a desire for their children to succeed in school.

Cooper and associates (1999) specifically acknowledge the difficulties immigrant parents face having high academic aspirations for their student's academic success but lacking knowledge of the school system policies that are necessary to help position their students for academic success. Additionally, Behnke, and associates (2004) interviewed Latino parents and children, focusing on the sometimes differing educational and occupational aspirations between parents and children. They found parents generally had high aspirations, but youth held lower academic aspirations for themselves. The research reveals that obstacles to both the parents and students educational aspirations include lack of time, lack of understanding about educational pathways, and a lack of English abilities (Behnke, et al., 2004).

Family socioeconomic factors. Household characteristics such as family income and parental education are outside of the student's immediate control, but can certainly influence student academic achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Moreno & Lopez, 1999; Plunckett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Government measures of poverty for the Latino population within the United States help reveal the reality of economic hardship that many Latino families face. Specifically for Latino children, poverty in this group grew the most between 2007 and 2010 for children with parents with less than a high-school degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Additionally, the socioeconomic situation of many Latino families influence the type of neighborhood and school the student can attend. However, it is important to recognize that children of poverty are also often resilient in unexpected ways (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003). Thus, family income and parental educational characteristics can act as

10

supports or challenges to Latino student academic achievement in a variety of ways (Finn & Rock, 1997).

In addition to family income, parental education levels themselves are important for minority student academic success. Studies show that minority students whose parents have higher levels of education typically have higher rates of academic success (Moreno & Lopez, 1999; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Specifically for Latino families, Plunckett and Bamaca-Gomez (2003) found a positive relationship between higher levels of maternal education and higher levels of student academic motivation and achievement (Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). These scholars attribute the higher levels of student academic motivation and achievement to a number of factors. These include increased financial resources to assist their children in school, parents having increased knowledge of the educational systems, examples of academic achievement from their mother's experiences, and students experiencing less pressure to contribute to family finances after leaving school (Plunket & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Thus, it appears that the income and educational level of the parents –in particular the mothers – of Latino students are influential in promoting the academic success and achievement of these students.

Limited parental education can also be a barrier for student success. Latino mothers who were less assimilated in their communities still held high expectations, but had less knowledge and understanding of school activities (Moreno & Lopez, 1999). Student academic motivation can be influenced by perceptions of their parents' ability to help them academically (Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Their confidence in their parents may decrease as Latino students have aspirations and knowledge of the school system that surpass their parents' experiences and abilities to help them, (Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). This demonstrates an interesting

balance Latino parents face desiring to help their students, but lacking the knowledge or ability, and perhaps even their children's confidence that they can help. These are possible barriers in their ability to support their child's academic success with limited education and knowledge of the school system.

Additionally, generational status and ties to family can also influence the educational achievement of minority students. For many immigrant families, time in the United States seems to be related to patterns in student involvement in mainstream culture and their academic trajectories. For example, Fuligini (1997) found that first-generation immigrant students performed better in school than students who had been in the U.S. longer. Similarly, he found that the high expectations first-generation immigrant parents held for their student's performance in school and their future was positively related to academic achievement for these students. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995) further describe possible tensions many second and third generation Latino students feel as they resist American mainstream culture, but also no longer feel completely connected with Mexican or South American culture from which their families come.

Clearly, families are a primary factor in student academic achievement for Latino students, in both supportive and sometimes conflicting ways. Familism, the parents' level and style of educational involvement, parental educational aspirations and academic expectations, and family socioeconomic factors all operate as important influences in the academic achievement of Latino students. Latino parents have many strengths as they encourage their children's education and provide various physical and social supports for their academic success. While parents want the best for their children, different family circumstances can act as challenges that can limit student academic achievement, specifically language differences and

unfamiliarity interacting within the U.S. school system. Yet many Latino students find ways to achieve in school despite these family challenges.

School Influences

The ways that students are situated in their school context can facilitate or inhibit the educational success of all students, but especially minority students. School culture and curriculum can influence the ways that students orient themselves toward academic success. Non-majority students may feel pressured to choose between home and school cultures by the institutionalized school policies and curriculum. Schools can positively influence minority student engagement through they ways that language and culture are used within the school context.

The context of schooling. Schools can support minority students in various ways. Unfortunately, schools do not always reach out to their minority populations in effective ways. Strike (2004) finds schools that do not actively encourage student belonging in a variety of ways may disengage and disempower minority students. Developing a school community that includes all students and promotes high academic standards should be a priority (Strike, 2004). The ways schools encourage connection and inclusion of minority youth within their school culture can help students succeed academically (Osterman, 2000; Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2010; Strike, 2004). Beyond specialized language programs, the ways language minority students are incorporated into the larger school community also has ramifications for their academic success (Finn & Rock, 1997). Important elements of the school community include teacher expectations and rapport with the students, the curriculum of the school, and language and cultural characteristics of the school experience. These elements of the school context can be supportive or undermining for minority student academic success.

Teacher expectations and rapport. A central characteristic of academically successful Latino students is the relationships they build with their teachers (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 2009; Hassinger & Plourde, 2005; Oikonomidoy, 2010; Wiggan, 2007). Hassinger & Plourde (2005) found that when minority students perceived that their teachers held high expectations for them and cared about their success, the students felt they had the support they needed to do well in school. In a study with African-American high school students, Wiggan (2007) studied students who changed from being oppositional to engaged in school, and found the teacher practices were "the most instrumental school effect impacting [the students'] school success." (p. 327) The students perceived engaging teacher practices to include using engaging pedagogy, being caring teachers, emphasizing teamwork and self-direction, interactive and encouraging in their lessons, and encouraging critical thinking in their students (Wiggan, 2007).

Similarly, Oikonomidoy (2010) examined factors influencing refugee student academic identities, and found the central factor in this development was the students' view of their teachers. Students favored teachers they perceived as kind and personable. This helped build a positive school environment for the students and a sense of belonging at the school (Oikonomidoy, 2010). Further, Osterman (2000) found that when students felt accepted by their peers and their teachers at school, they reported enjoying and being more engaged in school.

Minority students also describe ways teachers are not supportive. The student perceptions of disengaging pedagogy and ways teachers did not contribute to student success include teachers who were "teacher-centered, more dismissive, and those who showed low levels of interest in preparing for class and or teaching" (Wiggan, 2007, p. 332). Additionally, students report that teachers who did not treat students equitably or honor students' ethnic and linguistic identities do not support their academic identity (Oikonomidoy, 2010). It is evident that teachers

14

have a strong impact on student engagement and achievement, based on how teachers interact with and support all of their students. These are specific ways minority students connect with the school environment that encourages their academic success.

Curriculum in schools. The curriculum of the school plays an important role in supporting minority students. Elements of the school curriculum include the textbooks, the classroom learning objectives, and the courses of study the school provides. Critical race theory asserts that traditional school curriculum often "distorts, omits, and stereotypes" minority groups through justifying racism, sexism, and classism in the curriculum (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001, p. 97). Yet curriculum can also be supportive when it takes into account student ethnic identity, specifically student ethnic languages. Coulter and Smith (2006) find student success for English language learners can be encouraged with more support for language recognition in school classes and respect for student culture and language.

Language at school. Language learning programs are often the point of entry into the United States school system for many immigrant students in United States. Language programs may include ESL classes, language immersion programs, pull-out or sheltered instruction, as well as dual-immersion classrooms (Brisk, 2009). Many language-minority students face academic challenges when they arrive at school without requisite English language skills (Fuligni, 1997; Gandara, 2010). These students can have difficulties understanding academic content, progressing through the curriculum, and keeping up with their English-dominant peers. Further, language minority students may be at a disadvantage because their parents cannot support them in their schoolwork at home if they do not speak English or understand the content of their children's homework (Fuligni, 1997; Gandara, 2010).

Specific language programs may benefit language minority students more than others. For

example, dual-language education programs specifically encourage students to maintain both of their languages and learn the academic content in both languages. This positive focus on heritage language can help to integrate students into the larger community and foster "positive intergroup relations" among all students at the school (Gandara, 2010, p. 28). When language is viewed as an asset rather than a deficit, as in these types of programs, students may feel that their ethnic identity is being affirmed rather than challenged through their schooling experience. The ways students get to use and perceive their language skills and the ways schools support these language resources can lead to increased academic success for Latino students (Gandara, 2010).

Peer Influences

In addition to family and school influences, peer groups can also impact student academic achievement. Often, peer pressures may come into play and pressure students to choose between their social and school lives. The peer group's effect on student academic achievement can be through the degree or strength of social ties (Chang & Le, 2005), the ethnic makeup of their friend groups (Goza & Ryabov, 2009), and the related effects peers have on student behavior and attitudes toward school (Chang & Le, 2005). Specifically, peers have the potential to encourage positive attitudes toward school or encourage anti-school attitudes and behaviors.

Students can face problems adopting a positive, academic attitude toward school if they have peers that ask them to choose between friendship and academic achievement. For example, in a study of Asian minority groups, Chang and Le (2005) found that peers did not directly affect a student's academic achievement, but held an indirect influence. These authors find peers influence a student's attitude toward school which affects student academic achievement. With this indirect influence, the peer group's power lies in the attitude toward school they reinforced in the student. Chang and Le's (2005) study revealed the student's ability to maintain autonomy in choosing what type of student they will be, but also showed the ways peers can influence

16

subsequent school behaviors and attitudes toward school.

Ethnic characteristics of peer groups. Some research also suggests that peer group ethnic heterogeneity or homogeneity can also affect student academic achievement and varies with different ethnic groups. In one study, African American students held increased academic success with diverse friend groups, while Latino, Asian, and white students benefitted from having friend groups composed of their own ethnic group (Goza & Ryabov, 2009). Although these authors do not give specific reasons for the difficulties, students may find their ethnic identity can be affirmed as they associate with peers of their same ethnicity in the school context. For Asian, Latino, and white students, the academic benefits and friendship supports that come from having other students who are ethnically similar demonstrates the importance of peer groups and their influences on academic success.

Peer support and friendship. Friend groups can also influence academic achievement in school by the ways they connect with a student's self-concept and resiliency. In a study looking at loneliness, peer influence, and academic achievement, Guay, Boivin, and Hodges (1999) found a connection between students feeling distant from their classmates and the resulting negative influence on academic achievement. The study also found the reverse; that the degree of peer acceptance has an overall positive effect on student academic achievement. Peer groups can potentially help encourage individual student academic success by affirming student identity and promoting acceptance in the school. However, peer groups can also be a potential threat to student academic success when the peer group negatively influence and affect student attitudes toward school.

Student Attitudes and Identity

Student attitudes and identity focus on the student behaviors and characteristics that shape student academic success. The contextual influence of family, schools, and peers are significant. But individual student choices and beliefs students are also important in trying to understand their educational experiences and goals. Specifically, student attitudes and ethnic identity as it relates to culture and language as well as academic identity are factors in student academic success.

Student attitudes toward school**.** Individual student attitudes toward school are another strong predictor of academic achievement. Non-majority students respond to school with their level of academic commitment and achievement by the attitudes and perceptions of school opportunities (Colon & Sanchez, 2009). The ways schools create supports for positive minority and immigrant student attitudes can come by creating more ways to affirm individual student identity and increase involvement in schools. An additional component of a student's academic identity can be the cultural attitudes they hold toward school and their perception of their involvement in school. The ways students relate or connect with their school setting links with the degree of student success (Chang & Le, 2005; Gonzalez, 2009; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2010).

One specific example of the interplay between student attitudes and behaviors in school influencing positive academic behaviors was presented by Nichols, White, and Price (2006). They found that academically high-achieving Latino students reported higher beliefs in independent learning and other self-directed learning attitudes than academically low achieving Latino students. This seemed to be true for their sample, regardless of the socioeconomic status

of the students (Nichols et al., 2006). This internal-locus of control mentality demonstrates a type of student resiliency as the students felt they have control over their academic success.

Ethnic identity**.** Student attitudes toward school and school achievement are also shaped by ethnic identity, specifically ethnic identity as it relates to culture, language, assimilation pressures, and their academic identity. Ethnic identity can be understood as a, "construct or set of self-ideas about one's own ethnic group membership" (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, and Cota, 1993, p. 33). Ethnic identity can also be defined and shaped by context (Phinney, 1990). The ways ethnic identity is lived by students and enacted within the school can influence academic achievement as students have the opportunity to build their academic identity alongside their ethnic identity. Yet ethnic identity can also be a support or a barrier to student academic achievement based on how students relate to school and view their own level of involvement in mainstream culture.

Language is a strong cultural marker, and minority students may be resistant to fully engage academically if they fear competition between their native language and the dominant culture's language. This competition could weaken their ethnic identity. Vega, Khoury, Zimmerman, Gil, and Warheit (1995) compare immigrant and U.S.-born Latino students and the factors that affect their process in becoming part of the mainstream culture, and find conflicts with language negatively affecting school performance for both groups.

Additionally, U.S.-born Latino students still experience language difficulties at school and have additional struggles as they become more a part of the mainstream culture that contribute to negative school performance (Vega et al., 1995). Across the generational statuses of Latino students, Fuligini (1997) finds that, for Latino students in homes where English is not the primary spoken language, there can be negative effects on student academic achievement when

compared to students where English is the primary language. The language struggles Latino students face, even Latino students born in the United States, demonstrate the ways students can feel like they have not completely entered the school community. In contrast, students who can maintain their ethnic identity and heritage language while also utilizing the dominant language perhaps find ways to succeed academically despite contrasts between home language supports and school belonging tensions.

Intersection of ethnic and academic identity. As students negotiate their ethnic and academic identities, ethnic identity can be a support or a barrier to Latino student academic achievement. Minority students can experience a tension between their ethnic identity and academic identity, which often stems from feeling pressure to assimilate at school. Students may hold fears that doing well in school means giving up a portion of their ethnicity, or may betray the minority group to which they belong. Studying adolescent students, Arroyo and Zigler (1995) compare economically disadvantaged African American and European American students and find high-achieving students may feel they have to choose between their academic achievement and their ethnicity, regardless of the racial group. With this tension between ethnicity and academic achievement, many students can feel forced to choose between their ethnicity and academic identities.

Additionally, Vigil (1991) finds lower-achieving Latino high-school students in Los Angeles are also those students who have difficulty positioning themselves as an ethnic minority in a way that benefits their school performance and experience. These students do not fully create or adopt a personal ethnic identity, or sense of ethnic self. For these students, problems at school arise when they do not clearly identify with either the Anglo or the Mexican culture in their ethnic identity development (Vigil, 1991). Another study also finds that many African

American and Latino students challenge or disagree with—through their thoughts and behaviors—the mainstream American meritocratic belief or view that working hard in school leads to a stable, successful job (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva; 1994). These authors find that this student perception toward school interferes with students' future aspirations and can encourage students to hold disengaged feelings toward school.

There can also be positive connections between ethnic and academic identities. For Puerto Rican high school students, Garret and associates (2010) find that students can use their ethnic identity to be academically successful. Rather than feeling they were "acting white," these Puerto Rican students are academically successful and use their ethnic identity to disprove the negative stereotypes and perceptions of low academic success placed on their ethnic group (Garrett et al., 2010). In the different ways Latino students enter or join the majority culture at their school, the least conflict and most school success comes when Mexican students are Mexican-oriented rather than Anglo-oriented and when they feel school is accepting and supportive of their home culture (Vigil, 1991).

Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, and Sands (2006) also find ethnic identity to be a protective factor for some second-generation Latino students in terms of their school outcomes. These scholars (2006) define ethnic affirmation as, "the extent to which the adolescent has developed a positive sense of group membership" (p. 1429). Latino students who score higher on measures of ethnic affirmation are the same students whose teachers also report them having higher grades, doing their schoolwork, and getting along with other students (Supple et al., 2006). When students have this ethnic affirmation in their lives, they can be both Latino and academically successful without feeling an incongruity between these two identities.

Mehan and associates (1994) also find affirming students' cultural identities in the context

21

of academic success is a way to successfully incorporate minority students and encourage their academic success. Some students are able to manage their ethnic identities and their academic identities by having a separate school and neighborhood identity. Other students find they can connect with mainstream academic expectations of succeeding in school while keeping their ethnic identities "intact" (Mehan et al., 1994, p. 135).

Academic Engagement

Students who are highly engaged in school are academically successful, and academic engagement literature helps us consider another way to see student success. Academic engagement literature identifies the supports of family, school, and is a summary of academic success. Student engagement in school has been shown to be extremely important in including students in the school community and promoting student academic success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin 2009). The overarching concept of student engagement can be divided into three separate yet related constructs: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement connects with how students participate at school. Student engagement behaviors include getting to school on time, being prepared with homework and class work, and not being disruptive in class (Finn & Rock, 1997). Emotional engagement looks at how students relate to their peers and teachers, and how they experience the important relationships that connect them to their school community. Cognitive engagement includes the intellectual investment and effort that students put forth to cognitively engage in the work going in their classrooms. For example, do they pay attention in class, engage in important discussions and feel invested in the academic projects with which they are presented (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Suarez-Orozco and associates (2009) use these three dimensions of engagement to research immigrant student experiences and effects of these variables on student academic

engagement and achievement. Suarez-Orozco and associates find that the academic engagement of these immigrant students is determined by institutional and individual factors. However, they also find that student academic engagement is most influenced by "school-based supportive relationships," which includes relationships with peers, teachers, and adults in the community (p. 728). Minority students can feel integrated into the school community and succeed academically through these important supportive relationships.

Osterman (2000) finds the troubling trend that the students who need the most help in feeling a sense of belonging to their school community are most often the students who seem to receive the least amount of support. Further, Osterman's study finds that increased student perception of belonging in school, is related to students holding a more "positive orientation toward school, class work, and teachers" (p. 331). Thus, it seems that emotional engagement is pivotal in promoting overall academic engagement for these students.

Summary

This literature reveals the ways families, peers, school, and student attitudes and identity development influence minority student academic success. The present study asks about the ways Latino students are academically successful despite challenges in their pathway toward achieving academically. The next chapter will describe the research methodology and introduce us to the students that will share their stories of academic success in the context of strong ethnic identity involvement.

Chapter 3:Methods

Studies examining the state of Latino education in the United States typically focus on problems with the quality of education Latino students receive and the high Latino drop out rate from high school. However, this research departs from that approach by instead engaging with Latino students who are academically successful and also strongly identify with their ethnicity.

This project is part of a larger inquiry into the experiences of schooling for Latino students in a LIA program that emphasizes their ethnicity and culture. Using a qualitative analysis, I initially approached the whole collection of 12 student interviews searching for common themes. While this revealed categories that contribute to student success, the analysis and representation of the findings did not capture the storied interrelationships among categories or the interviews' patterns and plotlines. The initial codes provided segments of information, but reporting what I learned from the themes across 12 interviews reduced what the data could reveal about the storied successes for members of this group. I sought a way to capture the interrelationships and the depth I saw in the students' stories. Consequently, this study reanalyzes three student stories from a narrative perspective, in an effort to maintain the students' storied experiences. I incorporate and analyze themes from the stories while also preserving and honoring student voices by allowing their lived experience to have the central presence in the research (Van Manen, 1990). This research examines the storied experiences of these LIA students and their interpretations of their successes.

To answer my research question, "How do academically successful Latino students in the LIA program articulate the supports and the challenges they encounter in their pathways to success?" I consider how I represent the students and how they represent themselves. The phenomenon examined in this narrative study is how Latino high school students story their

24

success as students. In this research, I begin with the LIA students' lived experience and attempt to "understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 31). In our interviews and conversations, I tried to uncover their lived experience relating to their educational experiences as successful Latino students from their perspective. I specifically sought understanding of the meanings LIA students make of their experience in describing the ways they are successful, their reasons for pursuing success, and negotiations they encounter in pursuing academic success.

I begin this methodology section by discussing the context of this study, specifically the LIA program and specific LIA class. I then describe the participants within the LIA class, beginning with the entire class, then a description of the 12 students I interviewed, and then describe the three students whose stories are used in this research. I follow this with a description of the data sources, and finish with an explanation of the narrative research process and establishing trustworthiness in this research study.

Research Context

The context of this study is a high school LIA class in a suburban Utah city. Latinos make up 8.56% of the suburban community where this study takes place, and at this high school during the study, 12.76% of the student population was Latino (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/49000.html). I will describe the LIA program, and then the ways this school adapted their LIA class.

Program characteristics. LIA is a cross age, peer-mentoring program that has spread throughout schools in the state of Utah and into a few neighboring states. Academically successful LIA high school and junior high students leave their campus and go to a neighboring junior high or elementary school to mentor younger Latino students during a school period of the

day. The goals for the LIA program include service, education, and cultural expression (Latinosinaction.org), and these program goals are evident in the structure of the LIA class.

The essential element of LIA—the students' mentoring service hours—represent the program goals of service and education. The LIA students are trained in becoming "para-educators," where they gain skills in working with and tutoring younger students. Another education piece of this LIA class is the class time used for college preparation. Teachers lead students through scholarship information, understanding of the process of applying to college, and ACT registration and preparation. The cultural component of the LIA class is encouraged through optional, after-school, Latin dance lessons. Some students in the dance classes also choose to perform in various community events.

Qualifications to be a mentor in the program and student in the class include having bilingual skills in Spanish and English, maintaining a minimum 3.0 GPA, and being recommended to the class through a teacher or counselor. This program does not grant automatic entry for all Latino students and is not organized as a group for struggling high school students, unlike other popular peer-tutoring programs. This group represents Latino students who are doing well in school both academically and socially, with their success demonstrated through their GPA and being perceived as having leadership abilities.

Class characteristics. Each school within the LIA program modifies the class for their own school culture and class dynamics. The LIA class I worked with met two to three class periods a week, with students spending the majority of class time in the neighboring junior high and elementary schools mentoring and working with the younger students. In this high school's LIA program, each student was paired up with a younger student or class, with three or more LIA students at each of the four neighboring elementary or junior high schools. The first

26

semester of the LIA in-class time at the high school focused on para-educator training and tutoring while the second semester focused on college preparation. I joined this class and began my observations of high school students and their mentoring during this second semester.

The characteristics of this LIA class presents itself as a group of successful Latino high school students for this narrative research study. Their strong academic abilities and recognition, bilingual skills, and ethnic identification all demonstrate aspects of student success. These students are an interesting group in which to examine the experiences of high achieving Latino students and their perceptions of their academic success.

Participant Characteristics

The participants in this research were Latino students drawn from a particular high school LIA class. I first describe the general LIA class characteristics, and then move specifically to a description of the 12 students I interviewed in depth, and finish with a short description of each of the three LIA students whose stories comprise the material for this narrative analysis. Through my involvement with this LIA class, it became evident to me that there are multiple ways to be a successful Latino student at this high school.

Whole class characteristics**.** I conducted a short demographic survey for more details about the LIA class with the students' wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. This high school's LIA program had 29 Latino students with ages ranging from 15-18. There were 15 boys and 14 girls, and the majority of students were sophomores in the school. Most students from the survey listed "both Spanish and English" as their primary language, while five students identified "Spanish only" as their primary language. Students must be bilingual in both languages to participate in the class, thus the students' language identification can be seen as one marker of their ethnic identity and connection with their culture.

27

While nearly all students were first generation immigrants, students differed in the activities they participated in outside and inside of school, the clothing they wore, their language use and accent. How recently students immigrated also helped characterize social groups within the class. Some students were involved in the school as soccer players or cheerleaders, while others did not participate in any extracurricular school activities. A few students were involved in a community Latino dance group, as a nonschool extracurricular activity. Additionally, many students in the class participated in a school program called "Gear Up," which encourages higher education through activities and programs in schools throughout the community.

Characteristics of the twelve students. The 12 students I chose for formal interviewing were from different social and peer groups represented in the class. From my class time and informal conversations with all of the students, I gained an understanding of these different peer groups. This assisted my choice of which students to interview formally. The 12 students' dates of immigration ranged from their coming to the United States as a baby to immigrating just a few years prior when they were in junior high. All students were first-generation immigrants. Some students were more comfortable interacting with other students and the teacher in this class and in their interactions mentoring.

Characteristics of the three students. Against the themes I found during the initial analysis of the 12 student interviews, I chose three of the student interviews who shared their stories more deeply with me. These stories also held many representative themes from other student interviews. Here are brief descriptions of the three LIA students whose stories and experiences the research focuses on in this paper. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of these students.

28

Selena. Selena is a high school junior who recently moved from a neighboring state with a higher Latino population. Selena has a strong Latina identity and maintains her Latino accent. She dresses fashionably, but with a Latina flair. She was very confident and lighthearted in this LIA class, and was comfortable interacting with all student groups and teachers within the class.

Alexis. Alexis is a high school junior with strong family ties and a strong connection with her Latina roots. She was one of the shyer students in her LIA class, typically only talking to a few students in the class. Alexis was very studious and engaged, but in a more reserved way than her other LIA peers.

Juan. Juan is a high school senior who has been through periods of ambivalence toward school because of involvement with peer groups (gangs) that were antagonistic toward school. He was a powerful and divisive figure in the class, and students either seemed part of his group, or afraid or apprehensive to talk to him. Because of his former and current gang ties and affiliations, teachers and school resource officers would sometimes ask him for information about the status of other students.

Data Sources

Interviews**.** From the class of 29 students, I selected 12 students for formal interviewing. I chose these 12 students for the interesting and diverse stories they shared with me during our informal conversations throughout the semester. I wanted to know a more complete story of their educational lives and experiences through a formal interview. Bogdan and Biklin (1982) warn of "personal effects," that can negatively affect interviewing such as being of a different ethnicity, different age, or an outsider to the group (p. 138). With my position in relation to the LIA students, I minimized these effects through my extended participant observation and by developing a strong rapport throughout the school semester (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

29

While some interviews were group interviews, the majority of the interviews were one-on-one. They began with a few opening questions, and then the interviews flowed to where the students felt most comfortable as they reflected about their academic pathways. I created interview questions to elicit student stories about their perceptions of their school experiences, focused on the ethnic and academic identities of the students as they relate to their community and school experiences. I began the interviews reminding students I was interested in their stories and asked them to share their process or journey of their experiences as an academically successful Latino student at their high school. The interview was framed more as a conversation, and I let the students share their story. Most interviews lasted around thirty minutes, but they vary with one lasting 1.5 hours.

From the 12 interviews, in this paper I chose to focus and share the stories of three students as poignant examples of the diverse and multiple paths to success for Latino students. The three students that I choose to elaborate in this paper all come from individual interviews where students were willing to share deep and personal parts of their lives with me. When I originally coded these particular interviews, they exhibited all of the major themes emerging from the preliminary analysis, but when I focused on the codes and themes rather than stories, the depth of understanding about Latino student success seemed to be lost. I wanted to preserve the student stories as I felt that their stories held considerable power in expressing their experiences as successful Latino students. Taken together, these three stories represent a range of experiences can to success for Latino students in this LIA class.

Participant observation and field notes. During my time with this LIA class, I gathered data through sustained participant observation, field notes, and interviews. Through four months of sustained participant observation, I entered the LIA student space and learned their stories. I

joined the class as an undergraduate student from a neighboring university, and I maintained the clear position that my role was not as a teacher's aide, but as someone interested in the LIA students' stories.

My goal in using participant observation was to understand from the perspective of a Latino high school student what it is like to be academically successful, despite many potential challenges. The majority of my time in the classroom was spent with the students doing student activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). I attended in-class instruction, rode the bus with them to their mentoring assignments, observed their tutoring relationships and behaviors, and had informal conversations with the LIA students throughout the semester. I kept my research goal of wanting to know their experiences as Latino high school students clearly visible to the students during my time with them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). As I consistently spent time with the LIA students during their high school class time, with their mentoring experiences, and attending their extracurricular performances, our rapport grew.

At one point a few students asked if I spoke Spanish and wondered if I was Colombian. But my self-deprecating line, "I'm a white girl from Idaho wanting to know your story," was a point of entry. I was vulnerable and honest about my position and for why I was interested in their story. I wanted to know the ways they balanced being Latino and doing well in school. The numerous informal conversations and activities became opportunities to develop relationships with the students and aided me in selecting students for more in-depth interviewing. After class sessions, I would record field notes of my reflections from our interactions and the stories students shared with me that day.

Narrative Analysis

I recognize my role within the research as a both a medium and a participant in the LIA class. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) describe the created interaction between the interviewer, interviewee, and contextual factors when collecting stories in narrative research. Through me, the students could tell their stories, but I also acknowledge I am a white woman in their space. I represent the three students by providing their background and restorying their experiences so the reader can begin to see their world and gain understanding of these LIA student successes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

Narrative process. My process in analyzing these student stories to answer my research question begins with a holistic reading of the student story (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Within this reading, I will look at the entire story, identifying major events, and craft plot lines in how the major events fit together within their story. I will then use narrative reconstitution to create a narrative for each student maintaining the student perspective by using the student's own words as much as possible. I construct their story based on their words, my field notes, and my experiences with the students, framing their successes and challenges as successful Latino students. During this process I will attend to student language and voice to maintain authenticity (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007).

Limitations. Regretfully, I am no longer in a position to talk with the students in this research study, so I cannot ask them to read over their stories for accuracy or elaboration. However, I seek to establish resonance within the stories (Conle, 1996). Conle describes resonance as a "development of self through interaction with others at an intimate level" (p. 299). In this research, the interview process, with the help of extended participant observation and field notes, assists in creating the in-depth interaction needed to create resonance in the student stories.

This resonance also manifests itself as the stories resonate with each other and with me. This generates credibility and situates these stories as authentic accounts.

Chapter 4:Findings

This chapter showcases the diverse ways that three LIA students talk about their educational journey and experiences. These stories come from in-depth, open interviews that began with guided questions, and then went in areas and directions decided by the students. Specifically, students were asked to share their feelings and thoughts about their own journey through school and how they became successful. Because these students are all first generation immigrants from Mexico, they were asked about the timing and circumstances of their arrival and entrance into school in the U.S. Students were free to share what they felt was most relevant to their educational experiences, including family, community and other social supports.

