IN THE BORDERLANDS: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF LATINOS – TRANSFORMING AND SUSTAINING ACADEMIC IDENTITIES AMONG MEXICAN ORIGIN YOUTH

Leticia Villarreal Sosa, LCSW, Type 73, Doctoral Candidate
Assistant Professor, Dominican University
1. Latino Educational Crisis
2. Purpose of the study
3. Research Questions
   - Social Identity formation and change
4. Conceptual Framework
5. Method
6. Key findings
7. Summary
8. Practice Implications
Latino Educational Crisis

- One in five Hispanic youth between the ages of 16 and 24 do not receive a high school diploma.
- Among immigrants, Hispanics are most likely to drop out. They are 56% of immigrant population, but make up 90% of immigrant drop outs.
- The dropout rate is 2.5 times what it is for African Americans and 3.5 times the non Hispanic white population.
- Third generation and beyond has a higher dropout rate than second generation.
- The dropout rate for Hispanics is double that of other Americans at every income level.
- Mexican and Salvadorian youth have the highest dropout rate among Hispanic groups

Latino children are more likely to be at a disadvantage due to:

- Greater likelihood of living in poverty
- Lower level of parental education
- Attending disadvantaged schools
- Subject to tracking and segregation
- Negative stereotypes by school staff
Importance for Social Work

- As the gap continues, a potential increase in the number of Hispanic children living in poverty.
- Already Latinos have the most difficulty escaping poverty once working due to their low levels of education and concentration in low wage work.
- We are continuing to create and reproduce an educationally and economically marginalized population.
Importance for Social Work

- Education of Latino/as is a social justice issue.
- Multi-cultural education
- Spanish is not perceived as an asset, even students who are English speaking are not acknowledged for having a valuable language tool.
- Undocumented students – U.S. high schools graduate approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrant students every year. (DREAM act – provided a path to citizenship)
Chicanas and Chicanos attained low academic outcomes at each point along the educational pipeline in 2000. (Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, National Center for Educational Statistics, and the National Survey on Earned Doctorates.)
Stop Texas from erasing Cesar Chavez and Hispanics from school books

These new standards would eliminate all Hispanics since the conquest of Mexico in the early 16th Century. Cesar Chavez, arguably the most important Hispanic civil rights leader of the 20th Century, is among the historical figures to be eliminated. One of Lowe’s so called "experts" said that Chavez "lacks the stature…and contributions" and should not be "held up to our children as someone worthy of emulation." Also eliminated are a number of key Texas history makers such as Irma Rangel, the first Hispanic woman elected to the state Legislature.
Latinos under attack

Psychological Violence

Case of the boy who was asked to complete an assignment about undocumented immigrants.
Schools and Current Research

- Today’s schools and “kind” explanations
- Theoretical approaches did not explain within group variation
  - Cultural Discontinuity
  - Cultural Ecological Model
  - Social Reproduction/ Social Capital
Critiques of linear assimilation

- Race impacts reception by host society
- Social and Economic context that aided prior immigrant groups no longer exists
- Different aid provided by government
- Does not account for gender differences
Critiques of Assimilation

- Does not allow for bidirectional influence or internal variance.
- Assumes one agreed upon culture, a numerical minority, and no contact with culture of origin.
- Subtractive assimilation (versus additive experiences of immigrants speaking high status languages)
Immigrant Adaptation

- Various conditions heighten or lessen social categorization and salience of group boundaries.
- Knowledge of group history and current interactions with social structures and policies in the U.S.
- Type of social identity developed (Rumbaut, 1995; Hurtado, 1994; Fernandez-Kelly, 1996; Waters, 1996)
Influences on Differential Outcomes

- Reception by receiving society
- Type of receiving coethnic community: length of time, spatial concentration, class differentiation, ability to shield from discrimination
- Quality of resources
Purpose of the study

- How do everyday experiences in school shape the content and meaning of Mexican origin social identities?
- How do Mexican origin social identities work to influence students’ academic trajectories?
Conceptual Framework

- Social Identity Theory
- Borderlands Theory
Social Identity

- Social identity focuses on stigmatized social categorizations (group identity).
- Focus on how individuals define themselves in their social world with regard to social groups in which they place themselves or are placed.
- Social identity is a complex phenomenon shaped by social and cultural factors and assimilation or rejection of these factors.
Borderlands

