

**MEXICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS TELL THEIR STORIES  
OF SUCCESS IN THE MIDST OF A *COLONIA***

A Dissertation

by

GUADALUPE C. GORORDO

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

May 2008

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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**ABSTRACT**

Mexican American Teachers Tell Their Stories of Success in the  
Midst of a *Colonia*. (May 2008)

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Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee: Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson  
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The purpose of the study was to investigate how teachers at an elementary campus located in the midst of a *Colonia* perceived their achieved academic recognition when more rigorous federal and state standards seem to challenge even the most affluent areas of the state and country. This interpretive qualitative research was conducted using naturalistic inquiry techniques. Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews, a focus group and a videotaped classroom session. Participants were nominated by parents, the principal, and teachers from Colonia Elementary (pseudonym).

According to these four women, their success, and in turn that of the students resided in the fact that their students have been taught in a deeply nurturing environment where their home, culture, and language have been embraced. Noted in this study were four salient themes in the context of this *Colonia* school: (a) embracing the students' culture and language; (b) campus-aligned standards and a language transition plan; (c) environment of care, encouragement, and support with high expectations; and (d) clear

and well-defined goals based on assessment results. These teachers operated out of the context of what was needed in this *Colonia*. This study highlighted the strengths of four teachers who achieved success for children living in Colonia.

## DEDICATION

The journey to a doctoral degree is long and challenging. As a working, single mother and graduate student, I could not have fulfilled this dream without the unfailing support of my family:

- With love and admiration, to my mother, Consuelo Betancourt, thank you for teaching me hard work, integrity, and honor.
- To my two sons, their lives have inspired me. From Joseph's love of music and literary intellect to Jorge's innovation and creativity – they are a celebration of life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my co-chairs, Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson and Dr. Humberto Gonzalez. Dr. Webb-Johnson's support and feedback during all stages of the dissertation process were essential to the successful completion of this study. She provided intellectual support, constructive criticism, and encouragement as I moved through my research. I also wish to thank Dr. Gonzalez for his invaluable advocacy for the educators in Laredo in bringing this Ph.D. program to fruition. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Mary Petron, my Laredo support, for the many hours of guidance and conversations always providing encouraging words and an attentive ear. She offered the guidance to keep me on track and the freedom to explore, learn, and grow. *Mil gracias!* I am equally grateful to my committee members Dr. Kathryn McKenzie and Dr. Mario S. Torres. Each of these committee members assumed the responsibility of guiding me through the arduous dissertation process. Extended appreciation and recognition is given Dr. Virginia Collier whose thoughtfulness and support extended far beyond "her job" as adviser to the Laredo cohort. A heartfelt *thank you* to Joyce Nelson for her advice in the logistics and required documents to successfully meet all the university's deadlines and requirements.

I wish to thank the teachers who participated in this study and who so willingly and honestly shared their inspiring stories and compelling experiences about children living in Colonia. They, so warmly, opened their classrooms where they taught their

students in a deeply nurturing environment. They are great examples of successful Mexican American teachers. *Thank you* for the privilege to tell your stories.

To my family, my mother and two sons, thank you for enduring many days and months without me. My love and appreciation extend to my cousin, Vickie De La Rosa, for her mentorship and example of strength and resilience despite an early childhood of significant adversity in Mexico. I also want to thank my dear friends, Edna, Yvette, and Norma, for their support and continued encouragement to complete this lengthy and challenging journey. During the course of this doctoral project, I missed many gatherings and special events – thank you for understanding the importance of my dream. Finally, to my dearest and best friend of 30 years, Santos Olivarez, *thank you* for making your presence felt in significant ways—always keeping the door open while I held the last pose. You provided tremendous support through the countless hours of reading the drafts for each chapter. It is done!

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

The education of Mexican American students has reached a crisis stage. Although the number of Mexican American students attending public schools has increased dramatically in recent years, they continue to have the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In addition, for decades researchers have tried to explain this disparity in school performance, focusing largely on the characteristics of Mexican American students or their culture that apparently kept them from being successful in school (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Banks 2001; Carter & Segura, 1979; Cummins, 2001).

Unfortunately, many educators think that students and families are at fault because, from their perspective, “these children” enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills, and so-called indifferent parents do not value or support their children’s education (García & Guerra, 2003, 2004; Sheets, 2003; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Although the phenomenon of deficit thinking has had a harmful effect on this group of students, far less attention has been given to the many students who are doing well because of teachers who have helped them succeed in school.

While research on the achievement gap of economically challenged Mexican American students is extensive, few studies have conducted a focused exploration on

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The style for this dissertation follows that of *Human Resource Development Quarterly*.

successful Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, missing in educational research is the study of the academic achievement of Mexican American learners who live in *Colonias*. Focusing on this need, led me to center this interpretive study on voices, lived experiences, as well as the teaching experiences of successful Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students living in *Colonias*. Giroux (1992) notes that “any discussion of public schooling has to address the political, economic and social realities that construct the contexts that shape the institution of schooling and the conditions that produce the diverse populations of students who constitute its constituencies” (p. 162).

Responding to the need to listen to successful Mexican American teachers of economically challenged Mexican American students, I situated this study in an elementary school on the Texas-Mexico border located outside the limits of an urban city in a very impoverished area with many homes lacking the basic necessities such as running water and electricity and where it is common for several families to share the same dwelling, a *Colonia* (Wilson & Guajardo, 1999). In the elementary school that was chosen for the study, the student population was 100% Hispanic, 97.8% economically challenged, and 78.7% second language learners (Table 1). Furthermore, 100% of the faculty serving these learners, were Mexican American teachers who spoke Spanish.

Table 1. District and School Profiles

Colonia District	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
<u>Colonia District</u>					
<u>School Year</u>					
Total Enrollment	30,655	32,200	33,895	35,638	37,671
Percent Limited English Proficient	47.0	44.3	45.3	45.7	45.9
<u>Percent Student Composition</u>					
African American	.2	.2	.2	.2	.2
Hispanic	97.0	97.2	97.4	97.6	97.7
White	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.8	1.6
Economically Disadvantaged	72.9	73.4	73.2	74.1	72.4
<u>Teachers</u>					
Count	1,943	2,398	2,067	2,176	2,830
Percent Hispanic	87.3	87.6	89.7	91.0	91.4
Percent by years' experience:					
1-5 years	36.4	39.1	37.8	37.0	38.0
Average Years' Experience	8.8	9.1	8.9	9.0	9.3
<u>Accountability Rating</u>					
Academically Unacceptable					
Acceptable	√	√	√	√	√
Recognized					
Exemplary					
<u>Colonia Elementary</u>					
<u>School Year</u>					
Total Enrollment	435	406	397	371	369
Percent Limited English Proficient	90.7	83.0	76.6	78.7	82.4
<u>Percent Student Composition</u>					
African American	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hispanic	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
White	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Economically Disadvantaged	97.9	99.0	97.7	97.8	96.5
<u>Teachers</u>					
Count	29	32	39	32	31
Percent Hispanic	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Percent by years' experience:					
1-5 years	26.7	48.4	45.5	52.0	51.6
Average Years' Experience	8.2	8.5	5.1	6.8	7.0
<u>Accountability Rating</u>					
Academically Unacceptable	√				
Acceptable		√	√		√
Recognized				√	
Exemplary					

Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

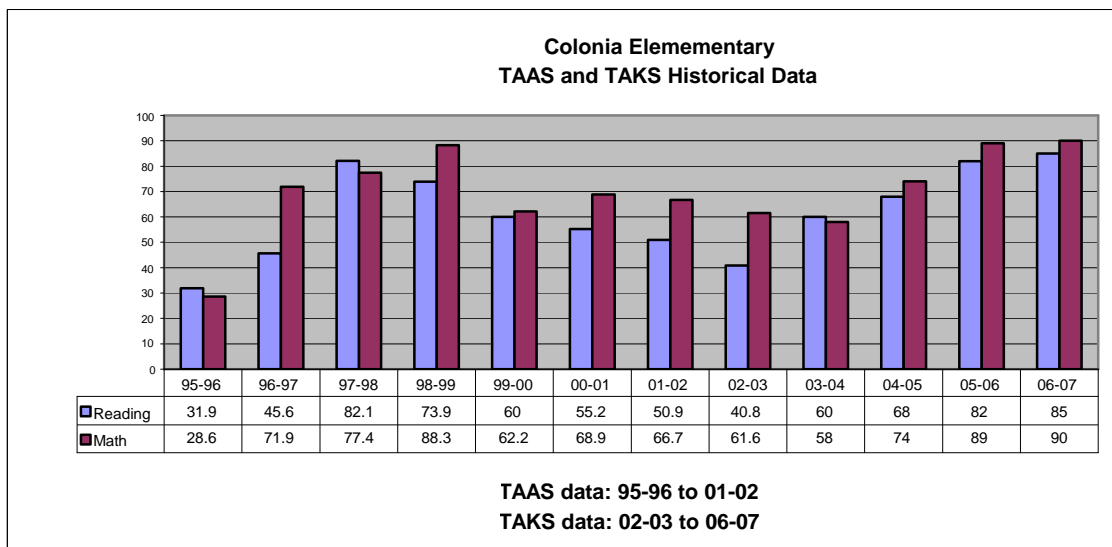
### *School Profile*

While a cultural match between teacher and student may be expected to bring some narrowing in the student's achievement gap, Villegas (as cited in Zeichner, 1992) has pointed out greater cultural compatibility in the classroom by itself, does not begin to address the social, economic, and political inequalities underlying many school problems. As illustrated in the *Color of Teaching* (Gordon, 2000), the Mexican American teachers studied expressed reservations about race-matched teaching, citing that "without an understanding of the complexity of ethnicities and how they are mediated through socioeconomic class, color, educational opportunities, and regionalism, teachers are bound to mislabel and misinterpret their students, resulting in profound inequities" (p. 75). For example, the school chosen in this study, with an almost 100% cultural match between students and teachers, had been rated as *Academically Unacceptable* or *Low-Performing* on three separate school years as reported by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2006b) accountability system. In August of 2006, the school received a rating of *Recognized*. However, the school was rated as *Academically Acceptable* in August 2007 (TEA, 2006b; TEA, 2007a) (Table 1). This would suggest that being a Mexican American teacher does not provide any guarantee of success working with Mexican American children because of the many variables involved.

Ten years earlier, during the 1995-1996 school year and based on TEA's (1996b) Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), Colonia Elementary (pseudonym) received a *Low-Performing* or *Academically Unacceptable* rating. Although the state

rates a campus based on reading, writing, math, and science as applicable depending on grade level, for this study only reading and math scores were reviewed because this campus had only missed meeting standards in either one of these subjects. In 1995-1996 when the campus was first rated academically unacceptable, Colonia's scores in reading were 31.9% and 28.6% in math. In 1996, to receive an *Acceptable* rating, a campus had to have 30% or more of all students and subgroups pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test in reading and math (TEA, 1996a). With 28.6% in math, Colonia Elementary failed to meet state standards. For the following six years, the campus steadily improved its scores (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Colonia Elementary: TAAS and TAKS Historical Data.



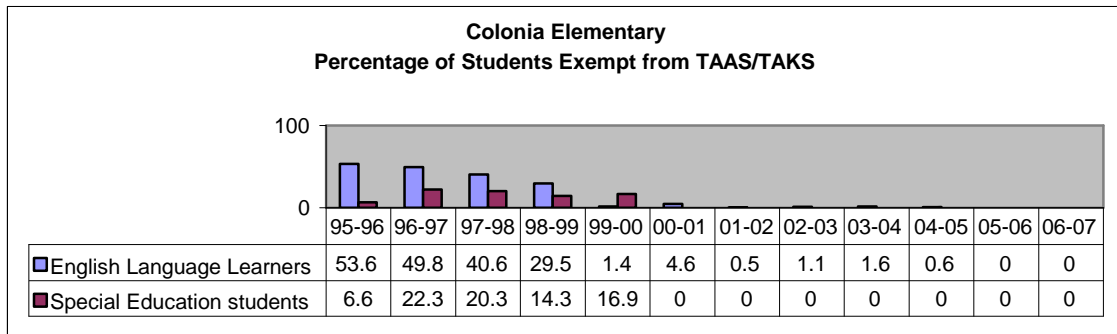
Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).



Additionally, while the campus significantly decreased the percentage of students who were exempt from testing based on eligibility criteria for English language learners and students receiving special education services (Figure 2), the number of students meeting ARD expectations on SDAA increased considerably (Figure 3). Exemptions for English language learners are the decision of the language proficiency assessment committee (LPAC) composed of two teachers, an administrator, and one parent of an English language learner attending the given campus (TEA, 1996a). For students receiving special education services, the decision rests on the admissions, reviews, and dismissal (ARD) committee (TEA, 1996a). The committee members for the ARD include an education diagnostician, teachers who directly work with the student, an administrator, and the student's parent (TEA, 1996a).

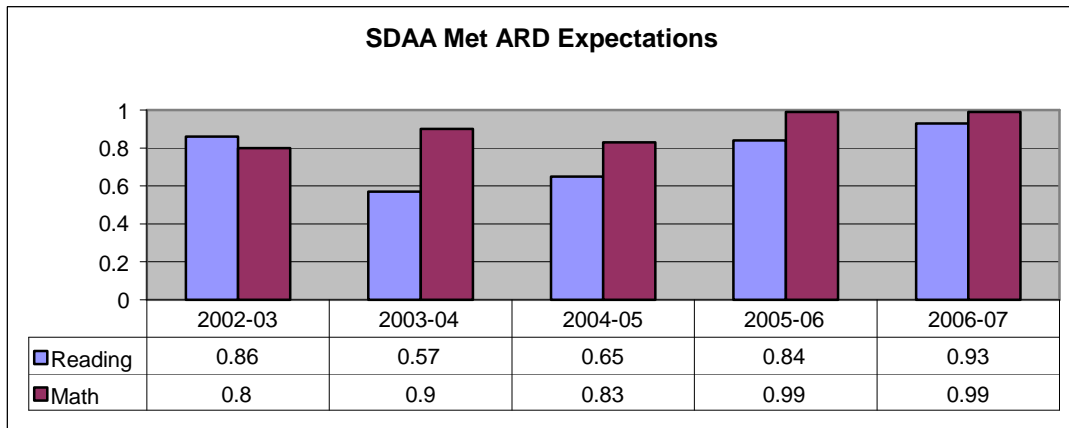
However, set on increasingly higher standards to meet a rating of *Academically Acceptable*, Colonia Elementary was again rated *Low-Performing* in 2001-2002. In 2002, the last year the TAAS was used in the accountability systems, the campus rates were 50.9% in reading and 66.7% in math. However, in 2002, to receive an *Acceptable* rating, a campus had to have 55% or more of all students and subgroups pass the TAAS test in reading and math (TEA, 2002). Regrettably, with a score of 50.9% in reading, Colonia Elementary received a rating of *Low-Performing*.

Figure 2. Colonia Elementary: Percentage of Students Exempt from TAAS/TAKS.



Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

Figure 3. Colonia Elementary: SDAA Historical Data.



Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

In 2003, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests, with more rigorous testing items and a new accountability system, were adopted. Following state mandates, campuses would not receive an accountability rating during their first year of implementation but rather campuses would maintain the rating earned the previous year. Thus, Colonia Elementary was rated *Low-Performing* for two continuous years (TEA, 2002). Despite, more rigorous standards in test scores and fewer students eligible for state assessments exemptions, Colonia Elementary was rated *Recognized* in 2006. The campus outstanding passing rates were 82% in reading and 89% in math. In 2007, the passing rates slightly increased, to 85% in reading and 90% in math.

However, due to a 73% in science and only 2% points away from retaining the *Recognized* rating (a passing rate of 75% was needed), the school was rated *Acceptable* in August 2007. Such trends in science results are representative across the state and nation. Even though poverty has been noted as a strong predictor of lack of academic success and schools serving high-poverty populations are more likely to show weak performance in high-stakes tests, this school has managed to beat these odds, with students outperforming their Mexican American peers from schools located in the same impoverished area and even those from more affluent neighborhoods within the same school district (Cunningham, 2006). Although there are two other elementary schools in the same *Colonia*, Colonia Elementary has experienced greater academic success (Table 2). These campuses had similar factors such as a stable administration, a faculty of mostly Mexican American teachers, similar teacher experience, and a constant student enrollment over the last four years (Table 3).

At the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, a scope and sequence was introduced district wide. However, due to many corrections, its effectiveness in producing higher academic gains during its first year of implementation was unlikely. Facing the challenges of “poor” schools, this school defied the odds and achieved increases in student academic success. What, according to teachers, is happening at this school that is producing such academic success?

Table 2. Academic Excellence Indicators for 2005-2006 and 2006-2007

	Colonia Elementary		Neighboring School 1		Neighboring School 2	
	Reading %	Math %	Reading %	Math %	Reading %	Math %
	<u>2005-2006</u>					
All Students	82	89	78	78	79	88
Hispanic	82	89	78	78	79	88
Economically Disadvantaged	82	89	78	78	80	88
Limited English Proficient	73	86	67	71	71	83
	<u>2006-2007</u>					
All Students	85	90	79	75	81	87
Hispanic	85	90	79	75	81	87
Economically Disadvantaged	85	90	80	75	80	87
Limited English Proficient	75	82	69	68	73	82

Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

Table 3. School Profiles

Colonia District	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
<u>Neighboring Elementary 1</u>					
<u>School Year</u>					
Total Enrollment	471	497	490	476	481
Percent Limited English Proficient	83.9	77.9	79.0	81.8	83.0
<u>Percent Student Composition</u>					
African American	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hispanic	99.4	99.4	99.8	99.6	99.8
White	.6	.6	.2	.4	0.2
Economically Disadvantaged	97.7	98.8	98.9	96.0	91.3
<u>Teachers</u>					
Count	34	33	34	34	32.9
Percent Hispanic	97.1	97.0	97.1	94.0	93.9
Percent by years' experience: 1-5 years	43.1	51.5	41.2	20.6	21.9
Average Years' Experience	8.7	9.2	10.5	10.0	11.4
<u>Accountability Rating</u>					
Academically Unacceptable					
Acceptable	√		√	√	
Recognized		√			√
Exemplary					
<u>Neighboring Elementary 2</u>					
<u>School Year</u>					
Total Enrollment	638	647	645	476	614
Percent Limited English Proficient	83.1	82.4	82.3	81.8	79.3
<u>Percent Student Composition</u>					
African American	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Hispanic	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.6	99.0
White	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.7
Economically Disadvantaged	99.4	98.8	98.9	96.0	97.2
<u>Teachers</u>					
Count	41	44	44	43	41.9
Percent Hispanic	97.6	95.5	93.2	93.0	92.8
Percent by years' experience: 1-5 years	48.8	56.8	48.1	49.8	45.3
Average Years' Experience	6.8	7.4	8.0	8.3	9.1
<u>Accountability Rating</u>					
Academically Unacceptable					
Acceptable	√	√	√	√	
Recognized					√
Exemplary					

Source. Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

### *Researcher's Lived Experiences*

My position in this study is based on 25 years in the educational field, in roles ranging from teacher to principal, and now a central office administrator. Throughout my experience, I have had many opportunities to observe teachers at their best and worst. Some teachers are successful in bringing academic success to their students, and yet, others fail to bring such success to their students. Often I have thought about my own teaching practices, but a busy work schedule and single parent obligations had always limited meaningful reflection. In retelling the stories of Mexican American teachers, I attempted to explore my life experiences as a Mexican American woman, born and raised in Mexico until the age of 19, thus, with deep roots in two cultures. Similar to many stories, this story was about the self, the only story I can claim.

During the course of this work, I attempted to understand and to reconcile my multiple identities as woman, immigrant, student, scholar, and educator. I offered my experiences as “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Delgado-Bernal (1999) wrote: “It is personal experience that provides one source of cultural intuition from which to draw upon during research” (p. 565). Delgado-Bernal listed four elements that comprise cultural intuition: (a) one’s personal and collective memory and experience, (b) existing literature, (c) an individual’s professional experience, and (d) the process of analyzing one’s work.

These claims to knowledge are grounded in experiences (Foley, 1990) as a Mexican American, as an immigrant, as English language learner, as an educator, and as

an emerging researcher. As I embarked on this study, I aspired to begin to make sense of my own experiences and “cultural intuition” (Delgado-Bernal, 1999; Foley, 1990). By providing a stage for the voices of these culturally and linguistically diverse teachers, both the participants’ and the researcher’s, such explorations may encourage a more inclusive and self-affirming dialogue among all teachers, especially as it relates to the academic success of Mexican American children.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research strongly proposes that issues related to race, culture, or social classes are among the greatest challenges for improving U.S. education (Boethel, 2003). In his foreword, Moll (as cited in Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999) stated:

The issue of how to address diversity in schools...promises to be the foremost educational issue well into the 21st century. In fact, in my estimation, educational researchers who do not address issues of diversity in one form or another, especially in the United States, are at risk of their work becoming irrelevant. (p. x)

Moll’s concern was substantiated by statistics. Demographers project that by 2040, the Texas population will be approximately 50.5 million people, and if immigration continues at current levels, 78% of those people will be Hispanic. In addition, according to the 2000 Census, Mexicans were 58.5% of all Hispanics (U.S. Census, 2005). Texas demographer, Steve H. Murdock (2006) has noted that Texas was undergoing a striking demographic shift that will significantly change the diversity and ethnic composition of student populations in public schools.

Coupled with these facts and significant to this research are the number of Mexican American learners who live in *Colonias*. In Texas, there are more than 1,450

*Colonias*, with nearly 500,000 residents (Texas Attorney General's Office, 2007). An estimated 64.4% of individuals who populated *Colonias* were of Hispanic descent, and 85% of them were residents under the age of 18 (Texas Attorney General's Office, 2007). Providing quality education for children living in *Colonias* is a major challenge because of high student dropout rates, grade level retention, and the border's rapid population growth. For the 2004-2005 school year, the estimated longitudinal dropout rate for secondary level Hispanic students (grades 7-12) (1.4%), was almost three times as high as that of White students (0.5%) (TEA, 2006d). Although 58.1% of students enrolled in Texas public schools were African American or Hispanic, 75.6% of students retained were from one of these two ethnic groups (TEA, 2006c).

Understanding the educational and professional experiences of Mexican American teachers becomes increasingly relevant as the country's demographic landscape changes and transforms. Thus, it was important to study what was currently being done to effectively create academic success specifically for economically challenged Mexican American children.

### **Literature Review**

Although individual school success or failure depends on the interaction of many complex variables, the ability of schools to meet the academic needs of students from racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds is just one of many such variables. For example, research has identified a number of variables linked to the academic achievement of Mexican American students. One important variable associated with their achievement is the significant discontinuity that exists regarding



the language, culture, and ethnicity of the teaching force and the children they are teaching (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Delpit, 1995; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

To provide direction for this study, the following research perspectives were addressed:

1. Changing demographics among Mexican American students in public schools,
2. Cultural differences regarding the education of Mexican American students, and
3. Studies focusing on successful or high-performing high-poverty schools serving Mexican American students.

*Changing Demographics of Mexican American Students in Public Schools*

In fall 1993, White student enrollment in U.S. public schools was 66.1%, and Hispanic student enrollment was 12.7%. In the same year in Texas public schools, White student enrollment was 47.7%, and Hispanic student enrollment was 35.5%. Ten years later, White enrollment in U.S. public schools has decreased to 58.7%, and Hispanic enrollment has increased to 18.5%. In the same period, White enrollment in Texas public schools declined to 38.7%, while Hispanic enrollment rose to 43.8% (NCES, as cited in TEA, 2007b).

Furthermore, Hispanic student enrollment, in Texas, has experienced the largest increase, rising by 650,199 students (or 46.5%) over the past decade. In 2006-2007,

Hispanic students (46.3%) were the largest enrolled ethnic group in the state, followed by White students (35.7%). The third largest group was African American students, at 14.4% (TEA, 2007a). In addition, the number of students participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program, a measure of school poverty, suggested a greater number of low-income students in Texas than in the rest of the nation. In 2006-2007, there were 2, 540, 888 economically disadvantaged students, 55.5% of all students (TEA, 2007a).

These dramatic changes in demographics coupled with rising stakes, and as the nation moves to “leave no child behind,” a sense of urgency has developed among educators who wish to determine how to better meet the educational needs of Mexican American children living in poverty. In Texas, the growth of *Colonias* – unincorporated, underdeveloped settlements along the Texas-Mexican border (Wilson & Guajardo, 1999), adds yet a greater challenge for educators. The isolation of *Colonias* and concentrated poverty contribute to the severe conditions and risks of failure in high poverty schools (Kincheloe, 2004). Given the distinctiveness of this community, it becomes important to understand its structure and the poverty that surrounds it. It is within this structure that some children are expected to learn and schools are expected to perform.

*Colonia* is a Spanish word meaning community or neighborhood. In Texas, the word is associated with unincorporated settlements that may lack water, sewage systems, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing. The 2006 State of Texas Low Income Housing Plan, released by the Division of Policy and Public Affairs of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) (2006), defined a *Colonia* as

a geographic area located within 150 miles of the Texas-Mexico border with a majority population comprised of individuals and families of low and very low income who lack safe, sanitary, and sound housing. This included a lack of basic services such as potable water, adequate sewage systems, drainage, streets, utilities, paved roads, and plumbing.

*Cultural Differences Regarding the Education of Mexican American Students*

*Cultural Mismatch*

Whereas students in U.S. urban schools are primarily poor and of color, the majority of their teachers are monolingual, European American, middle income women (Zeichner, 1992). Several studies have underscored the strong belief that cultural mismatch between teachers and ethnically diverse students most negatively impacts their academic performance (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Banks, 2001; Erickson, 1987; Klump & McNeir, 2005; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003; Ogbu, 1987). This difference of ethnic, cultural, and language background fuels a cultural clash that may be a barrier to the successful achievement of these students. This barrier may lead to the marginalization of children of color. “Marginality evolves when children are socialized away from their communities and families of origin” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 264). According to this theory, in today’s American public schools, there is a demand for students to comply with the mainstream curriculum, which privileges one set of knowledge and experiences over others. When one set of beliefs is held up as “right” or “normal,” the values of other cultural groups are treated as less suitable and children from those groups can be perceived as culturally deficient (Valencia et al., 2001).

## **Deficit Thinking**

In spite of public schools' mission statements maintaining that all children can learn, Valencia (as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) argues that “deficit thinking is deeply embedded in educational thought and practice and that it pervades schools that serve children from low-income homes and children of color” (p. 236). Valencia (as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) explains,

The deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster – such as familial deficits and dysfunctions...The popular “at-risk” construct, now entrenched in educational circles, view poor and working class children (typically of color) as predominantly responsible for school failure. (p. xi)

Valencia (as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) describes educators' deficit views as a “description-explanation-prediction-prescription” cycle in public schools. He explains that first, educators describe the deficits, limitations, deficiencies, or shortcomings of economically disadvantaged and students of color. Next, educators give explanation to the deficits by attributing the deficiencies to dysfunctional families or limited intelligence and motivation. Then, educators make predictions surrounding the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits. In the final stage of prescription, educators design educational interventions to remedy the deficits.

### *Studies Focusing on High-Achieving High-Poverty Schools*

Several studies based on the cultural mismatch concept make the assumption that academic achievement of students from culturally diverse backgrounds will improve if schools and teachers begin to conduct classroom instruction in a manner

responsive to the student's home culture (Phuntsog, 1999). Changes in classroom instruction to respond positively to the home culture of students is known in research literature as culturally congruent (Au & Kawakami, 1994), culturally responsive (Erickson, 1987), and culturally relevant (Gay, 2000) (Ladson-Billings, as cited in Phuntsog, 1999). By adopting culturally responsive school practices, educators seek to address issues of educational inequity and confront institutional bias and discrimination (Phuntsog, 1999).

