Understanding Educational Inequality: Latino Students and Academic Achievement in the United States

Master of Arts Thesis – International Education

New York University

Leah Powers

Spring 2018
# Table of Contents

Introduction..............................................................................................................................................4

I. Statement of the Problem.....................................................................................................................5

Contextual History and Background........................................................................................................7

II. Why Social Inequality?.......................................................................................................................7

III. Theories Associated with Educational Inequality and the Academic Achievement Gap.........................11

   a. Reproduction Theory of Schooling..............................................................................................11

   b. Cultural-Ecological Explanation and Oppositional Culture Theory...........................................12

Factors that Hinder Latino Student Educational Navigation.................................................................19

   I. Latinos in the United States: Why Should We Care?.....................................................................19

   II. Socioeconomic Barriers to Achievement and School Segregation..............................................21

       a. The Learning Environment......................................................................................................22

       b. Triple Segregation....................................................................................................................23

III. Legal Barriers to Educational Access and Achievement.................................................................26

IV. Socioemotional Barriers to Achievement.........................................................................................28

V. Academic Institutional Barriers to Achievement............................................................................29

       a. Teachers and School Culture.....................................................................................................30

       b. School Tracking.........................................................................................................................31

Factors that Facilitate Latino Student Educational Success....................................................................35

   I. Refocusing Academic Curriculum.................................................................................................36

   II. Refocusing Teacher Preparation..................................................................................................38
III. Refocusing Educational Policy........................................................................41

Gaps in the Literature................................................................................43

Conclusion.................................................................................................44

I. What is Next?..........................................................................................44

II. Proposed Methodology.............................................................................45

Bibliography...............................................................................................48
Introduction

According to the authors of *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*, “The immigrant journey is driven by dreams for a better life…Most see education as essential for their children’s success in the new culture,” (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2010, p. 1). Of the over 55 million Latinos currently living in the United States, two-thirds are immigrants or the children of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Consequently, immigration and its implications define the experiences of most Latinos in the United States, especially Latino youth.

Growing up in a Latino immigrant family increases the risk of social inequalities including: having low socioeconomic status, less access to federal services and benefits, less knowledge about academic institutions and the educational process, limited English speaking and writing skills, and greater exposure to structural racism and expectation of oppositional behavior by educators, all of which hinder Latino youth progress (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2010). Despite these realities, access to education for many immigrant families is particularly important as it is viewed not only as the surest path to well-being and upward mobility, but it is also recognized as the primary “sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution” in American society (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 2). Immigrant families and youth alike recognize that obtaining a quality education, despite America’s unequal social structure, can lead to greater economic security, good health, and family stability in the new culture.
I. Statement of the Problem

Social scientists have spent decades researching Latino youth and academic achievement gaps, often concluding that Black and Latino youth are lower achieving due to their extreme disadvantage in the educational process (Suarez-Orozco, et al., 2010). The literature reviewed in this study will outline the Latino experience of educational inequality. I will pay particular attention to the factors which hinder and facilitate the educational navigation and successes of K-12 Latino students of low socioeconomic backgrounds in poor urban schools in the United States. In order to do this, I maintain a perspective that moves beyond looking at race and educational inequality through a simple, well-used model of Black and White. Instead, I determine this relationship must be situated at the center of educational analysis through a comparative lens which embraces a larger spectrum, including distinct student populations, specifically Latino students, which considers the intersectionality of race and ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and language.

In analyzing the abundance of research available on Latino youth, oppositional culture theory, and academic achievement gaps, I focus on the following questions:

- What are the specific factors that hinder and facilitate the educational trajectories of Latino students in the United States?
- Do academic institutions help or hinder Latino students’ educational trajectories?

With these questions in mind, throughout this project I analyze literature which discusses the role that racialized inequalities, socioeconomic status, and legal status play in Latino youths’ ability to achieve educational attainment, explore the influence of culture on student engagement and achievement in schooling, and question the academic institution’s role in cultivating systems of support for these students. Situating these issues within the oppositional culture theoretical
framework, I argue that Latino youth highly value education and believe it to be the primary path to success, even when they are disadvantaged by poor learning environments, lack of resources, school tracking, societal perceptions of oppositional attitudes and behavior, and a schooling system designed to reproduce an unequal social order.

I also posit that the identification of such factors is particularly necessary for educators as well as education policy makers, not only because these are the individuals equipped with an understanding of the functionality of the educational process, but because they regularly come into contact with Latino youth in the classroom context. Furthermore, an understanding of the challenges low-income Latino students face may allow researchers, educators, and community members opportunities to develop effective strategies which promote Latino student success. Without acknowledging and ultimately implementing effective strategies, Latino youth are left vulnerable to long-term poverty and a lifetime of extreme hardships.
Contextual History and Background

“Americans have created the extent and type of inequality we have, and Americans maintain it.” (Fischer et al. 1996)

I. Why Social Inequality?

The topic of social inequality has long been a significant theme in sociological research and academia around the world. Since the nineteenth century, sociological perspectives on inequality have continuously developed and been subject to debate, primarily reflecting the ongoing shifts in the world’s political processes (Winant, 2000). For most sociology scholars, social equality is not simply measured in terms of monetary wealth or material goods, but includes living standards and quality of life. Specifically, it is the role and intersectionality of characteristics such as race, class, and gender that form the axis which defines social inequality in a modern society (Fischer et al., 1996; Carter, 2005).

Over the last several decades in the United States, economic gaps, employment opportunity gaps, gender wage gaps, and academic achievement gaps have significantly widened. The current political debate regarding inequality is not whether anything can be done about it, but should anything be done about it. As some vehemently argue, sharp inequality among the classes is a necessary requirement for overall economic growth. Others argue that inequality is a natural result based largely on the intelligence level of individual Americans. This theory, posited by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994), suggests that the wealthy Americans are wealthy mostly because they are smart, the poor Americans are poor because they are dumb, and the middle Americans remain in the middle because of their mid-level intellect.
Due to America’s open and free market, people either rise or sink to certain social and economic levels largely determined by their intelligence level, and, because intelligence is “essentially innate, this expanding inequality cannot be stopped” (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Fischer et al. 1996; p. 6). Furthermore, when attempting to explain racial inequality in the United States, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argue Blacks and Latinos suffer more economic and social inequalities than Whites because they are inherently less intelligent. For this reason, while government intervention may reduce inequality gaps to some extent, individuals cannot change their race, and therefore little can or should be done about racial inequality. Furthermore, enacting policies to shorten gaps would be an injustice to the more intelligent and talented upper class Whites, which would consequentially damage the national economy (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

According to Fischer et al. (1996), this idea that inequality is “natural and fated” is not only debasing to the lower classes and persons of color, but it is insufficient as it fails to address the factors these researchers determine to be more significant in promoting inequality: family, neighborhood, school, and community (p. 6). Advantages and disadvantages people inherit from their parents, resources that are shared by friend groups, the quantity and quality of education, and the historical era into which they are born serve to encourage social and economic attainment for some while discouraging others. These social institutions, whether knowingly or unknowingly, provide or withhold the necessary means for attaining higher class positions in American society and work to reproduce the prevalent social order (Carter, 2005).

