Latinos in American schools

Erin Leigh Green

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A Thesis

entitled

Latinos in American Schools

by

Erin Leigh Green

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in English

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The University of Toledo

May 2013
An Abstract of
Latinos in American Schools

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The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of the current position and issues relating to Latinos in American schools. The same chapter describes language issues and challenges Latino students and school administrators and educators face. In the second chapter, this thesis presents an empirical framework for the study of the position of Latinos in American schools; the methodology is presented as well as detailed descriptions of the research participants. In the third and final chapter, results are stated and analyzed according to each of the research questions. Implications and limitations of the research are stated along with suggestions for future research.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter One
America’s Latinos

Introduction

The widespread growth of Latinos in the American school systems uniquely touches everything in its path-- lawmakers, school systems, language, teachers, and students-- but the people who are responsible for the birth and growth of this phenomena, are those affected the most, the Latinos. According to Zentella (2005),

The number of Hispanics in the United States is expected to reach sixty million by 2020, amounting to 18% of the total population, and expanding far beyond the Southwest. Not only that, one of every five students in the United States public school system is either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, mostly from Latin America (p.3).

Many American public schools are not equipped with knowledgeable faculty and resources to properly assist Latinos in their educational endeavor, which is reflected in Latino retention and dropout rates. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, “Even though Hispanics are the largest minority group on the nation’s campuses, the Latino share among degree recipients significantly lagged their share among eighteen to twenty-four-year-old students enrolled in two-year colleges (21.7%) and four year colleges and universities (11.7%) in 2010” (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Also, according to Fry (2010) “some 41% of Hispanics ages twenty and older in the United States do not have a regular high school diploma, versus 23% of comparably aged blacks and 14% of whites” (p. 1).

Latinos strikingly steep high school dropout rate may be causing Latinos to fall behind other ethnic groups in education, which subsequently affects their future career and occupational prospects (Caravantes, 2006). The diversity of Latinos in the United States
deepens the severity of issues involving Latino immigrants and stimulates sincere concern on the part of school administrators, teachers and Latino families and students.

**Ethnographic study of Latino students in United States schools**

This research project, entitled “Latinos in American schools,” was conducted at the University of Toledo during the academic year of 2012-2013. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of adult Latino university students’ attitudes toward and experiences of American schools. Five participant adult Latino students took part in an interview with me in which my interviewees discussed and relayed information about the formation of their Latino identity, and their experiences in American schools, especially focusing on the participants’ perceptions of language choice and teachers’ attitudes and acceptance of them. Participants were free to delve deeper into any other matters relevant to my questions. The benefit of this study would be the advancement of knowledge in the area of Latino students and education, which may help enrich the academic lives of Latino students and equip school faculty and administrators to better understand their educational needs on a deeper level.

**Latino language and identity**

The construction and maintenance of Latino cultural, social and language identity is cultivated differently for Latinos in various geographical regions of the United States. Language usage discrepancies produce Latino identity crises because many SNSs (Spanish native speakers) have a natural tendency to form an identity of themselves based solely on the language they speak (Carreira, 2003). Language and identity are intricately negatively or positively correlated based on societal standards, expectations, opportunities, resources and vitality. Deciding on when and where to speak, learn, teach
or educate using Spanish or English as a medium comes as a challenge, often causing a rift amongst Latinos themselves. Carreira (2003) states, “It is important to keep in mind that there is a great deal of variation between communities of U.S. Hispanics with regard to factors known to affect linguistic loyalty and preservation” (p. 65). In Miami, for example, the Spanish language is seen as valuable, marketable, and overall, the vitality of the language is secure there. The implication this has is that many ELLs (English language learners) will be hesitant to fully immerse themselves in the English language. People in Miami, and the overall southern Florida area, may be more guarded and reluctant to have English override the great value they have placed on Spanish, their heritage language (Carreira, 2003).

In the Southwest and in northern parts of California, the view of the Spanish language is strikingly different. Research has shown that general socioeconomic advancement shows a strong negative correlation with Spanish-language usage and retention in schools among Hispanics (Carreira, 2003). In these areas the Spanish language may have a negative societal stigma attached to it. Carreira suggests in the New York and New Jersey areas, geographic origins may often be an indicator of the individuals’ attitude towards and preference of language. Latinos from the Dominican Republic and Cuba often may be perceived as mainly Spanish-speaking, place a high importance on learning and using English, while Puerto Ricans, often seen as English-speakers, now perceive English as the language linked to poverty (p. 67). Also Carreira notes, “Puerto Ricans sprinkle in Spanish linguistic features when speaking English as a way to mark their ethnic identity” (p. 67). In contrast to Carreira, though, a Puerto Rican native, herself, Dr. Jetsabe Caceres, a professor in the department of Political Science at
the University of Toledo states, “My sense is that, in general, Hispanics value Spanish very much, and the majority of Hispanic families want their children to learn Spanish as well as English, especially since they have so many family members still in Latin America who do not speak English” (Caceres, 2012).

Still, falsely assuming all Latinos have the same linguistic attitudes, perceptions and desires can possibly have pedagogical implications as well. As Carreira (2003) states, “The pedagogical significance of these differences is evident: SNS instruction must be regionally anchored. Pedagogical goals and materials that may be appropriate in Miami, for example, may be entirely out of place in the Southwest. Therefore, it is essential for SNS teachers to know the student population and local Hispanic communities they are dealing with” (p. 68).

Research conducted by Schecter & Bayley (1997), further explores what role Spanish plays in the construction, maintenance, and in some cases, rebuilding their family cultural identities. Schecter & Bayley followed four families of Mexican descent in California and Texas; the families came from a variety of backgrounds (first, second and third generation Mexican-Americans) and occupied a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Each family was struggling to maintain or reinstate their cultural identity. In some cases this was easier than others because of variables like a parent whose sole language was Spanish (p. 527-529), or having a desire to return to Mexico (p. 522-527).

Beckstead & Toribio (2003) after conducting a study at Goleta Valley Junior High school about “Minority perspectives on language,” identified two main factors for the ambivalence of choosing to use English or Spanish, further affecting language identity: 1) The necessity for communicating with the dominant English-speaking society, and 2) The
benefits associated with Spanish language home retention. Spanish language use was maintained in the home by all the participants, owing to interactions with Spanish-dominant speakers, such as older adult relatives and younger siblings (p. 158). One of the most crucial results conceived through the Beckstead & Toribio (2003) study, was that there was a decrease in Spanish-language usage with increased length of U.S. residency. They also realized student attitudes toward learning English were primarily positive because as one student commented, “In the United States, English is spoken. Also Spanish is not going to be spoken all the time in my classes. With English, you can go wherever you want” (p. 162).¹ Overall, students are aware of the importance of learning English, most of them would still prefer being taught in Spanish because it is “our” language, and they understand the teacher better and don’t fail exams as another student indicated, 1) Because Spanish is my language, and 2) I learn more from the teacher; the teacher won’t disapprove of my work, and I have a better chance of passing High School (p. 163).²

Bilingual parents often find it increasingly difficult to maintain use of Spanish in the home, as their children are immersed in an English educational environment and are surrounded by English media content. Monolingual Spanish speaking parents have a more difficult task. Many times, “Immigrant parents are misunderstood not only because of the infamous language barriers but also because parental efforts are evaluated with reference to a foreign and conflicting model of what is takes to be a competent parent” (Zentella, 2005). Zentella (2005) suggests that language learning is cultural learning (p. 161).

