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The trend of academic achievement and retention for immigrant Latino youth

Pamela Humphrey
University of Northern Iowa

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The trend of academic achievement and retention for immigrant Latino youth

Abstract
This paper discusses the trend of academic achievement and retention for Latino immigrant youth. Research indicates that the general trend for Latino youth is negative – generally achievement is lower than any other immigrant ethnic group, and the drop out rate is higher than for any other ethnic group. Factors such as language and methods of learning, segregation, poverty, low parental involvement in education, discrimination, and stress due to immigration have been identified as factors contributing to low academic success.

The ways in which schools deal with immigrant students is also discussed. Further research is needed on immigrant Latino families and students to determine why their academic success is below that of any other immigrant group. This research has illustrated that methods should be developed for ways in which schools, families, and communities can provide quality education of immigrant children. While data for immigrant children in Iowa is limited, the trend of academic achievement and retention for Latino youth in Iowa seems to follow that of the rest of the country. Suggestions for studies in Iowa are presented.
The Trend of Academic Achievement and Retention for Immigrant Latino Youth

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Master of Education

By

Pamela Humphrey

Suzanne Freedman, Master’s Research Paper Advisor

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Abstract

This paper discusses the trend of academic achievement and retention for Latino immigrant youth. Research indicates that the general trend for Latino youth is negative—generally achievement is lower than any other immigrant ethnic group, and the drop out rate is higher than for any other ethnic group. Factors such as language and methods of learning, segregation, poverty, low parental involvement in education, discrimination, and stress due to immigration have been identified as factors contributing to low academic success. The ways in which schools deal with immigrant students is also discussed. Further research is needed on immigrant Latino families and students to determine why their academic success is below that of any other immigrant group. This research has illustrated that methods should be developed for ways in which schools, families, and communities can provide quality education of immigrant children. While data for immigrant children in Iowa is limited, the trend of academic achievement and retention for Latino youth in Iowa seems to follow that of the rest of the country. Suggestions for studies in Iowa are presented.
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Master of Arts in Education: Educational Psychology

Suzanne Freedman
Director of Research Paper

Brian K. Smith
Co-Reader of Research Paper

Suzanne Freedman
Graduate Faculty Advisor

Barry J. Wilson
Department Head, Educational Psychology & Foundations

Date Approved
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The focus of this paper is the trend in academic achievement and retention among immigrant Latino youth. As the number of immigrants increases, the number of immigrant children in schools increases, presenting concerns in schools and communities that previously may not have been issues.

The influx of immigrants into the United States that began in the 1990’s continues into the twenty-first century, spurred by globalization, limited economic opportunities in developing countries, and political unrest (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). While most immigrants tend to settle in Texas, Illinois, and along the east or west coast (Conchas, 2001), every state is experiencing a growth in new immigrants. The majority of new immigrants are Latinos (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Researchers have identified factors they believe contribute to the trend of immigrant Latino youth’s poor academic performance and retention compared with other immigrant groups and other ethnic natives. Factors such as social mirroring, segregation, racism, low parental involvement in education, acculturation and immigration stress are discussed. Newcomer schools and segregated classes are used as means to increase the rate of learning English, but may also serve as isolation techniques and keep youth from interacting with native peers.

While most research concerning immigrants has focused on adult immigrants, several studies have investigated various aspects of immigrant youth and their education in the U.S. Of particular interest to this author are studies involving Latino youth and academic achievement. The studies find that Latino youth fare more poorly than any other immigrant group (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). This is in part due to parent-child relationships as well as factors outside the family such as the SES of the neighborhood in general, availability of positive role models,
etc. It is also in part due to the schools which Latino youth attend. Challenges immigrant students face are discussed in this paper.

This author is interested in the Latino population in Iowa schools. There is little research currently published about Latinos or other immigrants in Iowa, but some data are presented in this paper that indicate that Latino immigrant youth in Iowa follow the national trend. Although the number of immigrant children in Iowa is smaller than in many other states in the U.S., the number is increasing, in some school districts quite dramatically. Can the national trends of immigrant Latino youth in terms of educational achievement and retention be generalized to the Latino youth in Iowa, and if so, what are the implications for schools and educators in Iowa?

In the Discussion/Conclusion, several issues are raised that should be addressed concerning immigrant youth in schools, in particular Latino youth. Possible topics for future research are also mentioned. Terms that are used throughout this paper are defined next.
## Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children of immigration</strong></td>
<td>Parent is foreign-born, child may or may not be foreign-born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ESL</strong></td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>Anyone of Mexican, Central American or South American ancestry (interchangeable with <em>Latino</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home school</strong></td>
<td>Public school the immigrant child should attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigrant</strong></td>
<td>Person who has settled in the U.S. and is foreign born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>Child and parent are foreign-born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second generation</td>
<td>Parent is foreign-born, child is born in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Latino</strong></td>
<td>Anyone of Mexican, Central American or South American ancestry (interchangeable with <em>Hispanic</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEP</strong></td>
<td>Limited English proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native or native American</strong></td>
<td>Refers to non-immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SES</strong></td>
<td>Socioeconomic status</td>
</tr>
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Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Trends in Immigration

The 1990’s saw the biggest wave of immigration to the United States since early in the twentieth century and the influx continues into the twenty-first century (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Today, the number of immigrant children in the United States is growing faster than any other sector of children (Board on Children and Families, 1995; Qin-Hilliard, Feinauer, & Quiroz, 2001). First and second generation immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population under age 15 (Board on Children and Families, 1995). One-fifth of all U.S. school children are children of immigrants (Conchas, 2001; Qin-Hilliard et al, 2001; M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Most of these children are found in five states: California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas (Conchas, 2001), although all states have some new immigrants (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). How these children adapt to American society will have a big impact on American economy and society in the future (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Clearly, immigration is affecting Iowa’s population. Data from the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization Service (1998) shows that Iowa added 1,655 international immigrants to its population is 1998. Of those, 22.1% were from Mexico, and about 27% were from Asia. Immigrants from other Latin American countries were combined under “other” which made up 37.9% of the population growth from immigration. These percentages parallel the national trend.

New immigrants are both among the most educated and highly skilled people in the U.S. as well as the poorest educated and lowest skilled people (Rumbaut, 1996; M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Many of the latter are from Latin America and tend to settle in areas that are poverty stricken and racially segregated, with few work opportunities (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).
In prior waves of immigration, by the third generation most immigrants had become thoroughly assimilated into American culture. However, those immigrants were primarily Caucasian, coming from Europe and Canada. Today’s immigrants are mostly Asian (25%) and Latin American (50%) (Perkins, 2000; M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001), and it is unclear how easily they can assimilate into a culture that is dominated by whites (Perkins, 2000; Rumbaut, 1996). The unknown effect that the current wave of immigrants will have on American society raises issues of xenophobia, assimilation, and change (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Whether this new wave of immigrants will become successful members of society or members of a multiethnic underclass largely determines what impact they will have on American society as a whole (Rumbaut, 1996).

