

# LATINO YOUTH: IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION, AND THE FUTURE

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Immigrant Latino youth are here to stay. Many have US citizenship and, in contrast to their parents, who may continue to hold onto dreams of returning to their homelands one day, the US is their home. Whether or not they are embraced as legitimate US citizens, they will stay because, for many, the US is the only land they know. Therefore, understanding how Latino immigrant youth acculturate and adjust to life in the US and how they are being affected by the political backlash against immigrants must be seen as an important issue for educators today.

Unlike their parents, immigrant Latino youth often find themselves caught between two worlds, neither fully American, nor fully part of their parents' country. Many also arrive without having experienced formal education in their countries of origin nor literacy in their native Spanish language. Consequently, there is growing evidence that immigrant youth are susceptible to a variety of hardships and pressures that many adults, including their parents, do not fully understand. These challenges and hardships encountered by Latino immigrant youth living in a society where hostility toward their presence is growing must be of concern to educators, service providers, and policy-makers. Through constructing culturally relevant educational policies, programs, and pedagogy, we can assist Latino immigrant youth to avoid the pitfalls that often beset this vulnerable population. Helping educators to find ways to assist immigrant youth in making the adjustment to this strange and often hostile land is a central preoccupation of my reflections here.

## **Push and pull factors and their impact on Latino families**

Certainly not all immigrants who come to the US do so voluntarily. While it is hard to distinguish between the factors that pull immigrants to this country and the forces that push them to leave their countries of origin, there



is no doubt that many who come to the US do so because they believe they have no alternative. The great imbalance in wealth between the nations to the north and those to the south of the Rio Grande, created to a large degree by a history of US domination in the region — colonization and military intervention, unequal trade and unabashed exploitation of people and resources, and the subsequent legacy of widespread poverty and underdevelopment — has created conditions that make immigration from the south to the north virtually inevitable.

Many Latino immigrants leave to escape the ravages of political violence, to flee the suffering caused by unrelenting poverty, or in the wake of a natural disaster that has destroyed jobs, communities and possibilities for advancement. There are also those who come as political refugees to escape war, persecution, and torture. Even though they must overcome tremendous obstacles — barbed wired fences, coast guard vessels, or armed militias, they still come because, for many, immigration offers the only possibility of hope.

Immigration forces those who emigrate to make tough choices that often take a toll on families. The development of transnational families, separated by borders and thousands of miles, often results in children experiencing disruptions in school attendance (Ada, 1998). To ensure that relationships are maintained, it is not uncommon for Latino parents to send a child to Mexico or the Dominican Republic for six weeks during the middle of the school year. For educators who are concerned with academic progress, such a choice might seem nonsensical and even negligent, but to a family that is coping with the hardships caused by separation, such choices may be the only way to maintain the bonds of family.

Migrant workers often return to Mexico for several weeks during the winter because there is no work available during the non-growing season. Although they consistently return to their jobs, it is often the case that their children lose their seats in classrooms because of adjustments that are made during their absence. Those interested in supporting Latino immigrant youth and their families must at the minimum demonstrate a capacity to understand the difficult choices transnational families face (Olsen, 2000). Finding ways to help reduce the strains caused by separation, while minimizing the losses in learning associated with extended absences, is an important pedagogical consideration for schools that serve large populations of Latino immigrant youth.

A growing number of schools have adopted strategies to support Latino youth who miss extended amounts of time because they are part of transnational families. For example, one elementary school in Los Angeles modified the academic year so that students could take off for four weeks at the end of December and beginning of January. An additional two weeks of school is added to the end of the year to make sure that students do not miss out on instruction. A school in Texas located near the Mexican border established a cooperative relationship with a Mexican school across the border to enable its

students to enroll in school while they are in Mexico. Finally, several schools in Miami and New York that serve immigrant youth whose parents reside in the Caribbean have hired social workers who are familiar with students' living arrangements and who can provide additional social and emotional support to youth in need (Ada, 1988). Such measures do not eliminate the difficulties experienced by immigrant youth who are separated from their families but they do help to lessen the hardships they endure and demonstrate that the school is not interested in punishing students for a situation they cannot control. Employing staff with language and cultural skills to work effectively with immigrant youth and their families is also of vital importance if trust and respect between home and school is to be established (Valdez, 1999).