These three LIA students—Selena, Alexis, and Juan—have distinct stories about the ways they have come to be successful students and their perceptions of that process. Despite the challenges they faced, they each made decisions to be successful in school and found ways they could continue to achieve this success. In the following section, I introduce Selena, Alexis, and Juan, share their stories using their own words and analyze (*in italics*) their storied experiences. My commentary comes from my experiences working as a participant observer with the students for four months during their school year in their LIA class and mentoring. Additionally, my interpretations of their stories are embedded in my knowledge of their experiences from other informal interviews, conversations, and observations. I begin with Selena and her story of location and family comparisons, then move to Alexis and her extreme family ties despite significant past challenges, and finish with Juan and his gang ties and the ways he positions his academic success.

Selena

    Introduction. Selena was a passionate member of the LIA class, a fast talker, very assertive, and respected, but was also warm to everyone and had many friends in the class. Selena had been on the cheerleading team the previous year, one of the few LIA students involved in other extracurricular activities within or outside the school community. When I asked her how she first became involved with LIA, she told me she thought it was MEChA (Movimiento Estudientil Chicana/o de Aztlan), a Latino American advocacy group that fights for Latino rights and seeks to abolish the border between the United States and Mexico. She expressed at first being disappointed with what LIA as a service organization really was, but had since grown to appreciate and support this mentoring program. Selena has high academic aspirations, and wants to study pre-med in college so she can specialize in psychiatry. However, she also understands the financial and academic realities and challenges of enrolling in college. In an informal conversation, she acknowledged her situation that without having U.S. citizenship, she could not afford tuition for college. At the time of our interview, she was planning on working after she graduated from high school to save money for her higher education. She expressed frustration that her younger sister was born in the United States and has citizenship, but is not interested in college. She seemed angry with the United States immigration laws and was frustrated that her name has been in the "pool" for United States citizenship for over ten years.

    Selena's stories are about her transition to Utah and her comparison between experiences in California and Utah, her ethnic identity and her discrimination experiences, differences in language use, her teaches' expectations, cultural differences between California and Utah, her family's education history, and her own expectations for her academic future. Again, the

35

italicized portions within the stories are my research commentary from my participant observation time in the LIA class for four months.

Selena's story. When my family brought me here to the United States, I was eight months; I was still a baby. And when I moved to Utah, I had just turned fifteen. I think I'm just like a little bit more mature than I was over in California and kind of just got my priorities set. They're a lot different than what they were over there. I think maybe I've even grown, because I got to see the difference, and I got to see how people are here and how they were over there.

But it was a really hard transition, moving from California. At first it was— I didn't even want to come here in the first place. Second, it was because when I got here, the lady in the office at my new high school starts talking to me about, "The school used to be nice. There were so many nice people, and all of a sudden it's getting so bad."

And I look at her, and I'm like, "I come from Cali. This is not bad." I'm like, thinking, "What are you talking about? This is nice."

Like when I got here, the house that I'm living in, kids at my school tell me, "Where do you live?"

And I'm like, "Oh, I live right in front of Memorial Park."

And they're like, "Oh, you live in the ghetto!"

I'm like, "That is so not ghetto." I'd be in the music room or something at our junior high. And I'd be like, "My old house—everything would fit in this room. All three houses would fit in this room. That is so not ghetto." There were a lot of things that were different moving from California to Utah. Over in California you speak English, but you can mix it with Spanish, and people know exactly what you're saying. Then I got here to Utah, and I tried doing the same thing and they're like, "I don't speak Spanish." I'm like crying! In Utah, even though we were all

Latino, we had language differences, and that was a hard thing to get used to. That was hard. And my vocabulary, because I had so many slang words that I would use, no one could understand me here. Over there, if you're cussing, it's fine. Nobody cares. You can just do it. You can even do it to the teacher, and they don't care. Then I got here, and every two seconds my teachers were like, "Please don't cuss, please don't cuss." So I had to cut down on the cussing and all of that, and you get used to it. I've changed that, but anything else...I haven't.

I would come home to my mom, and sometimes I'd come home crying and I'd be like, "I don't belong here. I don't fit in here. Like everybody's so…," I would say. "Everybody's so slow." And I'd be like, "They don't even understand what I'm talking about," or something like that. And I'd be like, "Everybody's so close-minded." I had this big old head, like I imagined other stuff that I thought I didn't fit in. But I got to see the difference.

But at the beginning, it was hard. I felt ghetto. That was hard.

Commentary. *Selena shared less information about her immigration story than the other students, who immigrated when they were children while Selena moved to the United States when she was a baby. Perhaps because Juan and Alexis immigrated as children, it was easier for them to recall the experiences and emotions of that transition. Instead of focusing on her immigration story, Selena instead explains her migration from California to Utah. This is clearly important to her academic experiences as she explores her own sense of self as a successful student.*

Selena recognizes the differences between California and Utah with the improvement in home and school quality for her family, but she doesn't fully see or feel the comments others make toward her situation. The school secretary's observation about the demographic shift in the community is not offensive to Selena; she only notices the positive aspects of her new

37

situation with a nicer home and school. Yet Selena expresses frustration at being different from other Latino students. This is especially true in the ways she uses language. Importantly, she is not a language learner in the traditional sense, yet she still struggles to express herself in culturally appropriate ways in this new setting. Selena's description of the vocabulary and language differences between California and Utah are specific cultural markers that make up distinctions between these two communities.

Within these community and cultural differences, she also describes her struggle to transition herself into her new context.

Anyways like the culture, they're all similar. Just being Latino, they're all similar. Everybody's just like, "Your family's first, and this is first. And this comes first," It's all pretty similar. Then when I got here then it was just like this whole, huge transition where over there it's okay to talk about getting pregnant and over there it's okay to talk about condoms and how to wear them. Over there, if you don't know how to put one on, then they'd just make fun of you, because they'd be like, "Well, where were you when you were in 5th grade?" Then when I got here they started talking about stuff, and they started talking to me about abstinence, and I'm like, "What is abstinence?" And I just didn't know. And here, everything revolves around family I guess because of religion. But over there, if you were not religious, nobody cared anyways. And if you went to church, they'd be like, "Are you asking forgiveness because of what you did last night?" They would make fun of it. Here, it's actually like people want to go to church. That was a lot different too.

Commentary. With the two cultural contexts California and Utah provide for her understanding of school, Selena sees the ways things are different in terms of cultural norms with sexuality and religion in her new community. As a Latina she describes a more structured,

religious, and socially conservative norm in Utah compared to her California community. She chooses to share these examples to demonstrate the difficulty she had understanding her new social and geographic location as well as her experiences with other Latinos in her community These differences in social norms and expectations she notices between the two communities could also support her academic success. Selena was faced with many choices in deciding how she fits and acts in her new community.

As an individual still grappling with what it means to be Latina in this new context, she describes the different ways she perceives that Latino students act and coalesce at school.

For the Latino groups at my school here, older Latino students will help you out.

You can ask the older Latino students, "What are you doing now? What do I do next? What am I going to do my junior year? What am I going to do my senior year?"

There's also that whole other group too with the whole, "I just got here to Utah, and I don't speak that much English." It's mostly the girls that just won't talk to the guys that don't speak that much English.

And then there's like my group mostly, those people that came from California, and we're all together now. We kind of kick it. We still act like the way we were over there.

Then there's this whole other group: they came from somewhere else, but they don't fit into the rest, so they just made their own group. It's the whole, "They don't like one of us, so they stick together." So those are the ones within the whole Latino culture.

With my friends, it's mostly like, but also depends, because some Latinos are still like, "Oh it's all about family. You're supposed to get married!" And supposed to do this. But others are kind of more like me where it's just like "No, I'd rather be successful and then I'll think about a family later."

Over there in California, it's more like, everybody's Latino. And everybody, you just assume they're Mexican, because everybody's Mexican. And then after a while, then you're like, "Well, I'm not. I'm actually Puerto Rican. I'm not, I'm actually this," but you just assume. Over here, it starts like race against race, but then you're going to see the whole Latinos get together. It's just a whole different thing.

Commentary. *Selena describes how the peer structure for the Latino community is divided by language, ethnicity, immigration experience, and grade. But unlike the other LIA students in the interviews who experience school peer structure as limiting to their own academic success, Selena is able to navigate the social forces in school without having to conform to what her peers are doing. Selena does not feel forced to choose between her friends and her academics. She articulates a great deal of pride toward her ethnic peer group while still recognizing the tensions and difficulties that she sees within her ethnic community. This perspective comes out of her comparisons of California and Utah that informs her own outsider yet insider position in this community as well as a sense of ethnic pride and identity.*

Everybody I talk to is Latino. I talk to other people, but I don't really. Like, it's kind of those hi-bye sort of things. With the Latinos, it's more like somebody is always looking up to somebody else and even though we're the same age, they're still looking up to you. I found that more when I started helping the class here at Smiths' class. When I would walk in, they'd be like, "Oh the Mexican pride", and then they'd see me. She'd be like "Yay!" You know?

Overall, I don't feel American. Like, I'm kind of like here, but I'm Mexican all the way. I'm a Mexican culture and that's what I do. I'm more Mexican than I am anything. I personally, I don't care. Like I don't. Even if they would look down on me for it, I'd show it. Like I'd wear the

40

Mexican flag if it just makes somebody mad I would wear it. And I don't feel like I have to show anything. Like I know who I am, and as long as I know, that's it, that's all I need, I don't care.

Commentary. Selena's description of her interactions centering with Latino students in her school shows that she clearly identifies with and is happy about her ethnic group. Selena makes strong statements about her ethnic identity, declaring she's not ashamed or worried if everyone knows how strongly she identifies with her Mexican heritage. She does not attribute this ethnic pride specifically to her family, and so we are unable to point to relevant family influences for her ethnic identification. This strong association with her country of origin is particularly interesting given that she came to the U.S. as a baby and has very little experience actually living in Mexico. Selena's confidence with her ethnic identity seems to give her pride and self-assurance that she transfers to other aspects of her life. Although she places herself firmly within the Latino community at school, she is also comfortable interacting with and participating in activities with others from outside this group. She does not need to be validated by others to do well in school. Selena feels like she can make choices about who she is as a student and what she will do in school and her life. This was clearly evident in my observations of Selena at the school. She was active in extracurricular activities, including cheerleading, and although she did articulate some evidence of discrimination, she did not let that stop her from participating in the broader activities at her school.

At times I do experience discrimination here in Utah, but I feel it more not really with me. I think it's more because of the language differences. Because when I most heard about like why people being mean to Mexicans was because, was like with anybody that was new here that couldn't actually speak English. They would make fun of them and that'd just make me mad.

In cheerleading was when I experienced discrimination the most. The other cheerleaders would kind of just would put me in the side or put me in the back or like at the games they would be like, "Oh yeah you're flying today." But once we would do a competition or show it off to the school or something, then they'd be like, "You're going to be a base or a back-spot." And they wouldn't let me fly. That's where I personally experienced it.

The only other discrimination or like separation that I experienced was when I first got here that they were like, "Oh you're from California. You're from Los Angeles." Like you must be a bad person or something. And then afterwards when they saw that I was actually pretty cool and like I wasn't mean like they thought I was. Or because I was a good student. Like the teachers thought I would be a bad student or something. Afterwards they would be like, "Yeah she's pretty smart for being from California," and then that's when they kind of changed. I had to prove myself first and kind of be like, I'm not, I'm not a stereotype.

Since I've moved to Utah, I don't still feel really different from the other students. Ever since I've moved here, there's been a lot of other people who have moved here too. I don't feel that out of place anymore. So the more people come, the more at home I feel. That hasn't changed. I feel better now.

Commentary. Selena's experiences with discrimination are at three levels: her community, her peers and teacher perceptions, and her school activities. She attributes discrimination toward Latinos in her community from language differences between the majority and minority culture. However, she distances herself from this type of discrimination with her proficient English language skills.

Selena's experiences with discrimination in her community seem to be more subtle and interpersonal than community-wide discrimination for being Latina. Selena articulates that she

has more directly faced discrimination with cheerleading and the varied perceptions peers and teachers held for Selena as a Latina from California. Because she is confident with her language skills, she distances herself from what she sees as the cultural discrimination that other Latinos in her community face. Her description of the discrimination she experiences instead focuses on the perceptions others hold of her at school.

Being a Latina from California carried assumptions that she was disrespectful, socially wild, and that she would cause trouble. It is interesting that she feels both teachers and her peers initially held this negative view of her. With these assumptions, she felt she had to prove this stereotype wrong by doing well in school and being involved academically in positive ways. This perhaps could have contributed to her choice to take a positive academic path in her new community.

This third level of discrimination Selena describes was her personal experience with cheerleading. She did not go into details in how this experience changed her feelings or perceptions toward the other girls on her team, as well as not describing if the decision to not have her as a flyer was because of political or ethnic reasons. Selena does not describe the entire circumstance influencing the discrimination in her cheerleading world, but we see that she was frustrated with the inconsistent behavior of her team and that she interpreted this as discrimination. Yet this experience didn't sour or distance her from her involvement in school. Selena was strong enough with her identity to not let this discrimination keep her from being a member of her school community and feeling comfortable participating.

Selena also describes that she now feels a part of her community in Utah. Interestingly, she describes a reason for why she feels included now is at least partially because of the influx of other [Latino] California students rather than acclimating to Utah or completely changing to fit

43

in with the [white] Utah students. Although she describes some of the ways she's changed her behavior to fit in, specifically, her language use, she also does not consider her California identity subsumed or altered by her Utah identity.

Since I went to elementary school over in California, I don't think it would have been such a good idea to get influenced by the high school kids with a program like Latinos in Action. Everybody spoke Spanish and everybody spoke English, so even if you didn't know English, the kids next to you kind of tell you what you're doing and just give you the answers. Maybe if I would have needed the help, then having a Latinos in Action program at my school would have been kind of cool to have somebody that's a little bit older than me come help me, but I also never needed the help either.

But in California you were kind of just told to do what your parents did. Just kind of like, don't look for a role model. Your role model are your parents. That's how the teachers were. It wasn't that whole—"You need this whole influence in your life," like the Latinos in Action program I'm in now.

I thought in California being in school there was a piece of cake, because the teachers don't expect much from you. They're just kind of like, "Do your homework!" Some teachers don't even give you homework because they don't see the point in it. Because they just knew that nobody was going to do it. So it was just kind of, do this and you got your A. The difference between the teachers in California and Utah, I think it's more that since over there in California, kids just don't care anymore. The teachers kind of get into the same attitude. They just want to get you out of there. They're just tired of having kids there. They're tired of the kids just acting up and doing what they want to do anyways. I think here, the kids get more along with the teachers. They kind of let them into what they're doing, and the teachers kind of feel more

involved with the kids. It's just—it just gives them, like the right to care more. And with the whole gangbanging sort of thing—I've seen kids fight with the teachers or fight with the security guards. And actually fight, like fist fight and start rolling on the floor and make each other late.

When I was in California, it was kind of like, I can just not go to school, or I could just do this, or I could just get a job, or just get married. And it wasn't even that whole, "Go to college and finish and do this." Although, teachers in California would tell my mom like, "Oh, your daughter should be going to college." But then I would be thinking, "What's the point?" And once I got here and when I saw where teachers actually cared, then that's when I was kind of like, "This is cool, I can go to college."