Most social science researchers, such as Fischer et al. (1996), argue that inequality is a social construction – a direct consequence born from our nation’s historical actions. It should not be ignored that, historically, policies and regulations established by the United States have
tirelessly worked to benefit people with white skin, most especially upper class white males. It is difficult to argue against the unparalleled role race has played in United States history. Even at its birth, America was far from a society of racial equals. At the top existed a tiny elite comprised of white wealthy merchants and owners of great estates, while at the bottom were non-American native populations and African slaves who did not even own themselves (Fischer et al., 1996). Such racial divisions and the discriminatory ideologies which contributed to these divisions were so prevalent at the nation’s origin, they became embedded within the institutional framework which informs the modern political organization and social structure of the United States today (Snipp, 2003).

The average American citizen might assume that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination in the United States ended with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Furthermore, one could surmise that the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, America’s first black president, provides sufficient evidence of a collective movement away from racial discrimination and inequality as a real and lasting national exercise. The slate has been wiped clean and people of all races, classes, and social backgrounds now exist on an even playing field in which everyone is provided opportunity to access the “American Dream.” Considering Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) reasoning on nature, it can be argued then that any group inequalities in outcomes since the 1960s can only be explained as a result of group inequalities in natural intelligence or talent.

Yet, as Fischer et al. (1996) dispute, although Americans are “wedded to” this belief that the problem of social and racial inequality is “a consequence of our nature rather than our historical acts,” the fact remains that inequality is and always will be a socially constructed consequence of Americans’ political choices (p. 9). For Fischer et al. (1996), any narrative
arguing nature and intellect as the basis for inequality in the United States is not only degrading to persons of color, but is shortsighted and monolithic when determining the consequential role political choice and action have played throughout American history. From this perspective, Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) theory on nature and intellect serve to provide a convenient justification for the allowance of continual prejudiced thinking and racist action in America’s institutions. In addition, it provides the White dominant class individuals a feasible escape from the responsibility of acknowledging and atoning for the historical grievances of those who have experienced consequential inequalities from the historical political choices and actions of their dominant social group.

Perhaps what is most significant about Fischer et al.’s (1996) position on inequality as a social construct is that it exposes a realistic potential for change in America’s institutions and society as a whole. When considering the question of why some individuals succeed while other individuals fall behind—whether in academia, the job market, or the economic ladder—the researchers argue that the particular characteristics needed to make an individual successful, such as having white skin, are only needed because the collective society agrees on said characteristics. These characteristics only matter to the degree to which society makes them matter (Fischer et al., 1996). In other words, a society has the potential to choose what it values and has the opportunity to act on those values through political and social action. Therefore, it can be argued that it is possible right now for the United States to develop a better collective understanding of the historical grievances regarding harmful past political and social choices, choosing to develop and enact policy to create a more equitable society among its institutions, its neighborhoods, and its families. Not choosing to understand the past or act in the present
endorses the popular myth of nature, intellect, and white superiority, further polarizing the nation’s people groups.

It should be noted that developing such an understanding in order to determine more equitable policies is not monolithic in nature, but is heavily nuanced and multidimensional. Each institution contains its own problems and complexities and will require review within its own context. For the purposes of this paper, I will be reviewing academic institutions and educational inequalities, particularly as they relate to and affect K-12 Latino students, academic achievement, and access to educational resources.

II. Theories Associated with Educational Inequality and the Academic Achievement Gap

There is a long history in the United States of investigating causes of poor academic performance among students and, most often, these studies focus on the intersectionality of race, socioeconomic class, and gender (Conchas, 2006). It is no surprise to educational researchers that certain racial and socioeconomic groups benefit from schooling while others do not—a disparity that is particularly disconcerting for educators and educational policy makers. Substantially reducing racial and social inequality in educational achievement requires a better understanding of and implementation of theories and strategies that work to understand and ultimately reduce the achievement gap in schools, which in turn would help decrease racial and social disparities in crime, health, and the overall family structure (Harris, 2011).

a. Reproduction Theory of Schooling. Over the years, researchers have offered numerous theories to explain the academic achievement gap with varied perspectives on social class, gender, and most especially on the role of race. Reproduction theories of schooling are most often used by educational researchers to explain academic achievement gaps as they relate
to the intersectionality of these three actors. In examining prominent reproduction theories regarding schooling, Conchas (2006) explains that these theories suggest that schools in the United States are organized institutions necessary for maintaining capitalism’s need to “reproduce skilled laborers, to legitimate the notion of meritocracy, and to reinforce unequal class relations” in the larger social organization of life for the purpose of maintaining a robust economy (p. 8). However, according to Conchas (2006), what is often missed by reproduction theorists, is the importance of race in their theoretical schema as they all too often construe racial and ethnic inequality in schooling as “byproducts of class relations” in society (p. 9). He continues that for some of these reproduction researchers, although race is considered a significant actor in historical and economic processes involved in the class and gender struggles between various social groups, race is not necessarily solely responsible for inequalities or achievement gaps in schools. On the other hand, Conchas (2006) explains there is also a wide variety of research that focuses directly on race and ethnicity as the primary actor influencing inequality. These studies, however, employ a narrow Black and White model which consequentially “distorts the experiences of other racial minority groups” in schooling (p. 9). Furthermore, this Black and White framework limits the understanding of school failure to a common phenomenon among low-income Black youth and serves to promote the notion of viewing low-income students of color through a deficient lens. For Conchas (2006), race is, in fact, a central actor in school inequality and academic achievement, and he encourages researchers to consider the nuance, fluidity, and range of schooling experiences among diverse groups of students.

b. Cultural-Ecological Explanation and Oppositional Culture Theory. Similarly, Harris (2011) claims that accounting for academic achievement gaps in schools cannot be
blamed on any one thing; it is a complicated and multidimensional issue. Factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education, underfinanced schools, low teacher expectations, badly designed curricula, low parental involvement, limited access to resources, and the role of school as society’s primary reproducer of the social order all intersect with racial identity and play significant roles in overall student achievement. In his research, Harris (2011) confronts what are perhaps the most controversial theories used to explain educational inequality: the theories rooted in the belief that achievement differences are primarily genetic and biological in origin, as well as the popular belief that minority students have an antagonistic relationship toward schooling, which they express through anti-schooling, or oppositional, behavior (Harris, 2011). This biological explanation recalls Herrnstein and Murray’s popular theory that African Americans and Latino Americans—especially Mexican Americans—are inherently less intelligent than White Americans based on the notion that Blacks and Latinos are “genetically inferior” (Fischer et al. 1996, p. 171). According to Harris (2011), due to a severe lack of convincing empirical evidence regarding this claim and its relationship to the academic achievement gap, this theory has been effectively debunked. Unfortunately, as Harris (2011) notes, a considerable portion of educators as well as the general public in the United States continue to regard this falsehood as common sense fact today.