### **Culturally Responsive Practices**

Several studies have been conducted based on the assumption that academic achievement of students from culturally diverse backgrounds will improve if schools and teachers begin to conduct classroom instruction in a manner responsive to the student's home culture (Phuntsog, 1999). With the undergoing demographic shift in Texas that will impact the diversity and ethnic composition of student populations (Murdock, 2006), there is a pressing need for public schools to effectively address cross-cultural differences to improve the teaching and learning environment for diverse student populations. The literature on culturally relevant teaching has made a significant contribution to education in exploring the beliefs and practices of teachers who successfully connected their students from marginalized groups with academic success (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Research embraces the notion of cultural responsiveness as a means of helping all diverse students reach high standards (Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Gay, 2000; Klump & McNeir, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lindsey et al., 2003; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

As defined by Gay (2000), culturally responsive education recognizes that “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students makes learning more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). As a result, culturally responsive teachers see their students’ culture and lifestyle as an asset rather than as a determinant or an obstacle to their learning (Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Cummins, 1989; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). There are a number of culturally responsive practices that research indicates can positively affect student achievement: (a) meaningful and relevant learning, (b) high expectations for all students, and (c) teacher-student relationships of care and respect (Gay, 2000; Klump & McNeir, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lindsey et al., 2003; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

### **Meaningful and Relevant Learning**

Research findings on instructional practices have noted that education must be meaningful and responsive to students’ needs, as well as linguistically and culturally appropriate (Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Gay (2000) writes: “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment” (p. 8). It is particularly important to understand that to detach teaching and learning from the cultures of students decreases the chances that their achievement potential will ever be fully realized (Gay, 2000). She further explains that teachers must be competent in understanding the dynamics and uses of culture in the classroom.

Such practices, allow students from different ethnic groups to voice their cultural expression in order to enhance the content and learning process. The literature is increasingly clear about the need for some type of linkage or connection between the culture of the school and home references (Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). The pedagogical significance highlighted is the importance of allowing cultural elements that are relevant to the students to enter the classroom (Zeichner, 1992). Additionally, high standards and high expectations are central in being culturally responsive (Goodlad, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

### **High Expectations and Excellence**

Teachers' expectations have been found to have a significant impact on student achievement. According to this theory, low teacher expectations of diverse students is often a contributing factor to significant achievement gaps between learners of color and European American students (Goodlad, 1984; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Several studies reviewed showed that when traditionally low-performing students were given the opportunity to be in higher level classes with small-group collaborative work and using higher order thinking skills, they excelled in those classes (Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). "The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to 'choose' academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160).

Studies indicate that Hispanic students learn better when high expectations are set by their teachers and when teaching and learning are collaborative (Reyes et al., 1999). Particularly teachers' expectations, the patterns of interaction between teachers

and students, and the subjective climate of schools play a major role in the educational experiences of students (Alva & Padilla, 1995).

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

One of today's challenges in education is to create learning environments that maintain the cultural integrity of every child while focusing on their educational success (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). In these environments, teacher-student relationships are equitable and reciprocal; teachers encourage a community of learners rather than competitive, individual achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). The research on resiliency shows that a nurturing environment provides a secure base for children to develop confidence, competence, feelings of autonomy, and safety. In schools where there is trust, caring, and support, students have higher attendance, higher performance, and a lower rate of suspensions (Benard, 2004).

According to Stronge (2002) effective teachers care about their students and demonstrate their care in ways that the students understand. He emphasizes such attributes as interacting with others with gentleness and understanding, knowing students individually, having warmth and encouragement, and simply enjoying children are attributes of effective teachers. Further, Ladson-Billings (1994) reports successful teachers in multicultural settings have a high sense of self-worth and think well of others. Caring is defined by Stronge as "an act of bringing out the best in students through affirmation and encouragement" (Stronge, 2002, p. 14).



### **Purpose of the Study**

In this interpretivist study, I was interested in understanding what has made this Colonia elementary school successful with their economically challenged Mexican American students. What did it take to get great results in educational achievement in a school with a student population that is 100% Mexican American, 97.8% economically challenged, and has 78.7% students who are learning English?

My excitement for this subject derived from my lived simultaneous experiences as an immigrant, a quiet and scared student, and enthusiastic teacher and administrator of Mexican American students. Similarly, these teachers' multiple identities as immigrants or descendants of immigrants, as culturally and linguistically diverse students, as committed educators, and as bilingual and bicultural individuals are in a unique position in schools and in the community. Hence, the significance of this study, to center their voices and lived experiences as successful Mexican American teachers of Mexican American children living in *Colonias*.

Revealing the stories, lived experiences, and practices of successful Mexican American teachers will assist in developing an educational process to prepare teachers with the skills, and knowledge necessary to enhance their ability to undertake the gigantic responsibility of creating classroom environments appropriate for achieving academic success for all children and specifically for Mexican American children who live in *Colonias*.

### **Research Questions**

This study was based upon the following overarching questions:

1. What do these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful at Colonia Elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?
2. What **attributes** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?
3. What **instructional practices** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success among Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

### **Methodology**

In education, we have a great responsibility to our students and teachers to carry out research that is reliable, valid and trustworthy. As leaders, we are to deliver research in such a way as to do justice to the lived realities of all involved (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2005). Because qualitative research allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, I selected this method for the study (Merriam, 2002). The fundamental tenets of a qualitative study, along with the naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), guided the development of this proposed research.

The goal of this interpretive qualitative study was to explore the stories, lived experiences, and practices of Mexican American teachers who have facilitated the academic success of economically challenged Mexican American students at Colonia Elementary. Borrowing from Ladson-Billings' (1994) work in *The Dreamkeepers*:

*Successful Teachers of African American Children*, this study offers a mixture of learning and story of qualitative research and lived experiences. I examined the detailed phenomenon of Mexican American teachers' successful experiences with Mexican American students. What did those Mexican American teachers have to say about what they believe made them successful? Thus, I selected to situate this study within a basic interpretivist approach to naturalistic inquiry. I gathered research data that arose from naturally occurring contexts (Silverman, 2005).

As a means for data collection during this interpretive qualitative study, I conducted two semi-structured interviews and one focus group, as well as one onsite videotaped segment of the teaching of each informant. A semi-structured interview was used to learn how participants interpret particular aspects of their lives and experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005). To document their work, segments of their teaching were videotaped as a way to understand the patterns and routines of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Along academic data from the school and district, the main source of data was the teachers. Every word that people use in telling their stories is a reflection of their consciousness (Merriam, 2002). Patton (2002) identified cases that provide a thick description as those from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance to the purpose of the research.

The researcher has the accountability for the soundness of the reader's interpretation (Stake, 2005). To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, various procedures are employed, such as redundancy of data gathering and procedural challenges to explanations (Stake, 2005). Triangulation is the process of using multiple

perceptions to clarify meaning thereby verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation (Stake, 2005). It also serves to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the study is seen while also identifying different realities.

It is important for targeted persons to receive drafts of the write-up revealing how they are presented, quoted, and interpreted. The researcher has the responsibility to listen well to informant responses for signs of concern (Stake, 2005). By triangulating multiple data collection sources (teacher-selection process, interviews, video tapes, and documents or artifacts), the trustworthiness of this study was increased.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Academically Acceptable* – In 2002, the last year for Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) administration, to receive an acceptable rating, a campus had to have 55% or more of all students and subgroups pass the test in reading and math (TEA, 1996a). By 2007, an *Academically Acceptable* rating was given to a campus that performed at 60% for reading/English language arts, writing, and social studies, 40% for mathematics, and 35% for science in the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills assessment (TAKS) (TEA, 2007c).

*Academically Unacceptable or Low-Performing* – This is the rating for a campus that assessment performance in the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills assessment (TAKS) did not meet acceptable standards under the Texas accountability system (TEA, 2006a). During the period when the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was administered, the term “low-

performing” was used to denote a campus that did not meet the minimum standards under the TEA accountability system (TEA, 1996a).

*Colonias* – Salinas (1988) describes *Colonias* as rural and incorporated subdivisions characterized by substandard housing, inadequate plumbing and sewage disposal systems, and inadequate access to clean water.

*Culture* – It is defined as a way of life, especially as it relates to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time (Hollins, 1996).

*Cultural congruency* – It indicates a teacher’s respect for the cultural background of his or her students. Teachers need general socio-cultural knowledge about child and adolescent development; about second language acquisition; about the ways that socioeconomic circumstances, language, and culture shape school performance (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Zeichner, 1992).

*Cultural mismatch* – This occurs when the culture of the educational system and teachers differs from that of the students (Irvine, 2003; Lee, 2004).

*Culturally relevant or responsive* – This is defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). As a result, culturally relevant or responsive teachers see their students’ culture and lifestyle as an asset rather than as a determinant or an obstacle to their learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Diverse learners* – The terms “diversity” or “diverse learners” in this report focus on differences related to social class, ethnicity, culture, and language (Zeichner, 1992). The phrase students of diverse backgrounds refers to students in the United States who are often (a) from low-income families; (b) of African American, Asian American, Latina/o, or Native American ancestry; and/or (c) speakers of a home language other than English (Au, 1998).

*Economically challenged* – Economically disadvantaged students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or eligible for other public assistance in public schools as a result of a families’ “low income” as noted by the Texas Education Agency (2006a). Because this study will be shared from a strength perspective, the term “economically challenged” will be used instead of the commonly used terms such as “economically disadvantaged,” “low socioeconomic status” (SES), or “low-income.”

*European American* – Although the U.S. Census Bureau (2003a) uses the term “White” or “Anglo,” as do several of the statistical data sources I referenced, in this study, the term “European American” is used to indicate the ethnic and cultural background of people of European descent. In quotes from other sources where the terms “White” or “Anglo” were used, I have retained the usage the quoted author has chosen.

*Hispanic* – In the U.S. Census 2000, people of Hispanic origin were those who indicated that their origin was Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Hispanic origin. For example, people who indicate that they are of Mexican origin may be either

born in Mexico or of Mexican heritage. The term “Latino,” first used on the census form in 2000, and “Hispanic” may be used inter-changeably to reflect the new terminology in the standards issued by the Office of Management and Budget in 1997 that were implemented by January 1, 2003 (U.S. Census, 2005). Thus, when quoting U.S. Census figures, the term “Hispanic” or “Latino” will be used. If citing other sources, I have retained the usage the quoted author has chosen.

*Latino* – See definition for Hispanic.

*Mexican American students* – For the purpose of this study, Mexican American students refer to students of Mexican heritage.

*Recognized* – The 2007 *Academically Acceptable* standards are 75% for reading/English language arts, writing, social studies, mathematics, and science in the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills assessment (TAKS). These standards must be met by all student groups: African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged (TEA, 2007c).

*Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)* – This test assesses students in grades 3-10 and Exit level for graduation in the state’s curriculum. Tests are given in the areas of reading/English language arts, writing, science, social studies, and mathematics (TEA, 2006a).

### **Significance of Study**

As the Texas demographic shift continues to change, economically challenged students, primarily Hispanic students, will occupy schools in the majority, and thus, effectively serving this student group will become increasingly critical (Murdock, 2006). Thus, the implications that might surface from this interpretive study may contribute to research on reform efforts necessary to increase the academic performance of economically challenged Mexican American students, develop educational administration leadership approaches to foster academic excellence for all students, and to encourage a more inclusive and self-affirming dialogue among teachers.

This study is about our *Colonia* community of Mexican American children, our schooling and education, and about refusing to become mere demographic data. This story is about exploring the practices, attributes, and lived experiences of Mexican American teachers working with our communities to school and educate our children and to continue in the process of schooling and educating ourselves. The potential similarities of my experiences, with those of the participants, are possibly the strength of this study. Most of my life as a student and work as a teacher, principal, and administrator has been with economically challenged Mexican American students.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter II reviewed the literature, examined the research, and probed the possible causes of school failure among Mexican American students in areas such as deficit thinking and cultural mismatch. Chapter II also considered theories of cultural congruence and culturally relevant teaching as well an overview section about *Colonias*.



Chapter III explained the primary focus of my research. It presented the methodology, research design, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness criteria that were employed in the study. Chapter IV presented the major thematic findings of the study. Finally, in Chapter V, the researcher's conclusions, implications for practice, theory, policy, and recommendations for further research were outlined.

### **Conclusion**

Research clearly indicates that racially, ethnically, economically, and linguistically diverse students continue to fail in the U.S. public school system (Cummins, 1993, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). By examining the stories, teaching practices, and experiences of Mexican American teachers identified as successful, a new and authentic perspective to the effective teaching practices of Mexican American students who live in *Colonias* was shared.

The focus on successful Mexican American teachers may assist the field in getting at the heart of what is important in the development of successful teachers of Mexican American children. I wanted to relive the stories of those teachers who had contributed to my own academic success and that of other Mexican American children. The results may provide educators with important information about the role of the teacher in the education of economically challenged Mexican American students living in *Colonias*.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The overview of the existing literature on the educational success of schools serving Mexican American students who live in *Colonias* identified gaps in the research, and this served as the driver for this research that aimed at improving the educational practices for Mexican American students who live in *Colonias*. As I continued with the literature review, I found numerous studies conducted about *Colonias* but mostly in the area of health care, housing, and urban development. Yet, I did not find any studies carried out in *Colonias* that focused on the academic success of Mexican American learners. Furthermore, because of the limited research in this area, it is hard to report only on the educational practices for Mexican American students. The existing research and reports do not always recognize Mexican American as a single subgroup. Thus, when the literature identifies Mexican Americans, that term was used. If citing other sources, I retained the usage the quoted author chose. In addition, research on Hispanics, commonly includes all of the major Hispanic subgroups; such studies were used when information focused only on Mexican Americans was not available.

To provide direction for this study, the following research perspectives were addressed:

1. Changing demographics of Mexican American students in public schools;
  2. Cultural differences regarding the education of Mexican American students;
- and

3. Studies focusing on successful or high-performing high-poverty schools serving Mexican American students.

### **Changing Demographics of Mexican American Students in Public Schools**

In fall 1993, White student enrollment in U.S. public schools was 66.1%, and Hispanic student enrollment was 12.7%. In the same year in Texas public schools, White student enrollment was 47.7%, and Hispanic student enrollment was 35.5%. Ten years later, White enrollment in U.S. public schools has decreased to 58.7%, and Hispanic enrollment has increased to 18.5%. In the same period, White enrollment in Texas public schools declined to 38.7%, while Hispanic enrollment rose to 43.8% (NCES, as cited in TEA, 2007b) (Table 4).

Furthermore, Hispanic student enrollment in Texas has experienced the largest numerical increase, rising by 650,199 students (or 46.5%) over the decade. In 2006-2007, Hispanic students (46.3%) were the largest enrolled ethnic group in the state, followed by White students (35.7%). The third largest group was African American students, at 14.4% (TEA, 2007a).

In addition, the number of students participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program, a measure of school poverty, suggests a greater number of low-income students in Texas than in the rest of the nation. In 1995-1996, there were 1,754,401 economically disadvantaged students, 46.8% of all students. By 2006-2007, the number rose to 2,540,888, bringing the proportion of Texas students who were economically disadvantaged to 55.5%. During this time period, the increase in the number of economically disadvantaged students (786,467) exceeded the increase in the number of

total students (722,011) (TEA, 2007a). Moreover, the number of students identified as limited English proficient (LEP) grew by 48.3% between 1995-1996 and 2006-2007, and the number of students receiving bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) instructional services increased by 55.6% (TEA, 2007a).

Table 4. Enrollment and Percentages by Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status, and English Proficiency, Texas Public Schools, 2005-2006 and 2006-2007

Group	Enrollment		Percentages	
	2005-2006	2006-2007	2005-2006	2006-2007
All Students	4,400,644	4,521,043		
<u>Ethnicity</u>				
African American	623,534	665,799	15	14
Asian/Pacific Islander	133,271	141,859	3	3
Hispanic	1,969,097	2,047,308	45	45
Native American	14,350	15,037	0	0
White	1,660,392	1,651,040	37	38
<u>Socioeconomic Status</u>				
Economically Disadvantaged	2,397,700	2,506,972	55	54
<u>English Proficiency</u>				
Limited English Proficient	684,170	711,396	16	16

*Source.* Texas Education Agency (2006b, 2007a).

Even more overwhelming are Murdock's (2006) demographic facts relating to the projected percent of labor force by educational attainment in Texas by 2040 which expose the economic urgency of the situation. Basically, if public schools continue to ineffectively address the unacceptable academic record of economically disadvantaged students, specifically the Mexican American population, in the year 2040, one-third of the Texas labor force will not even have a high school diploma and almost another third

will only have a high school education, while less than 20% will have a bachelor's degree or beyond. As the Texas demographic shift continues to evolve, economically disadvantaged students, primarily Hispanic students, will occupy schools in the majority, and thus, effectively serving this distinct student population will become increasingly critical.

These dramatic changes in demographics, together with rising stakes, and as the nation continue on the path to “leave no child behind,” have intensified concerns among educators who must determine how to meet the educational needs of Mexican American children living in poverty. Poverty is the most consistently noted indicator of poor academic achievement (Springfield & Land, 2002). A child living in poverty is already at a distinct disadvantage which is compounded when the child attends a school with high poverty demographics (Springfield & Land, 2002).

In Texas, the growth of *Colonias* – unincorporated, underdeveloped settlements along the Texas-Mexico border (Wilson & Guajardo, 1999), adds yet a greater challenge for educators. The isolation of *Colonias* and concentrated poverty contribute to the severe conditions and risks of failure in high poverty schools (Kincheloe, 2004). Given the uniqueness of these communities, it becomes important to understand their structure and the poverty that surrounds them. It is within these structures that children are expected to learn and schools are expected to meet federal and state standards.

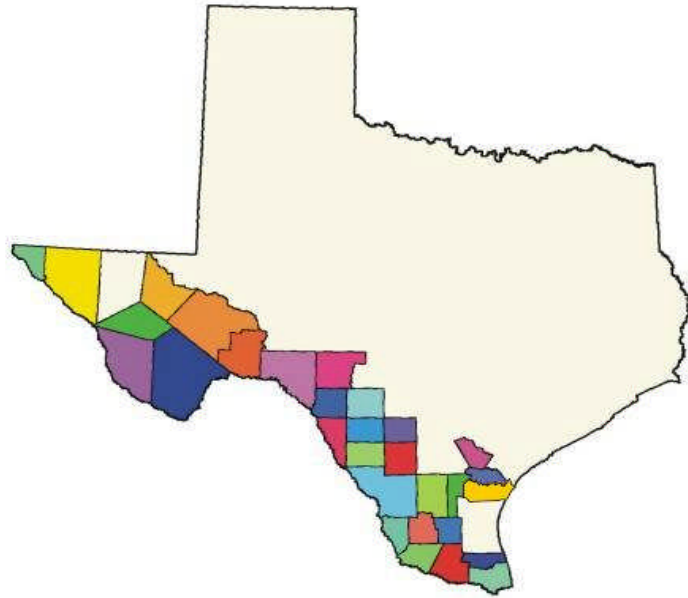
### *Colonias*

Since 1930, migration to the cities along the Texas-Mexico border has transformed small border towns into medium and large-sized cities. People from Mexico and other parts of Latin America were drawn to the border in search of work, seeking opportunities to make a better life for themselves and their families. Much of the growth related to border cities develops in rural *Colonias* surrounding the cities (Coppock, 1994). *Colonia* is a Spanish word meaning community or neighborhood. In Texas, the word is associated with unincorporated settlements that may lack water, sewage systems, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing.

#### **A Growing Population**

According to Chapa and Eaton. (1997), the lack of affordable housing along the border is the primary reason for the rapid propagation of *Colonias*. *Colonias* are found in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, but Texas has both the largest number of *Colonias* and the largest *Colonia* population. Texas is home to more *Colonias* residents than any other state. Approximately 500,000 Texans live in 1,450 *Colonia* communities along the 150-mile stretch from Cameron County on the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso County in the west (Texas Attorney General's Office, 2007) (Figure 4). Almost 90% of Texas *Colonias* are located along the Texas side of the Texas-Mexico border, in Hidalgo, El Paso, Starr, Cameron, Maverick, Webb, and Zavala counties. An estimated 64.4% of individuals who populate *Colonias* are of Mexican American descent, and 85% of them are under the age of 18 (Texas Attorney General's Office, 2007).

Figure 4. *Colonia* Communities in Texas.



Source. Texas Attorney General's Office (2007).

### **The Region**

The 2006 State of Texas Low Income Housing Plan, released by the Division of Policy and Public Affairs of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (2006), defines a *Colonia* as a geographic area located within 150 miles of the Texas-Mexico border with a majority population comprised of individuals and families of low and very low income who lack safe, sanitary, and sound housing. This includes a lack of basic services such as potable water, adequate sewage systems, drainage, streets, utilities, paved roads, and plumbing. To build their homes, most *Colonia* residents use whatever is at hand: wooden pallets, scraps of plywood, and tar paper found in

dumpsters as well as old cinder blocks and coffee cans hammered flat. A majority of *Colonias* have dirt roads, without even gravel surfaces, and have no surface drainage systems, and on rainy days the mud can get knee-deep. Often kitchen and bathroom waste lay in open pits. Used scraps of carpet cover the dirt floors. Fences made of bed springs or stacks of old tires divide family plots. In addition, the incidence of household crowding along the border is more than twice the national average: 13% of border households live in crowded units. Among the regions of Mexican American households, crowding rates are four times the national rate as over 26% of border Mexican American households live in units with more than one person per room (TDHCA, 2006).

Moreover, since *Colonia* houses are not hooked into municipal systems, residents must improvise to meet basic needs. Residents in *Colonias* endure continued problems with water quality. Often residents transport water in plastic storage tanks to their homes or use water that has not been treated. Scarcity means that water for bathing and cleaning comes from irrigation ditches. Bathroom and kitchen waste are usually disposed of in septic tanks or open cesspools. Also, most *Colonias* have no regular trash collection. Given this situation, health statistics of *Colonias* are unsurprising.

### **An Economically Challenged Area**

According to a random survey in June 2000 by the Texas Department of Health (TDH, 2000) in 96 *Colonias* in six border counties, almost half of the *Colonia* households make less than \$834 a month. Nearly 70% of the residents never graduated from high school. The unemployment rate stands at 18% for *Colonia* residents,



compared with 11% for their border neighbors (Cisneros, 2001). These *Colonias* are home to thousands of Mexican American children who enroll in public schools.

In Texas, approximately 85% of the 500,000 residents in *Colonias* are Mexican Americans under the age of 18. That number translates to almost 20% of the Texas public school student population. In this school district of almost 38,000 students, this *Colonia* population comprises 8% of the total enrollment.

#### *Colonia, Texas*

An in-depth description of this *Colonia* will heighten the importance of the information collected. *Colonia, Texas*, a pseudonym, is one of 27 *Colonias* lying south of Laredo and located in Webb County, which is situated in South Texas on the Rio Grande River across from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and the city of Nuevo Laredo. According to the latest census figures, *Colonia, Texas*, has a population of 5,543 and the medium household income is \$17,149. Persons under 18 living in poverty make up 54.2% of the population and less than 30% of the population has completed high school. Of the 350 grandparents living in households with one or more grandchildren under 18 years, 36.3% of them are responsible for their care. Persons who claim “English only” as the language spoken at the home are 4.7% of the population. The percentage of persons who claim Spanish as the language they most often use at the home is 95.3%. Sixty percent of the population in *Colonia, Texas*, is U.S. born. Ninety-nine percent of those who were born outside the U.S., claim Latin America as region of birth. Ninety five percent of the persons living in *Colonia, Texas*, have lived there for over ten years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003b). As the stakes continue to rise and the

country strives to “leave no child behind,” pressure has intensified to understand how educators can best meet the educational needs of an increased diverse and economically challenged student population.

### **Cultural Differences Regarding the Education of Mexican American Students**

While students in U.S. urban schools are primarily poor and of color, the majority of their teachers are monolingual, European American, middle income women (Zeichner, 1992). Several studies have emphasized the fact that cultural mismatch between teachers and ethnically diverse students most negatively impacts their academic performance (Banks, 2001; Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Erickson, 1987; Ogbu, 1987; Valencia et al., 2001). According to these studies, in today’s U.S. public schools, there is a demand for students to comply with the mainstream curriculum, which privileges one set of knowledge and experiences over others. When one set of beliefs is held up as “right” or “normal,” the values of other cultural groups are treated as less appropriate, and children from those groups can be perceived as culturally deficient (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia et al., 2001). Researchers have suggested that the cultural mismatch in the values of Mexican American children and those required within the educational system are largely responsible for the difficulties that Mexican American children continue to experience in the classroom (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Delgado-Gaitan, 1989; Skrla, & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997, Valencia et al., 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Often the culture and home language of the students is seen as the cause of the children’s difficulties in school, thus blaming the victim for failures of the school system.

### *Deficit Thinking*

In spite of public schools' mission statements maintaining that all children can learn, Valencia (as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) argues that “deficit thinking is deeply embedded in educational thought and practice and that it pervades schools that serve children from low-income homes and children of color” (p. 236). Valencia (1997) explains,

The deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that student who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster – such as familial deficits and dysfunctions...The popular “at-risk” construct, now entrenched in educational circles, view poor and working class children (typically of color) as predominantly responsible for school failure. (p. xi)

Deficit thinking is not a new concept. In 1971, author William Ryan first termed the concept of deficit thinking. In his book, *Blaming the Victim*, Ryan places the deficit thinking beyond the educational arena and examines the social structure as a whole. Ryan (1971) explains that blaming the victim is an ideological process – “a set of ideas and concepts deriving from systematically motivated, but intended, distortions of reality” (p. 11). In the educational system, the deficit thinking belief views economically challenged students and students of color as “less competent, less skilled, less knowing – in short, less human” (Ryan, 1971, p. 11).

Valencia (as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001) describes educators' deficit views as “description-explanation-prediction-prescription” cycle in public schools (p. 237). He explains that first educators describe the deficits, limitations, deficiencies, or shortcomings of economically challenged and students of color. Next, educators give

explanation on deficits by attributing the deficiencies to dysfunctional families or limited intelligence and motivation. Then, educators make predictions about “the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits” (Valencia, as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Thus, as a result, educators design educational interventions to remedy the deficits. This self-perpetuating cycle is commonplace in today’s public schools. Seemingly by tradition, schools produce failures among economically challenged students and students of color, and then “uses the failure as evidence that the ‘problem’ lies with/in the children, their families, their neighborhoods, their genetics, their social capital, and so forth rather than with the educational system and its deficit assumptions” (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 237).

School structures, according to Nieto (2000), are also discriminatory in their practices and procedures. Discriminatory practices fuel the current phenomenon of schools replicating social class. Education as the great equalizer, according to Nieto, does not exist because schools simply reinforce or duplicate the differences between social classes. She has suggested, that high dropout rates and the low number of identified gifted and talented Hispanic students, is an example of this replication. Nieto argued that a student’s social class is highly correlated to their placement in specific high school programs. In her study, she concluded that “all” high-income students were placed in college preparatory classes, while most low-income students were placed in either special education classes or low tracks (Nieto, 2000; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Findings by Skrla and Scheurich (2001) further support the common practices resulting in Mexican American students

overwhelmingly tracked into low-level classes, identified for special education classes, segregated based on their home language, subjected to more and harsher disciplinary actions, pushed out of the system and labeled “dropouts,” under identified as “gifted and talented,” immersed in “subtractive” school climates, and sorted in a plethora of “remedial,” “compensatory,” or “special” programs. (p. 236)

Educators’ deficit thinking has obvious negative consequences for students (Cummins, 1989; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Teachers who perceive students as having low ability develop low expectations and teach them differently than other students when applying a pedagogy that is grounded in the deficit thinking paradigm. Conversely, the students who are perceived as “low achievers” are not exposed to the same rigorous curriculum. Instead, they are tracked into vocational programs and low-level remediation classes, usually with teachers who are less competent or who are new to the profession and have low expectations for their students (Nieto, 2000; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

The culture and home language of the students is often seen as the cause of the children’s difficulties in school. However, the research is clear about the need for some type of linkage or connection between academic learning and students’ prior understanding, knowledge, native language, and values (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Cultural elements, relevant to the students, need to be incorporated in the educational practices (Zeichner, 2003). Studies show that

instruction needs to be meaningful and responsive to students' needs, as well as linguistically and culturally appropriate (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000).