Commentary. *Selena again compares California and Utah as she tries to make sense of her educational experiences and why she is successful. She describes not needing the help in school that LIA could provide, which shows her confidence in her academic performance. Yet with her California academic experiences, she perceives her California teachers encouraging complacency and leveled aspirations for Latino students. She recognizes the social capital LIA can provide students who do not have examples of educational success in their own lives for students in Utah.*

Selena's turn around in school came as she perceived teachers caring about her future and her academic success. Selena praises her Utah teachers, but does not directly share stories of how they influenced or helped her. She recalls her California teachers recommending college in her previous school, but it seems she did not believe her teachers or buy into the benefits of pursuing education past high school. We do not know what specific actions made the difference for her change in perception, but Selena talks generally about better expectations teachers held for students. She also notices a change in student perceptions of their teachers caring about their

success. This could be related to the smaller or more recent Latino population in this community and the relatively higher SES of the school and neighborhood.

Selena then describes the ways her family provides her supports, yet also the stresses that arise from the expectations they hold for her and the comparisons that frequently arise.

My family are the ones that are more expectant of me to be successful and make that money and go to college. They want to show me off to the rest of the family, because I'm actually doing it. All my other cousins already have their families, and they didn't even finish school. It's more of a pressure sort of thing as in you're supposed to be the best. I don't feel this pressure from school. From school, everybody wants to be successful. Everybody is just, they're happy just going to school. But for my family, that's where I feel pressure the most. From them I feel like everything I do, every achievement I do, everything. Though every time they get together as a family, then they'll start showing off.

"Oh well Selena's doing this, and Selena's doing that."

Yeah, "Really your daughter did this? Well, Selena did this."

The pressure to do well is more from my family. Kind of like...well, they would just call and be like, "Remember your cousin, your cousin Anna? Yeah, she just had her baby. She didn't even finish. Did you know that? She didn't graduate. You're graduating, right?" And it's just like questions like that. It would be like, "Oh Julio, Julio already, his baby's born, yeah his girlfriend's your age did you know that?" All my other cousins already have their families, and they didn't even finish school. For me, it feels like it's more of a pressure sort of thing as in you're supposed to be the best, and you have to leave everybody behind.

Commentary. While her immediate family supports her decision to do well in school, Selena also views their support as a way to show her off. Selena recognizes that she can choose different priorities of school and career rather than the typical routes and expectations for Latinas. This marks a powerful shift from fatalism to control with her education and future.

Additionally, she explains the pressure to achieve also includes the pressure to leave other aspects of her life behind. Selena feels both pressure and support from home. She does not give specific examples to how her family supports her, but she knows that her family expects her to succeed. However, within this network of family support, she feels a constant comparison between her extended family's traditional paths and her diversion from the family or cultural path.

With her new mindset that college is something she can do, Selena rejects the traditional expectations for Latina women. She expresses her desire to first be successful in school and career, and then focus on family, instead of following the expectation to immediately get married after high school. Selena's courage to go a different path seems to come from her resilient identity, where she is confident with both her academic and ethnic identity.

With her extended family in mind, she reflects on the educational attainments of her aunts and uncles and where she fits in her family's educational paths.

With the women in my family, there have been others with education, but I'm one of the first to actually go to college, like actually want to go, since the family moved to the US. Because in Mexico, my mom's sister—the first one, the first born—she didn't. She barely even finished high school in Mexico. And then the second born, she went into accounting and doing all that and so she actually has a degree in that, but it's just like she never worked in it. She worked in it in Mexico, and when she got here she went into cosmetology. And my mom is the

third born, and my grandparents didn't let her finish because that's when she had me. And my uncle, he graduated barely. He was one of the first ones to graduate here in America and he didn't go, he didn't go to college; he has, I don't know if it's degree or certificate or something, in being able to make glasses. But the oldest aunt and the second born, and the youngest one—my other aunt is the youngest one—they all went into cosmetology together and they have their own salon and that's the furthest education that they got.

My other aunt, she graduated with honors from high school and all of that, but she let my grandma keep her back because my aunt wanted to go into majoring in dance, in folk dance, and they didn't let her. My grandma said that that was an unrealistic future and that she had nothing to do with that, that that just wouldn't make her any money. And so my aunt decided just not to go to college.

My grandpa's family in Mexico, most of them are doctors or pediatricians, but I'd probably be the first one here to go to college here and finish here. I'm kind of nervous to go to college because I know my family is going to be expecting, they're just going to keep expecting a lot from me to be able to show it all off. But then again I'm also kind of excited because I just have like this whole plan of what I want to do, and another part of the nervousness comes from where am I going to get the money to pay for it because I still need to figure that out.

Commentary. Within Selena's extended family, there is a network and legacy of higher education in Mexico, but as a Latina in the United States, she is taking a new direction in her family. She describes her path as "actually wanting to go," compared with the way she portrays her aunts as women who chose more "typical" Latina occupations once they came to the United States. She seems to view herself as someone with more potential and interest in education than the rest of her family. Her excitement and nervousness with the prospect of college also shows

her maturity in understanding the financial realities and responsibilities associated with college. With Selena's decision for college and choosing school, she also recognizes that she is walking down a path that is different than many other girls in her family and ethnic group.

When I wonder if I could have been a pregnant teen, I don't feel—at first I felt like, "Yeah that could have been me." Because in high school over there it's not rare to see girls walking around with their tummy and it's not even looked down upon. It's like "Oh how cute! You have your belly!" And everybody's rubbing your belly and everything, and then you kind of do things like, that could have been me. That could have been me—just without a future. I was just going to finish high school and that's it. And so it seems to me, pregnant girls only go to school while they're pregnant. As soon as that baby's born you never see them again, unless you see them in the street or something, which is kind of rare. They just won't come out anymore. And so at first I was just like, "That could have been me," like I could have just had that baby right now and like not even know who the daddy was, because some girls are like that too. But then afterwards I was just like "No." When I got here and I kind of set my priorities straight I'd just be like, "Okay, that's what they chose, I didn't choose that." Like, I know what I want and I didn't choose that and now it's more like, "They chose this life, and I'm choosing this one and just don't tell me that I have something to do with them. They're just focused on their family. Okay, I'm happy for them, but this is what I chose." And so it's more like separated from them.

Commentary. Selena previously mentioned in her story that she wanted to prove she was not a stereotype. This again comes up as she describes the path of being a pregnant teen many Latina girls she knew in California took. Selena actively chose to not be a part of the assumed Latina role she saw many of peers in California and family members typically take. She describes wanting to have a career and eventually a family, but to choose school now for herself

rather than become involved in early family responsibilities. Her feelings of connection with school and teachers in Utah appear to be major part of her new motivation and desires for this departure from her family and peer norms and achievement in school.

We know she has a strong Mexican, ethnic identity despite of her limited time living in Mexico. This strength could come from the contrast of Selena being in a minority group within her new community. But her learned behaviors of being in a majority ethnic group in southern California could also influence and strengthen her ethnic pride and identity.

Selena admits feeling better with other California students around. These positive feelings could come from more California Latinos having a bigger vision and an outsider perspective from being a transplant into the Utah community. Perhaps this provides greater perspective and pride for being Latino than experienced by some of the other Latinos in the Utah community.

Conclusion. The majority of Selena's interview revolves around family expectations, the transition from moving from California to Utah as a teenager, and the interplay between school achievement and the meanings attached to that success for both her and her family. She describes being different from her extended family and feeling she has to leave her family behind as she achieves academically. Selena also acknowledges the support she feels in Utah versus the lack of direction or investment from her school experiences in California. She knows and can articulate the different Latino peer group cultures of her Utah high school.

Selena's story is one of being fiercely Latina, but also having a strong desire to achieve academically. She seeks to find her place as a Latina in her Utah community as she compares her Utah experiences with her California upbringing and the expectations she internalized from her previous school. Selena recognizes the cultural differences between the two places and a

50

repeated thought throughout her story was that she did not want to be a stereotype or thought of as "ghetto." Perhaps her transition to Utah made cultural differences more evident and she wanted to fit into her new community. Part of this effort was Selena's change in attitude toward and performance in school. She also holds a stronger academically successful identity in Utah than when in California. Selena's reasons for this change include increased supports in school and making the decision to reject the bad-kid, California stereotype label she received when she moved to Utah.

Selena was one of the most eloquent and assertive Latina girls in the LIA class during my time there. Perhaps her California upbringing from being in the ethnic majority at her school to being an ethnic minority in Utah solidified what made her different and strengthened her concept of her own ethnic identity. As she chooses her academic identity, she does not feel her peers interfere with her success. Instead, she feels both support and pressure from her family, specifically the comparisons she receives from her extended family. Selena experienced early school success, which is another factor that strengthened her academic and ethnic identity.

Selena chooses school in a way that academically surpassed the way many of her former California classmates and her extended family pursued school. She sees and rejects the path of becoming a pregnant teen and dropping out of school; Selena instead felt desires to achieve academically, even at the cost of feeling she was leaving others behind. Selena's shift in thinking in her life —from fatalism to choice—appears in the ways she adjusts to her new life in Utah as well as seeing new paths she could pursue as a Latina student. Selena now recognizes she has increased career and educational opportunities for her future and believes that as a Latina, she can do more than what could be culturally expected of her. Selena successfully manages

maintaining and strengthening her ethnic identity alongside her academic success and provides a portrait of Latina student academic success.

Alexis

Introduction. Alexis has an incredibly family-centered identity and is strongly attached to her immediate family in specific ways. This differs significantly from Selena who is less specifically family-focused. Alexis credits her achievements coming from the support and guidance of her family and teachers, and does not attribute her achievements in school to her own efforts and desires. Her loyalty and attachment to her family is evident in the ways she prioritizes her family's needs before her own in the choices she makes. Her parents—and their sacrifices for the family—drive her motivation to do well in school. As we will see in her story, Alexis was separated from her parents for several years when she was young. She and her siblings lived with a neighbor in Mexico while her parents built their family's future in the United States. From this early separation experience, she seems very affected in maintaining close loyalties to her family and her identity is within the context of her family.

Alexis' descriptions of her success acknowledge both her future and her past, but in many ways do not focus on her own path. She wants to honor and help her family, but does not appear to see herself independently from her family. Alexis seeks to set an example for her younger siblings and to respect her parents' past and current sacrifices for the family's welfare. Alexis says for her main support, she chooses her family over her friends. In contrast to Selena's story, Alexis views her peers as an influence that will lead her away from doing well in school. During informal conversations, Alexis described her family as very strict—she was rarely allowed to spend time with friends—but seemed to completely agree with her parents' decisions.

In the LIA class, Alexis was more shy than Selena when it came to her interactions with classmates and teachers. She seems to spend time with the quiet students in the class, and it is not

clear which LIA student or group she is closest with. In the LIA class and with her tutoring responsibilities, Alexis is very respectful and hard working. The teacher of the class she mentors in the local elementary school praised the care and discipline she showed her mentor student and the positive ways she helped all students in the class.

Themes and elements of Alexis' story include her strong family bonds, her separation story, her adjustment to the United States and school, her ethnic identity, stresses with translating and language in her family, perceptions of her family and school, future aspirations, and her own experiences and witnessing others' encounters with ethnic discrimination. Again, the italicized portions within the stories are my research commentary which includes information I gained through my four months of participant observation time in the LIA class.

Alexis' story. I'm glad I moved to the United States from Mexico. Over there we suffered a lot and there were a lot of things going on. We didn't face violence where we lived, but my father's family…they didn't like my mother. So, they didn't agree when they got married. And here in Utah, it's just my family and my grandpa. That's it. There's nobody else in Utah. We don't really do things with other Latino families; it's only with our family. We just do it by ourselves. Because I mean, everybody treats everybody different. We just come from different places and we were raised differently so we see things different from others.

It was actually my parents' choice to move to Utah. When they came from Mexico they decided to live here in Utah. So, they have more time living here because they left us over in Mexico for four years. We were living with some neighbors, even though we had our own house and everything, but they would take care of us. When my mom came there were only like six. She left six children over there. The family that was taking care of us only had two children so it wasn't as hard I think. My parents did get settled and everything in the United States, but when

they went for us, passing the border, their money got stolen and everything, so they couldn't bring us. Because they were going to have a hard time with the gas and everything, they had to come back to the United States. They were between the border, and so since the money got stolen and everything, there wasn't a way for us to come with them. And since we were six, they were going to spend more than usually, so they decided to come back to the United States. They waited for a long time until they got the money, and then went to get us. I was three when my parents left and they brought us here when I was seven. It was weird because when we saw them for the first time, I was like who are they? They looked totally different to me and I just didn't call them dad or mom for a long time until I got used to it.

Commentary. *A central feature of Alexis' story is the four-year separation from her family she experienced as a young child. The antipathy of her extended family toward her parents also influenced the unusual experience of living with neighbors during her separation from her parents. Alexis seems happy to be living in the United States and reunited with her parents rather than living in Mexico. Alexis is very aware of the overall struggle her parents and siblings experienced bringing her family to the United States, and their sacrifice influences her academic decisions.*

It appears her parents did not move to the United States with any support group in place to assist in the transition; rather, her parents first built the network, and then brought the rest of the family. Because Alexis recognizes the family tensions that existed in Mexico and the chance for a new start in the United States, this acts as a motivation to do well in school. Alexis' stories show the strong respect she feels for her parents and the trust and confidence she has in them, despite this extremely disruptive event of extended separation.

At home we speak Spanish only, so my parents don't know English. We speak Spanish only in my family because since we have more little ones, my mom wants them to learn Spanish too. So she knows that they're going to learn English in school, so it's easier for us too to speak Spanish at home. My parents do understand English, but they don't know how to speak it. They prefer to work in a Hispanic job or in certain place where they speak their language, so my parents don't look for jobs where they require English. So we have to translate for all of them the whole time. When we have some stuff that my mom needs to fix, or like the rent, or the gas— because there are sometimes when they charge her more than usually. When that happens, my mom, she tells us to call or to go with her and see what happened and stuff. It's a big thing and it is stressful being responsible translating because I'm always like bragging and I'll admit it. I think my parents should learn English. I'm like, they should learn it too even though they don't want to, but they should. It's actually harder for them right now. For us it's not that hard. Because my parents didn't go to school, they weren't really around school or around people who actually spoke English. And so since we were little when we learned English, we didn't had a hard time. I will say it that way.

What makes my family different from other families is, in my family, we have good communication. We communicate with each other a lot. If there's like a problem or someone who's dealing with a certain situation, we just talk over it, and we decide what's better to do. I think that if one person just gives their own opinion or does something like that, I think that it's not going to work. Because in the family, since we've always been together, it would be different if someone just does something by themselves. I don't know, we would just feel that the communication that we had is just actually, living apart, if someone would do that.

Commentary. Alexis describes her family and home life in terms of family pride and loyalty, and she does not see herself separately from her family. Alexis views herself within the context of her family and not as an independent agent. Her successes are for the benefit of the family, and she takes on the role of cultural broker as she assists with translating. She is able to navigate their new community while she uses her English skills and other successes to benefit her family.

Alexis' mother assumes her children will learn English at school, and she maintains the family's ethnic culture by speaking Spanish in the home. The tension of desires Alexis feels between wanting her parents to learn English and also protecting them shows the boundaries of her independence. Alexis briefly comments on the ease for she and her siblings learning English because they were young, and protects her parents' decision and situation of not knowing English. Her parents remain in a framework of sacrifice, the children benefit from that sacrifice, and in turn, help the family with their knowledge.