Similarly, the theory that Black and Latino students resist schooling and prefer failure to upward mobility has been increasingly embraced by educators and the general public since it was first proposed by John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham in 1986. For decades, John Ogbu and his associates have attempted to understand the reasons behind low achieving racial minority youth and have ultimately determined that differences in academic achievement result from minority groups’ initial incorporation into American society and minority groups’ perceptions of the
limited opportunity structure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Conchas, 2006). This “cultural-ecological explanation” developed by Ogbu and his associates emphasizes the role of historical racism and institutional oppression in shaping ethnic minority students’ opposition to the conventional routes of academic success which are available to the dominant White group (Valenzuela, 1999). Ogbu and his associates even go so far as to classify racial groups into “voluntary” and “involuntary minority” group status and suggest that each group interprets the social order of the United States differently, based upon their own group’s historical experiences (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Conchas, 2006). According to Ogbu & Simons (1998), voluntary minorities are immigrant groups such as the Irish, Jews, Chinese, and Koreans who historically moved to the United States of their own free will, typically for economic, social, or political reasons. Involuntary minorities, such as Native Americans, Africans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, are groups who historically have been involuntarily and permanently incorporated into American society through slavery, conquest, or colonization. All of these ethnic groups have vastly different social histories and migration stories. However, it is the members of the involuntary migrant groups that have experienced the most extreme economic, political, and social marginalization in United States society (Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Conchas, 2006; Carter, 2005).

The case of Mexican Americans is especially complex since they are more closely aligned with African migrant group experiences than with other Latino subgroups. For example, after the Mexican-American War of 1848, the United States controlled Texas, California, and much of the southwestern region of what later became the contiguous United States of America. Mexicans found themselves under the control of the very group they had just struggled to defeat. Likewise, Americans treated Mexicans as beaten foes and subsequently exploited them for cheap labor (Fischer et al., 1996, p. 176). Eventually, Mexicans were perceived as conquered
immigrants in the United States and thus treated as inferior subordinates. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) and Abrego & Gonzales (2010), among other social science researchers, argue that such attitudes and perspectives regarding Mexicans and Mexican Americans have remained in the United States’ collective conscious and have been carried into the school environment, making academic achievement and success difficult for these minority students.

Ogbu argues that, in present day United States, due to the involuntary classification and subsequent treatment of its minority groups, students such as African Americans and Latinos are low achieving in school because they recognize that in order to succeed in an American institution, they would be required to “act white” and therefore assimilate into White culture, but in turn would receive minimal payoff for putting any effort into schooling compared to their White counterparts (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). In other words, minority youth have consciously or unconsciously chosen to define their cultural identities in opposition to whiteness by refusing to speak standard English, do their schoolwork, earn high marks, or fully engage in school because they do not want to be seen as embracing behaviors that they label as “acting white” by their peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Carter, 2005). Therefore, minority students do not perform as well as White students because they desire to avoid the “burden of acting white,” which they perceive to have little benefit in their academic and economic upward mobility (Carter, 2005, p. 5). This belief regarding oppositional culture among Black and Latino students, which includes having an antagonistic relationship towards schooling, feeling a burden to act white in order to achieve, and expressing their discontent through anti-schooling behaviors is so pervasive in the United States’ collective cultural mindset that many educators as well as the general public, regardless of ethnicity, consider this theory “practical” and “common sense” (Harris, 2011, p. 3).
Additionally, many educators often attribute the racial achievement gap not only to students’ opposition to “acting white,” but to characteristics such as differences in student motivational levels, work ethic, and school engagement rather than to causes which may stem from the academic institution, such as curriculum development or classroom management. Harris (2011) argues that these characteristics expressed by minority students and avoidance of critical analysis of academic institutions by educators are typically used as mechanisms through which oppositional culture is asserted and reproduced in schools. Teachers often perceive that Black and Latino students display a greater oppositional disposition toward schooling through disruptive and argumentative behaviors, and lower pro-schooling dispositions through displays of effort, attentiveness, and eagerness to learn both inside and outside the classroom, than White and Asian students (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Harris, 2011).

Despite the popularity of Ogbu’s theories over the years, Harris (2006, 2011) argues against postulations of oppositional culture and “acting white,” claiming these ideas are overly simplistic and generalized to entire population groups. In fact, Harris (2011) cites significant quantitative and qualitative research on oppositional culture theory in his book *Kids Don’t Want to Fail*, which suggests that the notion African American and Latino students are less engaged with schooling than other racial and ethnic groups to be contrary. It should be noted that in his book, Harris (2011) does not entirely reject the existence of oppositional sentiment towards Whiteness among some minority students in schools, but he clarifies that such attitudes tend to exist among subgroups of students rather than entire populations of Black and Latino students.

Harris (2011) also recognizes that much of the prior research on the academic achievement gap agrees that culture plays a significant role in a student’s academic trajectory. However, for Harris (2011), attributing a culture of resistance to Black and Latino students based
upon their academic achievement is a mistake. He argues that the academic achievement gap would continue to exist without the presence of a pervasive oppositional culture among minority groups and asserts that oppositional culture should not be considered synonymous with poor academic achievement, but should be considered as an explanation for poor achievement. This perspective allows for the removal of the deficient lens through which educators and academic institutions often view Black and Latino students in order to consider the possibility that most of these minority students enter schooling with a favorable disposition, as well as consider alternative reasons for the persistence of the racial academic achievement gap.

In reviewing the quantitative and qualitative research from Harris (2011) and Conchas (2006), most of the Black and Latino student participants suggest they highly value education, desire further schooling, and consider schooling the best path to upward mobility, despite the racial, social, and gender barriers they inevitably encounter. These beliefs among minority students recorded by Harris (2011) counter the provocative claims of oppositional attitudes and “acting white” proposed by Ogbu and Fordham in previous decades. Furthermore, in removing the lens of deficiency regarding these minority students and viewing them as favorable to education and success, the problematic nature of Ogbu’s cultural ecological framework becomes more apparent. It can be argued that this presentation of minorities as culturally and behaviorally oppositional to Whiteness promotes “we-they” distinctions in American society which only serves to reinforce academic achievement patterns already established by academic institutions as they aid in the construction of the “otherness” of minority groups (Valenzuela, 1999; Harris 2011).

Most researchers who share Harris’ perspective of oppositional culture theory agree to remove the lens of deficiency promoted by Ogbu and instead implicate socioeconomic status as a
primary reason for the academic achievement gap. However, the exact components which account for this vary according to each racial group and their group experience in the United States. For this purpose, the remainder of this paper will focus on Latino student populations, their experiences in the schooling process, and their place in the academic achievement gap.
Factors that Hinder Latino Student Educational Navigation

“The strong relationship between poverty, race, and educational achievement and graduation rates shows that, but for a few exceptional cases under extraordinary circumstances, schools that are separate are still unquestionably unequal.”