Of course, there are limitations to what schools can do to mitigate the effects of long absences. Obviously, students would be better off if they had minimal disruptions in learning and if they could remain in the same school, assuming of course that it is a good school, for longer periods of time. However, children cannot control whether or not parents or grandparents will be granted visas, and their parents often cannot control the factors that compel them to move or make sacrifices to keep their families together. Families that are forced to make tough choices between stability for their children and the need to retain contact with relatives who live elsewhere should receive support, advice, and understanding from educators, rather than belittlement and condemnation. Working closely with families and assuring them that the educators who serve their children have their best interest at heart is essential for creating a partnership that can lead to creative solutions to complex transnational arrangements.

### **Race, assimilation, and social mobility**

Like many immigrants today, earlier generations of European immigrants encountered hardships: the Irish experienced decades of unrelenting discrimination and harassment (Roediger, 1991); Italians were crowded into ghettos and tenements of northeastern cities and forced to take the worst jobs (Gans, 1967); Jews were denied access to middle class professions and seats at prestigious universities by admissions quotas (Brodkin, 1999). Nonetheless, each of these groups gradually improved their social conditions and experienced the social mobility promised by the American Dream.

Of course, social mobility came with a price and some sacrifice. Many European immigrants found it necessary to abandon their native languages, to give up their cultures, and in many cases to "Anglocize" their names (Jiobu, 1988; Fass, 1989). During the 19th century, many German immigrants sought to have their language taught in public schools and in communities where they constituted the majority. These German immigrants managed to do so for years, long before *Lau V. Nichols* required the Federal government to support bilingual education (Katznelson and Weir, 1994). Ultimately, however, most



groups relinquished many of their ethnic and cultural distinctions to embrace a more socially acceptable American identity. With assimilation came social mobility and, over time, early stigmas and hardships were gradually overcome, as differences were erased (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963). Over generations, Irish, Italians, Jews, and others who were once perceived as ethnically inferior were gradually accepted as full-fledged white Americans (Roediger, 1991; Brodtkin, 1999).

In sharp contrast, the situation is very different for Latino immigrants and their children. Although Latinos represent the fastest growing segment of the US population and are now the largest minority group, it is not clear that the future will be as bright and promising for them as it was for European immigrants of the past. Globalization and de-industrialization have contributed to a worsening of circumstances for low-skilled Latino immigrants. Ironically, Latinos now constitute the ethnic group least likely to be unemployed, but most likely to be impoverished (Smith, 2002). This is so because Latinos are concentrated in the lowest paying jobs and many lack the skills and education needed to seek better paying alternatives (Smith, 2002). Unlike European immigrants whose offspring reaped the rewards of their sacrifices, Latinos are not experiencing a similar degree of success (Portes and Rumbaut, 2002).

The pervasiveness of racialized inequalities, particularly within education, at least partially ensures that Latino youth are more likely than any other ethnic group to be enrolled in schools that are not only segregated by race, but by class as well (Orfield and Eaton, 1996). In cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, where they comprise the majority of the school age population, Latinos are disproportionately consigned to schools that are overcrowded, underfunded and woefully inadequate on matters related to educational quality (Oakes, 2002; Noguera, 2003, 2004). For years, Latino youth have had the highest high school dropout rates and lowest rates for college attendance (Garcia, 2001). In general, they are overrepresented in most categories of crisis and failure (i.e., suspensions and expulsions, special education placements), while underrepresented in those of success (i.e., honors and gifted and talented classes) (Meier *et al.*, 1990). Outside of schools, Latino youth find themselves more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than white youth, more likely to have children as teenagers, and less likely to graduate from college (Hayes-Bautista, 2002). In short, if the old adage that the youth are our future is correct, then current trends suggests that the Latino population in the US is in deep trouble.

### **Latino immigrant students and prospects for the future**

1 As a researcher and the Director of the Metro Center at

Yet, in my work with schools,<sup>1</sup> I often hear from administrators who speak favorably of the conduct of Latino immigrant students. Though not all are described as studious, most are characterized as well behaved, courteous, and

deferential toward adults. These comments are often made with a comparative reference to African Americans and second-generation Latinos, who are more likely to be described as undisciplined, unmotivated, and at-risk (Ogbu, 1988). While passive, compliant behavior may win praise, the positive statements made about Latino immigrant students usually does not mean that they are succeeding academically. In fact, Latino immigrant students are overrepresented in remedial classes and Special Education, are more likely to be placed in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes that effectively bar them from courses that prepare students for college, and they are more likely to drop out of school.

