

**OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS: SCHOOL SUCCESS OF MEXICAN
AMERICAN GRADUATES FROM PAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
IN SOUTH TEXAS FROM 1955 TO 1975**

A Dissertation

by

JUANITA CELIA GARCÍA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2005

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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ABSTRACT

Overcoming the Barriers: School Success of Mexican American Graduates From Pan American University in South Texas From 1955 to 1975. (August 2005)

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This study examined the contextual factors that led to the success of Mexican Americans who overcame extraordinary obstacles in obtaining post-secondary educations. Mexican Americans continue to experience great challenges to post-secondary success. An in-depth case study was performed on ten subjects who managed to not only survive, but also do well in school and life. The purpose of the study was to identify obstacles these men and women had to overcome, the means they used to overcome them, and the salience of their ethnicity to their experience. Utilizing a worldview construct and the concept of familism, findings are presented that demonstrate how these men and women were able to succeed educationally.

First, their families placed a high value for and exposure to literacy, English and Spanish, in the participants' homes. Contrary to the fact that these participants' homes were characterized by low levels of parental education, they were exposed to high levels of literacy. A second important commonality among these high achievers was that all of them at some point in their schooling attended desegregated schools where they were exposed to Anglo peers with much greater social capital than

themselves. Finally, and perhaps the most important, is the profound value for hard work that characterized almost all of these households and was channeled into dedication to studies and a strong belief that effort, perseverance, and courage were important in achieving academic goals.

Rather than just focusing on the barriers, the problems common to low-income, first-generation college students as do most studies on student access and success, this study focuses on the creative solutions its subjects found and the kinds of support that made differences for them. The study records the perceptions of the successful graduates of the causes of their school success and tapped into their insights. The findings and recommendations of the study may enable educators to re-examine their own attitudes toward the schooling of Mexican origin students and its unanticipated negative consequences and help institutions of higher education identify policy changes that will facilitate the recruitment and retention of Hispanic and other minority students.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother, Guadalupe Ríos García, and my father, Cristobal de Alejandro García, whose courage in the face of tremendous adversities and obstacles has been a source of constant admiration, inspiration, and strength. My mother's constant prayers and faith have kept the family together. My father's *alegria* instilled in us a love for life. I thank them for their encouragement and support of all my educational endeavors. Thank you for all you have taught me and unselfishly given. In their honor, I dedicate this book to them.

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This accomplishment would not have been possible without the support of my family, including my mother, Guadalupe R. García, my sister, Emelia Cantú, my daughter Lisa Arriaga, my niece Dina Cantú Serda, and my comadres Hilaria Bauer, Dr. Chris Green, and Dr. Linda Cantú. Thank you for being there not only to celebrate my successes, but to comfort me in my failures.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

School is an increasingly important intervening institution in the political economy. In many ways, school has become the dominant status flow institution. In a society that claims to be one that provides everyone equal opportunity, schools direct students to different walks of life (Pearl, 1990).

The plight and struggle of public schooling for Mexican Americans began with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which brought about an end to the Mexican American War of 1846-1848 (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Mexicans became a part of the United States involuntarily through conquest. This signaled the beginning of prejudice and discrimination against Mexican origin people residing in the United States (Gibson & Ogbu, as cited in Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995).

Three contextual frameworks have been posited as explanations of the major barriers that characterize the plight and struggle of the education of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. These include (a) the ethnic isolation and denial of equal educational opportunity, (b) the exclusion and the eradication of the Spanish language and culture from the schools, and (c) the powerlessness that accompanies low socioeconomic conditions (Gonzalez, 1990).

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students.

The style of this dissertation follows that of *The Journal of Educational Research*.

Separate schools were unequal in many respects to those provided for Anglo children. In relation to Anglo schools, Mexican schools were older; their school equipment was generally less adequate; per pupil expenditures were generally lower; and the staff were less appropriately trained, qualified, and experienced. This era was characterized as a major change in the character of public education for Mexican American students because of the evolving nature of deficit thinking, the rise of school segregation, and inferior schooling (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

The concept of deficit thinking maintains that Mexican American students who fail do so because of limited educability. This type of thinking impacted perceptions of Mexican American students' educability and school practices. These views served as the dominant means by which to view Mexican American students as limited (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). The 1970's brought about considerable attention to the education problems for Mexican Americans. During this period, the Mexican American Education Study (MAES) report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was the most comprehensive investigation of Mexican American schooling conditions. The report confirmed that the historical segregation of Mexican American students has persisted into the contemporary period. This study served as a benchmark for the nature of education of Mexican Americans and a baseline from which to compare current schooling conditions and outcomes (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

After the Mexican American War, American schools were seen as a way to assimilate Mexican origin students into the predominately White Anglo society (Spring, 1997). This was achieved through a process of subtraction – that is, a process

that involved the removal of all minority communities, languages, and cultures from the governance, administration, and content of public education. The schools removed the ethnic and religious community as well as two significant aspects of the Mexican heritage – the Spanish language and the Mexican culture. This subtractive process led to (a) a lack of self-concept and identity; (b) separation between school and home; (c) elimination of the mother tongue as a prerequisite to second language attainment (Schellinger, 1994); and (d) removal of the cultural knowledge and values that are the basis for reasoning, inferencing, and interpreting meanings (Trueba, 1990). For decades, most Mexican American students whose mother tongue was Spanish and who were not proficient in English have faced the sink-or-swim pedagogical practice of English-only instruction. Although some Mexican American students survived this submersion, many did not (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

There is a consensus that across racial and ethnic groups, socio economic status is the single most powerful contributor to students' educational outcomes (Laosa & Henderson, as cited in Gandara, 1995). There is less consensus on the question of why socioeconomic status has such powerful effects. Some have suggested that the social reproduction of status differences between population groups is the direct result and intent of capitalist economic policy to maintain social class advantages (Bowles & Gintis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). The schooling system in the United States is ordered in such a way as to channel upper income students into educational opportunities. This type of a schooling system operates to convince lower-income students that they deserve lower status. Others have suggested that the effects of family socioeconomic

status on educational outcomes are more of an inadvertent result of a culture of poverty (Lewis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). In poverty cultures, maladaptive responses to schooling are transmitted through the generations by parents who (a) were themselves ill-suited to school, (b) did poorly, and (c) failed to learn the skills necessary to propel themselves through the educational system (Gandara, 1995). This is the powerlessness issue that low socio-economic conditions accompany. For over 25 years, there has been a declared national commitment to improving the educational performance of the economically disadvantaged. These efforts can take one of two forms: (a) repairing alleged deficits or (b) changing school structures. If powerlessness results in an ineffective approach, the powerlessness becomes a crucial issue in school failure (Pearl, 1990).

According to San Miguel and Valencia (1998), the education of Mexican American students has gone through intense transformations. There has been a multiplicity of research and publications concerning the school experience for Mexican American students; however, this era is characterized as a continuing struggle for educational equality. Through litigations, activism, advocacy and legislation, Mexican American enrollments in higher education have increased since the 1960's, bilingual education has been established, and school retention was improved (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Although there have been significant gains, presently, problems abound for the Mexican Americans: (a) they are under-enrolled in bilingual classes, (b) segregation is on the rise, (c) they still lag behind academically behind their Anglo peers, (d) school financing is still very much unequitable, and (e) the curriculum

continues to be watered down. Aggravating this plight is the current anti-bilingual and English only political campaigns, anti-affirmative action, and anti-diversity sentiments (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

In general, U.S. schools have not succeeded in the education Mexican American students (Wortham, 1997). Although there are many individual successes, Mexican Americans as a group disproportionately (a) remain below grade level, (b) drop out of school, and (c) fail to finish college (Losey, 1995). Little is known about the academic success of Mexican Americans. Interest in identifying factors that enhance academic and personal success has increased rapidly (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). Academically successful students are described as students “who sustain high levels of achievement, motivation, and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school” (Alva, 1991, p. 19). Rather than focus on the shortcomings of graduates who were at risk of academic failure, the success method attempts to identify factors that account for that success. Thus, contributing factors that moderate the influence of risk factors on outcomes are the focus of the study.

The successful graduates who will be studied will be college graduates who have overcome (a) the stresses of minority status, (b) discrimination, (c) economic hardship, (d) difficulty understanding the English language, or (e) parents who were unfamiliar with the education system in the United States (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the school success of Mexican American graduates from Pan American University in South Texas and record their perceptions of the causes of their school success. The secondary purpose of the study attempted to tap the wealth of primary human sources whose insights into their school success may enable educators to re-examine their own attitudes towards the schooling of Mexican origin students and its unanticipated negative consequences. Finally, the study attempted to discover what factors contributed to their graduate success and examine whether segregation and discrimination, language, and low socio-economic status are barriers in their educational journey.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What barriers did Mexican Americans who graduated from Pan American University in South Texas from 1955 to 1975 have to overcome?
2. What were the contributing factors for these successful Mexican American graduates?

Operational Definitions

Acculturation: “Defined as a complex process of psychological and cultural change resulting from the contact of two different cultures with one group of people being dominant and the other forced to modify or adapt some of their original cultural patterns and to absorb some of the dominant culture’s in order to accommodate to a new environment” (Rodriguez, 1994, p. 83).

Anglos: Members of the dominant culture of the United States.

Barriers: Immaterial factors that tend to restrict, impede, or separate, such as segregation or the eradication of a language.

Contributing Factors: Ones that actively contribute to the production of results captured in terms of perceptions of respondents.

Culture: In this study, culture will be used conceptually as the creation of boundaries for a set of people who have common and shared values, customs, habits and rituals, and social rules of behavior. Further, culture is acknowledged as a socially constructed phenomenon wherein people construct their reality of themselves based on their own experiences (Brinson, 1996).

Ethnic Identity: Refers to self-identification among group members as well as to their attitude toward and affiliation with their own ethnic group and culture.

Hispanic/Latino: Persons of Cuban, Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry or descent.

Mexican Americans: Mexican origins and residing in the United States having completed elementary, secondary, and post secondary education in the United States.

Pan American University: A state-supported institution of higher learning located in Edinburg, Texas, now called The University of Texas Pan American and formerly known as Pan American College.

Qualitative Research: Inquiry that is grounded in the assumption that those individuals construct social reality in the form of meanings and interpretations and that these constructions tend to be transitory and situational

School Success: The attainment of a Baccalaureate and/or post-Baccalaureate degree from Pan American University.

South Texas: The Rio Grande Valley of Texas that includes the counties of Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy.

Assumptions

1. The subjects who were interviewed understood the purpose of the study and answered all interview questions to the best of their ability.
2. The interpretation of the data accurately reflected that which was intended.
3. The researcher was impartial in collecting and analyzing the data.
4. The individuals agreed to be interviewed.

Limitations

1. The study relied on interviews with people who experienced school success at Pan American University in South Texas. Recording of events that occurred 45 years ago requires an interpretive act. In examining a primary source such as interviews, the researcher might not know what information would prove useful at a later phase in the study. This interpretive phase would involve searching for new facts that were not viewed relevant. Details that were provided by respondents who relied on their memory over many years.
2. Other limitations included biases, values, and interests that caused the researcher to attend to some details and omit others.

3. These results were not intended to be generalizable, but transferable dependent on context.

Significance Statement

The plight and struggle continues for Mexican American students in South Texas. Mexican Americans are the least educated population in the United States and are the least likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college and receive a college degree (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). The status of Mexican American education has not changed significantly. In general, U.S. schools have not succeeded in educating Mexican American students (Wortham, 1997). Even today Mexican Americans still face the same barriers of segregation and discrimination, language and culture, and low socio-economic status in their attempt to graduate from high school and continue on to college.

Previous attempts to better the academic conditions for Mexican Americans have focused on individual and institutional weaknesses and failures. This deficit approach maintains that students have deficiencies. The valuing approach seeks to identify strengths and promising practices by tapping into the wealth of knowledge and insights of successful Mexican American graduates of Pan American University who obviously overcame tremendous odds. This is a study of high academic achievement in the most unlikely of places: among low-income Mexican Americans from homes with little formal education. From these successful graduates, we can learn how to support individuals and families as we strengthen our schools and institutions.

Contents of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five major units or chapters. Chapter I contains an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, assumptions and limitations, and significance of the study. Chapter II contains a review of the literature. The methodology and procedures used in the study are found in Chapter III. Chapter IV contains the analysis of descriptive data collected in the study, and Chapter V provides a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the researcher.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This is a study of successful academic achievement among low-income Mexican Americans from homes with little or no formal education. Much is known about Mexican American school failure. However, we know relatively little about the factors that lead to academic success of these students. This study is about how some Mexican Americans and their families were able to convert the probability of school failure into academic success.

This literature review focuses on three areas pertinent to the study: (a) the educational plight of Mexican American students, (b) worldview theory, and (c) the concept of familism and education.

First, an exploration into the major themes that characterize the education of Mexican Americans in the Southwest includes the removal of the Mexican American community and its cultural heritage and language and the formation of the pattern of segregated schools and inferior education for Mexican American students.

Secondly, I utilize the concept of worldview in order to understand how education elements of the Hispanic culture are perceived and valued by the participants in this study. A discussion of the potential conflicts between the traditional Hispanic culture and those reflected in the academic culture is the focus.

In the final section, an exploration into the experiences that guide the interactions of many Mexican American families with schools will be discussed. The

conceptual framework of familism will be utilized to demonstrate how families and individuals are not only affected by social change, but also actively participate in that change. The concept of familism refers to the benefits and behaviors associated with family solidarity as well as obligations to and support from relatives (Santiago-Rivera, 1995). Also included is a discussion of how family background accounts for a larger portion of the variance in educational outcomes.

The Educational Plight of Mexican American Students

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students. This era was characterized as a major change in the character of public education for Mexican American students because of the evolving nature of deficit thinking, the rise of school segregation and inferior schooling, and the efforts by the Mexican American community for educational equity (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

The Concept of Deficit Thinking

The concept of deficit thinking maintains that Mexican American students who fail do so because of limited educability. Many social scientists claim that the large-scale failure of Mexican American students has long been explained by a deficit-based model which assigns to minority students a label of “culturally disadvantaged,” or, at worst, genetically inferior. Trueba and Bartolome (1997), along with many other researchers (Flores, 1992; Menchaca & Valencia, 1990; Ogbu, 1991; Osterling, 1998; Valencia, 1991), believe that this deficit model, also known as the “social pathology model” or “cultural deprivation model,” is firmly entrenched in our individual and

collective psyches and pervasively affects the educational process. Trueba and Bartolome (1997) write that “the equation of difference with deficit, especially as it relates to Mexicans and other low socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups, is deeply ingrained in the ethos of even the most prominent institutions and educational programs” (p. 2). Instead of focusing on “magical” pedagogical methods that will “fix” the problems of minority student failure, Trueba and Bartolome (1997) call for a critical reassessment of learning environments in their political contexts.

Other researchers assert that although the “deficit model” of minority student failure is incomplete and inaccurate; it is possible to recognize the influence of sociocultural factors in the process of achievement without equating “difference” with “deficit” (Walters, 1998). Ethnic attitudes toward family and school may indeed affect educational outcomes: it is unfair, these researchers argue, to simply blame ineffective school practices without considering mitigating influences that may or may not be part of a cultural framework (Walters, 1998). Still others warn against drawing any blanket conclusions about any ethnic group or culture. Romo and Falbo (1996) studied “at-risk” Mexican American students over the course of four years and found no single culture of the home, nor any statistical correlation between home culture and whether or not a student graduated. Romo and Falbo (1996) argue that it is the *interaction* between school policies and cultural differences between home and school that have the potential to create educational barriers for minority students.

According to Ogbu (1991), many researchers attribute minority students’ disproportionate school failure rates to “discontinuities in culture, communication, and

power relations” (p. 4). Enrique Trueba (as cited in Walters, 1998) asserts that minority experiences, language, and cultural strengths need to be incorporated into schools. But Ogbu (1991) raises the critical issue that cultural discontinuities and their subsequent relationship to school failure or success may not be applicable in the same degree to all minority groups. Moreover, Ogbu questions the failure of these attributions to explain why some minorities in similar situations seem to be able to cross cultural boundaries and do well in school, whereas some do not.

Some theorists attempt to explain the variability across minority groups’ school performance as a result of social-class variables (Ogbu, 1991). This notion is contradicted, Ogbu contends, by studies whose authors show that minority students of the same social class perform at a lower average rate of achievement than their Caucasian social-class counterparts. Other shortcomings of these theories are itemized by Ogbu in three ways: First, they ignore the wider historical and social forces that can encourage or discourage minorities from striving for success. Second, they do not consider a group’s collective orientation toward school success. Finally, they do not consider minorities’ own ideas about schooling and navigation of the education process from the perspective of the minorities’ own social reality and cultural model.

Ogbu (1992) speaks of the different belief systems that govern behavior in different ethnic groups. Ogbu defines a group’s “cultural model” as

Their understanding of how their society or any particular domain or institution works and their respective understandings of their places in the working order... The cultural model of each group—minority as well as majority—exists to provide group members with the framework for interpreting educational events, situations, and experiences and to guide their behavior in the schooling context and process. (p. 7)

Ogbu contends that the difference between the more academically successful and less successful minorities may well be found in the cultural model that guides their interactions.

School Segregation

During the segregation period, Americanization was the prime objective of the education of Mexican children. Schools and instructional practices were reorganized when Mexican children appeared in increasing numbers on school registers. Special programs that included Americanization classes were set up for both children and adults. The objective was the political socialization of the Mexican community to preserve the political and economic subordination of the Mexican people. The educational plan for the “Mexican educational problem” called not only for Americanization, but also testing, tracking, and emphasis on vocational education (Bernal, 1999).

In the first part of this century, the school system constructed a cultural demarcation between a superior and inferior culture. Assimilation involved not only the elimination of linguistic and cultural differences, but the eradication of a culture deemed undesirable. This was similar to the common school movement of the 1830’s and 1840’s when self-proclaimed protectors of the Protestant Anglo culture made an attempt to halt the drift towards a multi-cultural society (Spring, 1997). The dominant culture enjoyed greater wealth and prosperity by claiming cultural superiority while Mexican children, whether born in the United States or Mexico, were treated as foreigners, aliens, or intruders. To Americanize them was to transform the Mexican

community into an English speaking and American thinking community (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

During this time, school leaders throughout the Southwest set up activities to conform these students to the new environment. Americanization programs based on academic and popular literature portrayed Mexicans as dirty, lazy, and irresponsible. School leaders' diagnosis and prescription for the cultural illumination of the Mexican community called for more classroom time spent teaching the children clean habits and positive attitudes. This Anglo image of the Mexican community instilled in educators a sense of guardianship of the American way of life (Valencia, 1991).

This perception of the Mexican people was more insensitive than malicious. School administrators asked teachers to get sincerely interested in teaching the Mexican children. Special lessons were developed by the school districts for the training of teachers in the Mexican schools. Universities throughout the Southwest offered courses for the preparation of teachers planning to work in areas with high Mexican enrollment and school districts instituted in-service training for the teaching of Spanish-speaking children. Large districts with high Mexican enrollment organized courses to help their teachers understand the objectives of and learn the methods for the effective Americanization of Mexican children (Valencia, 1991).

Gonzalez (1990) describes one researcher's synthesis of the teaching methods of school teachers working with Mexican children in southern California. The researcher writes the following:

The classroom served as a center where desirable traits slowly replaced undesirable traits. Teachers urged Mexican children to make fun of the lazy

ones in the classroom; to compare Mexican and American homes for the sake of imitation; and to overcome the racial desire to show off by ridicule. (Cobb, as cited in Gonzalez, 1990, p. 105)

According to the researcher, one of the main weapons utilized by the teachers in this process was imitation. Since imitation was so dominant in the Mexican nature, opportunities should be provided for them to mingle with Americans worthy of imitation (Cobb, as cited in Gonzalez, 1990).

Because of this perception, the state superintendent's office required California teachers to base Americanization upon this tendency to imitate. This cultural model with its superior-to-inferior continuum mirrored the political and economic relations between the Mexican and Anglo communities (Gonzalez, 1990).

The essence of Americanization programs across the Southwest was language instruction and English was the medium of instruction. In San Antonio, half of the school population was non-English speaking, the vast majority Spanish-speaking. Moreover, 1930 estimates indicated that 90% of the Mexican children enrolled for the first time in Texas public schools could not speak or understand English (Romo & Falbo, 1996).

This language conflict presented an educational barrier. Rather than addressing the problem as overcoming a language gap in order to facilitate instruction, school leaders directed their attention to Americanizing non-English speaking children. The theoretical foundation for the emphasis on language came from interpretations of assimilation (Spring, 1997). Educators expected Americanization instruction to result in the termination of Spanish language usage in the community.