–Harvard University Civil Rights Project (2008)

I. Latinos in the United States: Why Should We Care?

Over the last several decades, the United States has rapidly become multicultural and multilingual. Historically, the United States has touted its diversity as a strength, while underrepresented communities of color have struggled to attain full and equitable participation in all facets of American life. This inequality begins with education. According to Contreras (2011), although the public educational system in the United States is often referred to as the “great equalizer” of our democratic system, it has fallen short of its potential to facilitate social and economic mobility among communities of color. This situation only stands to worsen as the systemic rollback of civil rights policies by federal and state governments continue. This fact is evidenced by the rollback of various policies across the nation: Arizona’s ban on ethnic studies programs in public schools in 2010; California’s Proposition 187 which targeted immigrant rights to public services; English only initiatives in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts; and a host of anti-affirmative action initiatives in California, Washington, Michigan, and Texas since 1995, have all had direct effect on educational institutions and have contributed to the inequities experienced by communities of color (Contreras, 2011).
The influence of the Latino population is expanding in several aspects of American life, particularly in their importance to the economy as consumers and workers, their presence in neighborhoods across the country and their visibility in popular culture, politics, and the media. Yet, little investment has been made to ensure Latino youth educational attainment, success, and future occupational and economic stability. Instead, there remains a xenophobic approach to Latinos in the United States which has led to the development of policies which attempt to deny Latinos access to necessary human and civil services and exclude them from institutions which serve to shape a democratic society. As I write, the immigration debate is at the forefront of national discourse with special attention placed on Latino populations. Several anti-immigrant policies and proposals have been developed in the last few decades with a noticeable increase since the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001. However, researchers such as Contreras (2011) argue these policies disproportionately target and disadvantage Latinos. She contends for a change in focus on policy regarding Latinos and claims that unless patterns of racial profiling end and addressing of limited investment in Latino youth education becomes an urgent priority across the country, the fate of the nation is at stake, with a significant portion of the population likely to be confined to lower and working classes, if not subject to deportation and mass incarceration. What should be a concern to all Americans is that should the nation fail to foster support for the Latino community in the United States, the nation’s workforce will fall short of meeting the demands of the global marketplace, and the society will experience further stratification and internal conflict (Contreras, 2011).

Current demographic data relating to Latinos in the United States paints a stark picture of the obstacles faced by Latinos and reveals why it is important to focus on the educational experiences and attainment of Latino youth in this country. According to a recent publication
from the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), estimates indicate there are nearly 55.4 million Latinos living in the United States, which represents 17% of the nation’s total population, making Latinos the largest racial or ethnic minority in the nation. This estimate did not take into consideration the approximately 4 million residents of Puerto Rico, a major U.S. territory located in the Caribbean. Moreover, more than one of every two people added to the U.S. population was Latino, constituting a 2.1% increase from July 1, 2013 to July 1, 2014, indicating the Latino population the fastest growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Perhaps what is most disturbing, as reported in the 2015 report of the National Center for Children in Poverty, is the fact that nearly 61% of Latino children have been living in low-income households. Only 61.4% of these youth have completed a high school education. 15% of these high school graduates have enrolled in a college degree-seeking program after high school (Jiang, Granja, & Koball, 2017). Within this growing population of Latino school-age children, high levels of poverty, low academic achievement, and high dropout rates persist. Such realities contribute to the reproduction process of an already unequal American society, further signifying that Latino students’ school achievement should be among the top priorities of educational policy makers today (Conchas, 2006).

II. Socioeconomic Barriers to Achievement

School going youth from low socioeconomic status (SES) families that attend low SES schools face particular challenges when it comes to academic achievement and upward mobility (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Unfortunately, years of consistent migration of middle class families away from urban areas has resulted in an uneven distribution of racial groups in large geographic areas, a phenomenon typically referred to as racialized segregation (Shedd, 2015).
Furthermore, various structural transformations to the United States economy, specifically in areas in which ethnic minorities tend to live, have resulted in extreme cases of concentrated poverty within these segregated geographic areas (Harris, 2011). These disadvantaged communities lack resources to adequately sustain public services and neighborhood institutions such as schools. As a result, these neighborhoods become characterized by high unemployment which contributes to making these impoverished areas breeding places for crime, violence, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity. Such conditions disrupt the learning process as they inhibit the development of the educational skills necessary for academic achievement (Harris, 2011).

a. The Learning Environment. The American population assumes that school is a safe haven for students. However, researchers point out that depending upon the physical location of the school, security and quality can vary enormously (Shedd, 2015). Furthermore, the school environment has a tremendous influence on student engagement and academic performance. While poverty has long been recognized as a significant risk factor to educational access and achievement, Latino youth face particular risk factors not experienced by other racial and ethnic populations. According to research conducted by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010), Latino immigrant children raised in circumstances of poverty are more likely to live in overcrowded housing located in extremely violent and drug infiltrated neighborhoods, less likely to have health insurance, and are more vulnerable to an array of psychological distresses which impair educational outcomes, including difficulties concentrating and sleeping, anxiety, and depression. Moreover, neighborhoods in which these children live and go to school are often saturated with gang activity and crime, while the schools themselves, which should ideally provide a safe space for children, are segregated, overcrowded, and understaffed. Suarez-Orozco et al.’s (2010)
research further claims that students’ perceptions of such violence in their schools and neighborhoods are correlated with declines in not only academic performance, but also supportive school-based relationships, intellectual curiosity, cognitive engagement, academic engagement, and even their levels of English proficiency (p. 41).

Additionally, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) report that resources, from books and school supplies to access to guidance counselors and librarians, are scarce in these locations. The buildings are often run down with peeling paint and garbage lining the school yard. Due to inadequate financial support, school curriculum is typically outdated and irrelevant to the cultural and social situations of the students. Meanwhile, as Thompson (2011) uncovers in his research, educators who work in such environments constantly face discouragement and are at constant risk of burnout. Thompson (2011) explains that these educators often label low SES Latino youth, particularly those who do not speak English as a first language, as “special needs students” who display “oppositional behavior to schooling” and are therefore placed in “dumbed-down classes” in which they fall further and further behind their peers due to their perceived resistant behaviors and language deficiencies (p. 162). Such environments promote neither learning nor a sense of safety for students, thus consequently failing to inspire students to continue their education beyond high school.

b. Triple Segregation. Suarez-Orozco et al., (2010) underscore the fact that most Latino students attend highly segregated schools in which the majority of their peers are students of color and come from low income, working class families. Despite the Supreme Court 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas decision designed to reduce school segregation, schools across the United States arguably have become increasingly re-segregated (Landmark Cases of the Supreme Court, 2012). Some critics argue this phenomenon to be a direct result of
Supreme Court case *Plyler vs. Doe*, and claim the inclusion of immigrants and undocumented students has fueled a robust growth in public schools of unprecedented waves of immigrant students resulting in a “modern-day version of segregation” (Thompson, 2011, p. 161). However, as Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) point out, one noteworthy difference in this new pattern of school segregation is that it is not only based on the students’ race. There are social class and linguistic divisions as well – what Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) term “triple segregation.” Their research suggests the most troubling factor regarding triple segregation is its inexorable link to negative educational outcomes including: an atmosphere of low expectation among students and educators, perceptions of oppositional behavior, low academic performance, reduced school resources, lower achievement on standardized exams, greater school violence, and higher dropout rates.