**Immigrants and education**

For many immigrant children school is the first and most important contact with their new society (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Teachers can have a big influence on children and possibly parents (Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000). Teachers may be role models for immigrant children. They also set the tone in the classroom, thus affecting how the immigrant child is accepted or treated by native students. In some cases, a teacher may be the primary liaison between the school and immigrant parents.

One popular impression of immigrant children is that none do well in school, but in reality, academic achievement varies over ethnic lines and even within ethnicities (Board on Children and Families, 1995). Research in the U.S. often does not separate the issues of immigration status and social class. Differing immigrant groups may over- or under-represent the more (or less) educated populations of their countries of origin, so it is difficult to generalize results to a particular local community (Board on Children and Families, 1995). In fact, it is
difficult to get accurate data about the achievement of immigrant children, because there are few tools for assessing LEP immigrant children, and they are frequently excluded from other assessments for fear they would make the school averages fall (Board on Children and Families, 1995).

Some immigrants see school as a means to success in the U.S. They believe that through education and hard work, anyone can become successful. Others tend to compare their education with that of white, middle-class America, and see discrimination as the reason for the difference. They are skeptical about the role of education as a means to success. They rely on actual (negative) experiences with institutions rather than abstract beliefs about the importance of education. Most immigrant parents encourage their children to do well in school, however some possess attitudes that send a mixed message – they question the effect of education on their children’s futures. They tend to hold teachers and school personnel responsible for their children’s lack of success in school. Children reflect the attitudes of their parents, which may lead to behavior problems, reduced effort, challenge of teachers’ authority, and disinterest in learning English (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Immigrant children in school

The presence of immigrants in schools requires a different mindset on the part of school personnel. The tendency in some schools may be to either treat immigrant children the same way as native children and let them fend for themselves, or isolate them from native children and treat all immigrant children the same, regardless of aptitude or former schooling. For example, many of the new immigrants do not speak English. In some schools, they may be placed in the same ESL classroom with students who already know some English. Additionally, ESL teachers may
not receive support from mainstream teachers, who may think that teaching immigrant students is entirely the responsibility of the ESL teacher (Valdés, 1998).

Students are usually lumped into a category such as “Asian” or “Latino” despite the fact that students from these groups come from several different countries, each with its own culture, history, etc. (Perkins, 2000; Rumbaut, 1996; Valdés, 1998). In some cases, immigrant children who attended school in their native countries are placed with immigrant children who did not attend school previously.

Teachers are mixed in their reception of immigrant children. Some are very positive and report that children are eager to learn, are respectful, disciplined, and attentive. Others are frustrated and more negative. The latter see immigrant children as lazy, less intelligent and more likely to cause trouble than native students (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The author did not specify if teachers from particular schools or neighborhoods had one attitude while teachers from a different type of neighborhood had different attitudes, so it is difficult to determine if immigrant status alone led to teachers’ attitudes or if there were other factors involved, such as SES of school and neighborhood, attitude of school administrators, etc.

**Factors affecting academic achievement**

The variety of factors affecting academic achievement of immigrant youth may make it difficult for schools to address the needs of all children. Penneycook (1994) suggests that schools are arenas where power struggles occur. For example, the English language is a good inclusion device for education and thus for employment, social status, etc. (Valdés, 1998). In fact, Gunderson (2000) points out that many in North America believe that students must learn to read and write English in order to fully participate in school, become productive members of society, and achieve academic and professional success. However, just being able to read and
write is not sufficient to be successful in American society – the immigrants must also adopt U.S. culture and language in order to be successful. Many ESL classes teach only survival English, and not English that will allow the students to succeed in society with high paying jobs or the mobility that mainstream members enjoy.

Learning a new language is a source of stress for immigrant youth. While they may learn conversational English right away (within a year) it may take up to five years or longer for them to learn English related to cognitive or academic functioning. Therefore, the student may take a long time to catch up academically, and in the process may become depressed or suffer from academic frustration and lowered self-esteem (James, 1997). Unfortunately, students with limited English proficiency tend to drop out of school at higher rates than those with English proficiency (Perkins, 2000).

Not only is the language of learning new for immigrant children, but in many cases so is the method of learning. Most immigrant children are used to dictation and rote memorization. They are used to being graded on their ability to reproduce on a test what the teacher has told them in class (Gunderson, 2000). For example an 18-year old female Cantonese student who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong stated, “In Hong Kong all we do, memorize, memorize, memorize, day and night, 5 hours homework memorizing every day. In Vancouver all we do is think, think, think, nothing more. It’s hard to think when the teacher doesn’t tell you what to do.” (Gunderson, 2000, p.4). The difference in teaching methods may not always be problematic, but does require adjustment by the student.

Immigrant students may not understand the American education system, and may not know how to try to fit in, especially in extracurricular activities such as band, chorus, sports, etc. In many Latino schools, teachers are strict and demand silence and respect. Latino students may
confuse an American teacher’s kindness with permissiveness and may end up in trouble. The misunderstanding of the school system may lead to disinterest and discouragement (Valdés, 1998), which may in turn lead to dropping out of school.

Many immigrant youth who have trouble achieving academic success settle in neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and violence. The schools are typically overcrowded, under funded, with outdated textbooks, staffed with ill-prepared or unqualified teachers, with a high turnover rate and low morale. These immigrant children are forced into a culture of violence because of the neighborhoods in which they live, making it difficult for them to concentrate on learning, and for the teachers to concentrate on teaching (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Because immigrant children have low English proficiency, they are enrolled in less competitive and academically challenging classes, which will eventually exclude them from going to college (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Academic achievement can also be affected by prior educational experience, that is, education in the native country. Many immigrant children may not have attended school or may have attended a poor school before immigration. Also, some immigrant children experience an interruption in education due to political instability in their country (Thomas, 1992). Thus, schools must contend with immigrant children with and without prior knowledge of the English language, with and without prior educational experience, and without experience in the U.S. school system.

Other factors that have been associated with poor school achievement have to do with linguistic differences and racism. As children become aware of negative stereotypes about them, their motivation and aspiration to do well in school declines (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This issue will be discussed more later in the paper.
Length of stay in the U.S. tends to be negatively related to academic achievement. That is, the more Americanized the student, the less inclined he is to perform academically – this is true for both Asian and Latino youths. Many immigrant children come to the U.S. enthusiastic about school and highly motivated to learn (Perkins, 2000). Teachers often say the new immigrant children are respectful, well-behaved, and eager to learn. They lose their achievement drive with acculturation (Kao & Tienda, 1995; M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In other words, they become more like their American peers. Generally, second-generation immigrants perform worse academically than first-generation immigrants. While their English skills improve, academic success declines. With Americanization, achievement declines and problems increase (M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Using a survey of 2,420 eighth and ninth grade immigrant students in San Diego, Rumbaut (1996) studied factors that affected GPA and educational attainment and aspirations. Factors that positively affect GPA included coming from a family of high SES, being a recent first generation immigrant, and having a peer group of co-ethnic friends. He found that the higher the SES of the immigrant youth, the higher his educational attainment and aspirations. Rumbaut also found (as did Kao & Tienda and M. Suárez-Orozco), that the longer the person was in the U.S., reading achievement scores and English proficiency improved, but GPA and hours spent on homework declined. Second generation youth showed a decline in educational aspirations as well as GPA. GPA was lower for immigrant Mexican students, but their educational aspirations were not lower. From the results of studies such as this, educators need to become aware of the need to find ways to encourage Mexican and other Hispanic students to remain motivated to realize their educational goals.

