Querer Superarse: First-Generation Latinos

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UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS

Redlands, California

Querer Superarse: First-Generation Latinos

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

By
Cynthia Oliveros

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2019
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ABSTRACT

Querer Superarse:
First-Generation Latinos

By:

Cynthia Oliveros
Doctor of Education
University of Redlands, California, 2019
Professor James Valadez, Ph.D., Chair

First-generation Latinos have endured challenges in an educational system that was not designed to serve or support them as they progress from kindergarten through high school. However, many first-generation students have beaten the odds through scholastic achievement, high school graduation, and acceptance to a four-year university. The intention of this study was to get a better understanding of what the determining factors are that help first-generation students overcome the challenges they face as they strive to succeed in high school, then obtain a college degree. The research also aimed to understand which intrinsic and extrinsic influences impact first-generation Latino students. Guided by social capital theory, this study used a qualitative approach to examine the high school experiences of eight first-generation Latinos attending a local university. The findings indicated that first-generation students are driven to succeed in high school via five interconnecting areas: encouragement from their parents, encouragement
from teachers, programs and resources, thinking about the future, and aprovechar las oportunidades (taking advantage of the opportunities) an education offers. Each of this study’s eight first-generation Latinos currently attending a local four-year university experienced all five of the finding areas throughout their high school journey. The purpose now is to share these findings with my school site, which serves a significant large population of Latinos, so that we may continue to guide and support students who are going to college and strive to encourage, motivate, and inspire more Latinos to pursue a college degree.
This dissertation of Cynthia Oliveros is approved.

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University of Redlands, California

2019
DEDICATIONS

Para mi abuelita, “Mi feita linda,” gracias por ser mi madre, tu amor incondicional y tus sacrificios para darme una mejor vida no serán en vano. Te quise mucho entonces y te seguiré queriendo siempre. No se preocupe, que algún día mis hijos la conocerán.
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GLOSSARY

Querer Superarse: To want to succeed or to beat the odds

Aprovechar las Oportunidades: To take advantage of opportunities
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“Cynthia, no te voy a premiar por estar bien en la escuela, lo que tu hagas en la escuela será para tu futuro, no para el mío.” Maria Luisa Jimenez Gradilla

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Latinos in the United States, specifically those from low socioeconomic status, have typically faced different obstacles compared to children from higher socioeconomic demographics. Institutionalized inequalities, such as those faced by Latino students, have existed for so long that they have been woven into the roots, the very beginnings, of our educational system. Those roots sustain marginalization and oppression, thereby “reproducing” individuals who perpetuate existing social divisions (Ornstein, Levine, Gutek, & Vocke, 2014). Latinos have endured challenges in education because it was not built to serve or support them as they progress from kindergarten to high school. It is important to note, however, that many Latinos have beaten the odds by achieving in school, graduating from high school, and meeting university entry requirements. Thus, first-generation Latinos do find a way to pursue higher education. Through a qualitative approach, this study examined the high school experiences of eight first-generation Latinos currently attending a local university. The research question I intend to address is this: How do first-generation students’ high school experiences impact their motivation and aspiration to pursue college? The intention was to gain a better understanding of what the determining factors are that help first-generation students overcome the challenges they face, considering that they come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, to succeed in high school and pursue a college degree. Data will be collected using procedures based on Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interviewing.

In this chapter, I will present an overview of the educational status of Latino students, the statement and background of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question that will guide the study, and my theoretical framework.
**Background of the Problem**

The Latino population in the United States is increasing rapidly, and Latino youth constitute a significant portion of the school-aged population (Calero et al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Zychinski & Polo, 2012). It is estimated that by 2050, more than one in three children in the United States will be Latino (Murphey, Guzman, & Torres, 2014). According to the most recent data, more than 56 million Hispanics or Latinos, roughly 18% of the overall population, live in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2014). In California alone, nearly 15 million Latinos comprise 39% of the population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Latino students will soon become the majority in California’s public schools. These increasing numbers, along with their pattern of lackluster academic achievement, need to become a major concern of teachers, school leaders, and policy makers (Gándara, 2015; Madrid, 2011). While Latino high school graduation rates have certainly increased over the past decade, academic achievement and college completion have fallen behind in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015).

Educators and school professionals will be working with more and more Latinos; for this reason, it is important to understand their needs, especially those of children (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). Many Latino students combat significant barriers and adversity in their lives: poverty, health problems, jail time, violence, marginalization, and oppression. Children in poverty experience a greater risk of health problems, food insecurity, teen pregnancy, and diminished adulthood employment (Berliner, 2013; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). Such children are more likely to drop out of school, especially when they encounter ill-equipped learning environments, misidentification of (dis)abilities, difficulties in acquiring English as a second language, and poor teacher-student relationships. Latinos have received a lower-quality educational experience
compared to their White peers or other ethnic groups, and they face an educational crisis as they falter throughout the educational pipeline, particularly regarding college enrollment rates.

The national goal of increasing college attendance began with the Reagan administration’s 1983 report, “A Nation at Risk” (U. S. Department of Education, 1983). This document showed a link between the slumping performance of schools with economic vulnerability and international competition (Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2015). The focus on “college for all” continued with the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” initiative, with the goal of greater educational equity accomplished, in part, by “increased college enrollment rates” (U. S. Department of Education, 2015). Despite such initiatives, Latinos face potential disaster as they consistently lag behind their peers, a problem that is most noticeable when analyzing college enrollment rates (Ocasio, 2014). The significant gap between Latino and White students has been well documented in public education (Howard, 2010). Children of Mexican descent, especially, are less likely than their peers from other ethnic backgrounds to graduate from high school; they are also least likely to enroll in college and complete a four-year degree. While many Latinos do enroll in college, the rate of enrollment in two-year colleges is higher than in four-year colleges (Gándara, 2015). In fact, 60.6% of African Americans and 63.2% of Asian Americans selected four-year universities in 2008, but a mere 48.1% of Latinos enrolled in four-year programs. The remaining 51.9% attended two-year colleges (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010).

The long-term implications for the US economy and social stability will depend, in part, on addressing the issues of Latino educational attainment (Marrero, 2016). Particularly important are the lower levels of academic achievement demonstrated by this group (Zychinski & Polo, 2012) and the continued achievement gap that separates students from dominant and
non-dominant cultures (Howard, 2010; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011), which may be due to Latinos not obtaining college degrees at the same rate as their non-Latino peers.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges first-generation Latinos face, as well as learning about the determining factors that allow these students to succeed academically. Most of these young people will be the first in their families to graduate high school and, more notably, the first to attend college. This study was also an opportunity to enhance the educational outcomes of future Latinos. Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States and, according to projections, the Latino population will increase to approximately 20% of the total population by 2030 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017). Most research analyzing college students’ experience is limited when focused exclusively on first-generation Latinos and their high school experiences and what impacts their desire to pursue a college degree (Yosso, 2006). This study serves to share the experiences of eight first-generation Latinos pursuing a college degree and examine existing knowledge regarding their aspirations to pursue college. Once my study is complete and approved by my committee and my university, my goal will be to share the results with my school site, the population of which is 87% Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These findings would also add to the existing literature about Latinos and their journey along their educational pathways.

The research findings from this study can be used by educators as they strive to improve the academic outlook for this population. Schools have the power to create a strong foundation that will have long-term, positive societal effects on students. Development of educator cultural competency, incorporation/partnering of social agencies, and the demonstration of positive regard are critical first steps schools can take in assisting all Latino students. Taking these
important steps may create a positivistic view of diverse Latino populations, not only among educators and school professionals, but also among Latino students, themselves (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). Understanding how students perceive high school and what barriers they encounter is essential in identifying factors contributing to a lack of motivation and the disconnect from aspirations to succeed academically. The goal, then, is to address those barriers by sharing them with staff, teachers, and parents so that they may work directly to address these issues. Educators play a significant role in transforming potentially negative situations into positive school experiences for these students. It is imperative that school personnel, especially those who may not share the cultural backgrounds and experiences of these students, deepen their understanding of what impacts students’ desires to pursue a college education (Trumbull & Rothstein, 2011). Although increasing high school graduation rates is a top priority for educators locally and nationally, identifying what impacts student desire to continue education after high school should be a goal for educators. Once the needs are identified, teachers can better support students.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital theory has increasingly been applied to the study of college access, particularly for Latino students. Social capital theory provides a means to assess the ways in which an individual’s social relationships and networks provide access to important economic, cultural, and academic resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Previous research on college access for Latino students has demonstrated the importance of various relationships, including those with immediate family, peers, extended family, teachers, and guidance counselors (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Social capital analysis allows for an understanding of how students access different types and different numbers of resources available through their schools, families, and
communities. These differences are critical for understanding educational inequities, such as those faced by Latino students, that impede college access. This study will use social capital theory to explore first-generation Latino students who have achieved in high school and then pursued a college education despite the tendency of this population to struggle academically. It is important to note that scholars have been working to elaborate new conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding the social networks, socialization, and educational attainment for racial minority youth, particularly Latino youth from working-class or economically disenfranchised urban communities (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). It is crucial to have such frameworks that detail the complexities of socialization, network relationships, and educational attainment among racial minority youth, including the roles of resourceful and committed socialization and institutional agents designed to empower both youth and stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, counselors, and youth program personnel.