The extreme loyalty within her family was most likely instigated by the period of separation between parents and children. Alexis' words that describe always being together, and not doing things for oneself, shows her family solidarity. She views her family in a team-focused context, one that works together and not independently.

Becoming this cultural broker took a few years of struggle in the school system, and her quick transition to her new context was most likely motivated by her desire to help her family.

When I came here, I felt totally different from everything. I had to adjust to a new life. I came to Utah and the United States in second grade. When we came here, well the thing is, that I should have been in third grade, not in second grade. So since I didn't know English and

everything like that, they put me to second grade instead of third grade. And it was actually hard because my first day of school, I remember that students would look at me and I thought they were like talking about me. Or anything, like, um, because I actually didn't understand English, so I was like, what are they saying? So I just felt weird. Regular school started at 8 and then ended at 2:15, but after that I would have ESL class so it would go from 2:15 to 3:30. But it didn't help a lot though. I think it was better being around other people instead of being in just a Hispanic or Latino group because you actually didn't learn a lot. You learn better just being by the same people. I wish actually that my school did have a tutoring LIA program when I first came to America, because it would have not been that hard. I would have understood things better. But I don't feel weird in school anymore. I think it was around third or fourth grade that I felt more normal.

Commentary. Her early school experience in the U.S. was hard and alienating. Alexis initially was afraid people were talking about her when she didn't understand English in her class, and this fear was a contributing force that motivated her desire to do well in school. She wanted to quickly fit in and join her community, and with this knowledge, she could understand and navigate the system. We see in Alexis' critique of the way she learned English that she did not wish for more comfort in school or gain a community with her ESL class. She instead wished to learn English as quickly as possible. Learning quickly could also help her family.

As she explains her perceptions of discrimination and how she fits into her community and school, she establishes herself as an outsider, protected by her family.

There is a lot of unjustice things that happen to Latino people. There was like a lot of unjust things that I've seen the police officers or any person do. I would see a police officer do

something that it wasn't fair for us for Hispanic people. I just see it that way because, just, they don't treat us equal. I want to study criminal justice in college. I just want to defend my ways and help the people that are my race and help the people. I don't know, I just appreciate my race and they shouldn't treat it that way, so everybody should be treated equal.

Not offending anybody, but I feel more Mexican than American. It's not because of respect or anything, but I don't do the pledge of allegiance. There's some things that I just actually don't like about America. In my family, everybody is acting more "Mexican," or "Hispanic," than "American." I would prefer the term "Hispanic" over "Latino" because "Latino" is just like...I don't know how to explain it, but I think "Hispanic" would be better than just a "Latino" or a "Latina." And to tell you the truth, I don't have a lot of white friends. All my friends, they're all Hispanic people. I just don't think that they would really understand. I don't know why. They are totally different from us so I don't think that I would fit with an American friend. I'll just say it that way.

Commentary. *Alexis' aspirations for college relate with the discrimination she has experienced and witnessed in her community. Her desires to take on a powerful role to defend her ethnic group through legal means shows a way she distances herself from her immediate social group. Instead of forming close personal connections with her Latino peers, she wants power at the legislative level. Alexis wants to advocate for Latinos, but does not have a personal connection with her Latino community.*

Alexis' language is somewhat defensive as she exerts her ethnic identity. She creates boundaries by saying what she doesn't do as a way to separate herself from the majority culture and her peers. The way Alexis describes not fitting in with an American peer is another way she

is distant from the majority culture. Yet in many ways, she also remains distant from her Latino peers.

With Latinos at my school, I've noticed that since there's LIA students and ESL students, I just see them apart from each other. It's not the same group that it used to be. Like ESL students, they're in their own group and LIA in their own group, and so they don't interact anymore like they usually did. So I just don't like it. I think that the program should be to everybody, not to one person or some certain persons who have 2.0 or good a GPA. I think it should be open to everybody. For my friend groups, I actually do have friends who are in ESL, and I have two friends in LIA. Basically it's hard for me to choose too, because if I go to one group, then the other one leaves. And it seems like if they get mad or they don't understand what's going on. So I just decide not to decide which group.

Most of my friends don't do well in school. They don't really support me. Well, they do make fun of me. They're like,

"Oh yeah the smarty one,"

or

"the nerd or…"

And so I'm like, it's not that I'm a nerd or the smart one, it's because I want to have good grades and I want to be someone in this life. And so they're like, but we want to do the same thing! And I'm like, it all depends how they look. Their point of view of whether they should do good in school or whether they shouldn't. Do you know what I mean? I don't know, it's just different. They've encouraged me to slough or not enter at a class, or I don't know, but I'm like, I'm not going go to do that, or it's not my thing to do it. And yeah, they've gotten mad with me and everything, but I mean, what they do and if they get mad with me or if they don't understand

59

they're actually not true friends so I just don't listen to them. I wouldn't say my friends are my support group. Ha ha, no.

Commentary. *Within her relationship with her school peers, Alexis finds divisions within the Latino population between the two Latino-focused school programs of those learning English and those tutoring in LIA. Socially, she is torn between these groups, yet she also seems to reject close relationships with her friends. Alexis fears her peers threaten her academic progress. It seems that she relates more with the Latino students learning English, and does not want to leave them behind when she takes on other academic opportunities, including the LIA class. This relates with the way she does not want to leave her family behind or her family to leave her. Alexis does not allow her friends to turn her away from school because she is so strongly insulated and supported by her family.*

If a kid decides to focus more on school or do good in school, it's because their parents are encouraging them. And because they've gone through things that they would like others to do the same thing. But let's just say a mother who came from a family who really didn't care school, who didn't care about education, or what they wanted to be in life, then I know they are not going to encourage their kids. So I think that the kids just need someone to be with them and encourage them to do good in school and graduate.

What motivates me—first thing—in school, it's my parents and my brothers. I want to give my brothers the example because they're little, and if I actually do a good job, I know they're going to do the same thing. They want to probably graduate from high school, go to college, and be someone important if I do it. And my parents, they just want to make sure that we do good in school and graduate. It's something that they actually didn't had the opportunity because they weren't able to do it. And it makes me think that if they didn't do it, I need to do it.

60

For me it's a huge responsibility too, because if I do it, it's like if my mom or my dad is doing it. I just feel that way. With my other siblings, there was two boys who graduated and two girls didn't. So they just thought that school was hard and everything, but they really didn't focus on school. They started working at an early age and so I think that the money was the one who decided. They were so much in money and so basically it took them to drop school. In my family, I'll be the first girl to graduate from high school and that makes me feel good, even though I would have liked that my other sisters would have done it too.

Commentary. Alexis' motivations for her academic success center on her family and the responsibility she feels to her parents and siblings. She feels the responsibility to succeed as a way to honor her parents' sacrifices for the family. Alexis describes pursuing her academic achievements as honoring and acting on behalf of her parents and their lack of academic opportunities. When she reflects on her sisters who did not graduate, she does not seem sympathetic to their decision to not pursue school. Yet as the first female to graduate in her family, she quickly deflects her pride in this accomplishment to wishing that success on her entire family. Additionally, she does not specifically explain the ways her family supports her, but she implies that her family encourages and cares about her education.

In addition to her family, Alexis also acknowledges the contributions teachers made in her life. She also recognizes the ways teachers can hold back other Latino students.

After I graduate from high school, I want to go to college, and graduate in criminal justice. Next year, I'm taking concurrent enrollment college classes at my high school, and I'm nervous because I won't have a teacher right in front of me in person, so it's going to be a little

bit different. Because it's my teachers are the ones who support me in the decisions that I take. Decisions that I take in school, it's them who help me.

But sometimes it seems like some teachers have like, they care more for a certain person than they should care for everybody else. It's like, um, she gives more attention to the person that it seems that she likes more. Other students are noticing too and so they just might feel, "Oh, I don't belong in this place." If the teachers don't have enough patience with them—and the things that the kids need is patience because it takes them a while to understand some stuff. But the teachers should understand too that it's not that easy.

Commentary. Alexis describes the support she receives from her teachers, but also notices the way her teachers do not treat all students fairly at times. This connects with her feelings of justice and wanting to be an advocate for the Latino community. Alexis sees the ways teachers have supported her, but notices the times teachers have not assisted other Latinos. She recognizes her support systems for her success are made up of a strong family and concerned teachers, and that other Latino students do not have these same advantages.

Her ability to distinguish the sources of support for the different directions in her life shows where Alexis places her loyalties and respect. She knows her family does not have the experience to help her navigate the U.S. school system, so she trusts her teachers' knowledge and support with her school decisions. With other, non-school decisions in her life, Alexis says she chooses her family for advice. These different sources that influence her life could come from her family's limited English skills and knowledge of the United States school system and their new community. She trusts her family to support her, but she also trusts her teachers and their ability to help her succeed academically.

Conclusion. Alexis' pathway of success is influenced by the support she receives and feels from her family as well as her immense loyalty to her family. A unique aspect of Alexis' story is her experience being separated for several years from her parents. Despite this separation, she is incredibly close and loyal to her family. The trauma of this event may have solidified these strong ties to her family. Her loyalties are to her immediate family, and she has little connection to her extended family because of past family conflicts. These two aspects of separation and extended family conflict seem to solidify her loyalties and connection to her immediate family.

Alexis has strong academic aspirations and we see that her college desires are motivated by her observations of unjust treatment toward Latinos in her community. She views her education as an opportunity and a responsibility to help Latinos generally, but more specifically and strongly, she sees that her success can help benefit her parents and younger siblings. To achieve this success, Alexis acknowledges the supports she receives from her teachers in school that influenced her academic success. Caring teachers helped her make decisions for her future where her parents did not have the knowledge and experience within this school system to support or advise her educational aspirations.

A significant school event that seemed to motivate Alexis' later academic successes was feeling like an outsider in school when she first moved to the United States. Her rapid transition to school success and quickly learning English came from fearing people were talking about her in a language she did not understand. Even after being in this community for several years, Alexis remains distant from her peers; she sacrifices and chooses her academic success over forming close social connections. She has chosen a successful path in school, and we know that her choice is extremely motivated by her commitment to her family's success. Her story is not about her own personal achievement, but about the achievement of her family and community.

Each decision in her path toward academic success is tied back to helping her family navigate and succeed.

Juan

  Introduction. Juan's pathway toward academic success centers on his perceptions of being independent and maintaining respect. His story reflects his deliberate distancing from his family members and peers so he can pursue school for himself. Juan shares the experiences that display the ways he lives a double life: his gang life and his own path. Juan is involved in gang life, but uses his position as an advisor within the gang to gain a form of independence that allows him to pursue his academic ambitions. His story holds the tension between these two worlds, and he displays power and helplessness throughout his story.

  Juan was a socially powerful, Latino male in his LIA class and in the school. He could joke around with students in the class, but he also kept himself apart from the group. He describes himself as a leader in the school, and I saw the ways other Latino males spoke to him with respect in the hallway as we walked down to our interviewing room. I perceived Juan as enthusiastic, articulate, and able to maintain a strong ethnic identity and pride through the way he dressed and spoke. I was initially nervous approaching Juan for an interview, but he ended up sharing the most personal information of all the interviews, with high levels of self-disclosure. It was an emotional conversation and we both cried at some point during the interview. Juan's aspirations for academic success defy the expectations most people in his life would assume for him, specifically in the ways he says he challenges the norms of gang membership. He also defies the stereotypes embedded in the powerful, gangster persona that he carries. His storied experiences reflect an exceptional and surprising story of a successful Latino student despite his family circumstances and pathway.

I begin his story with his assertion of the importance of achieving respect; his personal focus on achieving respect influences the majority of the way he shapes his story as he pursues academic success. He effortlessly shares stories of his family, gang involvement, school aspirations, struggling with living a double life, perceptions of his community and discrimination, and articulates a strong fatalism overall toward his life experiences. Again, the italicized portions within the stories are my research commentary including my participant observation time in the LIA class for four months.

Juan's story. My life showed me, you get respect or you take it away. You get what you want, and you get it however you want. I don't know how to explain it. I'm the leader. Like if you haven't noticed, everybody looks up to me at Latinos in Action. All the Latins, everybody looks up at me just because they know who to go to if they need something. But it's mostly because of my...like I demand respect, and I give a lot of respect.

Commentary. Juan reveals the high value he places on achieving and maintaining respect in every aspect of his life. Juan's academic and school aspects of his story seem to use respect as a way to become a leader. His success as a leader comes from the way he demands and gives respect.

Juan also identifies the differences in power and respect between different sides of his extended family.

My family is really powerful, and I always grew up with a lot of people looking after me and telling me—like I would walk into a store or anywhere, I'd go with all of this pride. Everybody knew who I was and who my family was. So ever since I was little, I was raised like, you're the best. You come from a strong family. Then we came to the United States, because my dad and my mom felt like it was getting too dangerous, because in Mexico, like our family works

for the government. Our family is lawyers and doctors. We own one of the biggest houses in Mexico City, so we kind of walk with our heads held up high and our last name known.

But my dad was afraid that I was going fall into danger in Mexico. The government in Mexico is corrupt. It's killing it's own people. Like we've seen it. We know it. So my dad's kind of like, you know Juan...I want America. Let's just try that. We have everything in Mexico. Except my mom's side is in the United States, so it was two different families. When we came down here to Utah from Mexico, my mom's side just kind of like, we were always...they were kind of like, the gangsters. So I fell into that. When we came down here, my mom didn't really know my uncles were in gangs. Didn't know where we were coming from, what was going to happen. Thought United States, oh my gosh! Perfect! My mom...like the girls of the family shouldn't know anything. It's just, the men of the family know the stories. The girls, they shouldn't know any.

Commentary. *Juan's two sides of the family have different routes of power and respect. His father's side of the family had power through legal channels in Mexico, with high levels of education influencing their high achievement. His mother's side of the family has power in the United States through illegitimate channels of gang involvement. This duality of routes to power and gaining respect in his family life is evident throughout Juan's story. He chooses gang life and school success as his two different paths toward power. His family left Mexico because it was becoming too dangerous, but there were also dangers and threats in the United States. Juan's mother's family's gang connections were the routes to power that came with threats and violence.*

Juan's descriptions of walking with his head held high in Mexico demonstrates growing up with a strong sense of pride and identity that was evident in the classroom and in the

decisions he makes in his life. Yet he is not explicit about specific ethnic behaviors or ethnic pride he practiced or was reinforced by his family; I think these ethnic characteristics were already such a large part of his life he felt he didn't need to explain or mention them. Or perhaps he did not view his ethnicity as a separate part of his life.

Juan then explains the role of family, loyalty and education.

My dad, he was the one that suffered to get my uncle through high school, to get him to college. My dad didn't go to school. He was smart, like my dad is intelligent, just because he's done things, known things, you know, in Mexico, to get them where they are today. When we got here, we had to be in the gang, just because we were raised like that. One of us two had to go, even both of us. With me and my brother, it's not that we're really close. It's just...I have to take care of my brother. Family first. But with me, my family was my gang. And they will always be like that. I had to get to the top, so my brother doesn't have to go through what I went through. My brother stays out of this. He knows I've done things. He doesn't know what I've done, how I've done, he doesn't know why I've done, like, you know, for him. I love my brother. I will die for him. He's the only reason keeping me alive, because I have to make sure he keeps going. My brother's path went this way, and my path went this way. I started pushing him away. I put my family through hell. I couldn't really tell them why. But I've gone through hell and back, so that my brother doesn't have to be a gangster. But if I could start my life over, I would do it all over again. Because I know I did the best thing for my brother. He doesn't appreciate it, he doesn't show it, but it's okay. I don't need him to appreciate what I'm doing for him.