1 In this paper the pronouns he and she are meant to refer to either gender. For ease of reading only one pronoun is used.
Comparison of educational achievement of immigrant and second generation youth relative to native born youth

Kao & Tienda (1995) set forth three hypotheses for explaining the academic performance of immigrant youth. *Straight-line assimilation* assumes that over time ethnic and racial minorities blend into the mainstream culture and become indistinguishable from the natives. This theory says that immigrant youth will have lower academic achievement initially, but will improve as assimilation occurs. *Accommodation-without-assimilation* predicts that youth will do better initially and then decline academically as they become tainted by native peer culture. *Immigrant optimism* espouses that parental attitudes determine the difference in academic performance between immigrant and native youth.

For purposes of their study, Kao & Tienda refer to first generation students as those who were foreign born and their mothers were foreign born. Second generation students are those who were born in the U.S. but their mothers are foreign born. All others are considered natives. Kao & Tienda examined middle school grades, standardized math and reading test scores, and aspirations to graduate from college among eighth graders, using the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88).

First generation students had slightly higher grades than third or higher generation counterparts, but not significantly different from second generation. Foreign-born parents had higher education aspirations for their children than native-born parents. Asians earned grades similar to whites, while Latino and African-American youth earned lower grades. However, the educational aspirations of minorities are equal to or greater than whites of similar SES.

The authors concluded that parental immigration status is a greater determinant than student immigrant status in determining academic performance. Racial and ethnic differences are
Parents’ optimism about their child’s academic achievement is decisive in the educational achievement of first and second generation immigrant youth.

**Psychosocial problems of immigrant youth**

Few studies have considered the psychological, psychosocial and mental health problems experienced by immigrant youth (James, 1997; C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant youth experience trauma due to loss of a familiar place, language, culture and community. They may experience trauma while traveling to the United States. Parents may assume that children and youth adjust easily to the new environment, but that is not necessarily true. Psychological problems are much more difficult to observe than language differences. Immigrant children from poor families are likely to experience health problems, depression, low self-esteem, aggression, and academic problems. Adolescents are doubly affected because not only must they adapt to a new environment but they are also experiencing developmental changes associated with puberty and adolescence (James, 1997).

In fact, little is known or has been researched to determine how (or if) the self-esteem of immigrant youth differs from that of mainstream youth (Portes & Zady, 1999). In adolescence, self-esteem is highly associated with appearance and acceptance by peers. While parental influence plays a role in the young person’s self esteem, peer judgments and relations, especially among classmates, is increasingly important (Portes & Zady, 1999). For immigrant youth, their adaptation into the new culture depends in a large part on how well they learn the English language and how well they achieve in school. This creates added stress in their lives because not only must they deal with the developmental issues of adolescence with which all youth cope,
they must also learn to function within new culture, learn a new language and a new school system (Portes & Zady, 1999).

Other factors that contribute to stress and affect adaptation to American society are discussed in the following section.

**Factors that contribute to stress**

When a person or family first arrives in the U.S., he or they may feel optimistic and hopeful about opportunities that await them. However, when reality is confronted and the situation in which they find themselves is not what they envisioned, some immigrants experience psychological problems (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Immigrants often face rejection or a hostile reception in their new society, which may result in depression, anxiety, distrust, anger, and perhaps even paranoia (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Factors that contribute to how immigrants adapt to their new society include: reason for migration, pre-immigration stress and trauma, socio-economic background, personality and temperamental factors, and psychological and physical health before migration (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Stress is particularly bad when a person is unable to cope in the manner in which he is accustomed, and is complicated further when he realizes that to not adapt results in serious consequences. Both of these happen during immigration (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Many immigrants are stripped of the mechanisms they used to cope in their native culture, and thus feel marginalized due to loss of a sense of competence, control and belonging in the society to which they have migrated.

Immigrants and their children are at a high risk of stress and maladjustment due to migration and acculturation. Children are at risk of higher anxiety, aggression, inability to tolerate frustration, low self-esteem, dependency, and poor relations with peers. Racial
discrimination and high student turnover also may cause behavior problems in children. For adolescents, migration tends to exacerbate the developmental crises of self-concept, identity and conflicts with parents. Low self-esteem is especially found among youth from ethnicities that are devalued by the dominant race (Aronowitz, 1984).

Immigrants suffer acculturation stress – stress caused from trying to learn new cultural rules and interpersonal expectations. One Mexican immigrant said, “I became an infant again. I had to learn all over again to speak, to dress, and what was expected of me.” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001 p.) In school, immigrant children have to learn the new culture quickly and intensely (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Immigration may alter relationships within the family. When a family migrates, the bonds that hold the family together are weakened. For example, parents often work one or more jobs, spending a lot of time away from home. They feel that by working hard they are helping their children in the best way they know how. However, this absence leaves children susceptible to alternative relationships, such as gangs (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). It also weakens parent-child interaction, which in turn negatively affects academic performance. Family relationships are further weakened as the child learns English – even though she retains some of her native language, she becomes better able to express thoughts and feelings in English while her parents retain their native language. Thus, parent-child communication suffers (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

**Social mirroring**

Adolescence is a time when people are forming identities (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). They form a self-image which is influenced by how they think others view them, especially in early adolescence. They want to fit in with their peers. Peers become more important than
family. Continuity and stability are important for the development of a positive self-identity, and immigrant children have an especially difficult time forming identities when these identities may differ among home, school, work, and relationship with peers. “When there is too much cultural dissonance, negative social mirroring, and role confusion, and when cultural guides are inadequate, an adolescent will find it difficult to develop a flexible and adaptive sense of self.” (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000, p. 217). Many come to the United States believing they can achieve the American Dream, only to find life is not what they imagined. Specifically, they are met with discrimination. They come to realize that getting an education does not translate into getting a better job with wages high enough to live the good life. With limited successful role models and social guides, many immigrant youth experience a turbulent adolescence.