- Borderlands is a theoretical framework that accounts for the historical and political ways in which Chicanos are constituted and constitute themselves as different or as “other”, the social constructions of identity, and multiple subjectivity.
- Borderlands theory is used to explain psychological resilience of Chicanas.
Extended Case Method

- Relies primarily on in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and other sources such as pop culture, media, historical documents, poetry, etc.
- Not a “cookbook,” but a method that can be reconstructed with various cases.
- Reconstructing existing theory using data from the field.
- Helps understand how individuals and communities both experience and transform environments.
- Context-driven description, thematic analysis, case studies.
# Extended Case Method Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic, Historical, Political Context as it affected the Mexican origin community</th>
<th>Student Interviews</th>
<th>Teacher Assessments of Students</th>
<th>Students’ Academic and Discipline Records</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic analysis of West Park Community</td>
<td>Ethnographic Field Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic, Historical, Political Context as it affected the Mexican origin community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Assessments of Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students’ Academic and Discipline Records</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort data</td>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content analysis of newspaper articles during 1996-97 about Zapata High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chicana/o Literature and Poetry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case and historical studies of the schools in the West Park Community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Poetry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Student Life in the High Schools Project:
- A longitudinal study of the transition to high school
- Following 98 Latino, African American, and Polish first and second-generation youth in three high schools in Chicago.

My study focuses on the Latino sample. This sample was recruited from one of the three elementary schools (100% Mexican) who primarily transitioned to a 96% Mexican/99% Latino high school.
The Student Life in High Schools Project

Longitudinal Study of 30 Students

Quantitative Analysis of Transition (Cohort Data)

Classroom Effects of Reform Case Studies (Classroom Experiences, School Policies and Practices)

Student Interviews
9 Interviews per student

School Transcripts
Achievement, Enrollment, Grades, Attendance

Teacher Assessments

Parent Interviews

Student Achievement, Enrollment, Grades, Attendance

Elementary School (K-8)

Spring 8th Grade
Summer 8th and 9th
Fall, Winter, Spring 9th and 10th

9, 10th and ongoing 10th – 12th

Spring 8th grade
Spring 9th grade
Spring 10th grade
## Citywide/West Park Park Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City Wide</th>
<th>West Park School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td><strong>High School</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.5% LEP</td>
<td>6.6% LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84.7% Low Income</td>
<td>54.9% Low Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Meeting/Exceeding State Goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading/Math</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60% / 58%</td>
<td>49% / 49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51% Dropout</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students were recruited in the Spring of 8th grade.
From the 242 8th graders, a sample stratified by gender, prior achievement, and bilingual status of 68 students was selected for recruitment.
66 students attended school on recruitment day.
56/68 students returned consent forms (82.4%)
Of those, a stratified sample of 32 was chosen.
Siqueiros Sample

- All student’s home language was Spanish
- 12 students (38% were foreign born)
- The sample lived in a very small geographic area, more so than the other schools – so this provides a natural control for neighborhood context.
- With regard to prior achievement, 16 (50%) were at or above grade level in reading, 6 (18.8%) were one year below grade level in reading, 8 (25%) students were 2 or more years below grade level but 4 of those students were in the bilingual program.
Interview Protocol

- 9 interviews per student
- Interviews were semi-structured, and reflexive style (Burowoy, 1998) topical interviews allowing for opportunities to elicit more in-depth narratives on various topics.
- Interview 4 was a focus group interview for most students.
- Ongoing analysis contributed to the development of subsequent interviews.
- Interviews were conducted in participant’s language of choice.
Analysis/Data Reduction

- Coding Data/Open Coding/Topic Coding
- Coding of all interviews within a selected data point and coding of all data points within selected cases.
- Field Notes, Maintaining Analysis Journal
- Case Studies
  - Individual, Community, School
- Comparison of Cases
- Thematic Analysis, Graphic Displays
- Interaction between theory and analysis
Findings
Identities are Complex

- Language, Race, Ethnicity, Color, Immigration, Gender, and Neighborhood/Class shaped the content of Mexican identities.

- **Macro Influences of Mexican Identity**
  - Chicago/community context.
  - Political/Legal.

- Students became more assertive about their Mexican identities over the transition to high school.
Border Identities

- Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean neither respects borders (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 2)

- Students all identified as Mexican

- Different negotiation for those born in the U.S. compared to those born in Mexico or in ESL program.
Response to anti-immigrant attacks

- I think all the laws that are coming right now, no? they are taking welfare. They are taking away many of the rights of Hispanics, of immigrants, more so aimed at Mexicans.