While the roles of racial segregation and poverty have previously been discussed in this paper, it is equally important to note the disparate achievement levels of English Language Learners (ELLs) compared to their peers, even among students within low SES schools. According to Contreras (2011), students who consistently speak another language at home, such as Latino immigrant students, are slower in developing the English reading and writing proficiency skills necessary for achievement in advanced classes as well as on standardized exams. As a result, these students are often labeled as “low achieving” and are further stratified into academic tracks that are less academically challenging, thus limited in their options for upward mobility. For Contreras (2011), this lack of English proficiency is not evidence of low intelligence or oppositional behavior to education by Latino students as former researchers, such as Ogbu, have suggested. Rather, it illuminates the few options and minimal resources provided to adequately address the needs of ELLs in American schools. Adequate funding for English
language learning programs, teacher professional development opportunities, and appropriate assessment measures for ELL achievement is tenuous at best and varies widely across state and district contexts. In addition, some regions across the United States continue to actively work to promote “English only” policies in school curriculum and instruction which only serves to further promote the continuation of disparity in achievement for ELL students (Contreras, 2011, p. 66). Denying ELL students the opportunity and tools they need within schools to learn English and become biliterate, according to Contreras (2011), is to deny them skills that “complement and support a healthy democracy” which education claims to foster (p. 150).

It should be obvious that unequal access to resources leads to unequal outcomes for students. As Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) explains, the divisions of race, social class, and language, which comprise the “triple segregation” context of a school, not only work to undermine a students’ ability to learn, but depresses a students’ capacity to concentrate, their sense of security, and their ability to experience trusting relationships in school (p. 91). Students in these schools are more likely to disengage over time as a response to long-term difficulties due to the impoverished community and school environment as well as the consequential circumstances of triple segregation.

What is so significant about this finding for social scientists is the knowledge that stratification within educational institutions commonly reflects the racial and social hierarchies and hostilities of the larger American society and culture. More specifically, as schools work to reproduce the social order so prominently established in the United States, the stratification process gives way to continued educational disparity (Conchas, 2006). This challenge of educational stratification and inequality experienced by Latino students and its promotion by
American society at large is made even more difficult by the legal battles Latinos have faced in recent decades and continue to face today.

III. Legal Barriers to Educational Access and Achievement

Blacks and Latinos in the United States have pursued hard-fought legal challenges for quality education and equity in school resources: the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 to dismantle segregated schooling; Castañeda v. Pickard in 1981, a case brought to court by Mexican American families to ensure adequate bilingual education, access to quality school programs, and equal participation for their language minority children; to Plyler vs. Doe, which guaranteed free public primary and secondary education for all undocumented alien children across the United States. Blacks and Latinos have made small steps towards ensuring equitable educational attainment for their children (Carter, 2005).

However, decades after implementing desegregation plans in schools, the unequal academic performances between racial and ethnic minorities and White students have persisted. While there have been improvements in school enrollment rates over the years, unequal performances of minority and White students on standardized exams have persisted. Black and Latino students continue to score at least two grade levels behind White students, have been suspended from school at disproportionately higher rates, and are consistently more likely than White students to drop out of school prior to graduating (Brenner, 1998; Carter, 2005).

The Latino population group is further stratified by legal status in ways Black minorities are not, especially if they are undocumented immigrants in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, most of the demographic statistics previously stated in this paper do not factor in the estimated nearly 12 million unauthorized immigrants currently residing in the
United States (Pew Research Center, 2017). Due to the 1982 Supreme Court decision *Plyler vs. Doe*, more undocumented Latino youth are growing up with access to K-12 education than ever before, yet they continue to face legal restrictions and economic barriers to higher education and ultimately to the workforce (Yates, 2004).

Despite the passing of *Plyler vs. Doe* in 1982 and significant increases in immigrant students in public schools across the United States, the fact remains that undocumented Latino students cannot access higher education legally or financially because they do not qualify for financial aid from government agencies (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Coupled with federal law mandates that deny undocumented aliens in-state tuition rates available to state residents as well as the fact that many scholarship organizations require proof of legal status for eligibility, the possibility of continued education post high school remains extremely unlikely for undocumented Latino youth (Yates, 2004). Latino students largely respond to their financial needs by working at least part-time during the academic year and/or full-time during the summers. While these wages help cover living expenses and tuition, they typically do not fully cover additional costs associated with attending college (Contreras, 2011). Furthermore, jobs these students acquire, from construction worker to restaurant waiter to office janitor, leave little time for students to engage with professors and peers on campus. As a result, students are left isolated, ultimately affecting levels of engagement in school (Yates, 2004; Contreras, 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010).

What poses a further challenge is that pathways to citizenship in the United States for undocumented immigrants have been increasingly restricted between 1986 and the early 2000s (Yoshikawa, 2011). An estimated 65,000 undocumented Latino youth graduate from American high schools each year, yet because of their immigrant status, educational and economic
Educational Inequality | Powers

Trajectories are stalled and derailed for these students as well as countless others who leave high school prior to graduation (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

IV. Socioemotional Barriers to Achievement

In addition to concerns regarding their higher educational and economic futures, many Latino youth, whether undocumented themselves or the children of undocumented parents, live in extreme fear of detection and deportation. Most immigration scholars, including Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010), agree that migration is a family affair and the process itself inflicts tremendous stress and psychological unrest on its participants, children in particular (p. 54). The reunification of entire families can take several years, consequently disrupting familial bonds which can have profound psychological and developmental implications for children and can ultimately affect their academic achievement and upward mobility (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 55). Due in large part to this struggle, Abrego and Gonzales (2010) determine that Latino families with undocumented family members constantly worry about becoming targets of detection and harassment, causing many parents to avoid obtaining assistance from government sponsored agencies which provide healthcare, food stamps, and other basic needs. Their research shows that the first concrete sign of this avoidance is seen in schools. This suggests that as undocumented immigrant fears of detection and deportation increase, the less likely children of these families will attend school regularly and some youth may drop-out prematurely (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Thompson, 2011).

Additionally, the prevalence of anti-immigrant sentiments across the United States further stratifies and psychologically harms immigrant Latino youth and their educational ambitions. Bhabha (2014) explains, the dominant perception of immigrants by American society
places youth in a vulnerable position as they often are recognized as “innocent” and “human like me” due to their child-like qualities. Simultaneously, society’s recognition of their “otherness” results in a hostility or indifference, causing them to be treated as “separate, dispensable, and threatening” (Bhabha, 2014, p. 13). This point of view not only fuels fear of detection and deportation among immigrant families, but creates an atmosphere of unrest and tension for school-going youth, which further disrupts the learning process.

V. Academic Institutional Barriers to Achievement

Thompson (2011) states that such tensions are as old as schools themselves. However, due to the significant influx of Latino immigrants into the United States in recent years, schools are “more frequently charged with preparing students to become productive members of a society that seems increasingly hostile to them” rather than being safe spaces of inclusion and holistic instruction (p. 162). Carter (2005) explains that many ethnic minority students experience school as a sorting and selecting machine which penalizes those with different cultural attributes than the dominant White standard. This explanation supports theories posited by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) as well as Ogbu (1986) who contributed to this common belief that any deficiencies in academic performance stems from cultural attributes and opposition to Whiteness. Nevertheless, Carter (2005) argues that rather than simply blaming culture for low achievement, performance is determined by the way in which these students’ cultural attributes are processed and understood by dominant institutions. Minority students are expected to present themselves in accordance with cultural mandates of white, mainstream society. However, Carter (2005) contends that it is a challenge and a source of tension for some students to succeed in a place where one’s culture is not welcomed or appreciated.
Reasons for this tension between an academic institution and the minority student as it relates to academic inequality are multidimensional and heavily nuanced. Significant research has been conducted on this topic which examines the various factors which play a role in creating and promoting this tension. For the purposes of this paper, I will review literature on the role of teachers within the academic institution as well as the effects school tracking has on Latino students.