Like their parents, many Latino immigrant youth have the drive, the work ethic, and the persistence to take advantage of opportunities that come their way. And unlike so many urban youth, they have the will and determination to find a way to improve the circumstances in which they live (Kao and Tienda, 1998). Of course, it is risky to generalize or to overstate the importance of will and work ethic. For Latino youth who live in communities where economic and social opportunities are limited and who have no ability to control basic circumstances that shape the opportunities available to them – namely, the schools they attend, the neighborhoods where they live, or whether or not any jobs are available — will and determination may not suffice. In fact, research on the socialization of Latino immigrant youth shows that in a reversal of past patterns, assimilation no longer serves as the pathway into mainstream American culture and middle class status as it once did for European immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut, 2002). Instead, the evidence suggests that the socialization associated with acculturation and assimilation often results in a lowering of the academic achievement and performance of Latino students (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Berkeley anthropologist, John Ogbu (1988), tried to explain the difference between Latinos, which he categorized as “caste-like,” non-voluntary minorities, and earlier European immigrants who were drawn to the US voluntarily. According to Ogbu, since non-voluntary minorities were incorporated through coercion (i.e., conquest, colonization, or slavery), they were more likely to develop oppositional attitudes toward assimilation, and by extension, toward schooling. Though Ogbu’s work has been widely embraced by many scholars in the field of immigration, his framework has failed to accurately reflect the Latino condition. There is simply too much diversity among Latinos; while some might be categorized as non-voluntary immigrants (e.g. Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and possibly Panamanians), others (especially those from Central and South America) clearly came to the US voluntarily – if fleeing war, repression or hunger can be considered a voluntary move.

Once they arrive in the US, new social, political, and economic forces take over in shaping social identities. Ogbu’s work does not address how variations in social context could influence patterns of social adaptation. A Mexican arriving in LA, or a Dominican arriving in Washington Heights in New York,

NYU, I work with many schools throughout the United States. For a description of my research see *City Schools and the American Dream* (Noguera, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the sociological literature on immigration holds that assimilation would lead to social mobility for immigrants. Second- and third-generation immigrants have generally fared better than new arrivals. For Latinos, available research suggests the opposite may be true.



can use Spanish in most of their day-to-day interactions and function in a monolithic culture for quite some time. However, for Latinos who settle in a community that is more diverse, new forms of identity and affiliation may emerge and the significance attached to national identities may melt away, particularly among Latino immigrant youth. Hybrid identities forged through interaction and familiarity with others develop naturally. Perceptions of self invariably become even more complicated for Latinos who look Black, at least by US definitions, speak English with an Ebonics accent, and whose music preference is a mix of hip hop, merengue, or reggaeton (Zentella, 2002). Even as the steady arrival of new Latino immigrants gradually begins to change the face and the character of American culture, our presence here also transforms who we are, and most importantly, who we are becoming.

Theoretically at least, education should serve as a means out of poverty. As it has for other groups in the past, education should be the source of opportunity and a pathway to a better life. Unfortunately, more often than not, schools that serve Latino immigrant youth fail to become vehicles through which their dreams and aspirations can be fulfilled. Too many are trapped in the worst schools, and are treated as though their inability to speak fluent English were a sign of cognitive and cultural deficit. What will it take for education to serve immigrant Latino youth and become a genuine resource for Latino immigrants? How can educators help students to make the transition to a new society less painful, particularly for those who lack family support? How can we make sure that the needs of Latino immigrant students are not ignored because their parents lack the power and voice to make their needs heard? The answers to these questions could potentially help reshape educational opportunities for Latino immigrant youth in this country.

We are at a moment of incredible possibility. Latinos are being courted by both major parties as swing voters with the ability to decide state and even national elections. Media moguls, baseball team owners, and fast food restaurants now recognize Latinos as an important consumer market. However, recognizing that Latinos can vote and spend money does not mean that we necessarily have the ability to alter our status in this country. If our communities, schools, and social institutions are to provide the support and nurturing that our youth so desperately need, it will require us to develop a new educational direction and a new political strategy. Until that time, many Latino youth will remain like so many immigrant youth of the past, industrious and hopeful but trapped in circumstances that stifle their ambitions and dreams.

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