Commentary. Juan follows his father's example of sacrificing for his sibling's academic success. In his family, he is shown that in order to maintain power, you must pursue education and sacrifice for your family's success. Juan loves his brother and this love is manifest in the

ways protects his brother from the gang life he lived. While Juan describes a break in trust with everyone around him, he feels an intense responsibility to protect his brother. However, he also stays emotionally distant from him. Juan describes his relationship with his brother in greater detail than the other students' stories. This mixture of wanting to be the protector but also feeling love for his brother is another example of the complexity of power and helplessness in his life.

Juan then explains his views of discrimination in his community in a way that is resigned but also defiant in defending his culture.

I miss Mexico just sometimes because of the beaches, you know. Not worrying about people saying, "Mexican," just because over there we're all Mexican. But Mexican people here also compare themselves. "Oh where are you from? Oh Mexico City. Oh this and that," you know? "Where are you from?" You know, just different things. I don't know. I could care less. In my community, the whites, they're just not used to change. They hear it from their parents, dang Mexicans. They hear it, they don't really think it. And you know, most of them do just because maybe just, you know, just maybe they got a bad experience. You have to think that too. Maybe Mexican hit him, or maybe they raped them, you know. Just you have to understand that. People have their own opinion from experience, or just from hearing it. Seen it on TV, hearing it from their bishops you know. You can't just judge somebody just because they call you a Mexican. So? So what? I am. What are you going to do about it, you know?

Commentary. *Juan sees himself separately from the discrimination in his community and speaks from the perspective of both the Latino and majority communities. He seems frustrated that the Latino community ranks themselves according to their past lives and accomplishments instead of embracing the new community and their new lives. In Juan's present community, he*

notices and explains the tensions between the established and the new communities with a perspective of the majority culture that is somewhat resigned. It is resigned in the way he makes it seem like that's the way it's always been, and to not be upset about the treatment. Yet Juan also asserts his ethnic identity by defending his ethnicity if someone calls him Mexican as an insult. This combination of resignation and defiance toward the discrimination shows the ways he understands the established system in his society but he also holds pride and desires to defend his ethnicity.

While Juan explains discrimination at a community level, he views his support for his success as fiercely independent from any other source but himself.

My support group's myself. I was never handed anything. I had to work from the bottom. Now I have whatever I want. But I remember all the sacrifice I did, all the people I lost, all the things I've gone through, and it sucks. Why am I going to depend on somebody else to make me feel better? You know you can help them, you just can't depend on them. I don't trust anybody; the only person I trust is me. It's hard for me to put it. If you put feelings into everything, you get hurt. So with me, I killed my feelings a long time ago. Started numbing them with drugs, drinking, beating on people. Because I thought it was my therapy, and I had so much aggression in me that I needed to get it out somehow. Like you have to show yourself, you have to believe in yourself more than anybody in order to be better. At the same time, I control my own life, you know.

Commentary. *Juan asserts that he is his own person, that he is independent, and that no one else influences his success. He experiences chaos from his gang ties while having aspirations for a different life, and copes by staying distant and independent from his peers and family. Juan's lack of trust toward the people around him could also come from feeling betrayed.*

Juan's earlier assertions of achieving respect could connect with his desires of helping others, but not relying on them. He feels intense pressure to take care of others, but does not want anyone to take care of him. These are power relationships, and if he is dependent on someone else, he has less control. Rather than relate or trust those around him, Juan turned to drugs and violent acts. Yet he views all of his behaviors as ways to maintain an independent pathway for control and success in his life.

I started changing my life, and in 10th grade I was trying to like...you know, maybe I can go to school and do good. But I was like, I'm living a double life...you know, just school and gangsters. So it was like that. I started feeling things, just kind of like when my dog passed away, I started thinking Juan, you can't be doing double lives. You can't. Even until now, I've just barely started saying, I used to smoke. I used to do drugs. It's kind of since that little incident with my dog happened, I quit. I quit everything—drinking—everything. You know because it wasn't leading out anywhere good. Trust me, addiction is really hard to get rid of.

Like I'll never be out of a gang. It'll never be that way. Like you don't leave a gang life. You leave it in a box, and that's the only way you're getting out. There's many leaders in our gang, and it's just unfortunately, I'm one of them. I don't do much. I still get my money. That's why I have so many cars. I have such nice things, That's why I walk with my head held up high, because I can do whatever. School for me honestly would be a waste of time right now, just because I'm making money without doing anything. Right now, I just barely got a job and it was Burger King, because I was sick and tired of taking money. It's not much; it's twice as hard when it's honest. Before I would make whatever I'd make, and then two weeks, I'd make it in one night, couple hours, couple minutes. Now it's just hard, just to think, "This is honest."

Commentary. Juan admits to living a double life, and he recognizes that his desires to stop living this way will come with a cost. Juan is struggling to figure out how to control his dual identity. When he tried repressing his feelings and stay powerful with his gang life, he knew he couldn't continue managing these conflicting paths. This tension prompted his desires to change his path. Juan knows the risk and problems with gang life, but he also catalogs how gang life benefits him. His decision to pursue honest, hard work shows his desire and his steps toward entering mainstream society, but he has many connections to gang life that keep him tied to that world. This part of his story is a clear example of his power and helplessness struggle of his life. Juan told stories of being powerful, but then laments he can never be out of the gang. Juan knows that he can never really leave the gang because of the source of power it provides him and the consequences he could face with cutting ties with the gang. But perhaps he is not as powerful within the gang as he presents, and that is part of the reason he cannot fully leave the gang.

Juan also knows school is an alternative source of respect and power separate from the gang, and his relationship with school is based on his perception of the power and benefits school can provide.

Like with me, it's always been knowledge is power. I always wondered what makes me different from everyone around me. But with me, is, I think of it, and I'm kind of like, "I'm just like you." I demand perfection. I demand to be the best of the best that I can be. I will never compare myself to anybody. I'm not better than you, no way. I'm not better than anybody in this school. If I put myself above people, that 's why I don't want to call myself a leader, you know? School for me has changed me for the better, for the worse, just coming here has been a struggle for me. At first, my gang was like, "Why are you going to school? It's a waste of time! You can

make more money in the streets." I wasn't big enough to say my ideas, because I was only in 7th grade when I started realizing this.

The main reason I wanted to be in LIA was the first year, I wasn't going to be in it. Then I found out one of my next door neighbors, her kid got raped. It was kind of like something that changed me. We're there to make a difference, and we're there to change somebody's life. But in school I'll exaggerate the truth every once in a while like for my homework or something, because, that's because I don't like to lose, you know grades is just grades, you know. I could care less.

Commentary. Juan did not share many specific experiences of his academic successes or challenges with school. Juan wants school to be a way he can make a difference and not about earning good grades. But he contradicts himself in the way he wants to be at the top in school, but also nonchalantly says grades are just grades. This is another example of Juan using his gang behaviors for his academic benefit by engaging in behaviors to succeed without taking conventional routes.

However, he does talk about the tension he experiences as he negotiates the two ways of being powerful in his life: in the gang, and in school. He has an almost instrumental mentality in the ways he transfers his gang skills to his school skills. Juan sees the ways it can advantage him outside of the gang and contribute to his academic success.

Juan is very interested in status and sees school as a way to further his success in society. With his social knowledge he learned from his gang life experiences, he has connections to powerful people, knows how to interact with them, and has opportunities to assert power and control others. Yet he also uses gang skills that promote his academic success, like demanding the best of himself to overcome challenges. Juan also benefits his academic life when he uses his

72

social knowledge and gang skills in school by developing good relationships with teachers and administration.

His instrumental view toward school prompted his turnaround as he now sees the way the gang is not sustainable for long-term success in this society. Like at the beginning of this interview with declarations of the importance of earning and maintaining respect, Juan is status-oriented, and is looking for legitimacy and power.

Juan's explanation of school focused on the social aspects, specifically, his interpretation of the ways Latinos act and are perceived in school.

I realized we're saying, you know, most Mexicans don't go to school. You know what? That's true. I started saying, you know what, let's change that. Just kind of, we had to be smarter than that to become successful. So real gangsters, we send our soldiers to the military. That gives them an extra advantage over any cops out here. See, we use everything that America offers for an advantage, and that's the bad thing. I started realizing young, when we send them to the Army, we send them to bigger advantages. Now we send them to high school, to finish high school. Quietly, no fighting. Not during school. And that's where everything leads...military, school, everybody started realizing, you know, Juan has a point. I helped things maybe for the worse, and it kind of sucks because I had no choice.

Real gangsters don't show it. All the wannabes here, they all dress like that. They want to walk like that. A true gangster doesn't want to stand out. Because there's a new kind of gangster, and that's the one we came up with or we're coming up with—knowledge is power. You have knowledge over anybody around you, you will get money. We have to be smart, we have to know what we're doing. We can't be walking the streets, not like it used to be. You know, dress gangster, act gangster, tattoos everywhere...we have to be smarter than that. It has to come from

73

the inside, and that's kind of when we started realizing that. Like at school I know nobody's no gangster, just cause by looking at them. I'm not saying I'm the only one, but I just noticed so far. Like I don't surround myself with people I know from the gangs because like it's dangerous to get in too close.

You know the only reason I come to school is just make sure my little brother is safe. I need to make sure nobody wants to go around the school shooting people. I'd be the first one out there. I'm not saying, I'm not the hero, I've just been in that situation, I'm the person that will watch my little brother.

Commentary. The powerful and helplessness duality of Juan comes through in this part of his story as the gang uses his suggestion of exploiting academic and military pathways to benefit the gang. Juan describes being able to position himself to appear loyal to the gang, but really choosing school for his own success. Yet he also uses language that makes him seem trapped and unable to pursue his own path.

In his commentary on school, Juan focuses on his classmates and describes his peers in a way that keeps him separate from them. Juan's perceptions of his peers and the Latino group at his high school is very distanced, as if he is above them and not a part of that group. His disparaging comments toward his peers reveal the childishness he sees in the Latino student population that tries to act tough at school. We know he is concerned about maintaining respect, and we can see that he is very strategic in his observations of his peers and his behaviors in school.

From his peers, Juan received incredible deference in class and when he walked down the school halls, so I assume students knew his gang position and status. He recalled an experience when one teacher joked with him asking him if he was a gangster and he lied to her,

74

telling her he didn't do that anymore. Juan also told me in an informal conversation that teachers and the School Resource Officer would sometimes question him, asking if certain students were in gangs. He resented being interrogated frequently, but his school leadership saw him as someone who had the insider position that they could trust and that was on "their side."

Juan chooses to maintain an insider/outsider mentality toward the gang. When he talks about his peers and their attempts to act gangster, he is within the group, scornfully looking at the outsiders. He creates boundaries with his repeated phrase, "real gangsters" and using the pronoun, "we" when he is talking about the gang. In other parts of his interview, he seems separate from the gang, looking on, but in this section, he maintains the gang solidarity, purpose, and goals. In terms of real gangsters versus fake gangsters, he sees the fake gangsters hanging out together, which he views as an amateur move. Juan knows who is really in what group, but teachers may perceive all of these gang-acting students in the same group.

Juan specifically shares his opinion of many of the fake gangsters at his school, and their attempts at joining gang culture.

Latins—for some reason—you're just kind of attract themselves to each other. Some reason we're closer, just, you know, friendly to a certain extent. Then there's this kids that you know they're always walk into class late, you know they kind of talk to all the Latin's, but they don't really, you know they don't really get the respect from everybody Latin. We don't hang out with them outside of school, you don't see them at the mall, you don't see them. They know that they have a good life and they just want to make it bad; they just want to seem that they're the bad people. Like nothing exciting has ever happened at their house so they come here expecting to make it exciting. There's a difference, like at school I know nobody's no gangster.

Commentary. Juan can quickly point out the incongruities of other students' lives as they attempt to enter gang culture. Yet he does not connect their experiences to the way his own life has so many incongruities as well. He views his peers' attempts at gaining respect are not truly accepted, and he somewhat despises these students who have happy lives but want to act another way.

When he wasn't talking about his peers and gangster statuses, Juan's commentary on school also included his future career plans.

College was always on my mind. But now I'm doing it for the right things, not for the gang. I feel you should respect where you go, because that's your teacher; that teacher's going to show you how to be successful. You have to be smart. For me, I want to study nursing in college. Too hard to be a doctor, ha ha ha, I'm just kidding, I don't know. I want to go into the medical field. I got my CNA over the summer. Like, I want to make a difference.

We'll see where life takes me. I wanted to show you that I'm different. I want to be different, but I know I will always be Juan. If I could turn off my brain, I would in a heartbeat. But at the same time, I must be here for a reason, and I embrace it. I don't push it. Instead of praying for my family to be good, I pray for like, thank you that, please let it be this way. You're going to fall eventually; you're going to fall. No matter what, you're going to fall. You can choose to enjoy it. Might as well enjoy every feeling you get. Being in a gang doesn't hurt me. You don't understand. I love this, I love the way I am. It made me me, and just no matter what happens, you know, I'll always be happy.

Commentary. Juan again uses an instrumental mentality as he transfers and uses his gang life skills to benefit him academically. In this part of his story, he is an outsider to his gang, demonstrating how he is independent and going to college for himself. His choice of training in

the service sector shows his concern for wanting to help others and make a difference. He is probably also using his gang and business mind with this career choice and assumes that this industry will have jobs. He does not specify or limit his desires to help the Latino community exclusively, but perhaps he does want to focus on Latinos and use his bilingual skills. He also wants to show that being in the gang means more than being a gangster. He can be a gangster, but he can also have desires to help his community.

Juan is optimistic about his future, yet also fatalistic. Juan's comment, "it doesn't hurt me," was in response to me expressing sadness that he was trapped living a gangster life when he wanted to go his own way. His optimistic declaration that he will always be happy is just one part of his personality that shows a hopeful fatalism for his overall outlook toward life. Within the interview, his emotions quickly rotated from happiness to tears, apathy, and anger. The way he nonchalantly switches from seeming purposeful to uncertain shows his mixed feelings about how much control he really has in his life with his situation as a Latino male. Juan wants affirmation for the struggle he is experiencing as he negotiates these two identities and different worlds.

Conclusion. Juan's overall educational aspirations and his path of choosing school come through his specific career goals and decision to pursue higher education. Juan does not clearly state whether this higher education is strictly for himself or within the influence of his gang. Juan has a strong ethnic identity within his gang status, but also sees the benefits of education. Juan's desires to do well in school and help his future seem like a recent turn in his life. Unlike the other students in the interviews, Juan only acknowledges his own efforts and desires with his academic aspirations, and does not credit any support from his family or teachers. This is the story he chooses to share—one of isolation and self-reliance. Despite experiencing hard things, Juan still

made the choice to succeed and do well in school. He sees the two pathways toward power and respect, and he is involved in both worlds while trying to negotiate both paths.