**a. Teachers and School Culture.** Teachers play a pivotal role in providing students with opportunities to learn through setting the tone in the classrooms as well as developing pedagogical approaches to deliver subject content. Teachers are also in a position to serve as role models with the ability to inspire students and cultivate a love for learning (Contreras, 2011). However, too often educators involved in these schools lack the cultural understanding relevant to their students’ background or current situation, and too quickly determine that the students’ attitudes towards the educational institution are oppositional in nature. According to Carter (2005), many teachers have adopted the traditional perspective of curriculum as neutral and apolitical, merely a method of imparting basic skills of literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. For these educators, the primary goal of curriculum is to pass on history, art, and knowledge produced by Western thinkers and artists as a means of enforcing a common culture which serves to reinforce an American identity among students. As a result, Carter (2005) argues that students who continually find that their ancestral culture, economy, history, and political experiences are less honored or even ignored in their classrooms are more likely to disengage from schooling.

Valenzuela (1999) echoes this perspective of teachers as lacking cultural understanding and awareness of the minority students in their classrooms. She explains that although most
educators encounter information regarding critical race theory and culturally responsive pedagogy in their respective teacher preparation programs, when real-life student concerns arise in the classroom, many teachers find themselves in uncomfortable and disorienting positions. Teachers are often called upon to deal with various barriers to students’ learning and achievement of which they may not have a personal understanding or have the proper skills required to confront such issues using practical methods. As a result, teachers are reduced to relying upon methodological approaches, which often do not take cultural attributes into consideration, thus losing the capacity to respond to their students holistically. In some cases, Valenzuela (1999) suggests that rather than addressing this issue as an institutional problem, teachers and administrators alike turn to “blanket judgements about ethnicity or underachievement” as explanations, thus adopting and perpetuating the “deficit minority” student perspective that some cultures are too impoverished to value education (p. 74). This explanation is rooted in the larger theoretical frameworks of the cultural ecological and oppositional culture theory which allows for the identification of underachievement in relation to students’ cultural practices such as the way they dress, the way they speak, their overall demeanor, and their choice of friend groups. For Valenzuela, it is this absence of self-critical discourse by the academic institution that unwittingly promotes condescending views towards minority students and serves to perpetuate racial stereotypes.

b. School Tracking. Carter (2005) defines school tracking as “the institutional practice that stratifies students by ability and by race and ethnicity, whether intentionally or not” (p. 72). This process of grouping by the institution does not go unnoticed by students, and research has shown it has significant impact on their educational trajectories and outcomes.
Despite the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling on Brown, which made the practice of separate schools unlawful, the problem of “within school segregation” remains a pervasive issue for the Latino community (Contreras, 2011, p. 145). In this context, Latino students are isolated and underserved even in racially diverse schools based on their English language proficiency. As previously discussed, in many cases, ELL Latino students are often separated into English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in order to “get extra attention” from educators without “disrupting the flow of the mainstream student body” (Thompson, 2011, p. 161). While these programs may appear beneficial, many times they are over simplified, under supported, poorly resourced, and underfunded by schools. It is important to note that grouping students by such abilities further stratifies student populations not only by academic performance, but by race and ethnicity as well.

Carter (2005) reports that, on average, at least half of Asian and White students in a particular school are likely to be placed in academically rigorous, college-preparation based, high track classes, while Black, Latino, and Native American students are more likely to be placed in less rigorous, vocational preparation based, low track classes (p. 73). Typically, students involved in these low track programs, such as ESL programs, are viewed through the racial deficit and oppositional culture lens, which means the curriculum will be less rigorous, teacher quality less efficient, and therefore, student academic achievement will be much lower than their Asian and White peers. In other words, students in these programs are less likely to receive the resources and support needed to prepare them for higher education and economically sound careers. Because of their classification as “deficient others,” emphasis is placed on preparing such students for technical programs and low-paying skills based jobs (Harris, 2011). Thus, it
can be argued that this practice of school tracking functions in schools to perpetuate social and economic inequality in American society.

Carter (2005) furthers her argument that consequences of school tracking are not only academic, but social as well. She argues that schools use tracking to send implicit messages about Black and Latino students that reinforce racial and ethnic boundaries and discourages students from interracial interaction. Often times, the result is that students of all ethnicities practice “self-segregation” according to these messages regarding racial divisions and rarely make any effort to interact with the rest of the school population (Conchas, 2006, p. 24).

Conchas (2006) reveals in his research that students of all races are aware of this self-segregating practice and even acknowledge there is a link between the racial and ethnic compositions of the different academic tracks within the schools and the racial and ethnic stigmas that go with them. Most students, especially White students, prefer to remain their separate classrooms. The lack of interracial interaction is harmful to students as it prevents the sharing of social and cultural capital, including material resources, professional contacts, information about the schooling process, and other valuable educational experiences.

For Latino students specifically, tracking in ELL programs severely undermines these students’ capabilities as well as their experience of trusting teacher and peer relationships in schools. According to Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010), academic English language skills affect Latino students’ abilities to adapt socially at school and are also highly predictive of academic success in the United States. Research reveals that these lower tracked students tend to do worse in school, have higher rates of misconduct and truancy, are less likely to go to college, and more likely to become disengaged from social groups and the learning process altogether (p. 41). Additionally, Latino immigrant students face linguistic obstacles, which, when compounded with
the obstacles tracking poses, further isolates and disadvantages these students in the learning process (Suarez-Orozco, et al, 2010; Carter, 2005; Harris, 2011). Schools could benefit from an opening up of society’s understanding of culture and the formation of a self-critical discourse in order to develop stronger methods of facilitating cross cultural interactions among students and educators in order to promote educational success.
Factors that Facilitate Latino Educational Success

“The inescapable reality is that schools matter for the performance of their students.”

–Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010)

It is well known that many Latino families migrate to the United States in order to obtain a quality education for their children, believing that this education will create upward mobility which leads to economic and social success. However, due to their low socioeconomic status and the ongoing practice of racial, linguistic, and economic segregation in the United States, many of the schools that Latino immigrant families encounter are poorly resourced, hostile, and dangerous. Too often, as Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) note, Latino children enter schools that for generations have failed to prepare poor and native-born minority students for future academic and economic success. These schools are even less prepared to properly serve newcomer immigrant families experiencing transplant shock who must learn a new language and social ethos, as well as acquire the skills needed to navigate the complex path to educational success (p. 366).

Literature on Latino educational achievement consistently concurs that schools and especially individual teachers are uniquely positioned for the performance and long term success of students (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, Valenzuela, 1999) According to Carter (2005), increasing school engagement and achievement among low income Latino students requires both improved academic skills as well as access to economic, cultural, and social resources. Therefore, in order to engage these learners and adequately prepare them for success in higher education, schools and teachers should look beyond the traditional basics of reading, writing, and
arithmetic skills. Instead, the focus should be on the development of a more rigorous academic curriculum relevant to the students’ situation, adequate teacher preparation and provision of resources, and a focus on developing relationships and support networks for Latino youth with educators and community members alike (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010).