### *Language*

In the United States, Mexican American learners face many challenges in maintaining their home language and culture. These include pressures to assimilate, depreciation of the Spanish language, and limited support for learning and maintaining Spanish language and literacy (Fillmore, 2000). Much of educators' decision-making on the potential academic achievement of culturally diverse students is dependent on the students' as well as teachers' communication abilities (Gay, 2000). Instruction must specifically address the concerns of Hispanic students who come from different cultures and who are often trying to learn a new language. Unfortunately, some classroom teachers feel that language-minority students are unlikely to succeed because they lack the academic language needed for performing academic tasks in school (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Valenzuela (1999), after studying Mexican American high school students, noted that schools often ignore students' knowledge of Spanish or even treated it as a deficit. She defined this approach as subtractive schooling. She noted that students who are not a part of that dominant culture find their own culture, and often times their language, less valued (Valenzuela, 1999). When students' voices are under-represented or devalued in the curriculum, students may feel silenced in classroom activities. By contrast, a curriculum that presents students' cultures in a positive light invites students to participate and become engaged (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In *Subtractive Schooling*,

Valenzuela (1999) provides an example to illustrate the effects of an inclusive pedagogy that respects all youth regardless of their linguistic abilities.

In some cases, Mr. Lundgren gives his Spanish-dominant students the opportunity to do the assignments in Spanish. He mentioned a female student whose poor English-language skills would have made the paper assignment overwhelming. “She struggles a little bit but does read a little bit in English.” For the most part, language is not a barrier for Mr. Lundgren, partly because he understands some Spanish, but also because he makes use of the other students in his class. (p. 103)

In another example, Ladson-Billings (1995a) tells about Ann Lewis’s sixth grade classroom, where Lewis encouraged the students to use their home language while learning English. As a result, the students were permitted to express themselves in the language (in speaking and writing) with which they were knowledgeable and comfortable. It was reported that by the end of the school year, the students were able to better use both languages (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

The implementation of bilingual education programs has to some extent provided support to value students’ home language. Nevertheless, despite its label, the primary goal of most U.S. bilingual education programs is to hurriedly develop proficiency in English. Maintaining home language and culture is at best a secondary goal (Valencia, 1991). Studies conducted of elementary students in bilingual programs reveal the successes that can occur when students are supported in their development and maintenance in Spanish proficiency. Maria de la Luz Reyes (2001) described several cases of natural biliteracy among second-grade bilingual students, whose teachers encouraged and supported the cultural and linguistic wealth that each student brought to school. Moll and Dworin (1996) reported that the key to “mediating external

social constraints is that teachers create conditions in which both languages are treated, to the extent possible, as unmarked languages” (p. 240).

### *Culture*

Consistently, researchers argue that minorities such as Mexican Americans fail because they face different styles of language socialization at home and at school (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1989). Children undergoing cultural change must not only come to recognize the norms and expectations of the new culture, but they must also form an identity that integrates their own culture and new cultures. As a result, this process involves difficult, sometimes painful, decisions as to which cultural values and practices to adopt and integrate into a self-identity (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

When teachers use student’s cultural and social experiences as a means to implement best practices and to develop new knowledge, learning becomes more significant (Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002). Gay (2000) writes, “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment” (p. 8). It is particularly important to understand that to separate teaching and learning from the cultures of students will ensure their continued failure to achieve academic success (Gay, 2000). The author explains that teachers must be competent in understanding the dynamics and uses of culture in the classroom. Such practices allow students from different ethnic groups to voice their cultural expression in order to add to the content and learning process.



Cultural appropriateness is evident when educators use the students' own culture to improve academic skills by making meaningful connections to their culture (Au & Kawakami, 1994). Children from various cultures come to school with different background knowledge. Immigrant students in particular may not possess the information about American culture and history that teachers and textbooks presume (Valenzuela, 1999). Teachers can help close knowledge gaps by providing background information directly; they can also make learning more meaningful by drawing upon the cultural traditions most relevant to particular groups of students (Gay, 2000). Educators must recognize that the main goal is to create communities of culturally diverse learners "who celebrate and affirm each other" (Gay, 2000, p. 43).

A number of studies have found a significant relationship between school adjustment and achievement (Alva & Padilla, 1995). In an ethnographic study of Mexican American elementary school students, Trueba (1989) described a number of students who were experiencing serious problems adjusting to school. These children exhibited signs of maladjustment that included: frustration, fatigue, lack of concentration, aggression, loneliness, acting out, and general anxiety (Alva & Padilla, 1995). "Psychic and emotional withdrawal from schooling are symptomatic of students' rejection of subtractive schooling and a curriculum they perceive as uninteresting, irrelevant, and test-driven" was noted by Valenzuela (1999, p. 62).

Much intellectual wealth exists in the culture and language of the ethnically diverse students. If these are recognized and used in instructional practices, school

achievement will improve dramatically (Gay, 2000). This stance is supported as indicated in the following statement:

The absence of shared communicative frames of reference, procedural protocols, rules of etiquette, and discourse systems makes it difficult for culturally diverse students and teachers to genuinely understand each other and for students to fully convey their intellectual abilities. Teachers who do not know or value these realities will not be able to fully access, facilitate, and assess most of what these students know and can do. (p. 81)

Study findings on instructional practices have noted that teaching must be meaningful and responsive to students' needs, as well as linguistically and culturally appropriate (Cummins, 2001; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Valenzuela (1999) asserted that,

Teachers see the differences in culture and language between themselves and their students from a culturally chauvinistic perspective that permits them to dismiss the possibility of a more culturally relevant approach in dealing with this population. For instance, teachers and counselors more often lament their students' linguistic limitations than they do their own. (p. 66)

Schools that explicitly deny the deficit thinking argument and incorporate students' interests and experiences, the funds of knowledge they bring with them into the learning situation, believe that all children can learn and will succeed regardless of cultural or language background (Moll et al., 1992). As noted, numerous studies clearly acknowledge the relationship and role that language and culture have in the process of acquiring knowledge evinced in teaching practice (Cummins, 2001; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

### *Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices*

Changes in classroom instruction to respond positively to the home culture of students is known in research literature as culturally congruent (Au & Kawakami, 1994), culturally responsive (Erickson, 1987), and culturally relevant (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Since the late 1980s, the field of culturally relevant teaching has asserted that “other people’s children” tend to be non-White. This literature also maintains that successful teachers of children of color are aware of the cultural distinctiveness and strengths of these students – they are not “colorblind” and do not buy into the deficit model (Delpit, 1995; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Nieto, 2003; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

Culturally relevant pedagogy has been described by several researchers as an effective means of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Reyes et al., 1999). As a means of helping culturally diverse students reach high standards, culturally relevant teaching has made an important contribution to the field of education in terms of exploring the beliefs and practices of teachers who successfully connected their culturally diverse students with academic success (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). An outgrowth of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, is founded on the notion that – rather than deficits – students’ backgrounds are assets in their learning process and that teachers should develop the skills to teach diverse students effectively (Cummins, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Nieto, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). This practice views students as co-constructors in the knowledge building process. Students are seen as

bringing knowledge into the classroom, and successful teachers acknowledge the students' culture, language, and strengths (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

As defined by Gay (2000), culturally responsive education recognizes that “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them...It teaches *to* and *through* strengths of these students. It is culturally *validating* and *affirming*” (p. 29). Ladson-Billings (1995a) defines it as

a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

There are several case studies that demonstrate how culturally responsive practices affect achievement and other indicators of school success for ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse students (Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1988; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Ladson-Billings' (1994) study of successful teachers of African American students attributed their success to their culturally relevant teaching practices. While observing successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) noted:

Students are allowed (and encouraged) to build upon their own experiences, knowledge, and skills to move into more difficult knowledge and skills. Rather than chastise them for what they do not know, these teachers find ways to use the knowledge and skills the students bring to the classroom as a foundation for learning. (p. 124)

According to Reyes et al. (1999), culturally responsive teachers “rather than forcing students to respond to questions or activities that fit into the traditional framework of the classroom, are willing to design their curriculum and classroom agendas to correspond with the complement the knowledge and understanding of the students they serve” (p. 201). In a high-performing learning community among Mexican American students, culturally responsive pedagogy is a requisite (Reyes et al., 1999; Johnson, 2002). Johnson (2002) argues that it also “requires teachers who use culturally relevant approaches to create meaningful learning experiences for students. This approach to instruction builds on rather than ‘tears down’ or devalues a student’s background and experiences” (Johnson, 2002, p. 9).

Culturally responsive teachers see their students’ culture and lifestyle as an asset rather than as a determinant or an obstacle to their learning (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Researchers González et al. (2005) noted that teachers who were involved in their study recognized the students and their families as a source of knowledge, and the potential application of this knowledge in their classroom. As a result, these teachers developed classroom practice enriched by drawing upon the existing funds of knowledge in minority students’ households. Funds of knowledge refer to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, and practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household’s functioning and well-being (González et al., 2005). Culturally responsive practices recognized students as bringing knowledge into the classroom, and successful teachers acknowledge the students’

culture as strengths (García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Reyes et al., 1999).

### *Teacher-Student Relationships*

One of today's challenges in schools is to create learning environments that preserve the cultural integrity of all children while focusing on their academic success (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). A number of studies that have examined the breakdown of relationships between teachers and students (Cárdenas & Cárdenas, 1977; Delpit, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) have looked at the mismatch of teacher-student relationships in terms of cultural appropriateness, cultural congruence, and cultural relevance. Cárdenas and Cárdenas (1977) referred to this mismatch as incompatibility. Through their model, the theory of incompatibilities, they expressed the belief that minority children's failure in schools is due to the lack of compatibility between their characteristics and the characteristics of a typical instructional program. Valenzuela (1999) further dwells on this issue in her book, *Subtractive Schooling*, when she states:

A mutual sense of alienation evolves when teachers and students hold different understandings about school. Because teachers and administrators are better positioned than students to impose their perspective, aesthetic caring comes to shape and sustain a subtractive logic. That is, the demand that students embrace their teachers' view of caring is tantamount to requiring their active participation in a process of cultural and linguistic eradication since the curriculum they are asked to value and support is one that dismisses or derogates their language, culturally subtractive elements of schooling. (p. 62)

Valenzuela (1999) further suggested that noncaring and nonacceptable teaching environments leave students vulnerable to academic failure.

The predominantly non-Latino teaching staff sees students as not sufficiently *caring about* school, while students see teachers as not sufficiently *caring* for them. Teachers expect students to demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract or *aesthetic* commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement. Immigrant and U.S.-born youth, on the other hand, are committed to an *authentic* form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students. (p. 61)

Furthermore, Valenzuela offers a powerful and important addition to the literature on multi-cultural secondary schooling. In the process of showing the complex nature of school experiences of Mexican American students, she points to two major problems in American schooling: the lack of authentic caring and the lack of respect for Mexican culture. Valenzuela encourages greater focus on caring about students' welfare, a broadening of training to include social and ethical responsibilities as well as academic knowledge, and encouraging active participation and more group involvement as a way to strengthen relationships in the classroom.

Moreover, studies such as the one conducted by Stronge (2002) noted that effective teachers care about their students and demonstrate their care in ways that the students understand. He emphasized such attributes as interacting with others with gentleness and understanding, knowing students individually, having warmth and encouragement, and simply enjoying children are attributes of effective teachers. Further, Ladson-Billings (1994) reported successful teachers in multicultural settings have a high sense of self-worth and think well of others. Studies have shown that a nurturing setting offers a secure base for the development of confidence, competence, feelings of autonomy, and safety. In schools that foster trust, caring, and support, students have higher attendance, higher achievement, and a lower suspension rate

(Benard, 2004). Comparable studies conducted in schools attended by a high percentage of Mexican American students have supported similar findings.

### **Studies Focusing on Successful or High-Performing High-Poverty**

#### **Schools Serving Mexican American Students**

Traditionally, schools with high poverty rates have struggled to educate students successfully. Educators have studied how schools with high numbers of poor students have been as successful in student performance as schools in more advantaged communities (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Reyes et al., 1999; Scheurich, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). While the situation and living conditions lived by children who live in poverty cannot be changed by the school, educators can definitely change their teaching practices to reach all children (Nieto, 2004). However, there are schools that have demonstrated remarkable success educating economically challenged children and Mexican American students (Edmonds, as cited by Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Similarly, as part of a study on effective practices, Moll (1988) reported his findings of outstanding teaching practices in two fifth grade classrooms. Both of the teachers had been identified by their principals and peers as effective with Mexican American children. One of the teachers taught in a bilingual classroom; while the other taught in a monolingual English classroom. Moll identified several characteristics that were common to both teachers. The first trait was substance and content in their teaching. They assumed their students were capable and competent, and they provided a challenging and rigorous curriculum. Secondly, they chose teaching materials that were meaningful and interesting to the students instead of using prepackaged curriculums.



Thirdly, they encouraged their students to use their own personal experiences to make sense of the classroom content. Relevant stories from the students' lives were integrated into the classroom discussions. Lastly, using sound educational interpretation, they developed curriculum that would meet the needs of their children. Consequently, their students often scored at or above grade level on school district's standardized testing measurements (Moll, 1988).

Further, "teachers create disciplined dialogues on subject matter. They critique and help each other become better teachers and they conduct research and question their teaching practices, with an eye toward constantly improving student learning" (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 200). In short "teachers use a pedagogy that establishes the relevance of classroom activities for students, responding to the students' culture and needs" (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 200), resulting in democratic classrooms that inspire learning activities where all students are engaged. "A culturally responsive teacher interprets the individual's behavior and manner of speaking as a part of the whole student and inventories these attributes as contributing to the positive inherent qualities of each and every student" (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 200).

Another study conducted by Trueba and Bartolome (1997) recommended teachers dismiss the idea that Mexican American children needed to be "fixed." Instead, they recommended teachers combine exemplary teaching practices with cultural and linguistic codes that were appropriate for Mexican American students. Their suggestions included using heterogeneous learning groups so that economically challenged children were not segregated from other more academically successful children and capitalizing

on the student's existing knowledge as well as valuing the language and life experiences of the children in their classrooms (Trueba & Bartolome, 1997).

For example, in *Lessons From High-Performing Hispanic Schools*, Reyes et al. (1999) presented undeniable evidence that current education conditions of low achievement for Mexican American students does not have to exist. Individual case studies of three elementary, three middle, and two high schools provide insight into the external, internal, and criterion performance conditions that maximize student learning in these high-performing Hispanic schools along the Texas-Mexico border. The students in the high-performing Hispanic schools are predominantly Mexican American from economically challenged backgrounds; many are recent immigrants or migrants. Yet, these students consistently score well-above-average on standardized tests (i.e., Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS) and have brought their schools numerous state and national awards for their outstanding accomplishments. Given the high dropout rates and early disconnection of Mexican American students in many schools, *Lessons* offers a different representation of this traditionally underachieving student population.

Reyes et al. (1999) noted the best practices found throughout the high-performing schools that represented eight important aspects related to Mexican American culture: (a) cross-curricular thematic units of study; (b) respect for ethnic diversity; (c) use of students' funds of knowledge and languages as bases of instructional strategies; (d) bilingual/bicultural teachers and staff; (e) involvement of parents and the community; (f) systematic assessment of student progress; (g) after

school and weekend programs for students and parents; and (h) academic teaming that includes teachers, administrators, parents, and other relevant community members.

Many of these instructional practices have been found to be pivotal factors of successful bilingual education programs serving student populations similar to those represented in the high-performing Hispanic schools (Cazden, 1988; García, 1994; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Valenzuela, 1999).

According to Reyes et al. (1999), high-performing schools serving Mexican Americans are very similar to other successful schools. Like effective schools in urban communities (Edmonds, as cited in Skrla & Scheurich, 2001), these schools are usually characterized as communities of learners where students come first, teachers set high expectations for all their students, and instruction is interactive and student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Research elsewhere has shown that in high-performing schools, teachers empowered students to become excited about and accountable for their own learning (Blase & Blase, 1994).

High standards and high expectations are central in being culturally responsive. “The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to ‘choose’ academic excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160). Teachers’ expectations have been found to have a significant impact on student achievement. According to this theory, low teacher expectations of minority students contribute to significant achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students (Ferguson, 2003; Goodlad, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

These studies indicated that Mexican American students learn better when high expectations are set by their teachers and when teaching and learning are collaborative (Reyes et al., 1999). Teachers' expectations, the patterns of interaction between teachers and students, and the subjective climate of schools play a major role in the educational experiences of students (Alva & Padilla, 1995).

Moreover, teachers who create learning environments to empower their students by providing opportunities for experimentation, innovation, discovery, and problem solving, are vital to the process (Reyes et al., 1999). Reyes et al. explained that students must "experience the personal satisfaction gained from constructing their own knowledge in a social environment or contributing to another's knowledge base and understanding." Additionally, "students are encouraged to select relevant information from their environment, interpret it through what they already know, and construct new meaning or apply what they have learned to new and different situations" (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 201). "When students are given a voice in deciding what and how they should learn, they begin to expect more of themselves and one another" (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 202).

The attitude of school personnel and society toward the cultural backgrounds of students affect their self-esteem. Respecting, including, and validating students' cultural heritages in the classroom and the school sends a message of equality that encourages students to feel proud and capable of meeting rigorous academic standards (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence. Culturally relevant teaching methods do not suggest to students that they are incapable of learning. These teachers provide intellectual challenges by teaching to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 123)

Culturally responsive teachers believe that all children can learn; therefore, they maintain high expectations for all students, regardless of where they teach or the backgrounds of their students (Zeichner, 2003). Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods believe that all their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 25). Above all, as Valencia (1997) also reported, such schools ignored the barriers to learning often associated with “deficit thinking.”

During the last two decades, numerous research studies have produced extensive information on effective schools (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Edmonds, 1979; García, 1999, Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Generally, the literature in effective schools serving Mexican American students, posit that teachers have high expectations for student achievement; teachers also emphasize the development and acquisition of literacy skills across content areas to heighten language and cognitive development. The school climate is one that is conducive to learning and one in which cultural diversity is celebrated. Regular feedback is provided to parents so monitoring student progress becomes a goal for teachers and parents (Reyes et al., 1999).

However, teaching practices alone do not create effective schools. As earlier effective schools studies reported, recent research confirms the significance of organizational variables, such as an inclusive leadership style that creates a sense of

community, bringing everyone into the learning process and preventing distancing of any stakeholders, whether that of faculty members, students, or parents and where the results on high-stakes assessments guide instruction (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Edmonds, 1979; García, 1999; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

Earlier studies have also noted the positive impact of high-stakes assessments often found in successful schools serving Mexican American students. In *Highly Successful and Loving Public Elementary Schools Populated Mainly by Low SES Children of Color*, Scheurich (1998) outlined focal beliefs and cultural characteristics that delineate these successful schools and that are based upon high-stakes accountability. In describing these schools, Scheurich (1998) stated,

In addition, these schools used high-stakes state test data as a whole-school accountability measure that drives instruction. Originally, this was a problem for me. I have long been an outspoken opponent of these tests because I felt that the research was abundantly clear on the negative effects. (p. 475)

The researcher emphasized an affirmed conclusion numerous times; schools that teach children of color can provide equitable teaching and learning when driven by systemic use of high-stakes assessments. He supports such findings by the comprehensive data collected in his study.

The work of Reyes et al. (1999) has also provided sound evidence of effective, results driven schools that equitably educated Mexican American students. As previously noted, these schools gauged their effectiveness based upon the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test results. This research was cited as a study that

documented accounts of “heroic schools that have achieved impressive results against formidable odds” (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has given an overview of the literature related to research that aims at improving the academic success for Mexican American students who live in *Colonias*; (a) changing demographics of Mexican American students in public schools, (b) cultural differences regarding the education of Mexican American students, and (c) studies focusing on successful or high-performing high-poverty schools serving Mexican American students. In order to create effective schools for students of all backgrounds, educators need to recognize that all students bring talents and strengths to their learning and should find ways to build on those talents and strengths (Cummins, 2001; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Chapter II provided a framework to better understand the reported practices and attitudes of teachers of Mexican American children, with particular regard to those students who live in *Colonias*. Given this background, it is possible to examine the following research questions:

1. What do these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful at Colonia Elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?

2. What **attributes** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?
3. What **instructional practices** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success among Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?



### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

I begin this chapter with a statement of the purpose of the study and the overarching questions for the research. I introduced the methodology through the important theoretical and analytic engagements that framed what I saw, the type of information that was collected, and the form of analysis and interpretation I foresaw. I then centered on the research method, specifically, the tools I employed during the data collection period.

To conduct this in-depth examination of successful Mexican American teachers' ways of understanding, teaching practices, and experiences (Merriam, 2002), the method of inquiry was interpretive. Data collection included conducting two semi-structured individual teacher interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), video taping segments of teaching practices, and one focus group session with the participating teachers. Interpretivism conceives of a world where there is a multiplicity of realities. Each individual perceives, understands, experiences, and makes meaning of that reality in different ways (Merriam, 2002). The overall aim of this paradigm is to understand others' experiences and relate them to one's own reality (Merriam, 2002). Interpretivists believe that reality is not objectively determined, but is socially constructed (Gubrium, & Holstein, 2003). The way one knows the world is through their experiences in that world.

In this interpretive study I was interested in finding out how teachers at an elementary campus located in the midst of a *Colonia* have achieved academic

recognition when more rigorous federal and state standards seemed to challenge even the most affluent areas of the state and country. Aware of the many challenges encountered in a *Colonia* school, I was ever so much more interested in the stories that teachers in the school had to tell about this success. This area which is inundated by so many shortages of what the rest of the country and state perceive as a right, people in *Colonias* lack the basic necessities such as running water and electricity, and where it is common for several families to share the same dwelling (Wilson & Guajardo, 1999).

In this elementary school, it was common to find Mexican American teachers of economically challenged Mexican American students helping their students succeed. Because the study was shared from a strength perspective, the term “economically challenged” was used instead of the commonly used terms such as “economically disadvantaged,” “low socioeconomic status” (SES), or “low-income.” As an interpretivist, I sought to understand how these teachers understand, experience, and made meaning of their world as it relates to teaching Mexican American children. It is both the descriptive characteristic and interpretive intent that makes an interpretive qualitative frame most fitting for addressing research investigating teachers’ perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences (Merriam, 2002).

My position in this study was founded on 25 years in education, in roles ranging from teacher to principal, and now a central office administrator, I have had many opportunities to observe teachers at their best and worst. Often, I thought about my own teaching practices, but a busy work schedule and single parent obligations had always limited meaningful reflection. In retelling these Mexican American teachers’ stories, I

began to explore my life experiences as a Mexican American woman, born and raised in Mexico until the age of 19, thus, with deep roots in two cultures. As a result, I embarked on this study and began to make sense of my own experiences as an educator. I trust that it has highlighted the value of a teacher's way of knowing and acting (Elbaz, 1991). By providing a stage for the voices of these culturally and linguistically diverse teachers, both the participants' and the researcher's, such explorations might encourage a more inclusive and self-affirming dialogue among all teachers, especially as it relates to the academic success of Mexican American children.

Educational reformers have drawn national attention to the Mexican American teacher shortage by providing demographic and empirical data that illustrate the racial imbalance within the teaching profession. However, few studies have explored, delved into, or described the stories and experiences of Mexican American teachers towards Mexican American students (Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Through this study, I provided a forum for Mexican American voices. For the purpose of this research, Mexican American is defined as those who are of Mexican decent, born in the United States. The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" is used when quoting an author.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What do these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful at Colonia Elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?

2. What **attributes** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?
3. What **instructional practices** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success among Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

During the course of this study, as researcher, I went beyond the portrayal of “effective teaching.” I explored the ways of understanding, teaching practices, and experiences that these Mexican American teachers brought to their Mexican American students.

Interpretive qualitative research methods were used to conduct this in-depth examination. Attributes and features of this research, as described by Merriam (2002), are the following:

1. Researcher strives to understand the meaning people have constructed around their world and their experiences,
2. Researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis,
3. Researcher who is concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products,
4. Researcher who tends to analyze their data inductively, and
5. Researcher who considers meaning as essential to the qualitative approach.

These fundamental tenets, along with the naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), guided the development of this study. Specifically, Guba and Lincoln

(1985) stated that qualitative study was like a “snapshot of reality,” “a slice of life,” or “an episode.” As such, qualitative research allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. In essence, this qualitative research is centered on the uniqueness of a particular situation, contributing to the underlying search of contextual depth (Merriam, 2002).

### **Research Design**

Inspired by the qualitative research conducted by Ladson-Billings (1994) in the text, *The Dreamkeepers*, I modeled this study after her work. Consequently, the classroom teacher was the unit of analysis. This interpretive qualitative study was conducted by means of naturalistic inquiry methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) to develop a better understanding of human behavior. I sought to understand how a group of Mexican American teachers perceived, understood, experienced, and made meaning of their teaching practices with Mexican American students in an academically successful school located in a *Colonia*. This study was also phenomenological in nature. I explored a particular phenomenon of individuals in reference to their experiences and their interpretive way of making sense of their surroundings (Patton, 2002). In addition, Patton (2002) identified information-rich cases as those from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling that is hence worthy of in-depth study. In parallel fashion to Ladson-Billings’ (1994) research, I adopted the approach to ask what can be learned from Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students who have produced academic achievement among their students.

As noted, the decision to study successful Mexican American teachers was in part motivated by Ladson-Billings' (1994) text. In this study, I sought to, in some measure, replicate her study on successful teachers of African American students and implement several of her research practices to study successful Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students. During her three-year study, Ladson-Billings noted the philosophies and actions of identified successful teachers of African American students and, with their help, proposed a model for culturally relevant teaching (CRT). By carefully documenting what these teachers did to reach these students, the author provided a useful and engaging account of ways to improve the learning of African-American students. Her study was grounded both in critical theory and interpretivism. Ladson-Billings identified the systemic reasons for the failure of African American children in public schools and was committed, through social action, to improve how they were taught. She sought to understand the teachers' work without developing a prescribed formula for successful teaching strategies. She engaged in ethnographic practices including teacher selection, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. Centered on the teaching pedagogies rather than the curriculum or the students, Ladson-Billings stressed that "it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 13). Focusing on Ladson-Billings' (1994) work, I have learned sound practices to construct this study's framework. *The Dreamkeepers* text served as foundation for my research.

### Site Selection

Located outside the Texas-Mexico border, the elementary school sits outside the limits of an urban city. For this study, the school was identified with the pseudonym of Colonia Elementary. Colonia Elementary is in the heart of a very impoverished area with many homes lacking the most important necessities such as running water, electricity and where it is common for several families to share the same dwelling. According to the latest census figures, Colonia, Texas, also a pseudonym, has a population of 5,543, and the medium household income is \$17,149. Persons under 18 living in poverty make up 54.2% of the population and less than 30% of the population has completed high school. Of the 350 grandparents living in households with one or more grandchildren under 18 years, 36.3% of them are responsible for their care. Persons who claim “English only” as the language spoken at the home are 4.7% of the population. The percentage of persons who claim Spanish as the language they most often use at the home is 95.3%. Sixty percent of the population in Colonia, Texas, is U.S. born. Seventy percent of the persons living in Colonia have lived there since 1995 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003b). Colonia, Texas, is one of 27 *Colonias* lying south of a large city in southwest Texas.

Colonia Elementary was selected due to its unique academic success and its student and teacher demographics. As reported by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), this campus has been rated as *Academically Unacceptable* on three separate years; yet in May of 2006, it received a rating of *Recognized*. One hundred percent of the 371 students are Hispanic. Ninety-

eight percent or 364 students were labeled economically challenged, and 80% or 297 students were identified as second language learners. In 2005-2006, the campus employed 32 classroom teachers. All teachers, as well as the leadership team consisting of a principal and assistant principal, are listed as Hispanic (TEA, 2006a).

### **Participants**

Similarly to Ladson-Billings (1994), teachers will not be identified as successful solely based on their students' standardized test scores. With this in mind, recommendations to participate in this study were done by parents, the campus principal, and peer teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Mexican American parents, the principal, and teachers from the proposed elementary school were asked to identify teachers whom they felt were effective in the teaching of Mexican American children. Parents were asked to provide reasons why they thought the nominated teachers were effective. The parent nomination process was conducted during a regularly scheduled parent meeting at Colonia Elementary. The principal and colleagues were asked to identify those teachers they believed to be most effective with Mexican American students and the criteria used to make the selection. The participant nomination and selection from the principal and colleagues included a letter describing the study, nomination process, and a nomination form. The principal completed and submitted the nomination forms for review. By following this method of purposeful sampling, the number of participants was determined after the nomination process had been completed. Based on the number of classroom teachers employed last year at Colonia Elementary, I had foreseen the participation of three to four teachers.