¹: “en EUA se habla inglés. También porque mis clases no todo el tiempo las voy a tener en español,” also, “con el inglés puedes ir donde tu quieras” (p. 162).
²: 1) Porque es (Spanish) nuestro idioma y 2) Porque le entiendo más a la maestro y no repruebo mis examenes y tengo más posibilidades de pasar major a la High School (p. 163).
Caravantes (2006), remarks, “Perhaps, no one has thought to look at Latino culture itself, as the main culprit. I am convinced that what will bolster Latinos in their journey towards success in the United States, more than anything else, will be to incorporate that which is adaptive from the Anglo-Saxon culture, and yet still retain the beautiful elements of their native Latino culture” (p. ix). Due to the presence of cultural barriers, language learning barriers also arise. This is due to many, and often times, negative factors. These factors include: 1) The lack of knowledge on the part of teachers between a child’s internal system and linguistic environment, 2) Socialization to language versus socialization through language, 3) Time required for linguistic and cognitive maturation, 4) Controversy over bilingual education, and, 5) Bashing of ‘Spanglish’ and dialectal dissoning (p. 13).

The problem Latinos may have in solidifying themselves as a dominant, successful ethnic group in America may be their lack of awareness in their own social identity, which could be caused by cultural and language barriers. According to Lin (2008), “The aim of this telling “identity” is to overcome incompleteness, to aspire to full humanity by using techniques of self-cultivation, which aim to harmonize and reconcile the different, fractured divisive aspects of personhood” (p. 14). Language is an intricate part of a Latino’s identity; it can sometimes be the deciding factor between success and failure, preservation of the past, restoration of personhood, or the doorway to newness, opportunities and being in sync with society.

**Uncertainty of Latino language preservation and English development in schools**

All across America, Latino school children, young adults and adults, alike, receive powerful linguistic messages at school that devalue the beauty of the Spanish
language, and ultimately, place it second to English. These messages may transfer to students themselves as a whole, making them feel inferior or secondary to the non-Latino/Hispanic students. A profound rethinking of the purpose and impact of schooling, with particular attention to the role of language, needs to spark transformation on how delicate situations such as the usage and ownership of the L1 (first language, which would be Spanish), are perceived, welcomed and accepted in American school settings.

Not only are American educational administrators uncertain of the best way to educate Latinos, uncertainty and fear grip Latinos themselves as well. According to Zantella (2005), “Latinos refrain from claiming pride in their usage of the Spanish language due to the fear holding them back because Spanish is considered important for family cohesion and cultural identity, but not very useful for learning, writing and getting a good job” (p. 176). Choosing a medium of instruction is far from being a purely linguistic issue. Educational choices are frequently subjected to the interests of the economy, administrators, families and individual students. According to Mesthrie, Swan, Duemert & Leap (2005), the UNESCO (United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) notes,

> From educational linguists, it is understood that classroom-based teaching and learning is heavily dependent on language; therefore, educational authorities should aim at persuading an unwilling public to accept education through the mother tongue, and should not force it. Also it is possible to acquire a good knowledge of a second language without using it as a medium of instruction for general subjects. The amount of the second language should be increased gradually, and if it has to become the
medium of instruction, it should not do so until pupils are sufficiently familiar with it (p. 359).

Herold-Espinoza (2003) conducted two case studies in Arizona on two Mexican-Americans, Carla and Manny, who both were raised monolingual and bicultural. Two prominent remarks from the students stood out in her study: Manny comments, “My parents thought that the only way for me to achieve the ‘American Dream’ was to be reliant on the English language” (p. 49). Carla also notes, “I realized that English was necessary if you wanted to succeed in this country, but it should not be acquired at the expense of my own language (Spanish)” (p. 70). Both Carla and Manny just want to llegar a ser alguien [become someone], but is difficult for them when feeling like they are “living in a form of inner exile” and “do not fit in anywhere” (p. 49). Both students felt the American educational system was working against them, and they were victims of linguistic and cultural devaluation; and they felt many of their teachers exhibited a serious lack of interest in whether or not they succeeded. According to Espinoza-Herold, “Many Mexican-Americans in schools feel the need to identify themselves as distinct individuals through their own linguistic forms. They need to use a language close to their heart and to their identity, a language that is not understood and often denied in dominant mainstream institutions” (p. 49). Realizing that education opens doors, and most importantly, is essential for human progress and welfare causes concern for caring Latino adults who are devastated by the lack of linguistic and cultural support Latino students receive, in some, not all, instances in their experiences in American schools. As cited in Rosaldo (1989),
“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into the mirror and saw nothing” (ix).

Alarmingly, according to Murrillo, Wortham & Hamann (2002), “As of 1996, 19 states have “official English” laws in effect, and that number is currently increasing over time. For many Americans, concern over democracy, equality, liberty and civil and human rights are subordinate when it comes to the issues of language” (p. 44). The growing unacceptance about bilingual programs in schools builds upon Latinos’ pre-existing fears and anxieties of their own and their children’s education. Murrillo, et al. (2002), mention, “Language policies directed toward English language learners (ELLs): 1) fundamentally affect these students’ level of achievement, 2) influence their perception of self, and 3) either impede or promote these children’s social acceptance within, and acculturation to, the school community” (p. 193).

Sadly, many school districts in Georgia and North Carolina implemented a sink-or-swim submersion- a strategy that is likely to delay English-language acquisition, as well as inhibit academic progress in other areas (Murillo, et al., 2002). Fortunately, though, many Latino advocates rallied and persuaded the educational lawmakers to implement a reformed bilingual education plan. Hispanic parents and students wanted assurances that there would be regard for their heritage language, but at the same time that Spanish would not act as a barrier to their academic success. That is, they believed the Spanish language carried tradition, beliefs, and values they wanted to maintain (Murillo, et al., 2002). In Illinois, the beliefs of one teacher, Mrs. Osmond, were expressed in the following quote, “We need to respect and promote the primary language
as we teach English. I also have a firm belief that we should be teaching in the primary language, and teaching English until English is proficient, then we can switch over to English” (Murillo, et al., 2002). The choice between Spanish and English usage, or both, especially in the classroom, may have a strong effect on the Latino student’s development and overall future educational and personal ascendancy and achievement.

**Bilingual education on the horizon**

Many Hispanic parents advocate bilingual education, so their children can effectively learn the English language, but still maintain their Spanish language and Hispanic culture. Duignan & Gann (1998) note, many highly educated Cuban immigrants want to preserve the Cubans’ Spanish culture. Puerto Ricans and Chicanos want bilingual education to ease the steep high school and college dropout rates of their children. For Mexicans, bilingual education is the chance they have at gaining a new sense of self pride for the Hispanic poor and keeping their children in school (p. 233).

According to Duignan & Gann (1998), Spanish-speaking educators state there are at least five reasons why Hispanics dropout of school:

Many Spanish speakers fell behind early in their education because they did not know much English; by the time they reached high school, they were discouraged. Many complained of bad teacher attitudes toward Hispanic students because of the students’ color, accent, and poor English skills. Students did not hear enough English spoken at home or in their neighborhoods and received little help in reading and writing in English at home. Also, failing to see the relevance or economic benefits of further education, so they left school to find a job as soon as they could. Finally, a
high percentage of illegitimacy, concubinage, and abandoned mothers and children among Hispanic slum dwellers created a poor environment for learning and staying in school (p. 234).

Discriminatory policies against Latinos’ language and culture might be considered an inner, quiet surrender of educators being able to perform their duties fully and responsibly. Bilingual education marks and begins the pathway for multicultural education which respects the heritage language of a learner and equips them with the proper linguistic tools to succeed as an English language learner and user. With the growing number of Spanish speakers in the United States, the real question is how can we provide an excellent education to students, and at the same time, teach them English?

Valdés (2001), reports on four types of language learning programs in the United States. The first program mentioned is English-only, in which all subject matter is taught in English, and there is no support for ELLs (English language learners). Secondly, English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction with specially trained teachers where ELL children are taken from the regular classroom for further special English instruction. Third, is the transitional bilingual education or immersion program in which the minority language is used to teach concepts and English is used increasingly. Finally, is the maintenance bilingual education program in which the minority language and English are used to teach concepts after English is acquired (p. 15). According to Valdes, lack of skill in English is a critical barrier to Latino success. Most Hispanic immigrants who come to the United States have low education and skill levels and speak little or no English, and even the children of immigrants born here do not acquire proficiency in English and drop
out at an earlier rate. Limited English proficiency is the single most important obstacle to upward mobility among Hispanic immigrants (p.17).