Most educators at the time firmly believed that Spanish failed as a medium through which learning takes place. The child who learned English became an equal and full member of society, whereas the child who failed to learn English retained the culture and habits of another race. This belief was based on the assumption that a diversity of languages in a single society predisposed that society to political antagonisms between language groups (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

Throughout the first half of the century, school policies treated the culture of the Mexican child as unworthy of equality with the dominant culture. The segregated Mexican communities contrasted with the communities of the dominant society. Elimination of the Mexican culture and language took precedence as an educational goal (Valencia, 1991).

In *Mexican Americans in School: A History of Educational Neglect*, Carter (1970), relates that this disadvantaged and subordinate status of Mexican Americans has been recognized by Southwesterners for many years. This recognition was accompanied with the belief that this situation was the natural order and that Mexicans were somehow doomed by their cultural inheritance. Although this concept of inferiority was and is erroneous, Anglo society did function best with the availability of cheap, unskilled labor and a subordinate class. The poor unskilled Mexican fit in to the economic system and helped sustain it (Carter, 1970).

Carter (1970) also describes how society and its schools produced an adult Mexican American population prepared for participation in the agricultural economy of the Southwest. The school was successful in equipping most Mexican Americans with

the knowledge and skills appropriate to low status, that is, minimum English language ability, underdeveloped reading ability, and little problem-solving capabilities. School practices evolved that functioned to preserve the social and economic system by unconsciously encouraging the minority group to fail academically, drop out early, and enter society at the low status that was traditional for Mexican Americans. This failure to achieve well in school contributed to the Anglos' belief that the Mexican Americans had inferior intelligence and that they were lazy and lacked initiative. This circle of circumstances became well established in the Southwest and persists to the present (Carter, 1970).

De Facto School Segregation: The 1950's to the Early 1960's

In the early 1950's and 1960's, Mexican Americans saw the elimination of school segregation as the key to full economic and social mobility (Bernal, 1999). Social changes occurred rapidly after World War II, but the schools were not able to keep up by modifying its practices and policies. These coupled with the attitudes and perceptions of teaching staff continued to have influence on minority-group children (Carter, 1970). Leaders in the Southwest recognized that maintaining a rapidly increasing Mexican American population with low status as a group and poor education represented a serious threat to societal stability. Educators' concerns about the status of Mexican Americans and pressure to raise their position were related to societal forces. Many of the school practices resisted change because to change would mean changing the school and changing society (Carter, 1970).

Carter and Segura (1979) stated that it is evident that predicting the future requires understanding the present and the past and that it is possible to predict future educational directions. The authors asserted that there is every reason to believe schools will change little in the next ten years. Carter and Segura (1979) further recounted the following:

Despite the demand for equal education opportunity and more efficient schools and programs for minority-group children, the records do not show that any of the recommended and implemented compensatory programs are producing the anticipated long-term results. There is little doubt that most schools will continue compensatory and remedial programs until financial assistance disappears. (p. 381)

The authors recommended more research, program evaluation, and widespread publication of findings so that program evaluations reach and influence the decision makers as well as educators at all levels (Carter & Segura, 1979). The authors further predicted that federal intervention would continue and that the numerous compensatory programs would lose their government support. This would be as a result that no evidence that these programs reached their objective of improved academic achievement (Carter & Segura, 1979). Carter and Segura also assert that in all the years of efforts to upgrade Mexican Americans through compensatory and remedial programs, the personal reward for attending school has been overlooked. The authors called for the need to examine the concept and attributes of a quality education because minority students continue to be turned off by schools. The more the decision-makers realize that compensatory and remedial programs do not work, the greater the demand for alternative approaches (Carter & Segura, 1979). The authors outlined what quality education is, and the following is what they declared:

Quality education (1) equalizes benefits-the poor are not recycled; (2) improves school holding power and academic performance; (3) involves all elements of a school social climate; (5) demands the total elimination of all institutional racism and bias; and (6) creates an environment where participation provides its own reward. (Carter & Segura, 1979, p. 386)

The authors further contend that most of these elements are missing in most Southwestern schools. Public schools will not radically improve themselves. Quality education will be encouraged by pressure from forces outside the profession. Although there are exceptions, Southwestern educators are unable either to analyze their schools objectively or to make the modifications necessary to encourage minority-group success (Carter & Segura, 1979).

Since then, the education of Mexican American students has gone through intense transformations. There has been a multiplicity of research and publications concerning the school experience for Mexican American students; however, this era is characterized as a continuing struggle for educational equality. Through litigations, activism, advocacy and legislation, Mexican American enrollments in higher education have increased since the 1960's. Although there have been significant gains, presently, problems abound for the Mexican American students. The drop-out rate is shamefully high, students are still viewed as limited and are under-enrolled in bilingual classes, segregation is on the rise, Mexican American students still lag behind academically behind their Anglo peers, school financing is still not equitable, and the curriculum continues to be watered down. Aggravating this plight is the current anti-bilingual and English only political campaigns, anti-affirmative action, and anti-diversity sentiments. According to San Miguel and Valencia (1998), the 1990's will go down in history as a

decade of oppression and regressive social laws and policies against Mexican Americans and other Latinos as seen in voter approval of Propositions 187, 209, and 227 in California and *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996).

What does this history of the plight of Mexican American education help us predict about the immediate and long-term future for the Mexican American community and its struggle for educational equity? San Miguel and Valencia (1998) believe that the clash between White obstinacy and Mexican American determination will certainly continue and that this resoluteness will escalate in the difficult years ahead.

Worldview: A Window into “Reality”

As people of color, it is not possible to separate our experiences into neat and distinct categories labeled “race,” “gender,” or “class” (Almquist, 1995). All of these elements combine to comprise our total experience or worldview, the lens from which we view our world. The concept of worldview is useful in understanding differences among individuals and groups (Brinson, 1996).

Within our worldview lie our values, beliefs, and the set of assumptions that allow us to make sense of the world. Ibrahim refers to worldviews as an individual’s philosophy of life. They not only affect and mediate attitudes, values and beliefs, they also affect an individual’s behavior (Sue & Sue, 1990), mode of problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution (Ibrahim, 1991).

Worldviews consist of an individual’s perceptions in addition to shared input from one’s reference group including those from one’s family and ethnic group

(Sodowsky & Johnson, as cited in Ihle, Sodowsky, & Kwan, 1996). Thus, a worldview is “an individual orientation within the context of the ways a person is affected by other people and the groups with whom he or she is involved” (Ihle et al., 1996, p. 74).

The construct of worldviews is central to the fields of multicultural psychology, education, training, and development (Ibrahim, 1991). Worldview models have been presented for understanding the “culturally different” in these settings because they allow the values of racial or ethnic groups, which may differ from majority culture views, to be acknowledged and differentiated from those of the teacher, counselor, or trainer. Culturally different groups are thus able to examine their own experiences based on their own cultural realities (Myers, as cited in Ibrahim, 1991).

The value of worldview theory, which allows for the expression of an individual’s perspective in regard to their cultural group while at the same time allowing the person to be distinguished from the rest of their cultural group, makes this construct an important element of study. A lack of understanding of a person’s worldview may lead to attaching general inferences about a cultural group to the individual, thus leading to stereotyping and the negation of the person’s individuality (Ibrahim, 1991).

Assessment of Worldviews

Worldviews have traditionally been assessed via quantitative measures. The literature yielded only one study where the concept was applied in a qualitative study. Rodriguez (1994) utilized feminist methodology to study the perceptions and relationship of Mexican American women to Our Lady of Guadalupe. She explored her

participants' "assumptive worldview" in order to articulate their position in the world regarding religion, culture, and oppression, the central concepts in her study.

In asking her central question, "How do these women make meaning of the world and how can I best represent what these women in my research have revealed to me?" (p. 115), Rodriguez (1994) concluded that she could not afford to be reductive due to the nature of her participant's assumptive world which is centered in "complex relationality" (p. 115). She defines this as a complex and pervasive web of interrelationships and connections. Rodriguez (1994) found that her participant's assumptive world is a complex one that has at its core survival and "values of hope, family, importance of life, and the ability to endure suffering, in particular straddling two cultures and not belonging to either one" (p. 122).

The Role of Culture in Worldview

Worldviews are culturally based. Wolcott (1994) states that "cultural systems provide us with practical answers to questions of how we should act and what to think about how we act" (p. 283). Culture tells us not only how to label but how to interpret what we are seeing, feeling, and experiencing (Wolcott, 1994).

Ultimately, an individual selects from his or her own repertoire of cultural behaviors which is developed from historical roots and social conditions in which the individual lives as well as socialization processes (Ibrahim, 1991). Thus, different worldviews are developed by different cultural experiences. The worldviews of American minorities are a result of their particular historical and current experiences of racism and oppression in the United States (Sue & Sue, 1990) and, are therefore, likely

to be different from majority culture worldviews. Myers posited that a culture's worldview functions in order to ensure the survival of its people (Ibrahim, 1991).

Culture plays an important role in the life of Mexican Americans. Rodriguez (1994) states that the Mexican American culture with its multiple identities, unique foods, music, history, and religious traditions is central to the psychosocial reality of the Mexican American people. According to Blea (1992), the rites of passage, rituals, and traditions of the Mexican American culture provide important cultural references and direction that help sustain them.

Acculturation and Cultural Blending

Utilizing a worldview perspective in this study allows us to see how successful Mexican Americans view our own unique cultural experiences while at the same time acknowledging diverse "within culture" views (Ibrahim, 1991, p. 15). Acculturation factors such as generational status, socioeconomic status, education, primary language, and religion affect an individual's unique experience and, thus, their worldview.

Worldview theory provides information regarding how well the person fits or does not fit the values, beliefs, and assumptions of his or her primary group. It also assists in developing an understanding of how the worldview of the dominant society has been assimilated by the individual, thus providing a measure of acculturation. The degree of acculturation influences the degree of adherence to traditional customs, values, and norms (Santiago-Rivera, 1995) as well as the types of problems faced and how they are interpreted. Rodriguez (1994) outlines a circular multidimensional model of acculturation whose factors include:

- Generation – How long has the person/family been in the United States?
- Religiosity – What is the religious belief system of the person/family?
- Cultural Awareness – What is the extent of knowledge and participation in cultural rituals?
- Language – What is the person’s language preference?
- Ethnic Identity – What is the person’s ethnic loyalty?

Blea (1992) adds education and the role of the Chicano movement as examples of other acculturative processes that affect our worldview. She believes that as Mexican Americans, we have three choices as the result of being subjected to these influences: (a) to maintain resistance to dominant values, (b) to acquiescence to the new culture while rejecting Chicano values and traditions, or (c) to adopt a blending or synthesis of the two cultures.

If we accept that the dominant or majority culture worldview reflects values of individualism, autonomy, competition, future orientation, nuclear family structure, and assertiveness, and that academic institutions of higher education reflect those values, we can speculate where some Mexican Americans may experience dissonance with the “academic” culture (Vasquez, 2001, p. 116).

Emphasis on Family

The importance of value of the family has been termed the most salient and empirically supported characteristic of the Hispanic culture (Vasquez, 2001). Even taking into account varying levels of acculturation, the Hispanic culture places more

emphasis than does the Anglo culture on the family or *la familia*, as a source of emotional gratification, support, and growth as well as responsibility.

The family unit values of cooperation and mutual assistance are learned, for example, the pooling of money and other resources, in order to send a family member to school (Rodriguez, 1994). The family, thus, often functions as a problem-solving unit (Smart & Smart, 1995).

The Concepts of Respect and Cooperation

The concepts of respect and cooperation are emphasized in the Hispanic culture. This respect is extended to elders and “and an honored place in the family is reserved for what they have accomplished, their wisdom, insight and the sacrifices that they have made for the family” (Smart & Smart, 1995, p. 73). However, this respect is also extended to others outside of the family who are in positions of authority, such as instructors or teachers.

Accordingly, “challenging someone’s statements, trying to change another person’s opinion, or debating issues can be seen as a sign of disrespect” (Nieves-Squires, 1991, p. 2). Unfortunately, in the classroom, behavior such as silence or politeness may be misinterpreted by teachers and instructors as a lack of interest, ability, or lack of independent thinking skills.

The Influence of Mexican American Family Values on Education

Bronfenbrenner (1993) theorizes in his ecological model of human development that it is the interaction of the individual and overlapping spheres of influence that ultimately constructs the potential of each particular person over time.

Therefore, to answer the questions about Mexican American academic achievement and parental involvement, we must focus on a “layer” of influence: the family. As Epstein (1977) pointed out, children in industrialized societies are influenced simultaneously by the schools they attend and by their families. But researchers often ignore the effects of one environment entirely to focus on the other, thus producing an incomplete picture of developmental factors. We need to take into account the unique effects of the various proximal or face-to-face settings in which children operate.

This section of the literature review discusses how Mexican American cultural values within the family shape educational options for children, creating harmony with many aspects of the American educational system. The section reviews the literature concerning two widely held cultural assumptions by Mexican American families: (a) the concept of family interdependence or “familism” and (b) the concept of “*educación*” or the training in proper behavior that supports academic learning. These concepts work together to protect the child from both psychological and economic difficulties while promoting the agrarian values of family unity and respect (LeVine & White, 1986). Both “familism” and “*educación*” have implications for the ways families communicate about progress towards educational achievement.

One of the most pervasive characteristics of Mexican American families is described by the concept known as “familism,” defined by Hurtado (1995) as a strong commitment to family or strong emotional ties to family and home. As many studies have shown, Mexican Americans express stronger ties to family than do Anglos (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Familism is closely related to attitudes of

interdependence and cooperation, which are also commonly reported Mexican American characteristics (Smart & Smart, 1995).

Familism is considered one of the most culture-specific values of Hispanics. For instance, the team of Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (1995) found that 92% of the first-generation Mexican immigrants in their study and 86% of the second-generation Mexican immigrants responded that family was the most important thing in their lives, while only 74% of the Whites responded thusly. This family closeness among people of Mexican heritage may be facilitated or transmitted early in life by parent-child interaction.

Family as Emotional Support System

In their study comparing four groups of adolescents – Mexican adolescents in Mexico, Mexican immigrant youths in the U.S., second generation U.S. born Mexican Americans, and White adolescents – the Suarez-Orozco (1995) team found that Mexican and first-generation Mexican immigrant youths are more likely than Anglo adolescents to turn to family members for advice when they have a problem. Latino adolescents also tended to report more positive feelings about their parents than Anglos. There was greater perceived emotional and material support from family for both Mexicans and Mexican immigrants in this study than for Anglos (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

Rueschenberg and Buriel (1989) used the Family Environmental Scale (FES) to pick up both internal and external aspects of family functioning. Results indicated that internal functioning, such as cohesion, level of conflict, and organization of family

matters, remained the same in Mexican American families even as they acculturated. The patterns of intrafamilial relationships and interactions did not appear to differ substantially from one generation to the next despite language change and more external interaction.

Raymond, Rhodes, and Raymond (1980) surveyed 206 Anglos, 143 Blacks, and 156 Mexican Americans. The Mexican Americans expressed significantly more importance of family than did the other groups. Family satisfaction was correlated highly with overall psychological well-being.

The Ideal of "Educación"

Numerous studies have investigated concepts concerning the meaning of education for recent Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Duran & Weffer, 1992; Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, & Goldenberg, 1991). Reese et al. (1991) offer the most detailed analysis of Hispanic immigrant ideals of education. The Hispanic model of "*educación*" derived by Reese and colleagues (1991) is more complex than the typical Anglo American view and centers around the maintenance of proper relationships both within the family and with others. "*Educación*" concerns respect, obedience, and proper behavior, which are seen as supporting academic achievement. This moral learning is seen as the foundation for academic learning by Hispanic families (Reese et al., 1991).

In this model, moral learning takes place within the family. Teaching children right from wrong is seen as the most important family responsibility. The values of *educación* are closely associated with family unity or familism. The teaching of respect

and obedience occurs within the family, where the child's place is highly valued. Parents must teach children to have good manners or behavior, to respect parents and others, and the difference between right and wrong. While academic teaching and learning are seen as a distinct function of school, they are not separate from the moral development encouraged in the family, but rather part of the "good path" or *buen camino* children should follow to become well-developed human beings (Reese et al., 1991).

Parental Involvement and Family Processes

In a study of 158 Latina mothers of first grade children in Los Angeles, more acculturated Latina mothers (with acculturation defined according to number of years in the United States, number of years of schooling and amount of education in the United States) reported a greater knowledge of school activities than less acculturated mothers; but less acculturated mothers held higher expectations for their children's academic performance (Moreno & Lopez, 1999). Further, less acculturated mothers had a higher expected educational attainment for their children than their more acculturated counterparts (Moreno & Lopez, 1999). Moreno and Lopez attribute these higher expectations and aspirations to an "immigrant zeal," which leads newer immigrant Latinas to have high hopes for their children, combined with cultural beliefs and attitudes from their own background about the value of diligence and opportunity.

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) conducted an ethnographic study of families in Carpinteria, California, to develop an understanding of the psychosocial dynamics of home learning environments of Mexican American students in that area. Key findings

from the study supported that low socioeconomic conditions limited the physical resources that parents could make available to their children, but did not impede parental discipline, monitoring and scheduling of homework, and organizing family routine. The role of social networks outside the home (church, neighbors, and friends) helped the parents to mediate the lack of knowledge of school matters and enabled them to become more knowledgeable about resources and requirements.

Parents in Delgado-Gaitan's study placed a high emotional and cultural value on education, frequently telling their children that schooling was a privilege, one that they had not been afforded in Mexico. The parents' concept of an "educated" person was much broader than the completion of a school program and encompassed social manners, cooperation, and respectfulness. Parents reported that one could be "*buen educado*" and have received little schooling and "*mal educado*" despite years of schooling. The completion of and assistance with homework assignments caused the most confusion and variation in the study, with parents who had received little schooling themselves both insecure and frustrated about how to best assist their children. Delgado-Gaitan (1992) believes:

It is necessary to continue examining the family learning environments of children from ethnically different groups to help educators better understand and interpret the discrete circumstances of children's home life. Thorough descriptive research, educators can make recommendations regarding the necessity for schools to open lines of communication with families and whole communities in a systemic way in order to facilitate the families' access to necessary academic and social resources. The error of relying on overly simplistic explanations about the learning environments in Mexican American families, such as the cultural deficit explanation, is that they deflect attention away from the schools' responsibility to develop effective programs for underrepresented groups. The influences that contribute to the quality of life of a family are many. These include the cultural group identity, parents'

educational background, their socioeconomic conditions and the parents' knowledge about the school. (p. 513)

Azmitia et al. (1996) found that although Mexican American parents of successful junior high students were limited in how much assistance they could provide with homework content, they were able to effectively monitor homework completion and could refer students to others who could help, such as siblings or teachers. These researchers found that parental monitoring was positively correlated with academic performance and that older siblings frequently played a role in providing homework assistance.

A 1997 study by Jones and Velez produced several interesting findings through in-depth interviews of 20 Latino families. With regard to supervision and monitoring, though few parents reported giving direct help with homework, all provided some type of encouragement and monitoring. These were generally expressed in the form of expectations rather than formal rules and consequences. Parental emphasis on the importance of education was generally expressed in the diligence with which parents made sure homework was done at a designated time and place and before other activities. Jones and Velez (1997) also found that the most successful students had parents who exhibited the most "intrusive" parenting style, monitoring both their children's homework and other activities very closely. These parents reported frequent communication with their children, knowledge of who their children's friends were and what they did in their leisure time, and a high degree of trust and camaraderie between themselves and their children. In their study, Jones and Velez (1997) found that although all of the 20 sets of parents had high aspirations for their children, their

notions of how students might achieve their goals were vague. Few parents expressed any specific knowledge about college entrance requirements or how to apply.

Family Literacy

A fundamental aspect of family literacy is that literacy activity within the context of daily family routines is just as important as that which occurs in formal school settings (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). Parents are not at all deficit with regard to the literacy behaviors they are qualified to transmit to their children (Taylor, 1993). The educational community must learn to appreciate the funds of knowledge that families possess and the variety of literacy activities in which they engage (Moll, 1990).

Broader and more accurate understanding of the literacy activity that occurs in the home can work in favor of minority families, in particular, who may at times feel alienated from their children's school experiences because of language-related barriers to communication or culture related differences in the definition of "parent involvement" in education (Valdes, 1996).