Because of the small sample, fixed resources, and time allowances, this inquiry focused on studying one phenomenon in depth, teachers' stories, reflections, and teaching experiences. Patton (2002) states:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to 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*. For example, if the purpose of an evaluation is to increase the effectiveness of a program in reaching lower-socioeconomic groups, one may learn a great deal more by focusing in depth on understanding the needs, interests, and incentives of a small number of carefully selected poor families than by gathering standardized information from a large, statistically significant sample... the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study. (p. 46)

Choosing to interview teachers from only one elementary school was done on the basis of the purpose and rationale for this study. As noted, the validity, meaningfulness, and insights that were generated from this qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the teachers selected than with sample size (Patton, 2002).

### **Data Collection**

As a means for data collection during this interpretive qualitative study, I conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group, as well as videotaped classroom practices. A semi-structured interview was used to learn how participants interpret particular aspects of their lives and experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005). To document their work, segments of their teaching were videotaped as a way to understand the patterns and routines of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Interviews and observations also served as a way to triangulate the data. I compared

statements made during the interview to observe teaching practices. Gathering data by interviews and classroom observations were methods that I found suitable because I was interested in other people's stories since stories are a way of knowing. Thus, the primary source of data was the teachers; primary units of analysis were drawn from the selected teachers.

Every word that people use in telling their stories is a reflection of their consciousness. Patton (2002) identified information-rich cases as those from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance to the purpose of the research. It was important for me to begin the interview with general questions, moving to more specific areas as the interview progresses. This is done to ensure that the participant, not the researcher, guides the content and pace of the interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It took four months of data-gathering using multiple data collection methods including participant nominations, interviewing, videotaped classroom observations, document review, field notes, and written and audiotaped journals kept by the researcher (Patton, 2002). The use of multiple method sources for collecting data produce richer data and make the findings more believable (Glesne, 1999).

#### *Interviews and Classroom Observations*

In part adapted from Ladson-Billings (1994), nominations and interviews with the teachers occurred in a four-phase process. Phase one was the teacher-selection. In phase two, I engaged in a 45-minute to an hour, semi structured interview (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In phase three, a one-hour focus group interview took place. Also, during this phase, segments of their teaching were videotaped. In the final phase of data

collection, a second interview was conducted for one hour to discuss different follow-up questions.

After the participants were identified and had agreed to participate, phase two, consisting of the first interview, began. These interviews were held at the city's public library at a convenient time as determined by each participant. During this phase, my focus was to build trust and form a relationship with the teacher (Fontana & Frey, 2005). It was important to meet and get to know the teachers prior to our sessions because as an executive director for instructional accountability, directly responsible for the implementation of state assessments, I needed to dismiss any predetermined concept teachers might have about me or my position. I wanted them to feel comfortable and not vulnerable so that they could share their experiences. I explained my motivation for conducting this study. As a former principal at this campus, I admired what they had been doing and I wanted to share their stories. Additionally, during the initial interview, a consent form (see Appendix A), describing the nature and purpose of the study and ensuring confidentiality of the information, was completed. Following an interview protocol adapted from Ladson-Billings' interview questions (see Appendix B), the questions addressed their ways of understanding, teaching practices, and experiences about their students. These interviews took approximately 45 minutes to an hour (see Appendix C for a sample interview). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

A focus group took place in phase three. Although I had anticipated this meeting to take one hour, we met for almost three hours. As with the initial interview, the focus

group was audiotaped and later transcribed. As part of this phase, a video taping in each teacher's classroom took place. An eight to ten minute segment of their teaching practices was taped by the researcher. Participants selected a segment of a lesson, which in their opinion illustrated the patterns and routines of the classroom. Students' faces were not be directly videotaped. The focus of the taping was on the teacher.

In the fourth and final phase, a second interview was conducted for one hour. This second interview was the ground for discussing follow-up questions from the initial interview.

#### *Focus Group*

This meeting provided an opportunity to gather as a group and to explore the accuracy of the information and interpretation of their realities. This phase facilitated the process for member checking, a crucial technique for establishing credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). As I had anticipated, this interaction provided an occasion for the participant to volunteer additional information that contributed to the conceptualization of the purpose of the study and shared additional beliefs and perceptions about their students collectively. In addition, the focus group was an informal opportunity to observe how the teachers respond to each other's experiences. Member checks were done throughout the interviews as well as the focus group, as I paraphrased what one or more teachers had said previously, either within the group or from the individual interviews, and asked if my understanding is accurate. In addition, after the analysis of the data, Chapter Five was emailed to each participant for input. Through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus groups, I looked at

participants' teaching practices, ways of understanding, as well as their views about the students they teach.

Furthermore, throughout the study, I continually monitored my perceptions and impressions through personal notes by keeping a journal. This self-monitoring served to correct any misconceptions and make me aware of possible biases. Using a variety of methods in research helps produce a more complete record of the events recorded. Different methods provide different data to be compared and triangulated. As a result, my recreation of what was experienced was more likely to resemble what actually had occurred, an important prerequisite to data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Written, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) derive from raw field notes through the process of analysis. I described it as through as I had been there. Analysis involves identifying "what's important." Transforming a large amount of data into a meaningful interpretation is a major challenge for the qualitative researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Considering this study's interpretive stance, the ultimate goal was to describe the context in which events occur. Qualitative researchers generate thickly descriptive analysis to persuade the reader that the interpretation is plausible and might or might not be found in other places and at other times (Geertz, 1973). Transcripts and notes are the raw data of qualitative research. They provide a descriptive record of the research, but they cannot provide explanations. The researcher has to make sense of the data by sifting and interpreting them. Data are usually preserved in their textual form and

“coded” to generate or develop analytical categories and theoretical explanations. In this case, teachers’ interviews were hand-coded to look for key words and phrases to search for developing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the purpose of coding procedures is the following:

1. Build rather than test theory.
2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data.
3. Help analysts consider alternative meanings of phenomena.
4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously.
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory (p. 13).

The formation of categories depends on a number of analytic methods, one of which is the constant comparison analytic process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach emphasizes interpretations that constantly evolve throughout the collection of data and examination of data in concentrated detail. The goal of this process is to create theory grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This begins with seeking indicators of categories in actions and events in a document, such as field notes, then naming those indicators by coding them. Coding involves asking questions of data, perhaps most fundamentally, “this is an example of what?” Consequently, these codes and the associated data in the document are compared to discover consistencies of meaning and distinctions between different codes. When consistency is found, the result is a coding category, which becomes more precise by making additional comparisons

with other data from the site. The researcher continuously creates notes in this process of comparisons, to record the process of category development. This continues until forthcoming data no longer modify the conceptualization, and thus the category is saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### *Trustworthiness*

In education, we have a great responsibility to our students and teachers to carry out research that is reliable, valid, and trustworthy. As leaders, we are to deliver research in such a way as to do justice to the lived realities of all involved (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2005). In this project, I had the opportunity to spend a considerable amount of time with several talented Mexican American teachers.

The researcher is accountable for the soundness of the reader's interpretation (Stake, 2005). To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, various procedures are employed, such as triangulation (Stake, 2005). Triangulation is the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation (Stake, 2005). It also serves to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the study is being seen and to identify different realities. It is important for targeted persons to receive drafts of the write-up revealing how they are presented, quoted, and interpreted. The researcher should listen well to these persons' responses for signs of concern (Stake, 2005). By triangulating multiple data collection sources through the use of audiotapes, interviews, taped classroom observations, and documents or artifacts, as well as the position of the researcher, the trustworthiness of this study was increased. The probability of a match between the lived realities and the constructed

realities or my representations will be strengthened through these techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

### *Research Timeline*

The research process began early spring 2007. I spent most of February and March securing consent through District and University approval processes and establishing relationships at the proposed campus once approval had been granted. From April through June, participants were nominated, individual teacher interviews and classroom observations were conducted, focus groups were held, and continuous data analysis was done. During August and September 2007, I began to develop analytic themes through the exploration of the data collected: taped interviews, videotaped observations, transcripts, field notes, and documents. Full transcription and more detailed analysis of data continued in October. Chapter V writing began by the beginning of December, while clarification and triangulation of data continued until the date of this publication. The data collection and analysis was conducted as follows:

February-April 2007: Gained access and consent, teacher selection process, and document review.

May-June 2007: Interviews 1 and 2, taped classroom observations, and focus group as well as ongoing data analysis.

August-September 2007: Developed analytic themes through the exploration of the data collected: taped interviews, videotaped observations, transcripts, field notes, and documents.



October-November 2007: Full transcription and further detailed analysis of data.

December 2007: Research conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

Many studies have probed deeply into quantitative data, but few have reported on the stories and routines of teachers who actually meet the needs of Mexican American students who live in *Colonias*. My interest was to explore their ways of understanding, teaching practices, and experiences that may have caused teachers to facilitate the academic success of their students. The use of oral narratives in educational research provides us with opportunities to learn about successful teacher practices. Using a variety of methods in research helps produce a more complete record of the events noted. Different methods provide different data to be compared and contrasted or triangulated. As a result, my recreation of what was experienced was more likely to resemble what actually occurred, an important prerequisite to data analysis.

Additionally, this work may contribute to the literature on Mexican American teachers and may have personal value to Mexican American teacher candidates who may possibly be encouraged by the representation of successful and culturally affirming teachers working in *Colonias*. Furthermore, the representations resulting from this research hold great promise in being significant to all participants, including the researcher, those researched and other stakeholders.

For researchers, this type of study needs to be replicated multiple times. We need to know much more about the practice of successful teachers for Mexican American and other students who have been underserved by our schools. “We need to

have an opportunity to explore alternate research paradigms that include the voices of parents and communities in non-exploitative ways” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 163). For practitioners, this study emphasizes the need to look closely in the classrooms of those teachers who exhibit teaching practices that encourage and produce student success and “to challenge those who suggest it cannot be made available to all children” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 163).

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explored the compelling success stories of four Mexican-American teachers who work with economically challenged Mexican-American students living in *Colonias*. These narratives present the participants' passions and insights about their experiences working at Colonia Elementary.

#### *What is the Colonia Experience?*

Just before the entrance to Colonia, Texas, there is the typical service station and sandwich shop found in most Texas cities. Traveling by car through the narrow streets, the preconceived notion of the small Texas town begins to vanish. A couple of blocks down on the left is a small Catholic church painted in pale yellow and surrounded by a well-kept, modest garden. Several blocks further down, the lived reality of this community becomes evident from the rusted cars sitting next to brand new ones, the sand and weeded front yards next to perfectly manicured ones, the foot-worn rutted paths instead of sidewalks, and the children playing with make-shift toys. Even in the midst of all of this, these children are happy. Their smiling faces slightly smudged with dust, lifted by the hot breeze from the unpaved streets, reflect their unawareness about what others may perceive as their "poor surroundings." It is not uncommon to see children cheerfully building racing cars out of discarded cereal boxes with plastic lids as tires. Early in the morning on this visit to Colonia, several small figures could be seen

walking through a field that separates the *Colonia* from the school. Boys and girls walk through the unlit field, ignoring the stray dogs.

Much like the homestead settlements that resulted from the land-rush activities of the 1880's, *Colonias* are today's answer to unending human urge to have a piece of soil that one can call their own and for the promise of the American dream. Cut from pieces of land not considered valuable, these 70 by 50 lots are *Colonias'* homesteads. A hodge-podge of house structures in grids of paved and unpaved streets can leave any visitor wondering where the development began and in which direction it ends. Lack of infrastructure leaves most homes without basic utilities and without the basic transportation avenues. While an outsider may view this scene as one of hopelessness and despair, others like the parents of children who attend Colonia Elementary indeed see it as the realization of the American dream.

### **A Bicultural Community**

During one of my visits to Colonia Elementary, I met Marcela Rodriguez, a 30-year-old mother of four. Like so many other families in Colonia, Marcela bought a quarter acre lot for \$6,000, paying \$100 a month. She and her 11 year old son have scavenged for plywood, sheetrock, and assorted building material to build a three-room home for the family. She moved from Mexico to Colonia, Texas, so her children could attend U.S. schools. Marcela's story is common to many of the families whose children attend Colonia Elementary. Families living in Colonia are part of communities on both sides of the border. Often they spend weekends and holidays with relatives in Mexico and on weekdays residing and attending school on the Texas side of the border.

Defining a *Colonia* student in Texas generally means a student who shares both Mexican American and mainstream U.S. culture and two languages – Spanish and English. For most children from *Colonias*, the school environment is their first and only consistent vestige of a “typical” student’s life in large cities and towns throughout Texas. The school is where the first opportunity to become a member of the mainstream takes place. Despite the collective identity of impoverished people who live in *Colonias*, these residents are people who exhibit a loyalty to this place, resilience, and an extraordinary desire to improve their life and their children’s future through education (Holz & Davies, 1992). This is the *Colonia* experience.

#### *The Road to Colonia Elementary*

As you turn off the highly traveled and commercialized State Highway 83, you immediately are introduced to the vast differences of life. Smooth pavement becomes worn and scabbled asphalt. Where the life on the highway may move at fast speed, life in the *Colonia* seems to be at a standstill. One and a half miles east of the stop light, Colonia Elementary is nestled in an area surrounded by mesquite trees and *cenizo* bushes blazing with silver leaves and deep purple flowers. In the scorching summer heat of south Texas, a sweltering breeze lifts papers, plastic bags, and other light trash making them cling to nearby link fences. This is the landscape of Colonia Elementary.

This *Colonia* community, in terms of economic growth, has little to offer. However, in terms of human and cultural value, these families offer their most treasured possession – their children. And, yes, to an outsider, life in this *Colonia* may seem stagnant. For the four teachers in this study, life in Colonia is full of promises and

dreams fulfilled. As it became evident through the participants' stories, the school in this *Colonia* community represents a secure fort, meeting place, or refuge away from the hardships of *Colonia* life. The school represents a place where *Colonia* students can learn, feel secure, and experience a sense of belonging.

#### *Journey at Colonia Elementary*

Interpretivism conceives of a world of multiple realities where each individual perceives, understands, and makes meaning of that reality in different ways (Merriam, 2002). With an overall aim to understand other's experiences, in this case four Mexican American teachers, the method of inquiry was interpretivism. Inspired by the qualitative research conducted by Ladson-Billings (1994) in the text, *The Dreamkeepers*, I modeled this study after her work. During her three-year study, Ladson-Billings noted the philosophies and actions of identified successful teachers of African American students and, with their help, proposed a model for culturally relevant teaching (CRT). By carefully documenting what these teachers did to reach these students, the author provided a useful and engaging account of ways to improve the learning of African-American students. Similarly, I sought to understand how a group of Mexican American teachers understood, experienced, and made meaning of their teaching practices with Mexican American students in an academically successful school located in a *Colonia*.

Although the main source of data collection was the in-depth, semi-structured interviews, other data were used for the purpose of triangulation. To ensure credibility, data were collected through classroom observations, a focus group, field notes, and the researcher's reflections. Nominations and interviews with the teachers occurred in a

four-phase process. Teacher selection was done during phase one. Participants were recommended to participate in this study by parents, the campus principal, and peer teachers. In phase two, a one-hour, semi-structured interview took place (Fontana & Frey, 2005). And in phase three, although planned for one hour, a focus group extended to almost three hours. Also during this phase, segments of the participants' teaching were videotaped. In the final phase of data collection, a second interview was conducted for one hour to discuss follow-up questions based on the informants' answers from the initial interview.

The data collection and analysis was conducted as follows:

February-April 2007: Gained access and consent, teacher selection process, and document review.

May-June 2007: Interviews 1 and 2, taped classroom observations, and focus group as well as ongoing data analysis.

August-September 2007: Developed analytic themes through the exploration of the data collected: taped interviews, videotaped observations, transcripts, field notes, and documents.

October-November 2007: Full transcription and further detailed analysis of data.

December 2007: Research conclusions.

Translating a large amount of data into a meaningful interpretation is a major challenge for the qualitative researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Trying to ease this task, data analysis began immediately with the first data collection. Following the completion of each individual interview, I listened to the

audiotapes, studied the field notes, and reflected on the interviews and classroom observations. With the assistance of my 19-year-old son, Jorge, I transcribed the audiotapes in order to familiarize myself with the data and as a result facilitate the identification of emerging themes or categories. I reviewed the thoroughness of the data transcript by listening to each taped interview and classroom observation while simultaneously reading the transcript in order to make any changes needed. As I continued to transcribe the interviews, I came to understand transcription as a process through which I was transforming myself – distancing myself from the interview situations and participants. Although challenging, I made the familiar *unfamiliar* so that the participants' voices would be heard.

Even though I initially felt prepared to successfully and effectively explore the interviews, transcriptions, and the analysis process despite limited experiences, I soon found myself drowning in a tumultuous sea of data, which at times blocked me from tracing a roadmap. I was a nervous and very inexperienced researcher! Finding meaning in data involved identifying patterns and themes. This task was very challenging. I looked for underlying issues and concepts in order to merge the data collected from the research instruments. Patton (2002) explained that an analysis was “the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns” (p. 144). As a result, the information was organized in a logical and meaningful way. The data were grouped by major category systems that were identified. The analysis of the data was guided by:



1. What do these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful at Colonia Elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?
2. What **attributes** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?
3. What **instructional practices** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success among Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

Answers to the research questions surfaced through the teachers' conversations, stories, and teaching practice examples. The findings of this analysis are detailed in this chapter.

In the first section of this chapter, **Profiles of Four Successful Mexican American Teachers**, I describe the teachers, their background, personal information, comments from those who nominated them, as well as segments of the initial conversation about their success as Mexican American teachers who serve children in Colonia. This information facilitated a broader perspective of each teacher in the context of the *Colonia* experience. In the second section, **Stories of Success in Colonia** provided the analysis of responses to the research questions obtained from participants' personal accounts gathered during the two individual interviews, through the conversations in the focus group, and their teaching practices observed during classroom visits. Field notes and reflections were interwoven in their responses in an attempt to describe the setting and atmosphere where these stories took place. In the last section,

**Identification of Patterns and Themes**, I analyzed the data and identified common themes across all participants. Themes emerged through coding and categorization.

### **Profiles of Four Successful Mexican American Teachers**

In Texas, TAKS scores seem to be the main measure of academic success. However, as I began to analyze the data of what the individuals in Colonia defined as successful, it became evident that TAKS scores alone did not define success. It was not just the fact that these children were doing well academically. In the context of the *Colonia*, these insiders defined a successful teacher as someone who “knows the family situation,” “leads by example,” “caring but with high expectations,” “passionate and dedicated,” and “understands the needs of our students.” These Mexican American successful teachers in Colonia Elementary knew the strengths of the students and their families and played into those strengths to achieve success. When comparing the campus 2006-2007 TAKS results to Diana’s and Raquel’s students, the only participants in TAKS tested grades, it was evident that the definition of success also included academic success as measured by TEA (Table 5).

Table 5. Academic Excellence Indicators for 2006-2007 Grades 3 and 5 TAKS Scores

	Colonia Elementary		Diana/Grade 3*		Raquel/Grade 5*	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
All Students	82%	89%	89%	100%	72%	80%
Hispanic	82%	89%	89%	100%	72%	80%
Economically Disadvantaged	82%	89%	89%	100%	72%	80%
Limited English Proficient	73%	86%	80%	93%	63%	71%

\*Diana & Raquel, personal communication, February 24, 2008.

Source. Texas Education Agency (2007a).

While Fatima and Sylvia teach pre-kindergarten and first grade, they also showed evidence of academic success in the LAS results (Table 6). As a result, four Mexican American female teachers participated in this study. Their profiles are presented in the order of the initial interviews. The informants, who ranged in age from the early 30s to mid-50s, were raised in Colonia Neighboring City, Texas. All teachers have a Bachelor's degree and are certified with a bilingual endorsement. Each teacher holds other certifications for areas such as gifted and talented and reading. After teachers were identified by other teachers, principal, and/or parents, I notified them of their nomination and invited them to participate. The email was later followed up by a phone call. Although six teachers were nominated, only four teachers accepted the following invitation:

Congratulations Mrs.\_\_\_\_\_, you are one of six teachers who were designated as successful teachers at your campus by parents, principal, or other colleagues. It must give you much professional satisfaction knowing that you are appreciated as a valuable member of the faculty. Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Table 6. Language Assessment Scale (LAS) Results for End of Year 2006-2007

	Fatima/PreK*		Sylvia/Grade 1*	
	English	Spanish	English	Spanish
Increased minimum of 1 scale score	100%	100%	95%	91%
Reached highest scale score - 5	25%	75%	46%	89%

\*Fatima & Sylvia, personal communication, February, 28, 2008.

*Note.* LAS assesses four primary language subsystems: phonemic, lexical, syntactical, and pragmatic. It incorporates diverse measurement types, content areas, and scoring procedures into two English-language and one Spanish-language forms. In order to maintain confidentiality, the participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Table 7 provides demographic data on the teachers involved in this study.

Table 7. Profiles of Teachers in the Study

Description	Fatima	Sylvia	Diana	Raquel
Age	31	45	55	49
Gender	F	F	F	F
Ethnicity	Mex Am	Mex Am	Mexi Am	Mexi Am
Spanish Fluency Level	Very Fluent	Fluent	Fluent	Fluent
Education	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
Certification	Elem Ed Bilingual Early Childhood	Elem Ed Bilingual	Elem Ed Reading, Bilingual Gifted/Talented	Reading/Bilingual Gifted/Talented
Grade Level (2006-2007)	Pre Kinder	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Nominated by	Principal/Peer	Principal/Parent	Principal/Peer/Parent	Principal/Peer
Years at Campus/Total Experience	9/9	7/17	2/14	9/9
Pathfinder (Years)	3	7	2	4

### *What Has Influenced the Success of These Four Teachers?*

Wanting to offer a clear and accurate portrayal of each participant, I introduce the teachers separately and, through much description, begin to share their stories of success in teaching Mexican American children who live in *Colonias*. What has caused their success? The very fact that this school serves *Colonias* is very important. As I conducted the literature review for this study, I found numerous studies about *Colonias* but mostly in the area of health care, housing, and urban development. I did not find studies carried out about *Colonias* that focused on student academic success. It is those untold stories I wanted to uncover. I described the teachers' background and experiences through details of their classrooms, daily routines, and qualities of teaching that make

them successful. By also adding nomination comments, these teachers' well-established and respected positions in the community are revealed. Following a description of each of the participants, a short segment of their interview offered an opportunity to begin to hear their voices.

On Thursday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, I conducted the first interview. Trying to find a place that would be easy to access for these teachers, I suggested the city's public library which is located mid-town. The site was agreeable to all participants. I selected a table in an out-of-the-way section of the library on the second floor. As a beginning researcher, I was nervous about everything. Would the tape recorder work? Would the teachers be receptive, at ease with me? Would my questions address my research questions?

Teachers were asked to talk about themselves, their education, their teaching experience, and their upbringing. I wanted to know how their upbringing and early schooling compared with that of the children living in Colonia. I also asked them about what they thought had facilitated their success with the children attending Colonia. In addition, they were asked to portrait the children from Colonia Elementary. I was looking for insight into the building blocks that had produced academic success in this *Colonia*. To establish a positive rapport with each participant, I began each interview with this statement, "I admire what you have been doing at Colonia Elementary and I want to share your stories."

**Diana**

Diana seemed calm and yet nervous about the interview. When we initially talked on the phone to set up the interview, she expressed reservation in participating in the research because she was going on vacation during the month of July. She was ready to schedule the interview as soon as possible. She wanted to make sure that she fulfilled the commitment. I felt her concern was indication of her dependable character.

It was the last day of school for the students when I met Diana at the entrance of the public library. Since we had not met in person, I told her that I would be carrying a book bag with the district's logo and I would be close to the main entrance. By the time Diana arrived, I had already set up the tape recorder and tried it out. Everything was ready.

Diana, a third grade teacher in her second year at Colonia Elementary, was nominated by the campus principal, four teachers, and two parents. Diana, 55, was a veteran teacher of 14 years. Slim, tall, and distinguished looking, she had a commanding presence. Diana was a very dynamic person who said what she thought. Previously, she taught in another local district that also served a high percentage of economically challenged Mexican American children. She identified herself as a Mexican American teacher and a fluent Spanish speaker. The Colonia Elementary principal described her as

a leader in her grade level, a good disciplinarian, willing to learn new teaching strategies, and extremely dedicated. Diana is an instructional leader who assists other teachers with the implementation of the curriculum. She leads by example. She is respected by her peers.

A parent said in Spanish, “Es una persona que les inculca mucha confianza a los niños y los enseña con mucha paciencia. Es estricta.” (She was a person who instills trust in the children and who taught with much patience. She was strict). Diana, however stern and distant she seemed at times, was respected in this *Colonia* community because of the way she treats the students and parents. As a teacher at Colonia Elementary, Diana believed in providing the best education for students living in Colonia:

I have extreme high expectations of all students. There needs to be a relationship. They need to be successful in academics but society as well. I remind them about the manners and courtesy that our culture is known for. If a student walks by without returning a greeting or acknowledging one, I stop the student and have a talk with them about the need to be friendly so that people will be friends to them. I think this is very important.

Diana was raised in Colonia Neighboring City. She attended Catholic schools. After high school graduation, she married a man in the military. She has lived in Europe, Colorado, Mississippi, and Illinois. After raising her children and returning to Colonia Neighboring City, Diana went back to college. She graduated from the local university with a Bachelor of Science in Education and an endorsement in bilingual education and a certificate in gifted and talented education. She told me that since she started her teaching career later in life, she was not planning to pursue a master’s degree.

I asked Diana why she chose to teach in Colonia Elementary. Somewhat hesitant, she said,

I think because it’s very rewarding because...we see some kind of results that’s one of the most rewarding feelings that, I guess it’s for my own personal reasons, because it’s basically rewarded. These kids have...oftentimes are already labeled as “they can’t do it” and I just feel like any child that is put in the

right environment and pushed as much as possible can make it and I just felt I might be able to make a difference there.

Despite Diana's strict look and firm demeanor, our conversation revealed a warm and caring teacher with great confidence in the success of her students.

When I asked Diana about the distinctiveness of the children living in Colonia, she said,

It bothers me to see sad children. There are so many of them out there and what can I do? Some have so many problems at home that it's unreal. When I hear about sexual, physical, and mental abuse cases, my heart goes out to them. That is not to mention the other problems they have to deal with on a daily basis: drugs, no food, electricity, fighting, and every conceivable problem. And I admire our students! They come to school ready to learn. You can motivate them very easily. They're eager for praise and love. They want someone to listen to them and show that they care.

### **Fatima**

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, I conducted the second interview. Fatima, the youngest of all the nominated women, is in her early 30s. She had nine years of teaching experience. Colonia Elementary had been her only assignment since she graduated from the local university with a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies with bilingual education specialization. Fatima had an easy smile and bright, serene eyes. She grew up in a working class community where everyone knew everyone. At points, she received public assistance. Very fluent in Spanish, Fatima also described herself as a Mexican American teacher.

Fatima, a pre-kindergarten teacher, was nominated by the campus principal and two of her peers. Colonia Elementary principal said this about Fatima,



Fatima is extremely caring. She works extra hard to get across to students so they will understand the material she is presenting. She does this in a very caring and presentable way. The students love her. She never raises her voice. She is always looking for new ways to teach them and reach them. She is so diversified and motivated. She is an excellent teacher and has the most patience I have ever seen with children. Her children see this and want to do things to please her.

A co-worker supported the principal's statements, "Mrs. Fatima goes far and beyond the call of duty...She is usually working after hours to improve her classroom environment which in turn has a positive impact in her students' learning."

When I asked Fatima about her upbringing, she told me that she came from a similar background as the children she taught.

We're a family of five children, myself included. We come from a low-income family. When we were growing up, it was basically my mom, the one that would work and she would work a lot of hours and it was just basically us and I'm the oldest. I'm the one that was in charge of taking care of all the little ones and we come from a very humble home and it was hard growing up but I feel that I've pleased my mom.

She also talked about the schools she attended as a young girl and how she was influenced to become a teacher.

I've been to President Elementary then I went to Doctor's Middle School then I went to Doctor's High School and through the teachers that I've had throughout the years, that's what really motivated me to be a teacher...because I feel that that was something, when we were in elementary that was something that we couldn't speak Spanish "Que no. You can't speak Spanish, you can't speak Spanish. It has to be English, English, English." And I felt that the children really needed to have a really strong foundation in their native language that they could succeed so I really went by (pause) that's what I really wanted, bilingual education then I started teaching in pre-kinder.

I asked Fatima why she continued to teach at Colonia Elementary. She explained to me that since it was her first teaching assignment, it is where she had "planted her roots." Fatima has taught at Colonia for nine years.