Many Hispanic parents trust and rely on bilingual education to foster their children’s academic growth, but they also do not want their children falling behind, which in many cases, bilingual education has left Latino students lagging behind native-English speakers in academic settings, relating to low GPAs (grade point averages), unsatisfactory state test scores, and depressed high school and college/university graduation rates (Caravantes, 2006). A great divide persists on whether bilingual education is effective and useful or defective and detrimental to Latino students.

Bilingual education failing to capitalize on students’ growing knowledge of the English language may leave many Latino students discouraged and linguistically ill-equipped to successfully navigate their future academic challenges.

**Bilingual education alternatives**

Due to the uncertainty of the effectiveness of bilingual education, many states have taken a different route to serve their Latino students. In El Paso, Texas a bilingual immersion program was implemented, which differs from a traditional transitional bilingual education program. As mentioned earlier, Valdés (2001) reports on four different types of language learning programs, but he does not make a distinction between a transitional bilingual program and bilingual immersion program. A transitional bilingual education program has students being taught in Spanish for the first four or five hours of the school day, with only sixty to ninety minutes a day reserved for English language instruction. With bilingual immersion, most of the students’ instructional day is conducted in English from the first day of first grade, so the students are receiving more
instruction in English than in Spanish but still receive some instruction in Spanish. Gersten (1992) states, “Bilingual immersion is structured and designed so that students understand what they are taught, and so their interaction with the English language is meaningful from the very first day (p. 19). According to Gersten (1992),

Well-designed bilingual immersion leads to more rapid, successful, and increased integration of Latino students into the mainstream, with no detrimental effects in any area of achievement. The major strengths of the bilingual immersion program are its utilization of contemporary thinking on language acquisition and literacy development and its relatively stress-free approach to the rapid acquisition of English in the early primary grades (p. 20).

Many Latino students in the El Paso district benefitted from the bilingual immersion program. Parents were supportive of the program because it recognized and utilized their students’ first language, while promoting their second language, and transitioned them smoothly and quickly from immersion to mainstream classes (Gersten, 1992).

In California, the goal of the bilingual immersion program is to “maximize English learning in a rich English-language environment with no risk to their native language development” (Calderon & Rowe, 2002, p. 5). This program is similar to the bilingual immersion program mentioned in El Paso; students receive more instruction in English than in Spanish but still receive some instruction in Spanish. Not only are English language learners involved in this program, but native English speakers are as well; they have the opportunity to learn and utilize the Spanish language. The bilingual
immersion program is meant to be a bridge between English learning and L1 maintenance. It is a program in which students have dual access to language learning while providing understanding and appreciation of the culture. According to Calderon & Rowe (2002),

The benefits of this program include: 

**Educational**- Bilingual immersion programs benefit all students, whether they are minority or majority, rich or poor, young or old. Students can acquire high level of proficiency in the L1 and L2; 

**Cognitive**- Bilingual students achieve cognitive and linguistic benefits on academic tasks that call for creativity and problem solving. They also know about the structural properties of the language, including its sounds, word and grammar; 

**Sociocultural**- Bilingual persons are able to understand and communicate with members of other cultural groups and to expand their worlds; 

**Economic**- There are plenty of jobs that call for bilingual and multilingual proficiency; 

**Global**- Our nation can benefit from bilingualism and biculturalism as strategies and initiatives are put in place (p. 6).

The bilingual immersion programs are not subtractive; they promote balanced bilingualism. The curriculum assists in dethroning remnants of Western ethnocentrism in the American educational system. The bilingual immersion programs in Texas and California are a fruitful framework in which other states and educational institutions can model and build off of to reach Latino students, evoke change in their academic lives and annihilate feelings and occurrences of incompleteness, tension and frustration. Varieties of bilingual education can be an alternative solution to effectively educate Latinos.
This study is focused on the advancement of knowledge in the area of Latino education through gaining a deeper understanding of the current position of adult Latino students currently in school. The different types of language learning programs, such as the bilingual immersion, may presently, or in the future, be an influential factor that may determine a Latino’s success in American schools.

**El Señor [the Lord] and language**

For many Latinos, academic success in and out of the classroom can come from the support and involvement of the family, caring teachers and administrators, encouragement from peers and friends and from *la Iglesia* [the church] and *El Señor* [the Lord, God]. According to the Hispanic Pew Center, “about one-third of Catholics in the U.S. are Latinos; however, many Latinos are converting to join evangelical churches due to the desire for a more direct, personal experience of God” (2007). Latinos can feel a sense of belonging and community from either the Catholic or evangelical, Pentecostal church. The Pastor and brothers and sisters in the church can be important influencers of success for the Latino student. For a particular community of Latinos in the San Diego, California area, linguistic interactions at their Sunday school and services during the week socialize the adolescents to Christian Pentecostal identity that seeks to position them on *el camino* [the path], or God’s path, and away from *el mundo* [the world], or the larger society. Adult authorities wish to protect the youth from *perdición* (perdition), that is, falling prey to dangerous practices, including drinking, drugs and premarital sex (Ek, 2005, p. 78). Besides teaching the practices of Christianity, the church often also promotes literacy in *both* English and Spanish. According to Ek (2005), “The skills that students develop in churches-- which include reading, memorizing, and interpreting high-
level texts such as the Bible-- can be leveraged for classroom learning; and the church is an important space for language maintenance and the rising status of Spanish, which is deserving of respect and should be well-learned” (p. 91). Possibly for Latinos, their spiritual life can affect all other aspects of their life. Spirituality can plant a seed of security, comfort and strength in a Latino individual, which could propel the Latino student to forge ahead confidently and steadfastly in their academic pursuits.

The church can have a powerful role in shaping Latino students’ identities, morality, and language and literacy skills, as well as preparing them for certain challenges in the future. Many Latinos are aware that having even small faith can create change and possibilities in their life. The language, linguistic, and literacy skills and development the church offers should not be discounted as serving only religious instructive purposes, but should also be seen as fulfilling a deeper mission, one filled with success, desire and destiny.

¡Ayúdeles! [Let’s help them!]

The dynamicity of the Latino student has caused changes to occur in the American educational system, with regards to linguistic and cultural support. It may be unrealistic to discount the changes, challenges and hardships Latino students have had to endure. Elizondo-Serratos (2006), a University of Toledo faculty member pursuing her Ph.D in Higher Education, writes, “The recognizable challenges that Latino students face are inclusive of many obstacles and frustrations. These challenges include low familial support, few role models and mentors, cultural stereotypes, inhospitable climates in the high school setting, a sense of cultural misfit, lack of sensitivity from educators, and lack of dissemination of appropriate college prep planning information” (p. 2). Elizondo-
Serratos (2006) interviewed a handful of Latino students at the University of Toledo in 2006 to identify areas of success for Latinos and pinpoint educational barriers. She found three of the culprits of Latino success are, at times, lack of family support, lack of knowledge about educational options and resources and the feeling of not “fitting in” (p. 7). Elizondo-Serratos has spearheaded a movement at UT to help Latinos feel more at home and comfortable while at the university. She currently oversees the LSU (Latino student union) and is the director of Latino Initiatives. Her message to the UT Latino students who she comes across and to her own four children is, “STAY IN SCHOOL!” (p. 7). Although Elizondo-Serratos advice may be seemingly simplistic, it is powerful. Staying in school, albeit, can be difficult at times can result in being rewarding for the Latino students and their families.