Bourdieu (1986) developed the theory of social capital that has been used to analyze the educational success of children from different social classes. For Bourdieu, social capital included resources a person has and can use to pursue successful educational outcomes and social mobility. He asserted that classes can be distinguished by the amount of capital they “posses,” and some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. Thus, the social capital of marginalized groups is quite different, basically unfavorable, compared to the social capital of more “fortunate” students. The low cultural capital minority youth experience sadly defines the education they will receive, for they may be denied access to programs that could benefit them as they enter and move through the educational system. Depending on the quality of their lives and the obstacles they have endured, minority students require extra resources to have an equitable opportunity for academic success (Bourdieu, 1986).
Of interest, however, is the fact that some students can and do overcome these hurdles and achieve more success than their non-Latino peers.

In 1966 James Coleman authored *The Coleman Study* (Coleman, 1966) one of the most cited and influential articles on social capital. He investigated this concept from two different perspectives: family and environment. He believed that both family and community played a significant role in the creation of human capital in society’s younger generations. He emphasized the role of family and family life in producing social capital. Specifically, family was vital in raising a healthy generation and ensuring a healthy society; this responsibility continues throughout life. The second provider of social capital was environment. He believed individuals benefit from social capital not only in their family but also within the larger community, comprising all associational and relational networks. Schools, neighborhoods, and other organizations provide individuals with social capital at different levels (Coleman, 1988).

Putnam (2000) contended that the central idea of social capital is that social networks have values. He emphasized the benefits of social networks, such as information, trust, and reciprocity. The collective value of all social networks and the benefits that arise from these then help people resolve individual and collective problems more easily. In terms of educational issues, people use their social networks in different phases of education (Putnam, 2000). Different stakeholders’ involvement, specifically related to the community and state, helps to increase the relevance and quality of education. In other words, the strong bonds and links that people have with other individuals and organizations help create and maintain certain character traits: tolerance, empathy, reciprocal respect, and eagerness to engage in dialogue with other members of society. In contrast, people lacking connection or interconnectedness with others find themselves less able to test the accuracy of their own views and opinions. Without such
opportunities, people grow less tolerant, more cynical, and more likely to be swayed by negative or unhealthy impulses. Furthermore, associational and relational networks that comprise social capital serve as channels for the flow of helpful information amongst people, and this facilitates the pursuit of individual and collective interest.

In his most recent work, Stanton-Salazar (2011) offered a social capital framework, specifically related to working-class minority children and youth, that defines social capital as consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in their network and accessible through direct and indirect ties with institutional agents who empower students and youth lacking higher levels of social capital. Stanton-Salazar defined an institutional agent “as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high status and authority” (p. 1067). Working-class minority students, such as Latinos, access social capital through these individuals who figure prominently in an adolescent’s social network and who fulfill their roles as institutional agents when they advocate for disenfranchised youth via the transmission of highly valued institutional support: resources, opportunities, privileges, and services geared toward academic success in high school and beyond. Stanton-Salazar further added that access to resources and institutional support among low-status youth is significantly dependent upon the network characteristics, network-related capacities and skills, and networking orientations of those institutional agents devoted to supporting and empowering low-status youth.

Lareau and Horvat (1999) stated, “the role of race [can be] independent to the power of class” (p. 49). Social class certainly correlates with educational outcomes, in that higher social class leads to better educational opportunities. Then again, working-class and poor families live together in the same communities, so their children attend the same schools, this results in
schools with large populations of the same social class; thus, reproducing social reproduction and social inequities. Despite the relevancy of social class, including race in this framework is crucial, however, for it is intertwined with social capital and children’s school experiences. Although parents’ social class influences where children will go to school, race is also a factor. In fact, Lareau (1989), a sociologist who has been exploring social class and family-school relationships since the 1980s, maintained that while social class has an important influence on children’s school experiences, race can serve to compound the impact of class. Lareau (1989) further contended that race specifically and substantially influences interactions in school settings. Moreover, Lareau (2011) discovered in her study that African-American families from middle-class neighborhoods were very concerned about the impact of race on their children and for this reason they monitor their child’s experiences closely. In addition, one family studied was adamant about teaching their son about race being an important aspect of his life and that although discrimination would exist in his life because people “see a color first” that his race would also impact his life so his parents stressed to him that he should never use discrimination as an excuse for not succeeding or doing his best. Children’s overall school experiences, which are impacted by their social interactions while dealing with social institutions and personnel, may depend on individual characteristics, such as race and class. In Lareau’s (2011) study, an African-American family also shared that the activities their son would participate in were monitored to make sure their son would not be the only Black child and that he was in mixed groups from “cultured” families, meaning people who were accepting of different people in a positive manner. Parents’ involvement and views of schools can also be shaped by their race, which further impacts their children’s overall school experiences. For example, the Williams’ family in Lareau’s (2011) study shared that they were aware for the potential of their son
Alexander being exposed to racial injustice, but they were prepared to protect their son from injustices and any type of discrimination. Additionally, parents’ race plays an important role in their ability to communicate with their children’s school, to express their concerns, and to comply with school requests (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). For example, in Lareau’s (2011) study, Ms. Marshall and other African-American parents were faced with the possibility of Whites having low expectations for their children, different forms of discrimination, and the experience of racial insensitivity from other children and adults. For the middle class African-American parents, the thought of their own children experiencing any type of injustice or discrimination in an institutional setting automatically came up due to their own personal experiences of discriminations they endured growing up. For the middle-class Black mothers, those were the types of concerns or issues they were dealing with because their children spent a large part of their daily lives in predominantly White environments. On the other hand, at the middle-class, predominately White suburban school the middle-class White parents frequently went to the school to complain about minor matters such as scheduling conflict resulting in their child not being able to perform in a skit for other students, criticizing teacher’s choice of projects, book report assignments, homework levels or classroom arrangements. Lareau (2011) referred to Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical language in that in her study both Black and White middle-class parents consistently explored for opportunities to activate their social capital on behalf of their children to potentially gain important advantages for their children. Black and White middle-class parents passed along their skills that could be particularly beneficial to their children in adulthood.

Social capital theory serves as the foundation and guiding lens for the analysis of the experiences for the eight participating first-generation Latino university students. These
students’ endeavors to confront existing institutionalized social inequalities, marginalization and oppression, all while navigating through school to better themselves, are the reason for including race with this framework and explaining how social capital and race influence their school experiences (as can be seen in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Summary

The increasing number of Latino students in public education has not always translated into increased levels of success; thus, these students perpetuate a “tradition” of poverty and struggle. However, as there are students who do succeed despite the challenges they face, it is important to discover what it is about those students that sets them apart from the others. Understanding the relationships among social networks, socialization, and educational
attainment of Latinos can lead to answers and help create interventions and school systems that truly encourage more youth to attend a four-year university.

Chapter Two includes the review of the related literature to better elucidate important obstacles first-generation Latinos face throughout their education, including the history of education, social injustices, social classes, family, poverty, and race.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter includes a description of the literature supporting this study, as it is important to understand what impacts the education of first-generation Latino high school students. An outline of obstacles these students face while attending K-12 schooling in the United States is also included in this chapter. Sections discussed in this chapter are the following: history of education, social injustice and oppression, social classes, family, poverty, and race. These elements are important to any discussion of the challenges first-generation Latino students face while attending school in the US.

History of Education

During the national period, the Founding Fathers of education in America, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster, developed three important proposals for schools: first, prepare people to be citizens in a new and different republic; second, teach utilitarian and scientific skills and subjects to help citizens develop the nation’s vast territory and abundance of natural resources; third, create a new culture unique to America (Ornstein et al., 2014). These leaders, however, had different ideas about how to enact the proposals. On one hand, Benjamin Franklin founded a private secondary school with a curriculum emphasizing useful knowledge: carpentry, shipbuilding, engraving, printing, and farming. He recognized how important science, invention, and technology would be to America’s future (Ornstein et al., 2014). Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, who was influenced by The Enlightenment period which began in Europe, believed that the main purpose of education was to promote a republican society of literate and well-informed citizens.
(Alexander, Salmon, & Alexander, 2015). Those citizens would, of course, be White men who demonstrated academic aptitude.