- I don’t think they should even call them immigration laws. I think they’re laws against just Mexicans.
“Diana” Born in the U.S., Immigrant Parents

I consider myself Mexican even though I was born here. I wish so much that I would be born in Mexico. I mean…it’s that I consider myself a hundred percent Mexican. Just because my parents are from there. You know, I mean, I love my country so much…it’s like I’d rather be born over there than here. It’s that, over there, yeah, it’s hard, but here it’s like, what’s the point of you being born over here if you got your brown skin, you know?
It’s like this because we’re not..I’m over here [U.S.]..it’s like I said, I’m Mexican and I see everybody different, you know, the Americans..and when I go to Mexico it’s like, people look at me like I’m an American and..yeah, you feel kind of weird. When you’re over there and they treat you different and that’s when...you start to have some doubts...I do..I consider myself Hispanic...um because, you know...um, my friends are Mexicans...I mean, I’m Mexican too...
Mexican Identities

- Immigrant identity
- U.S. Mexican identity
- U.S. minority identity
We: Being Mexican Collectively

- We are professional people.
- We’re lazy.
- We are the only Mexicans.
- We are artists.
- We’re mostly put down.
- We are pretty much a minority.
- We’re just not united.
- They just think we’re stupid.
Content of Academic Identity

- Continued belief by staff that dropping out was due to low parent expectations, having to help the family economically, academic failure.
- Media perpetuated these views. Success stories framed as success *despite* family, friends, and culture.
- Students cultural and family background seen as liability to be overcome.
- Positive constructions of Mexican identity combined with a context of failure and risk.
Academic Identity in the School Context

- **Early School Experiences**
  - Bilingual Education
  - Retention and Social Promotion
    - 21 of the 32 students experienced a retention
    - Sense of powerlessness
  - Lack of meaningful curriculum
    - Students expressed need for curriculum that included their history
    - Students believed learning about their culture was superficial (celebrations and holidays).
  - Tracking
Academic Identity in the School Context

- High School Experiences
  - High School Selection Process
  - Lack of challenging curriculum
  - School reputation/Context of failure
  - Gang Context
  - Lower expectations
  - Anonymous high school environment increases reliance on social categorizations.
School context reinforces academic failure.

Only 6 students stated they are certain they will graduate. 20 Students state they may not graduate.

Goals:

- “just passing,”
- “making it through the year,”
- “stay alive,
- “to not drop out.”

Students experienced a sense of constant vulnerability regardless of prior success.
Academic Identities

- Different group identity is salient in the school context
  - Sergio states, “Racism does exist,” describes it as happening when a teacher is “putting them down.”
  - Students equate school spirit with celebration and pride of Mexican culture.
  - Experiences vary by gender and immigrant identity.
In a way, cause sometimes the teachers who are white, you ask them and they say, “Oh you can’t learn that because your this’ or they assume certain things because they know you’re Hispanic. Even my sister, when she wanted to go to Loyola, her counselor said, “No, you can’t make it, you have to go to a junior college.” She said, “I don’t want to.” They told her, “You have to, you’re from Zapata.” I can’t believe they do this to the Mexicans, you want to push them as high as they could go and they don’t do that.
Academic Identities

- Underachiever
- Discouraged
- Tentative Academic Identity
- Solid Academic Identity
- Troublemaker
Academic Identity is Not Fixed

- Elementary academic identities did not predict high school trajectories for the average students.
- Immigrant identities and gender combined to form different levels of risk.
- Some students actively reconstructed their academic identity.
Gifted students who were on lower status with the elementary were positioned in a higher status once in high school.

Several average students (girls) were repositioned amongst the top students and were considered part of the “smart” groups of students recommended for honors classes.

The school organized opportunities for reconstructing identity based on social categories.
Immigrant Identity and Boys

- Immigrant identified boys had an easier time during the transition and getting to graduation.
- Second generation or US identified boys experienced an immediate decline in grades and faced many challenges such as suspension and gang threats. Only two graduated.
- 12 out of the 16 boys do not graduate (75%)
Immigrant Identity and Girls

- Immigrant girls dropped out (except one in the gifted program).
- Second generation girls graduated at higher rate than boys. Three did not graduate.
- 7 out of 17 girls (44%) do not graduate.
Second generation girls have the opportunity to create supportive relationships with other girls.