According to Vygotsky (cited in Goodman & Goodman, 1990), written language develops as speech does, in the context of its use. It is thus very important for learners to be immersed in language in order for literacy to follow naturally. Children who experience rich and extended conversations with adults early at home and in the school environment achieve greater academic success in their later years. Children's early experiences with speech and conversation provide them with essential knowledge that supports later literacy development. Researchers have found that children develop

the ability to talk about language through their conversational interactions with parents and teachers. Reading skill is built on this awareness of spoken language (Colker, 2003).

Chapter Summary

The plight and struggle of public schooling for Mexican Americans began with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which brought about an end to the Mexican American War of 1846-1848 (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Mexicans became a part of the United States involuntarily through conquest. This signaled the beginning of prejudice and discrimination against Mexican origin people residing in the United States (Gibson & Ogbu, as cited in Okagaki et al., 1995).

Three contextual frameworks have been posited as explanations of the major barriers that characterize the plight and struggle of the education of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. These include (a) the ethnic isolation and denial of equal educational opportunity, (b) the exclusion and the eradication of the Spanish language and culture from the schools, and (c) the powerlessness that accompanies low socioeconomic conditions (Gonzalez, 1990).

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students. Separate schools were unequal in many respects to those provided for Anglo children. In relation to Anglo schools, Mexican schools were older; their school equipment was generally less adequate; per pupil expenditures were generally lower; and the staff were less appropriately trained, qualified, and experienced (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

In addition to school segregation and poor schooling, Mexican Americans have often experienced a subtractive approach to their language and culture. Following the Mexican American War, American schools were seen as a way to assimilate Mexican origin students into the predominately White Anglo society (Spring, 1997). This was achieved through a process of subtraction – that is, a process that involved the removal of all minority communities, languages, and cultures from the governance, administration, and content of public education. This subtractive process led to (a) a lack of self-concept and identity; (b) separation between school and home; (c) elimination of the mother tongue as a prerequisite to second language attainment (Schellinger, 1994); and (d) removal of the cultural knowledge and values that are the basis for reasoning, inferencing, and interpreting meanings (Trueba, 1990). For decades, most Mexican American students whose mother tongue was Spanish and who were not proficient in English have faced the sink-or-swim pedagogical practice of English-only instruction. Although some Mexican American students survived this submersion, many did not.

There is a consensus that across racial and ethnic groups, socio economic status is the single most powerful contributor to students' educational outcomes (Laosa & Henderson, as cited in Gandara, 1995). There is less consensus on the question of why socioeconomic status has such powerful effects. Some have suggested that the social reproduction of status differences between population groups is the direct result and intent of capitalist economic policy to maintain social class advantages (Bowles & Gintis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). The schooling system in the United States is ordered

in such a way as to channel upper income students into educational opportunities. This type of a schooling system operates to convince lower-income students that they deserve lower status. Others have suggested that the effects of family socioeconomic status on educational outcomes are more of an inadvertent result of a culture of poverty (Lewis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). In poverty cultures, maladaptive responses to schooling are transmitted through the generations by parents who (a) were themselves ill-suited to school, (b) did poorly, and (c) failed to learn the skills necessary to propel themselves through the educational system (Gandara, 1995). This is how poverty often leads to the powerlessness that prevents many Hispanics from seeking post-secondary opportunities.

The education of Mexican American students has undergone intense transformations during the past 30 or 40 years. Through litigations, activism, advocacy, and legislation, Mexican American enrollments in higher education have increased, bilingual education has been established, and school retention was improved (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Although there have been significant gains, however, problems still abound for Mexican Americans: (a) they are under-enrolled in bilingual classes, (b) segregation is on the rise, (c) they still lag behind academically behind their Anglo peers, (d) school financing is still very much inequitable, and (e) the curriculum continues to be watered down. These factors contribute to the low post-secondary enrollment and retention of Hispanics. Institutes of higher education are waking up to the importance of establishing aggressive recruitment and retention programs for Hispanics and other underserved populations who are seeking answers.

In addition, culture must be recognized by researchers as a key factor in the study of Mexican American educational achievement (Trueba, 1990). To understand the role and value of culture in the lives of the men and women in this study, it is helpful to utilize a worldview construct. This construct acknowledges the uniqueness of each participant with his/her “unique set of family history and life, ethnicity and culture” (Ibrahim, 1991, p.13) while allowing us to see how these factors affect their behavior and life choices, including the pursuit of higher education.

One of the most pervasive characteristics of Mexican American families is described by the concept known as “familism,” defined by Hurtado (1995) as a strong commitment to family or strong emotional ties to family and home. As many studies have shown, Mexican Americans express stronger ties to family than do Anglos (Raymond et al., 1980; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Familism is closely related to attitudes of interdependence and cooperation, which are also commonly reported Mexican American characteristics (Smart & Smart, 1995).

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achievement. This moral learning is seen as the foundation for academic learning by Hispanic families (Reese et al., 1991).

In this model, moral learning takes place within the family. Teaching children right from wrong is seen as the most important family responsibility. The values of *educación* are closely associated with family unity, or familism. The teaching of respect and obedience occurs within the family, where the child's place is highly valued. Parents must teach children to have good manners or behavior, to respect parents and others, and the difference between right and wrong. While academic teaching and learning is seen as a distinct function of school, it is not separate from the moral development encouraged in the family, but rather part of the "good path" or *buen camino* children should follow to become well-developed human beings.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the school success of Mexican American graduates of Pan American University in South Texas and record their perceptions of the causes of their academic success. The secondary purpose of the study attempted to tap the wealth of primary human sources whose insights into their school success may enable educators to re-examine their own attitudes toward the schooling of Mexican origin students. The study attempted to discover what factors contributed to academic success and examine whether segregation, language, and poverty are barriers in an educational journey. Of particular interest is the salience of other factors that will allow the discovery of other strategies used to overcome obstacles and risk factors. The research design selected for the study is a qualitative one that utilizes heuristic and naturalistic methodologies in order to incorporate experience and to inductively and holistically understand human experiences. Both forms of inquiry can assist in bridging the critical gaps in the literature on the educational attainment of Mexican Americans by adding rich, in-depth data and details that contribute to a more defined explanation of the phenomena studied.

Previous research in the area of Mexican American academic success has been primarily quantitative in nature. This research has its roots in the positivistic approach to scientific inquiry (Borg & Gall, 1989). This form of inquiry assumes that there is one single objective separate from the beliefs of individuals. Its purpose is to explain the causes of change in social facts through the use of accurate measurement in order to

reduce error and bias (Firestone, 1987). Although it has been considered the traditional and dominant research method, qualitative methodology has been gaining acceptance in educational research.

Qualitative research is often used as an umbrella term to cover various research methodologies that share certain characteristics. These include concern for understanding perspectives from the participants' frame of reference through (a) data that are rich in description; (b) concern for the natural setting and focus on the researcher as the key instrument; (c) a concern for process versus outcomes; and (d) the use of induction to analyze data (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992).

The selection of a research methodology is not only determined by the questions that the researcher is seeking to answer, but also often "expresses values about what the world is like" and "how one ought to understand it" (Firestone, 1987, p. 20). Qualitative methodology was utilized in this study in part to rectify the imbalance in the research literature, but primarily because this methodology is concerned with descriptions of human experiences and their interpretation of that experience.

In qualitative methodology, the "context and the meaning of that context to the people in it are of utmost importance" (Merriam, 1991, p. 10). Qualitative research focuses on understanding participant experiences and the meaning assigned to these experiences. It also allows for the depth and richness necessary to explore these experiences.

In a qualitative study, finding out what something means requires description of an individual's perspective and situation such that meaning of the experience is

elucidated. According to Patton (1990), quality has to do with nuance and detail. It has to do with the subtle and unique things that make a difference between the points on a standardized scale. If a researcher wants to find what the lives of two different people are like, a quality description provides the detail to explain the phenomena. The emphasis is on meaning rather than interval or ordinal scaling and the answers to questions require detailed, in-depth, and holistic descriptions that represent people in their own terms and that get close enough to the situation being studied to understand firsthand the nuances of quality.

A Method of Choices

A method of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy (Patton, 1990) in favor of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality. Patton states that the focus should be on whether one has made sensible methods decisions given the purpose of the inquiry, the questions being investigated, and the resources available. The method of choices recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) compared the design characteristics of qualitative-naturalistic inquiry in contrast to quantitative methods. They concluded: “What these considerations add up to is that the design of a naturalistic inquiry cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 225).

I have chosen a qualitative method for my study because it is appropriate for my specific inquiry situation. This will become evident as I describe how I applied

these methodologies to my research. That is, I will demonstrate how the qualitative method is a good “fit” with my study.

A Naturalistic Approach

Qualitative research uses naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings. According to Guba (1981), naturalistic describes a method for inquiry where the inquirer and the respondent are interrelated with each influencing the other. The naturalistic method rests on the assumption that generalizations are not possible and what one looks for are working hypotheses that relate to the context. The naturalistic approach assumes that there are multiple realities, that inquiry will diverge rather than converge as more and more is known, and that all parts of reality are interrelated so that the study of any one part necessarily influences all other parts. “The issue is not which assumptions are true but which offer the best fit to the phenomenon under study” (Guba, 1981, p. 4).

A naturalistic strategy is selected when the researcher wants to minimize research manipulation by studying naturally unfolding processes. Patton (1990) believes qualitative designs are naturalistic when the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the research setting. The setting is a naturally occurring interaction that has no predetermined course established by and for the researcher. The point of using qualitative methods is to understand naturally occurring states. Naturalistic inquiry focuses on capturing process, documenting variations, and exploring important individual differences in experiences and outcomes. Deciding whether to use naturalistic inquiry or an experimental approach is a design issue. Experimental

designs predominantly aim for statistical analyses of quantitative data, while qualitative data are the primary focus in naturalistic inquiry (Patton, 1990).

According to Patton (1990):

Naturalistic inquiry assumes an ever-changing world. Change is a natural, expected, and inevitable part of human experience. Rather than trying to control, limit, or direct change, naturalistic inquiry expects change, anticipates the likelihood of the unanticipated, and is prepared to go with the flow of change. (p. 53)

Inductive Analysis

Patton's (1990) review of inductive analysis identified qualitative methods that are particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. A research approach is inductive to the extent that the researcher attempts to make sense of the situation without imposing preexisting expectations on the phenomenon under study. Patton further contends that "inductive analysis begins with specific observations and builds toward general patterns and categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the researcher comes to understand patterns that exist in the empirical world under study" (p. 44).

Patton (1990) further discusses the strategy of inductive designs.

The strategy of inductive designs is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be. The qualitative methodologist attempts to understand the multiple interrelationships among dimensions that emerge from the data without making prior assumptions or specifying hypotheses about the linear or correlative relationships among narrowly defined operationalized variables. (p. 44)

In other words the inductive approach to research means an understanding of activities and outcomes that emerges from experience with the setting. Theories are grounded in direct experience rather than imposed.

When the research focus is on individuals, an inductive approach begins with the individual experiences of those individuals. General patterns across cases may be identified when case materials are content analyzed, but the initial focus is on full understanding of individual cases before those unique cases are aggregated. According to Patton (1990), “the findings are grounded in specific contexts; theories that result from the finding will be grounded in real-world patterns” (p. 45).

A Holistic Perspective

Researchers using qualitative methods strive to understand a phenomenon as a whole. The holistic approach assumes that the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts and also assumes that a description and understanding of a person’s social environment is necessary for overall understanding of what is observed (Patton, 1990).

Patton (1990) further reveals that a holistic approach “gathers data on multiple aspects of the setting under study in order to assemble a comprehensive and complete picture of the social dynamic of the particular situation” (p. 50). Each case is treated as a unique entity that has its own particular meaning and its own cluster of relationships that emerge from the context in which it exists. Patton (1990) contends “the advantages of qualitative portrayals of holistic settings and impacts is that greater attention can be given to nuance, setting, interdependencies, complexities, idiosyncrasies, and context”

(p. 51). Holistic research is to search for thematic wholes and the challenge for the researcher is “to seek the essence of life of the observed, to sum up, to find a central unifying principle” (Bruyn, as cited in Patton, 1990, p. 316).

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry seeks to involve the researcher’s voice in the research process. In order to utilize this research methodology, one must have a “direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). Heuristic inquiry asks: “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (Patton, 1990, p. 71). Heuristic inquiry seeks to understand the “wholeness and unique patterns of experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16) through a process that involves reflecting, exploring, sifting, and illuminating the phenomenon. Douglas and Moustakas (1985) describe a process of creation and reflection in relation to the self and the self in relation to others. As such, heuristic inquiry is truly a process of inquiry rooted in the individual.

Primarily because the data being researched are within the realm of the experience of the researcher, to utilize this research methodology one “must have a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). The heuristic process seeks to engage the researcher into an inner journey. What emerges is information or data that is “autobiographical, original and accurately descriptive of the textures and structures of lived experience” (Douglas & Moustakas,

1985, p. 41). The end result of this process of insight and self-discovery is self-growth and ultimately transformation (Moustakas, 1990).

Although some phenomenological concepts form the basis of heuristic inquiry, unlike phenomenology, in heuristic inquiry the individual must have experienced the researched phenomenon directly. Patton (1990) states that phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: “What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?” (p. 69). Patton further elucidates that the phenomenon experienced may be an emotion, a relationship, a program, an organization, or a culture. Moustakas (1990) cites Maslow’s research on self-actualization and Jourard’s study of self-disclosure as examples of heuristic research studies. While heuristic inquiry begins with a question or problem that the researcher seeks to illuminate, Moustakas (1990) is quick to point out that behind every concern that affects individuals personally, there is social and perhaps universal significance.

The three-phase model of *immersion*, *acquisition*, and *realization* as described by Douglas and Moustakas (1985) are key concepts essential to an understanding of heuristic analysis. The first phase of the model, *immersion*, is a way of exploring, identifying, and understanding the research phenomenon. Moustakas (1990) describes this as immersion of the object under study, an ability “to get inside a question, become one with it, and achieve an understanding of it” (p. 15) through a process of self-search and reflection. At this stage, researchers literally “lose themselves” in the topic without concerns for identifying patterns, cohesiveness, or themes.

The concept of *indwelling* is important to an understanding of this phase. Indwelling has been called a painstaking yet essential part of heuristic inquiry. According to Moustakas (1990), “Through indwelling, the heuristic investigation turns the corner and moves toward the ultimate creative synthesis that portrays the essential qualities and meaning of experience” (p. 15). This nonlinear process involves a “turning inward” or “looking with soft eyes” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 48) in order to seek a deeper more significant and holistic meaning. Both of the components of the immersion phase serve as “preparation and incubation that are required for launching the process of discover” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 45).

The *acquisition* phase allows the researcher to gain a better sense of the direction in which the inquiry is moving and to start the collection of data. In heuristic inquiry, data are identified as “that which extend understanding of or add richness to the knowing of the phenomenon in question” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 48). The concepts of tacit knowledge, self-dialogue, and focusing are underlying concepts of this phase.

Tacit knowledge consists of two major components, subsidiary and focal factors. Subsidiary factors are “the elements of perception that enter into conscious awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 21). These are tangible, they can be seen, and described. Focal factors are also known as implicit or subliminal factors and are invisible. Both factors combine in order to present a whole picture of the phenomenon. Tacit knowledge can be thought of as the “forerunner of inference and intuition,

guiding the person to untapped aspects of awareness in nonlinear ways that elude analysis or explanation” (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 45).

Self-dialogue allows the researcher to speak directly to the experience, in a sense to be questioned by it. This allows for the possibility of rhythmic flow “back and forth, again and again-until one has uncovered its multiple meanings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16). This initial process is critical for it allows for self-disclosure through constant questioning of oneself and the research question or problem.

Moustakas (1990) describes focusing as an “inner-attention, a staying with, a sustained process of systematically contacting the more central meanings of an experience” (p. 25). The purpose of this process is to un-clutter the mind, to clear it for insights that have been out of conscious view. It is at this point that the main connections of feelings and thoughts can be made. Both self-dialogue and focusing are utilized to illuminate the tacit dimensions.

The final phase of *realization* is also called the synthesis phase. It is here where data are sifted and sorted and the search for the whole picture is realized. Frick (1990) calls this the stage of “identification of healing and growth” (p. 79). According to Douglas and Moustakas (1985):

This is a quest for synthesis through realization of what lies most undeniably at the heart of all that has been discovered. Synthesis goes beyond distillation of themes and patterns. It is not a summary or recapitulation. In synthesis, the searcher is challenged to generate a new reality, a new monolithic significance that embodies the essence of heuristic truth. (p. 52)

Application of Methodologies

The flexibility of a qualitative design that utilizes naturalistic and heuristic inquiry is that it allows each researcher's experience to be "unique, reflecting the individuality of the research, the nature of the project, and the open and flexible nature of heuristic inquiry itself" (Frick, 1990, p. 78). The naturalistic inquirer is inclined to use himself/herself as the instrument in order to gain greater flexibility and the opportunity to build upon tacit knowledge (Guba, 1981). Whatever the nature of the design, however, at the heart of heuristic inquiry lies the research question which grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or theme (Moustakas, 1990).

My interest in this topic arose from my own personal experience of achieving academic success despite the many barriers I had to negotiate to accomplish this success. In addition, my own personal experience as a graduate of Pan American College in 1969 also contributed to my intense interest in this research question.

My research was directed by several heuristic phases. First, I utilized immersion in the topic. The immersion phase began with the intensive review of the literature. In addition to the review, I "steeped" myself in the work of authors such as Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. and Richard Valencia, whose literature focus is on the educational plight as well as the struggle mounted by the Mexican American people in their quest for educational equality. I also read the works of Patricia Gandara whose studies focus on the phenomenon of educational excellence within this population and on the contemporary perspectives of Bourdieu and Passeron whose views on school achievement can be traced to differences in cultural capital.

In the indwelling phase, I utilized a reflective journal as a means of capturing my memories of my own “plight and struggle” in achieving academic success and as a means of reflecting on the meaning of my participants’ experience. In addition, I entered into self-dialogue during the analysis phase in order to arrive at an awareness of my own experiences. Finally, I created a synthesis, which contained all core themes expressed by my participants.

Pilot Study

One pilot study was conducted in the preliminary phase. The pilot study focused on five Mexican Americans who successfully navigated the hurdles to higher education by graduating with bachelors’ degrees from Pan American University between 1960 and 1975. An initial letter was sent to these participants on September 3, 2002 (Appendix A). A follow-up progress letter was sent to the participants on September 10, 2003 (Appendix B). The study revealed a number of background characteristics that had predisposed them to educational success.

Chief among these was a high value for and exposure to literacy, English and Spanish, in the participants’ homes. Contrary to the fact that these participants’ homes were characterized by low levels of parental education, they were exposed to high levels of literacy.

A second important commonality among these high achievers was that all of them at some point in their schooling attended desegregated schools where they were exposed to Anglo peers with much greater social capital than themselves.

Finally, and perhaps the most important, is the profound value for hard work that characterized almost all of these households and was channeled into dedication to studies and a strong belief that effort, perseverance, and courage were important in achieving academic goals.

Sample

The sampling strategy used in this study was purposeful sampling. According to Patton (1990), the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling.

A sample of ten Mexican American outstanding graduates of Pan American University were interviewed for the study. The men and women selected for the study met the following criteria: (a) they graduated from Pan American University from 1955 to 1975; (b) they self-identified themselves as Mexican American; (c) they attended elementary and secondary schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas; and (d) they had been raised in a low income/working class family.

The criteria for the sample were meant to result in a heterogeneous group of successful graduates who faced a variety of risk factors including segregation, language, and poverty. Primarily, I wanted to see how this group, who were faced with tremendous obstacles, persevered and overcame them. I was interested in examining the tremendous adversities and obstacles these successful Mexican Americans had to overcome and how they successfully navigated the hurdles to educational success. I

hoped that this would result in a sample that would be reflective of successful Mexican American graduates of Pan American University from 1955 to 1975. In effect, once participants met the criteria I established, I followed them and their stories.

Locating Participants

Participants were identified and drawn from a current alumni database maintained at the alumni office of Pan American University. A database of Mexican American (Spanish surname) graduates of Pan American University was provided by Doug Erickson who conducted his own study of racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination at Pan American University from 1955 to 1975.

Five of the participants interviewed in the pilot study were carried over into the present study. The remainder of the participants were obtained through the same venues as the ones in the pilot study. That is, as a current alumnus member of the university, I had personal knowledge of several of the participants who were either classmates or acquaintances. Others were identified by personal referrals from veteran professors at the university, the Distinguished Alumni Program, and by recommendations of educators in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Data Collection

The primary method for collecting data was through in-depth interviews with each participant. The primary purpose of in-depth interviewing is to gain an understanding of the experiences of people and the meaning they assign to these experiences. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (Patton, 1990).