I really like the community. I really like working with the children. I know that a lot of people say that “God, why do you work all the way over there in the south? Why? Why?” It’s like, because I love it, I love working there. [I] like the kids. They’re eager to learn and (unknown)...I love it, the kids are eager to learn....I really like that the parents are really, really helpful. I really like it and our school is like a family. We all work together from pre-kinder all the way to fifth grade and our administration is wonderful and I really like it. I’m really happy where I’m working at and our kids need teachers that have the passion to teach.

I enjoyed Fatima’s fresh approach to teaching. She was positive and committed to her students. Fatima had a smile that exudes confidence and warmth revealing the love for her job and her students.

Fatima spoke in a soft voice. This is how she described her students in Colonia Elementary. “I enjoy working with *Colonia* students. I believe they are great and intelligent students but too often teachers view them differently. I can identify with them and this is where I feel I can make a difference.”

### **Raquel**

On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, I interviewed Raquel, 49, a single Mexican American woman who came to teaching after working in accounting for over ten years. Colonia Elementary was Raquel’s first teaching assignment. Raquel and Fatima began teaching at the school at the same time and have taught there for the last nine years. Raquel, a fifth grade teacher, described herself as a Mexican American who speaks Spanish. She was medium in stature with a round face. She had short wavy hair, wears glasses, which disguise her sympathetic eyes. She held a bachelor’s degree, bilingual certification and a gifted and talented certificate.

Colonia Elementary principal and co-workers nominated Raquel with similar statements attesting to her success and dedication to her students. The principal wrote this about Raquel:

The way Raquel teaches and her approaches are all based on her expertise as a gifted and talented teacher. You would think she is teaching GT students by the wonders she does with her students. She's caring for her students – as if they were her own. She does not have any and those are hers. The students know it and they absolutely love her. They sense it and feel it. She cannot do enough for them. She tries new techniques, strategies, and styles.

One of the teachers who nominated her said,

She has passion and dedication that is needed to teach in Colonia. She is compassionate to the circumstances and challenges that our families are faced with over the year... [She] get[s] to know the family situation, and provide necessary support for our students...

Raquel provided her home phone number to her class in case students had questions or problems with their homework, or needed help with personal problems. She believed the following:

In order to work with *Colonia* students, the individual is required to be sensitive, caring, open, firm, and dedicated. I call or make visits to their homes as needed. As a teacher, I feel I often act as a mother to them because some of them need so much love and attention. But this does not mean that I ease up on them; I am tough but fair and require nothing but the best. I am sure I'll never know everything I've been to them, but I do know that I'm called to do more than teach them. I'm here to make a difference in their lives.

When I asked Raquel about her experiences growing up, she told me she had a good education.

We grew up in, actually a barrio household. We had, our culture was Mexican American where we grew up, I can say we were not rich, but we were middle class. We had a good upbringing; our parents instilled very good morals....I had my first elementary years in City Elementary and then went to Captain Junior High, Gateway High School, where I graduated. Unfortunately, I didn't go to

college right away. I left [to] Houston and I did some accounting over there. When I got back about ten years later, I decided to get my bachelor's in education and at first I didn't think I was going to like it but now I understand that it was be the best thing I could have done. I love it!

As I did with the other participants, I asked Raquel why she had remained at Colonia.

I decided to come back to Colonia Neighboring City. There's big culture difference because there's so many different ethnic groups in Houston and I saw the need as far as needing someone to teach our culture, the Mexican American, because living in a big city, you understand there is a lot of diversity, and not only that, they put you down...not [being] educated you will never get to the top of the line. So I came back to Colonia Neighboring City and I had the opportunity to go back to school...I decided to stay and somebody (unknown) gave me the opportunity to teach at this campus and from there on I stayed and I've been happy with my children that I'm teaching.

This is how Raquel described her students in Colonia Elementary.

I think *Colonia* children are...maybe the most challenging to work with but I enjoy working with them. It's not as bad because I understand where all this is coming from. It takes someone that is caring and puts them first and really wants them to get ahead and not give up. Everyday, I remind them why their parents send them to school – to have a better future because that's why many of they came to Colonia.

It was a pleasant interview as I listened to a committed teacher sharing her stories about her students. Raquel's interview was reassuring. Her conversations reminded me of my time as a campus principal. Often after school, I met with teachers to converse, without an agenda, but to just listen. By listening to them share their daily teaching experiences, it would revitalize my own excitement about being the campus principal.

### **Sylvia**

That same day about an hour later, I interviewed Sylvia, the last of the participants. Sylvia was a very energetic Mexican American middle-aged woman. She

was tall in stature and graying prematurely. Sylvia has “tom- boyish” mannerisms and loves to smile. She was friendly and expresses concern for others. She walked and talked in a confident manner. She was soft spoken when speaking in English, but much more expressive when speaking in Spanish. When speaking about her vocation, about her students and their parents, and their families, she was passionate and effusive. This was her seventh year teaching first grade at Colonia Elementary. Before coming to the school, Sylvia taught for ten years prior to leaving the profession for three years to work for a publishing company. As the other participants, she holds a bachelor’s degree with a bilingual certification. She would love to continue her education and dreams of a doctorate in education. However, as a single parent with two teenage children, she felt they must be her priority.

Sylvia was nominated by her principal and two parents. When nominated, the principal wrote, “Genuine knowledge of second language learner strategies.” One of the parents described her as a fair and honest teacher. *“Es una maestra muy justa y honesta.”*

In her nomination, the campus principal had these comments about Sylvia:

Sylvia is very determined to making a difference. She’s very strict and firm with them, but I know she cares for them. She’s a hard worker. She comes early and leaves late. She’s very committed. I can’t say enough about Sylvia other than she is on every committee or program that will help student achievement.

I asked Sylvia about her experiences growing up. She said,

I went to an elementary school in Pasadena, Texas, from kinder-3<sup>rd</sup> grade. We then moved to Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico. I was in the Pan-Americano for only one year in Tampico. We then moved to Villa Aldama, Tamaulipas, Mexico (a very small rural town)...I went to this elementary (Enrique C.

Rebsamen) from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>. In this school I learned my second language, Spanish. We then moved to Colonia Neighboring City. I attended LJC Jr. High School for one year and then my parents moved us to Saint Thomas High School where I graduated in 1980....At a local university, I graduated with a bachelors degree in general education and bilingual education in 1987.

Sylvia talks about her work with *Colonia* students:

Any teacher or caring person can work with *Colonia* students. But you have to want to. I always make home visits and ask parents to come and observe their children and help in the classroom so they will become involved with their child's education. Throughout the years, I've made it my business to find out about my students' family situation. Year by year at least three-fourths come from a one-parent family or children who are being raised by grandparents or other close relatives.

There seems to always be fighting. Families fight and a lot of this behavior comes into the classroom from home. A lot of these students come from homes where drugs are common where guns are readily available, where moms and even sisters are call-girls and there is a lot that the child is exposed to. Some students cannot walk in, sit down or be close to each other without a verbal or sometimes physical contact. But I am changing all that; it's just taking time and patience on my part.

I then asked her why she had chosen to teach at Colonia.

Actually, a friend of mine called me. She was a principal at the time and she asked me if I would apply for a new position that had been created for this particular school. I was in the process of personally changing my life during this time so I wanted to get back into teaching. I had left for 3 years and I was working with a publishing company and I went, filled out the papers, got interviewed and actually on my way to a presentation in San Antonio, I was called and said that I had been recommended for this position and I accepted it and I've been there already for seven years.

When I asked Sylvia about the uniqueness of the Mexican American children who attend Colonia Elementary, she said,

In our particular area, I feel that, in our area in particular, our students like I said our school is their haven because some of our children sometimes don't know what they're going to go back to at home, sometimes they don't even know who's going to be home....Are they going to sleep in the same house and

sometimes even is there going to be food on the table? That is one of the main concerns that I want to say of the entire area at least as, 80, 90% of our students go through that, yes, under the security of not knowing yet they know that the school is always there, that it's not going to disappear and the teachers are there. They might not have it at home, but they do have that security at school.

Sylvia's joy and enthusiasm about teaching at Colonia was indeed very evident. The interview was an enjoyable and informative.

Sylvia, as the other three teachers, was also responsive to the population she served:

The students that attend Colonia are happy children, polite and courteous. These students are eager to learn and they are respectful. I hardly have any referrals. People don't believe me but that's because we [teachers] understand the students, their backgrounds and we instill in them that in our culture, we treat people with respect.

After these initial conversations, I felt I had a general sense about these Mexican American teachers and an early understanding about their success with the children in this *Colonia*. Rooted in Mexican American families and cultural backgrounds, these teachers seem to have used their childhood and family experiences to instill a sense of learning in the children that entered their classrooms. Their conversations conveyed their passion for enriching the lives of students attending Colonia Elementary.

In addition, I also felt more secure about my ability to conduct an interview that produced useful data for the study. As I transcribed the interviews, I understood transcription as a process through which I was transforming myself – distancing myself from the interview situations and participants, or, as I thought at the time, cutting myself out of the interviews.

### Stories of Success in Colonia

These four Mexican American teachers spoke with great pride about the success that has been experienced by the children in Colonia. When I met with them, they spoke with much eagerness and great satisfaction about their own journeys in education. Mostly, they spoke of all their students' success.

The answers to the research questions evolved from the interviews, focus group, class observations, as well as field notes. To provide continuity in answering these questions, I will share some of the most salient responses from my informants.

#### *Research Question 1*

What do these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful in this Colonia elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?

When I asked Diana to describe the children who attend Colonia Elementary, she responded after a few moments of reflection. Diana went on to say,

Overall academically, vocabulary, and kind of background knowledge. Their experiences are so limited they don't have a lot of, for example, just going simply to the mall or the theaters, things that the average child has seen weekly. For them, it's just never been experienced. That's not what their focus is. It's like trying to get them out and say "This is important. This is important."

I then asked Diana to give me an example on her daily interactions with her students; she paused, and then answered,

There's a lot of interaction. A lot of the students in our classes have a lot of issues coming in from home, single parents. For example, I have a child who had a lot of emotional, has a lot of emotional issues. He's, he saw when he was little his father almost kill his mother. So when he comes into the classroom, you know, he's not only (unknown) to try to get him to be academically successful



but just dealing with his emotions from minute to minute. He'll walk in, he's in a very good mood and then something happens and he just goes, completely shuts off and in the past I know that he was struggling tremendously. He's very bright... he actually got an 88 on his math. He's very good at math. He's very good with science and stuff but he struggled with the reading but he did pass the reading, barely, barely passed it so I mean it just gave him a very good, his self-confidence, it empowered him to feel like "Hey, I'm O.K." and I know one day he came in, towards the beginning of school, middle of the school year and we're just interacting with our classes and he goes "You know what?" and I said "What?" he says "I'm a genius." I said "Yes, you are."

When asked to describe one of her students who she thinks had been successful, Diana quickly began to describe a little girl,

I have a little girl who has struggled since kinder; she's been retained once already. This year, she's made great strides in her academics. She's passing and I was very happy with her math score...I didn't think she was going to make it at all, she barely could...it takes her a long time to grasp the information and she got an 85 on her math test. I was very, very proud of her and now she's, you know, we're doing double-digit multiplications and she's just going there with the class. She's just part of the class. She's just humming along with like the rest of them are. So I think that she has made great strides. The reading, she still struggles. She did not pass; she missed it by one so I'm going to have her this summer. I'm going to work with her but I think that, you know, there's certain areas where maybe they're going to be stronger and maybe I'll have to work with the others and just kinda have to wait but she's come a long ways.

Just as I had asked Diana, I also asked Fatima to detail any of characteristics that the children at Colonia Elementary bring to the classroom as a group. With a big smile on her face, she promptly responded,

Their culture. How they're brought up, their culture, their, that they're all (unknown), like they all, their own individual selves but they all have the love for learning and they all have the love for their Spanish and they're all eager to learn English. They all want to learn. (unknown) "Yes, yes, that's why we're here at school, so we can learn both of the languages." And it's a lot [of] their culture, what they see at the house, what they learn at the house, their vocabulary that they bring. I learn from their vocabulary, the vocabulary that they use at home I learn from their vocabulary too and [that is] something I really enjoy... Their language, their background, their family background...

I also asked Fatima to give me an example of her daily interactions with her students; she took a moment to think, and then answered,

Some of them come from dysfunctional families and there's a lot of, like the kids tell us the stories about what happens at home so they really need like a role model, somebody to look up to in school and like, they're always telling us stories about like this happened, this happens and I try to explain to them like 'Yes, yes, but here at school you're safe. We're going to work together and whatever you need, the teacher's here for you.' And it's really important for them to feel that they're loved at school, not just at home (unknown) at school and that they have somebody to look up to and I feel an endowment because like, once, like right now at school and then they were like 'Umm, am I going to see you teacher?' I'm like, 'Yes, we're going to see each other next year.' 'But we want to be in your class.' 'No, next year you're going to be in another class but I'm still going to be here for you if you need something, teacher's here for you.' And you really need to have a strong interaction with your children so that they can learn and they can be successful.

I then asked Fatima to describe one of her students who she thinks had been successful.

Again, she took a few minutes to think and then began to give me a detailed description.

There was this little girl that started at the beginning of the year. When she started at the beginning of the year she just didn't want to come to school at all. She would cry a lot and she would kick and 'No, I wanna go with my mom, I wanna go with my mom, I wanna go with my mom!' and then as we, as the first two weeks progressed, I worked a lot with her like 'No, this school is going to be lots of fun. You're going to learn a lot and make lots of little friends.' And she was like 'No, no, no, no' but then after the first six weeks I saw like, when we started introducing letters and sounds I saw a little light go on in her little head and she got all into it she was like '(unknown) I want to learn all the letters teacher.'

And as we progressed and I monitored her, I saw that she learned all her letters and her sounds and I started teaching her the syllables to see just how far she can go, how far she can go and yesterday I was teaching her like '(unknown) mira si pones la 'm' con la 'a' (unknown) ma." And she was just like "Ma, ma, ma, ma." ... 'Now you put them together, they're gonna become friends and make them form a word.' And she was like 'Si teacher, yo quiero leer come tu teacher.' ... I started giving her little books and I started working with her.... And I was so surprised because she was even starting to read in English because I do Spanish and English. I have two groups in Spanish and one in English, so she

would hear me, what I was doing with my English [group]. She was always there, she was always eavesdropping and eavesdropping...and then I saw her just one day, I was reading with my English group and she was like, she got the book and she was like 'The cat is...' and I was like (gasp). '(unknown)' So that was a child that really touched my life. This year, and that I know she's going to be really successful.

Fatima's response illustrated the expectations that she has of her students. Through her lessons, she provides the tools for her students to excel beyond what is expected at this grade level.

As with the other participants, I also asked Raquel to characterize the Mexican American children who attended Colonia Elementary.

Colonia kids, children, they're all different...some of them are struggling. They have a lot of need. Some of them probably don't even have light. They don't even have water. They come to school with very little. We have to; it has to be motherly, what we're putting into them. Their characteristics, everybody's different. Some of them are very good, are very intelligent. Some of them are struggling and they know it's hard for them and they don't want to learn but we have to give them some motivation. I think that's what the thing is, that you have to sometimes have to sit with them for them to understand that you want them to be there. You want them to be successful and some of them struggle and some of them are saying that 'I don't want to do it because I don't have to do it' and you have to instill in them that there is an importance in education.

I also asked Raquel to give me an example on her daily interactions with her students; she took a moment to think, and then answered,

They're very important because they get to know me. We respect each other. I think that's one of the things that we have to learn as teachers, that we have to respect them first so that they can respect us and what I see that once we gain their respect, they're willing to do what you ask them to do, to learn what they need to learn. And I see them grow and grow as far as, this year I had the opportunity to let all my students, I always ask them to write something to the fourth graders when they're coming up and I had the opportunity to read their compositions and most of them said that they were thankful to be with me because they learned what they needed to learn and they learned to respect me.

As I asked her to describe one of her students that she deemed successful, she turned her head slightly away from me and gazing at the nearby windows after a few minutes she said,

O.K. one of my students that came in, he was considered to be a GT [gifted and talented] student but for some reason, last year, he didn't care. This year, when he came in, I pushed him hard and I expected him to do, his goals have to be high and as a matter of fact this year when he was leaving he became one of our top scholars. He also was one of my top commended students in every single level in TAKS. He, everything, and everything he would do, he would always give it back to me and I would say 'Do it again, you can do better.' And...when he left he said 'Ma'am, you know what? Someday I'm going to be, go up there, because I know I have my high goals up there.' So that's one of the students I can really tell you he grew from one grade to another, not only academically but also in maturity.

As I did with the other teachers, I asked Sylvia about her daily interactions with the children in Colonia. With eagerness and excitement in her voice, she said,

Everyday interactions, you know, that as teachers we have many hats, we teach, we're moms, we're counselors, we become sometimes even the dad because we're the ones with the disciplinary hand and we need to understand that rules need to be followed and that there are consequences and rewards. Examples, um, I can't think of examples. Well, basically I know that in the mornings when we would go in, the children are happy to see you, they give you hugs and sometimes, we're not supposed to, you cannot interact with the child and push the child away and not be reciprocal, they're just so loving. Our children in our campus feel very loved. I guess they feel, in a way, our campus or their school is their haven because they get a lot of attention and they know that we love them, and I'm talking about first grade, actually no, the entire school. Our children like the school. They feel like, they like coming to school and it's just being there, being present...then knowing that we're there for them. It can be a cut. It can be a tooth is falling off or 'Can I go to the doctor?' because our nurse is called 'doctor' and it's, I don't know, the children are just loving.

I also asked Sylvia to describe one of her students who she thinks has been successful. Pausing for a few minutes as though she was having trouble choosing one student, she responded with compelling enthusiasm.

It's a female, beautiful little girl...very bright, very astute. I'm pretty sure she's GT [gifted and talented] as she has all the characteristics. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to bring in the mother for permission to have her tested but she's, she manages both languages very well. She came in from kinder already reading English but yet she never stopped reading Spanish because she would trade with the kids and take books from the library and my personal library in the classroom. She's an only child and this year they just had their second baby and she was very happy since it was a baby boy. She comes from a very violent, the father is very abusive but only to the mother not to her but she's lived in that environment but yet, even with those setbacks that she has, she's always very happy. She's very eager to learn and you would never even guess that anything was going on at home or that she had any type of problems because she has that good girl lucky smile and happy feeling so you would never think of it. The only thing is that she shares information with us as teachers, she feels secure and she (unknown) in arms so everything's O.K. but very bright. She thinks out of the box that I come in and sometimes go 'O.K. I had no thought of it that way, but she's right.'

### **Home Language**

These successful Mexican American teachers held the students and their parents in high regard. It was apparent that these teachers let students express themselves in the language they feel most comfortable. As I conducted the classroom observations, I noted that despite the unwritten rule that by the second grade, English was the language used almost exclusively for instruction, Raquel and Diana accepted the students' responses in either English or Spanish. It was evident that the children knew that if they were not able to fully express themselves in English, their answers in Spanish were just as valid. Teachers draw on the students' use of their first language and build upon what learners already know. Sylvia said that in first grade "we need to carry them...into the English making the transition and not forgetting their first language, their Spanish. So, carrying them both together across the level." They see their students as competent individuals.

The participants also shared their experiences about working with parents. They recognized that without the parents' input, their work would be harder. Raquel talked about the parent meetings that are regularly held in the school. "We meet with the parents; parents and teachers, we share our expectations; parents and teachers, we set our goals and we all get involved." Diana elaborated on her personal relationship with parents.

I've always work with parents. I've always felt like I need to have a good rapport with parents. And no matter where I've been I keep in contact with them. And...if there are problems or successes to share, I keep in constant communication with them, asking for their support and usually they do support. And, so that's part of who I am. Parents are a big part of my process and the children's success...I need to contact parents. And a lot of that has to be positive. And usually when I approach them is with a positive tone. Whether the child is struggling or misbehaving is to start with a positive. And then "how can we, we work out with this situation?"... And...I think that constant communication helps tremendously. 'cause they know what's going with their child.

Similar comments were made during the focus group. Raquel explained,

(parental) involvement to support us comes in various ways because many times they can't help them at home because they don't have the language (English). But their support comes in other forms, like they may sit down with them to read. They can't read English but they'll sit with them. They'll ask for the homework folder. They make sure that the homework gets done. Or, they make sure they go to bed early during the school week.

While teachers' comments from previous studies did not always seem to tap on the students' assets, but rather on perceived deficits, those comments were few and far apart in this study (Valencia, 1997; Valencia et al., 2001). For example, during the initial interview Sylvia stated,

My personal belief, just teach them in English from the beginning. It is just easier maybe for us. Our children in the area don't speak Spanish very well, or

you could say academic Spanish versus, and again they don't speak academic English either. So we're doing double work teaching them the correct Spanish, the academic Spanish, and then going into transitioning them into the English.

These sentiments were expressed again during the focus group, when Raquel stated, "They have the *barriada* Spanish, the *barrio*, the *Colonia* Spanish." Sylvia also added to the conversation, "They have the Tex-Mex Spanish, but they don't speak either language very well so...I mean it is difficult." Diana confirmed the other's comments. "And, they are weak in Spanish...with vocabulary and everything. Fatima did not make any comments in this area.

At the time these comments were made, I began to reflect on my own upbringing. In "our" area, we grow up with the English and Spanish languages almost simultaneously. It is not surprising that both languages merge into a rich and almost harmonious blend of sounds and accents. This regional dialect is known as Tex-Mex where Spanish is influenced by English and vice versa. This is not to say Tex-Mex should be viewed as inferior as some outsiders often do. We communicate differently in an area closely connected to two countries. Many of us who live in this area take the best of both worlds, taking and borrowing from each culture.

Nevertheless, their constructive views about what students bring to their learning were overwhelmingly more evident in their stories as well as in the observed teaching practices. It became apparent early during the interviews that teachers valued their students' language and family. None of these Mexican American teachers attempt to change their students' home conditions (Nieto, 2004). Rather, they try to build upon the students' *Colonia* life experience.

### *Research Question 2*

What **attributes** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

These four Mexican American teachers spoke of their desire to help their children and to make a difference in their educational process. In the first interview, I asked Diana why she thought she has had such success in Colonia. Looking straight at me, she said, “We care about our students.” She talked about one of her third grade students.

So, he just really felt like he knew so much and he does. It’s just being able to get that out of him without him focusing so much on, I said “Forget about the home issues. Let’s try to focus on what you need to learn in school.” Like I told him one time, I said “You gotta be strong because this is your life, this is your future, and you need to make something of yourself to make your mother proud of you so let’s go from there.” Just try to keep it in positive terms and busy.

Diana believed that expectations and setting high standards have contributed to the success of her students. Despite her words about caring, she made it very clear that care for the students does not mean lowering expectations. Diana added,

I think the first thing is high expectations. My expectations for my kids too at this school. I mean it’s not like “Ay’ pos’ pobrecito, this child can’t do it.” No, they can do it and they are going to do it. Our kids...oftentimes are all ready labeled as “they can’t do it” and I just feel like...I just felt I might be able to make a difference there. I don’t feel like our kids should have an excuse to be below anybody. I think the intensity of instruction has to be more so.

For Raquel, success was also based on the teacher-student relationship that she has with her fifth graders. She allows the students to voice their opinions and respects their answers. She understands their way of thinking and values their contributions to



their learning. Responsive to her students' living conditions, she connected their life histories with their learning experiences to achieve success.

They have a lot of needs. Some of them probably don't even have light. They don't even have water. They come to school with very little. We have to...it has to be motherly, what we're putting into them. I interact with them quite a bit; I do a lot of one-to-one. I sit with them. I read with them. I like for them to read to me. Even "hands on," I sit with them and I cut with them and whatever I have to do. Sometimes when we're outside, I'd play baseball with them but I think that's to show them that we're part of each other, we're part of our group, we take care of each other.

Similar feelings were shared by Fatima, her traits reflect what Noddings (1992, 2002) calls the ethic of caring; that is she made sure her students feel safe and have time to learn. This is evident in her classroom as when it was expressed in her initial interview and subsequent focus group. Fatima provided a warm and inviting learning environment and sets high expectations. "We're going to work together and whatever you need, the teacher's here for you. 'Yes, yes, but here at school you're safe.' And it's really important for them to feel that they're loved at school."

Fatima's pre-kindergarten classroom was covered with bright and lively pictures, some store-bought but most done by the students. Two bulletin boards displayed the summer school theme, "Lasso Learning." The theme was also presented in Spanish, "Lazando la Lectura." Students' work and other colorful decorations were prominently displayed on the walls around the classroom. Similar displays were also found on the bulletin boards immediately outside the room. Several learning centers were easily identified: computers, drama and role playing, music, science and discovery, reading and writing, and a small kitchenette. In the center of the classroom, a multi-colored rug

with the English alphabet and numbers anchored the area where Fatima delivered her whole group instruction.

During my classroom observation, Fatima's lesson, totally conducted in Spanish, focused on animals that can be found in the *Colonias'* surrounding areas such as horses, armadillos, roadrunners, and coyotes. While discussing these animals' characteristics and habits, Fatima reviewed several letter sounds. As she showed the children some words in a big book, students seemed to easily identify frequently words used in Spanish. And true to her statements about facilitating the students' own learning abilities, several students were not only reciting sight words, they were already decoding.

*Chóquela aquí, chóquela aquí* (gesture similar to a "high five") *Les voy a escribir el nombre de los animalitos en estas tarjetitas. Cuantas silabas tiene el coyote.* (clap on each syllable) *co-yo-te, co-yo-te. Si. Tiene tres silabas. Aquí viene otro amiguito. La tortuga, de la tierra o del mar? Con que sonido comienza tortuga. Si. Comienza con la "t." Ahora vamos a limpiar el pizarrón* (imaginary board) *con Fabuloso* (popular liquid cleaner used in by Mexicans on both sides of the border, similar to Windex). *Ahora le toca al caballito. Cuantas silabas tiene caballito. Vamos a contarlas, ca-ba-lli-to. Muy bien. Tiene cuatro silabas.*

I'm going to write the name of the little animals in these little cards. How many syllables can we find in coyote? co-yo-te, co-yo-te. Yes. It has three syllables. Now, here comes another little friend. Turtle, land or sea? What's the beginning sound? Yes. It begins with "t." Now, let's wipe the board (imaginary board) with "Fabuloso." Now, it's time for the little horse. How many syllables can we find in little horse (caballito)? Let's count them, ca-ba-lli-to. Very well. It has four syllables.

Although pre-kindergarten students are not expected to read by the end of the year, Fatima presented activities geared to early reading developmental phases such as decoding and blending.

First of all, we worked a lot on their letters and sounds, that is something that is really important for them because it's something they're going to need for kinder so we've been working a lot on their letters and sounds and we've been focusing a lot on their learning experiences and their language experiences and a lot of plays and role-playing, a lot of dramatizing, like stories and a lot of singing and movement. I feel that that's our strongest, strongest, strongest thing right now because we not only focus on the pre-kinder guidelines, we exceed, we get them to learn all their letters by the time they exit pre-kinder and we start teaching them how to blend. And the kids that are ready, we teach them how to read and I feel that that's what's really has helped the kinder... Well, we work as much as we can and our expectations are really high and we help them (students) along to meet those expectations."

Sylvia's interviews also yielded similar traits of genuine care for the students combined with high expectations.

You know, that as teachers we have many hats, we teach, we're moms, we're counselors, and we become sometimes even the dad.... Our children in our campus feel very loved. Our children like the school. They feel like they like coming to school and it's just being there, being present and then knowing that we're there for them. It can be a cut. It can be a tooth is falling off or "can I go to the doctor?" because our nurse is called 'doctor' and it's, I don't know, the children are just loving.

These four teachers accepted the fact that their children at school respond to them in their "motherly" way as a substitute mom. For the teacher to take the role of the mother is also common in the Mexican American culture. Parents expect their children to respect the teacher in their absence while in school. This can be attributed to Mexican American values taught at home where students must view their teachers as their parents and show respect to their elders or those in authority. These four successful Mexican American teachers demonstrated care, encouragement, and support without compromising their high expectations. Their stories of success told of incidents of care and expectations as seen during the interviews and classroom visits.