C. Suárez-Orozco (2000) refers to writings of D.W. Winnicott (1971) who purported that a mother serves as a mirror for her child. A child uses his mother’s reaction to his actions or to other events to determine the value or quality of his actions. If a child’s actions are viewed favorably he is more likely to have a positive self image than a child whose actions are not viewed favorably. Suárez-Orozco takes this a step further and says that society also serves as a mirror for individuals. She says that, “…all human beings are dependent upon the reflection of themselves mirrored back to them by others….When the reflected opinion is generally positive, the individual (adult or child) will be able to feel that she is worthwhile and competent. When the reflection is generally negative, it is extremely difficult to maintain an unblemished sense of self-worth for very long.” (p. 213) The reflection may or may not be accurate; that is, the image that the immigrant sees may not be a true picture of how he really is. There can be positive mirroring when positive expectations bring about positive responses. Of more concern is “false bad”, or negative mirroring, which is discussed next.
Responses to negative social mirroring

Many immigrant children receive mirroring from society that is continuously negative and hostile. What happens to these children? Adams (1990) says that when a child receives such images from a variety of sources, e.g., the media, classroom, and street, the outcome is devastating (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Even though parents provide positive mirroring it may not be considered valid by the child, or may not be strong enough to offset the negative social mirroring. One possible response is an “I’ll show you” attitude where the child determines to be successful to prove society wrong. This response occurs infrequently. The more common response is to acquiesce to the social mirror and accept that he will never amount to anything, or resolve to prove just how bad he can be (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco (1995) defined three ways in which adolescent immigrants adapt to their new society and thus to the education system: ethnic flight, adversarial adaptation, and bi-cultural. Ethnic flight means that the youth mimics the mainstream culture, leaving his old culture behind. Ethnic flight does not occur as much today as with the old immigrants, because most immigrants today are “of color” and cannot blend as easily into the mainstream culture.

Adversarial adaptation means that the youth rejects the dominant culture, including school and social institutions. These youth drop out or are forced out of school. They also tend to have difficulty relating to their parents and family, so their main focus group is their peers. The adversarial adapters are those who deride other youth for “acting white” or giving up their culture for the dominant one, or for being successful in school.

The bi-cultural adapters use transitional strategies to navigate between their native culture and that of the dominant society. These youth use hyphenated terms to identify cultures
of which they are a part (e.g. Hispanic-American). These young people are generally successful in school and see education as a means to gain success in U.S. society, and a way to give back to parents and others who supported them and sacrificed so they could be successful (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Reaction of native students and parents

In the United States today, there is widespread discrimination against immigrants. Many people believe that immigrants have a negative impact on society, contributing to violence, unemployment rates, crime, and other negative economic impacts (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000). In some areas, this discrimination carries over into schools.

White parents of students in schools that were previously predominantly white may become worried when immigrant students, especially children of color, begin to attend school. Their worries include lower academic standards, problems that immigrant children might bring to school, violence, gangs, and interethnic romance (Valdés, 1998). Some teachers, too, experience worry over working with a diverse classroom when they have had little or no experience. They may know little about diverse ethnic groups, poverty, or how to work with immigrant parents. When immigrant parents do not exhibit their interest in education in the same manner as mainstream parents, teachers mistake the difference for apathy, disinterest, and even antagonism (Valdés, 1998).

Reaction of immigrant children

How can a child cope in a society that labels him as an alien, unwanted, not deserving of basic rights, etc.? Even if the child is here legally, these attitudes are directed toward him, especially if he is not white skinned. The hostility is generally unmasked and straightforward — that is, it is easy for the immigrant child to pick up on the attitudes of the natives (C. Suárez-
While similar attitudes have accompanied earlier waves of immigrants, the new immigrants are different in that they are primarily people “of color”. It is, thus far, unclear how skin color will affect their acculturation and eventual acceptance into American society.

As a part of the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study, C. Suarez-Orozco found that immigrant children are indeed aware of the negative attitudes and discrimination natives have toward immigrants, especially immigrants of-color. For example, they asked immigrant children in their study to complete the sentence, “Most Americans think (people from my country) are …” (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000, p. 211). The responses of Latino and Haitian children were overwhelmingly negative, most of them providing negative responses such as: stupid, poor, ignorant, impolite, don’t know anything, garbage, useless, members of gangs, etc. (C. Suárez-Orozco, 2000, p. 211). This is a good indication that immigrant children are aware of what natives think about them.

Assimilation vs. acculturation

There is debate in American society on whether immigrants should be assimilated into the society or acculturated. Assimilation means immigrants give up their native culture and completely replace it with the culture of the new country. Acculturation, on the other hand, allows the immigrant to become part of the mainstream culture without giving up his native culture. This has become an issue for schools in terms of whether to offer bilingual or English only classes, whether to isolate or integrate LEP students, etc. That is, do schools try to force homogeneity in the classroom, or do they accept and enhance differences among students in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, etc.?

It is healthier for the immigrant child to be acculturated rather than assimilated (James, 1997). Since adolescents are more likely than younger children to keep cultural beliefs and
values from their native country (James, 1997; Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000), they are able to
develop healthier self identities if their cultural beliefs and values are given validity by society
and the educational system. Acculturation also helps retain unity of the immigrant family since
the child would not feel that in order to fit in with his new society, he must reject his parents’
culture and values. Additionally, acculturation allows the immigrant child to keep some of the
coping mechanisms he has developed in order to adapt to a new society and a new school.

**Latinos and education**

**Trends**

The term “Latino” was coined by demographers to refer to anyone of Mexican, Central
American, or South American ancestry. Latinos come from many different countries and
cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of Latinos in the U.S. are
immigrants or children of immigrants (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

According to the 1993 census, only 51.3% of Latinos twenty-five years of age and older
have completed high school, compared to 79.9% of whites. Nine and seven-tenths percent of
Latinos ages twenty-five and older have four or more years of college, compared to 22% of
whites (Bureau of Census, 1993).

The Latino population in Iowa increased from 1.2% of the total population in 1990 to
2.8% in 2000 (Bureau of Census, 2001). While Latino children by no means make up a large
portion of the school population in Iowa, from the 1985-86 school year to the 2000-2001 school
year, the Latino population in Iowa public schools increased 333%. Spanish speaking students
comprised 63.3% of the total number of LEP students in Iowa schools in the 2000-2001 school
year (Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

“Recent studies have shown that economic and educational progress among immigrant
groups is uneven and unequal.” (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Asian immigrants generally
tend to fare well, while Latino immigrants, especially Mexicans, tend to do poorly. In 1990, only 74% of Mexican immigrants aged 15-17 were in school versus 95% of natives and other immigrants. Since low academic achievement and high dropout rates exist among Latino children (E. Trueba, 1999; Bureau of Census, 2001), school achievement among Latino children should be one of the top priorities of the educational system (Conchas, 2001).