I. Refocusing the Academic Curriculum

Black and Latino students are not “culturally predisposed to failure” in American society, as some researchers have suggested (Carter, 2005). Instead, as scholars such as Valenzuela (1999, 2010) and Conchas (2006) argue, it is the absence of culturally affirming curriculum that leads to lower levels of academic achievement among minority students. Culture and cultural representation are recognized by students and make a significant difference in their level of academic engagement. Those who advocate a culturally affirming curriculum believe that curriculum should not be limited to presentations of dominant White culture, but used to encourage all students to study and take pride in their own culture. Valenzuela (2010) argues that it is not only possible, but necessary for educators to adopt a more culturally affirming perspective within their curriculum. She explains that in order to do this, curriculum should be adapted to include a space where students can talk about race and issues of race as it relates to the students’ own experiences in school and in the greater society. By holding such discussions within a classroom setting, educators can help students dissect the multiple ways institutions, such as schools, condition all people to hold “harmful stereotypes and blanket judgements” as well as offer validation of the various cultural identities of students (Valenzuela, 2010, p. 81). Conchas (2006) pushes back, however, when he claims that such adaptations to a more culturally affirming curriculum should be cautiously considered and implemented, warning that if such
adaptations are handled unwisely, they may create an “even more divisive environment” than ones created by the voluntary student self-segregation that is already present in many schools today (p. 42).

In addition to a more culturally affirming curriculum, researchers advocate that academic curriculum designed for low achieving students needs to become more rigorous and provide opportunities for college preparation. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) argue that rigorous curriculum in diverse urban schools should aid in developing a “college-going school culture” with a “multicultural college going identity” within the student body (p. 81). In order to do this, schools must display high expectations of its students as well as its educators. This type of curriculum should be included in academic and linguistic intervention programs that do not dissolve into racialized tracking, after school tutoring and mentoring programs that go beyond promoting basic literacy and numeracy skills, and gifted and talented programs that encourage critical thinking and problem solving skills (Contreras, 2011).

Contreras (2011) further argues that special attention should be given to students in earlier grades, specifically from preschool to fifth grade, since the inevitable barriers to achievement are likely to compound over the course of the schooling process. Implementing culturally affirming and rigorous curriculum in elementary education schools and programs could act as an early intervention method which could alter some minority students’ academic trajectories. Research suggests that such intervention at these grade levels results in reducing the racial academic achievement gap in high school, as evidenced by GPA and standardized test scores (Contreras, 2011). What is significant about this research, is that it not only discourages the practice of school tracking, but promotes racial and social class integration of students within schools. In this manner, societal hierarchies can be broken down as students share information
and resources regarding access to material resources, after school programs, personal relationships with mentors, and college preparation procedures with one another. Furthermore, improved curriculum and integrated classrooms allow minority students a choice in their academic trajectories. Rather than being tracked into a vocational school or into a position which causes them to disengage from schooling altogether, students are given access to choice between a vocational or college trajectory. This opportunity of choice helps to create a more equitable educational institution and ultimately a more equitable society.

II. Refocusing Teacher Preparation

Another key factor regarding the high-stakes nature of educational achievement for Latino students is teacher quality and experience. I have already discussed that Latino students are more likely to attend urban schools in high-poverty concentrated neighborhoods. This typically means that Latino students are also more likely to encounter less qualified and less effective teachers in the classroom (Contreras, 2011). Valenzuela (1999) argues that the majority of teachers today do not enter schools with a culturally relevant perspective, but with the understanding that their primary job is to impart their expert knowledge on a specific discipline. Further complicating this reality is “bureaucratically inefficient educational policy” that offers little to no incentives for prioritizing student welfare over “the rules” (p. 256). In response, students attempt to challenge this status quo, either individually or as a collective whole, but it does little to alter the power structure and often times works to confirm teachers’ and administrators’ suspicions that minority youth express oppositional behaviors because they really do not care about schooling. Valenzuela (1999) continues that such attitudes and low expectation of teachers regarding low achieving minority students are often reflective of the training, or lack
thereof, teachers receive in their respective teacher preparation programs. Too often these preparation programs fail to acknowledge the academic institution’s role in social reproduction or address the significance of cultural relevance in the classroom, emphasizing instead the importance of high achievement and acculturation of dominant White, middle-class norms. Valenzuela (1999, 2010) does recognize, however, that while some teacher preparation programs have greatly improved in this area in recent years, its significance has been limited to an abstract talking point, shrouded in theory and political ideology. As a result, future teachers fail to be properly equipped with the practical skills necessary to implement cultural relevance in any sustainable way in their classrooms.

Carter (2005) aligns with Valenzuela’s position and claims that in today’s divisive society, which is fraught with racial, ethnic, class, and sociocultural dynamics, Black and Latino youth not only need, but desire exposure to individuals who can understand their own social realities and backgrounds. More specifically, Carter (2005) suggests that in urban schools, there is a real need for teachers who can demonstrate to students how to overcome poverty with “critical, self-loving, and other-respecting perspectives,” who do not make them ashamed of who they are but rather proud of how far they will go (p. 150). In the case of Latino students, Valenzuela (1999) argues an urgent need for more Latino and bilingual school personnel, especially in low income urban schools. These teachers school personnel need to have not only pedagogical skill and cultural sensitivity, but also a deeper social understanding and the capability to handle the many ways in which students differ from one another. This is no easy task as it requires the ability to work with people of diverse backgrounds, the capacity to think analytically and creatively across disciplines, bilingual language skills, and an understanding of historical and global perspectives (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010).
These researchers recognize that such suggestions are extremely demanding of teachers, and therefore argue that teachers should not have to attempt these developments on their own, especially since those who do attempt to make a difference become increasingly vulnerable to burnout, dissatisfaction, and the temptation to withdraw mentally and physically from the teaching profession altogether (Valenzuela, 1999, 2010). Rather than adding further burden to an already overwhelmed and under-resourced teaching population, researchers and policy makers, such as Contreras (2011), not only call for improved teacher preparation programs, but call on the federal and state governments, school districts, and administrators to address teacher equity more directly by investigating the “allocation and usage of money and other resources” among their schools (p. 69). Contreras (2011) explains that while high achieving schools have teachers who tend to have strong academic credentials, have been prepared to teach students with special needs, have access to strong professional development opportunities, and are more likely to collaborate with peers and develop peer mentoring networks, poor, low-achieving urban schools experience high teacher turnover and have limited funding and resources to support teachers professionally.

Uneven access to qualified teachers and issues of high turnover in urban schools means Latino students are less likely to be exposed to culturally affirming curriculum as well as less likely to develop meaningful relationships with their peers and educators (Contreras, 2011). If change does not happen, and educators and academic institutions refuse to acknowledge the hierarchy of cultural meanings in schools, another generation of students at risk for limited educational attainment and economic dependence will emerge.
III. Refocusing Educational Policy

Academic achievement is determined not only by the efforts of the individual student, but also by the context in which they grow, learn, and develop (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). As Thompson (2011) points out, Latino immigration has fueled the most robust growth in public schools in the United States since the post-World War II baby boom. The Latino population growth has been so rapid and so significant that it has severely strained the capacity of school districts already short on resources needed to serve low achieving students and students with linguistic needs, putting classrooms on the front lines of the nation’s fight over how to include immigrants and their children in American society (p. 160).