“Sometimes we talk about problems. Sometimes one of the girls is having problems at home and we help her. We give each other advice.”

Immigrant girls are more isolated than second generation girls, thus they may not have access to supportive networks.

Immigrant boys are more isolated than second generation boys. This may be a protective factor.
Caring

- Teacher expect students to demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract, or aesthetic commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement.

- Mexican American youth are committed to an *authentic* form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students (Valenzuela, 61).
How students define caring

I: What makes her a good teacher?
182: She listens to kids

I: What makes them good teachers?
182: Well, that they’re always on my back to do my work. Mainly that and encouraging me.

184: Because, I am, because when they yell at me, I really understand, because most of them always play around with me. But when they talk serious, I’ll be serious with them. That’s why I like fooling around with them. I talk to them a lot about, besides school, about outside.
When students don’t perceive caring

- Yeah. See if you start figuring the person doesn’t care about you, why even bother to attempt to make that person... happy about you?
- But if that teacher has no interest in you whatsoever, why even have interest in that person?
- That was because no matter how much I tried, he continued to put me down. So I have up, basically.
The simple things…Relationships

- Support, concern, and encouragement
- Let them know you care
- Give positive encouragement
- Give guidance in navigating the school system
- Mentorship
Effective Classrooms

- Use of small groups
- Understand the students’ culture
- Reflect the students’ culture in the curriculum
- Student to student interaction
  - Supports cultural learning style
  - Increases linguistic development
  - Many studies document interactional styles benefit Mexican American children.
The most impressive schools were those where teachers and staff worked together to personalize each student’s school experience.

Teachers collaborated to ensure that no Latino student fell through the cracks academically or psychosocially.

Schools aggressively recruited multilingual, multiethnic staff who could relate to students and parents.
Effective Teachers

- Communicate high expectations
- Communicated clearly when giving directions and presenting new information
- Pacing instruction
- Communicating expectations of student success
- Monitored student progress
- Provided immediate feedback when required
- Made use of student’s home culture
Summary

- Mexican identity is shaped by various contextual factors.

- Mexican identity is commonly associated with low educational and life outcomes. The weight of the social forces behind these popular understandings is often so great that Mexican origin youth shape their lives around these low expectations.
Summary

- We learn from students’ experiences that some resist notions of Mexican identity grounded in failure and seek to or manage to overcome this context.

- The student experiences of those that successfully navigate the transition to high school teach us that while transitions can be devastating for some students, it can also be an opportunity for re-constructing their social identity in relation to their academic identity.
Promising Examples

- Abriendo Puertas – recruited and trained parent volunteers to teach other parents the knowledge necessary for college applications and attendance. The volunteers are predominately Latinas, undocumented or first generation women, live below the poverty level, and do not have a high school diploma.

- Latino Pride/Latino Success!

- Latino Family Night
Empowerment Interventions

- Helping relationships based on collaboration, trust, and shared power
- Identifying and building on client’s strengths.
- Raising client’s consciousness about issues of class/power/etc.
- Use of identity as basis of mentorship work with students.
Education as Empowerment

- Development of a critical consciousness - this can be done through support groups or informal and formal educational channels.
- Recognizing client skills and building on those skills.
- Strength based
Supporting Latino Education

- Support legislation such as The DREAM act
- Support and push for hiring of Latino/a teachers, social workers, etc.
- Encourage staff development for teachers to develop increased awareness of issues of oppression and the transculturation of non-Latino staff.
- Recognize cultural and community capital students bring to the school: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant, (Yosso, 2005).
Supporting the success of Latino students and families

- Supporting adult education and ESL (volunteering, donating, or helping parents access these services).
- Writing/calling your political representatives on a variety of issues that would impact education.
- Use of solution focused talk and therapy
- Building alliances and collaborating with community agencies, groups, parents, and teachers.
Social Engagement Model

- Ask the student and parent to define sphere of social engagement – not your definition (e.g. school participation).
- Social engagement in different social spheres is impacted by various social identities.
Hurtado (1997). Inserting Women into Cultural Transformations
Implications

- No social identity supersedes another
- Consider influences of various systems; expectations of various systems may conflict (e.g. Mexican American female)
- Consider micro system: skills, values, self-perceptions, perceived conflicts
- Interventions must be multisystemic
Interventions

- Teaching specific skills
- Using mutual aid, self-help or support groups
- Mobilizing resources or advocating for clients.
- Therapeutic alliance with social identity