Keeping Latino students in school may involve not only the will and determination of the students, themselves, but the triune workmanship and cooperation of the student, family and educators; the responsibility can lie within all three. The family, being the nucleus of everything, can strengthen the Latino’s heart for perseverance, but could also serve as guides for emotional and linguistic support. The Latino student, adapting to the English language and American culture, with a sense of confidence may develop an increased ability to deal with obstacles. Finally, support, guidance and assistance from educators should be highly valued.

According to Espinoza-Herold (2003), The Spanish language is an inherent part of a Latino’s identity. Devaluing and suppressing the language may, in the long-term, have negative underlying effects on the Latino students’ identity, their linguistic development, and may cause them to suffer in their educational pursuits (p. 70). Helping
America’s Latinos break down educational barriers begins in the classroom. The power of language choice brings acceptance and freedom in a Latino student’s academic life. Espinoza-Herold also notes, “By respecting and utilizing Spanish while learning and maximizing English language performance, the Latino student will no longer have to suppress the language close to their heart, but will have the ability to utilize and take ownership of both Spanish and English” (p. 49).

**Expanding knowledge**

Although Latino’s have reached a number of educational milestones involving Latino student enrollment, Latino students lagging behind other ethnic groups in education is still a growing cause of concern and discontent for American educators (Caravantes, 2006). More research needs to be conducted to identify the factors that deter Latino students from doing well in school, and focusing on what can be accomplished to eliminate or relieve some of these factors. As mentioned previously, more research on bilingual education and other alternatives to bilingual education is desperately needed. The value of the Spanish language, not only in society, but in education needs to be further studied as well. This study explores the current position of adult Latino university students by focusing on the formation of Latinos’ identity in school, language usage and choice issues, and on how educators and administrators can help guide Latino students to success. The benefit of this study will be the advancement of knowledge in the area of Latino students and education. Hopefully, this information can create a canvas of new ideas and opportunities that may truly help to fulfill America’s Latinos’ aspirations to be all they dream of becoming, and help them redeem a sense of completeness and fulfillment.
Chapter Two

Methodology & Vignettes

Background & role of researcher

Throughout my undergraduate studies of political science and Spanish, I developed a passion for social justice, especially concerning Latino immigrants. My best friend is a Latina, and growing up, I have watched her break through barriers, cultural and linguistic, to become a beautiful, well-educated, successful woman. I took a class, Latin American Politics, in the spring of 2011 with Dr. Jetsabe Caceres, which further sparked my interest in trying to understand all the dimensions of Latinos, their areas of struggle, concern, desire and hope. Latinos are becoming an influential and prominent part of the makeup of America. For example, in the recent 2012 presidential election, according to Lopez and Taylor (2012), “Latinos voted for President Barack Obama over Republican Mitt Romney by 71% to 27%. Obama’s national vote share among Hispanic voters was the highest seen by a Democratic candidate since 1996, when President Bill Clinton won 72% of the Hispanic vote” (p. 1). Discovering and unveiling problems whether educational, personal or political, that Latino students hassle with as a way of understanding and finding solutions became my focus. I conducted one personal in-depth interview with five Latino University of Toledo students to explore these issues. One participant is one of my best friends, another one a former student of mine, and one a former co-worker of mine. The other two participants were individuals who have been my classmates in previous undergraduate courses. This chapter will delineate the methodology used in the research project, including the rationale for the use of a qualitative research design, data collection as well as detailed descriptions of research
participants. In addition, the research design and materials will be described. The final section will describe the data analysis methods.

**Theoretical framework**

In Mariella Espinoza-Herold’s book, *Issues in Latino Education* (2003), she describes her experiences conducting an ethnographic, qualitative study of the subjective realities of young Latino high school students in the Tucson, Arizona area. Espinoza-Herold states, “This book should be read by every educator who has watched helplessly as alienation, anger, and frustration seep into the identities of bright and imaginative high school students, causing them to disengage academically and eventually drop out” (p. vii). Through multiple personal, one-on-one interviews with each student, she was able to gain their trust, causing them to be utterly open and honest with her. Her findings led her to ultimately voicing concrete recommendations for school reform. Her book is a compelling call for change and demonstrates that human relationships are at the heart of quality schooling, and must also be the start for educational reform (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). My study was designed to mirror Espinoza-Herold’s study, and was conducted by interviewing five University of Toledo Latino college students, to investigate the position of Latinos in American schools and to have a better understanding of their attitudes and experiences in schools. A qualitative research design with in-depth interaction was implemented for this purpose. The open nature of this qualitative study allowed for the discovery of unanticipated data, and had the advantage of attempting to provide insiders’ perspective.

The overall design of my study was the same as Espinoza-Herold’s, except, mine was done on a smaller scale. She interviewed her participants many times, in different
locations including their homes, schools and at their jobs. Her study lasted more than a year, which gave her unique insight on the growth and changes her participants made from being a freshman in high school to high school seniors; she also continued interviewing one of her participants, Carla, while she was attending college. I only interviewed each of my five participants once; the interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes each. Also Espinoza-Herold’s participants were high school students, whereas all of my participants, were University of Toledo students. Also Espinoza-Herold’s research was conducted in the Tucson, Arizona area, while mine was conducted in Toledo, Ohio. Through my study, I wanted to see if some of my participants’ experiences mirrored the experiences of Espinoza-Herold’s participants. I was also curious to see if some of my participants brought up other issues and concerns that Espinoza-Herold’s participants did not. Through my own experiences, I know that there can be quite a difference between being a high school student and being a college student. When I came to the University of Toledo, I felt like a morphed into a completely different person with different perspectives, goals and outlooks than I had in high school. Since Espinoza-Herold’s participants were high school students, and my participants, college students, I thought my participants may have a different perspective on the issues surrounding Latino education in America.

**Research questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of adult Latino university students’ attitudes toward and experiences of American schools. The benefit of this study would be the advancement of knowledge in the area of Latino students and education, which may help enrich the academic lives of Latino students and equip school
faculty and administrators to better understand their educational needs on a deeper level. Research questions were developed to help maximize understanding.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What do my participants say about the roles of language, economic status, attitudes towards Latinos, family and religious values affecting the establishment of their identities in American schools?

2. What positive and negative views or experiences do my participants report about bilingual education in the American schools they attended?

3. What do my participants say about their experiences with their teachers in American schools? What role did their teachers play in developing their future academic choices?

**Data gathering procedure & instrument**

Participants were recruited via university email, and then a time was appointed to conduct the interview. Interviews were conducted on the University of Toledo campus on the third floor of the Field House. I believe my participants represent the overall Latino population at UT; two of my participants were born and raised half of their life in Mexico. The others were born in raised in various Latin American countries: Venezuela, Puerto Rico and Peru. Not only do my participants represent a diverse range of countries, but each possesses a unique background as well as many rich, authentic personal and academic experiences. Each of the five participants came to live in the United States at various stages of their lives, for various reasons, and with different language backgrounds. The five participants took part in one non-recorded interview with me which lasted approximately forty-five minutes after I had gained their consent to do so. I
was not a neutral-objective observer; I did not stand outside or above the study, but I was situated and immersed within the study; thus, the research may reflect some of my values and viewpoints.

The open-ended discussion interviews were all conducted in English even though they had the option of doing them in Spanish; however, during the interview, participants sometimes used Spanish phrases to best exemplify and demonstrate their answer to a particular question. Throughout the interview, I recorded my participants’ responses to the questions on personal paper documents that are being kept confidential.

Participants

In order to maximize feelings of security and confidentiality for the participants in this study, pseudonyms are being used. The following is just a small glimpse into the lives of the participants.