## Results from Interviews and Classroom Visits

When teachers spoke about care for their students, they also expressed deep care for each other. All four teachers talked about how the staff works together. During the focus group, a conversation that was supposed to last approximately one hour extended to almost three hours. The group was certainly supporting some of the statements that had been previously made during the initial interviews. The group was definitely accustomed to working together as a team. By their interaction, it was clear that discussions and conversations are common among this faculty. Sylvia stated avidly, “We vent with each other; we cry with each other; and we celebrate each other...we are friends.” Diana seemed to finish the statement, “we embrace each other.” She also added, “We are a good core of teachers. And our expectations come hand in hand. We are going to go in there and we are going to teach everything that has to be taught at that grade.”

These educators took advantage of the students’ everyday life experiences that make teaching and learning meaningful as children who live in a *Colonia*. Children were allowed to make academic connections to their immediate environment. For example, Diana built vocabulary lists from those things and experiences that children bring. “I was teaching the word ‘camouflage’ because my students had been talking about ‘saltamontes’ (grasshoppers) that seemed to disappear in the tall grasses.” Or the time when I observed Fatima reading about animals that can be found around Colonia like ‘roadrunners,’ ‘armadillos,’ ‘horses,’ and ‘coyotes.’ These teachers were aware of the students’ environment and use those situations as springboard to their teaching.

Teachers knew that their children learn best when their first language and culture are part of the teaching process. During our first interview Fatima, pre-kindergarten teacher, said that she “felt that children really needed to have a really strong foundation in their native language so they could succeed.” She also added,

I feel like for the past years like we’ve really focused on a lot of getting their, getting the little ones to get a strong foundation in their own native language where like the focus on the lower grades is a lot on Spanish. We need a strong foundation in their native language like when they go into first or second it’s easier for them to make the transition into English.

This was also evident in Raquel’s fifth grade classroom. She continuously made links between home and school. Teaching in Colonia for the last nine years, offered Raquel an advantage because she knows the community and families well. She drew on the knowledge that her students bring to class. She knew her students’ family members from the grandmother who makes ‘tamales’ and ‘buñuelos’ for the holidays to the uncle who just got back from Mexico. During the second interview, Raquel said,

Many come to school with no prior knowledge about a lot of things. I have to provide those missing experiences or find ways to create building blocks from which they can learn or relate to. I start with the family home, their Spanish which they must feel that you value because it is who they are and then I take off from there. It can be hard but I love it.

These four Mexican American teachers shared their stories about what has made them effective in providing successful school experiences to the Mexican American children who are economically challenged and live in Colonia. They told me about their caring, encouraging, and supportive attitudes as well as the high expectations they have for their students. I saw evidence in their words, teaching practice, and in the classroom

environment that they have created for their students. They demonstrated a firm commitment to making a difference in the lives of all the students in Colonia.

### *Research Question 3*

What **instructional practices** allow these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

While I visited Colonia Elementary and the community many times so that I could get a deeper sense for the area, on July 13, I visited Colonia for the purpose of observing the participants' classrooms. The goal for the classroom observations was to study teachers' practices while working with children attending Colonia Elementary. I wanted to see first hand their interaction and communication with the children.

What I found at Colonia was an array of distinct teaching practices that, at least in the four classrooms I visited, were seamless. In these classrooms, I observed constant teacher-student interactions, small groups, and learning centers. I also found supporting evidence in the stories told by these teachers during our interviews. Clear standards seemed aligned to state assessment results as well as student achievement as measured by teachers' own assessment tools. Through their comments and conversations, I became aware of the continuous dialogue from grade level to grade level as well as the campus-developed plan with timelines and standards for language transition that was developed by the staff to meet the needs of their students. For example, all four teachers accepted the language that the students used to answer questions or participate in class discussions.

The participants spoke of the frequent meetings that are held among teachers of different grade levels. These planning meetings, often conducted by the campus Pathfinders, were geared to maintaining an open dialogue among teachers to consistently monitor, align, and improve students' academic achievement. Pathfinders are similar to team leaders. According to the information gathered from the teachers' interviews and several district's documents, the position of Pathfinder was created from the need of attracting and retaining experienced teachers to the *Colonia* area. About ten years ago, the district faced a constant teacher exodus from *Colonia* schools. Located outside the city limits, *Colonia* is located about 30 minutes from *Colonia* Neighboring City. Thus, in addition to the perceived challenges in teaching in the *Colonia* area due to its high poverty, teachers did not want to make the 30-minute drive. As a result, the district implemented the Pathfinder Program.

In other words, pathfinders are grade level team leaders who assist in coordinating the campus instructional programs. According to these teachers, other program goals are to provide equitable instructional expertise for the children who are in greatest need of instructional acceleration, to provide a role model of effective instructional strategies, to develop the leadership skills of colleagues, and more importantly to provide a sense of encouragement and appreciation for the commitment to the children of the *Colonias*. The plan called for a Pathfinder at each grade level, from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade at a cost of approximately \$55,000. Initially, the fact that the four participants were Pathfinders seemed to be a common factor in their success in the context of the *Colonia* experience. Diana and Sylvia were recruited from

other areas to be Pathfinders, but Raquel and Fatima became Pathfinders because they were successful with children at Colonia Elementary. Common to these participants was their commitment to contribute to the success of all students in Colonia not only those who they were currently teaching in their classroom. These teachers had as much interest in the success of students who were in any grade level. A way to accomplish this success was through the vertical alignment and following a scope and sequence.

Just as a continuous dialogue during team meetings was highlighted by the participants, alignment is also central according to Diana. During the second interview, she explained,

Vertical alignments are important. We meet with the grade level below and above us and discuss how we can better align the instruction like, we see that a certain group, the group that came up was very, say, weak in spelling or whatever, we'll discuss those things and we meet at least twice or more during the year and that's very important because everybody has to be on the same page.

Diana was not the only participant who felt that vertical alignment was needed to facilitate the achievement of academic success. Raquel also expressed her thoughts about a school-wide alignment. She said that “the vertical alignment that we do from grade level to grade level...has helped us reach success.” Raquel described one of their meetings.

We meet. For example, 5<sup>th</sup> grade meets with 4<sup>th</sup> grade. And, we...after maybe a month, we start seeing what...the weakness or gaps of the students that are coming in. And, then we talk to them (teachers) and...telling them exactly what we expect from our students to be at, when they come to the next grade level.



Just as alignment was viewed by the participants as a central instructional practice to be effective in facilitating the academic success of their Mexican American learners, they viewed the use of a scope and sequence as another effective practice.

Diana confirmed that she uses the district scope and sequence, but she also explained how she regularly modified it.

We always have the same goals but in terms of scope and sequence, I follow the scope and sequence but like I said if I feel like it's going too fast I don't, I'm not gonna, like I have talked to my principal last year I said, "It seems to me that sometimes we're just quantity and speed and what do we want, we want better, we want quality work"...Like I said, I know the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) very well in third, I know third very well so it's like this is not good enough. They test multiplication and they (unknown) four different ways, I need to slow down and I need to teach, no matter, we're going to have to come back and do that anyway....Of course once the scores came in and she [campus principal] realized I knew what I was talking about, you know, she says O.K.

Through our conversations, I found out that this was usually the case at Colonia. The district's scope and sequence was partly in place. Fatima's teaching practices were similar to Diana's.

Well, we, I try to follow everything in the scope and sequence, the pre-kinder guidelines and what my administration wants to the "t," but I also try to, I'm the one that knows the children. I'm the one that knows exactly what they need so I follow my scope and sequence and I integrate it into my lessons and everything but the strategies, I know that have worked and that I know they're gonna help my children learn, I integrate them, not leaving anything as I follow my scope and sequence and I follow everything to the "t" with my lesson plans and my teaching but then I also know the kids, I know like what child needs this, what child needs that, so I group them, I do my small group's instructions....It's an alignment between the scope and sequence about what I've learned through my years of experience.

*Common Threads in Teaching Practices*

As I conducted the interviews and focus group, I continued to uncover similarities among the participants' teaching practices. For example, all four participants spoke about implementing the district's scope and sequence to the extent that it met their students' needs. Diana was very forward in stating her practices.

I cover everything. I'm not dependant on the book to give me all the information. You know, we have a basal reader or whatever or a math book or even scope and sequence for that matter. You know, yes, I'll follow it, but I've already studied my grade level so I know what I need to teach and if there're any gaps.

Similarly, Raquel explained her practices in following the scope and sequence:

“I mean it's, yes, the scope and sequence is there. Yes, we have a timeline, but if the student's not learning, then I have to go back and find a way to (unknown).” Fatima was no exception to these common practices in Colonia Elementary.

I'm the one that knows the children. I'm the one that knows exactly what they need so I follow my scope and sequence and I integrate it into my lessons and everything but the strategies I know that have worked and that I know that are gonna help my children learn.

This is how Sylvia described her lessons as

Well, we have to do a mixture of everything, you know that but it's to the point that if I have to do something like, a student doesn't understand, I am going to have to do what I have to do to make them understand and what I do is sometimes when I don't see a student is struggling, I go out and take all my, although it's not in the scope and sequence, I take him out and do one-on-one and I work with him until he gets it because that's what I think. I mean it's, yes the scope and sequence is there, yes, we have a timeline, but if the student's not learning, then I have to go back and find a way to reach him.

It was apparent that these four teachers were indeed planning together since their thoughts and practices were very similar. The four periodically met together and

discussed materials, strategies, and progress when working with their students. While each of them felt that a scope and sequence provided a good guide, they also felt that their experience with Mexican American children in this *Colonia*, gave them additional tools to enhance their instructional practices.

Sylvia, a participant who has held the Pathfinder position longer than the other teachers, explained,

Well, I have to say that the district does gives us scope and sequence and we follow it, but then again, we know the scope and sequence are more of a guide than a Bible. More of something to help you know where everybody's on track, so we know that our scope and sequence in our district was created because there's a lot of movement in the district so we want to make sure that the children are targeted and that nothing, none of our building blocks we've been teaching are left out of our children if they transfer from one school to another within our same district. So, I understand the reason for scope and sequence. As far as teaching, we pretty much have our campus on the same page. We all know where we're heading. We all know what we want to do. As long as we're following the TEKS, we're on the scope and sequence either one week ahead or one week or two weeks behind, there's no problem.

Just as these teachers were cognizant of the importance of grade-level alignment and following a scope and sequence, they also recognized the need to consistently monitor the students' progress – not only the results of state assessments such as TAKS but also the results of local assessments designed for the student population at Colonia. In one of our conversations, Sylvia said,

We monitor the scores on all our children. Basically, it's either through the TPRI, which is through the reading, the Texas primary reading inventory, which is a state exam, we use that for guidance. We give a benchmark test for math at the beginning of the year to see where they're at and to see where we need to take off and basically either a test is given, benchmarks given by our district or something that we as teachers have created in the classroom for our own students.

Well...we have to meet our goals and we have to look at our children individually. And know what it is that you have to target based on the needs of that student. Where do we get the information? Well, the data that is given to us through teacher observations, the weekly tests that we give our children, what they come in with at the beginning of the year. That's our baseline and what we need to do to help each child. So, that's what makes a teacher successful.

In her now customary brisk voice, the one that made Sylvia's responses so descriptive, she continued.

We, uhm...give...uhm...the Texas Primary Reading Assessment for the state, TPRI in English and in Spanish, Tejas Lee. And based on that we get a lot of feedback and information data that proves that what we are doing is correct because we are being successful. Also, teacher observations, and the data that we test, the weekly test, and the growth of the child with what they come in. We keep portfolios. And through their work, we see what they've done from the beginning of the year to the end of the year and it is kind of like "wow"!

At the beginning, they start a lot with just pictures. And maybe a little sentence that they give us. And the spellings in the sentences ...uhm...we see that at the beginning of the year. And, we see that in Spanish. So, by December, we pick up more, you know, 3, 4 times during the year. And, I mean August to December because that's in Spanish. And there is a BIG difference. Their writing and because now it is more elaborate. Their pictures or their drawings are a little bit more detailed or more...you can see more. You see their growth of their maturity and...the development...the higher-order thinking questioning and skills... Depending on what subject it is, I know what their needs might be based on the data that we get and from the feedbacks that we get from them [children], we can regroup them, we can meet their needs.

In a similar way, Fatima talked about how she monitors her students' academic growth. However, her views on student success went further than that of the other participants. She talked about the competence of the students beyond academics.

And for me, LAS (assessment to gauge language acquisition) is also like a tool. Did our kids learn all the letters and sounds? Did our kids learn how to identify initial sounds, how to break words into syllables. Did our kids master objectives in the report card? Did our kids learn their numbers from 1 to 10? Do they know how to graph? Do they know how to pattern, do they know how to sort? Do they know their shapes, their colors? Do they know how to interact with other

children, how to socialize, how to work with the computer. Do they know how to take care of themselves, their health, wash their hands, button their buttons, tie their shoes? To see how they grow...teaching them to love their school, to respect the school and show respect for everyone around the school.

These successful Mexican American teachers were also very thorough with the selection of materials and activities. For example, Diana is continuously evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teaching materials to ensure the academic success of Mexican American children who live in Colonia.

[lessons]...if I can't find them in the book, I make them. I use the names of the streets in our area. Math, I make my own tests weekly. Sometimes, I might use objects that are found in their homes like pinto beans or sometimes I have used the "lotería" (type of bingo played in Mexico). I have a whole 3<sup>rd</sup> grade test every week until the end of school all the way through TAKS, and it's a spiraling (unknown) like if we taught place value. Like on the first week, the first Friday, a test already, whatever we taught. Next week, if I teach two objectives and I test on two. So, they start with like 10 questions, by the end there's 60 questions and they've seen them over and over and over, but I've, I cut and paste and I, so there's a lot of effort on my part to make sure I've covered the curriculum and I think that has helped.

Raquel also reviewed her teaching activities and materials,

In my classroom I do a lot of group teaching, I do one-to-one, I do a lot of hands-on activities. I'm starting from reading all the way to social studies, everything we do, I like for them to present PowerPoint. I like for them to do everything like, if they have vocabulary, they have to find pictures that go with the vocabulary words and they have to present it to the class and explain it. They have to do a lot of interaction with each other.

These teachers in Colonia also spoke of the success they had experienced since English transition had been accelerated to begin in the first grade instead of the district suggested period in the second grade.

## Early Transition

Teachers also attributed the success experienced by Colonia to the campus implementation of an earlier language transition, a decision made by teachers and parents. Most parents considered it the job of the school to teach English and assumed the responsibility for maintaining Spanish at home. Sylvia points out that,

Everybody (teachers and parents) came up with a plan and basically what could we do to change what was going on? So, we made a plan and they usually target us individually as different grade levels, shared with us her ideas, and we just kinda brain stormed, came up with a campus plan and everybody was on the same page and we all worked together. One of our things that we did in first grade was in our bilingual, they used to transition our children at the second (grade) in January, the second half of first grade, we would transition them in English and we found it to be successful.

Diana's opinion about transition in 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

I know that, in the past, they had stayed with the Spanish for a ways going up and I think that that might work, you know, Spanish all the way through if that was driven all the way through, but I think that just that transitioning a little bit earlier has helped them...in terms of testing them in English I think that has helped us tremendously...the English they've already at least gotten in second grade they're getting that basic foundation, you know, we're able to do so much more with them now that it's [English] starting to become a part of them...I know that there's a dilemma with in the bilingual situation and all that but if we're gonna test them in English in third grade then it's got to be done a little bit earlier than transitioning them in second because there's just not enough time.

Diana further emphasized the importance of staff development for a successful early transition program.

Just because you know two languages does not warrant the right to teach bilingual classes. It's a whole different ball game. You need to be trained and know of the theories of second language acquisition.

Raquel also saw great benefits in transitioning students by 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

One of the things was that we started the early transition in English. When I first started here at the campus, I used to see them struggling and they had a lot of frustration with reading. Now, you see they're more fluent, they want to read, they want to read stories. You see them. The way they interact with each other, the language (English) is there.

While Fatima does not teach the students after their transition, she did emphasize the strong foundation in Spanish that her students received in pre-kindergarten.

I feel like for the past years like we've really focused on a lot of getting their, getting the little ones to get a strong foundation in their own native language where like, the focus on the lower grades is a lot on Spanish. We need a strong foundation in their native language like when they go into first or second it's easier for them to make the transition into English.

By exposing the students to more rigorous reading programs in the early grades, Colonia now begins the transition to English by the first grade. Fatima explains,

Because we, in our grade level, we focus a lot on a very strong phonics program with them and exposing them to a lot of the blending, the blending and the different reading strategies they're gonna need for kinder and really, I think that we went from the late transition to the early transition, and I feel that the kids are being really successful and we can see it in our results, our test scores. The kids are doing really well.

As the campus has implemented an early transition plan, these teachers use strong bilingual strategies. I observed evidence of these practices while I conducted the classroom visits.

Sylvia conducted her lesson from different areas of the room. She walked around the room monitoring all her students. She attentively listened to her students as she interacted with them.

Watch my mouth...hat, now change one letter, mat, mmmm aaaaa tttt, hhh aaa ttt, hhhaatt, very good! good job! OK, watch my mouth, sssaat, sssat. Good job. Sssaat, sssaat, ssaatt. Next word, now I'm going to do something different. Watch my mouth... Go back and do the word cat again. Caattt,

cccaaatttt, ccccaaatttt. Good job! OK. Now. Which other one? Cual otro? I want you to do the word cap, cccappp (teacher touches her chin and exaggerates her lip movements as she pronounces the word) ccccaaaaappppp, ccaap (teacher is walking around checking on students' progress) cccaaap. Now, I want you to make another word, watch my mouth. Vanessa can you see my mouth? I like the way this group is looking at me, looking at my mouth. (Students imitate teacher's mouth movements as they also sound out each letter. Excellent.

Ok, guys. Now. Watch my mouth, watch my mouth. Tttaapppp, ttttaaaaapppppp, ttttaaapppp. T...A....P, tap. What is it? Look at me. The word is tap, tap, not pat (she demonstrates the difference by using a pencil to "tap," and her hand to "pat" her own shoulder). (Sylvia exaggerates the articulation of each letter. A student seems to be having trouble differentiating the sounds. Sylvia kneels down to the student's level to show her how she forms her lips to form the sounds in the word "tap.") Watch my mouth. (She continues to slowly form each letter to complete the word.)

Let's do another word. Map, mmmmaap, maap. Who can tell me what a map is? Es un mapa, un mapa (a student answers 'It is a map, a map'). Yes, un mapa. It is a map. (Sylvia again exaggerates the articulation of each letter.) Watch my mouth. Watch my mouth. (Students continue to imitate the movement of the teacher's mouth as they pronounce each letter separately until the word is formed

While lessons were different and students' grade levels varied, I observed similar strategies being implemented by these four teachers. During my observation in Diana's classroom, one of the students was having trouble spelling out a vocabulary word. She knew the letters in Spanish but was not as proficient in English.

Martha, please spell out our next word, "size." (Diana pauses for a few seconds allowing the student to write the word on a notebook before asking again.) The word is "size." (She enunciates each letter sound very slowly. The student then begins to spell out the word pronouncing the first letter in Spanish and the rest in English.)

Although the student pronounced the vocabulary word as though it began with an "e," which is a common mispronunciation for Spanish-speaking students, Diana repeated the word several times emphasizing the beginning student thus allowing the



student to hear the correct pronunciation. (Frequently, Spanish speakers, add an “e” to words that begin with “s.” For example, when pronouncing school, a Spanish speaker usually adds an “e” at the beginning of the word, thus pronouncing it as *eschool* similarly to the word in Spanish for *escuela*.) At this time, both teacher and student exchanged a triumphant smile.

It was common to listen to children speaking Spanish among themselves or at times during a lesson when they felt more proficient answering in Spanish; however, it has become part of Colonia culture that English is the language students speak academically after grade 1 or no later than grade 2. While conducting observations in Colonia, these teachers frequently alternated languages to extend students’ talk in both languages.

These successful Mexican American teachers understood the student population. They serve embracing the knowledge brought by the students, such as the Spanish language and their parents, sharing attitudes of care and expectations, as well as teaching practices that encourage and facilitate the academic success of economically challenged Mexican American learners who live in Colonia. And, although meeting state and federal standards was a significant goal, they also relied on other assessments for their measure of success. They shared a vision of success that permeates Colonia Elementary.

### **Identification of Patterns and Themes**

It was most challenging to find a bridge between interviews and analysis. Furthermore, data were slippery as I attempted to grab onto the thread to pull the study

together. After numerous attempts to bring the research to fruition by sifting through seemingly endless piles of data accumulated during the interviews, focus group, class observations, field notes, and reflections and using the demonstration version of the software ATLAS for the initial coding, these were some of the initial finds.

### *Coding*

Even though this software does not analyze data, it did make it easier to code the data. Patton (2002) stated: “The human being, not the software, must decide how to frame a case study, how much and what to include, and how to tell the story” (p. 442). Even using ATLAS, much thought and analysis went into cutting and pasting data. To illustrate those first sub-themes, I included a quote from each participant.

- Prioritized student achievement.
  - Diana: It doesn't matter what grade you're in, our expectations are very high for each grade level. Teachers are expected to get them to a certain level, literacy level... they have to meet certain standards.
  - Fatima: Providing them with a lot of visuals, a lot of kinesthetic things and exposing them to a lot of language, my kids have really, really, really grown from previous years.
  - Raquel: I do a lot of group teaching, I do one-to-one. I do hands on activities. Whatever it takes to get them to succeed.
  - Sylvia: I have placed interest in everyone and I know that every child learns in different ways, different styles so I just try to look at them as individuals and target their needs.
  
- Implemented a coherent, standards-based curriculum and instructional program.
  - Diana: Vertical alignments are very important. We meet with the grade level below and above us and discuss how we can better align the instruction.
  - Fatima: We worked a lot on their letters and sounds. That is something that is really important because they're going to need for kinder.
  - Raquel: I mean, yes, the scope and sequence is there. Yes, we have a timeline, but if the student's not learning, then I have to go back and find a way to reach him.

- Sylvia: Vertical alignment within the school. I think it can't happen if kinder is not doing their job then 4<sup>th</sup> is not going to be able to pick up 3 or 4 years of a gap. So, everybody had to be aligned to reach the goals.
- Used assessment data to improve student achievement and instruction.
  - Diana: The first point would be to look at TAKS. Beyond that, I'd say just to reflect where I started with them and where they are now.
  - Fatima: I have to make sure that my kids have mastered the pre-kinder guidelines that are set for us by the district and state. We also assess our kids with Tejas Lee to see where our kids are at, at the end of the year.
  - Raquel: Our low achievers are the ones that get the most attention because we want them to be successful. I see them that they were in the 30's. Now, you see them in the 60's. They are almost there.
  - Sylvia: We give a benchmark test for math at the beginning of the year to see where they're at and to see where we need to take off and basically either a test given, benchmarks given by our district or something that we as teachers have created in the classroom for our own students.
- An emphasis on clear standards.
  - Diana: I think what has helped us too is I know they transition them in first grade. But we have a transition plan, we do not transition them unless they reach a level in Spanish.
  - Fatima: Getting the little ones to get a strong foundation in their own native language. We need a strong foundation in their native language like when they go to first, it's easier for them to make the transition into English.
  - Raquel: We are all doing it (early transition) and because you see our children as they come to you. The difference in their language, their vocabulary, their reading, they're proven readers.
  - Sylvia: Our goal is to transition them, the students by January into English. That's when we begin the transition.
- Students treated with love and respect.
  - Diana: So, it's not only to try to get him to be academically successful but to deal with his emotions from minute-to-minute.
  - Fatima: We're going to work together and whatever you need, teacher's here for you.
  - Raquel: Sometimes when we're outside, I'd play baseball with them but I think that's to show them that we're part of each other, we're part of our group, we take care of each other.
  - Sylvia: I guess they feel, in a way, our campus or their school is their haven because they get a lot of attention and they know we love them.

- Team effort for accountability.
  - Diana: Basically, what I feel is that everybody has to work together. You know, it's a team effort. It's not 'well there's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and 4<sup>th</sup> grade did bad.' No, it's all of us.
  - Fatima: In our grade level, we focus a lot on a very strong phonics program and exposing them to a lot of the blending and the different reading strategies that they are going to need in kinder. Kinder teachers tell us that our kids are coming really prepared!
  - Raquel: We meet. For example 5<sup>th</sup> grade meets with 4<sup>th</sup> grade. And, we...after maybe a month, we start seeing what...the weakness, gaps or strengths of the students that are coming in. And, then we talk to them and... telling them exactly what we expect from those students to be at when they come to the next grade level.
  - Sylvia: I concentrate more on 1<sup>st</sup> grade but if needed say...2<sup>nd</sup> grade might need something because maybe I have more experience. I may do a demonstration or model. Because if I'm successful in 1<sup>st</sup> grade then we'll all be successful.
  
- Teachers committed to helping all students achieve.
  - Diana: We got a very good campus. We're all driven; we're all driven to student success.
  - Fatima: We not only focus on the pre-kinder guidelines, we exceed, we get them to learn all their letters by the time they exit pre-kinder and we start teaching them how to blend. And the students that are ready, we teach them how to read.
  - Raquel: We focus on all the students not just the high achievers.
  - Sylvia: And, not only what is expected of us in TEKS...but going above and beyond what we really need to do because that's what's going to make the child more successful.

However, unaware of the multiple limitations by using the ATLAS demonstration version, I lost the initial coding! Nevertheless, I did not want to give up on this software, because I had found it easier to work than coding by hand, consequently I continued with ATLAS.

During the next stage of this overwhelming, and often overpowering task, the codes dealing with the same themes were grouped into larger categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The initial findings were collapsed into four themes supported by the

evidence uncovered from each informant. After meticulously reviewing the unitized and categorized data, four themes emerged.

The following overarching themes were revealed:

1. embracing **culture and language**, recognition of the value inherited in the students' home life and language;
2. **campus aligned standards** common across grade levels and **a language transition plan**;
3. an established environment of **care, encouragement, and support** while holding high expectations; and
4. clear and well-defined **goals based on assessment results**.

#### *Themes*

As these four Mexican American teachers related their experiences of success in Colonia, these four themes emerged interwoven and interdependent. Four salient themes as related to teachers in this *Colonia* school emerged: (a) embracing the students' culture and language; (b) campus-aligned standards and a language transition plan; (c) environment of care, encouragement, and support with high expectations; and (d) clear and well-defined goals based on assessment results.

Concurrently, these themes seemed part of a larger landscape in the academic achievement of Mexican American students in Colonia. Statistics, numbers, TAKS results alone do not tell the story of success at Colonia Elementary. Children, with bright and beautiful smiles, are behind those statistics, numbers, and TAKS scores. Research has noted statistics of achievement gaps and dropout rates, numbers that reveal

the lowest level of education attainment and the poor results of high-stake tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The larger landscape encompassed these teachers' practices of care, encouragement, expectations, and embracement of their students' lived experiences that supported the academic achievement success experienced by children in Colonia Elementary. These themes were found embedded in the three research questions but were not associated with any one question. They are presented in order of major reoccurrence.

*Theme 1 – Recognition of the Inherited Value in the Students' Home Life in Colonia*

The data analysis indicated that teachers' use of their students' home life experiences in Colonia provide invaluable tools that aid in the students' academic success. These successful Mexican American teachers hold the students in high regard. Their shared stories implied a sense of cultural awareness and value for the students' home life. For example, these teachers let students express themselves in the language they most feel comfortable. In their classrooms, it was evident that the children knew that if they were not able to fully express themselves in English, their answers in Spanish were just as valid. Teachers draw on the students' use of their first language and build upon what learners already know. Sylvia said that in first grade “we need to carry them...into the English making the transition and not forgetting their first language, their Spanish. So, carrying them both together across the level.” Fatima referred to the richness that her students bring to the classroom. She said, “I learn from their vocabulary, the vocabulary that they use at home...I learn from their language,

their background, their family background.” These teachers saw their students as competent individuals and value the culture of their home (Scheurich, 1998).

These educators took advantage of the students’ everyday life experiences that make teaching and learning meaningful as children who live in a *Colonia*. Children were allowed to make academic connections to their immediate environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This was particularly evident in Raquel’s fifth grade classroom. She continuously made links between home and school. Teaching in Colonia for the last nine years, offered Raquel an advantage because she knew the community and families well. For example, when she covers a science unit on matter, she often invites a student’s grandmother who makes *tamales* for the holidays. They cover the changing of corn into the smooth *masa* to cover the cornhusks before filling with a rich meat mixture.