Heuristic inquiry seeks to obtain the “depictions that are at the heart and depth of a person’s experience – depictions of situations, events, conversations, relationships, feelings and thoughts, values and beliefs” (Moustakas, 1990). A primary method of obtaining data qualitative inquiry is through extended open-ended interviews. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone’s mind (i.e., preconceived ideas) but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. Often, the interviews take the form of dialogues between oneself and the research participants (Moustakas, 1990). The task for the interviewer is to make it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world. The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer (Patton, 1990).

Patton (1990) outlines three approaches to collecting data that are appropriate for qualitative research. The *informal conversational interview* is characterized by spontaneous generation of questions and a “natural flow of interaction” (Patton, 1990, p. 198) in which the individual may not even realize they are being interviewed. In the *general interview guide approach*, the researcher utilizes an outline of a set of issues, which is used as a checklist of sorts to ensure that the researcher asks all participants the same relevant questions. Finally, in the *standardized open-ended interview*, the researcher asks a set of carefully worded questions of each participant. All three approaches adhere to the fundamental principle of qualitative interviews, which is, “to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understanding in their own terms” (Patton, 1990, p. 287).

Although Moustakas (1990) believes the informal conversational interview is “most clearly consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic exploration and search for meaning” (p. 47), I chose to utilize a combination of the *informal_conversational interview* and the *interview guide approach*. Primarily, this allowed me to obtain the same data from all the participants while still allowing the freedom to ask follow-up questions that would help to illuminate the topic further. Utilizing this interview style, one is thus “free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously and to establish a conversation style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 1990, p. 287).

Interview Structure

Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews I conducted with the participants allowed them to reflect on their educational and life experiences and the meaning they gave to them. The first part of the interview was a life history that focused on the participants’ life, work, and family history, including the family of origin’s attitude toward education (Appendix C). This part of the interview was unstructured. The second part of the interview focused on the details of the participants’ educational experience (Appendix D). This part of the interview was semi-structured and open-ended. The pilot study and the preliminary literature review allowed me to define the interview questions.

Each interview lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreeable location, usually at the participant’s

home or workplace and were audiotaped and transcribed as quickly as possible after the interview.

Data Analysis

Two processes were used to analyze the interview data. In the first phase of the process, individual profiles were developed of each participant by utilizing Moustakas' (1990) procedural guide for heuristic analysis. As suggested by Moustakas, a period of immersion was entered. Data were then set aside for a period of rest and returned to again to compile the portraits. According to Moustakas (1990), this process encourages "awakening of fresh energy and perspective" (p. 51).

Qualities and themes that emerged in the data were identified on each person. Interviews were revisited and transcripts unitized. Unitizing, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is "identifying chunks of meaning which come out of the data themselves" (p. 345). These chunks of meaning should have two characteristics. First, they should be heuristic, which is aimed at an understanding that the researcher needs. Second, these chunks must be small pieces of information about something (i.e., contributing factors to success; barriers that had to be negotiated) that can stand by themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unitizing data is very similar to what Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as coding:

Coding is analysis: To review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis...Codes are tags or labels...usually attached to 'chunks' of varying size-words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs. (p. 56)

From these themes, a depiction was constructed using the language of the participants and highlighting examples drawn from the individuals. Thematic connections were focused in the stories. The transcripts were marked and coded according to the concepts that emerged. The data were organized by cutting the parts of the transcript that represented certain concepts and placed them in file folders that were color coded for each concept. A set of questions was developed to ask the data. These included:

1. What are the factors that contributed to the success of these Mexican American graduates of Pan American University?
2. What was their school experience like? What elements are the same or different?
3. What are the obstacles they encountered and how were they negotiated?
4. What are the common background characteristics?

These questions were used as a reflection to further illuminate the data. The stories were the focus point for understanding the participants' experiences in order to arrive at a creative synthesis. A composite depiction was then developed that represented the common qualities and themes that emerged and which "retain the language and includes examples drawn from the individual" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 5).

Verification and Validity

There is much debate as to the appropriateness of the traditional use of the concept of validity in qualitative research (Seidman, 1991). For example, Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1989) argue that four alternative concepts, those of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability rather than

validity best represent the goals of qualitative research. Wolcott (1994) questions the “preoccupation with validity” (p. 368) in qualitative research. Instead, Wolcott’s concern is for capturing an *understanding* of “a social world we are continuously in the process of constructing” (p. 368).

Recognizing that heuristic inquiry utilizes qualitative methodology, Moustakas (1990) also questions the use of the traditional concept of validity in heuristic inquiry, arguing that the primary concern in heuristics is a search for *meaning*:

Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? (p. 32)

Moustakas writes that this judgment can only be made by the primary researcher, as the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the initial formulation of the research question. One strategy that is used by heuristic researchers to check for the accuracy of findings is the constant verification of data. This process “involves returning again and again to the raw data and checking again and again the constituent meanings of the experience for comprehensiveness and essence” (p. 33).

In heuristic inquiry, verification is enhanced by sharing with each participant the meaning and the essences of the phenomenon and having them assess the data for the comprehensiveness and accuracy of their experience (Moustakas, 1990). As a means of verification, my emerging understanding of the meaning of the data was presented at various points throughout the study. These member checks were conducted in order to make sure it captured the meaning of the participants’ experience accurately. The first check on verification occurred after the initial transcript of the

interviews. Participants were mailed their transcribed interviews and were urged to check them for accuracy.

The second verification check occurred after I completed the individual portrait of each participant. These profiles were mailed as well to the participants. I asked each to check for accuracy and comprehensiveness of their experiences to ensure that I had identified the essential themes in their educational experience. They were also encouraged to note any other information or insight they might have on the topic on a “reflection sheet” which I attached to the profile. All of the participants who responded remarked that their profiles captured their experiences accurately.

Limitations

This study was limited by its scope, which encompassed participants who experienced educational success and attended Pan American University from 1955 to 1975. Recording of events that occurred 45 years ago requires an interpretive act. In examining a primary source such as interviews, the researcher might not know what information would prove useful at a later phase in the study. This interpretive phase would involve searching for new facts that were not viewed as relevant.

Other limitations include biases, values, and interests that may cause the researcher to attend to some details and omit others. Finally, while my “insider” status as a Mexican American graduate of Pan American University affords me unique insights as both researcher and participant in this study, allowing me to see things that may be hidden to others, it also portends a possible limitation in that some information/patterns may be hidden to me due to my “embeddedness” in the culture.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Stories of Success: Navigating the Barriers to School Success

They had low first, middle first and high first. It would take us three years to get to the second grade.

-Luis

One of the things that I remember is the fact that we were never counseled into going to college, even though my counselor was right next door to a study hall period that I had. I would go visit with him almost every day. He never mentioned college to me.

-Irasema

These quotes serve to point out the tremendous odds Mexican American graduates of Pan American University in South Texas had to overcome in order to succeed academically. Much is known about Mexican American school failure; however, relatively little is known about the factors that lead to academic success for Mexican Americans. How were they able to convert the probability of school failure into academic success? What factors contributed to their success?

Mexican American School Failure and Success

For the past 40 years, literature on Mexican American underachievement lead to the conclusions that Mexican American students (a) do not have access to the same kinds of educational experiences in the home, the community, or the schools as their Anglo counterparts; (b) encounter multiple barriers to opportunity throughout their schooling; (c) lack the optimism and general sense of hopefulness about their futures that motivates many students to achieve; and (d) lack the access to social capital or the general cultural background, knowledge, and skills that are passed from one generation

to another, that paves the path through school and into higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). With so great a focus on underachievement, relatively little attention has been focused on Mexican American high achievement.

In spite of obstacles, some Mexican Americans have succeeded in college attendance and degree completion over the past several decades. This study focuses on lessons that can be learned from those students who succeeded academically that might be applied to improve the problem of continuing underachievement of Mexican American students.

The Context and Setting of the Study

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas stretches from Brownsville to Mission and reaches north to Harlingen. The real business of the Valley is agriculture. It is an area with mind-numbing problems such as health and poverty. Two of the lowest-ranking metropolitan areas in the United States, based on 1999 statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), are in the Valley. It is a life of hard-knocks, but full of optimism and perseverance. In a place of great hardship, there is always something more. There must be, or nothing would remain. The essence of life in the Valley is that it has endured and in that endurance is a strength that will continue through this century. The future lies in a stubborn resilience among the Mexican American people. That is precisely what I am seeking to reveal by examining the stories of academically successful Rio Grande Valley natives that demonstrate that perseverance and endurance to accomplish educational success.

Introduction to Participant Profiles

The profiles serve to contextualize the voices of the research participants by reconstructing a range of past events in their lives including their family history and educational experiences. I also felt the profiles were needed in order to maintain the integrity of my research participants, presenting them as whole individuals. These profiles summarize their experiences growing up, focusing on their family of origin, as well as their early educational experiences. I also provide a brief overview of their family background and educational experiences. Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Parent's Education Mother	Father	Primary Language	School District	Year Graduated from Pan American
Rosco	50	None	None	Spanish	Edinburg	1975
Celestina	54	None	Unknown	Spanish	McAllen	1975
Lupita	60	None	3rd	Spanish	La Feria	1960
Luis	60	3rd	10th	Spanish	McAllen	1960
Irasema	59	8th	2nd	Spanish	Pharr-San Juan-Alamo	1961
Rene	57	None	2nd	Spanish	Edinburg	1969
Adalberto	69	None	None	Spanish	McAllen	1955
“Joe Mama”	56	8th	8th	Spanish	Edinburg	1969
“El Frijol”	55	5th	3rd	Spanish	PSJA	1970
Stella	50	5th	H.S.	Spanish	La Joya	1974

Rosco

Rosco, 50, was born and raised in Edinburg, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. He is the third youngest of 12 siblings born to a family of migrant workers. He currently works for the United States Government and lives in Houston, Texas.

Most of Rosco's fondest memories of school are of the friendships he developed. Some of these friendships have remained with him throughout his life. He described the side of town he grew up in as "the other side of the tracks" or the barrio, known as the bad side of town, and going to the neighborhood elementary school. It wasn't until middle school that he was exposed to students from all the surrounding neighborhoods in Edinburg. His elementary school was 100% Mexican American, but in middle school, he got to meet Anglo students as well. It was here that he realized that these students were no different than him.

In middle school, he wanted to show the other students that even though he grew up in the barrio he was just as smart as they were. This urge to compete pushed him to excel in school, but he recalls that he sensed that the teachers always considered him different and he was always having to prove himself. When thinking about this, Rosco revealed that this was the most painful memory of school – always having to prove himself because teachers did not believe in him like they believed in the students from the good schools in town.

Despite the financial circumstances and economic hardships that accompany a family with a large number of children, which in turn diminishes the quality of parenting, Rosco's parents instilled a deep sense of purpose for life and for education

for all their children. His father always told the children that if they didn't educate themselves, they would always work in the fields. This pushed Rosco to excel and show his parents and siblings that he could make it. He admits he continues to try to prove that he is just as good as anybody else.

He related that receiving his high school diploma was the first thrill he had of achieving academically. It was a special event and it was then that he felt equal to everyone else in the ceremony. Rosco admitted that when he received his diploma, he didn't realize it was only the beginning of his education and the life he was to make for himself.

When reflecting on this, he disclosed that the drive to show everyone he could make it pushed him to achieve. He also excelled in the one sport no one expected him to excel at because of his height, but he managed to win a basketball athletic scholarship. This gave him the opportunity to continue his education when most of his friends were getting drafted. He also had to show his older brothers who had made it through college that he could make it too.

Rosco admits that the first semester at Pan American was like a brand new world. He was in an educational environment with Anglos, African Americans as well as Mexican Americans, and this exposure to other cultures further drove him to want to excel. He believes that if he had been exposed to other things, he may have gone into medicine or law, but the only role models he had were the Mexican American coaches or teachers, so he got his degree in physical education. He still wonders if he had been

exposed to successful Mexican American doctors or lawyers, maybe he would have gone into medicine or law.

Celestina

Celestina grew up as an only child in a single parent home. She is married and is a middle school principal. Celestina's story accentuates the painful memories she has of her childhood that include feeling different than the other children and the burden of living with an alcoholic mother.

Celestina described how she was born here in the United States, but her mother moved to Monterrey, Mexico, and then later returned when Celestina was five years old. She describes this time as very frightening because it was a totally different and alien environment.

Her mother found work as a housekeeper and the family she worked for paid for Celestina's tuition at a private Catholic school. At this school, she was one of three Mexican American children. With no knowledge of the English language, she began her early elementary education. Celestina attributes her survival in that alien world to the fact that she was an extravert and was resilient enough to survive in it. She also realized that she could achieve academically just like her Anglo peers.

Celestina recalls only painful memories during this challenging time. Kids were really mean and the nuns would rap her on the knuckles for talking. Her private school days ended in the fourth grade when she was falsely accused of breaking a stained glass window, but her mother's constant encouragement kept her going. Celestina's mother always reminded her that education was the key to prosperity.

In junior high, Celestina credits a couple of wonderful math teachers for believing in her and helping her succeed. One teacher encouraged her to participate in University Interscholastic League math and the other surrounded her with positive quotes that led to great positive thinking.

During the high school years, Celestina wanted to do and be so much and she never got the opportunity. The Anglo students always were the school leaders and the class favorites, even though Mexican Americans were the majority. She attributes this non-support to the lack of unity among the Mexican American students. She had ambitions of continuing her schooling, but no counselor or teacher ever talked to her about college. She recalled her own Spanish teacher, a Mexican American, preventing her from being in the National Honor Society because of an incident in class. This teacher went as far as calling her mother and telling her that Celestina did not need to have an education.

She ascribes to the fact that her high school principal, Mr. Morris, gave her an opportunity to go to school by making a phone call to his friend, the Dean of Students at the local college. After that, she was determined to do whatever it took to succeed, and it was not until she was in college that she realized she could be successful. According to Celestina, at Pan American College, Mexican Americans could become leaders. She became secretary of her freshman class and was a leader in student government. She even was the first Mexican American in Kappa Delta Sorority and felt that it was important because she set a precedent for other Mexican American females who followed. It was at Pan American College that Celestina realized she

could overcome all the obstacles she had growing up and the fact that she was poor did not matter.

She now has an opportunity as a principal to influence curriculum so that our Mexican American students can be proud of who they are and never develop the mindset that they are inferior to anyone.

Lupita

Lupita's parents were born in Mexico and moved to the United States where she and most of her siblings were born. She has three brothers and six sisters and all ten graduated from high school, an accomplishment of which her parents were very proud. Her father had very little education and her mother, an orphan, had none.

She recalls her early years as a beautiful experience. The family lived a block from the public elementary school, and she went home to eat every day. Her parents really valued education and made sure the schoolwork got done and would check report cards.

Lupita's father worked as a barber, and she remembers how every evening her father would put all the day's wages on the table for whatever they needed for school. They always knew that the money would be there for whatever supplies they needed for school. To Lupita, this showed how much her father valued education. Education was first and foremost, and this was instilled in her and all her brothers and sisters. Although school was difficult because of the language issue, the older ones would help the younger ones and her father was filled with pride at their accomplishments. Her father also taught her to read and write in Spanish.

At the time, the Mexican American students were segregated and Lupita attended the Mexican school until the fourth grade. She then moved to a school on the other side of town where all students, Anglos and Mexican Americans, attended. Her father passed away before he could see Lupita graduate from seventh to eighth grade, but she knew he would have been very proud of her.

In high school, Lupita was a member of the National Honor Society and the Student Council. She was a very good student and would hear everyone else talk about going to college and she also knew that some way she was going to college also. She did not know how because the school did not provide that support and information to her. Lupita had to depend on her older brothers and sisters who had graduated and gone on to other colleges and business colleges.

Lupita recalls a Spanish teacher at Pan American College who encouraged her to become a teacher although she admits that she knew she wanted to be a teacher since she was in the second grade. She knew from the beginning that she was destined to teach.

Lupita went on to obtain a bachelor's, master's and a doctorate degree. She remembers thinking that those degrees were for her father.

At the present time, Lupita has just completed 40 years as an educator and advocate for children. She taught school for many years, was an elementary school principal, and a director for bilingual education programs. She believes that value is still not placed on the Spanish language and believes that education should be viewed as a gift box because of its value and importance.

Luis

Luis, 60, is the oldest of 18 children. His mother and father were raised in McAllen, but were originally from Mexico. His father came to the Valley about 1917 and settled in an area of McAllen called La Paloma. All the children were born at home, which was the custom back then. His father worked for HEB food stores for 33 years and Luis, at age 9, worked with his father until he finished college.

Growing up in a large family meant very few privileges. The family was poor and lived in a two-room house that consisted of a living room/bedroom and a kitchen/bedroom. Luis slept in the kitchen on a cot. In high school, Luis had to take on a second job as a janitor to help the family make ends meet. He married young, at 20, and moved out of the house.

Luis attended a private neighborhood school, Escuela Guadalupana, run by a self-help organization of Mexicanos. These were schools that were established in the last half of the nineteenth century by Mexican Americans to escape the anti-Mexican attitudes of public school authorities by attending nonsectarian private schools (Spring, 1997). This school was a one-room school with grades kinder through fifth grades. Instruction was completely in Spanish and Luis went there through the fifth grade. He considers this as an advantage because he was fluent and literate in Spanish. After he completed the fifth grade at the “escuela,” Luis was enrolled in the segregated neighborhood public school and placed in first grade to learn English. He remembers his first grade teacher, Mrs. McBee, going to the chalkboard and putting some math problems such as 1+1 and 2+2. One of his classmates from the “escuela” went to the

chalkboard, erased the problems the teacher had written and wrote $2,355 \times 895$ and proceeded to write the answer. Needless to say, the teacher was astounded and the story reveals that the public school teachers in the Mexican schools were ill prepared to meet the educational needs of their students. He also remembers being spanked for speaking Spanish.

Fortunately for Luis, his family was very literate. He remembers stacks of Spanish newspapers and magazines in the family's two-seater outhouse and recalled many a time that he sat there with his father and read. He regards his father as being very smart. His father read a lot and gave him his liberal philosophy, always stressing social involvement.

His high school years are described as traumatic. He had few friends and was subjected to tracking. Since he was very smart because of his voracious reading, he felt his friends did not value the fact that he was ranked higher than they were. He felt that the school system was trying to "Anglocize" him. This term was used to describe high-achieving Mexican American students because school achievement was viewed as a value of white culture and doing well in school took on the connotation of "acting white" (Gandara, 1999).

Luis credits older friends and several teachers for providing the support to continue in school and eventually to graduate from college. He majored in education because there were few possibilities at Pan American at the time. After earning a Bachelor's degree, he taught in the same school he went to as a source of pride.

Presently as a school administrator, he continues to advocate for students by staying active in supporting bilingual education and is constantly vigilant of Mexican American civil rights issues.

Irasema

Irasema, the oldest of three children, grew up in a very ambitious household. Her mother and father were both born in the Rio Grande Valley, but didn't have the opportunity to get an education because they were both very poor and had to work. Although her parents had little education, both stressed the value of education to their children and even though the children worked to help their parents in the family store, they all had perfect attendance in school. All three children eventually obtained degrees, two with masters' degrees and one with a doctorate degree.

Her father was very much into business and built his first molino or mill with a \$100 loan. Eventually he went on to own three grocery stores and a restaurant. He was a very strict man with a strong work ethic, with no knowledge of the English language, but filled with high expectations for his children.

Irasema also attended a private one-room Mexican school. She attended the school for one year. Instruction was strictly in Spanish and Irasema learned how to read, write, and do basic mathematics. She then went to the public school and was placed in high first grade rather than low first grade, although she did not know a word of English. Irasema recalls her first-grade teacher asking to her come to the front of the room and count to ten. She remembers just standing there because she did not understand what the teacher wanted her to do. The teacher took her hand and started

counting. She then realized that she knew how to multiply and divide, but did not know how to count to ten in English. So she began to learn English quickly and was promoted to second grade and then quickly promoted again to third. Irasema credits a strong foundation of concepts in her native language that helped her learn her second language rapidly. At home, her father drilled her in math and would even hire tutors to help with the English since he could not. This hard work helped her skip grades and she was very young, just ten years old, when she went into high school. A family friend who knew the principal, helped to get her admitted at that young age. Because of her age, many teachers took her under their wing and helped her to continue to learn English. She recalls wanting to go to college, but she was never counseled even though she would see the counselor every day. Irasema credits a neighbor for leading her in the right direction and telling her what she needed to do to go to college.