**Academic success**

Like other immigrants, Latinos in U.S. schools face problems due to the process of immigration, resettlement, and minority status (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). However, studies that document low achievement levels for Latino immigrant students tend to hide wide variations in the academic achievement among them (Board on Children and Families, 1995). While the overall academic performance of Latino students is poor, there are many who succeed in school. Some researchers do not account for the differences in academic achievement within an ethnic group and this gives educational achievement on the part of Latino students a homogeneous look, when in fact it is quite heterogeneous – that is, some Latino students are successful students while others are not (Conchas, 2001). Conchas (2001) attributes the difference of academic success within immigrant ethnicities to differences in school engagement (i.e., attitudes toward school and academic achievement) and institutional factors that help determine academic achievement. These factors may include placement of immigrant children, teacher and administrator attitudes and treatment of children, etc.

Rumbaut (1996) refers to fieldwork done by Maria Matute-Bianchi, who identified five categories of Mexican youth, and then came up with a picture of “successful” and “unsuccessful” students. The successful students recognized a link between education and life’s goals. They expressed a desire to go to college, and had adult role models. These students generally were
comfortable with their Mexican identity and at the same time were adapting to the American way of life.

On the other hand, “unsuccessful” students did not have positive adult role models, and viewed success as being able to “work the system”. They did not have any future goals or aspirations. They felt that adapting to the American way of life meant rejection of their Mexican culture, and went out of their way to reject whiteness. They adopted learned helplessness by focusing on being members of a disadvantaged group that is unable to make it in the mainstream American culture. This illustrates the fact that although many immigrant children and youth face the same tasks of adjusting to a new society and educational system, some are able to overcome the obstacles and succeed, while others do not. Research is still trying to determine what accounts for the difference in success among immigrants.

Chavkin & Gonzalez (2000) identify resiliency as one of the key factors that determines whether or not an immigrant youth will be successful in school. They define resiliency as the ability to cope with adversity. Gordon (1996) studied the self-concept and motivational patterns of thirty six urban Latino youth. She found that the difference between resilient and non-resilient Latino youth is that the resilient youth had faith in their cognitive abilities – they believed they could achieve academic success. This self-esteem is achieved when various factors are present: supportive relationships, self-esteem and motivation on the part of the student, parental support and involvement, community youth programs, and academic success and prosocial skills training (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 2000).

Chavkin & Gonzalez (2000) describe several programs in neighborhoods with large Latino immigrant populations designed to strengthen the resiliency of immigrant youth. For example, AVANCE (which means “advance” in Spanish) helps teach low-income mothers to
provide educationally stimulating and emotionally encouraging environments for their children. This program not only helps children, it also helps build the self-esteem of the mothers. Mujeres y Hombres Nobles (honorable men and women), based in east Los Angeles, targets youth who have dropped out of school. Its main purpose is to instill a sense of self-worth, and pride in culture and language. The program encourages community participation. Programs such as these can be used as models for programs nationwide.

Vernez & Abrahamse (1996) conducted a study to “systematically describe and analyze the experience and performance of immigrant children and youth in the U.S. education system” (p. xi). The authors used data from “High School and Beyond”, in which over 21,000 tenth and twelfth graders in 1980 were followed over a six year time period, through high school, graduation, and post-secondary education. They also used data from the 1970, 1980, and 1990 U.S. Census to analyze participation in U.S. education across all age groups and over time. (One drawback to doing this is that today’s immigrants may not behave similarly to immigrants in the 1970’s.) Many immigrant youth do not enter the school system in the U.S., especially if they are fifteen years or older when they immigrate. However, if they are in school at age fifteen, they are more likely to go to college than their native counterparts.

Latinos score lower on nearly all key family and individual characteristics than any other ethnic group. These characteristics include income, parental education, and educational aspirations. This may help account for their lower academic achievement. Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in terms of numbers, and their academic achievement is lower than all other ethnic groups. This is important not only to the individual and his family, but to the U.S. society at large since the education of Latinos will determine the quality of the future labor force.
It is important to determine if immigrant (Mexican) youth entered the school system and dropped out or never entered at all, because that will determine what types of interventions will be used to keep the youth in school. If these are our future workforce, we need to be sure they are educated and become responsible citizens. While, generally, immigrant youth tend to take an academic track leading to college, Latinos are the least likely ethnic group to do so (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996).

**Drop outs**

According to data reported by Rong & Preissle (1998), dropping out of school is a serious problem among immigrant youth, especially Latino immigrant youth, and within that group, especially Mexican youth. At age 17 (in 1990), 34% of Mexican immigrants who were not in school had not graduated from school; at age 18 it was 48%. Four percent of Mexicans age 17 had fewer than five years of school, while 6% of 18-year-olds had less than five years of school. One-third of the seventeen and eighteen year old immigrant youth are Mexican, but Mexicans make up two-thirds of those who have dropped out of school, in that age group.

Data indicates that the dropout rate for immigrants decreases with length of stay in the United States (Rong & Preissle, 1998). For example, 17-year-old Mexican youths who had recently immigrated had a 57% dropout rate; those who had been in the U.S. for six to ten years had a dropout rate of only 16%. This data suggests that the younger the child enters school in the U.S., the more likely she is to complete school. It seems that the younger child has an opportunity to adjust to a new school and a new language, and is more on the same level with native children her age, both academically and developmentally, than an older immigrant who has almost no chance of learning English well enough to graduate with his peers. By the time they would catch up with their peers academically, they will be older than others in their class.
Latino students in Iowa

The Latino students in Iowa seem to follow the national trend. According to Elizabeth Salinas Newby of the Iowa Commission on Latino Affairs, the drop out rate among Latino students is “horrible”. “Latino students feel disenfranchised from our school systems. They get discouraged and quit.” (quoted in Bolten, 2002). Data from the Iowa Department of Education (2001) shows that 9.3% of ninth-twelfth grade Latino students dropped out in the 2000-2001 school year, and 8.1% dropped out in the 1999-2000 school year. This compares to a dropout rate among white students of 2.3% in each of the aforementioned school years.

In the twenty-one school districts with the highest number of Latino students, the Latino students make up a disproportionate part of the number of dropouts. For example, the average Latino enrollment in the twenty-one school districts makes up 13.2% of the school population, but Latino students accounted for 20.6% of the dropouts in 1999-2000, and 21% in 2000-2001. The proportion is even higher for some individual school districts. For example, in Columbus, where Latino students make up 44.6% of the school population, they accounted for 60.6% of the dropouts in 1999-2000, and 81.8% in 2000-01. In Boyden-Hull where 6.8% of the students are Latino, they made up 40% of the dropouts (Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

Latinos in mainstream schools

Guadalupe Valdés (1998 & 2001) has studied Latino youth who have immigrated to the U.S. with “zero” English and how they learn English in school. The question behind her studies is, “Why is it that so many non-English-background students fail to learn English well enough to succeed in school?” (Valdés, 1998, p. 4). This is important because in order for immigrants to succeed in American society, they must learn English, but not just English grammar and vocabulary, but “functional” English – English that will enable them to succeed in other
academic subjects studied in school, as well as English that will enable them to succeed in society at large. She also worried that emphasis on writing across the curriculum serves as a gatekeeper for students, and may produce even more dropouts (Valdés, 2001).