Horace Mann, a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education during the 1830s, pushed for the establishment of common schools to be paid for through taxation. His argument to the wealthy was this: being the guardians of society, they had a responsibility for educating the populace (Ornstein et al., 2014). Common schools could train individuals to be productive, responsible members of society who worked hard and obeyed the laws. He strove to convince farmers and workers that their children, if educated by the common schools, could advance up the social ladder, for they would finally have the knowledge and skills necessary to do so. In other words, these schools would function as social equalizers. While Mann visualized common schools as providing more equality of access to education and lessening class differences, he still believed that the upper classes should maintain control of the economic and political systems (Ornstein et al., 2014). Since that time, the earliest ideas about who should be empowered versus who should be marginalized still typify social classes and education in America. Thus, common schools laid the foundation of the American public-school system, and the common school movement is important because it created publicly controlled and funded elementary education (Alexander et al., 2015).

**Social Injustices and Oppression**

The general concepts of social domination and oppression in the United States were redefined by the new left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and then applied to the thoughts and actions of many individuals and organizations in contemporary American political life. Socialist activists claimed that deep institutional injustices characterized American society.
Indeed, Young (1990) described five concepts of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, all of which are discussed below.

The different social classes have a direct impact on society and the inequalities children face in schools. Social class affects the type of schooling students receive, and children who are most impacted in schools are those from low-socioeconomic classes and those who are poor. Lower-class children are also the most impacted by the incompatible theories of education. They are missing socialization in education because they lack social capital (Coleman, 1988). For many children of the lower class, moving constantly from school to school is often their reality. These changes are not always for the better. They usually attend schools with fewer resources to help them reach the proper level of achievement for their grade level (Anyon, 1980; Berliner, 2013; Gándara, 2015). Thus, the trend continues: These children have less access and opportunity for social mobility and may be directly impacted by not having the same level of social capital as their peers from the middle- and high-social classes (Alexander et al., 2015).

In educating working-class students, “democratic solidarity” was the focus. Unfortunately, this model further contributed to oppression, for these students are treated more as a collective group and less as individuals with ideas and creativity to be expressed. They are instructed to follow adults’ directions and be compliant, and they are often taught via the copying of class notes and the following of procedures (e.g., an agenda), much like the type of education offered by the common schools promoted by Horace Mann. Students in these schools do not have opportunities for discussions about what they should be learning and/or why they are learning what is being taught (Anyon, 1980). Unfortunately, despite the recognition of these discrepancies, the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic levels continues to grow, and students from the lower socioeconomic ranks suffer the most (Howard,
2010). Ultimately, the low social capital for these students is the result of coming from poor families who lack education, and this situation passes from generation to generation.

Marginalization, or the process of exclusion, is the second face of oppression (Young, 1990). Marginalization occurs because certain parts of society decide who is “worthy” of an education or who will be used for labor. Those from the higher socioeconomic classes who have a better education use their power to exclude those who they believe should not participate in social life (Young, 1990). In the United States, a substantial portion of the Latino population is marginalized in this manner. The problem for most schools with a high percentage of marginalized Latino students involves an epidemic of underachievement in reading and math skills, failed classes, truancies, suspensions and, even more distressing, high drop-out rates (Howard, 2010). Additionally, poor minorities, who often live in the same neighborhoods, end up in schools serving other poor minorities, thereby propagating social and educational norms that are not conducive for higher levels of school achievement (Berliner, 2013; Lareau, 2011).

While students with low-socioeconomic status typically have unequal academic achievement compared to those students from higher social classes (Berliner, 2013), the curriculum from which they are taught may inherently expect less: less cognitive activity, less impactful collaboration, and less exposure to post-high school opportunities. In fact, higher-order skills are embedded in the curriculum of schools in high-income areas. The students are encouraged to develop reasoning and mathematical thinking; they complete independent research, and their writing assignments become research reports. The students also benefit from enrichment experiences that further their overall intellectual development. Districts (and families) from these areas have the resources to finance such activities. Children from the upper-class can count on social capital thanks to their parents’ social capital.
The third face of oppression is powerlessness (Young, 1990). Socially, people are aware some will have power, and some will not. Those who have internalized their powerlessness will be dominated by those from the ruling class. Those being dominated may be treated with disrespect, have trouble in making decisions, and/or fail to develop their capabilities. Educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) believed that powerlessness was the strongest form of oppression because it often causes people to oppress themselves and, in turn, oppress others. Many people who are oppressed may not be aware of their oppression and are, therefore, powerless. Students may demonstrate this powerlessness through lack of motivation; they lack the power to change their situation, so they do not even try. Freire called this type of oppression a culture of silence. Those who are powerless are silent; they do not discuss their oppression and are certainly not allowed to by their oppressors. Some victims internalize their situation and almost seem to accept that they are “naturally” inferior.

The fourth face of oppression is cultural imperialism (Young, 1990). The culture of the ruling class is to rule and to force the dominant culture on others. The teaching of English as the dominant language can be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism. This began early on: In the early 1800’s, Noah Webster promoted a monocultural American identity with its own distinctive American version of English as the national language (Ornstein et al., 2014). Webster, after whom a dictionary is named, helped create this distinctive American version of English. Even today, public schools “Americanize” all children from every race and ethnicity by imposing this monolithic cultural version on them, often at the expense of native languages and/or dialects. Consequently, a major source of discussion and funding relates to the education of English Language Learners. Whatever the method of bilingual education, the goal is the same: the acquisition of English. Success and inclusion in American society is dependent on this skill.
The last face of oppression is violence (Young, 1990), which takes the form of hate crimes. Many oppressed groups experience threats of violence due, at least in part, to xenophobia, an intense and irrational fear of people, ideas, or customs that seem foreign or strange. The historical tendency not to prosecute perpetrators of hate crimes appropriately has led to frustration and, as can be seen almost daily on the news, answering violence. The tensions even boil over into the public-school system. Minority students who have endured living in a deeply divided society engage in physical altercations at school or in their neighborhoods because that is how they might manifest their anger and frustration over their lack of social and cultural capital.

**Social Classes**

Although social class in the United States is a controversial issue, with some believing there are three levels of classes, some insisting five, and others arguing that there are six different levels, this paper will describe upper, middle, and lower. Annette Lareau (2011), a sociologist who studies family life, explored how the social position of children and parents has an impact on the quality of their life experiences, specifically in the arena of family-school relationships, the cultural logic of child rearing, and the process through which parents go about deciding where to live and send their children to school. The children of upper-class parents have the option of attending expensive private schools, or they live in areas with high-achieving public schools (Lareau, 2011). These students have more opportunities because their parents have more connections with other upper-class individuals; in other words, they possess academic and social “capital” (Anyon, 1980). Upper-class children have more opportunities to practice 21st century skills, including critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity, as these skills are embedded in the curriculum. Furthermore, since income and income stability are highly
correlated with education, better-off children will succeed and more of the less well-off children will fail to make a good living (Berliner, 2013) as adults.

The middle-class, which makes up about half of the US population, has several layers: upper-middle class, average-middle class, and lower-middle class. Most upper-middle individuals are college graduates and earn above-average salaries. Children of upper-middle individuals may also attend private schools or highly ranked public schools. “Discursive democracy” is the form often used in classrooms containing these students. As shared by Anyon (1980), this type of education is more evident in affluent, professional classrooms that focus on student individuality within a collaborative group setting; the purpose is to encourage students to speak up and to promote creativity and problem-solving skills.

Lastly, individuals from the lower class often lack the means to meet the most basic needs of their families. Lower-class children are those who are also the most affected by the incompatible theories of education. Despite the recognition of these discrepancies, the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic levels continues to grow, and students from the lower socioeconomic ranks are, of course, impacted the most. While in some nations, a family’s social class has a greater effect on tested achievement; it is also clear that in some nations, the effects of familial social class on a student’s school achievement are about half of what they are in the USA (Berliner, 2013).