Participants also shared their experiences about working with parents. They recognized that without the parents’ input, their work would be harder. Raquel talked about the parent meetings that are regularly held in the school. “We meet with the parents; parents and teachers, we share our expectations; parents and teachers, we set our goals and we all get involved.”

Early during our interviews, it became evident that teachers valued their students’ language and home life. None of these Mexican American teachers attempted to change their students’ home conditions (Nieto, 2004); rather, they tried to build upon those life experiences in Colonia. Teachers drew on the students’ use of their first language and built upon what learners already know. Above all, as Valencia (1997) also

reported, these teachers ignore the barriers to learning often associated with “deficit thinking.”

When teachers use student’s cultural and social experiences as a way to implement best practices and to develop new knowledge, learning becomes more relevant (Padrón et al., 2002). Furthermore, when teachers value the students’ home life, culture, language, demonstrate high expectations, and use diverse teaching practices, student success will occur (Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Scheurich, 1998). These teachers embraced the experiences that children bring. As a result of operating off the strengths of what the children bring, they provided challenging lessons with high expectations. The power of these stories lies in the sense that we are talking about *Colonias*. We are talking about economically challenged students. We are talking about culturally and linguistically diverse children.

*Theme 2 – Standards Common Across Grade Levels and a Language Transition Plan*

What I found at Colonia was an array of distinct teaching practices that, at least in the four classrooms that I visited, were seamless. Through their comments and conversations, I became aware of the continuous dialogue from grade level to grade level as well as the campus developed plan with timelines and standards for language transition that was developed by the staff to meet the needs of their students. Research has found that aligning curriculum with instruction and assessment provides teachers with a successful system. Making sure that instruction follows established standards or curriculum ensures that students are taught the material they will need to be successful at their grade level (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Corallo & McDonald, 2001).



It was apparent that these four teachers were accustomed to planning together since their thoughts and practices were very similar. Consistent with research in high-performing Hispanic schools, these teachers had established a collaborative and open work environment; shared a clear mission of success with other teachers and students, and encouraged teaching practices that improve the learning conditions of their Mexican American students (Faltis & Hudelson, 1998, Lucas et al., 1990, Reyes et al., 1999). The four periodically met and discussed materials, strategies, and progress when working with their students. All of the teachers appreciated the value of teamwork and believed that communication with other teachers helped them increase student success. Their teamwork took various forms; it could be highly structured as when they led it as Pathfinders, where teachers worked together on each step of the activities and teaching practices they used in the classrooms. For some teachers, teamwork was just an exchange of experience, techniques, and methods. A few teachers had regular and frequent discussion with other teachers. Sylvia explained, “the vertical alignment that we do from grade level to grade level...has helped us reach success.” Raquel described one of their meetings.

We meet. For example, 5<sup>th</sup> grade meets with 4<sup>th</sup> grade. And, we...after maybe a month, we start seeing what...the weakness or gaps of the students that are coming in. And, then we talk to them (teachers) and...telling them exactly what we expect from our students to be at, when they come to the next grade level.

Just as alignment was viewed by the participants as a central instructional practice to be effective in facilitating the academic success of their Mexican American learners, they viewed the use of a scope and sequence as another effective practice.

Diana confirmed that she uses the district scope and sequence, but she also explained how she regularly modified it. While each of them felt that a scope and sequence provided a good guide, they also felt that their experience with Mexican American children in this *Colonia*, gave them additional tools to enhance their instructional practices.

These successful Mexican American teachers are also very thorough with the selection of materials and activities. For example, Diana continuously evaluated the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teaching materials to ensure the academic success of Mexican American children who live in Colonia. Raquel also reviewed her teaching activities and materials,

In my classroom I do a lot of group teaching, I do one-to-one, I do a lot of hands-on activities. I'm starting from reading all the way to social studies, everything we do, I like for them to present PowerPoint. I like for them to do everything like, if they have vocabulary, they have to find pictures that go with the vocabulary words and they have to present it to the class and explain it. They have to do a lot of interaction with each other.

Research has shown that in high-performing schools, teachers empowered students to become excited about and responsible for their own learning (Blase & Blase, 1994). In addition, teachers collaborate across grade levels and curriculum areas to ensure that teachers and students receive the support they need. Successful schools have collaborative staffs that are invested in the success of each student (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2002).

Although I did not observe the use of technology by the students, I did review samples of PowerPoint presentations that students had presented as part of their

vocabulary lessons. Raquel and Diana discussed how they integrated technology in their lessons as students were asked to research the meaning of words and that of popular phrases used in English. Students incorporated multimedia that facilitates auditory skill development by combining visual presentations with sound and animation (Bermúdez & Palumbo, 1994). Once the research had been done, each student was expected to present their findings to the class. Recent studies have shown that technology-enriched instruction incorporates more active student learning and is more student-centered. Instead of delivering knowledge, teachers are facilitators of learning with multimedia and other technology (Padrón et al., 2002).

Diana, Fatima, Raquel, and Sylvia also attributed the success experienced by Colonia to the campus implementation of an early language transition, a decision made by teachers and parents. These teachers in Colonia also spoke of the success they had experienced since English transition had been accelerated to begin in the first grade instead of the district suggested period in the second grade. By following the transitional plan developed by the Colonia community, the transition to English begins in the first grade.

As part of the campus early transition plan, these teachers used cohesive and targeted bilingual strategies. I observed evidence of these practices while I conducted the classroom visits. For example, Sylvia conducted a lesson on phonemic awareness using highly successful second language acquisition strategies.

Let's do another word. Map, mmmmaap, maap. Who can tell me what a map is?  
Es un mapa, un mapa (a student answers 'It is a map, a map'). Yes, un mapa. It

is a map. (Sylvia again exaggerates the articulation of each letter.) Watch my mouth. Watch my mouth. (Students continue to imitate the movement of the teacher's mouth as they pronounce each letter separately until the word is formed.

Good (1988) defined the term "active teaching" as teaching that is responsive to students' needs and interests. Ineffective teaching practices used in many schools may prevent economically challenged, Mexican American students from excelling (Cole, 2001; Haberman, 2005). Darling-Hammond (2000) stressed the importance of teachers to be adept at using a variety of strategies in their teaching in order to positively impact student performance.

*Theme 3 – Environment of Care and Support Toward All School Community Members*

Another theme that was noted was that of care and support. These four Mexican American teachers spoke of their desire to help their students and to make a difference in their academic performance. In the first interview, I asked Diana why she thought she had such success in Colonia. Looking straight at me she said, "We care about our students." Despite words about caring, she made it very clear that care for the students did not mean lowering expectations. She believed that expectations and setting high standards has also contributed to the success of the students. Sylvia's interviews also yielded similar traits of genuine care for the students combined with high expectations. There are clear indications that teacher expectations can and do affect student's achievement and attitudes (Good & Brophy, 1997). In a study of urban teachers conducted by Brophy (1982), he identified eight factors that influence their effectiveness in working with urban children. One such factor is teacher expectations and a sense of

self-efficacy. Brophy suggested that effective teachers believe that all children can learn and that they are capable of teaching them successfully.

For Raquel, student success also stemmed from the teacher-student relationship she has with her fifth graders. She allowed the students to voice their opinions and respected their answers (Scheurich, 1998). She understood their way of thinking and valued their contributions to their learning. Responsive to her students' living conditions, she connected their life histories with their learning experiences to achieve success. Similar feelings were shared by Fatima; she provided a warm and inviting learning environment. As educators, they understood that there is more to education than "covering" the TAKS objectives or any other objectives as mandated by the state; there is also the need to nurture relations with our students, to allow students the opportunity to be free to express their ideas without shame of speaking Spanish or fear of speaking English less than perfect. By making teaching culturally relevant, strategies such as valuing the contributions of economically challenged Mexican American students in Colonia will help bridge the gap between students, their diverse experiences, and what the school curriculum requires (Banks et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

These four successful Mexican American teachers were caring, encouraging, and supportive without compromising their high expectations. Their stories of success told of incidents of care and expectations as seen during the interviews and classroom visits (Scheurich, 1998). As these four teachers spoke about care for their students, they also expressed deep care for each other. All four teachers talked about the staff and how they worked together. From their interactions, it was clear that discussions and conversations

are common among this faculty. Raquel stated: “We share ideas. We exchange ideas. It could be centers. It could be maybe different activities that maybe they may want to implement.” Sylvia added, “We vent with each other; we cry with each other; and we celebrate each other...we are friends.” Diana seemed to finish the statement, “we embrace each other.” Fatima summarized what it means to be a caring teacher in Colonia. “We focus on all the kids not just the high achievers...because we want them all to be successful.”

*Theme 4 – Well-Defined Goals Based on Assessment Results*

Colonia has well-defined goals and maintained programs and practices that target those goals. For example, teachers often hold planning meetings that are geared to maintaining an open dialogue among teachers to consistently monitor, align, and improve students’ academic achievement. They plan vertically and across grade levels sharing resources that will help the students to become successful (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

Just as these teachers were cognizant of the importance of grade-level alignment and following a scope and sequence, they also recognized the need to consistently monitor the students’ progress not only the results of state assessments such as TAKS but also the results of local assessments designed for the student population in Colonia (Carter, 2000; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

The participants’ practices correspond with the major arguments of several researchers and educators that classroom-based assessment benefits instruction and pupil learning (Reyes et al. 1999). The use of both Spanish and English in the

questioning provided a way for Diana to know that, even if the student could not express her learning in English, she understood the activity on vocabulary words.

Martha, please spell out our next word, “size.” (Diana pauses for a few seconds allowing the student to write the word on a notebook before asking again.) The word is “size.” (She enunciates each letter sound very slowly. The student then begins to spell out the word pronouncing the first letter in Spanish and the rest in English.)

By using their students’ first language in classroom assessments, these teachers provided students with more opportunities to demonstrate their learning.

Sylvia also talked about the different types of assessments that are administered to the students. Among those assessments, she lists portfolios and journals.

We get a lot of feedback and information data that proves that what we are doing is correct because we are being successful. Also, teacher observation, and the data that we test, the weekly test, and the growth of the child with what they come in. We keep portfolios. And through their work we see what they’ve done from the beginning of the year to the end of the year and it is kind of like “wow”!

Similarly, Fatima talked about how she monitors her students’ academic growth.

However, her views on success went further than that of the other participants. She talked about the competence of the students beyond academics.

Do they know how to interact with other children, how to socialize, how to work with the computer. Do they know how to take care of themselves, their health, wash their hands, button their buttons, tie their shoes? To see how they grow...teaching them to love their school, to respect the school and show respect for everyone around the school.

Research has noted that the use of alternative forms of assessment help teachers choose instructional strategies aligned with good practice (Airasian, 1991; Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Short, 1993). Resnick and Resnick (1992) assert that, unlike statewide

mandated standardized testing, which mainly contributes to public accountability, classroom-based assessments have more power to evaluate instruction and identify students' personal needs.

### Summary

These four successful Mexican American teachers understood the student population they serve. They embraced the knowledge and experiences brought by the students. These educators shared common attitudes of care and expectations and goals. Professionally, these successful teachers implemented teaching practices and incorporated materials that encouraged and facilitated the academic success of economically challenged Mexican American students living in Colonia. Although meeting state and federal standards was a significant objective, they also relied on other assessments for their measure of success. Most importantly, they shared a vision of success that permeated Colonia Elementary.

Each classroom observed was unique and had a particular cultural composition. Despite their similarities, however, it is important to recognize that schools, classrooms, or students are not exactly the same. These teachers' voice benefits from being viewed as a constant and evolving conversation among educators as a continuous search for excellence. I do not suggest that there is a prescription to fix some of the issues facing Mexican American students who live in *Colonias*. However, in the segment of time that these economically challenged Mexican American students achieved academic success in this *Colonia* and within the confinements of these teachers' stories, current research



on the perceived realities of many high-poverty schools was not supported. These Mexican American teachers understood the *Colonia* experience.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter provides a summary of the research, interpretation of the results, probable implications of those results, and the conclusion – a visionary challenge. The first section is a brief overview of the study highlighting the research project and the reason for this dissertation. The second section includes the identified salient themes and the researcher's interpretation of the results of the study. The third section includes implications of the findings with specific attention to the possible application of the results: (a) for practice at the building and at the district levels and (b) for further research. The conclusion is the fourth and final section of this chapter.

#### Summary of the Study

The education of Mexican American students has reached a crisis stage. Although the number of Mexican American students attending public schools has increased dramatically in recent years, they continue to obtain the lowest level of education and the highest dropout rate of any group of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). While research on the causes of the achievement gap between economically challenged Mexican American students and other student groups is extensive, few studies have conducted a focused exploration on the successful Mexican American teachers of highly achieving and successful Mexican American students (Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, missing in educational research is the study of the academic achievement of Mexican American students living in *Colonias*. Focusing on this need, led me to center this interpretive study on voices and

lived experiences, as well as the teaching practices of successful Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students living in *Colonias*. I centered this naturalistic inquiry on providing a view of what makes these Mexican American students successful instead of adding another brick to the wall that focuses on the reasons from their failure.

Research has been conducted on the academic success of Mexican American students in high-poverty schools, but those studies have been conducted out of the context of *Colonias*. This study highlighted the voices of successful Mexican American teachers in the context of a high-poverty school located in a *Colonia* that by definition denotes its location as a distinctive region. Identifying the location of the high-poverty school, Colonia Elementary, added a needed layer in identifying the unique needs of the students who attend it and how those needs were met by their teachers.

Responding to the need to listen to successful Mexican American teachers of economically challenged Mexican American students, this study was situated in an elementary school on the Texas-Mexico border. The school was located outside the limits of an urban city in a very impoverished area with many homes lacking necessities such as running water and electricity and where it is common for several families to share the same dwelling, a *Colonia* (Wilson & Guajardo, 1999). The Colonia Elementary student population was 100% Mexican American, 97.8% economically challenged, and 78.7% second language learners. Furthermore, 100% of the faculty serving these students were Mexican American teachers who spoke Spanish.

The purpose of the study was to explore how teachers at an elementary campus located in the midst of a *Colonia* achieved academic recognition when more rigorous

federal and state standards seem to challenge even the most affluent areas of the state and country. Aware of the many challenges encountered in a *Colonia* school, I was intrigued by the stories that teachers in the school had to tell about their success.

The four participants' stories were compelling and offered insight into a school located in a *Colonia*. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What did these Mexican American teachers **say** has made their Mexican American students who are economically challenged successful at Colonia Elementary school? What has contributed most to their academic success?
2. What **attributes** allowed these Mexican American teachers to be effective in providing successful school experiences to Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?
3. What **instructional practices** allowed these Mexican American teachers to be effective in facilitating academic success among Mexican American students who are economically challenged and live in *Colonias*?

The questions posed for this study were examined in relationship to participant interviews, classroom observations, focus group, and researcher reflections.

Recommendations to participate in this study were made by parents, the campus principal, and peer teachers. They were asked to identify teachers they felt were effective in the teaching of Mexican American children and the criteria used to make the selection. Analysis of district data resources resulted in a number of powerful themes.

Upon reviewing the nominations and the criteria for defining success, it became evident that TAKS or standardized test scores alone did not define success. It was more

than the academic success experienced by these children living in Colonia. In the context of Colonia, these insiders defined a successful teacher as someone who “knows the family situation,” “leads by example,” “was caring but with high expectations,” “passionate and dedicated,” and “understands the needs of our students.” These successful Mexican American teachers in Colonia Elementary fit this definition. They knew the strengths of their students and their families. They utilized those strengths to achieve success.

These four teachers cared about the education of students living in Colonia. Further, these teachers did not view themselves as more accomplished or better than the parents or the community. They took their practice as educators seriously and were very committed to their profession and their students. They believed all students could learn while understanding the daily challenges by their students and their families.

In this interpretive study, I recognized that in order to understand what is pedagogically effective for Mexican American students living in *Colonias*, I had to study the complex economic and social realities of students in the specific contexts where they live. To understand the *Colonia* experience, I had to interpret it. I attempted to understand the experiences of the four Mexican American teachers who participated in this study.

### **Summary of Themes**

Schools cannot change poverty or the living conditions of children; however, schools can change ways to reach and teach all children (Nieto, 2004). These four successful teachers in Colonia Elementary have done just that – they taught in ways that

reached and effectively taught Mexican American students living in Colonia. The initial findings were collapsed into four themes supported by the evidence uncovered from each informant.

### *Embracing Culture and Language*

The first theme, embracing culture and language, referred to the teachers' recognition and value of the students' language and home life in a *Colonia*. Understanding the students' social worlds helped these teachers capitalize on Colonia's resources to draw on what students do know for teaching and learning. The findings of this study substantiated previous research on the "funds of knowledge" that students bring with them into the school settings. The "funds of knowledge" research supports that all children can learn and will succeed regardless of cultural or language background provided that they have knowledgeable, caring, reflective, and advocacy-oriented teachers who consistently tap the rich funds of knowledge that the students bring to school from their Mexican American homes and communities (Moll et al., 1992).

Educators need to be aware of the cultural and linguistic diversity that exists among students by bringing many outside experiences into the classroom (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Padrón et al., 2002; Reyes et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). For example, teachers in this study integrated the experiences brought into the classroom by their *Colonia* students. Many U.S.-born Mexican American students regularly cross the border into Mexico to visit friends and relatives or go shopping. These regular international trips require students to intermingle in two countries where the Spanish

language is the common characteristic among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. These students learned of the exchange of dollars to pesos (Mexican currency) and the differences in the units of measure – the metric and English systems. They also learned the impact of immigration laws regarding the legal documents required for border crossing and basics regulations for importing and exporting goods. They were very aware of the limitations of what can and cannot be brought across the border and the understanding of the social world found between the two countries. These experiences added another dimension to the lives of children living in Colonia, not necessarily, because the other side of the border is so terrible, but because coming to live in this country to benefit from the educational system is an opportunity that parents have decided to pursue and undertake.

These teachers understood the *Colonia* experience and because they understood it, they worked within the context of helping students living in Colonia to be successful. While there is a belief that it takes a Mexican American teacher to teach a Mexican American child (Gordon, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999), I did not find anything during my interactions with these four informants that supported such a belief one way or another. My informants did not dismiss the teacher-student cultural match as a factor, but they certainly did not highlight it as the only or main factor. I need to underline that Mexican American students do not need Mexican American teachers and Mexican American teachers only. Rather, that all students, and Mexican American students living in *Colonias* in particular, stand to gain when they are taught by a diverse teaching force with multiple knowledge and community traditions.

Trueba and Bartolome (1997) had similarly underscored the indispensability of teacher's knowledge of the home language and culture of the students. Without this knowledge, teachers cannot bridge the gap between the students' home, community, family, and schools. Along the same vein, I also found that understanding what happens as it relates to Mexican American children who live in Colonia was integral to their success. A "culturally responsive pedagogy" permeated Colonia Elementary such as respect and use of students' funds of knowledge and language as bases of instructional strategies (Moll et al., 1992; Cazden, 1988; Faltis & Hudelson, 1998; García, 1994; Lucas et al., 1990; Valenzuela, 1999). So, while being of the same race assisted them in the threshold of entry, it was their understanding of the culture that proved more important. During our conversations, the participants often expressed this understanding. Diana, in her commanding tone, said: "I mean, it's not like 'Ay pos pobrecito,' [poor little one] this child can't do it. **No**, we're going to see how much we can get out of him and push him as much as we can." Similar thoughts were shared by Fatima. "It's the same thing, the kids from here [*Colonia*] can learn as much as the kids from the north [the affluent section of neighboring city] and even more." Raquel echoed these sentiments in her caring yet imposing voice, "I pushed him hard...I would say 'Do it again, you can do better.'" The high value placed on the students' language by the participants was also evident in these conversations.

In addition to using those cultural lived experiences, these successful teachers also embraced the students' first language – Spanish. Teachers in this study encouraged students to speak Spanish when English was not yet fluent and frequently and openly



expressed the advantages of speaking a second language in a world economy. This language orientation reflected the lived reality of students living in Colonia, who were bilingual and bicultural due to the dynamic nature of their experiences in both sides of the border. They understood that the language of their students and families reflected the heart of the culture brought to the classroom. For example, all four teachers accepted the language that the students used to answer questions or participate in class discussions. Even though some second language acquisition research discourages the use of two language simultaneously, the participants allowed it because it facilitated learning English in the context of students living in Colonia.

Often some classroom teachers feel that second language learners are unlikely to succeed because they lack the academic language needed for performing academic tasks in school (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Although, some comments shared during the interviews and focus group seemingly supported such feelings, as I mined further into those conversations, I believe that those comments were made because these teachers thought about what was going to facilitate the school work for the children, so that the students could be successful.

Diana described her concerns that many of her students hardly spoke a word of English and that she felt she needed to “have them speaking, reading, and writing English” at grade level by the end of the year, when they were expected to take TAKS in English. Some teachers at this point found themselves thinking, “Hey, they’re not doing well in either one [language] so let’s just focus on one and keep going.” That doesn’t mean they felt that Spanish was not important. As a result, these teachers did “double

work.” Students were taught English and academic Spanish. They thought, “If we didn’t have to do the double work, we could get a lot further.” Sylvia further stated, “This is just my own personal belief. It facilitates teaching the students and they are going to be exposed maybe two extra years into the English.” She did not say or believe her students should “just forget about Spanish and learn English.”

As I made meaning out of the participants’ remarks and comments, I found Fatima’s words to best describe how one embraces the *Colonia* experience. When I asked her to characterize her students, she said,

Their culture. How they’re brought up, their culture...like they all their own individual selves but they all have the love for learning and they all have the love for their Spanish and they’re all eager to learn English, they all want to learn.

The culture and home language of students is often seen as the cause of their difficulties in school (Cummins, 1989; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Reyes et al., 1999; Ryan, 1971; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). However, these four Mexican American teachers in Colonia Elementary explicitly denied the deficit thinking argument and incorporated students’ interests and experiences into the learning situation. The participants believed that all children could learn and would succeed regardless of cultural or language background (Moll et al., 1992; Valencia, 1997). These findings support what other studies have clearly acknowledged – the fundamental relationship and role that culture and language have in the process of acquiring knowledge (Cummins, 2001; García & Guerra, 2003; Gay, 2000; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billing, 1994; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar,

2001; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). In Colonia Elementary, the four participant teachers required students to interact with people in their families, neighborhoods, and communities. These teachers knew students and their communities well enough to integrate assignments with community history, events, conditions, and issues.

*Campus-Aligned Standards and Language Transition Plan*

The second theme, campus aligned standards, referred to the teachers' commitment to common strands across grade levels and a language transition plan. The four teachers in this study exhibited strong working knowledge of subject matter as they collaborated and planned together. A major objective was for their students to better understand the content material. A language transition plan, developed in partnership with the school and the parents living in Colonia, was also aligned from grade level to grade level.

At Colonia Elementary, my informants reported that the campus had aligned academic standards. They evaluated and helped each other become better teachers and they questioned their teaching practices, with the goal to constantly improve student learning (Reyes et al., 1999). Sylvia captured the essence of the grade level meetings, when she said, "we share ideas, these are shortcomings, and these are weakness...We exchange ideas. It could be maybe different activities that maybe they [other teachers] need to implement." Within another perspective of these meetings, Diana said, "We meet with the grade level below and above us and discuss how we can better align the instruction." Raquel also talked about modeling effective lessons for the benefit of less experienced teachers or those who are new to Colonia. "We have to model; we have to

get the other teachers up to par. They all have to be trained. We have to get them there. We provide the training in the classroom.” Teachers also discussed the implementation of a district’s scope and sequence.

As part of the district’s initiative, Colonia followed a particular curriculum scope and sequence. However, always mindful to meet the unique needs of the children they serve, they adjusted it so that their students could be successful. Participants remarked on how the scope and sequence is “more of a guide than a Bible.” Sylvia said it was “something to help you know that everybody’s on track.” These teachers responded to their students’ strengths and weaknesses. Both Raquel and Fatima discussed how they followed the scope and sequence but how they deviated from it when they see a student struggle. When students struggled, Fatima explained, “I individualize their instruction by following the scope and sequence and the pre-kinder guidelines with what we need to follow...but making it [meaningful] for them.”

These successful teachers understood the *Colonia* experience. They worked within the context of helping their children to be successful. All four teachers commented on how their instruction was adjusted for their students while remaining within the aligned standards. These findings support the work of Reyes et al. (1999), who found that successful teachers

Rather than forcing students to respond to questions or activities that fit into the traditional framework of the classroom, are willing to design their curriculum and classroom agendas to correspond with the complement the knowledge and understanding of the students they serve. (p. 201)

Diana said,

I'm not dependant on the book to give me all the information, you know, we have a basal reader or whatever or a math book or even scope and sequence for that matter. If I can't find them [lessons] in the book, I make them.

Even though this alignment, within the scope and sequence is important in the success of students living in Colonia, the language transition plan was even more significant.

In response to the needs of their students and families, several years ago, Colonia implemented a language transition plan that called for an earlier shift to English. The plan was developed with input from teachers and parents. While the implementation of bilingual education programs has to some extent provided support to value students' home language, the primary goal of most U.S. bilingual education programs is to hurriedly develop proficiency in English. Maintaining home language and culture is at best a secondary goal (Valencia, 1991). According to Fatima at Colonia Elementary, the emphasis has been on "getting the little ones to get a strong foundation in their own native language." She added that the plan called for the transition to begin in first grade so that "it's easier for them to make the transition into English."

As these comments surfaced during our conversations, my own experiences as an English language learner began to conflict with these teachers' remarks. I attributed my academic success in this country to my strong hold of the Spanish language before transitioning to English. Could this plan have been developed because of deficit thinking attitudes? As I continued to analyze the conversations of my informants, I concluded that the plan was a joint effort between the school and the Colonia community to help the students succeed. Teachers felt that they were "doing double

work teaching them the correct Spanish, the academic Spanish, and then going into transitioning them into the English.” It would probably make their endeavors much easier in the sense that they would only have to teach in English. One wonders if that is best for the child, the teacher, or the education system.

The primary goal of most U.S. bilingual education programs is to develop proficiency in English. Research indicates that the goal of bilingual education is to teach English, while maintaining and developing one’s first language; however, many people dismiss this goal and the reasoning behind it (Collier & Thomas, 1989). The initial rationale behind bilingual education was that the transfer of knowledge and expertise from the first language to a newly acquired language was best accomplished when the learner was cognitively proficient in the first language (Collier & Thomas, 1989). The Mexican American teachers in this study were not saying, “You just need to learn English and be done with it.” These teachers were committed to valuing the students’ first language while guiding them to learn English. During our focus group, Fatima has this to say,

I felt that the children really needed to have a really strong foundation in their native language that they could succeed....We need a strong foundation in their native language like when they go into first or second it’s easier for them to make the transition into English.

Diana also expressed her concerns that many of her students hardly spoke a word of English and that she felt she needed to “have them speaking, reading, and writing English” at grade level by the end of the year, when they would be expected to take the

achievement test in English. These are powerful statements coming from teachers who have lived these experiences.

Teaching practices alone do not create effective schools. As earlier effective schools studies reported, recent research confirms the significance of organizational variables, such as how the results on high-stakes assessments guide instruction. In short, “teachers use a pedagogy that establishes the relevance of classroom activities for students, responding to the students’ culture and needs” (Reyes et al., 1999, p. 200). An environment that is conducive to educational success is also key in meeting the needs of children living in Colonia.

*Environment of Care, Encouragement, and Support With High Expectations*

The third theme, an environment of care and support, referred to the informants’ established atmosphere of care and support towards all school and community members. These successful teachers were considerate of this environment while still maintaining high expectations. Home and cultural sensitivity expressed by the study’s participants reflected some of their knowledge base of students living in Colonia.

A climate of respectful cultural acceptance was crucial to the success of students living in Colonia. These four teachers created classrooms where all students felt accepted, respected, and supported for who they “are.” The participants discussed and exhibited a deep understanding of *Colonia* culture that not only included knowing the families, the communities, and the students, but they also accepted and affirmed ways of knowing and understanding the world in the context of this *Colonia* experience.

There is a reality that some children come from violent environments. In fact, many of the children in these four classrooms did come from violent environments in the home and/or the community; however, that did not mean they were not loved. Sylvia went on to say, that an environment of violence was not right, but she was not judging. It was very clear to me that none of these teachers were judgmental. They were just dealing with the reality that the students may come from a violent situation, but they were still able to be happy within the context of school and with the support of caring teachers.