Valdés found that in most schools, immigrant students are placed in ESL classrooms, isolated from mainstream students. Much of the work these students do is bookwork. They do not have an opportunity to interact with native speakers, nor are they exposed to academic subjects native students study. Therefore, they are behind in English as well as other academic subjects. This puts immigrant adolescents at a particular disadvantage, because they only have, at the most, five or six years to learn English and other academic subjects well enough to pass standardized tests which, in many states, are required for graduation.

Some teachers of mainstream subjects may not want immigrant students, even those who speak English, because they do not feel comfortable working with them, or are not sure of how their presence will affect the classroom. The result is that non-English speaking students tend to associate exclusively with each other, in and out of the classroom (Valdés, 1998).

**Latinos in Newcomer schools**

On the other hand, there are those who advocate the effectiveness of “newcomer schools”. These are separate, transitional schools where all students are immigrants. Hertzberg (1998) says that newcomer schools help capture and cultivate the enthusiasm new immigrants have for school. Research shows that immigrant Mexican children have varied learning patterns and orientations toward schooling, as well as self motivation and individualized ideas of learning, and some scholars believe that the atmosphere in the newcomer schools capitalizes on that self-motivation better than do mainstream schools.
Hertzberg describes Redwood School in California as a school that has been successful in preparing immigrant children for mainstream schools. 95% of the 450 students in Redwood School come from low-income neighborhoods, although the open, spacious school is located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the district. The school provides a nurturing, caring environment. While helping children learn English is one goal of the school, instilling self-pride and subject matter learning take top priority. The students are generally considered well prepared by their home school teachers.

Another successful newcomer school is Newcomer High School in San Francisco. This is a transitional school which students volunteer to attend for a maximum of one year. They have intensive English classes as well as bilingual classes in other academic subjects. This is an alternative to attending mainstream schools and getting lost in the crowd (Feinberg, 2000).

Not all newcomer schools are so successful. Some native Americans see them as a way to hide immigrant students, to segregate them and provide substandard education. One such school is what Feinberg (2000) fictitiously named Dreadful K-12. A list of omissions in the plan for this school perhaps describes it best: it was not to be a building designed as a school but a leased building such as a warehouse or armory, so there was no cafeteria, playground, etc.; no textbooks – only what could be copied from resources already owned by the district; no specified teacher allocation formula; no plan to manage the transition to the home school. Publicly officials claimed that if immigrant students were enrolled in the mainstream school their special needs would not be met, but privately they expressed fear of disease spread by immigrants, that the middle-class families would leave the district if immigrant children attended the school, and standardized test scores for the school would decline.
One disadvantage of even a good newcomer school is the limited interaction with native American peers. According to H.T. Trueba (1994), immigrant children are more afraid of speaking or acting in culturally inappropriate ways than of speaking the language incorrectly. By isolating new immigrants, the children do not have opportunities to hear native speakers and thus have fewer opportunities to learn culturally appropriate ways to speak. Like Valdés, Feinberg (2000) states that if immigrant children are to learn English, they need to be around native speakers, not isolated from them.

**Social capital**

Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998) refer to within-family and between-family social capital that affect academic achievement in immigrant children. Within-family social capital refers to the parent-child relationship. If parent and child interact in learning activities, this enhances learning in the child. The likelihood that parent and child will have similar educational goals or expectations is also greater, and those goals are more likely to be higher than in a relationship with less within-family capital. They say that Mexican immigrants have less within-family social capital and more dissonant acculturation because many parents do not actively learn English and necessary information about U.S. culture, while immigrant Mexican children learn from their native-born peers “not to learn” (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998).

Between-family social capital refers to relationships such as those between the family and other social institutions, and trustworthiness and solidarity (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Immigrant Mexicans may be short on between-family social capital as well, because they often settle in poor neighborhoods, with few role models to show how to become successful in American society. Immigrant Mexicans generate few entrepreneurs. Therefore, Mexicans do not have a strong backing from an economic community that encourages academic achievement and
upward mobility. Instead, Mexican immigrant youth are heavily influenced by their co-ethnic peers who alienate hardworking students and deny the value of education (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998).

**Latino students’ perceptions of the education process**

As part of a larger comparative racial and ethnic research project of urban high school students and education, Conchas (2001) describes a case study conducted at an urban high school on the West coast of the U.S. The study focused on students’ perceptions of the institutional process and how it related to their engagement and motivation, as well as the differences among the educational experiences of Latinos. The study was done over a two year period and consisted of interviews, focus groups, and observations of twenty-six Latino students in grades ten through twelve. During the period this study was conducted, the high school had a Graphics Academy which was a program specializing in computer-assisted graphics technology, a Medical Academy for those students who were interested in pursuing careers in health-related occupations, an Advanced Placement (AP) program that included classes from five subject areas, as well as a general education program. The majority of the AP students were also in the Graphics Academy.

Conchas observed that the way in which opportunities were divided among students mirrored the opportunities in society in general and how they are distributed along racial lines resulting in inequities. The students were aware of these inequities. In fact, students tended to group themselves by race: during lunch and breaks, students of like ethnicities would congregate apart from others; in class African-Americans sat together, Latinos together, etc. The school programs reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes. For example, most of the AP and Graphics Academy students were white or Asian.
Students in the general program received little help or encouragement from teachers or the institution. Only 5% of the Latinos in this program graduated. These students found school boring and lacked motivation to do well. They had goals, but did not know how to achieve them, and did not receive help from school personnel. They had few positive role models. Interestingly, they realized that having support and role models are important, but did not know how to get either one. They felt alienated and invisible.

There were three Latinos in the AP track and thirteen in the Graphics Academy (including the three in the AP track). While these students were high achievers academically, they were also very stressed out about their situation. They felt alienated not only from their Latino peers, but also from other students in their program. The social bonds for these students were fragmented. They made no effort to relate to other Latino students. Because the teachers in these programs encouraged competition among the students rather than collaborative learning, these thirteen students felt isolated from each other as well. These students had goals of “making it” in U.S. society, or feeling that they had something to prove, and thus adapted to school processes in order to succeed.

The Medical Academy, on the other hand, had a totally different perspective. Its focus was to serve the school’s students who were likely to drop out, and to prepare them for jobs in the medical field. The academy encouraged collaboration and cooperation among students. The teachers made an effort to get to know the students personally and to work with families. The result was a feeling of community among all of the students. The racial lines were less finely drawn. The Latino students in the Medical Academy expressed more optimism about their futures.
Conchas concluded that while schools often replicate the inequalities and stratification found in society at-large, they can negate some of the inequalities if students and teachers work together toward academic success. Further, the study shows that institutions can implement programs and cultural processes that can encourage or discourage academic success on the part of Latino students.