In all, few people would expect there to be equal achievement outcomes when inequality of income exists among families (Berliner, 2013). The inequalities between schools from wealthier communities and those in poor communities are well known to students, parents, and teachers (Anyon, 1980). One reason for the lack of movement in generational income is the unequal schooling provided to our nation’s middle and lower-class children (Berliner, 2013).
Family

The educational attainment of parents, meaning the number of years they attend school and their success later in life, has been identified as the strongest factor affecting children’s success in school (Coleman, 1988; Egalite, 2016). Parental support also has many well-documented benefits for students of all ages (Stevens & Patel, 2015), meaning that the inclusion of parents in education is widely accepted as a critical factor in the long-term success of students in the United States (Jeynes, 2012). Much research indicated that children are less likely to drop out of school, be truant, or earn low grades if their parents are actively involved in their education in some way (Fuller, 2014). According to Egalite (2016), Coleman’s report *Equality of Educational Opportunity* summarized one of the most comprehensive studies of American education ever conducted. The report declared that the impact of family background has a more powerful effect on achievement than what schools deem to be of importance: class size, teacher qualifications, and program expenditures.

Egalite (2016) studied four family variables that may influence student achievement: family education, family income, parents’ criminal activity, and family structure. The first variable is family education. Better educated parents, who may be more careful in choosing the neighborhoods they move into, consider the quality of the schools that are assigned to a particular neighborhood (Egalite, 2016). Educated parents are also more likely to read to their children, to enhance their children’s development and human capital by using advanced language skills when communicating with their children, and to use their social capital in ensuring their children experience a higher quality of education (Egalite, 2016). Interestingly, despite low educational and occupational success, parents can serve as important role models for their children (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Their children might not want to end up in the same
social and economic milieu as their parents, but they do want to be like their parents in the areas of resilience, strength, and perseverance. Admiration and appreciation for their parents’ sacrifices were emphasized, as were specific skills and qualities the students learned from their parents in terms of overcoming challenges (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Their parents also regularly emphasized the connection between education and not “ending up like them” (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013, p. 341). In one study, some of the participants, mainly “the high aspirers,” cited their parent’s lack of education as a motivating factor for their own aspirations (Fuller, 2014).

Second, parents with greater financial resources can identify communities with higher-quality schools and thus choose more expensive neighborhoods, places where good schools are most likely located (Egalite, 2016). On the other hand, parents who are struggling financially do not have resources to check homework, send their children to summer camp, organize museum trips, or help plan for college (Egalite, 2016). One promising social policy for combating the effects of family background could be the expansion of programs that enable families to choose the best schools for their children regardless of the neighborhood in which they live (Egalite, 2016).

Third, parents’ criminal activity affects student achievement. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 2.3 percent of US children have a parent in federal or state prison, and Hispanic children are 2.5 times more likely than White children to have a parent who is incarcerated (Berliner, 2013). The emotional strain caused by a parent’s incarceration can impact a child’s achievement in school (Egalite, 2016).

Fourth, with family structures becoming more diverse, living arrangements have grown increasingly complex (Egalite, 2016). The two-parent family, for example, is vanishing among
the poor (Egalite, 2016). Single parents who work long hours have less time to spend with their children, and household responsibilities further cause them to have less time to spend in the development of their children, such as making sure their children do their homework and get sufficient sleep (Egalite, 2016). Schools cannot fully alleviate the disruptive effects of a dysfunctional or unstable family, so a strong, supportive school culture can transform the “social ecology” of a disadvantaged child (Egalite, 2016).

**Poverty**

The culture of poverty, a theory introduced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959) during the 1960s, emphasized that poverty was an economic and psychological condition passed from one generation to another, thereby creating a cycle of poverty. Lewis believed that mobilization of the poor and community action is imperative in the war against poverty. Poverty can exist without inequalities, but in societies where inequalities are as great as in ours, poverty may appear to be worse to those who have little, perhaps because all around them are those who have so much more (Berliner, 2013). It is known that poverty can have a devastating impact on children’s development. Unfortunately, poverty seems to have an almost genetic effect in that it can “follow” a family from one generation to the next. Many poor individuals are trapped in poverty, and it is difficult to break out of it (Howard, 2010). The Great Society policies, designed to eliminate poverty and equalize economic opportunity, were successful in institutionalizing the federal government’s commitment in providing education for economically disadvantaged children but failed to make educating disadvantaged students a priority.

On the other hand, other sociologists of education put the obligation on society. According to an interview, Giroux stated that in order to reach a good and just society, social justice must face social, political, and economic factors (Peters, 2012). Creating social
movements with multigenerational voices is vital in order to be critical and transformative. Critical Pedagogy must be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative (Giroux, 2014). As Giroux (2018) asserted,

As cultural workers, artists, activists, media workers and others, it is our responsibilities to recognize that pedagogy illuminates the relationship among power, knowledge and ideology, while self-consciously, recognizing the role it plays as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations. (p. 6)

Furthermore, Fine (2016) stated the desire for change is embodied by many researchers and sociologists. Michelle Fine is a professor of social psychology and urban education. She has conducted research for the past 20 years on public education with poor, middle income, and wealthy adolescents in and out of schools as well as urban educators, parents, and prisoners in college. In addition, Fine (2016) declared it is not enough to gather narratives of young people who embody lives of critique and desire and instead is advocating for the request to work along those young people as informants and co-researchers in creating a social movement. The social movement is to shed light on the systems in place that have kept the social injustices in society for so long and most importantly have worsened inequalities in schools that serve students from poor neighborhoods.

According to Giroux (2017), in order to improve the US public education system, it is vital to address the issues of economic exploitation, racist oppression, and patriarchal gender relations that form the socio-economic context in which public schools operate. In other words, schools are not the problem nor are the students or families from working-class or poor neighborhoods. The responsibility is of the society and the crucial role it has in stopping the
reproduction of poverty. The work of Henry Giroux (2017) is an important contribution to the ongoing effort to develop and nurture a critical theory and practice of education. The struggle for a socially, politically, and economically just society is an on-going problem that directly affects children living in poverty. When democracy begins to disappear, innocent people and children mostly from poverty stricken communities are subjected to catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and Poisoned water supply in Flint, Michigan. There was devastation in Hurricane Katrina, where thousands of poor people, mostly Black, were stranded, isolated with no food or clean water, medical help and place to sleep, and many who died. In Flint, 8,657 children under six-years old were subjected to lead poisoning by being exposed to poisoned water supply. Both of these catastrophes directly affected poor Black populations (Giroux, 2017). Poor people experience disenfranchisement as the people from New Orleans and Flint, Michigan did. According to Giroux (2017), poor minorities suffer the most and most of the children it affects are marginalized and powerless.

Race

It is essential to include race in any discussion of social reproduction and inequalities that continue to occur and affect children’s schooling in the US. There are populations of people and children who have been and may still be oppressed and marginalized solely for being part of a social group that is seen as inferior by the dominant society. As described in the previous sections, education has favored White children, children of higher economic classes, children who have more social and cultural capital, children whose parents possess networks of people with higher social capital, and children who live in better neighborhoods than their non-white counterparts. Giroux maintains, since the 1980’s young people, especially from minorities of class and color, are under siege which he refers as “war on youth” (Peters, 2012). Furthermore,
as mentioned in the previous section on poverty, people and children who are subjected to
catastrophes such as Katrina and Flint were poor and Black. It is inevitable to realize how
poverty and race work mutually to produce an unequal society. Minority children, including
Latino children, have had to navigate through K-12 schooling while enduring discrimination
because of their race or ethnicity.

Lareau (2011) studied 88 students’ parents, representing both White and Black races,
from different social classes. She argued that race is more determinative of the organization and
experience of childhood than social class. In addition, she stated that all Black children
encounter racism from Whites in the middle, lower, and poor classes. Black children and Black
parents in each class category faced discrimination. Also, Black parents are less involved in
their children’s schools and tend not to comply with institutional standards (Lareau & Horvat,
1999). They are reluctant to express their concerns, fearing a lack of acceptance and a
breakdown of communication. Similarly, Latino parents are generally not as involved with their
children’s schooling as White parents, in part, because of the language barrier (Stanton-Salazar,
1997).

Also, Latino families, sharing the same distrust as African-American families,
demonstrate less involvement with the schools their children attend (Lareau & Horvat, 1999;
Stanton-Salazar, 1997). White parents, on the other hand, have better communication with their
children’s schools and express their concerns freely, for they have more confidence that their
children will not be marginalized. Clearly, race can impact students’ experiences in school yet
more so when the student is both poor and of a minority group such as Latino or Black.