Participant 1: Bella

Bella is an eighteen year old female from Maturin, Venezuela. She has been in America as a full-time student at the University of Toledo for two years now; she is a former student of mine. She is studying biology (with a concentration in pre-med) and plans to attend medical school to become a physician. She said that she would like to go to Africa and be of service to the impoverished peoples in that region. Bella mentions that her Catholic roots have influenced her to help and serve others. Bella currently does not have any family with her in the United States, but has said that it has been easy to make friends. Many of her friends are fellow Venezuelans, but she said she enjoys making American friends to learn more about the American culture and to better her English. Bella is bilingual; she started learning English when she was in middle school in
Venezuela. She believes learning English is very crucial to her success in the United States. One of the challenges to her success and happiness in the United States is loneliness, but she says her spiritual life and her knowing that God is with her helps her overcome the loneliness. Her family has been at her side, emotionally, every step of the way. Bella says she is closest with her father, and says she talks with him (in Spanish) almost daily to get his advice and encouragement. Bella said her experience thus far at the University of Toledo has been unforgettable and fulfilling. She said that she notices UT embraces diversity, and has not had any problems with her teachers or any of her classes. She says that I, the researcher, have been one of the most influential teachers for her because of my care and personal interest in her. She said she likes my style of teaching: being able to translate what I know in a simple way, and making learning fun. Bella says it was not hard to adjust to the American school system. She says everyone at UT has been supportive of her and actually wants to help her out. Although Bella says she still has far to go in her English-language learning pursuits, I, personally, could not find anything that would need improvement as far as her English usage goes. Bella’s conservative, Christian roots, and her tenacity and drive to help human beings everywhere, led her to tell me, when I asked her what her advice would be to other Latinos or Venezuelans coming to America, she said to, “never lose your values” (personal interview, July 10th, 2012).

Participant 2: Manny

Manny is a twenty-year old male from Vega Baja, Puerto Rico. He came to the United States one week after he was born; he is a former co-worker of mine. He fluently speaks Spanish, English and Italian. Hearing his Italian grandfather speak caused him to
learn Italian. He prefers to speak in English, but has to speak in Spanish with his family. He started learning English when he was in kindergarten. Manny’s favorite subject in school was English. Although Manny never found it difficult to make friends in school, he did have some troubles with some of his teachers, who, he thought, had unrealistic expectations of him. One example he gave me was of a Mrs. Vasquez who had told him he would never be good in English, but turned out to be one of the top students in her English class. He also said there were many times he felt discriminated against by teachers and school faculty. Manny is a Jehovah’s Witness which he says has had a large impact on his academic life. He said that there were some activities in school he just could not participate in due to his Jehovah lifestyle. Also he said that his tight knit, judgmental family often shaped his academic choices and decisions. Although Manny has had some disheartening school experiences, he says that overall, learning English has been beneficial because “I get to learn why people are the way they are. I get to identify what they are talking about, and it is easier to make friends.” Manny is going to be a first time father soon, and when I asked him what language(s) he would teach his daughter, he said definitely English, but also Spanish, as a reminder to her and himself of where he came from (personal interview, July 5th, 2012).

Participant 3: Nona

Nona is a twenty-three year old female from Mexico City, Mexico. She moved to America when she was eight years old due to her dad’s company being bought out by an American company; she is my best friend. She speaks Spanish and English, but prefers Spanish when she is around her family and English around her friends and at work. Nona has a Bachelor’s degree in marketing, and is currently the assistant marketing manager at
Wal-Mart Home office in Bentonville, Arkansas. She says she has been prominently influenced and shaped by her Catholic religion and by her muñe, her grandma (muñe is short for muñeca, meaning “doll”). She says, “my religion has shaped my ethics. I learned that nothing is worth compromising your integrity to achieve any goal.” Nona says that when she came to America when she was eight, the language barrier was her biggest obstacle. It only took her five months to become fluent in English. Once she learned English, her adaption into her school became a lot easier, and she was able to make friends. She learned English by attending a private tutor and with an ESL teacher at her elementary school. Although she sees the importance of the English language, she also thinks Americans, do indeed, value the Spanish language. She says Spanish being taught earlier in school to younger children is a sign of its growing importance. Besides the language barrier when she first arrived to America, Nona mentions,

One of the other challenges was overcoming the stereotypes people had of Hispanic people. The common stereotype that all Hispanics are tan, uneducated, poor, and illegal, etc… really annoys me because we are all not the same. Funny enough, I do not fit any of those stereotypes, and when I identified myself as Hispanic, most people have a hard time believing me because I did not “fit” into the profile. This only motivated me to break those stereotypes and try harder to prove that Hispanics are diverse, and we do not all fit in one profile.

Nona says that during her academic years, she never felt discriminated against, and she felt all the schools she has attended valued diversity. Nona says she has enjoyed all of her teachers as well, “they have all been truly passionate about teaching. I like teachers that
come to the classroom and are upbeat and engaging, to me those seem to be the best teachers.” Nona makes it her personal duty to be a good role model for her younger brother and all young Latina girls, so they can be inspired to achieve their goals and positively represent the Latino community (personal interview, August 1st, 2012).

Participant 4: Daniel

Daniel is a twenty-one year old Peruvian male who was born and raised in Toledo, Ohio. Both of his parents were born and raised in Peru, and moved to the United States when his mom was offered a job by a German-American couple to be a nanny/housekeeper in their home; he is a former classmate of mine. Daniel is the first person to ever attend college in his family. He is pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in International Business and Spanish at the University of Toledo. He is bilingual; he speaks both Spanish and English, preferring to speak English, but frequently speaks Spanish with his parents and his family in Peru. During the summers, Daniel works as a waiter in his family’s restaurant in Peru, so his Spanish is refined during this time. He sees being bilingual as an advantage. Daniel says he only caught a few glimpses of discrimination while in school. He attended a private high school, and there, he says, he felt he was looked at differently because he was one out of only two Hispanic men in the entire school. All of his experiences with his teachers have been positive. Even at UT, he feels very welcomed and secure. He is a part of the Latino Student Union, where he has been able to make many lifetime friendships and connections. He feels that the schools he has attended do value the Spanish language, which he is appreciative of, because he believes the Spanish language is an important makeup of his identity. He believes that Latino success starts at home. Daniel says, “My parents were not able to attend college, so my
parents did everything they could to make sure I did.” Daniel is a motivated, caring and an outgoing person whose drive for success was fueled by parental and his own personal desires to succeed and to create his own destiny (personal interview, August 5th, 2012).

Participant 5: Izzie

Izzie is a twenty-one year old female who was born in Leon Guanajuato, Mexico; she is a former classmate of mine. She immigrated to the United States when she was seven years old due to the collapse of her parent’s business. Her family moved to be with her dad’s family in Cleveland, Ohio. Both of Izzie’s parents speak Spanish, but she prefers to speak in English. She is currently pursuing her Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and Spanish, and is a part of the Latino Student Union, Student Government, lacrosse team and College Democrats. Izzie is very family-oriented and extremely close to her mom and sister. She always involves her family in all the decisions she makes. Izzie notes that, when she was young, attending school was sometimes rough for her. She said that she was not able to speak or communicate with anyone because she did not know English. Also she said the other kids in the lunchroom would make fun of her because of her Mexican-style lunch her mom would pack her! Izzie found it rough to make friends because of the language barrier. Also a disheartening experience with the principal affected her whole family; one of her principals had a meeting with her parents, saying that they could no longer speak to her in Spanish at home. She says both of her parents now speak English, but at the time, they only knew how to speak “broken English,” so they could not help her effectively at home. The school realized she was struggling and had a young Puerto Rican, Shanti, start to tutor her. Izzie said Shanti was not helpful because she said her Puerto Rican Spanish was quite different from her
Mexican Spanish. She then started attending ESL classes through the school and in the community, where she learned the bulk of her English. Izzie tells me that learning English is vital and crucial to success in the United States. Continuing forward, her experiences in middle and high school were fantastic; she made many friends and said her teachers were very supportive of her. One of her former teachers was monumental in getting herself into a prestigious all girls high school, and getting her younger sister in as well. Izzie is a motivated, focused and passionate young lady who hopes to obtain her MBA in the future and is simultaneously paving the way for other young Mexican girls to aspire to succeed and to cherish and take pride in their Mexican heritage (personal interview, August 12th, 2012).