**Latinos vs. other immigrant ethnic groups**

Hao & Bonstead-Bruns (1998) were concerned about the difference in academic achievement between Asian and Mexican immigrant students. They used data from the NELS:88 to investigate parent-child relationships, ethnic differences, and educational expectations for the two ethnic groups of interest. The sample included students from four immigrant groups (Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Mexican), and three native groups (Mexicans, African-Americans, and whites) who were eighth graders in 1988. Endogenous variables were parents’ educational expectations for their children and the children’s expectations for themselves. Exogenous variables included immigrant status and ethnicity, parent-child interactions in learning activities, parents’ characteristics, student characteristics, and school characteristics. They used data from standardized math tests and reading tests, as well as GPA to measure academic achievement.

They found that Mexican immigrant youth do not have significantly higher expectations for education than do their native counterparts, which is contradictory to what other researchers have found. Immigrant Mexicans rank lowest on parent-child interaction, and native Mexican-Americans rank next-to-last. While for Chinese and Koreans immigrant status meant higher educational expectations, for Mexicans it did not.
They also found that the type of school matters, as does regional location. School-level variables explain a large portion of variability – over half for math and reading scores and a quarter for GPA.

For immigrant Mexicans, shared family expectations are low, parent-child differences in expectations are high, and this combination leads to lower academic achievement. Immigrant Mexicans also have less between-family social capital in terms of lower value of education, weaker ethnic economy, and limited acceptance in the local economy. Mexicans are also more likely to attend schools with more minorities and students of lower socioeconomic status.

Hao and Bonstead-Bruns conclude that we need to develop interventions that increase parent-child interactions. As mentioned before, parents’ educational aspirations for their children have a large impact on the academic success of the child. This study found that Mexican immigrants have low parent-child interaction and a high difference in academic goals between parents and children. If interaction increases, the goals should tend to be more alike. Specifically, if educators can involve parents in more school-related activities, and show parents how to relate to their children about academic topics, academic success should increase.

**Harvard Immigration Project** (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001)

The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) began in 1997, tracking more than four hundred recently arrived children of immigrants from more than fifty schools in the Boston and San Francisco areas. This study uses structured questionnaires for children, parents, and teachers, as well as ethnographic field work in school and communities, psychological and narrative techniques. Achievement data and other information collected by schools (such as grades, attendance, records, and disciplinary actions) are also used. The fieldwork and interviews are conducted by thirty trained research assistants. Using different
methods of research is important, because the information collected from just one means may be misleading. For example, the researchers found that sometimes respondents would respond to a questionnaire in the way they thought the researcher wanted them to, but their observed actions would indicate differently. One example of this is most children say that school is very important to them, but their observed behavior suggested otherwise. One student in particular kept telling the interviewers that doing well in school was very important to him, and that he would go to college to become a doctor. But, through observation it was found that the student became disengaged from schoolwork and became one of the “backroom boys” (p. 11) - cutting classes and missing homework.

Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco identified several challenges to immigrant students and the schools they attend:

1. Origins – Immigrants come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational systems, education level of parents, family life, legal status. This is a challenge to immigrant students because they will most likely be placed in an ESL classroom with other immigrant students with possibly different levels of prior educational experience. The material taught may be either material they have already studied and mastered, or material they cannot comprehend. This is a challenge for schools as they try to provide quality and meaningful education for all students. It is difficult to adequately address the academic needs of a wide variety of students. Additionally, many immigrant children go to school with many emotional needs which should be addressed.

2. Poor neighborhoods – Latinos tend to settle in racially segregated neighborhoods. Youth who grow up in poor, segregated neighborhoods are more likely to drop out of
school and thus get lower paying jobs. However, if the families and community are positive and not as poor, youth do better in school and in life.

3. School factors – Schools in poor areas are generally under-staffed, have low staff morale, have low academic expectations, lack resources, and have high crime rates and rates of violence. Effective schools are those with positive leadership, high staff morale, high academic expectations for all students, and a safe environment.

4. Segregation in schools – Segregation is a challenge because “segregated” tends to mean “less” for schools with a predominantly minority population. Among Latino immigrants, segregation has increased rapidly over the past two decades. They experience the highest drop out rate of any ethnic group. The challenge is to motivate, educate and retain students in these schools.

5. Bilingual education – It is hard for immigrants to learn when they do not have mastery of the English language and are not being instructed in their native language. Many native Americans view allowing learning in a language other than English as a threat rather than an asset. However, danger to cognitive development occurs when a person gives up his first language without receiving enough training and practice with the second language. How well an immigrant child learns English depends on how well he knows his native language. Full academic mastery of a second language usually takes 6-7 years of study and exposure.

6. School reform – More and more schools are requiring passing a standardized test in order to graduate, or to advance in grades. This testing may benefit the white, middle class students and at the same time harm immigrant students, many of whom do not know English well enough to take the required tests. Thus, many drop out of school.
Most school reform movements consider primarily mainstream students. The challenge is to design assessment tools that adequately indicate the academic achievement of immigrant students, and school reforms that will benefit all students.

7. Classroom engagement – Immigrant children have to learn to function in schools that have different cultural styles from those in their home lands. Many are used to highly structured classrooms with strict teachers, where cognitive and interpersonal practices differ from those in the U.S. The challenge is to teach immigrant students how to function in their new classrooms.

8. School-parent relations – Many parents do not like the lack of discipline and respect in schools and think teachers appear ineffective and weak. In some cultures parents are not encouraged to participate in school, and teachers may think non-participation indicates lack of interest. Parents may not feel secure about questioning the authority of school personnel. The challenge to schools is to find ways to reach out to parents and teach them ways to become involved in the educational process, along with teaching them how the education system works.

9. Parental savvy about school differences – Some students may rely on guidance counselors, who instead of helping students prepare for college may actually discourage them from going, or keep them from taking courses to enable them to more easily enter college or excel in school. Parents who can learn how the education system works are in a better position to help their children succeed in school.
Chapter 3 - Conclusion/Discussion

Summary

From prior research we can see that the current trend for immigrant Latino youth in school in the United States is that they experience low retention rates and low academic achievement, relative to every other ethnic group, both native and immigrant. This is a disturbing trend, especially given that Latinos are the fastest growing minority in the country, as well as the ethnic group with the youngest members. Researchers agree that most immigrants arrive in this country with high educational aspirations and goals but many lose their enthusiasm after being in this country for a while. Many suggest that it is social mirroring, or the way in which they are received in the host country, that accounts for their increasing disenchantment with education. Most researchers agree that immigrant students want to fit in with American youth, and need to be able to interact with native peers as much as possible. Instead of segregating immigrants in special schools or classrooms, they should be placed in mainstream classes as much as possible. Others contend that, at least for an initial period of time, immigrant students should be segregated to give them a chance to acclimate and learn U.S. culture and education system.