Relevantly, Orfield and Lee (2005) asserted segregation and discrimination in schools
continue to happen in the US which results in unequal opportunity and racial inequality for
As immigration has transformed American schools and the numbers of Black students and Latinos has grown substantially, with Latinos now being the largest minority group and Black students following closely. There has been a continuous pattern of deepening segregation for Black and Latino student since the 1980’s (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Black and Latino students attend schools with a majority of students in their own groups and attend more diverse schools than their White peers (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Moreover, Black and Latino students are heavily isolated in extreme poverty schools depending on the state they live in. Also, there is a link between segregation by poverty, race, and academic performance. Furthermore, in a few hundred highly minority high schools there tends to be a high percentage of dropouts and the students never finish school as those schools are referred as “dropout factories.” In addition, Black and Latino students attend predominately minority schools in disproportionate numbers resulting in racial inequality as well as social injustice. It is inevitable to discover racial consequences and educational inequality when studying students of poor communities and the segregation of schools; meaning the large populations of Black and Latino students attending concentrated poverty schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I summarized the review of the literature by discussing the obstacles first-generation Latinos from low socioeconomic background face when navigating their education in the US. Poverty, restricted social mobility, race, and the legal/political situations involved with immigration status tend to reduce the quality of life many families experience. This unfortunately creates a cyclical turn of events affecting one generation after another, all with few opportunities to change or escape the situation (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). As stated by sociologists Michelle Fine (2016) and Henry Giroux (2017), society must come together and
create a movement with critical pedagogy in order to create the change needed to end poverty. Social inequality and racial inequality continue to be the reality for poor and working-class Black and Latino students (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Highly segregated schools maintain neighborhoods with high minority groups such as Black and Latino students. In addition, poverty segregation and racial inequality continues to exist across the nation and directly impact students, especially minorities of class and color (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Inevitably, poverty and race are in sync to create an unequal society. Hence, poverty and race are two critical issues in our society that act as producers of social injustice. The literature in this chapter provided an overview of the institutionalized inequalities that have existed for so long in our educational system. Additionally, the literature presented support for the findings of this study by exploring the determining factors that help first-generation students graduate high school and meet the requirements to pursue a college degree. The following chapter includes the methodological qualitative research design that guided this study under its theoretical framework of social capital.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

In this study I used the qualitative method because

[t]hrough qualitative research, we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate.

(Mason, 2002, p. 1)

This method leads to deeper, more descriptive accounts of Latino students’ experiences. Such in-depth studies of successful Latino students are imperative if we are to increase levels of achievement. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the high-school experiences of recently graduated, first-generation Latino students. Through ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979), I gained a deeper understanding how their high school experiences affected their desire to pursue a college education.

Research Design

There were four components to this study: a pre-screening survey, a one-on-one interview, a pre-debrief, and a debrief with each participant. The gatekeeper, a science teacher from a local high school, sent out a letter to former students, as well as current instructional aides and AVID Tutors who work at the same school site. The letter described the study and how to contact the researcher via email and Facebook. Once the interested participants contacted the researcher, the researcher emailed them the Consent to Participate form and granted them access to a pre-screening survey designed to filter the participants to ensure they met the age requirement (18), to confirm they self-identified as first-generation college students, to determine
their current educational level, and verify if they self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. Once each interested student completed the survey the researcher contacted him/her via email to schedule the one-on-one interview, the main source for data collection. Through ethnographic interviews, the participants shared their culture which, according to Spradley (1979), refers to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experiences and generate social behavior. The interviews were guided by the researcher’s questions which were intended to initiate and focus dialogue on the overall research question. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. The pre-debrief focused on informing participants what to expect after the main interview, how long all the interviews were projected to take, and when data analysis would be shared with each participant. The debrief focused on how the participants could contact the researcher if they had any questions or if they wanted to meet to discuss the findings once the research was completed and approved by the University.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were eight first-generation Latinos attending a local university in southern California. The participants were five males and three females between 18 and 21-years of age. The participants were made aware of the study via an email invitation sent by a gatekeeper, a local high school science teacher. The gatekeeper stays in contact with many of her students and reached out to them via email or Facebook. The letter emailed or shared through Facebook informed students of the research title, purpose, significance, participant criteria, and the survey link for them to complete if they were interested in participating in the study. Once the surveys had been submitted by the participants through Google Docs, the interested participants who met the requirements were contacted by email to schedule the interview. Each participant, prior to the start of the research was asked to sign a consent form
that reiterate study details and their willingness to be electronically recorded for the purpose of the study. The participants were also reminded at each level of engagement in the study that they could terminate their participation at any time, even after the interviews had been conducted (Mason, 2002). Table 1 illustrates the participants’ demographics. Following the chart is a description of the participants’ background. A pseudonym was used for each participant to protect his/her identity.

Table 1

*Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Male or Female</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Jose</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Sofia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Luis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Manuel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-Jennifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Pedro</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Yolanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participants’ Backgrounds*

The eight participants in this study are first-generation Latinos who currently attend a local four-year university. Three of the participants were current freshmen; four of the participants were sophomores; one of the participants was a senior on track to graduate this June.
when I interviewed her. All the participants completed a prescreening survey and were selected to participate in this study because they were interested in participating and met the criteria: self-identifying as a first-generation college student, self-identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and meeting the age requirement of 18. The participants all share key factors: They all attended and graduated from the same local high school; their parents never attended college; their parents immigrated to this country; some of their parents never learned English; the participants all learned English as a second language; they are all currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree at local universities. Additionally, all the participants live locally and have lived in southern California.

Four participants mentioned they were in the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program during all four years of high school. One participant mentioned she was in the AVID program since the seventh grade, but two others were never part of the AVID program. One of the students shared that she had been in both AVID and the Middle College Prep program (college courses offered to high school students with great academic standing and taught by college professors) since her freshman year. Five participants disclosed they want to be teachers, and the other three want to pursue a career in the medical field. While the eight first-generation Latino interviewees have different personalities and different career goals, they all share the motivation and aspiration to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

**Research Setting**

Some of the interviews were conducted in a study room at a local university that was reserved ahead of time to avoid interruptions. The study room was a neutral, convenient location geared toward maintaining privacy and where neither the participant nor the researcher had an advantage. One interview was conducted in a patio area outside a local coffee shop because it was more convenient for the participant. It was also important to conduct the interview in a
setting where a conversation could take place, and both the researcher and participant were able to hear one another and for a clear recording of the interview to take place (Mason, 2002).

Data Collection

According to Spradley (1979), culture refers to the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior; in fact, every culture has many social occasions recognizable by the kind of talking—speech events, in other words—that occur. Ethnographers watch, listen, ask questions, and take notes as they interview the participants. Because gathering data requires a great deal of time, energy, and patience, it was necessary to limit the sample size for this study.

The eight participants were interviewed with the goal of making the discussions feel more like friendly conversations. These friendly conversations became the ethnographic interviews, as ethnographic elements were introduced. The three most important ethnographic elements used are explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations, and ethnographic questions (Spradley, 1979). The first element occurred once the researcher met with the informant and shared the reason and importance for the interview. The second element took form when ethnographic explanations, such as the purpose of the study, the goal for the interview, the explanation for recording the interview, and the purpose of notetaking during the interview. The third element took place before and after the conversations when the interviewees were invited to ask any questions they had. The participants then became the informants (Spradley, 1979), in that throughout the interviews, they shared their culture and experiences. The interviews were the primary source of valuable and significant data used for this research study.

The main tool for discovering another person’s cultural knowledge and experiences is through ethnographic questions (Spradley, 1979). Even though many styles of questions can be
used for ethnographic interviewing, this study used questions that were purposely neutral in an effort to invite the participants to open up and share as much as they could. The data collected includes the audio recorded interviews, the transcribed interview, and any notes taken during and after the interviews. When not being analyzed, the recorded interviews, transcriptions, and notes were kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home (Mason, 2002) in order to guarantee the safety and privacy of all the participants.

Data Analysis

Once all the ethnographic interviews were conducted, the data analysis took place via coding (Saldaña, 2013). In qualitative data analysis, a code is a concept that symbolizes and attributes meaning to the interview transcripts for the purpose of categorizing, pattern detection, and theory building (Saldaña, 2013). Once the interviews were transcribed and typed, the coding process began. Coding took place through different cycles (Saldaña, 2013). In the first cycle of the coding processes, the data was coded into a word, an expression, or a sentence. For example, the word “background information” was coded next to each section where the participants shared a little about themselves when asked the first question. As the coding continued, more expressions, sentences, and words were coded: “My parents told me to do well in school;” “Seeing my family struggle led me to want to take education more serious;” “My parents did not go to college;” “My parents did not having the opportunity to go to college;” “Teachers influenced me;” “Teachers were supportive;” “support from resources;” “support from the career center;” “programs;” “Culinary club made me think about college;” “resources;” “AVID was very helpful;” “I want to be teacher;” “AVID teachers;” “my counselor;” “parents’ constant motivating and encouraging;” “My parents couldn’t really help me with school;” “The best opportunity or thing that helped me was AVID;” “parents’ motivation;” “I want to pursue a
PhD;” “parents’ personal stories;” “good experiences;” “teachers’ personal stories;” “great resources;” “thinking about long-term goals;” “want to go to college;” “parents’ encouragement;” “good resources;” “family and teachers’ influence;” “I want to become a math teacher;” “make parents proud;” “stories.”