Irasema considers herself very lucky because her father paid for her college education. She admits that higher education was a lot of work, but she was used to hard work and she loved school. Irasema excelled in college and received a Bachelor's degree in education. Her father continued to support her educational endeavors even while obtaining her master's degree. She was married at the time, but he insisted that he wanted to continue to pay for her education. He was very proud of his daughter and her accomplishments.

To this day, Irasema continues to work diligently every day for other children to succeed. She is presently a school administrator and strongly supports parental

involvement programs and bilingual education. She credits her parents, but especially her father, for her success.

Rene

Rene, 57, was born and raised in Edinburg, the youngest of seven children in a two-parent home. He is currently a district attorney in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Rene described his family's economic status while he was growing up as "at the poverty level." His mother was born in Mexico and his father in Texas. Both were laborers with little or no education. His mother was a housewife who did the washing of clothes for other people and made tamales that the family sold in the streets of Edinburg. The family also had a tortilla factory.

Despite the poverty, Rene describes his family as loving with good familial relationships. His mother was a matriarch with a strong family power in the home. His dad was a patriarch, but his power extended outside the home while his mother's power was concentrated within the family. They both were strong disciplinarians.

Although his parents had little education, they recognized the need for education and pushed Rene to go to school. He recounts how he could have dropped out like the rest of his brothers and sisters, but he credits his self-motivation and his parents' strong influence for his academic success.

Rene, whose first language was Spanish, started school when he was seven. He describes his early school experiences as "shocking" when he went from an all-Spanish environment to an all-English one. Despite this, most of Rene's educational experiences were positive. He recalls that the only negative experience was the fear

factor of getting caught speaking Spanish; although in another way, he credits this as a positive that enabled him to navigate the future experiences in learning the English language.

Paradoxically, Rene's earliest memory of academic success was when he failed the second grade. Because of his family's migrant work, Rene's early school attendance was sporadic; and therefore, he was retained in the second grade because he was a migrant. He describes this as one of the most significant motivating factors to his success because it inspired him to prove himself to the educational system.

Not surprisingly, self-motivation and nurturing teachers helped Rene succeed in school. By sixth grade, he was nominated for accelerated classes and well on his way to proving to his prior teachers that they were wrong in retaining him. He remained very focused all through his school years and graduated from high school second in his class.

Early in his junior high years, Rene knew he was going to college. He knew he could afford to go to Pan American and considered transferring later; but economically, he could not afford any other school, and personally, he wanted to stay close to his parents. He finished college in three and one half years and became the first in his family to earn a college degree.

El Frijol

El Frijol, 55, was born and raised in San Juan, Texas, the younger of two boys in a two-parent home. He is married, the father of three children, and currently superintendent of schools for a Rio Grande Valley school district. In the course of our

interview, El Frijol talked about his passion about community advocacy and about his involvement in politics.

El Frijol described growing up in a close-knit migrant family where hard work in the fields was their way of life. Their home was located in *La Colonia Palma Vista*, the poorest section of town. Although the family migrated to work in the fields, his mother made sure that they would come back in time for school so that the boys would not have to participate in the seven month school program for migrants. He maintained a strong and admiring relationship with his mother, who died at the age of 44 when El Frijol was just about to graduate from high school.

His mother had very little education, but she recognized the value of education for her children. El Frijol credits his mother for being the driving force for his educational success. He described her as a “very sweet, lovely lady” who taught her boys the skills they needed to get a good start in school. He recalled that by the time they started school, they knew all the concepts required for the first year of school. Spanish was the dominant language, but the transition to English was easy because of the strong foundation in concepts. El Frijol recalled his mother telling him that all she wanted was to see them graduate from college, but she never saw him attend or graduate from college because of her early death. Now, he looks back and appreciates that and it means a lot to him.

El Frijol describes his father as very different from his mother. His father provided for what they needed and was a very good, hard worker. He related that his father went along with his mother in supporting education, but he wanted his boys to

work. He taught them the “world of work.” El Frijol recalls that his brother is like his father, a very hard worker who graduated from high school and then went on to the “world of work,” but El Frijol wanted more education.

El Frijol started pre-school at the age of four in *la escuelita de Amanda Garza-Peña*, which was the Mexican school and then went on to kindergarten at a private Lutheran School for one year. He then went on to a Catholic school until the eighth grade. El Frijol attributes his mother’s strong Catholic faith for sending them to Catholic school. His parents had to sacrifice and pay two dollars a month to attend the school, even though there was a free public school across the street from where they lived. In high school, El Frijol was a straight ‘A’ student which he says he owes to his mom because she made sure that they never missed a day of school. Before he was admitted to the ninth grade, El Frijol was given a test and he scored at the twelfth grade level and placed in college preparatory classes, but his brother was not. He recalls some of the teachers, especially his English teacher, telling him he should consider some sort of vocation because he was not college material. He remembers many discrimination practices that he experienced when he got to the ninth grade in the public school. In the Catholic school, he had not experienced any discrimination because he says all the students and the teachers were Mexican American; but in high school, he didn’t even know there were counselors there to advise him. He did recall one Mexican American counselor that he met in his senior year that encouraged him to continue and go to college. El Frijol will never forget her for her interest and encouragement, but he will

also never forget his English IV teacher who told him he was not college material and that he should look for something else to do.

After high school graduation, El Frijol and his friends decided they were going to college so they drove to Texas A&I in Kingsville. He recalls that they didn't know about registration or transcripts or what courses to take, but he did know he had to go to college because his mother, who had just died, told him he better go. After talking to different people there, they realized they did not have the money to go to school there. Even though El Frijol was a Boy State candidate, a Foreign Exchange student candidate, and had excellent grades, he never received any kind of scholarships that would have assisted his college expenses. So, the friends came back to Pan American College and found out about work study programs and financial aid loans.

Once he entered Pan American, he did very well his first year; but during his second year, he found himself facing scholastic probation. His mother was deceased, his father and brother were not around, so he "partied" and his grades suffered. About that time, he and his high school sweetheart, who was only 15 years old, got married, and his grades improved. He went from scholastic probation to the Dean's list. He recounts that if it hadn't been for his wife, he wouldn't have finished college. He credits his two great women, his mother and his wife, for his academic success.

After graduating from college with a major in Spanish and a minor in Physical Education, El Frijol began working as a Physical Education teacher at Buckner Elementary and got involved in politics. After his second year of teaching, he decided to run for mayor of San Juan, Texas, but was discouraged after the county

superintendent of schools sent him a letter saying that if he ran for public office, he would no longer have a job. He commented that at the time, he knew that was unconstitutional, but he had a wife and family to support. Angry with the school system, he joined the teacher corps in 1972 and went to Crystal City with *La Raza Unida* Party. He received a master's degree in Bilingual Education, became involved in the Mexican American Youth Organization, and ran for mayor and took over city hall.

Unfortunately, many people, including his father, thought that their jobs were at risk because the majority, the Anglo, was not in power. El Frijol recalled that he still faces that kind of mentality to this day. He feels being equal and respecting each other's culture is very important and continues to be involved in fighting for the rights of Mexican-Americans.

When asked why so many Mexican Americans at the time did not succeed academically, El Frijol stated that self-motivation and support from parents is the key. He again, recounted that he owes it all to his mother and he wishes he would have had her longer, but is thankful for her love and guidance.

Joe Mama

Joe, 56, born and raised in Edinburg, Texas, is one of three boys born to the family of Arturo and Rosa. He is married and is currently Director of Personnel for a Rio Grande Valley School District. His story contained frequent references to the family's economic struggle and the instilling of deep-rooted family values of hard work and persistence that kept them going.

Joe Mama described his family's economic status while he was growing up as poor. His father worked for the county of Hidalgo upgrading roads, and his mother worked as a cafeteria manager for the Edinburg School District. His parents decided early on that they were not going to migrate even though it meant hardships; but his parents made a commitment to themselves and to their sons that they were going to find jobs locally because they did not want the family "moving back and forth."

He describes his mother and father as very giving and very supportive. Joe and his younger brother were very involved in athletics, but his older brother was not. He was more involved in the world of work and wanted to make his own money. His mother and father supported their efforts and sacrificed to provide for their sons. Joe Mama described very poor living conditions as he grew up. The home did not have indoor plumbing, but still the attitude was that they were thankful that they had a roof over their heads. His father was a semi-pro baseball player who pushed his sons to finish what they started and to never quit.

Although the family's first language was Spanish, his parents, especially his dad, instilled the importance of learning the English language. He recalled that his dad used to make them practice English at home and made sure the boys knew that English was the dominant language and that it was very important to learn and master it.

Joe Mama recalls that school was very, very difficult and turbulent. He remembers his fifth grade teacher who used to pull his ear if he caught him speaking Spanish. That's how it was instilled to practice English and not speak Spanish. Joe

Mama believes that in the long run, his teacher's disciplinary tactics and his parents' insistence that they practice English, paid off.

Joe Mama recounted a childhood filled with good memories of playing sports with his friends. To them, it was an enjoyable pastime that kept them from getting into trouble. Joe believes that sports gave them the discipline and the competitive edge that they were seeking at the time.

Joe describes his mother and father as very loving, but very strict. He recalled various incidents where he got in trouble at school and was even in more trouble when he got home because his parents already knew about it. His father was a strict disciplinarian who pushed his boys to the limits. Although his parents were strict, Joe knew he could go and talk to them about any problems and that they were ready to give him the best advice they could. His parents always made sure school work got done, even though they couldn't help them most of the time. School work always came first before anything else.

His early school years were a struggle because Joe was a slow reader. To this day, he still has trouble reading and analyzing text and admits he has never been a quick learner. When he got to high school, he had a history professor who quickly pointed out to him that he was not college material because he could not speak before an audience and give reports. Joe recounts how he continues to have that history teacher in the back of his mind as he makes presentations to teachers and school administrators. Joe managed to take that negative experience and used it to enhance what he knew he had to do, which was go to college and graduate.

At Pan American, he found himself having to take a speech test that was given to non-English speaking students. He credits his fifth grade teacher and his dad for insisting he practice the English language for his success on that test. He also gives credit to a speech professor for praising and encouraging him. He says that made a difference and it pushed him in the right direction. He got admitted into Pan American and went into a work study program to help his mother and father finance his schooling. He recalls that all his other friends in work study were working in the library or with professors, but Joe became a student janitor. He was a student janitor the four years he was at Pan American. During the first year of college, Joe had a difficult time adjusting to the regiment of studying and going to the library. Instead, he found himself in the student center playing ping pong and watching television. After the first semester, he faced scholastic probation. He remembers his parents telling him that if he couldn't make it in school, then he was going to go work for the county just like his father. That's when Joe said, "No, thank you" because he knew how hard the work was. His grades improved and during his junior year he became very involved in a Catholic fraternity. He became one of the 12 founding chapter members. At the time, the fraternities and sororities at Pan American recruited only the White middle class, and this group of Mexican American men decided that if they were not good enough to join the fraternities at Pan American, they would start their own.

Joe Mama admits that throughout his educational career, nothing has come easy. He struggled to get head coaching positions, but persevered until it finally came.

He has faced tragedies and struggles, but remembers what his father instilled: “keep going, don’t quit.”

Stella

Stella, 50, born in McAllen and raised in La Joya, is the third child in a family of four siblings. She is married and is an Assistant Superintendent of Schools. She is focused, self-motivated, and self-confident. Her story contained frequent references to her serious dedication to her education.

Stella described growing up in a warm, close knit family where there was an “abundance of love and support.” She attributes a lot of her success to the family support that includes her grandparents, who she lived with until the third grade, and her aunts “who are like second moms.” She described her “growing up” years as very positive and full of good memories.

Her father had a high school degree and a degree from McAllen Business College and her mother had only a fifth grade education; but she attributes her very wise mom as the motivator for a better life. Stella’s father was an intelligent, hardworking, and reserved man, a “go getter” who was independent and very self-directed. Stella feels she inherited a lot of his traits and described him as a man with good foresight, who in his own “quiet way,” set goals for her. She recalls having a wonderful relationship with her father. Both parents wanted their children to have a good education and managed to put all their children through college. Stella distinctly remembers her mother saying “You’re not going to stay the way I stayed. You’re going to have a better life than I had and so you are going to college. I didn’t have the

opportunity, but I'm going to start praying and I'm going to do whatever I can to ensure that you have the opportunity." She also recalls her dad saying, "I can't leave you anything else, but I am going to leave you your education and nobody can take that away from you."

"A very strong, determined lady and very persistent" is how Stella describes her mother. She's the type of woman who "goes after what she wants and she doesn't give up easily." Her family was priority and she provided a strong support system that the family needed.

Economically, Stella described her family as "middle class." They didn't have the "extras," but they always had what they needed and never felt deprived. The family knew there were others who had more than what they had, but they still felt they had everything that they needed

Stella's early education was in a "beginners" or a reading readiness class, and she recalls being timid and afraid, but yet excited. Stella had been prepared for school by her family and did not recall any negative experiences. She described herself as "one those little girls who tried to do everything she was told and never caused any problems." She was promoted from beginners to the second grade because she was a quick learner, but remembers being a little hesitant when they would call on her to read. She recalls being afraid of being called on and that she would not know all the words. By the middle school years, Stella knew she was smart and that she was being tracked into accelerated classes with other top students. She graduated from high school believing that she could do whatever she wanted to do.

After graduation, Stella wanted to go to school in San Marcos, Texas, and be a home economics teacher, but her mother would not hear of it. Her strict mother did not want her going away so far from home and insisted she attend Pan American College. Stella thought that maybe if she went to Pan American for two years, then she could transfer to San Marcos; but by the end of her first year of college, she was classified as a junior and had no time to convince her mom to let her transfer.

Stella describes her college experience as focused and very driven. She lived at home and commuted and recalls that she did not have a lot of fun in college. Stella was very serious and dedicated to her school work and even worked part-time along with taking 18 to 21 hours a semester. She earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education with a minor in English. She began teaching in the fall of 1974 and started work on her master's degree, then worked to get her supervision, mid-management, and superintendent certificates. She was accepted into the doctoral program at The University of Texas, but decided to work and earn her doctorate at Pan American.

Stella attributes parental expectations as critical for school success. While working in the fields, her parents would point out the value of a good education, and Stella knew that she was not going to continue doing that kind of hard labor. Her parents accomplished their mission. One of her brothers has an MBA and Stella has a Ph.D.

Her education confirmed the fact that she is a self-driven person. It gave her a reason to like who she is and to accept herself as an individual, to feel proud of who she is, and to stand tall and dream.

Adalberto

Adalberto Ochoa, 69, was born and raised in McAllen, Texas, and is a 1955 graduate of Pan American. He is articulate, reflective, and projects a quiet serenity and self-assurance. His story reflects a time when opportunities for Mexican Americans were limited. He is the oldest participant in this study and is currently a retired professor from Pan American University and a private educational consultant.

Adalberto, one of five boys, grew up in the “heart” of the *barrio*, 17th Street in McAllen. His parents were illiterate. His mother taught herself to read some Spanish, but his father could not read or write. His mother was self-educated and learned how to read and do math on her own. She became a well known business woman on 17th Street and eventually acquired property and built a restaurant/hotel and a *tortilleria* and grocery store. Adalberto recalls that his mother worked very hard so they were able to have a few things, but her main concern was education. Unfortunately, only two of the brothers finished high school and went on to college and earned degrees. The others dropped out of school. Adalberto feels his mother favored him and had higher expectations for him than for his brothers. She always bragged about his good grades, and he was the first kid in the neighborhood to own a typewriter. She even paid for private typing lessons and private Spanish lessons after school. She really pushed him and Adalberto believes this helped “fulfill a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

His father was a butcher, and he would buy cows and sell them for profit; but Adalberto admits that he was not the most responsible person. Adalberto describes him

as an “independent soul” and “very charming.” He lived with them, but did not take responsibility for providing for them. His parents divorced eventually.

Adalberto’s primary language was Spanish, and he learned English in school with Ms. Meyers in the first grade with Dick and Jane and Spot. He picked up English by reading, but mostly on his own because at the time they did not teach oral language. They just taught decoding. Adalberto learned English at the movies. He went to the movies almost every day at the El Rey Theater in Spanish and the Palace Theater in English. He mimicked the actors on the screen and could repeat the sentences that they uttered. So his English learning happened at the theater because in school they mostly did worksheets. He was quick to learn the language, and he was promoted to third grade and recalls being double promoted twice because he finished high school at the age of 16.

Despite his good grades, Adalberto does not recall any encouragement or praise from his teachers, although his mother would always tell him how smart he was. He knows that he must have been one of the top graduating seniors, but he never found out. He recalls a counselor telling him that he would be a good clerk someday because he had good clerical skills, and yet, he was in the National Honor Society with straight A’s. He never felt encouraged by his teachers or administrators. He believes it to be “a sin of omission rather than a sin of commission.” Adalberto did credit two teachers in high school, Mrs. Roban-Paez and Mrs. Marguerite Robinson, who praised his work, and he remembers and cherishes those times.

Although there were no books or magazines at home, Adalberto would walk from the *barrio* to the McAllen Library, which at the time, was in the basement of a bandstand in Archer Park. He recalls checking out books and reading voraciously. “Once I realized that the world of Dick and Jane was rather boring and stilted and stifling and that there were other books like *The Prince and the Pauper* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, reading became fascinating.” The librarians became his friends, and they would suggest books to him. He has been an avid reader and has fostered this in his own children. “Books,” says Adalberto, “are my friends.”

Adalberto attributes all his success and academic achievement to three important people: his mother, a great friend and mentor, and a great teacher. His mother did not have much education, but she encouraged him to do well. His friend, who he “made along the way,” lived in very literate environment. His family had magazines and books everywhere, and their language was very advanced. His friend modeled goal-setting and told him about college. Adalberto wanted to emulate him. His high school English teacher, Mrs. Marguerite Robinson, always challenged and praised him.

At Pan American, or Edinburg Regional College as it was called back then, Adalberto took challenging courses, but was very tenacious. At the time, education degrees were the norm, so Adalberto became a teacher. As a matter of fact, he was among the first generation of Hispanic teachers in the Rio Grande Valley.

After graduating first in his class at Pan American and with high recommendations from a professor, Adalberto applied to teach in the McAllen School

District. The Superintendent of Schools would not hire him, even with the recommendation of a school board member. Adalberto feels that this was because he was Mexican American. Eventually, Adalberto went to Hidalgo ISD and then at the age of 20, became principal at Runn Elementary School in Donna, Texas, and helped get the school accredited. He recalls that later in an interview with another Valley school district, the superintendent told him “you’re Hispanic, but I’m going to give you a chance to be a principal, but you better be very, very, good. If you are not excellent, we are not going to hire anymore Hispanic principals.” Adalberto “opened the gates” for other Hispanic principals.

Adalberto compares his educational experiences to a mosaic because there would be a piece where he spent two years in Ecuador training teachers for the American government, another piece would be for his work at the regional service center in San Antonio and where bilingual education began. It would include his tenure as a adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico, and it would include the teaching in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and being a principal.

Adalberto enjoys the best of two worlds, the Anglo culture and the Mexican American culture. He believes both can be blended beautifully and interwoven into almost one. “It’s like you have two souls, *dos almas*, so you have two chances to get to heaven.”

Findings

The study focused on ten Mexican Americans who successfully navigated the hurdles to higher education by graduating with bachelors’ degrees from Pan American

University between 1955 and 1975. The study revealed a number of background characteristics that had predisposed them to educational success.

First, their families placed a high value for and exposure to literacy, English and Spanish, in the participants' homes. Contrary to the fact that these participants' homes were characterized by low levels of parental education, they were exposed to high levels of literacy. A second important commonality among these high achievers was that all of them at some point in their schooling attended desegregated schools where they were exposed to Anglo peers with much greater social capital than themselves. Finally, and perhaps the most important, is the profound value for hard work that characterized almost all of these households and was channeled into dedication to studies and a strong belief that effort, perseverance, and courage were important in achieving academic goals.

Valuing Literacy: Creating an Environment for Achievement

Chief among these was a high value for and exposure to literacy, English and Spanish, in the participants' homes. Contrary to the fact that these participants' homes were characterized by low levels of parental education (see Table 1), they were exposed to high levels of literacy. This was the case for most of these individuals. Parents and older siblings read to them and all were exposed to all types of print materials. Virtually all of the participants in this study reported being avid readers themselves, usually modeling their interest after a parent or older sibling.