**Data analysis**

Analysis of data began with referring back to my handwritten notes taken during the interview relating to each of my research questions: 1) What do my participants say about the roles of language, poverty, discrimination, family and religious values affecting the establishment of their identities in American schools? 2) What positive and negative views or experiences do my participants report about bilingual education in the American schools they attended? 3) What do my participants say about their experiences with their teachers in American schools? What role did their teachers play in developing their future academic choices? Coding categories were chosen based on specific elements of each research questions. The coding categories were as follows: a (language), b (economic status), c (attitudes towards Latinos), d (family) and e (religion) for research question one were formed. Categories of a (positive views) and b (negative views) and c (other, more) were formed for research question two. Research question three only had a (teachers).
Initials of the participant whose information went into each category were written by hand in the margin. For example, for one of my coding categories which was 1.a. (research question one, part a; how language affects identity, any response from all of my participants that related to language affecting their identity, was coded into this category. I put my participants’ real initials and pseudonym initial in in the margin next to the coding category. Each of my participants had responses that fell into this category. One of my participants, whom I put their initials as V.M., and also the initial of her pseudonym, B (Bella), in this case, was then handwritten in the side margin. (B) stated, “English language is very influential,” and “knowing English is good for traveling purposes. (M) (Manny) stated, “English is used to protect and defend oneself,” and “With a new language, comes a new perspective (helps you understand people better).” (N) (Nona) mentioned, “Learning English will help you advance yourself in the U.S.” (D) (Daniel) noted, “It is an advantage to know English and to be bilingual because both English and the Spanish language are valued in society.” (I) (Izzie) stated, “You have to learn English to get ahead in the U.S., and the Spanish language is seen as a bonus to her.” I then noted, as a side note to myself, regarding this category, that Izzie is a heritage language learner. Throughout the coding, if there were any other details that I wrote down during the interview that related to the coding category, I incorporated those in the section.

After coding all of my interview data, one of my fellow colleagues, another graduate student, assisted with a cross-check rate of inter-coder reliability for twenty percent of my data, which was coding information for one of my participants. The degree
of inter-coder reliability that was achieved was 92%. After cross-checking, summary notes were formulized to outline and synthesize all data information.

Glimpse of conclusions

In the next and final chapter, Chapter three, my findings will be reported and discussed. Also implications and limitations of the research will be stated. Finally, I will give suggestions for future research and a conclusion of the entire study will be formed.
Chapter Three

Results

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of adult Latino university students’ attitudes toward and experiences in American schools. Three research questions were formed to gain in-depth responses that reflect and melody the true experiences and feelings of the participants. The results are as follows:

Research question 1.

What do my participants say about the roles of language, economic status, attitudes towards Latinos, family and religious values affecting the establishment of their identities in American schools?

The role of language in establishing identity in school

Both the English and Spanish language play a crucial role in the development of participants’ identities in academic settings and in their personal lives. All of my participants acknowledged that knowing and using the English language can be seen as an advantage. Also all of the participants recognized the need to know the English language because as Bella says, “It is an influential language.” Nona recognizes that, “it is important to know English to get ahead in this country [the United States]”. She also noted that knowing English is important for travelling purposes as well. Manny had a slightly different view on why it is important to know English: “It [English] can be used to defend and protect oneself,” and he also states, “Learning a new language such as English gives one a new perspective on the world; it helps one understand people better.” All of the participants see the value in the Spanish language as well, and all except one
participant, Manny, feels the American educational system values the Spanish language, meaning the Spanish language is accepted and is seen as valuable.

**The role of economics in establishing identity in school**

Economic factors were the catalyst for four of my participants’ families need for geographical relocation [to the United States]. For one of the participants, Bella, economical factors outside of her own life, affected her decisions. Bella mentions that her drive, “to help poor people around the world,” has caused her to study pre-medicine. Manny moved with his family from Puerto Rico to the United States for cheaper living, a nicer environment and more job opportunities. Daniel also moved with his family from Peru because of a job opportunity offered to his mother by a German-American couple. Nona’s story mimics Manny’s and Daniel’s; she moved to the United States from Mexico when the company her dad worked for in Mexico was bought out by Wal-Mart, so they had to move to the United States in order for her dad to keep his job. Izzie’s parents’ business financially collapsed in Mexico, so the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio to be with her dad’s side of the family and to find new and better job opportunities. Four out of five of my participants were uprooted from their home countries for the sake of their parents’ financial futures. The relocations of the families caused the participants to have to bravely re-start their lives in a foreign place, and unbeknownst to them at the time, was the first step in their journey to becoming who they are today.

**The role of attitudes towards Latinos in establishing identity in school**

Overall, all the participants have had interactions with others who have been accepting and supportive of their Latino heritage, especially from professors, faculty and
students at the University of Toledo. According to four of my participants, when they were younger, they did face only some challenges with teachers and making friends.

Just like all four of my other participants, Bella says she, “LOVES UT!” She expressed to me, and the other participants did as well, that she has never come across any kind of discrimination or mal-attitudes towards Latinos. She, and the others feel that everyone at UT including staff, faculty and other students have been kind, receptive, supportive and encouraging. This was not always the case for the participants though. Bella has recently discovered that the University of Toledo medical school is no longer accepting international students into the program. As Bella sat talking with me about this issue, sincere concern surfaced on her face, and uncertainty emerged from her speech. She told me she would like to stay in Toledo for medical school, but now she does not know if there is any way possible she can get around this barrier. A sense of discouragement and disappointment thickened the air around us. Her head drooped when she said she might have to go back to Venezuela, or go to another state for medical school. I did not know the reason, and neither did she, why the medical school is no longer accepting international students. Although the school is not accepting all international students, not just students from Latin America; nonetheless, the sting of the pain and disappointment about this fact still pierces Bella’s mind deeply. During their primary and secondary schooling, Manny, Daniel, Nona and Izzie experienced some difficulties with teachers and/or classmates. Manny mentioned that when he was in elementary school, he was labeled as an “immigrant.” He also noticed that a lot of teachers and fellow classmates had a “white mindset,” meaning that he was not, “embraced kindly,” in school because he was not white. Daniel attended a private high
school in Toledo, and said he felt like an outsider because he was one of the only two Latinos in the school. When Izzie was in grade school, a principal conferenced with her parents telling them not to speak to her in Spanish while at home. Izzie also experienced some bullying by classmates, especially at lunch time, when her classmates would “make fun” of the Mexican-style food her mom would pack in her lunchbox. Izzie told me that at many times she, “felt lonely,” not only because of the language barrier, but because she too, just like Daniel, was only one out of maybe two or three Latinas in the entire school. Nona mentioned how people perceived her wrongly through the stereotypical lens of what it means to be a Latino- poor, lazy and uneducated. She worked hard in school and at her job to prove that the “stereotypical view” is NOT who she is.

The role of family in establishing identity in school

Family has affected the formation of each of the participants’ identities by influencing their decisions, guiding them through challenges, and, overall, by being a source of strength, comfort and support. Bella says her family is very, “supportive,” and she talks with her dad daily because she said he, “comforts and encourages her.” According to Nona, “In the Hispanic culture, the family is the center of everything.” Nona is very close with her muñe (grandma), her mom and her aunts. Nona still goes to church with her family every Sunday evening and afterwards they have a family dinner. She says she wants this tradition to carry through the rest of her life. Nona told me she talks with her mom about, “everything- from finances, boyfriends, girl drama, hair color, and diet/exercise to spirituality!” Izzie told me that, “her plans always involve family, and family is planned into what she is doing.” Izzie says she is very family-oriented. Her father left her mother a few years ago because as Izzie states, she said he was, “a macho
Mexican-man who tried to control everything, and even told her mom she would not be able to survive without him.” Her dad leaving the family has caused her family to draw closer to one another. Izzie told me that her mom had to find a job when her dad left, so she knows her mom works hard, so she is motivated to work hard too. Izzie, Bella and Nona all have smaller siblings, and they all commented how they want to be a good role model and inspiration to them. Daniel says his parents are his, “motivation to succeed,” because he wants his parents to see him succeed after all they have done and sacrificed for him. Finally, Manny mentioned how, “his tight-knit, very judgmental family influences him on all of the decisions he makes.” Manny opened up to me and told me, “His family was disappointed when he told them his girlfriend was pregnant, and he felt like he had failed them.” He says his mom and grandma are now excited for the baby, so he now does not feel so terrible about his situation.