For the second cycle, new codes were created from existing ones. New codes that represented previous codes were organized into sections and subsections. The new codes were as follows: “parents,” “teachers,” “programs,” “resources,” “future,” and “opportunities.” The codes from the first cycle of coding were all organized into those six sections or code names.

For the third cycle, the six codes from the previous coding process were organized into categories and subcategories which eventually synthesized into five themes. Finally, the remaining themes were compared with each other and consolidated in many ways until those codes began progressing toward the five thematic results: “encouragement from parents,” “encouragement from teachers,” “programs and resources,” “thinking about the future,” and “aprovechar las oportunidades,” meaning to take advantage of opportunities. The five themes are described in the findings, and a discussion of the findings will follow.

**Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to get a better understanding of first-generation Latinos’ high school experiences and how those experiences may or may not impact their motivation and aspiration to pursue college. The goal was to interview ten first-generation Latinos currently attending a four-year university. The gatekeeper was instructed to send out the letter to students once the IRB had been approved for the study, but the gatekeeper was extremely busy with science projects, and it took her about two weeks to send out the letter of interest to her previous students with whom she keeps in touch. The two-week delay had not been anticipated, and it led
to limited amount of time available to wait for more students to respond to the letter. Also, during the time of the year this study took place, most, if not all, college students were returning to school from spring break. Hence, it was a challenge to get more participants. In addition, because students were just beginning fourth quarter, the scheduling of the interviews was affected, for the original plan was to complete all the interviews in the month of April (four weeks). Instead, it took eight weeks to complete all eight interviews. If the study had permitted another few months, more participants may have been able to participate.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have provided details about how this qualitative study used ethnographic interviews. I illustrated the methodological approach that was accomplished with the pre-screening survey, the one-on-one interviews, data collected through audio recordings, and analysis of the data. This methodology was complete once I collected the data and analyzed the transcriptions using coding. The participants were eight first-generation Latinos currently enrolled in a four-year university. I applied the theoretical framework of social capital to ground this inquiry and its understanding of the experiences of these first-generation Latinos. This study intended to expand the discussion of first-generation Latinos students’ educational experiences and the determining factors that helped them overcome the challenges they face to succeed in high school and pursue a college degree. In the following chapter, the eight participants will be introduced through their background information and a presentation of the findings that arose during the data analysis of the transcriptions, including the significance of the findings.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

The research question guiding this study focused on the recollections of the participants’ experiences in high school, therefore highlighting the significance of their memories of what they lived through while attending high school. It cannot be overemphasized that Latinos have endured challenges in an educational system poorly designed to serve them. Even so, many Latinos navigate their way through school and advance to college. The goal in this chapter is to unearth the ramifications of the experiences that first-generation Latinos have while attending high school and understand the factors that propelled them to want to pursue a college degree. Table 2 illustrates the meaning behind each theme discovered through data analysis collected via coding.

Table 2

*Meaning of Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Meaning of Themes in Relation to study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement from Parents</td>
<td>Parents communicate their desire for their high school-aged children to do well in school and go to college. The parents persistently inculcate in their children the importance of an education, sharing their own challenges and experiences, and sharing their wish for their son or daughter to have a better life than they had.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement from Teachers</td>
<td>Teachers impact students by creating positive relationships, and they are in a position to help, support, and guide students toward academic success. Teachers motivate their students by sharing their personal stories of pursuing college degrees. Teachers inspire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following represents the five themes in response to the research question:

(a) encouragement from family; (b) encouragement from school; (c) programs and resources;
(d) thinking about the future; and (e) aprovechar las oportunidades (taking advantage of the opportunities) an education can offer. It is important to understand the connections each theme had to the eight participants and how all five themes collectively impacted these students’ desire to attend a four-year university. The five themes are supported by the participants’ accounts of what they experienced during their high school journey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Meaning of Themes in Relation to study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programs and Resources</td>
<td>Students receive crucial support from programs such as AVID and Middle College Prep. Students also depend on the resources available from the Career Center, including knowledgeable and dedicated counselors and a college technician who plans field trips to colleges and helps students complete the FAFSA and college applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking About the Future</td>
<td>Thinking about long-term goals and the future allowed the students to consider a post-high school education. Thinking about the struggles their families have endured from not having a college education made the participants think about how different their own lives could be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aprovechar las Oportunidades</td>
<td>“To take advantage of the opportunities” an education offers; something participants heard over and over from their parents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Encouragement from Parents

This theme addresses the importance of the relationship between the parents and the students, especially when the parents communicate with the students about school. Also, the close relationship empowered parents to share their own struggles related to their lack of education. Most of the participants mentioned it was their parents who emphasized the importance of school.

As Sofia declared:

Overall, I wanted to go to a university to make my parents proud, also to give myself a better opportunity. My mom and my sister and my aunt and cousins have been through a lot, and their lives have been tough and so they have motivated me because seeing them, how much they have struggled, and that motivated me and I think about if they put the effort to and came through all their struggles and succeeded forward then I too, can put in the effort and succeed forward and do well in school and in my future.

Similarly, Luis stated:

My parents always told me to stay in school and do well in school and that I needed college…. My mom said you must go to school, and you have to follow that path…. My dad as well but my mom would tell me more.

Likewise, Manuel revealed, “Whenever I would talk to my mom, she would always tell me how important school is and that I should take advantage of the opportunities. She did motivate me in pursuing a college education.” Furthermore, as Jennifer recounted, “My mom also told me that the only thing she could inherit me was an education, to take advantage of it, and make her proud and all the sacrifices she has done not to let them go in vain.”
Moreover, Gabriel remarked:

So, my mother never got the opportunity to go to a university, she had me at 18 and ended having to work a lot of jobs so I didn’t get to see her much so I was pretty much with my grandparents a lot…. What made me think about college was my mom telling me, look we don’t have much and you can do something with yourself.

In like manner, Pedro recalled:

Well the thing that happened was that I saw my family struggle and heard about how it was hard to buy groceries and they had to get help from the church and get hand-outs from people and that led me to want to take education more serious and so I don’t have to end up in that situation.

Finally, Yolanda claimed, “My parents always encouraged me.” Encouragement from parents clearly affected these students’ motivation and aspiration to do well in school and go to college. According to Bourdieu’s (1986) social capital theory, minority students, such as these participants who come from a low-socioeconomic class, live in a neighborhood with other low-socioeconomic families, and attended schools whose populations averaged 87% Latino, do not have the same social capital as students from higher social classes. They faced disadvantages related to achievement in high school and in meeting the requirements for acceptance into the university in which they are currently enrolled. Notably, these participants received support from their parents, with whom they had strong relationships, and it was their parents’ encouragement and stories of struggle and hardship that influenced them to do well in school.

Encouragement from Teachers

This theme addresses how meaningful interactions with their teachers influenced the students’ aspirations and motivation to do well in school and develop post-high school plans,
goals, or dreams. The participants shared how a teacher and/or a counselor would encourage them, via support, guidance, positive reinforcement, and listening, to do well. Additionally, teachers would share their own personal stories about how they got into college or what college they attended, inspiring the student to think about pursuing a college degree. Sofia reminisced, “The stories my teachers would share about their college experience also inspired me to want to go to college.”

When asked what led her to becoming a first-generation college student, Jennifer elaborated:

Started that I had this motivating fifth grade teacher that would use big words that I didn’t understand but she would always use the word college bound because she would constantly tell me I was college bound. She would say that if she could go to college then we could too. So, her voice stuck with me all through the sixth grade, through middle school and when I got to the ninth grade her voice kept coming back to me. She is also a [REDACTED] alumni. I kept hearing her voice that I was college bound then I finally understood what that meant. I did believe I was college bound. She is one of the reasons going to college happened for me.

As Manuel expressed, “My teachers would ask me what goals I had and then helped me find about schools that I could go to.” Jennifer mentioned that her AP Biology teacher entered her science research project in a competition, and she won five hundred dollars for college. When it came to get help with grades, Pedro noted, “My parents couldn’t help me, and I had to get help from my teachers.”

When Gabriel was asked who influenced him to enroll in college, he shared the following:
A lot of teachers, especially AVID teachers, they were very supportive and always told me that I was very smart. There was a lot of teachers that were very helpful, and I still go visit some teachers about questions I have about math, or to talk about my goals in school. I don’t think I could have done all of this without the teachers and their support. Evidently, encouragement from teachers and counselors affected these students’ motivation and aspiration to do well in school and go to college.