Developmental issues affect the adaptation of immigrant youth. Adolescence is a time of transition and change, a time when youth are especially concerned with what others think of them, and a time when they develop their own self-perception. When this period of transition is coupled with having to learn to live in a new culture and speak a new language, leaving behind the familiar, the result can be disastrous. All of the above issues were discussed in the paper.

Before we can adequately address the topic of academic achievement of immigrant Latino youth, I believe we need to answer the question, What is academic achievement? Can we define this term in the same way for native, white middle-class students as for immigrant
students, when the majority of the measures currently used for academic success are geared toward mainstream students? Will a majority of immigrant students ever gain high academic achievement unless the tools used to measure their success are altered to include their culture? Such a tool would more accurately measure the educational achievement of immigrant youth and could also serve as a tool to properly place immigrant students in classes to meet their needs, rather than putting all immigrant students in a class based on their ability to speak the English language.

**Implications for schools**

Several researchers mentioned the fact that many immigrant children are enthusiastic about school and very motivated to learn. I believe it is important for schools to find a way to capture and retain that motivation, to find ways to challenge students to excel in school. Teachers should try to build relationships with immigrant students and also encourage cooperative learning among students. School can also be a place where immigrant youth interact with American peers, and develop relationships with them. Retention in school is related to motivation and acceptance by peers. Once the immigrant loses enthusiasm for school and motivation to complete his education, the tendency, especially for adolescents, is to drop out of school.

Research has shown that parent-child interaction and parent involvement in school have positive effects on academic achievement. This is true for immigrant children and well as native children. Research also shows that Latinos, especially Mexicans, have low parent-child interaction and low parent involvement in schools. This may be due in large part to the parents working much of the time, but may also be influenced by cultural factors. Schools should make an effort to encourage parent involvement with their children’s education, and teach parents
ways in which to become involved. Ways of reaching out to parents include parent seminars at
the school, parents nights to give the parents an opportunity to visit the child’s classroom and
teachers, and use of a parent liaison to serve as the contact between school and parents. The
reaching out needs to be on the community level as well as the school level. The community can
help provide mentors, youth programs, role models, and encouragement for parents, etc.
Programs such as those described by Chavkin & Gonzalez (2000) require that the community
and school work together in order to be successful.

Often policy makers and members of the public have little information about what
actually goes on in school. They do not realize that placing non-English speaking children in an
all-English program often limits the amount of English they actually learn, and also what other
academic material they learn. Objectives of language instruction for immigrant youth must
include teaching them to be able to understand the spoken language of their teachers as they
teach all subjects, and they must be able to read and understand textbooks (Valdés, 1998).

Specific recommendations for schools and teachers to help insure retention and academic
achievement for immigrant children include: 1) offer classes to help immigrant students develop
academic English; 2) develop programs that are school-wide projects and not limited to an ESL
classroom; 3) end the isolation of immigrant students; and 4) build on academic strengths of
immigrant students (Valdés, 2001). Also, it is very important that teachers do not expect
behavior based on membership in an ethnic group. Each student should be treated as an
individual. Teachers should demonstrate that they believe in students’ abilities and respect them
and their culture. They need to use culturally responsive or appropriate instruction and try to
understand students’ cultures. Teachers should be willing to discuss students’ ambivalence and
resistance to school and help them to understand their attitudes. It is important for teachers to set high standards and expect all students to achieve them.

**Suggestions for future research**

I believe it is important to continue to research the education of immigrant Latino children, and to take action based on the results of the research. If the current trend continues in the academic achievement of Latino immigrant children, the quality of the workforce in this country is in jeopardy given that Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. This should be motivation to find a remedy for the problem even for those who do not generally support or have an interest in quality education for immigrants, especially immigrants of color. On a more personal level, if we are to truly promote a "no child left behind"\(^2\) policy, we must include quality education for immigrant children as well as native children.

Research on immigrants and families of immigrants should be done in order to bring their problems to the forefront. This is especially important as the number of immigrants continues to increase. If they are excluded from educational research, the studies that are conducted will over-represent the mainstream culture, and the condition of the education of ethnic minorities will be excluded or dismissed. The education of immigrants is important not only to their well-being, but to the well-being of the U.S. economy, since they are increasingly important contributors to the economy (Board on Children and Families, 1995).

Additionally, future research can investigate the following: why some immigrant children succeed and others fail; why some adapt and others do not; how personal characteristics affect adjustment to life in the U.S.; how to prevent educational maladjustment; search for variables that moderate the stress of immigration; what factors can reverse the downward trend of

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\(^2\) This refers to the No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001, passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by President Bush to try to ensure quality education for all students.
educational achievement of immigrant children; how life changes interact with developmental changes that occur during puberty, or entry into school (Board on Children and Families, 1995).

Further study of subgroups of Latino immigrants (i.e., Mexicans, Central Americans, etc.) needs to be done (M. Suárez-Orozco, 1987). Even though immigrants from Latin America share the general geographic location or origin, they differ greatly in culture, economic conditions, reasons for immigrating, etc. To lump them altogether and assume all fit a general pattern is a disservice to them as well as to the quality of research being done.

Virtually all of the research I found has been conducted on the east or west coast of the U.S. This makes sense since many immigrants have settled along the coasts. Can the findings among these immigrant youth be generalized to predict the trend of Latino youth in rural midwestern states such as Iowa? In order to investigate the trend of the education of Latino youth in Iowa, future studies might examine the following questions:

A. What is the composition of the Latino population in terms of immigrant status, generation of immigration, education prior to coming to the United States or to Iowa, whether they came directly to Iowa from their native country or lived elsewhere in the United States prior to coming to Iowa, etc.

B. In what types of neighborhoods do immigrants in Iowa settle?

C. What are the educational goals and aspirations of new Latino immigrants in Iowa compared to those who have been here for some time?

D. Is social mirroring a factor in the adaptation of Latino youth to school in Iowa?

E. How are Latino immigrants received by the school personnel, community, and other children and their parents?
F. Is there a significant difference in the academic achievement and retention between Latino youth and majority youth of similar socioeconomic status in Iowa?

G. What is currently being done to work toward helping immigrant Latinos achieve academic success?

This paper has looked at the trend of academic achievement and retention in immigrant youth, particularly Latino immigrants. Clearly, research shows that the general trend for Latino youth is one of academic non-success and high dropout rates, although there are many who do succeed. We looked at factors that researchers believe affect the academic success of immigrant youth, but there is no clear answer to what causes the negative trend. While further research is needed to investigate factors that contribute to the negative trend in Latino education, schools, parents, and community leaders should continue to search for ways to motivate and encourage Latino youth to stay in school and aim for academic success. States and communities that are just beginning to receive an influx of Latino immigrant youth, such as Iowa, should be encouraged to take preventive actions to avoid the poor academic success and high dropout rates of the immigrant youth, and take positive action to help immigrant youth succeed in school.
Bibliography