One participant, whose father dropped out of school at tenth grade, commented on the early literacy training he received from him:

We were a very literate family. We had a stack of Spanish magazines on one side and a stack of English ones on the other side of the two-seater outhouse. So we would read from both. My father was one of the smartest persons. He was literate, read a lot. (Luis)

Other participants recounted the ways literacy was valued and modeled:

I remember being fascinated by encyclopedias, Marvel comic books, my sister's romance novels, and sports magazines. (Rosco)

My father taught me to read in Spanish. English I learned from my sisters because they had to model. My dad would help us with math, but it was the vocabulary we did not have. The older sisters would help the younger ones. (Lupita)

Every time my father would work with us after school in Spanish. He would really drill us in math. This is what he knew. (Irasema)

My dad loved to read. He would pick up a magazine and read it. My dad would pick up a sports newspaper and read the articles on his heroes or the baseball players he liked. (Joe Mama)

Other participants admit that reading possessed them at an early age:

I was a reader. I just always read. I would go to the library and check out the maximum number of books for the summer. (Celestina)

I used to go across the street to my neighbor's house to read the newspaper. I remember that I wanted to be the fastest reader that there was. I would go across the street to my neighbor's house as soon as the newspaper would hit the porch. I would read the paper and fold it back up, almost on a daily basis. I read about sports, news reports, war, whatever. (Rene)

There were no books or magazines at home, but I walked from the *barrio* all the way to the McAllen Library which was a little bandstand in Archer Park. I checked out books and I read voraciously. Once I discovered that the world of Dick and Jane was rather boring, stilted and stifling, I realized that there were other books like *The Prince and the Pauper* and *The Swiss Family Robinson* that had delightful stories and I realized that reading is not this mechanical stuff where you're just calling out words...nonsense words. Reading can be fascinating and the librarians became my friends. (Adalberto)

Cultivating Knowledge

Reading is not the only form of literacy training, nor was it the only way in which these parents and families encouraged their children's love of learning. According to Vygotsky, written language develops as speech does, in the context of its use. It is thus very important for learners to be immersed in language in order for literacy to follow naturally (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). Children who experience rich and extended conversations with adults early at home and in the school environment achieve greater academic success in their later years. Children's early experiences with speech and conversation provide them with essential knowledge that supports later literacy development. Researchers have found that children develop the ability to talk about language through their conversational interactions with parents and teachers. Reading skill is built on this awareness of spoken language (Colker, 2003).

When I went to school, I knew colors, I knew numbers, I knew how to speak English. My mom would sit me as she was making *tortillas* on the counter and she would drill me. This was like at the age of two or three. So when we go to school, *ya sabemos todo*. We knew everything. (El Frijol)

I was timid and afraid when I started school. My family had prepared me, but just the experience of being alone. But the teachers were Hispanic so I didn't have any problems. (We went to a Mexican private school and there I learned how to read, write, and multiply because it was taught to me in my own language, Spanish. In first grade in public school, I just picked up English. I had the concepts and a strong foundation. (Irasema)

My dad would discuss the different things he read with me or he would say do you know about this or have you heard about this. He read his Bible and quoted scriptures. He was able to read a passage and interpret what it meant. (Joe Mama)

My mother didn't know much about education, but she knew I was doing well so she encouraged that. She couldn't help me with homework or vocabulary because she hadn't been educated formally, but informally she had a lot of

background. I attribute my success to three people: my mother, a great friend that I made along the way whose family was very literate and his language was very advanced, and a great teacher, Mrs. Robinson, who always gave me praise. (Adalberto)

One of the subjects recounted how discussions of politics, labor organizing, and social involvement were topics in his home:

My father gave me my liberal philosophy. We were like this because there was no union. Be careful about this. Social involvement was very important. (Luis)

The picture that emerges of the home environments of most of these subjects is one in which a high premium was placed on ideas and information, in spite of the limited formal education of the home. One participant noted how her father stimulated her business sense by exposing her to the family business at an early age:

My father was very much into business, selling and buying. He built his first store with one hundred dollars that were loaned to him. He had a bicycle and went all over town delivering masa. He would get up at 4 o'clock in the morning. Then he started adding other things. He bought a horse and buggy. Then he bought a jeep and a truck. He came to own three stores, a restaurant and a cantina. He was a businessman. (Iramsema)

Family Support and Encouragement

The ways in which families help children acquire the motivation to achieve have been studied extensively by psychologists. Eminent among these are McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell (1953), who concluded that motivation for achievement could be engendered in children through early training by setting high standards and providing sufficient independence for children to develop a sense of task mastery.

Wolf (1964) and Dave (1963) investigated parental behaviors that combined to create a press for achievement that results in higher academic performance. Studies of family processes indicate that students perform better when they are raised in homes

characterized by supportive and demanding parents who encourage and expect academic achievement.

Family support may take the form of encouragement for performing well in school, helping with homework, providing stimulating learning experiences, and helping children set educational goals. To what extent were these overworked and undereducated parents able to provide these kinds of supports for their children? Participants were very emphatic on the topic of parental support and encouragement. Most reported that both parents were supportive, although mothers were more supportive with male participants, and fathers were indicated most supportive for the female participants (see Table 2).

Male participants described how mothers provided the support for schooling that fathers lacked:

My mother, bless her soul, favored me. I was her favorite and she held high expectations for me, very high. She really pushed me and this helped fulfill a self-fulfilling prophecy. My dad would help out once in a while, but he was not the most responsible person. They eventually divorced. (Adalberto)

My mom was a sweet lady. My dad was rarely home. She was pro education and she was consistently on us. We never missed a day of school because of my mom. (El Frijol)

My mom was the matriarch and the enforcer in our family. (Rosco)

My mother was a matriarch. She had strong family power. My father was a strong individual, but his trade was outside the home. He would let mom rule the family and he would get involved only if necessary. (Rene)

Table 2. Most Influential Parent in Supporting Educational Goals

Name	Gender	Parent
Luis	Male	Father
Celestina	Female	Mother
Irasema	Female	Father
Lupita	Female	Father
Rosco	Male	Mother
Adalberto	Male	Mother
El Frijol	Male	Mother
Joe Mama	Male	Mother/Father
Rene	Male	Mother
Stella	Female	Father

Female participants explained what role their fathers consistently played in their educational goal-setting:

I have very fond memories of my dad because he did not know English and he could not help us. When we had problems with school work, he would look for a tutor. He would call a teacher friend of his and ask who could help his daughter with English lessons. He would find people for us because he could not help us. (Irasema)

My father had a lot of pride, as far as whatever we learned. If anyone came to visit, he would showcase what we learned. We recited the alphabet, sang songs because he wanted us to feel proud of our accomplishments. My father passed away when I was in the seventh grade and when I graduated from the eighth

grade I kept in mind that I had made it, and my dad would have been very proud of me. (Lupita)

For the most part, my dad was more supportive because he understood school, and he had gone to school, and he understood the system. (Stella)

Familial Support

Most of what parents could offer was verbal support and encouragement for their children's schooling and all participants felt very strongly supported at home.

Participants recalled how sometimes parents articulated and demonstrated this support:

My mother would always tell me to study hard so that I wouldn't end up like her cleaning houses. (Celestina)

My mom would tell me, "you are not going to stay the way I stayed. You are going to have a better life than I had, and so you are going to college." I tell everybody that we really didn't have an option. It was no questions asked. (Stella)

To my parents, education was very important. Even though we worked all of the time at the store, they wanted us to do our homework first. They believed that education was very important, and they sent us to school. We all had perfect attendance. (Irasema)

My parents decided early on that they were not going to migrate. People around our neighborhood would pack up and take their family to work in the northern states. Mom and dad made a commitment to themselves and to us that they were going to find jobs locally. They didn't want us moving back and forth and missing school. (Joe Mama)

Perhaps those that didn't make it did not have the nurturing and the family ability to support them to continue in school. (Rene)

Dad wanted us to do the best whether it was working the fields or working at whatever. He always kept telling us that if we didn't educate ourselves, then we would always work in the fields. (Rosco)

Every time report cards would come out, my mother would run around the neighborhood, door to door, showing it off. I was the first kid in the neighborhood to own a typewriter. My mother bought me private typing lessons. She paid for private Spanish language lessons after school. (Adalberto).

Mijito, no le aflojes (don't give up). I mean we couldn't go and play and we couldn't do anything until all our homework was done, and my mother would check our paper to make sure we had it correct. (El Frijio)

School Factors

A second important commonality among these high achievers was that all of them at some point in their schooling attended desegregated schools where they were exposed to Anglo peers with much greater social capital than themselves. A primitive view of the advantages of desegregated schooling arose during the late 1960's and early 1970's. The Coleman Report suggested that a primary benefit that accrued to minority students as a result of ethnic mixing was the modeling of the academic behaviors of the non-minority students. The authors suggested that access to equal resources was probably at the heart of improved performance of minority students in desegregated schools (Coleman et al., 1966).

Most of the participants in this study began their early elementary years in segregated Mexican public schools or in private Mexican schools, but joined their Anglo peers in middle school or high school. The small towns in the Rio Grande Valley usually had one middle school and one high school. The students were mixed when they reached these levels.

Coleman et al. (1966) noted that the largest portion of the variance in achievement attributable to schools can be accounted for by the composition of the student body. There is also evidence that minority students who attend schools that are racially and ethnically isolated do not perform as well as those who attend more racially integrated schools (Orfield & Paul, as cited in Gandara, 1995).

This exposure to middle class attitudes and dispositions about self-worth, competence, and hopefulness ignited a sense of competition in most of the participants.

For example, Rosco expressed this sense of worth and competition:

Middle school exposed us to other kids, other thoughts that they had. We were considered barrio kids, but when I started to meet kids from other schools and we were saying, "Hey, these kids (Anglo) are no different from us." The competition with them pushed me to excel in my education. (Rosco)

Adalberto recalls advanced classes that were available, but not everyone could take.

Now if you took English IV, you happened to be with kind of an elite group because not everybody took English IV. So I found myself with the best students in the class. They were very challenging, and I was challenged by them and I wanted to do just as well or better. (Adalberto)

Other participants remember friendly competitions with classmates.

A friend of mine and I had a competition to see who could make more A's. He was younger than I, but we had a healthy in school competition at the end of every six weeks. We would compete because we were in the same classes. (Rene)

My brother and I did extremely well playing baseball so I was able to match up with the Black athletes and the Anglo athletes. When I got to junior high, I felt like I fitted in. (Joe Mama)

The two ladies that were selected Valedictorian and Salutatorian were in the same classes I was in. They would ask me what grades I got. I was always one or two points behind them. (Luis)

Tracking

Because most of these participants showed academic promise, they were usually tracked into college preparatory classes with other high-achieving White students. Had they not been placed in this track, it is unlikely that they would have achieved the level of education they eventually did (Oakes, 1985). These participants

were astute enough to be clearly aware of this fact, and many complained that they had to fight for the right to take college prep courses because the schools did not identify them as being college potential.

One participant recounts how much he was tested when he transferred into the high school from Catholic school.

They tested us when we went to transfer from a Catholic school into public school. They thought we came from a school that is not accredited, so they gave us a test and I scored real high. (El Frijol)

Another participant recalls that he was never encouraged by teachers despite his straight A's.

I remember my counselor telling me that after having tested me that I should be a good clerk. She said I had great clerical skills, yet I was in the National Honor Society. I was one of three Hispanics in the National Honor Society , but I never felt encouraged. (Adalberto)

Stella remembers that in middle school, she knew it was evident that she was being tracked.

The smart kids were always together, so we knew we were being tracked and that we were smart, but I still remember being afraid of being called on and I wouldn't know the words. (Stella)

One participant questioned the college opportunities of some of her peers.

You know, I thought, "How come they (Anglo peers) are going to college and I am not going to college?" It was at the end of the year in which I graduated. I did not know I was going to go to college until we started in September and they were going out there to register and I just tagged along. (Irasema)

The participants in this study were in a position to be tracked into classes that were typically attended by Anglo students because they overwhelmingly attended desegregated schools in their middle and high school years.

The benefits of desegregated schools for these participants activated a sense of worth and ignited the competitive drive that accrues to students for whom social capital is a birthright. The real benefits of desegregated schools for many Hispanic students may lie in the access to social capital – knowledge of the system and how to navigate it – that accrues to students who form friendships with non-minority and middle class peers for whom social capital is their birthright.

Transferring Values and Beliefs

Finally, and perhaps the most important, is the profound value for hard work that characterized almost all of these households and was channeled into dedication to studies and a strong belief that effort, perseverance, and courage were important in achieving academic goals. As some of the participants put it:

I remember one time when we had seventeen and eighteen year olds in the sixth grade. I remember young men and women at the time who had been retained and going backwards. I had to say to myself that we are as capable as anyone else. I think about some of the guys who were very intelligent individuals. Some of the guys got kicked out and never went beyond high school or eighth grade. But my parents were supportive and this gave me a sense of pride. (Luis)

Dad wanted us to do the best whether it was working the fields or working at whatever. He always kept telling us, “If you don’t educate yourself, mijo (son), then you will always be working the fields. You have a choice; better yourself because I can’t give you anything more. This is all I can give you, but you can go beyond what anyone else thinks about you.” (Rosco)

My mother would always tell me to study hard so that I would not end up like her – cleaning houses. (Celestina)

The Nexus of Hard Work

Parents of these subjects modeled high standards in their own work whether it was picking cotton or cleaning houses. Most of these successful Mexican Americans

followed the model set by their parents holding themselves to equally high standards in school and that effort and perseverance could overcome other's assessment of their ability. Their families constructed a belief system that emphasized resiliency and tenacity that helped them overcome adversity. Parents instilled a sense of doing their best in whatever they did and stressed that education was a way to better themselves. This supports the knowledge that families are central to the process by which children acquire the social knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes valued by the larger society (Bukatko & Daehler, 1998). As some participants recalled:

Those students that were not encouraged to pursue an education dropped out; but for us, education was really stressed at home. My father would tell us that education was the best gift he could leave us. (Lupita)

I think you have to have some kind of spirit or some kind of attitude about yourself. You have to feel that even though there are barriers, that you are going to overcome those barriers somehow. And you have to have tenacity. I just knew that I could do it. My mother told me so. (Adalberto)

The most important thing that helped me succeed in school is my parents' expectations. We all worked very hard, but that was so that we would be able to appreciate and value education. This gave me the reason to like who I am and to accept myself as an individual and to feel proud of who I am and to just stand tall and dream. (Stella)

The values instilled in us by our parents pushed us on. My dad would never allow us to quit something we started. (Joe Mama)

My father worked very hard for us. I was one of the first ones to have a car for graduation because he was very proud. He wanted us to be responsible and dependable people. (Irasema)

One of the things my parents would always tell us was to respect your teachers. They would tell us not to question them and to do as we were told. They warned us about doing the wrong things. They reminded us that we represented the family and we had to be polite. (Lupita)

The lessons in the value of hard work, persistence, and respect were articulated, and parents were very explicit about what they expected their children to take from their own work experience. The role of hard work served as a model for behavior that would later translate into the children's work habits at school as well as instilling a sense of independence and tenacity.

Personal Characteristics

When asked what personal characteristic was most critical to their academic success, these participants cited a number of specific factors. Among the list of responses were persistence, hard work, ability, social skill, self-discipline, and goal orientation. Four of the ten participants indicated persistence was the most critical characteristic and four participants indicated self-discipline was critical. One participant indicated goal orientation, and one indicated ability as most critical (see Table 3). All the participants credited themselves with being hard and tenacious workers, and all recalled their parents as the models of their hard work ethic. All participants valued this quality, but did not perceive it as the most critical for academic success.

Table 3. Personal Characteristics Most Critical to Academic Success

Gender	Persistence	Hard Work	Ability	Social Skill	Self-Discipline	Goal Orientation
Male	1		0		0	0
Female	3		1		4	1
Total	4		1		4	1

Ability via Effort

Conventional wisdom suggests that people who excel academically are simply more intelligent than those who do not. There is, however, considerable evidence that intellectual ability (as measured by standardized tests) and academic attainment are not necessarily highly correlated, especially among minorities (Duran & Weffer, 1992). Support for the idea that persistence may play a larger role in academic achievement would seem apparent. Simonton (1987), in his review of achieved eminence, found that persistence was more powerful than ability by itself in explaining the prodigious accomplishments of a sample of outstanding achievers. The author noted that high, but not the highest intelligence, combined with the greatest degree of persistence, will achieve greater eminence than the highest degree of intelligence with somewhat less persistence.

One participant, a district attorney, offered the following insight on the role of ability via persistence and self-discipline in his own academic career:

I failed the second grade because I was a migrant, and I think this was one of the most significant motivating factors in my success because at first I was offended because I was kept back; but that inspired me to prove to them that they did not know anything about education. I believe my self-discipline allowed me to persist and prove to them that they were wrong. (Rene)

Another participant commented on how drive rather than ability was responsible for his academic success:

Learning didn't come naturally. I had to struggle and I came to find out I was not a very fast reader and not the quickest of learners. After giving an oral report in high school, the teacher asked me what my plans for the future were and I told him I wanted to go to college. He told me I should pick a skill, maybe an electrical or mechanical skill, because I was not a good speaker. I didn't feel very good about myself, but I used that negative experience to persist in my educational endeavors. (Joe Mama)

One participant, a professor and educational consultant, summed up the role persistence played in the educational success of all of the participants:

I was very tenacious, very tenacious. I went to college and some of the courses were quite challenging in the sense that you had to get up and give a speech and it was very, very scary. (Adalberto)

Resiliency

Resiliency theory identifies protective factors present in the families, schools, and communities of successful youth that often are missing in the lives of troubled youth (Krovetz, 1999). When at least some of these protective factors are present, children develop resiliency, that is, the ability to cope with adversity. According to Bonnie Benard (1991, 1997), there are at least four common attributes of resilient children:

- Social competence
- Problem-solving skills

- Autonomy
- Sense of purpose and future

Resiliency theory proposes that all of these attributes are present to some degree in most people. Whether they are strong enough to help individuals cope with adversity, however, depends on the presence of protective factors during childhood.

Families of the study's participants instilled in their children a sense of satisfaction with who they are and to recognize the standards of conduct considered acceptable and ethical within their community. Parents helped their children develop a strong concept of self that encouraged a sense of autonomy, individuality, stability, and self-consciousness.

An assistant superintendent of schools whose father was the most influential parent recalled how her father worked very hard for his children, encouraged them to do their best, and stimulated her interest in learning:

My father had very high expectations of us. He wanted us to be responsible and dependable people. He would tell us that school was a given, it was not an option. So when it came time to go to college, it was like inside of you. You knew you had to do this. It was intrinsic. (Irasema)

Another participant reflected on his parents' ability to tolerate the adversities in their lives:

My parents were supportive. Tenacity, I guess, and they had a source of pride. I guess that is why we persevered when so many did not. (Luis)

One participant recalls how his mother favored him and held high expectations:

My mother kept bragging about me. Every time report cards would come out, she would run around the neighborhood, door-to-door, showing it off. I was the first kid in the neighborhood to own a typewriter. She bought me private typing

lessons. She really pushed me and she had high, high expectations. This helped fulfill a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Adalberto)

Despite dominant group denial of their culture and identity, the participants in this study actively resisted the operation of the societal structure in educational settings.

Ethnic Identity

For the purpose of this discussion, ethnic consciousness will mean an awareness of belonging and or being different. Ethnicity represents an inter-group identity reflecting a consciousness of a collective uniqueness derived from shared cultural characteristics such as language and an awareness of being different from other social groups. In the past, schools required that subordinated groups deny their cultural identity as a necessary condition for success in the mainstream society. Culturally diverse students were required to acquiesce in the subordination of their identities (Cummins, 1994). The study's participants did not passively accept dominant group attributions of their inferiority. Frequently, they actively resisted the societal power structure in their educational settings.