Although these participants could not count on the form of social capital that Bourdieu (1986) outlined, these participants possessed human capital, meaning that the social capital the students possessed came from their environment (Coleman, 1988), including the social network they had through their teachers. Coleman (1988) emphasized that family and the community play a significant role in the creation of human capital. For these participants, the strong relationships they had with their teachers, and the support, guidance, and help they received was enough to influence them to do well in school and to inspire them to want to go to college. Moreover, Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) social capital theory focused specifically on minority groups, such as Latinos from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who lack higher levels of social capital. His theory asserted that like these participants, the form of social capital they acquired in high school came from the institutional agents such as their teachers who empowered them through the support, they offered to them. Likewise, Putnam (2000) believed that social capital is comprised of social networks, and the benefits that arise from those networks have values such as trust, information, and reciprocity, one form all of this reflected by students’ efforts to research and visit colleges, along with the completion of applications.
Programs and Resources

This theme addresses how the programs and resources the school offered were indispensable to and greatly appreciated by the students, as evidenced by each one naming either a program, a counselor, or the career center as something or someone they relied on during the college application process and procedure for applying for financial aid, taking the SAT or ACT, and supervised field trips to different colleges. The participants felt it was important to disclose during the interview that, as first-generation college students, they could not depend on their parents, for they had neither the knowledge nor the experience of what going to college entails.

As Jose explained:

My parents and my family are all from Mexico and no one could help me about going to college so I had to find someone to help me about it, no household support, so school is what I had to rely on and from the administration from the school, just filling out the FAFSA for financial aid was really hard and my parents could not help me with that; they didn’t even understand why I needed their taxes and their information so I could get help with going to college.

For all the participants, programs offered at the high school were instrumental in helping them go to college. Sofia stated:

My freshman year, I joined AVID and I met others that would help me with my classes. Also, my freshman year I was able to be part of a new program that they were testing out called Middle College Prep, it was a great experience having a real college class so that helped me the rest of my high school years. From the beginning, AVID helped me because the strategies I learned from tutorials I use them now in college. AVID did help me more when filling out forms and when I needed help, I knew who to ask. The
professors from Middle College Prep program gave me more experiences that prepared me better for college and not be scared about going to college.

When Jennifer was asked what challenges she experienced, starting with freshman year up to her senior year, she recalled the following:

Well first, I did not know how to get to college and I knew my mom did not know how so I knew, no sabe [she does not know], so I knew I could not count on her and that I would have to find out by asking teachers and getting help; AVID did help with that.

When she was asked what she found as opportunities in high school, Jennifer stated:

AVID, I made a lot of friendships because of AVID and we stayed friends throughout high school and would help each other so that was a good thing. I had a very close relationship with my AVID classmates. We learned so much with tutoring and tutorials and there was a lot of opportunities, lots of opportunities with AVID.

Jennifer continued, “I had a lot to put in my scholarship portfolio because of all the opportunities from AVID.”

Pedro asserted,

I think the best opportunity or the best thing that helped me was AVID, being in an environment with people you see all the time and you become friends and then they help you. When it came to apply for college and filling out the FAFSA, AVID was helpful, and now that I am in college, I am like wow, AVID is very useful.

Similarly, Gabriel, stated, “When it came to applications for colleges and taking ACTs and SAT’s and filling out the FAFSA, AVID helped me with that, I was so scared to mess-up anything in my FAFSA application.”
When asked about the opportunities he experienced in high school, Jose remarked:

Some opportunities I found was there was a lot of field trips to go visit colleges. So there was a lot of college expos and there was a lot of opportunities to do that and my junior year I did go to my counselor and career center and that is where I would go and ask if there were any other field trips to colleges and if I had any questions about the FAFSA or colleges I would go to the career center.

When Jose was asked who influenced him to go to college, he replied:

It was definitely the Career Center and my last year in high school it was my counselor. They were the ones who gave me the support I needed in taking the right classes I needed what I needed to go to college. The career center was very helpful since I could not rely on my parents to help me with that.

Throughout the interview, Jose emphasized that his parents were no support regarding going to college. At the end of his interview, he articulated the following:

I think any first-generation student has to know that it is really hard to get the support at home. If the parents don’t speak English because it is a huge challenge, and I know that those students do need help from school and school is where the student is going to get the help they need about the requirements and going to college…. the biggest barrier is the language barrier and for that reason the resources come from the school and not from your parents.

The participants made it very clear that they could not depend on their parents when it came to homework, college applications, financial aid, or what classes to take. It is important to note that the students were aware of the lack of parental/family support because their parents were from a different country and were, therefore, impacted by the race/ethnicity issues.
pertaining to social capital. As Jose mentioned, his parents and family were all from Mexico, so he could not count on them for help with school or applying for college. He and the participants were aware that they lacked the support from their parents specifically because they did not speak English or have college experience. Jennifer touched upon her knowledge that her mom did not know how to help her get to college. The other participants also disclosed that counselors and the career center were instrumental in ensuring appropriate enrollment in classes, as well as completion of all necessary forms and applications. Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) theory bolsters this idea that the participants knew they could count on institutional agents to help them. The resources and the school support, which Stanton-Salazar (2011) referred to as social networks were significantly beneficial to the participants.

**Thinking about the Future**

This theme addresses how the participants’ parents, teachers, programs, and resources collectively influenced the participants to think about their own future and how there is always hope for their future. Some of the participants recalled their parents sharing with them their own struggles caused by limited education and/or no college degree and having to take jobs that they would not if they had a better education.

For example, Manuel claimed:

Thinking about the long-term and my future and thinking about what I could do for my future is what helped me think about going to college. I know I would want better jobs in my future and then talking with my mom she would share her experiences and tell me that if I went to college I wouldn’t have to do the type of jobs she has to do so that motivated me too.
Similarly, Pedro noted,

I think the biggest part for me was having to work at the swap meet and going Saturdays and Sundays to help my family and not liking going there, that made me work harder in school so that I could go to college, so I don’t have to go there when I am older.

With less focus on himself, Gabriel stated, “I feel like I owe my parents for working so hard to give us a better life. I want to finish the dream of going to college.” Interestingly, Jennifer asserted,

Another reason I thought of going to college is that I am not the type of person that likes to be told what to do, I like telling others what to do so that also made me think about going to college and have my degrees and becoming a boss.

Undoubtedly, the students’ ability to think beyond high school and consider their futures and to be able to think about what kind of lives they would like to have provided them a high level of motivation. The interactions with their parents, teachers, counselors, program advisors, and career center technicians all had a positive effect on the participants’ thoughts regarding their lives after high school and their future success. This combination of the networks of people was significant; Coleman (1988) emphasized how family and schools create human capital which, in this case, created the social capital contributing to the participants’ thoughts about future endeavors, as emphasized by Stanton-Salazar (2011).

Aprovechar las Oportunidades

This theme addresses the power of the Spanish expression, aprovechar las oportunidades, which means to take advantage of the opportunities. The participants explained the impression it made on them when coming from their parents. Jose reminisced, “At home you will get the
conversations that you should take advantage of the opportunities to go to college and do good in school.” Jennifer stated something similar,

My mom didn’t go to college, she would tell me take advantage of it and make us proud and all the sacrifices I am doing don’t let them go in vain, in Spanish she would say, *como es que puedes estar en los Estados Unidos y no aprovechar las oportunidades.*

Jennifer’s mom would lecture her in Spanish: “How can you be in the United States and not take advantage of the opportunities.” For many, if not all, Latino parents, the desire is for their children have more opportunities and be more successful than they are, so they rely on the educational system for helping their children to graduate from high school and receive a college education.

Yolanda shared her thoughts of what many Latinos endure,

I realize that when I was in high school, I always observed my environment and the Hispanic Culture, not a lot of Latinos go to college or they just don’t have the opportunity to go to school, or they have a job and they are stuck in that situation and can’t move forward and knowing that I did have the opportunity so I wanted to take advantage of that opportunity, why not take that opportunity?

Jennifer confided,

Coming from immigrant parents, I carry a certain stress as a college student that other students don’t have. I worry about my mom’s immigration status and that adds to the stress of college, but I believe it is a privilege to go to college and I am taking advantage of this opportunity.
Without a doubt, the Spanish expression “aprovechar las oportunidades” the participants heard from their parents made an impression on their motivation and desire to go to college, as evidenced by their current enrollment at a local university. Much like a previously mentioned factor, this may be attributed to the strong bond the participants had with their parents, along with the significant networks of people they had at their school (Coleman, 1988) who acted as their institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) by empowering them as they navigated through four years of high school. The participants clearly wanted to make their parents proud and did not want to waste the life-changing opportunity represented by a college degree. This desire to better themselves, despite being Latino and the first in their families to attend college, demonstrates that these participants took advantage of the social capital they attained.