Juan clearly sees school as a way to access power and respect in the mainstream. His desires to succeed in school are not from having a passion for learning or loving a specific school subject. However, he is very competitive and driven to be at the top with his school performance. Juan makes the connection between the similar systems of gang life and the school organization, as if being a student in school is a type of business. He takes what is comparable and familiar to him and successfully plays the game of school, which positions his academic success. We do not know if he really is phasing out of the gang or if he really does have the power and prestige he espouses, but this is the story he chose to share of his story his pathway toward academic success.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This research represents the stories of three academically successful Latino students. These students come from a group that is known to struggle in school, and are often individually glossed over and considered as one monolithic group. Scholars sometimes missed the diverse and powerful stories of these students, if they focused only on the superficial background traits of these students without delving deeper into their own experiences and perspectives. These stories, from the students' perspectives, reveal accounts of academic success amid the challenges in their lives common among language minority and immigrant students. This research clearly shows that although each student articulates somewhat different experiences and challenges, they all have desires to be successful and have been able to achieve academic success in their own way. These students' stories, however different from the mainstream student experience, demonstrate the broad range of experiences minority students have, and reveal multiple pathways to academic success for these students. Results from this study broaden our conceptions and understandings of the ways students can achieve and be academically successful, amidst the many varieties of challenges they may face.

This chapter situates these student stories and the research text in the context of the literature and research on Latino high school students and their experiences. Throughout the three student stories, several specific themes emerge as relevant to the research question of how these academically successful Latino LIA students describe their pathway toward success. The students negotiate their experience within the context of specific supports that they identify. Students are also reflective in the ways they see the limits of these supports. They see the boundaries, limits, and responsibilities within their supports, and that their own efforts are also necessary as they achieve and enact their story of academic success. I will focus on these

common themes in the stories of these three academically successful Latino students. These themes include the role of family, family support, and how they manage their relationships with peers. Further themes include the importance of various school structures and support, and how students grapple with tensions between student ethnic and academic identities.

This research study supports other research and provides additional insight into how elements in their lives can both limit and support Latino student success. Themes drawn from the student stories demonstrate the powerful ways students live stories of academic success despite challenges they experience. Their stories add an additional, intimate perspective of the ways minority students can be successful. These students share somewhat similar experiences to those of first generation immigrants, having lived in the same community during their high school and participating as mentors in the same LIA program. However, the individual stories reveal the range of opportunities and challenges for each student, and the ways they articulate their lived experiences of success.

Reflections on Findings

Family's impact on student achievement. The research suggest that family contributions to minority student academic success can come through parents maintaining high expectations and providing support for their children (Fan & Chen, 2001; Fuglini, 1997; Hill & Torres, 2010). In each interview, all three students describe their relationship with and role of their family, yet each student relates with and views their families supporting their academic success in different ways. The students recognize they are in a position where they can benefit and provide for their families through their academic efforts. Major themes relating to the students' relationships with their families include parental educational aspirations and familism. The students also recognize the limits of their families' help and know to turn to other sources for academic help.

The students have support from their parents to do well in school, but they face the expectation to achieve this success on their own. The students must take up an independent narrative toward this success. Juan very clearly takes up this narrative of independence, but it is also apparent in the other stories as well. Selena feels support from her family in that they believe she can achieve, but they cannot help her navigate school. She receives praise for her success and is compared to her extended family and the paths others have taken, but must work alone to achieve that success. Alexis works for her family's success, even if they do not recognize all the ways, and she takes on the burden of being an adult. She sees the ways her family suffers by not having access to the culture of power, and her success in school are a reaction to the vulnerability as she seeks to gain security for her family.

Living up to their parents' aspirations. In this study it is clear that parents are a key component to why these students are successful. Interestingly, none of these students detail specific ways they see their parents supporting them academically. However, while the student stories do not cite specific examples of parents' direct, or traditionally recognized contributions toward academic success, it is clear how parent sacrifices, especially getting their families to the United States, strongly influence the academic success of their children. These LIA students are directly or indirectly living up to their parents' aspirations for them because they believe their parents have sacrificed so much for their success. These students see their parents sacrifice the familiarity of their old homes and lives for the dream of their children's success in the United States.

A student's immigrant generational status can be another component, related to their family life, that motivates them toward academic success. Fuligni (1997) finds the generational status of students can have a positive impact on academic success, specifically for first

81

generation immigrant students. First-generation students find ways to internalize their parents' sacrifices, which can encourage their academic success (Fuligni, 1997). Selena, Alexis, and Juan are all first-generation immigrant students, however, they each tell a different story about how their families' immigration and other sacrifices motivate their academic success. Their motivations differ in how they view their parents' support and the individual relationships these students have with their families.

Another component of students living their parents' aspirations comes in the ways they create shared experiences of their success with their families. Much like the research by Garett and associates (2010), Alexis and Selena describe moments when they feel that when they are doing well in school, they give their parents the opportunity to also share in that success. We see this most clearly in Alexis's story as she draws a lot of meaning and motivation to do well in school from the sacrifices of her parents. She is particularly motivated by the extended time that she and her parents were separated. Alexis talks about wanting to make her parents proud by her success in school and honoring her parents' sacrifices (Garett et. al., 2010). Selena also acknowledges her parents' sacrifices, yet by describing the pressure she feels to perform well in school to honor them. Overall, however, Selena does not seem to internalize her parents' sacrifices into her everyday life and educational experiences in the same way that Alexis articulates.

Juan's story differs from Alexis and Selena in the way their stories directly honor their parents. Juan's story does not directly acknowledge the influence his parents provide for his academic success, but we see many ways his extended family still strongly influences his life., It is clear he is impacted by both with his family history of educational attainment in Mexico as well as with the family gang connections in the United States. Both of these influences seem to

82

have led Juan down a path of gang life upon his arrival to this country, as well as impacted his academic success. With his success in school, Juan talks about making a conscious choice to reject the gang and choose his own path. He puts the gang life in contrast to his choice to succeed academically and as a way to construct his own power, independent of the gang. Juan creates a story where he centers on his own sacrifices, instead of his parents' sacrifices.

With these dynamics in the stories, we see ways parent sacrifices motivate each students' actions and attitudes toward their academic success. Yet we also see that these students present different story lines to explain how their understanding of his or her family motivate, support, or encourage their successes. The students' experiences show there can be multiple paths toward similar successes and gives powerful illustrations that reinforce other research findings of the importance of families in minority student success (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Hayes, 2011; Lopez, 2001).

Familism's rol e i n academ ic motivati ons . Related to parent sacrifice and aspirations for

their students, familism (Davis, Resnicow, & Couper, 2011; Esparza & Sanchez, 2008; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Rothman, Gant, & Hnat, 1985) is another powerful family support concept that is clearly represented in this research. Familism becomes apparent when we see individuals place family interests before their own. Of the three students, Alexis's story most clearly demonstrates the characteristics of familism in caring for her families' needs and aspirations over her own. This is not to say that family is not significant for Selena and Juan. Yet unlike Alexis, these other students demonstrate a stronger individual identity separate from their families.

Alexis takes on a role in her family as a cultural broker, and translator, which orients her towards familism. We can certainly see in her story that her period of separation from her parents

strengthened her connection with her family in this way. Alexis often talks about her family relationships as the location of her own identity, which is another aspect of familism (Rothman et al., 1985). As she internalizes the sacrifices her parents made that allow her opportunities to succeed in the United States, she then honors her parents by taking advantage of these academic possibilities. Alexis's attempt to balance her strong familism with her own achievement generates a foreclosed identity described in Marcia's (1980) discussion on identity stages. She wants to honor her family, and she has not broken her ties with them to attain an individual identity. She does describe some independent aspirations, but they are tied back to her loyalty and desires to help her family.

Familism may act as a barrier for some students and their academic success, but for Alexis, familism is a protective and motivating element in her academic achievements. Familism is protective in the ways it kept Alexis focused on school and her academic success but came at the expense of her not connecting very deeply with other Latino students. Alexis chooses her family over her friends, something that is not typical of youth her age. Her family's period of separation and reunification appears to influence the ways she rejects peer friendships. But Alexis does not describe this familism as a loss, but worth this cost of deep friendships with her peers.

Peers' importance in academic success. Peer influence is another powerful common element in the student stories. Although these students articulate different kinds of relationships with their peers, they all talk about their perceptions of peers and the social dynamics of their school as relevant to their motivations for doing well. Overall, the students do not describe their peers as a strong motivating force for their academic success, but find their peers significant to

their lives in school in other ways. The students appreciate their friends, but they also see themselves apart from them.

In Goza and Ryabov's (2009) research, they found Latino students did better in school when their primary peer groups were made up of their same ethnicity. Similarly, all three of these Latino LIA students in this study report that their primary peer groups were Latino and that this was important for them as they navigated the social aspects of school. Within the stories, students speak mostly about their Latino friends, either not mentioning having friends of other ethnicities or describing the distance they see between themselves and their White peers. Selena describes it as being "hi, bye," sort of friends. Alexis thinks there were too many differences between herself and the majority culture to be friends. Juan holds an apologetic yet defiant outlook toward his white peers, expecting and describing unfriendly attitudes toward Latinos but not blaming them for that outlook. Immediately after his analysis of others' negative perspectives, Juan expresses great pride in his Latino ethnicity, which seems to be a protective act to his self-concept.

Although not one of these students gives credit to their Latino friends for giving them very much academic encouragement or support, they do talk considerably about the influence of peers and the ways that peers matter in school. The students' accounts of the ethnic characteristics of their friend groups supports Goza and Ryabov (2009) findings highlighting the supportive nature of same ethnic peer groups, but differs in that these students do not view their Latino friends as academically supportive. They appreciate the camaraderie and support of their peer grouup, but they do not count on their Latino friends at school to support them with their academic pursuits.

The three students find solidarity with their Latina/o peers in their school in different ways than their relationship with their majority culture classmates. The distance these students perceive between the two ethnic groups in their school and community is acute. Alexis also experiences the tension between the LIA class and the ESL class within her school Latino community. Although students shared Latino ethnicity, Alexis notices separation between these two specialty Latino classes (tracks) in her school. She feels caught in that separation with her desires of loyalty to her friends in the ESL class, but wanting to advance academically through LIA. However, although Alexis has loyalties to her Latino peers at a group level, she also fears her friends could hurt her future. This is evident in specific stories Alexis shares about her peers not being academically oriented and she instead choosing her family as the primary source of her academic and social supports.

Juan's desire to distinguish between real and fake gangsters shows his awareness and perspectives of the Latino peer groups at his school, but he does not acknowledge any type of friendship or camaraderie with his peers. He makes it clear that he feels that he is independent of his peer groups and that, in his view, his friends and family are not really influencing his academic success either way. Juan sees this purposeful distance as necessary for his success and that he does not allowed others into most aspects of his life as a way he maintains controls in his life.

Selena, in contrast, finds her friends not necessarily supportive of her academically, but also not hurting her academic choices and progress through school. She uses her outgoing personality and draws support from her friends to enact a story of academic and social success. Selena also views her peers as a support group for her transition into a new life in Utah. She acknowledges feeling more comfortable with Utah now that she has a peer group of other

www.manaraa.com

California, Latina/o transplants. Selena builds peer relationships without fearing they are a bad influence or that they will pull her away from her academic goals. She is proud of her decision to do well in school even as it leads her away from what she describes as the traditional expectations for Latinas. Although she describes a tension in these choices, where she feels as if she is leaving everything behind as she pursues success, she also clearly views herself as acting independently and seems to be proud of her decisions.

These stories demonstrate that peers provide important social support with managing school and gives space to explore and strengthen their ethnic identities even if they do not directly act as strong academic supports. Peer influence matters for these students in the ways their peers help the students feel accepted in school. These students see the ways their peers support them, but they also see their separation from their friends as necessary for the individual work they must put into their academics. In general they do not directly rely on their peers for academic support.

School's supports for students. The students in this study describe the school setting as a positive academic support. Specifically we can see how they view school as helpful to them in the ways the students describe teacher support and language and ethnicity supports at school. They view school as a gateway for success in their future lives, and they articulate the belief that through their own efforts and the support of school, they can succeed academically. These findings connect with previous research that argues that school can be a powerful support for minority students depending on the ways they provide and increase accessibility to academic opportunities for all students and encourage inclusive school communities (Osterman, 2000; Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2010; Strike, 2004). School can also be a burden for minority students as they negotiate their relationship to school within a racialized space often underlying mainstream

cultural expectations of school (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007), but this study shows that these students find ways to navigate and use school resources for their benefit despite the difficulty of racialized expectations. These students see and articulate the ways the school can help them, but are also savvy to limitations in school and work to negotiate these to their advantage.

Teacher supports. Research shows that building relationships with teachers is a central characteristic of academically successful minority students (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 2009; Hassinger & Plourde, 2005; Oikonomidoy, 2010; Wiggan, 2007). This is compatible with what we find as the three LIA students all articulate the importance of strong connections with their teachers and ways they thought their teachers helped them to succeed. Selena and Alexis describe teachers who support them and open their eyes to increased future opportunities that can come to them through succeeding in school. These findings resonate with research by Oikonomidoy (2010) who found that teachers who are more personable and caring ease the transition into the school community and help foster a sense of belonging to the school community. Selena illustrates this concept when she compares her teachers in California with her teachers in Utah. Selena credits her teachers for inspiring her to be more motivated in school because she believes that her teachers in Utah care more about student success. In other words, she is able to see herself as a successful student because of her perception of increased, consistent teacher support in her new community.

Alexis is less explicit about the ways teachers support her, but her story reveals that she believes that her teachers are caring and supportive because she is an academically successful student. She draws upon this belief to explain her story of success in contrast to other Latino students she knows who are not successful. Alexis trusts her teachers to support her in decisions she takes in school, and with school-related advice, especially the processes of school and

88

navigating the day-to-day aspects of schooling. But she sees their role as limited and temporary and defers to her family for the larger ideological and long-term decisions in her life.

Similarly, Juan sees his relationship with his teachers as more instrumental and temporary. His story places teachers as minor characters, ones that may even be naïve in his view. His academic achievements are not motivated by his respect and trust he feels toward his teachers, but he sees them as important resources nonetheless. He knows his teachers have value in his life, and he recognizes the power his teachers possess, both as intellectual gatekeepers as well important for the connections and networks they can provide for him in his life and for his future.

Our Latino students identify teachers as important players and valuable resources for their academic success. The students recognize the opportunities in their new communities, they see the ways their teachers encourage and support them with their academic aspirations, and the students view school as a place and a way they can succeed. This supports Wiggan's (2007) findings from his research on minority student success showing caring, supportive teacher practices as the strongest motivator for a minority student's academic success. Yet our students also see the ways their teachers provide social and cultural capital supports (Bourdieu, 1986, Colman, 1988), like advice and knowledge about advancing to the next academic stage for their school success. Because they view their teachers as gatekeepers to success, and not only as skilled practitioners, our students deliberately and thoughtfully use their teacher supports and resources to enable their success.

Language and ethnic supports. LIA is a program that works explicitly to support Spanish language and other aspects of cultural and ethnic development for these students. Students in the LIA class use their bilingualism in positively recognized ways where the school

89

community views their language skills as assets rather than as detrimental (Garret et. al., 2010; Coulter & Smith, 2006). All of these students recognize the benefit of bilingualism for them academically. Further, Selena, Alexis, and Juan are all able to positively display their Latino identities in the school through the LIA program.