**The role of religion in establishing identity in school**

Bella, Nona and Manny all described to me how religion has helped shaped who they are, and how it has influenced the way they live. The other two participants, Daniel and Izzie said that religion does not play a major role in their lives, although both identify themselves as Catholic. Manny, who is a Jehovah’s Witness said he lives by the teaching and practices of the religion. This, he said, “has caused him to not be able to take part in certain school activities and functions.” Bella and Nona both identity themselves as “Christians,” not necessarily as Catholics. Nona attends a non-denominational church with a Pentecostal base. Nona says, “Her religion has shaped her ethics; I learned that nothing is worth compromising your integrity to achieve any goal.” Bella mentions that while at UT, she has, “maintained her Christian values,” and that she learned, “the
beautiful value of willing to help others through her religion.” Willing to help people, Bella says, “is her main duty she wants to fulfill in life.” She says she wants to do this by going to medical school and assisting people in poorer regions of the world.

The role of personal interaction/communication in establishing identity

Another factor that arose as an important factor affecting identity, which was not part of my original research question, was personal interaction/communication with friends/others. Personal interaction helps language and social development. Daniel says, “It is important to get involved in clubs or activities at school because it helps you make friends and is good for networking purposes.” Manny mentioned, too, that making English-speaking friends was “crucial” in his development. Bella told me that most of her friends in Toledo are from Venezuela or other Latin American countries, but she said she has made a few American friends and enjoys spending time with them to improve her language and learn more about American culture. Nona and Izzie keep themselves immersed in the LSU (Latino Student Union) and other activities (cooking Latin dishes, listening or dancing to Spanish music, and watching Spanish movies) to maintain their Latina identity. Bella also made me aware of another organization she is involved with called Global Voices. Through this organization, she helps Americans and other ethnic groups learn about her culture and language, and in return the Americans and other groups teach her about theirs. Bella says she likes to help others learn Spanish and about Venezuelan culture while also benefitting by receiving help herself.
Research question 2.

What positive and negative views or experiences do my participants report about bilingual education in the American schools they attended?

Only one of the participants experienced bilingual education. Bella never attended any bilingual or ESL programs in the United States; she learned mostly all of her English in a private English school in Venezuela. Nona also never attended any bilingual or ESL programs; although, in elementary school, her teachers gave her additional practice after school, and she also had a private English tutor that her parents hired for her that came to her home and helped her. Izzie’s situation is similar to Nona’s; she never had any formal official bilingual or ESL education, but she did have assistance after school from her teachers, and she also worked with a tutor as well during school hours. The tutor that helped Izzie was from Puerto Rico, and Izzie said she really could not understand her tutor’s Spanish, so her tutor’s English instruction was fairly ineffective. Daniel said he already knew a lot of English before coming to the United States, and he said just from being in an American school and attending all classes that were conducted in English he was able to learn the English language very quickly, so he also never had any bilingual or ESL education.

Only one participant had ESL/bilingual education: Manny attended an integrated bilingual program in Miami, Florida. He said he liked his Spanish classes, but his English classes were, “miserable,” because he could not understand anything, and he said his English teacher, “had an attitude.” He said she made him feel, “stupid” if he did not get the answers right. He mentioned how his natural curiosity for learning was killed. After attending bilingual school in Miami, Manny moved to Detroit, Michigan, where he
attended an ESL class. He enjoyed the ESL classes because it gave him, “a sense of community.” He also enjoyed his instructor, who although she did not know any Spanish, he said she always tried her best to communicate effectively with not only him, but everyone. Also Manny said that in his ESL classes, instead of doing grammar drills all day, he was able to participate in, “fun, engaging games and activities that produced learning.” He said his instructor made him excited to come to class because he felt like he belonged, and he was able to have fun while learning.

Overall, all my participants had experiences in American schools where they felt welcomed and had a sense of belonging even though most of the participants were either the only one or one out of only a few Latinos in the entire school.

Research question 3.

What do my participants say about their experiences with their teachers in American schools? What role did their teachers play in developing their future academic choices?

All of my participants said they prefer teachers who are passionate, caring, fun, motivated, organized and explains subject matters well. All of the participants say their American teachers have been helpful, kind and understanding. Bella mentioned that, “American teachers are more helpful where Venezuelan teachers are frustrated [from being underpaid].” Bella mentions that at UT, there have been two professors who have influenced her: her math teacher who helped her “believe in herself,” and myself, whom she says, “I truly cared about her progress and explained topics well.” Nona had a marketing professor, Dub Ashton, who “inspired me to pursue my career in marketing. He had such a passion for marketing and he made me more interested in learning more
which further convinced me I picked the right major.” Daniel said that all of his teachers throughout his time in the Toledo Public schools were very supportive and helpful. Daniel says that even at the private high school he attended, his teachers were great; he said they were very smart and concerned about his success! Manny did have some minor problems with teachers who undermined and doubted his abilities, which motivated him more to succeed. Izzie mentioned that she has profoundly enjoyed her time at UT; all of her professors have been, “excellent!” She said that while in high school in Cleveland, there was a faculty member by the name of Mrs. Gibbons who took sincere concern in her family’s financial situation. At the time Izzie was attending a private high school, but was going to have to leave because her family’s inability to pay, but Mrs. Gibbons stepped in and convinced the school board of trustees to waive some of her fees and helped her receive a scholarship. Izzie was able to finish her high school years at the private school! Her younger sister also attends the same private school by means of Mrs. Gibbons help as well. Izzie says she still keeps in contact with Mrs. Gibbons and is deeply appreciative of her assistance.

Mostly all of the participants have had positive, uplifting and encouraging experiences with American teachers. Bella, Nona and Izzie each had certain individuals who had personally influenced and impacted not only their educational careers, but their personal lives as well in a memorable manner.

**Implications of research**

I believe this thesis may help deepen the knowledge and further help schools and administrators widen their understanding of Latino students to help breach the gap
between the Latinos who are falling behind and the ones who have paved their way to success and have truly made their mark in America.

In Chapter one, I quoted Caravantes (2006), “I am convinced that what will bolster Latinos in their journey towards success in the United States, more than anything else, will be to incorporate that which is adaptive from the Anglo-Saxon culture, and yet still retain the beautiful elements of their native Latino culture” (p. ix). I believe all of my participants have done just that; they have maintained their Latino identity, while immersing themselves in the American culture which has helped them all become successful individuals. My participants are cultural chameleons; they know when their Latino identity should be fully embraced, and they know how to use American cultural aspects to their advantage as well. Although many of my participants have Latino friends, many of them have realized the importance of having American friends and participating in Americanized activities and functions.

For the participants, attending school in America meant that learning the English language would be necessary and helpful in their educational pursuits, but I believe that, for my participants, learning English went beyond educational matters. My research has caused me to agree with Zantella (2005) that choosing a medium of instruction is far from being a purely linguistic issue. Educational choices are frequently subjected to the interests of the economy, administrators, families and individual students (p. 176). It was refreshing to me to see that my participants’ drive to learn English came from a personal, inner desire and choice to do so because they knew it would be vital for their future and important in their academic studies. It seems that none of them were utterly forced or
severely pressured into learning the language, but instead, they accepted and invited English language learning into their life gracefully.