One participant, a school administrator, recalls how the school system was trying to "Anglicize" him:

My friends did not have high class rankings like I did, and I felt that I was being pushed away from them. Like they were trying to Anglicize me. They insisted on calling me Ray and I would insist they say my name in Spanish. But I could sense that if you wanted to be in the organizations at school, you had to leave the buddies. It was like they were trying to get me to adapt Anglo values if I wanted to join the mainstream. I kept my cultural values and maintained them. (Luis)

Another participant, a male Ph.D., remembers being different after being asked if he ever felt uncomfortable at anytime in his education because he was Mexican

American:

I didn't feel uncomfortable. I felt there was a difference. I felt that different expectations were made and had been established for us. I remember when I was hired as a principal, the superintendent told me that he was going to give me a chance to be principal, but that I better be very, very good because if I was not excellent, they were not going to hire any more Mexican American principals. You don't say that to an Anglo principal, okay, I'm going to hire you as an Anglo, but you better be good or I'm not going to hire any more Anglos. (Adalberto)

A superintendent of schools never felt he had to adopt Anglo values in order to succeed academically:

I did not accept the Anglo values, and I did very little blending. Some of my friends did and I was totally against that. I would see my peers get better jobs because they kind of gave in, but I never gave in. You like me as I am or you don't like me. To this day, I think that you have to like me the way I am or accept me because I am equal to you no matter what. My culture is my culture, and you need to respect it like I respect yours. (El Frijol)

One participant, a female retired principal, recalled how the Mexican Americans felt like the Anglo kids were superior to us:

In high school, I always wanted to do and be so much and I never got an opportunity. I wanted to be a cheerleader and wanted to be in student government, but people needed to be voted in and I never was. And the *Mecianos* voted for the Anglos. They were the class officers and the cheerleaders. But when we got to Pan American, a lot of students came from different schools and people had different points of view. All of sudden, the *Mexicanos* could be the leaders of the class. (Celestina)

Several theorists (e.g., Cummins, 1989; Ogbu, 1992) have pointed to the fact that subordinated groups that fail academically tend to be characterized by a sense of ambivalence about the value of their cultural identity and powerlessness in relation to

the dominant group. A central tenet is that the negotiation of identity in the interactions between educators and students is central to students' academic success for failure. For the participants in this study, having a strong sense of identity facilitated their resistance to acquiesce to the dominant culture and its values, and this resistance contributed to their academic development.

Summary of Findings

The profiles and parental backgrounds of these successful Mexican Americans reveal some of the reasons these men and women were educationally at risk. They reveal backgrounds of poverty, educational neglect, and discrimination. Many received little encouragement and support from schools in their pursuit of higher education. This study describes the obstacles that these men and women had to overcome and the means they used to overcome them.

Utilizing a worldview construct, findings center on how these men and women succeeded educationally. A primary finding of my study is that these men and women constructed a positive sense of themselves in order to navigate the barriers and enter the world of higher education. Central to this identity was a strong sense of independence that helped them to overcome obstacles to their educational success. Learning from their families, they constructed a belief system that focused on values and "doing what you have to do." They also chose to view the world positively, utilizing a reframing technique to turn negative experiences into positives. This belief system was used as a self-motivating device in the absence of family, mentors, or others to support or guide them.

The strategies used by the families of these academically successful Mexican American graduates of Pan American University mirror in many ways the strategies of the mainstream middle class in advancing their children's education and future. Through their own resources, these families managed to circumvent many of the barriers and impediments faced by most Mexican American students. Perhaps the most important strategy they employed was the profound value of hard work, perseverance, and dedication to their studies.

There is much to be learned from these stories of success. We must find ways to remove the impediments and provide the knowledge and skills that will allow all students to realize their ambitions. Through stories, we can help to inspire students and provide them with a sense of hope.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study presents a picture of Mexican American men and women whose dogged persistence has helped them overcome adversity and succeed when others under similar circumstances could not. With their backgrounds of poverty, discrimination, fighting constant cultural exclusion, little support from the public school system for their educational goals, and lacking adequate financial resources, it is indeed remarkable that they persevered to complete their college degrees.

Much is known about Mexican American school failure. However, relatively little is known about the factors that lead to academic success for Mexican Americans because the research has focused so heavily on failure. This study is about how some Mexican American men and women and their families were able to convert the probability of school failure into academic success. This study explores the obstacles these successful men and women overcame and the means they used to overcome them, as well as their understanding of the salience of their ethnicity to their educational experience.

In this chapter, I discuss the study findings, employing the literature on the educational plight and struggle for Mexican Americans, the concept of familism, and worldview to the analysis. I explicate my conclusions from the study, adding insights and observations from my own personal experiences. In the final section of the chapter, I discuss the implications of my study findings to theory and practice, as well as provide recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a creative

synthesis of all the themes elaborated by my study participants incorporated in the reflection of my own experience.

Discussion of the Findings

The study findings reflect how this group of men and women succeeded educationally. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What barriers did Mexican Americans who graduated from Pan American University in South Texas from 1955 to 1975 have to overcome?
2. What were the contributing factors for these successful Mexican American graduates?

The Barriers

Three contextual frameworks have been posited as explanations of the major barriers that characterize the plight and struggle of the education of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. These include (a) the ethnic isolation and denial of equal educational opportunity, (b) the exclusion and the eradication of the Spanish language and culture from the schools, and (c) the powerlessness that accompanies low socioeconomic conditions (Gonzalez, 1990).

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students. Separate schools were unequal in many respects to those provided for Anglo children. In relation to Anglo schools, Mexican schools were older; their school equipment was generally less adequate; per pupil expenditures were generally lower; and the staff were less appropriately trained, qualified, and experienced (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

In addition to school segregation and poor schooling, Mexican Americans have often experienced a subtractive approach to their language and culture. Following the Mexican American War, American schools were seen as a way to assimilate Mexican origin students into the predominately White Anglo society (Spring, 1997). This was achieved through a process of subtraction – that is, a process that involved the removal of all minority communities, languages, and cultures from the governance, administration, and content of public education. This subtractive process led to (a) a lack of self-concept and identity; (b) separation between school and home; (c) elimination of the mother tongue as a prerequisite to second language attainment (Schellinger, 1994); and (d) removal of the cultural knowledge and values that are the basis for reasoning, inferencing, and interpreting meanings (Trueba, 1990). For decades, most Mexican American students whose mother tongue was Spanish and who were not proficient in English have faced the sink-or-swim pedagogical practice of English-only instruction. Although some Mexican American students survived this submersion, many did not.

There is a consensus that across racial and ethnic groups, socio economic status is the single most powerful contributor to students' educational outcomes (Laosa & Henderson, as cited in Gandara, 1995). There is less consensus on the question of why socioeconomic status has such powerful effects. Some have suggested that the social reproduction of status differences between population groups is the direct result and intent of capitalist economic policy to maintain social class advantages (Bowles & Gintis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). The schooling system in the United States is ordered

in such a way as to channel upper income students into educational opportunities. This type of a schooling system operates to convince lower-income students that they deserve lower status. Others have suggested that the effects of family socioeconomic status on educational outcomes are more of an inadvertent result of a culture of poverty (Lewis, as cited in Gandara, 1995). In poverty cultures, maladaptive responses to schooling are transmitted through the generations by parents who (a) were themselves ill-suited to school, (b) did poorly, and (c) failed to learn the skills necessary to propel themselves through the educational system (Gandara, 1995). This is how poverty often leads to the powerlessness that prevents many Hispanics from seeking post-secondary opportunities.

Mexican Americans of that time and geographical area attended under-funded, segregated schools that did not prepare their students well for nor encourage them to seek higher education. Many of their teachers and counselors, in fact, often actively discouraged even the most able students from trying to further their schooling. Their parents were uneducated, Spanish speakers who did not know how to navigate the American educational systems, and who did not believe they could afford college for their children. They themselves saw post-secondary institutions as alien and intimidating, as beyond their reach. Unfortunately, the obstacles they faced continue to confront most Hispanics today.

Yet the ten Mexican Americans in this study all overcame these barriers, obtaining not only undergraduate and graduate degrees, but also significant personal and career success such as becoming superintendents, assistant superintendents,

principals, and district attorneys. Rather than just focusing on the barriers, the **problems** common to low-income, first-generation college students as do most studies on student access and success, this study focuses on the creative **solutions** its subjects found and the kinds of support that made differences for them. The study recorded the perceptions of the successful graduates as to the causes of their school success and tapped into their insights. The findings and recommendations of the study may enable educators to re-examine their own attitudes towards the schooling of Mexican origin students and its unanticipated negative consequences and help institutions of higher education identify policy changes that will facilitate the recruitment and retention of Hispanic and other minority students.

The education of Mexican American students has undergone intense transformations during the past 30 or 40 years. Through litigations, activism, advocacy, and legislation, Mexican American enrollments in higher education have increased, bilingual education has been established, and school retention was improved (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Although there have been significant gains, however, problems still abound for Mexican Americans: (a) they are under-enrolled in bilingual classes, (b) segregation is on the rise, (c) they still lag behind academically behind their Anglo peers, (d) school financing is still very much inequitable, and (e) the curriculum continues to be watered down. These factors contribute to the low post-secondary enrollment and retention of Hispanics. Institutes of higher education are waking up to the importance of establishing aggressive recruitment and retention programs for Hispanics and other under-served populations and are seeking answers.

The Contributing Factors

The study used an assets-based rather than a deficits-based model for finding solutions to the barriers to higher education that many Hispanics continue to experience. As a Mexican American who was born, raised, and educated in South Texas and who has obtained two degrees and is seeking a third, I provide an insider view both of the obstacles as well as routes to school success. My knowledge of Mexican American culture in South Texas led me to examine the effects on my subjects of two key concepts: familism and *educación*.

Numerous studies have investigated concepts concerning the meaning of education for recent Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1992; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Duran & Weffer, 1992; Reese et al., 1991). Reese et al. (1991) offer the most detailed analysis of Hispanic immigrant ideals of education. The Hispanic model of “*educación*” derived by Reese and colleagues (1991) is more complex than the typical Anglo American view and centers around the maintenance of proper relationships both within the family and with others. “*Educación*” concerns respect, obedience, and proper behavior, which are seen as supporting academic achievement. This moral learning is seen as the foundation for academic learning by Hispanic families (Reese et al., 1991).

In this model, moral learning takes place within the family. Teaching children right from wrong is seen as the most important family responsibility. The values of *educación* are closely associated with family unity or familism. The teaching of respect and obedience occurs within the family, where the child’s place is highly valued.

Parents must teach children to have good manners or behavior, to respect parents and others, and the difference between right and wrong. While academic teaching and learning is seen as a distinct function of school, it is not separate from the moral development encouraged in the family, but rather part of the “good path” or *buen camino* children should follow to become well-developed human beings.

Valuing Literacy

For the most part, parents of the study’s participants were very supportive of their children’s educational goals, set high performance standards, encouraged literacy, obtained educational assistance, and helped with school work in any way they could.

Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, expressed his belief that language develops in the context of its use, hence, the importance for learners to be immersed in language in order for literacy to follow naturally (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). This is precisely what all parents of these participants did. The men and women in this study recounted how parents placed a high premium on ideas and information, in spite of the limited formal education of their parents.

Funds of Knowledge

Among the settings of children’s learning and development outside of school, families are considered a central context for children’s mastery of important cultural tools. Contemporary analyses emphasize the “cultural capital” or “funds of knowledge” that parents pass on to their children (Moll, 1990). The dimensions of family activity settings include goals and values of socialization and an ecocultural perspective on

contexts of development that highlight ways development and socialization occur in the activity settings of everyday life.

Despite their social class, economic, and educational background, the parents of the study's participants were versatile in adapting to changed conditions and used new channels and barriers to their own advantages to ensure the success of their descendants. For example, the struggle against school exclusion and discrimination in Texas is historically based and documented. The educational rights of Mexican American children and the future welfare of the group have often been the most emotional and pressing issues around which Mexican Americans have successfully organized. One of the earliest responses to the problem was issued in the early 1900's in the form of separate community schools or "escuelitas." "Las escuelas" were privately based institutions established for the expressed purpose of improving the education of Mexican American children. Their goals were to arrest the acculturation process, to compensate for problems of exclusion and discrimination in the public schools, and to provide a quality education especially suited to Spanish speaking children (Zamora, 1978).

Four of the ten men and women in this study attended "escuelitas." As a community based institution, "la escuela" was directly governed by the unique needs of its constituency. Although Spanish was the prime language for instruction and Mexican culture the specific teaching context, the acquisition of English was held to be indispensable. "Las escuelas" were created amidst a conflictual environment as an

alternative solution to distressful conditions. These schools are concrete examples of Mexican American self-determination and resistance.

The study findings reflect how parents' aspirations and strategies for guiding their children towards maturity were crucial to their educational success. These parents, by necessity, created an environment for school success.

Attending Desegregated Schools

A large and growing body of research supports the benefits of socio-economic diversity in public school enrollments (Equality of Educational Opportunity, 2004). These benefits include increased academic performance and lower drop-out rate for low-income students. This research shows that low-income students who attend a school with students who come from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds outperform low-income students who attend schools that have higher concentrations of students from low-income families.

Social Capital

All of the men and women in this study attended desegregated schools during their middle and high school years where they were exposed to peers with much greater social capital than themselves. This view of the advantages of desegregated schooling arose from the Coleman (1966) report and suggested that a primary benefit of ethnic mixing to minority students was the modeling of academic behaviors of the non-minority students. Gandara (1999) also found that two-thirds of her participants had attended schools that were either mostly White or which were highly mixed in her study of educational mobility of Chicano students. An analysis of more recent

qualitative data reveals the real benefits of desegregated schools for many Mexican Americans may lie in the access to social capital or knowledge of the system and how to navigate it that “accrues to students who form friendships with non-minority and middle class peers for whom this social capital is a birthright” (Gandara, 1999, p. 44).

All the participants of this study began their early elementary years in segregated Mexican public schools or in “escuelitas,” but joined their Anglo peers in middle school or high school. The small towns in the Rio Grande Valley usually had one middle school and one high school. The students were mixed when they reached these levels. Because most of these participants showed academic promise, they were usually tracked into college preparatory classes with other high-achieving Anglo students in the desegregated schools they attended. These Anglo students formed a network of peers and were often the conveyers of information about academic opportunities.

Whereas human and financial capitals refer to individuals’ characteristics and material possessions, social capital refers to characteristics of the relationships among individuals. It is through these social relationships with individuals that establish favorable conditions for engaging and advancing in the educational system.

Transferring Values and Beliefs

Vygotsky’s sociohistorical theory emphasizes the unique collective wisdom compiled by a culture and transmitted to the child through ongoing, daily interactions with the more knowledgeable members of that culture. A central tenet of his theory is that as children become exposed to and participate in their community, they begin to

internalize and adopt, often with the guidance of a skilled partner such as a parent or teacher, the culturally based, often mature and effective methods of thinking about and solving problems with respect to the environment. The tools and ways of thinking or sociocultural values can be transferred to children through social interactions involving significant adults in their lives (Bukatko & Daehler, 1998).

The Nexus of Hard Work

Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) found that parents tend to define involvement as being involved in informal activities at home, such as checking homework assignments, reading and listening to children read, obtaining tutorial assistance, and instilling cultural values. Lopez (2001) who studied a migrant family in Texas, whose children consistently maintained a high level of academic achievement, found that the parents were not involved in traditionally defined ways. For them, their goal was to teach “their children to appreciate the value of their education through the medium of hard work” (Lopez, 2001, p. 420). In order to do this, the family took their children to work with them in the fields and constantly reminded them of the importance of hard work and consistently pointed out the employment limitations created by a lack of education. The family essentially gave their children a choice, “to either work hard at school or work hard in the fields” (Lopez, 2001, p. 420).

This value for hard work and persistence consistently emerged in the stories of all the study’s participants.

The Concept of Self

An important dimension of self-concept is the quality of being unique. This quality is used to resist cultural disadvantages that would pull these men and women from education. Four decades of literature on Chicano/Latino underachievement lead to the conclusion that these students encounter multiple structural barriers to opportunity throughout their schooling (Gandara, 1999).

The obstacles these men and women faced were tremendous. They were forces that would pull them away from education were it not for the different self that they construct. Whether it was the development of a special skill or the drive to compete with their Anglo peers, these men and women found a way to be different starting from childhood to overcome the adversity in their lives. Gandara (1995) also found that her study participants cited “an aspect of their lives that allowed them to accept themselves as different” as a means of protecting “themselves from a pervasive cultural imperative” (p. 93) that of school failure.

The men and women in this study use this quality as a resistance strategy that allowed them to defend themselves against the pressure to follow culturally prescribed roles, while granting them the opportunity to begin to self-define themselves. This is essential in considering higher educational opportunities. Part of their identity is based on their uniqueness, but the fact that they have succeeded in school when so few others like them have not, also reinforces the fact that they are smart and resilient individuals.

Because these men and women had few support or role models to emulate in school, the quality of being independent is utilized to help them overcome obstacles to

their educational success. This quality originates from previous early experiences of responsibility in childhood. Gandara (1995) also found that two-thirds of her participants reported having parents that stressed independence and “doing things on your own” (p. 31).

Like Gandara’s participants, the men and women in this study also used this quality to overcome the obstacles they encountered and to help them achieve. They also engaged in activities throughout their lives that instilled a sense of responsibility. The responsibilities they accept and the higher level of expectation to which they are held fosters self-sufficiency. They develop an ability to “do it on my own,” an ability that is, of course invaluable in overcoming the hard work and sacrifice the higher education entails.

As first-generation college students, these men and women must learn to do things on their own. These men and women must engage in risk-taking and independent behaviors in a deliberate move away from passive, nonassertive behavior.

These men and women must, by necessity, develop a strong sense of self. Their families play a crucial role in the development of self. The home is the place where they find their identity and self-worth.

Construction and Origin of Values and Beliefs

In the area of parental influence and origins of values and belief systems, results of this study supported the findings of several key researchers. Findings supported those of a 1992 Delgado-Gaitan study, which were that low socioeconomic conditions limited physical resources but did not impede parental discipline,

monitoring, and organizing a family routine. Despite the challenges presented by hard work, some crowded living conditions and economic struggles in varying degrees, most of the parents of the participants were diligent about setting routines and establishing a sense of order in their lives. Though they were limited in how they could help with schoolwork, these parents effectively monitored schoolwork. Parents of the participants in this study were interested in their children's education, gave it a top priority in their lives (confirming research by Delgado-Gaitan, 1992), and were willing to do whatever was necessary to help their children succeed. Parents provided a great deal of encouragement and emotional support of their children's educational efforts. This support was expressed in informal ways, and it was indicative of the high degree of trust and camaraderie the parents had with their children.

Belief System

This group of men and women employ a belief system that at its core focuses on a positive outlook to withstand obstacles in their path to success. Their attitude was used when they encountered negative situations both in their past as well as setbacks and obstacles in their educational experiences.

For example, this philosophy was employed in the way they deal with failure in school. It was also used in the way they dealt with their lack of financial resources and the resulting sacrifices they must make. Finally, they also utilized this positive attitude and philosophy of life to diminish the impact of racism.

Achor and Morales (1990) described their study participants as using resistance strategies which they termed "resistance with accommodation" (p. 281) to overcome

the prejudice and discrimination they encountered. They cited this resistance as challenging existing power relationships while accepting “institutionally approved means of attaining educational advancement” (p. 281).

These men and women developed, by necessity, their own positive attitude as a means to move them forward. They utilized a worldview “that is positive and affirming of self and one’s relationship to the world” (Jackson & Sears, 1992, p. 185) which provides them with an alternative to stress and resistance.

Parent’s Role in Origin of Belief System

The study results demonstrated that these men and women received “unambiguous messages about the value of education” that “fostered traits of self-esteem and self-confidence conducive to personal growth and development” (Achor & Morales, 1990, p. 227).

In their study of parents of low-income Hispanic high-achievers, Treviño and García (2004) asked these parents why they involved themselves in certain activities. These parents explained that it had to do with their personal and family belief systems. It all starts with a vision of superior achievement for their children and high academic expectations.

The parents of the men and women in this study all had the same vision of high academic achievement for their children. Graduating from high school and going on to college was not negotiable. These families encouraged a mindset in their children that they were smart and could out-work and out-think their way to success. Families

expected the children to respect themselves and their teachers and to be proud of who they are.

Expectations

Suarez-Orozcco and Suarez-Orozcco (1995) indicated that Latino parents' view schooling as an *avenue para llegar a ser alguien*. This contention was supported by the participants in this study. Parents of the participants wanted their children to be educated so that they could "be someone." They wanted their children to have better jobs, better lives, better futures, a finding replication results from a 1991 study by Matute-Bianchi.

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) suggests that Latino parents attach a broader meaning than do American parents to the idea of what it means to be *buen educado*, or well-educated. Encompassing good manners, hospitality, and cooperation, this concept of well-educated was illustrated in similar ways by the responses of the participants in this study.

Significance of Ethnicity/Culture

This research illustrates the salience of the participant's ethnicity to their worldview. The study demonstrates the salience of ethnicity by illustrating the maintenance of cultural family characteristics as central aspects in their lives. As a group, they showed the effects of acculturation and the removal of their culture and language in school. However, their adherence to their faith and family culture demonstrates they have not assimilated into dominant culture values and beliefs. My findings support those of Keefe and Padilla (1987) who found evidence that the

“culture of Chicanos who have lived for generations in the United States is distinctive,” “possessing many unique features, rather than an amalgamation of Mexican and American cultures” (p. 7). These authors also found ethnic identification and extended familialism are the two most significant internal factors “associated with the persistence of ethnicity among Chicanos” (p. 8).