Specifically, Selena is enthusiastic about her ability to proudly display her Latina identity through the LIA program and connect with other Latino students and the rest of her school. She exhibits an achieved identity, according to the criterion of Marcia's (1980) research, and is confident in her ethnic and academic identity. In contrast, Alexis is critical of the program for being too selective of Latino students and she did not value the LIA program as a way to feel more integrated in the school. She is however, able to appreciate the general academic and social opportunities that it offers and holds for her. Similarly, Juan sees these supports as beneficial academically and comfortable but stays aloof from the teachers and other students and appreciates the ethnic components of the program mostly for others.

The students all recognize the program as a chance to achieve academically without giving up their Latino identities. Although these students have individual responses to the program with its language and cultural focus, all students feel that it is a space at the school that is supportive and helpful in their academic lives. This space is important because it affirms student ethnicity while supporting academic goals. Programs like this one can create important spaces at school for minority students to see and take up narratives of success. As these students talk about their future plans, all of them talk about helping others, specifically Latinos. This raises questions about how programs such as LIA may influence student perceptions of themselves and their future aspirations.

Ethnic and academic identity: balances and tensions. The ethnic identity experiences for the students in this study are a significant support for their academic success in school. Rather than existing in competition, these students balance their ethnic and academic identities in ways that helped them succeed (Garret et al., 2010). Alexis describes honoring her family at the cost of remaining aloof from the influences of peers and school; Selena feels she is leaving others behind as she achieves success in school; Juan feels that he lives two competing lives with his gang life and school life. Yet all of these students relate strongly with their ethnic identities and are able to do well in school despite these large differences in their social and family situations and experiences.

This research supports work that argues that a strong ethnic identity has the ability to act as a protective factor for minority students and promote academic success (Supple et al., 2006, Vigil, 1991). Through the LIA program, the students can display and share aspects of their ethnicity in accepted and institutionalized structures at the school. They navigate the space between ethnic and academic identities because of these school resources and feel a sense of belonging in the school. The students can use aspects of their ethnic identity in ways that are positively recognized. The LIA program allows them to be seen as community role models and receive positive recognition for their bilingualism skills.

Interestingly, all of these students in this study also recognize that they are unlike other Latino students in some way as a result of their academic achievement and participation in the LIA program. Each student makes sense of that difference in his or her own way. Alexis is frustrated as what she sees as the unequal opportunity for other ESL students, while Juan and Selena are more inclined to think that their opportunities come as they rise above their family members and the alternative choices that they have made.

Juan lives an interesting balance of ethnic and academic identities with his gang ties. He lives in the midst of a tension between power and helpless in his life, which limits Juan's ability to gain a strong, independent identity (Marcia, 1980). He recognizes the difficulty of living double lives. However, Juan is still in the process of understanding who he is as a student, as an ethnic male, and as a Latino. His story shifts from stories of respect and power within the gang to the powerlessness of feeling he was unable to leave. With these extreme dynamics, Juan lives in an identity moratorium as he continues to explore his identity and what type of person and student he will be (Marcia, 1980). Juan sees the ways his academic identity can benefit him, but he also sees the limits of that identity as he honors and maintains his ethnic identity and ethnic ties.

These students all acknowledge in some way a school situation where they do not feel forced to assimilate their ethnic identity to the mainstream culture or where they feel excluded from the wider school body if they remain identified with their own ethnic group. The students proudly described their ethnicity and who they were in their home and school lives throughout their stories. This ethnic identity is a resources for them, and allows them to be incorporated into the school community (Mehan et al., 1994). For these students, ethnic identities were obviously powerful sources of strength and pride in their lives that also positively influenced their academic successes. Being a successful student was a way they demonstrate their feelings of pride about their ethnic identity.

Alexis, Selena, and Juan display different perspectives and meaning making related to their lives and school that show different levels of identity development. Each student is in a different state of identity development, living a different story, yet we identify him or her as a

successful Latina/o student. The students' identities are also built on their abilities to balance the tension between their ethnic and academic identities.

Conclusion

This research highlights the amazing potential for academic success for Latino students in the U.S. These stories are examples of Latino students that took up a narrative of success despite challenges in their lives that might at first appear to be academically limiting. This is in contrast to pessimistic and deterministic perspectives that focus on the difficult situations of students and how these can interfere with their educational success. Educators, parents, and policy makers can benefit from listening and paying attention to the ways that successful students articulate their own experiences of success in school.

This research clearly shows that there are multiple pathways toward success and that a student's circumstances are not deterministic. For example, many of the challenges reported in the research literature are also identified by these students as being supports for them in their academic success. Although these themes have relevance in different ways for each of these students, they all draw upon them in the construction of their narratives of success. In fact the students themselves often articulate that these themes act as both challenges and supports.

Although research often examines the supports and challenges that exist for students, we assert that a more important question is how students respond to, and make meaning of, the circumstances of their lives. Keeping the student stories intact during this narrative study allowed their experiences to inform us more deeply than if we were to look across the student interviews more generally in an overall thematic way. What these results suggest is that students make choices about what they will do within the constraints of their specific situations. The stories presented in this research show how students are making meaning of the circumstances and events in their lives. These students, although very different from one another, all discovered

93

narratives that allowed them to be highly ethnic and academically successful. This begs the question of how we as educators can support minority students who may not often have access to these kinds of powerful narratives.

The school site in this research, and particularly this program, appears to allow space for students to choose a narrative of success. The LIA program allows Juan a place within school where he is respected, enables Selena to find a story of strength and showcase her Latina pride, and permits Alexis to create a story of security for herself and her family. These students have different goals for their education. How they respond to their families, their peers, and their school shows that it is not the circumstances alone but in the meaning the students are making of their circumstances that matters for student success.

The stories of Selena, Alexis, and Juan help bring a new perspective to the experiences of Latina/o high school students with a positive and optimistic outlook. It is imperative that we acknowledge the many minority students who manage to leverage different supports and opportunities in order to be academically successful. Acknowledging the variety of pathways Latina/o students take and live during their journey toward academic success can inform school program development, educational policy and academic and social expectations for Latina/o students.

We also recognize the social supports schools and communities can provide to actively support minority student success in the context of a strong ethnic identity. We can also strengthen student assets, specifically families, schools, and identities and the ways these act as consistent supports for student success. Supporting families includes broadening teacher and school understanding of parental involvement and creating stronger connections between home and school life. Building strong, inclusive school communities is another way students can be

academically successful and ethnically expressive without minimizing their ethnic experience in school (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007). Additionally, allowing students to be strong academically and ethnically without competition or confusion to their identities is crucial in supporting Latina/o student academic success.

References

Arroyo, C. G., & Zigler, E. (1995). Racial identity, academic achievement, and the psychological well-being of economically disadvantaged adolescents. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69,* 903-914.

Barajas, H. L. & Ronnkvist, A. (2007). Racialized space: Framing Latino and Latina experience in public schools. *Teachers College Record, 109,* 1517-1538.

Behnke, A. O., Piercy, K. W., & Diversi, M. (2004). Educational and occupational aspirations of Latino youth and their parents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 26,* 16-35.

Bernal, M. E., Knight, G. P., Ocampo, K. A., Garza, C.A., and Cota, M. K. (1993). Development of Mexican American identity. in *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities.* Ed. Bernal, M. E. & Knight, G. P. Statue University of New York Press: Albany, NY, 31-46.

Bogdan, R. & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (New York, Greenwood), 241-258.

Bordieu, P. (1974). The school as a conservative force: Scholastic and cultural inequalities. (J.C. Whitehouse, Trans). In J. Eggleston (Ed.), *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (pp. 32-46). Cambridge, England: University Printing House. (Reprinted from Bordieu, P. (1966). L'ecole conservatrice. *Revue Francaise de Sociologie, 7,* pp. 225-6, 330-42, 346-7.

Brisk, M. E. (2009). *Bilingual education: From compensatory to quality schooling.* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Buckner, J. C., Mezzacappa, E., & Beardslee, W. R. (2003). Characteristics of resilient youths living in poverty: The role of self-regulatory processes. *Development and Psychopathology, 15*, 139-162.

Chang, J. & Le, T. N. (2005). The influence of parents, peer delinquency, and school attitudes on academic achievement in Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian or Mien, and Vietnamese youth. *Crime & Delinquency, 51*, 238-264.

Clandinin, D., Pushor, D., Murray Orr, A. (2007). Navigating sites for narrative inquiry. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58, 21-35.*

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (supplement), S95–S120.

Colon, Y. & Sanchez, B. (2010). Explaining the gender disparity in Latino youth's education: Acculturation and economic value of education. *Urban Education, 45*, 252-273.

Conle, C. (1996). Resonance in preservice teacher inquiry. *American Educational Research Journal, 33*, 297-325.

Connelley, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19*(5), 2-14.

Cooper, C. R., Denner, J., & Lopez, E. M. (1999). Cultural brokers: Helping Latino children on pathways toward success. *The Future of Children, 9*(2), 51-57.

Coulter, C. & Smith, M. (2006). English language learners in a comprehensive high school. *Bilingual Research Journal, 30*, 309-335.

Davis, R. E., Resnicow, K., & Couper, M. P. (2011). Survey response styles, acculturation, and culture among a sample of Mexican American adults. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 42*, 1219-1236.

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1992). School matters in the Mexican-American home: Socializing children to education. *American Educational Research Journal*; 29, 495-513.

Epstein, J. L. (1985). Home and school connections in schools of the future: Implications of research on parent involvement. *Peabody Journal of Education, 62*(2), 18-41.

Esparza, P. & Sanchez, B. (2008). The role of attitudinal familism in academic outcomes: A study of urban, Latino high school seniors. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 14*, 193-200.

Fan, X. & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 13*, 1-22.

Finn, J. D. & Rock, D. A. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school failure. *The Journal of Applied Psychology, 82*, 221-234.

Fredericks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential for the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*, 59-109.

Fuligini, A.J. (1997). The academic achievement of adolescents from immigrant families: The roles of family background, attitudes, and behavior. *Child Development, 68*, 351-363.

Gandara, P. (2010). The Latino education crisis. Educational Leadership 67(5), 24-30.

Garrett, T., Antrop-Gonzalez, R., & Velez, W. (2010). Examining the success factors of high-achieving Puerto Rican male high-school students. *Roeper Review, 32*, 106-115.

Gonzalez, R. (2009). Beyong affirmation: How the school context facilitates racial/ethnic identity among Mexican American adolescents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 31*, 5-31.

Goza, F. & Ryabov, I. (2009). Adolescents' educational outcomes: Racial and ethnic variations in peer network importance. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 38,* 1264-1279.

Guay, F., Boivin, M., & Hodges, E. V. E. (1999). Predicting change in academic achievement: A model of peer experiences and self-system processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91,* 105-115.

Hassinger, M. & Plourde, L. A. (2005). "Beating the odds": How bi-lingual Hispanic youth work through adversity to become high achieving students. *Education, 126*, 316-327.

Hayes, D. (2011). Predicting parental home and school involvement in high school African American adolescents. *High School Journal, summer, 94*, 154-166.

Hill, N. E. & Torres, K. (2010). Negotiating the American dream: The paradox of aspirations and achievement among Latino students and engagement between their families and schools. *Journal of Social Issues, 66*, 95-112.

Kao, G. & Tienda, M. (1998). Educational aspirations of minority youth. *American Journal of Education, 106*, 349-384.

Keith, T. Z. & Keith, P. B. (1993). Does parental involvement affect eighth-grade student achievement? Structural analysis of national data. *School Psychology Review, 22,* 474-496.

Latinos in Action mission statement. (n.d.) Retrieved from Latinosinaction.org.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Lopez, G. R. (2001). The value of hard work: Lessons on parent involvement from an immigrant household. *Harvard Educational Review*, *71*, 416-437.

Lugo Steidel, A. G. & Contreras, J. F. (2003). A new familism scale for use with Latino populations. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 25*, 312-330.

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 159-187). New York, NY: Wiley & Sons.

Martinez, S. (2009). Mexican American high school students' perceived level of challenge in school. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 31*, 297-316.

Mehan, H. Hubbard, L. & Villanueva, I. (1994). Forming academic identities: Accommodation without assimilation among involuntary minorities. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 25*, 91-117.

Moreno, R. P. & Lopez, J. A. (1999). Latina mothers' involvement in their children's schooling: The role of maternal education and acculturation. *The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, JSRI Working Paper #44.*

Oikonomidoy, E. (2010). Zooming into the school narratives of refugee students. *Multicultural Perspectives, 12*(2), 74-80.

Nichols, J. D., White, J. J., & Price, M. (2006). Beliefs of intelligence, knowledge acquisition, and motivational orientation: A comparative analysis of Hispanic/Latino and Anglo youth. *Multicultural Perspectives, 8*(4), 39-48.

Osterman, K. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*, 323-367.

Pew Hispanic Center. (2010, May 13). Hispanics, high school dropouts, and the GED. Retrieved from http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/122.pdf

Pew Hispanic Center. (2011, September 28). Childhood poverty among Hispanics sets record, leads nation. Retrieved from http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/

Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 499-514.

Plunckett, S. W. & Bamaca-Gomez, M. Y. (2003). The relationship between parenting, acculturation, and adolescent academics in Mexican-origin immigrant families in Los Angeles. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 25*, 222-239.

Rothman, J., Gant, L. M., & Hnat, S. A. (1985). Mexican-American family culture. *Social Service Review, 59*, 197-215.

Singh, K., Chang, M., & Dika, S. (2010). Ethnicity, self-concept, and school belonging: effects on school engagement. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice, 9*, 159-175.

Strike, K. (2004). Community, the missing element of school reform: Why schools should be more like congregations than banks. *American Journal of Education, 110*, 215-232.

Suarez-Orozco, C. & Suarez-Orozco, M. (1995). *Transformations: Immigration, family life, and achievement motivation among Latino adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University

Press.

Suarez-Orozco, C., Pimentel, A., Martin, M. (2009). The significance of relationships: Academic engagement and achievement among newcomer immigrant youth. *Teachers College Record, 11*, 712-749.

Supple, A. J., Ghazarian, S. R., Frabutt, J. M., Plunkett, S.W., & Sands, T. (2006). Contextual influences on Latino adolescent ethnic identity and academic outcomes. *Child Development*, 77, 1427-1433.

Utah. (2011) In *U.S. Census Bureau*. Retrieved from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/49000.html

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*: *Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* (2nd ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Vega, W. A., Khoury, E. L., Zimmerman, R. S., Gil, A. G., Warheit, G. J. (1995). Cultural conflicts and problem behaviors of Latino adolescents in home and school environments. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *23*, 167-179.

Vigil, J.D. (1991). *Personas Mexicanas Chicano high schoolers in a changing Los Angeles*. Harcourt Brace & Company: Fort Worth, TX.

Wiggan, G. (2008). From opposition to engagement: Lessons from high achieving African American students. *The Urban Review, 40*, 317-349.

Yosso, T., Villalpando, O., Delgado Bernal, D., & Solorzano, D. G. (2001). Critical race theory in Chicana/O education. *National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference, 9,* 89-104.