Through my study, it did not seem that my participants’ faced an immense amount of discrimination based on their language or their culture. Many of my findings are contrary to Herold-Espinoza’s (2003) findings, when reporting about Carla and Manny, “they just want to llegar a ser alguien [become someone], but it is difficult for them when feeling like they are ‘living in a form of inner exile,’ and ‘do not fit in anywhere’” (p. 49). Herold-Espinoza also mentions that Carla and Manny felt the American educational system was working against them, and they were victims of linguistic and cultural devaluation; and they felt many of their teachers took a serious lack of interest in whether or not they succeeded” (p. 49). Many of my participants reported being immersed in educational environments where they were treated fairly and respectfully and were offered help and guidance in their English learning ventures. Also it seems for the most part the participants were all educated by individuals who genuinely cared about their progression and achievement as a student.

The participants’ language and learning experiences while in America have seemed to be fruitful and should serve notice to critics that Latinos, can indeed, be successful in America. Bella, Manny, Nona, Daniel and Izzie have all maintained their Latino identity and the language close to their heart, Spanish, while immersing themselves in the English language by attending and succeeding in American schools, and in the midst of everything, have transformed into some truly remarkable young adult Latinos!
Limitations of research

One of the limitations of this study is I do not have direct or firsthand experience of what it is like/feels to be a Latino in America. However, one of my participants, Nona, always jokes with me and says, “Erin, you were born to be a Latina!” I have a heart for Latino people: I love their language, accent, spirit, music, food and from what I have always experienced, their kindness and ability to have fun out of any situation! I told Nona, though, that I am grateful to be of Irish, Polish, Czech and Native-American descent, but for the purpose of writing this thesis, I wish I was Latina. It is like the old saying that goes, “you don’t really know until you walk in their shoes.”

Another limitation to this study was the size; I only had five participants, which probably means this study only slightly tapped the surface of the issues involving Latino education.

Location was another factor relating to limitation. My study was only conducted in Toledo, Ohio. If I have gone outside of Toledo, outside of Ohio, beyond the Midwest, maybe participants in other areas would have had completely different experiences and insights.

My participants all being college students could potentially be a limitation as well. Most of my participants have the financial means and have the privilege to attend the university, so maybe I would have gotten a different view of situations if I had interviewed participants who did not have the financial means/opportunities to attend a university.
The information elicited by this study is solely only a small representation of the entirety of issues, concerns and development regarding Latino students in American schools.

Suggestions for future research

There are many ways this research could have been improved. Some suggestions I have for future research include having more participants, including participants from many different regions of the United States, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and spending more time with each of the participants. In Mariella Espinoza-Herold book *Issues in Education* (2003), she was able to conduct an ethnographic study with two young Latino high school students over a period of several years in which she conducted multiple interviews at different increments of time with the students and their families. This allowed for her to identify patterns of change and deeply connect and communicate with her participants on another level. Espinoza-Herold also had some interesting discussion questions in her book: 1) As a teacher or school administrator, what steps would you take to change or reform school policies that you believe are detrimental to students’ successes? 2) If you were a school administrator, what kind of programs, policies and practices would you implement to allow students the opportunity to affirm their identity and to succeed in school? 3) How would you diminish the impact of negative interactions between students and some of the teachers? (p. 64, 92). It would be helpful if this study would have touched on some of the issues Espinoza-Herold questions above. Lastly, due to the diversity amongst Latinos themselves, it may have been beneficial to solely focus on only one group of Latinos, like just Mexican-Americans or
Puerto Rican-Americans. The immense diversity of the Latino population calls for careful examination of the issues concerning all of them.

**Conclusion: no longer void of purpose**

As I mentioned before this study was fueled by my personal passion for social justice issues and human rights. The basis of my three research questions were formed to have a better understanding of adult Latino students’ attitudes and experiences in American schools, because it is my belief, that with a deeper understanding of these issues, effective and meaningful action and change can occur which can initiate transformation in the educational lives of Latinos.

In Chapter two, one of my participants and my best friend said to me during our interview which has already been previously mentioned is that,

One of the other challenges was overcoming the stereotypes people had of Hispanic people. The common stereotype that all Hispanics are tan, uneducated, poor, and illegal, etc… really annoys me because we are all not the same. Funny enough, I do not fit any of those stereotypes, and when I identified myself as Hispanic, most people have a hard time believing me because I did not “fit” into the profile. This only motivated me to break those stereotypes and try harder to prove that Hispanics are diverse, and we do not all fit in one profile (Nona, 2012).

This research shows that yes, Nona, I see and I hope others start to see as well that you are all not the same. This research helps dismantle the strongholds and stereotypes that people hold against Latinos. It shows that the first step toward change is understanding and understanding begins with the truth. Like Nona said, Latinos are not all “tan,
uneducated, poor and illegal.” They have dreams and aspirations like Bella, who is on her way to becoming a doctor one day, or like Daniel who is on the right path to becoming a successful business man. Determination, dedication, and passion is the driving force behind many of their lives, like Nona, who is currently assistant marketing director for one of the largest corporations in America, or like Izzie, who has overcome personal and familial obstacles to be set to graduate soon from UT with degrees in political science and Spanish. The family is their core, their strength and their support, which is something, I’m sure they will pass along to their own children someday, like Manny, who already plans to make sure his newborn child will know Spanish. Bella, Manny, Nona, Daniel and Izzie all have taken ownership of the English language alongside their Spanish, and embraced American ways while still remaining true to their roots and to themselves. These are Latinos. The findings of this study serve as reflections of the participants’ lives and as a reminder to administrators and educators across America of the diverse needs of Latino students.

Research question one was as follows: What do my participants say about the roles of language, economic status, attitudes towards Latinos, family and religious values affecting the establishment of their identities in American schools? Each of the variables [language, economic status, attitudes towards Latinos, and family and religious values] each were uniquely significant in establishing my participants’ identities in American schools. Both the English and Spanish language played a crucial role in the development of participants’ identities in academic settings and in their personal lives. All of my participants acknowledged that knowing and using the English language can be seen as an advantage. Economic factors were the catalyst for four of my participants’ families
need for geographical relocation [to the United States]. The relocations of the families caused the participants to have to bravely re-start their lives in a foreign place, and unbeknownst to them at the time, was the first step in their journey to becoming who they are today. Overall, all the participants have had interactions with other who have been accepting and supportive of their Latino heritage, especially from professors, faculty and students at the University of Toledo. With regards to teacher experiences and making friends, four of my participants, when they were younger, did face only some challenges with teachers and making friends. Families influenced the participants’ decisions, guided them through challenges, and, overall, were a source of strength, comfort and support. Three of my participants described to me that religion has helped shaped who they are, and it has influenced the way they live, like Bella, who through religion, has learned that helping others can be rewarding and honorable.

Research question two was as follows: What positive and negative views or experiences do my participants report about bilingual education in the American schools they attended?

This research question was not fully answered because only one of my participants had participated in bilingual education in the United States, and the participant noted that his experiences with bilingual education were worthwhile and advantageous to him. The other participants mentioned they had some tutors and attended some ESL classes in which they were able to advance their English skills. Most of the experiences of the four participants were beneficial and helpful, except for some language barriers between Izzie and her Puerto-Rican tutor.
Research question three was as follows: What do my participants say about their experiences with their teachers in American schools? What role did their teachers play in developing their future academic choices? All of the participants say their American teachers have been helpful, kind and understanding. A few participants had minor problems, when they were younger, with a select few teachers due to a language barrier and expectations of the teacher.

My hope is that through this study, American educators and administrators gain a better understanding of adult Latino university students’ attitudes toward and experiences in American schools; and it helps expand on pre-existing knowledge of this subject in order to help better serve and guide Latino students onto the right path where they may find success and fulfillment.
References


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