Literature descriptions describe the cultural conflict often inherent in negotiating two cultures; but for the men and women in this study, there was no single answer as to how they resolve cultural conflicts and balance two worlds. The answer depends on how they see themselves situated in their ethnicity.

In the past, schools required that subordinated groups deny their cultural identity as a necessary condition for success in the “mainstream” society (Cummins, 1994). According to Cummins, “the historical pattern of dominant-subordinated group interactions has been one in which educators have constricted the interactional space in an attempt to sanitize deviant cultural identities” (p. 31). Several theorists (Cummins, 1989; Ogbu, 1992) have pointed to the fact that subordinated groups that fail academically tend to be characterized by a sense of ambivalence about the value of their cultural identity and powerlessness in relation to the dominant group.

For most of the men in this study, their ethnicity and identities were non-negotiable. They did very little blending. Their strong identification with traditional cultural values resulted in resisting “Anglicizing” or adopting Anglo values in order to succeed academically. Adlberto, the study’s oldest participant, felt very good about

both cultures and felt he could go from one to the other. He understood he was different, but believed he understood the feelings and anxieties of the Anglo culture.

For the women in this study, their culture is viewed as wonderful values that their parents instilled. They believed that it makes no difference what culture one is from or how much money they have. The important thing is the values and beliefs the parents transferred.

Conclusions

With so great a focus on Mexican American underachievement, relatively little attention has been paid to the phenomenon of high achievement for Mexican Americans. Moreover, given that so many hurdles stand in the way of Mexican American students' achievement, their successes are truly cause for celebration and deserve much more attention that they have received.

These men and women have constructed a worldview that they have obtained from watching their parents sacrifice, work hard, and survive. This dynamic serves as a powerful motivation that pushes them to succeed. Thus, these sons and daughters owe the origin to the belief system that allows them to complete their education to their parents.

Using an assets-based rather than a deficits-based model for finding solutions to the barriers to higher education that many Hispanics continue to experience, the study documents the journey of ten Mexican American men and women who overcame these barriers, obtaining not only undergraduate and graduate degrees, but also significant personal and career success such as becoming superintendents, assistant

superintendents, principals, and district attorneys. What lessons can be learned from them and how might those lessons be applied to the continuing problem of underachievement of Mexican American students in the 21st century?

In addition to describing their familial and educational experiences, findings point to how they succeed in life. By applying a worldview perspective, we have identified the beliefs and assumptions that have allowed them to do so. The men and women in this study employ a worldview that assists them in overcoming obstacles that include denial of equal educational opportunity, exclusion, and the eradication of the Spanish language and culture from the schools, and the powerlessness that accompanies low socioeconomic conditions. This group of men and women utilize their worldview to navigate the barriers to academic success. I outlined the need for the plight and struggle framework and analysis at the outset of this dissertation. As such, it is imperative to examine the external social causes of oppression these men and women have experienced. In this regard, we must look to the institutional factors that put these men and women at risk of academic failure. If an “examination of the school experiences undergone by achieving Mexican Americans” is “a critical factor in determining factors contributing to their ultimate success” (Achor, & Morales, 1990, p. 277), then we must look to these findings which reveal the fact that the school system had such a low regard for Mexican American students.

The study findings also suggest that we do not give up our culture when we succeed in an educational setting because, in truth, we carry our culture with us to varying degrees. Our family and community are distinct cultural characteristics we

wish to maintain. We have not assimilated. Academic success can be attained without total disconnection.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study, one of few qualitative studies focusing on Mexican American men and women at risk of school failure, provides a glimpse into their worldview, revealing how they succeed on their educational journey and exploring the salience of their culture to this experience. The study has several implications to both theory and practice. The study should result in implications for practice for K-12 teachers, counselors and school administrators, Hispanic students and their parents, and faculty and administrators of two- and four-year colleges. Recommendations for the improvement of career and academic advising at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels will result as well as ways to inform parents how best to support their children's educations in culturally congruent ways.

By applying a worldview construct to map the cultural values, assumptions and belief systems of these study participants, adds to the literature base on this theory. The worldview of these first-generation college graduates reveals the importance of cultural roles and attitudes in their decision to pursue higher education and as well as their success. In particular, because worldview theory has had limited use by researchers conducting qualitative research, I hope this study will provide encouragement to others considering its use.

One of the most pervasive characteristics of Mexican American families is described by the concept known as "familism," defined by Hurtado (1995) as a strong

commitment to family or strong emotional ties to family and home. As many studies have shown, Mexican Americans express stronger ties to family than do Anglos (Raymond et al., 1980; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Familism is closely related to attitudes of interdependence and cooperation, which are also commonly reported Mexican American characteristics (Smart & Smart, 1995). In particular, this study documents the family ideals of education that center around proper relationships both within the family and with others.

This study also demonstrates the need for school personnel to recognize the importance and impact of culture on educational experiences. Multiculturalism has emerged and emphasizes the need for culturally aware and sensitive administrators, teachers, and counselors to deal with the demographic changes. I hope this study will be useful in adding to the limited knowledge base on the dynamics of culture as it affects Mexican Americans in higher education. This study presents a foundation for understanding their families, their school experiences, and the obstacles these men and women must face to overcome in order to enter higher education.

In its contribution to practice, this study provides needed information on the obstacles Mexican Americans face and the means they use to overcome them. Their experience should be useful to schools in designing programs and services that value the unique histories and strengths of their students' and their families. People learn in the process of trying to achieve valued goals. The tools and attitudes of learning have to be nurtured within an educational milieu that affords, supports, and encourages their

expression and their development. This involves not only the design of new programs, but also an attention to the implicit values and assumptions of the culture.

The valuing paradigm sees parent participation in schools as inclusive and assumes parents have strengths, worth, and responsible attitudes. This valued parent model views parents as teachers and resources and seeks to enhance children's developmental progress by educating and supporting parents and by strengthening partnerships between parents and professionals in addressing educational needs of children as well as improving the working relationships among home, school, and community. The reality is that parent involvement must be a collaborative effort. Teachers and administrators must view parents as integral partners in the academic achievement and well being of their students and seek to create an environment where parent participation is welcomed and utilized.

These findings also speak to the importance of adequate support systems and continued need for programs to provide disadvantaged, minority students, especially first-generation students, with assistance in helping them navigate the "new territory" in which they find themselves. Further, university systems should consider cultural environment, ethnic identity, acculturation, and social support (e.g., family and role models/mentors) as important psychosocial issues when providing context-specific and culturally relevant services to Hispanic university students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Demographers predict that the number of Hispanics in the U.S. will increase dramatically in the upcoming decades. By 2040, for example, Texas state demographer

Steve Murdock predicts that 66% of students in K-12 public schools in Texas will be Hispanic up from the current already high 32% (Austin Area Research Association, 2003). Based on past trends, other states will experience similar growth rates for Hispanics. The current serious gap between the post-secondary enrollment and graduation rates of Hispanics (and African Americans) as compared to White Anglos and Asian Americans, therefore, will be of even greater significance than it is today. Again, using Texas as an example, only 49% of Hispanics graduate from high school as compared to 87% of Whites. Similarly, only 12% have a college degree (associate's or higher) as compared to 36% of Whites (Education Commission of the States, 2003).

Given the fact that Hispanic students are worse off today than in the past, I recommend the need for qualitative perspectives of Hispanic students and their families. In order to understand and reverse the phenomenon of school failure, the researcher has to understand the students' home and school experiences. Additionally, I recommend the use of heuristic research as a means for Mexican Americans to reflect on their own experiences. It is vital to all our futures that our state takes steps to protect postsecondary access now and prepares to serve a diverse group of students during the years ahead.

Reflections

Since my early childhood years, I have always liked school. The story my mother likes to share with others is that my sister and I would come home from school everyday and play *las escuelitas*. We would mimic the teachers and actually do school

work at home. Those scenes would repeat themselves many times over the years, and eventually, my sister and I both became teachers.

Following, I share my experiences growing up and my own educational journey. My story will serve as a creative synthesis, the final phase of heuristic research, serving to integrate all core themes elaborated by my participants.

Growing Up

I was born and raised on the west side of McAllen, Texas, a part of town that is mostly populated by Mexican American families. Like most of the participants in this study, I was raised in a traditional Mexican American family. I grew up with one sister and many cousins in a large extended family. My grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles all lived within a “family compound.” The houses were all situated close together. Early on, I learned to defend myself and to exert my independence.

My father worked in a factory in the early years, but soon studied radio and television repair and eventually became self-employed in a succession of successful business ventures. He was born in the Valley, but raised in Mexico, with only a third grade education. My mother was born and raised in the Valley and is a fourth generation “Tejana.” She dropped out of school in the tenth grade, but managed to help my dad in his business ventures and raise us.

Both my parents were supportive and nurturing, but my mother was the one who actively encouraged us to get an education and go to college. My parents instilled in me the sense that I was capable of accomplishing great things if I stayed focused.

Valuing Literacy

Just like most of the participants, I, too, experienced the value of literacy in the home. My mother worked with me in my early pre-school years so I would be prepared to enter first grade. At the time, in the early 1950's, public schools did not have kindergarten; instead, there were community schools or "*escuelitas*" to prepare children for the public school. The story goes that my mother enrolled me in the kinder class, but was told after a few weeks that I already knew all that was needed to know to enter first grade. This speaks volumes for the value my mother had for literacy. Both my parents struggled to get us our first set of encyclopedias so that my sister and I would have reading material in the home. We read voraciously. Comic books were our favorites in the early years.

My father was an entrepreneur and his business skill and tenacity instilled in me a sense of risk-taking and confronting failures and learning from them. I remember my admiration for him every time he started a new business venture. To this day, his last business venture is still owned and operated by the family.

Early School Experiences

My early school experiences went relatively smoothly. I started school speaking English, thanks to my mother. I do, however, maintain a significant incident when I was in the first grade that revolved around my first-grade teacher and a boy named Francisco. Francisco did not know any English and depended on me to translate what the teacher was saying.

One day Francisco asked me for the directions to an assignment. The teacher called us both to the front and punished both of us for speaking Spanish. The punishment was to wash our mouths with soap. I felt humiliated before the entire class and devastated that I was being punished for trying to help a classmate. My self-esteem plummeted for a while; but my parents, in their usual way, helped me to regain my composure and face adversity. That incident was the catalyst for my career as an educator. I was determined to never put any of my students through such devastation and humiliation.

Junior High and High School Years

I struggled in junior high and high school. In my adolescent years, I sort of lost the focus of school and instead focused on the social aspects of adolescence. But I always knew I was going to college. There was no question of that. I do remember my seventh grade literature teacher who further opened the world of reading and quality literature. I remember her as very spiritual and calm. She would open the class with a minute of prayer and reflection. I believe she was the significant person who helped me get through my junior high years. Junior high was also when I was first exposed to Anglo students and their attitudes and dispositions of self-worth. I remember the really pretty Anglo cheerleaders and how I wanted to be just like them, but I couldn't because of my weight. I remember a really smart Anglo boy, and I knew I could be just as smart if I stayed focused on schoolwork.

During my high school years, I was a fair student. Somehow I was tracked into college prep courses and did fairly well. I don't remember talking to any counselors,

but I do remember an incident with a friend of mine and a counselor that made quite an impression on me. I was working in the main school office as an office helper and saw a friend of mine, Pearl, walk in to see the counselor, Mrs. Rice. In the conversation I overheard, Mrs. Rice was asking Pearl about her grades and absences. I heard her tell Pearl that it would be in her best interest to drop out of school because she would never catch up with her classmates. Pearl dropped out in the tenth grade. I saw Pearl many years later in McAllen. She was working as a sales lady in a women's wear store. I wondered if she was happy with what she got or was she sorry she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be.

Pan American College Experience

Unlike some of the participants, my parents paid for all of my college tuition, books, and social events. At Pan American, I was exposed to a different world. There were students from all parts of the Valley, the state, and from other states as well. Being the social butterfly that I was, this soon led to many social functions and eventually my grades suffered. I was put on scholastic probation, and if I didn't do better, I would not be able to continue. This did not go over very well with my parents. They quickly re-focused me, and soon I was back on track.

I graduated with a major in education and a minor in English. My student teaching experience really confirmed the fact that I was going to do what I always dreamed of doing, teaching.

Family Support

Like all the participants' parents in this study, my parents, were supportive and demanding parents who encouraged and expected academic achievement. My mother was the most influential parent in supporting my educational goals. This is contrary to the study's finding that mothers were most influential with male participants and fathers were most influential with female participants. In the study, most of what parents could offer was verbal support and encouragement for their children's schooling; but for me, my mother taught me to speak, read, and write in English and my father taught me to confront failure and adversity. My parents and extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, and uncles) instilled a healthy sense of self. They all made me feel I was unique, that I could control my own life, that my life had stability, and that I could think positively about myself.

Personal Characteristics

Like Rene, the district attorney who shared his insight on the characteristics of persistence and self-discipline, I, too, believe that self-discipline was most critical to my academic success. Without self-discipline, you cannot be persistent. In early childhood education, this is called internal locus of control. Children differ in their sense of self-determination and control. Some children are convinced that what happens to them depends on their actions – that their choices, decisions, and abilities govern whether outcomes are good or bad, successful or unsuccessful. Such children have a strong mastery orientation, a belief that success stems from trying hard; failures are conditions to be overcome by working harder (Bukatko & Daehler, 1998).

I became a bilingual teacher and worked to find ways to be an effective teacher for my students. I did this by instilling a love of reading and using good quality literature to model language and cultural diversity. Every day for 20 years, I provided quality interaction for all my students. My goal was to develop their languages, their thinking, their self-esteem, and to transfer values so they could have a strong foundation for learning and succeeding in school just like my family had done for me.

I have come full circle from the shy, but confident child, to one who acknowledges the profound influence education has had on my life. Education has enriched my life, and my hope is that it will enrich the life of my descendants as well.

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APPENDIX A
INITIAL LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

September 3, 2003

Dear Prospective Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University conducting a dissertation study on the school success of Mexican-American graduates of Pan American University in South Texas. I am presently contacting graduates who may be eligible and interested in participating in my study.

The intention of the study is to investigate the school success of Mexican-American graduates from Pan American and record their perceptions of the causes of their school success. A secondary purpose of the study will attempt to tap the wealth of primary human sources whose insights into their school success may enable educators to re-examine their own attitudes towards the schooling of Mexican origin students. You may qualify if you are a Mexican-American graduate of Pan American University and who meets the following criteria:

- (1) You graduated from Pan American University between 1955 and 1975;
- (2) You self-identified yourself as Mexican-American;
- (3) You attended elementary and secondary schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas;
- (4) You had been raised in a low income/working class family.

Study participants will be asked to participate in (1) audio-taped interview of approximately one and one and a half hours duration (set at your convenience). You will receive copies of your transcribed interview as well as the final results of the study. Identities of all participants will be kept confidential.

I sincerely hope your schedule will allow you to participate in the study. Your participation will make a very important contribution to the research literature. Please contact me at 210-681-9481 if you have any questions or would like further information about the study and your participation in it. I am enclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope and a response sheet for your convenience in replying. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Juanita Celia García

APPENDIX B

FOLLOW-UP LETTER TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

September 10, 2003

Dear Research Participants,

I sincerely hope that all is well with you since we last talked. I bet you are surprised to finally hear from me after so long! I apologize for the delay in getting back to you. Working full time and traveling considerably impacts on the amount of time I can devote to this study.

However, I wanted to update everyone on my progress. I have completed five interviews and have completed transcribing the interviews. I also composed a short narrative on each of your stories. Also completed was a content analysis of patterns in what you told me. This was turned in as part of a course assignment and I am happy to report that I received an "A" on this paper and the professor told me I am on the right track. I also completed the methodology chapter and will continue to work on the literature review.

In the meantime, I need your help in reviewing the enclosed transcripts of our interviews. Please concentrate on whether I got the information right or perhaps you would like to add information that you didn't think about when you were interviewed. In addition, you may notice some passages are marked with a blank line when we could not make out what you were saying. If you feel you know what it was you were trying to communicate, please feel free to provide that feedback.

I am also enclosing the short narrative or participant profile. Please review the narrative for accuracy. I want to be sure I capture your stories correctly.

Also enclosed is a stamped-self-addressed envelope for your convenience in responding to me with your comments and additional thoughts. Also, please feel free to make any other comments about your participation in the study if you so desire. My best wishes to all of you!

Sincerely,

Juanita C. García

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions Overcoming the Barriers

Demographic Information

Age

Place of Birth

No. and gender of Siblings, current occupation, amount of education

Early Family Background

Please tell me about your family background (mother, father, sisters and brothers).

What was it like growing up in your family?

Where did you grow up (what part of the Rio Grande Valley)? What was the racial/ethnic and socio-economic composition of the neighborhood you grew up in?

How much education did your parents have?

Did your brothers/sisters complete high school? Did any of them go to college?

What was your parent's primary language? Siblings? Self?

Has your primary language changed over time?

What generation Mexican-American are you?

Did your parents work? What type of work did they do?

How would you describe your economic status when you were growing up?

How would you describe your mother?

How would you describe your father?

What kind of relationship did you have with your parents?

How involved were they in your schoolwork (did they help with homework)? Did they "push" you, set high standards, etc?

What was your mother/father's attitude toward education? Were they supportive of your educational goals?

Which parent had the greatest influence on the development of your education?

What influence did your family have on your educational goals and achievement?

Early Educational Experiences

Please tell me about your early education prior to high school. What were your initial feelings about school?

What are some of the experiences you had that were negative?

What are your earliest memories of achieving academic success?

How did you know you could do well?

How did you know you could do well?

What contributed to your success?

Were you ever tracked into a particular curriculum? (accelerated, remedial)

What are some obstacles you had to overcome and how did you do that?

What do you attribute those barriers to?

Did you finish high school or get a GED? (Year) Where did you go to school? Was it a segregated school?

Were you encouraged to consider college by your family? By any school officials (counselors, etc)?

Did anybody discourage you?

Tell me what you remember about when you first decided to go to college.

What options did you think were available to you after graduation from high school?

Did you feel uncomfortable at anytime in your early education due to the fact that your are Mexican-American?

How would you describe the quality of the education you received in elementary/high school?

College Experiences

What made you decide to go to college?

Did you have an image or an idea of what college would be like? Did you feel prepared?

What was the most difficult adjustment you had to make in college?

What events in your educational career stand out?

As you reflect over your entire educational career, what was the most difficult part?

What enabled you to survive when many others didn't?

To what do you attribute your success?

Did being in college change the way you think about yourself or the world?

What has the role of reading been in your life?

If you could paint a picture of what your education was like for you, what would it look like for you?

Cultural Perspective

Did you ever feel you had to adopt Anglo values in order to succeed academically?

Did you have to reject any family/cultural values in order to survive?

Do you think there are any important differences between Mexican-Americans and Anglos?

What is great about being Mexican-American?

What is hard about being Mexican-American?

What don't you ever want to hear said ever again about Mexican-Americans?

APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT SURVEY

**OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS: SCHOOL SUCCESS OF MEXICAN-
AMERICAN GRADUATES FROM PAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
IN SOUTH TEXAS
1955 TO 1975**

1. What is the highest academic degree you have attained?

2. Where did you receive the degree?

3. What is your occupation?

Questions 4 thru 7 are about your childhood.

4. Circle the language(s) that you spoke at home.
 - English
 - Spanish

5. Were one or both of your parents readers? (Circle one)
 - One
 - Both
 - Neither

6. Were politics/current events discussed in the home? (Circle one)
 - Yes, always
 - Yes, often
 - Yes, but seldom
 - No, never

7. Did you have encyclopedias in your home? (Circle one)
 - Yes
 - No

8. Which of the following characteristics is *most* critical to academic achievement?
(Circle one)
 - Persistence
 - Hard work
 - Ability
 - Social skill
 - Self discipline
 - Goal orientation

VITA

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EDUCATION

- 2005 Doctor of Philosophy, Educational Administration
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas
- 1978 Master of Arts, Elementary Bilingual Education
Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas
- 1970 Bachelor of Science, Elementary Education
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CERTIFICATIONS

Professional Mid-Management Administrator
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EXPERIENCE

- 1993 – Present Education Associate
Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, Texas
- 1991 – 1992 Administrative Intern/Vice Principal
South San Antonio Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas
- 1990 – 1991 District Coordinator
Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement, San Antonio, Texas
- 1989 – 1990 Member
Bilingual Mentor Teacher Project, Texas Education Agency and
Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, Texas
- 1989 – 1992 TTAS Appraiser
South San Antonio Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas
- 1990 – 1991 Observation Classroom Teacher
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- 1987 – 1988 Entered Career Ladder, Level III
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