While teachers certainly provided appropriate reactions to incidents of violence, they also took the opportunity to value the resiliency demonstrated by their students and their families. According to Werner (1994), many children who live in poverty succeed both academically and socially despite severe situations and obstacles. Each of the teachers in this study talked about the resiliency of their students.

During the initial interview, Diana said, “That is not to mention the other problems they have to deal with on a daily basis: drugs, no food, electricity, fighting, and every conceivable problem. And I admire our students! They come to school ready to learn.” When talking about the little girl in a violent home situation, Sylvia portrayed her as a very successful student,

Even with those setbacks that she has, she’s always very happy. She’s very eager to learn and you would never even guess that anything was going on at home or that she had any type of problems because she has that good girl lucky smile and happy feeling so you would never think of it...but [she is] very bright. She thinks out of the box.



Bostock (2004) asserted that resilience addressed the traits that cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity. Resilient children cope, survive, and even thrive in challenging situations. According to Werner (1999), resilient children tend to be affectionate, outgoing, resourceful, responsible, interested, and self-confident. Resilient children are reasonably persistent and display the capacity to bounce back or utilize a range of strategies when faced with problems. Students living in Colonia had the ability to achieve in the face of such obstacles.

Complementing these resiliency traits in students living in Colonia, the participants also exhibited traits of care, encouragement, and support of their own. Studies report that such traits are of great importance in a child's life as major contributors to resiliency, providing them with a secure base for development of trust, autonomy, and initiative (Werner, 1994). Sylvia's statement was confirmed by my other three informants, "It's really important for them [students] to feel that they're loved at school, and safe." She also shared that Colonia Elementary was a "safe haven because they get a lot of attention and they know that we love them."

Such sentiments support a maternal relationship between teachers and students. I observed student/teacher relationship building in a maternalistic context. Those interactions reflected the maximum respect between a teacher and student. Raquel coined it best in reference to interactions, she said, "**It has to be motherly.**" This can be attributed to Mexican-American values taught at home where students must view their teachers as their parents and show respect to their elders or those in authority. "The action of *faltar al respeto* (to offend another's sense of dignity) is considered to be a

serious affront” (Valdes, 1996, p. 132). This mutual respect creates a community of learners where teaching and learning is a collaborative effort. While exhibiting care and support in their relationship with their students, these four teachers infused high expectations in their teaching practices.

These teachers perceived students living in Colonia as having the ability to succeed and exposed them to a rigorous curriculum. They did not accept mediocre work from any of the students. Raquel said, “I pushed him hard...I would say ‘Do it again, you can do better.’” During the focus group, she summarized the sentiment of the group when she said, “And our expectations come hand in hand. We are going to go in there and we are going to teach everything that has to be taught.” Such statements may be supported by the benchmark results in Diana’s and Raquel’s classrooms. While they prepare to administer this year’s TAKS tests, evidence of these teachers’ success can already be predicted (Table 8). Since this benchmark was done approximately three months before the actual state assessment that was administered on March 6, 2008 additional instruction and focused intervention with students who have not passed is expected to bring a higher percentage of students passing TAKS reading.

These participants’ teaching practices centered on students’ learning and interests. Their success, not ready-made, had much to do where they are grounded and in seeing themselves in everyone that is a part of their school community. Although our conversations revolved around the *Colonia* experience and what they perceived had brought academic success, these four teachers also emphasized the goals targeting assessment results, both state and teacher developed.

Table 8. Benchmark Results for 2007-2008 (TAKS Release Tests Were Used)

	Colonia Elementary		Diana/Grade 4*		Raquel/Grade 5*	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
All Students	59%	49%	63%	40%	53%	50%
Hispanic	59%	49%	63%	40%	53%	50%
Econ Disadvantaged	59%	49%	63%	40%	53%	50%
Limited English Proficient	48%	35%	56%	36%	40%	45%

\*Diana & Raquel, personal communication, March, 1, 2008.

### *Goals Based on Assessment Results*

The fourth emerging theme, clear and well-defined goals, referred to teachers' focus on achievement results that were directly linked to state assessment standards as well as those designed by the teachers. Earlier studies have also noted the positive impact of high-stakes assessments often found in successful schools serving Mexican American students.

In *Highly Successful and Loving Public Elementary Schools Populated Mainly by Low SES Children of Color*, Scheurich (1998) outlines focal beliefs and cultural characteristics that delineate successful schools supported by high-stakes accountability measures. In describing these schools, Scheurich (1998) states,

In addition, these schools used high-stakes state test data as a whole-school accountability measure that drives instruction. Originally, this was a problem for me. I have long been an outspoken opponent of these tests because I felt that the research was abundantly clear on the negative effects. (p. 475)

The researcher emphasizes his affirmed conclusion numerous times that schools that teach children of color can provide equitable teaching and learning when driven by systemic use of high-stakes assessments.

The successful teachers in this study also held themselves accountable by developing additional assessments. Sylvia talked about the different types of assessments that are administered to students. Among those assessments, she listed portfolios and journals. “We monitor the scores on all our children. We make sure that everybody that needs interventions receives interventions.” Similarly, Diana talked about how she monitors her students’ academic growth. “If I see gaps in the scope and sequence when I’m teaching, I know that I’m going to have gaps in the students. So, I make my questions. If I can’t find them in the book, I make them.”

Resnick and Resnick (1992) asserted that, unlike statewide-mandated standardized testing, which mainly contributes to public accountability, classroom-based assessments have more power to evaluate instruction and identify students’ personal needs. Just as these teachers did not make excuses for their students in the context of *Colonias*, they made themselves accountable as a result of effective instruction based on a variety of high-stakes assessments whether TAKS or teacher constructed measures.

### **Implications for Practice**

For practitioners, this study emphasized the need to look closely in the classrooms of those teachers who exhibit teaching practices that encourage and produce student success and “to challenge those who suggest it cannot be made available to all children” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 163). This study affirmed the importance of studying Mexican American teachers’ stories and experiences in *Colonias*. According to this study, these teachers recognized the expertise and knowledge that students living in Colonia bring in the classroom by virtue of their life experiences. These four teachers

respected the individual qualities, heart, mind, culture, and experiences of children living in Colonia. The power of these stories centered on previously unheard voices of Mexican American educators teaching students living in *Colonias*. Children in Colonia are economically challenged. Children in Colonia are culturally and linguistically diverse. Mexican American teacher of children living in Colonia provide compelling stories that have practical implications and approaches for other educators who work with such dynamic populations. Administrators and educators may gain contextual and instructional insight from the voices highlighted in this study.

As highest priorities, the results of this study urge school administrators to incorporate the following three areas into education improvement efforts to truly accentuate the power of embracing the culture, language and life experiences of Mexican American, second language learners:

1. Move from a near-exclusive curriculum on state assessment to an integrated curriculum to impact the diverse needs, experiences, and backgrounds of students through culturally responsive lessons that facilitate improved student learning;
2. Use systemic and regular collaboration among staff members, individualized mentoring for teachers, experienced specialists to support teacher development, and staff training in how to engage students living in *Colonias* and other high-poverty areas; and,

3. Prepare administrators and principals to lead district improvement efforts that specifically impact schools in high-poverty areas and those serving Mexican American, second language learners.

This is very much an alternative and successful approach besides the traditional approaches of tutoring, feeding, and providing social services. This study revealed the approach to understanding the student and using that understanding as a vehicle to support culturally responsive teaching practices.

In addition to strengthening district and school improvement efforts, this study has implications for preservice teacher education. Such programs should provide preservice teachers with carefully structured experiences in the communities and schools in which they will teach, and provide opportunities to develop personal relationships with students and families (Cruz, 1997; Worthy & Patterson, 2001). Similarly, these practices can be provided for inservice teachers. Whether or not one shares the language or culture of the family, teachers can support bilingualism, biliteracy, and positive identification with home language and culture (Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998; Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Even in the harsh realities of schools in *Colonias*, teachers like Diana, Fatima, Raquel, and Sylvia enabled and inspired their students for continual learning and lifelong development.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As I conducted the literature review for this study, I found numerous studies about *Colonias* but mostly in the area of health care, housing, and urban development. I found no studies on *Colonias* that focused on student academic success. Future research

will benefit from the inclusion of educational issues, in addition to research that focuses only on economics and living conditions.

To achieve effective schools in *Colonias*, educators and policymakers need to listen to the voices of those who are successfully meeting the educational and cultural needs of students living in Colonia. The present study is an important step toward understanding some of the issues faced by educators who serve students living in *Colonias*. We need to know much more about the practice of successful teachers of Mexican American and other students who have been underserved by our schools. Further systemic research is needed to fully understand the unique *Colonia* experience to address the complex educational environment of so many students.

For researchers, this type of study needs to be replicated in a variety of context within *Colonias*. Based upon the results of this study, listed below are recommendations for further research:

1. Studies conducted with a larger sample size of teachers who practice in *Colonias* to explore instructional practices that are specific to subject areas. Interviewing teachers from various schools and districts within *Colonias* to expand the scope of the study.
2. A longitudinal study can be conducted with a cohort of students currently attending Colonia Elementary following them through middle school and high school. How are these students doing academically over the years?

3. Other important groups to study are the students, parents, and administrators in *Colonias*. Research is needed to investigate the contributions and experiences of these other participants.

“We need to have an opportunity to explore alternate research paradigms that include the voices of parents and communities in non-exploitative ways” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 163). It will take much more research and many more studies such as this one to establish successful efforts for teaching children in *Colonias*.

### **Conclusions**

The success of Diana, Fatima, Sylvia, and Raquel, and in turn, of the students, rested on the fact that the students have been taught in a deeply nurturing environment where their home, culture, and language are valued and encouraged. In these teachers’ voices, I heard their commitment to change Colonia Elementary with their presence and their resolve that all students can succeed. Their first priority was meeting the educational needs of all the children who attended Colonia Elementary. These research findings seem to echo those presented in *Lessons From High-Performing Hispanic Schools* (Reyes et al., 1999). The uniqueness of this work, however, rested in the location of the school – a *Colonia*.

*Lessons* presented a conceptual framework for creating academic success in high-poverty schools. Reyes et al. (1999) noted eight important aspects of success with Mexican American students: (a) cross-curricular thematic units of study; (b) respect for ethnic diversity; (c) use of students’ funds of knowledge and language as bases of instructional strategies; (d) bilingual/bicultural teachers and staff; (e) involvement of



parents and the community; (f) systematic assessment of student progress; (g) after school and weekend programs for students and parents; and (h) academic teaming that includes teachers, administrators, parents, and other relevant community members.

Consistent with the research on *Lessons*, these four teachers at Colonia Elementary (a) recognized, valued, and respected the students' language and home life in a *Colonia*; (b) established and maintained common strands across grade levels; (c) shared a clear mission of success with staff and students even in the midst of some real challenges; and (d) accepted primary responsibility for student achievement (Reyes et al., 1999).

Found braided in the four themes identified in my research are several of the critical aspects of success with Mexican American students identified in *Lessons*. For instance, the aspects of respect for ethnic diversity, bilingual/bicultural teachers and staff, and involvement of parents and the community seamlessly braided into the theme of embracing culture and language as recognized by the teachers in my study. These successful teachers provided varied opportunities to their students, such as accepting answers in Spanish when English was not yet fluent. These *Colonia* experiences seem different from other small towns and large city school experiences because a void in embracing cultural contexts often exists in other environments. Teachers in those settings often operate from deficit perspectives of needs as they relate to children of color and those with linguistic differences. Diana, Fatima, Sylvia, and Raquel provided educational services as a result of embracing and developing strength perspectives found in the students living in a *Colonia*. Many people who are from the outside looking in think that these children need something different because "they are just so poor."

Diana, Fatima, Sylvia, and Raquel are bringing down the barriers to deliver a quality education whether children live in poverty, affluence, a suburb, or a Colonia. They believed that the cultural capital that the students bring with them is valuable and a resource; which combined with the acquisition of basic and advanced skills and knowledge can push them forward to academic success.

The second theme, campus aligned standards and language transition plan, is braided in the tenet of the use of students' funds of knowledge and language as basis for instructional strategies. These successful teachers operated out of the context of what was needed at Colonia Elementary. Again, most people would come with a deficit lens. What others may see as deficits, these teachers saw as strengths. Teachers in this study were not saying the children were not economically challenged. They were saying such challenges did not prevent students living in a *Colonia* from the potential of the academic success. They taught from a *strength* perspective – the *strength* perspective that addresses different approaches to achieving optimal learning within *Colonias* such as (a) understanding and appreciating the *Colonia* environment; (b) valuing the students' language and their experiences in *Colonias*; and (c) incorporating the students' special enriching values, such as being respectful and wanting to learn, into their learning experience. The core of this study resided in the fact that Diana, Fatima, Sylvia, and Raquel were not *stuck* on “they are poor.” Many teachers do not get to academic success with Mexican American children; they do not know how to reach success because they are *too stuck* on “they are poor.”

The development of an academic team composed of teachers, administrators, parents, and relevant community members was also identified as an important tenet in *Lessons*. This aspect can be woven in the third theme, an environment of care and support. The power of the *Colonia* experience is that even when children come from challenging environments, teachers can facilitate meaningful educational interactions and create good relations between families and teachers because they are on the “same page.” Yes, some of these children live in some very difficult and challenging situations. There is domestic violence. There are homes that are not optimal. Yes, teachers may get frustrated at times. However, they recognized and respected the strength in a family owning their land, no matter how small the plot. They admired the courage to move to a foreign country where language and culture were new and unfamiliar – all in search of a dream of a better life. The families in *Colonia* are people who exhibited loyalty to the region, resilience, and an extraordinary desire to improve their life and their children’s future through education. There was never any doubt during any of these teachers’ conversations that their children were going to be successful.

In addition, aligned to the tenet of a systematic assessment of student progress is the fourth emergent theme, clear and well-defined goals. The successful teachers in this study held themselves accountable for their students’ academic gains. These teachers monitored the progress of all students in *Colonia*. Just as these teachers did not make excuses for their students in the context of *Colonias*, they made themselves accountable as a result of effective instruction based on a variety of high-stakes assessments whether on TAKS or teacher constructed measures.

Although these four successful Mexican American teachers conceded that their children came from difficult environments, they did not allow the challenging realities of their lives in Colonia to interfere with what they did in the reality of constructed success in the classroom. There is power in what is happening at Colonia Elementary and the collective understanding of the experience. These teachers understood and appreciated the unique *Colonia* experience and the students who proudly defined it – the *Colonia* experience of dignity, language, and hope.

*An Introduction, Not a Conclusion*

It would be misleading to call this a conclusion of any sort. While all research projects require some sort of end, something to symbolize that a grand conclusion was reached or that a major discovery was made, for me this project is but an introduction. On a very personal level, reflecting on my journey, I realize it taught me much about the research process to find solutions to educational problems, while striving to affirm and empower those who participated in my study. Through the conversations with Diana, Fatima, Sylvia, and Raquel, I gained insight on the teachers' role in the success of the students living in Colonia. I have gained valuable experience and knowledge. I began to understand more thoroughly the power provided through interpretive research. Accessing the voices of Mexican American women, who teach Mexican American children from a strength perspective, has empowered me as a new researcher.

This study complemented and extended the body of literature that has focused on the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools (Reyes et al., 1999). In particular, this study described a very unique high-poverty school – one found in a

*Colonia*. Instead of focusing on a school that merely did better than other high-poverty schools, this study examined the stories of success of four teachers at Colonia Elementary. In addition to reporting descriptions of Colonia Elementary, this study narrated the teachers' stories of the change process so that others might gain a deeper understanding of how successful teachers began, maintained, and sustained the journey toward excellence for Mexican American students living in *Colonias*. The research journey has afforded me the opportunity to leave my first footprint. I join others, whose shoulders I rest upon (García & Guerra, 2003; González et al., 2005; Moll, 1988; Nieto, 2003; Reyes et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999) in facilitating continued academic success for 20% of the Hispanic public school population in the State of Texas. There is much more for our research community to learn from the *Colonia* experience.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**CONSENT FORM**

## CONSENT FORM

### A Successful Elementary School in the Midst of a *Colonia*: Mexican American Teachers Tell their Stories of Success

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Guadalupe C. Gorordo, a doctoral student in educational administration at Texas A&M. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the dissertation, I am conducting a study on Mexican American elementary teachers regarding their success with low socio-economic status (SES) Mexican American students who live in *Colonias*.

You were nominated to be a possible participant for this study by parent, principal, and/or peer because you are perceived as being successful in facilitating academic success to Mexican American students. The purpose of the study is to expand our understanding of what successful teachers, like you, perceive makes them successful with economically challenged, Mexican American students, and to offer my findings to other teachers interested in knowing the perceptions of classroom teachers who are successful teaching economically challenged, Mexican American students.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will interview you two times for approximately one hour each time. To ensure accuracy in documenting your responses, the interviews will be audio taped. You will also be asked to video tape an 8 to 10 minute segment of one of your teaching lessons. The study will culminate with a focus group that will meet for up to 2 hours. Focus group session will also be audio taped. You will choose the most convenient time to conduct any of the listed activities except for the focus group which will be decided by the group. The anticipated time to begin the interviews is June 2007. The interviews and observation will be completed by the end of the 2007 summer school. There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort to you, and you will be making a contribution to the field of education by informing educators what works well with your students.

Your participation in this study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records as well as audio and video tapes will be stored securely and only I and my committee chair, Dr. Gwen Webb-Johnson will have access to them. The audio and video tapes made will be erased a year after the end of the study. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me or with your current campus. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any of the questions that may make you uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time without your relations with the University, job, benefits, etc.,



being affected. You can contact me at (956)729-1445 or at ggorordo@uisd.net or Dr. Webb-Johnson at gwebbj@coe.tamu.edu with any questions about this study.

A copy of this consent will be given to you. If you would like to know the results of this study, please let me know, as I will be pleased to share them with you. Thank you so much for your help.

This research study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, you can contact the Institutional Review Board through Ms. Angelia M. Raines, Director of Research Compliance, Office of the Vice President for Research at (979)458-4067, araines@vprmail.tamu.edu

Sincerely,

Guadalupe C. Gorordo

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

## Interview Protocol

### 1<sup>st</sup> Teacher Interview *Individual teacher*

May I audio tape our interviews?

Tell me something about your family, where you grew up, and your education.

1. Being a Mexican American teacher who speaks Spanish, you are in high demand. Why are you teaching here?
2. How important are the everyday interactions you have with your students? Can you give an example?
3. Can you think of any characteristics that Mexican American students in *Colonias* as a group bring to the classroom?
4. What kinds of things have been done in the school that has facilitated the academic success of Mexican American students?
5. What kind of things have you done in the classroom that has facilitated the academic success of Mexican American students?
6. Think about one of your Mexican American students who is doing well in your class. Give me a profile of that student. Portray the student, but do not give any information that would identify this student.
7. How do you handle the possible difference between what you want to teach and what the administration (campus principal or district) wants (for example, curricular scope and sequence, philosophies)?
8. Predict where your students will be in 10 years or as they move into adulthood.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Teacher Interview *Individual teacher*

1. Why do you think this school has achieved the rating of *Recognized* while neighboring schools have not?
2. What is your definition of a successful school? teacher?

3. Why do you think this school/you are successful at teaching Mexican American students?
4. What are the three most important strengths this school/you possess that make you a successful teacher? Why?
5. In the role of school/teacher, what are the 3 most important things that can be taught to these students? Why?
6. What do you see as the role of the school/you in the students' achievement?
7. How do you determine or evaluate the success of your students beyond the TAKS? How will you determine whether or not *you* were successful?

Group interview  
*Focus group*

An avenue for follow-up to address participant and researcher questions.

1. Is there anything else you can tell me about what makes this school successful for *Colonia*, Mexican American learners? You're a successful teacher?

Adapted from Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**APPENDIX C**  
**SAMPLE PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW**

### Sample Participant Interview

Raquel-- Sat, June 2, 2007/ 1<sup>st</sup> Interview

Just for the record, may I audiotape our interview?

**Yes, ma'am.**

Q: So, as we get started, can you tell me something about your family, where you grew up and about your education?

**We grew up in a, actually a barrio household. We had, our culture was Mexican-American and we grew up, I can say we were not rich, but we were middle class.**

**We had a good upbringing, our parents instilled very good moral. They gave their own lives. I had my first elementary years in City Elementary and then went to Captain Junior High, Gateway High School, graduated. Unfortunately I didn't go to college right away. I left into Houston and I did some accounting over there.**

**When I got back about ten years later, I decided to get my bachelors in education and at first I didn't think I was going to like it but now I understand that it was be the best thing I could have done. I love it.**

I didn't know there was that much of a gap.

**Yes, it was a big gamble. It was about 10, 15 years. I started to go but then after that I stopped and left. I went to Houston for a while. I wanted to see something else, something different and thank God I came back and I got educated and got my bachelors in Interdisciplinary studies. I specialized in reading and I have my bilingual certification.**

Q: Now, being a Mexican-American teacher and you speak Spanish and you're in high demand. You mentioned that you went to Houston you know that it's like, very high demand. Why are you teaching?

**I decided to come back to Colonia Neighboring City. There's big culture difference because there's so many different ethnic groups in Houston and I saw the need as far as needing someone to teach our culture, the Mexican-American, because living in a big city you understand there is a lot of diversity and not only that, they put you down. Being not educated you will never get to the top of the line so I came back to Colonia Neighboring City and I had the opportunity to go back to school. Unfortunately my father passed away and I decided to move back to Colonia Neighboring City and that was one of the reasons I stayed here and I decided to stay and somebody (unknown) gave me the opportunity to teach at this campus and from there on I stayed and I've been happy with these children that I'm teaching.**

Now, how important are the everyday interactions you have with your students and can you give me an example?

**The daily interactions?**

Yes.

**How important are they? They're very important because they get to know me.**

**We respect each other. I think that's one of the things that we have to learn as teachers, that we have to respect them first so that they can respect us and what I see that once we gain their respect, they're willing to do what you ask them to do to learn what they need to learn and I see them grow and grow as far as, this year I**

**had the opportunity to let all my students, I always ask them to write something to the fourth graders when they're coming up and I had the opportunity to read their compositions and most of them said that they were thankful to be with me because they learned what they needed to learn and they learned to respect me.**

Q: Now, can you think of any characteristics that these students in this area bring to the classroom as a group?

**Characteristics as far as...?**

Q: A while ago you were mentioning something about the culture, something that is different, how is this group?

**These Colonia kids, children, they're all different because some of them have a good background, some of them are struggling. They have a lot of need. Some of them probably don't even have light. They don't even have water. They come to school with very little. We have to; it has to be motherly, what we're putting into them. Their characteristics, everybody's different. Some of them are very good, are very intelligent. Some of them are struggling and they know it's hard for them and they don't want to learn but we have to give them some motivation. I think that's what the thing is, that you have to sometimes have to sit with them for them to understand that you want them to be there, you want them to be successful and some of them struggle and some of them are saying that I don't want to do it because I don't have to do it and you have to instill in them that there is an importance in education. Is that more or less...?**



Q: Yes, again it's what you give me and it is your experience of the campus. What kind of things have been done at the school that you feel has facilitated the academic success of children?

**One of the things was that we started the early transition in English. We started, everything was hands-on. We started doing a lot of hands-on. We interact with the students totally, the whole day. It's interaction, instruction, we have to do small groups, we do centers, we try to do different things. We teach a lot of technology. I try to do everything we can with the kids, different things. Not only for them to be doing a deal, there has to be more, the children have to learn from other experiences. We try to take them outside, like plants, for science has been very important because they see them grow, they see them die. All of that has been different and I think that's one of the reasons our interaction we have with kids is 100% or 150% I have to say.**

Q: And is this at the campus level or is this just in your classroom?

**No, it's the campus level pretty much. We're all doing it and because you see these children as they come to you how, the difference in their language, their vocabulary, their reading, they're able to be, they're proven readers. When I first started there at the campus I used to see them struggling and they had a lot of frustration with reading. Now you see they're more fluent, they want to read, they want to read stories. You see them the way they interact with each other, the language is there because I remember before they wanted to speak only Spanish, now they interact with everybody in English, so that has changed and that has helped.**

Q: You've given me examples of things that have been done at the school, what about in your classroom?

**In my classroom I do a lot of group teaching, I do one-to-one, I do a lot of hands-on activities. I'm starting from reading all the way to social studies, everything we do, I like from them to present PowerPoint. I like for them to do everything like, if they have vocabulary, they have to find pictures that go with the vocabulary words and they have to present it to the class and explain it. They have to do a lot of interaction with each other and with me so that they can be prepared because if not, and for some reason or other, these children are starting to get that they're important, I think that's one of the main things that they know, that's important to us for them to learn.**

Q: What things do you think you've done to instill that they're important?

**I interact with them quite a bit; I do a lot of one-to-one. I sit with them. I read with them. I like for them to read to me. Even "hands on," I sit with them and I cut with them and whatever I have to do. Sometimes when we're outside, I'd play baseball with them but I think that's to show them that we're part of each other, we're part of our group, we take care of each other**

Q: Now, think about one of your students who is doing well and profile that student to me and don't give me any personal information but just portray that one child that you think is successful, that is doing well.

**Do you want somebody that came in low and went up high...?**

Q: It's up to you, whoever you feel that this is, I want to portray this student because he's doing well.

**O.K. one of my students that came in, he was considered to be a GT student but for some reason last year, he didn't care. This year, when he came in, I pushed him hard and I expected him to do, his goals have to be high and as a matter of fact this year when he was leaving he became one of our top scholars. He also was one of my top commended students in every single level in TAKS he, everything, and everything he would do, he would always give it back to me and I would say "Do it again, you can do better." And I was, when he left he said "Ma'am, you know what? Someday I'm going to be, go up there because I know I have my high goals up there." So that's one of the students I can really tell you he grew from one grade to another, not only academically but also maturely.**

Q: Now, how do you handle the possible differences between what you might want to teach and what the administration, whether it is the principal or the district, may want to you to teach? For example, in the scope and sequence or the philosophies?

**Well we have to do a mixture of everything, you know that but it's to the point that if I have to do something like, a student doesn't understand, I am going to have to do what I have to do to make them understand and what I do is sometimes when I do see a student is struggling, I go out and take all my, although it's not in the scope and sequence, I take him out and do one by one and I work with him until he gets it because that's what I think. I mean it's, yes the scope and sequence is there, yes we have a timeline but if the student's not learning then I have to go back and find a way to (unknown).**

Q: So then you have to modify on the needs of the students.

**On the needs of the students, that's correct, even if I have to do a small group, even if I have to do one to one or whatever I need to do.**

Q: Can you predict where your students will be maybe in ten years or as they move into adulthood, where do you see them being?

**I predict at least 80% will be going into the university because they were successful and I think if they continue to being successful, to me I've always told them that if they're successful one time, then from there it's going to become easier to set their goals, so I'm predicting about 80% of my students will go to university and finish and have a degree.**

Q: So that means that about 80% of them will finish high school and want to...

**And move on to better things. I think their goals can be up there. As a matter of fact I got a note from one of the parents yesterday. One of my students, he's going to graduate next year and his goal is to be an engineer, so I am very happy about that.**

Q: From the time you started teaching, where are your first group of kids?

**I already have somebody, some of them are already graduating and some of, like I said, one of them is already in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and he's going to be going into the 12th grade and his career in engineering and I've seen several that are coming back saying "Ma'am I'm already..." they're either in the magnet school or I've had several that are doing very successful so that's why I feel that most of them or 80% will do well.**

And those are all the questions that I have.

## VITA

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### EDUCATION

- 2008            Doctor of Philosophy, Educational Administration  
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas
- 1990            Master of Science, Education  
Texas A&M International University, Laredo, Texas
- 1981            Bachelor of Arts, Education  
St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2005-Present    Executive Director, Instructional Accountability  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 2001-2005      District Test Director  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 1996-2000      Principal, Juarez Lincoln Elementary  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 1994-1996      Assistant Principal, Paciano Prada Elementary  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 1991-1994      Assistant Principal, Clark Elementary  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 1988-1991      Teacher, Clark Elementary  
United Independent School District, Laredo, Texas
- 1987-1988      Teacher, American School Foundation  
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- 1985-1987      Teacher, Highland Park Elementary  
Austin Independent School District, Austin, Texas
- 1983-1985      Teacher, Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center for the Blind  
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