As Suarez-Orozco et al. (2010) profoundly state, the priority of policymakers should be on developing more schools that provide engaging academic climates, not only for Latino immigrant students, but for all the nation’s children. Schools should maintain high standards and expectations for all students, not just a select few based on race, social class, and linguistic ability. The goal should be for children to learn how to learn so that they may become the critically thinking, lifelong learners they need to be in order to attain success in the world economy.

In order to reach these goals as a society, Contreras (2011) calls for changes in policy which could serve to meet the most urgent unmet needs of Latino students in the United States today. Contreras (2011) provides a policy framework which addresses the needs of Latino students throughout the educational system and argues this framework is necessary for rescuing and supporting Latino children who are currently experiencing inequities within their educational contexts. Her recommendations include:

1) better health care and access to social services
2) subsidized preschool programs  
3) housing desegregation and stabilization initiatives  
4) target recruitment and better preparation for teachers  
5) immigration policy reform including a passage of a DREAM Act  
6) support for dual-language education  
7) dropout prevention and college access programs  

(Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Contreras, 2011, p. 150-151).

Contreras (2011) acknowledges the broad scope of this framework and therefore argues a need for other researchers and educators, preferably those with substantial background experience within a diverse classroom context, to get involved in policy discussion and development as means of advocating for the disadvantaged youth they have encountered.
Gaps in the Literature

It is at this point, however, that various gaps in the literature become apparent. While much research has been conducted focusing on educational inequalities regarding the racial achievement gap as well as the factors which hinder the educational navigation of Latino students, considerably less research has focused on high achieving minority students and the factors which promote successful trajectories for such students. The literature that does exist either focuses primarily on female students within the Latino community, or lumps Latino students together with their African-American peers. While many of the inequalities and problems discussed in the literature do affect both populations of students, such as poverty and theories on oppositional behavior based on race, Latino students are subject to barriers that African-American students are not, including legal status and socioemotional barriers related to detection and deportation.

In addition, the current status of undocumented Latino immigrants has proven to be a continual moving target in American society and politics. Federal policies affecting immigrants, and therefore Latino students, are subject to change according to the convictions of the current White House administration, congressional leadership, and the Supreme Court. Furthermore, due to their undocumented status and desire to remain undetected for fear of deportation, many Latinos are not willing or able to participate in research, making much of the current research and statistical data unreliable and non-generalizable.
Conclusion

I. What is Next?

In order to gain a better understanding of the factors that can promote successful educational navigation for Latino students, more research should be conducted which not only focuses on the challenges unique to Latino students apart from other minority students, but should also make a point to disaggregate the various cultural populations which exist under the blanket term “Latino.” For instance, it is worth investigating in detail the educational experiences and institutional barriers undocumented Latino students must confront in American schools and how these experiences differ from Latino students born in the United States. While I have briefly touched on these differences in this report, further investigation for better understanding of undocumented Latino immigrant student experiences must be a priority. With Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) currently under threat and gaining national interest daily, educators are finding themselves on the front lines of this complicated issue as academic institutions must determine how to best support these individuals and their families.

In addition to citizenship, a student’s individual country of origin should be considered, regardless of his or her immigration status, in order to determine the unique challenges that student faces based on family heritage. Such studies could include: Puerto Rican adolescents coming to the mainland United States from post-hurricane devastated Puerto Rico and entering into K-12 schools; students with family origins in countries such as Mexico and El Salvador which are currently being targeted, overtly criminalized, and threatened with mass deportation by the Trump administration; and students affected by the downgrading of sanctuary cities and sanctuary schools, primarily in locations where governments have significantly increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence. These are only a few examples of the
many variations of challenges Latino students face on a daily basis, all of which significantly affect the learning process and their academic trajectories based on documentation status and family country of origin.

Another primary concern for researchers in regards to the academic institution itself should be the role of teachers and school personnel and the roles they play in the lives of immigrant Latino students. If, as the current research suggests, schools matter for the academic performance and future success of students, a more in depth study should be conducted on the methods teachers use in the classroom to develop and implement rigorous and culturally affirming curriculum.

Furthermore, policymakers should heed the advice of researchers such as Contreras and begin taking steps towards developing policies which will improve the lives and circumstances of Latino students who are currently experiencing inequalities within their educational contexts.

II. Proposed Methodology

In order to confront the gaps in the literature, I propose conducting mixed-methodological, longitudinal research which focuses on the educational experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrant students in comparison with students of Mexican origin born in the United States, attending K-12 schools in the state of New York. Since the majority of Latino immigrants in the United States arrive from Mexico, and this particular population group is quickly gaining national interest due to the criminalizing rhetoric and regular threats of deportation from the current White House administration, this is a prime time for research on Mexican youth and their experiences in American K-12 schools. I will focus on high school
youth, specifically 9th through 12th grade, who attend low income, urban high schools in Washington Heights, New York City, New York and determine:

- What are the specific factors that hinder and facilitate the educational trajectories of undocumented Mexican immigrant students?
- Do academic institutions, teachers, and school administrators help or hinder undocumented Mexican immigrant students’ educational trajectories?

I will conduct research at three different high schools in Washington Heights, and include six male and six female subjects and their families per school for qualitative interviews. Three of the six subjects for each school will be undocumented Mexican immigrant students and the remaining three subjects will be students of Mexican origin born in the United States. For quantitative data I will rely on standardized test scores and GPA to determine academic achievement and advancement.

I will also include interviews and classroom observations of teachers, guidance counselors, and academic administrators within the Washington Heights high schools. Ideally, these teachers, counselors, and administrators come into contact with undocumented Mexican immigrant students as well as documented immigrant students on a daily basis in their classrooms, school hallways, and lunchrooms, and will have a familiarity with culturally affirming curriculum.

To carry out this study, I will require three graduate assistants who are native Spanish speakers and are familiar with the realities laid out in this thesis. These assistants will assist with interviews and classroom observations. Having native Spanish speakers will be important for building rapport with the students and their families, especially among the undocumented immigrants. Although I have a significant background in Spanish language studies, I am not a
native speaker and foresee this as a potential barrier to gaining access to subjects as well as obtaining accurate data from subjects.

In the end, I expect to find results consistent with the suggested findings of researchers such as Suarez-Orozco, et al. (2010), Harris (2011), Carter (2005), Conchas (2006), and Contreras (2011) which have been discussed in this thesis. I expect undocumented Mexican immigrant students, as well as United States born students, will claim they highly value education and believe it to be the primary path to a successful future. However, they are often disadvantaged by poor learning environments, lack of resources, school tracking, societal perceptions of oppositional attitudes and behaviors, and a schooling system designed to reproduce an unequal social order. Undocumented immigrant students face additional challenges such as financial constraints, access to federal services, and fear of detection and deportation which inevitably affects academic achievement and upward mobility. Without intervention, Latino youth are left vulnerable to long-term poverty and a lifetime of extreme hardships.
Bibliography