**Summary**

Throughout the course of this chapter, the participants’ experiences were examined and presented in thematic sections. Previous background information about each participant was provided in Chapter Three. The participants’ direct responses were shared in order to respect their authentic emotions and cultural influences. The examination of the findings fit into five topics: encouragement from parents, encouragement from teachers, programs and resources, thinking about the future, and aprovechar las oportunidades. The following chapter contains a discussion of how the five topics shaped the participants’ views about education and affected their desire to become first-generation college students.
CHAPTER FIVE
Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter begins with a discussion regarding the inequalities Latinos endured while navigating through the education system in the US and pursuing a college degree. These topics emerged within the context of the interviews, and the discussion will be supported by the literature addressed in Chapters One and Two. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief discussion related to the limitations, including recommendations for future research, as well as the conclusion.

This study proposed to answer the following research question: How do first-generation students’ high school experiences impact their motivation and aspiration to pursue college?

Discussion

Overall, the study’s findings are important, as the national portrait of access to college and attainment of college degrees shows continuing inequalities based on class, ethnicity, and income, especially for Latino first-generation students. Lareau (1989, 2011) contended that race has a significant role in the experiences children have in schools. Although institutionalized inequalities faced by Latino students have long existed in our educational system, many Latinos find a way to rise above such inequity to succeed in school and pursue college degrees. The eight first-generation Latino college students who participated in this study revealed the various elements, such as individuals or a network of people who provided the resources, support, and guidance they needed during their four years of local high school. There were factors that led these eight participants to meet the A-G requirements needed for acceptance into a four-year university in southern California. Five findings from this study are detailed in the following
sections: encouragement from parents, encouragement from teachers, programs and resources, thinking about the future, and aprovechar las oportunidades.

**Encouragement from Parents**

According to Bourdieu (1986), social relationships and networks such as parents and family serve as great sources of social capital to minority students. In this case, the participants’ parents did not attend college, and although they encouraged them to do well in school, they did not have the social capital that students from middle and high class would have received from their parents. However, throughout the interview process, all eight participants communicated that their parents encouraged them to do well in school and instilled in them the idea that an education meant that when they were older, they would not have to overcome the obstacles and challenges their parents faced. Most of the students explained that despite their parent’s inability to provide specific information or guidance (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) the parents were a source of inspiration, which to them was an important resource in helping them in pursuing a college education (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). This is also supported by Fuller’s (2014) findings in that the participants from his study related their aspirations to their parents’ lack of education. The participants shared that their parents would tell them to take advantage of the opportunities an education can give them so that they would have a better life and better jobs than they, themselves, did. Interestingly, the participants mostly cited their mothers as the ones sharing experiences, such as having to drop out of school in order to work and help their own parents/families. These mothers emphasized the importance of school; they saw school as the key that would unlock a future far different from their own. According to Stevens and Patel (2015), parental support in any form, such as the encouragement the participants received, is critical in the success of students.
Aside from the impact made by immediate family members, the participants also divulged how the plight of extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins, influenced them. Witnessing the trauma caused by not having a place to stay or money for food, not to mention having to depend on help from churches and other family members, served to harden the resolve of the participants. As Egalite (2016) noted, the impact of family is a powerful element influencing the achievement of students. This finding directly answers the research question of how first-generation students’ high school experiences impacted their motivation and aspiration to pursue college in that the eight participants were certain about their parents, specifically their mothers’ encouragement, throughout their high school journey and how that directly impacted their motivation to do well in school and want to pursue college after high school. This finding was unexpected because it was surprising to me how these participants shared what their parents would share with them and they were actually listening to their parents where most people would think that teenagers aren’t really listening when parents are sharing their stories or advice.

Encouragement from Teachers

Coleman (1988) believed that both family and community play a significant role in the creation of human capital in younger generations. Furrer, Skinner, and Pitzer (2012) offered teachers and researchers a motivational framework regarding the importance of students having high-quality relationships with teachers in order to promote academic engagement and achievement. In fact, the participants repeatedly mentioned that their teachers were of great assistance in that they used various strategies to encourage the students to work hard and consider going to college. The willingness of these teachers to share the struggles they faced
along their educational pathways was a revelation for these students. In fact, four of the eight participants declared they wanted to be teachers, three for high school and one for elementary.

Along with recounting their personal experiences, teachers gave their time by being available when the participants had questions about college or how to navigate the college application process. This is important because teacher-student interpersonal relationships, not just teachers’ academic instruction, contribute to adolescents’ academic achievement and motivation (Mikami, Gregory, Allen, Pianta, & Lun, 2011). The participants involved in AVID relied on teachers, as well as on the strategies and knowledge they provided to better serve their AVID population. According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), a teacher becomes an “agent” when institutional supports are mobilized to benefit a student. The relationship students have with their teachers contributes to students’ engagement, participation, motivation, and learning in each class.

Social capital and institutional support are crucial for working-class minority children. The network of people or institutional agents available to the participants in this study made an impact on their aspiration and motivation to meeting the requirements for and then enrolling in college (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The participants mentioned they had teachers who helped them in completing college applications, or just having conversations about colleges they could go to influenced them in choosing a college. The participants’ teachers served as agents prepared to help them in pursuing a college degree (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Evidently, this finding directly addressed the research question. All the participants touched on a teacher or teachers having a positive impact on their motivation to do well in their classes in order to meet A-G requirements and in being aspired in pursuing college post high school. The participants’ positive
relationships within their four years at the high school directly impacted their motivation and aspiration to pursue college.

**Programs and Resources**

Although the participants brought up that their parents and teachers motivated and inspired them to do well in school and go to college, each mentioned that such encouragement went only so far. When it came time to apply for colleges, applying for FAFSA, and completing the variety of tasks necessary for eventual acceptance, they relied on school resources such as counselors, program advisors, and career center technicians. While Bourdieu (1986) believed social capital includes resources a person has and can be used to pursue successful educational outcomes, the participants had institutional agents that were available to transmit those resources and programs to the participants (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Putnam’s (2000) definition of social capital referred to connections between individuals and social networks. Putnam believed that social capital can be measured by the amount of trust and reciprocity in a community or between individuals. In other words, the strong bonds and links that people have with other individuals and organizations maintain certain character traits that nurture a relationship with those individuals. For example, the AVID program participants asserted that AVID was phenomenal because of strategies that were taught, field trips offered, and access to indispensable resources designed to facilitate post-secondary studies. AVID students work closely with the teacher and with other students as they learn skills that make them college and career ready. Participants who were not part of the AVID program noted that their counselors and the career center were vital resources for their continuing education. School personnel and available resources serve to make students aware of the many opportunities they have if they pursue a college education, a fact supported by Stanton-Salazar (2011). The ability to access resources through institutional
agents depends, however, on the strength and consistency of the relationships (Putnam, 2000; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Programs and resources indirectly impacted the eight participants in the sense that they were able to receive the fundamental resources needed to know what requirements they needed to get accepted into a four-year university as well as the resources in completing college applications, FAFSA application, and the programs that prepared them for college. Although this finding did not directly impact their motivation and aspiration to pursue college, the programs such as AVID was the bridge needed to get them thinking about the possibility of attending a university and actually helping the eight participants attend a university a reality and not just a dream or aspiration.

**Thinking about the Future**

The gesture parents made in sharing their personal challenges led the participants to think about their own futures and that of their own families. Thinking about the future causes people to ask themselves questions: “What kind of a life do I want to have?” “How do I see myself 10 or 20 years from now?” “What kind of lifestyle do I want for my own children?” Furthermore, the gift teachers gave the participants by sharing their stories and what let them to attending college and becoming teachers led these students to consider their own future careers. One participant who was part of the culinary program thought about what it would be like if he became a chef, and that led him to ponder post-high school possibilities and his potential future.

The participants shared that their parents, teachers, and programs and resources all helped them to look beyond the present. In fact, research on college access for Latino students has demonstrated the importance of various interactions with family, peers, extended family, teachers, counselors, career centers, programs, and resources across each step of the college preparation process (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). According to Stanton-Salazar (1997), the
social networks the participants experienced through personal access of resources, programs, and social relationships were significant in the participants’ experiences, for they were influenced to think about their futures thanks to personal support or institutional support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This finding indirectly addressed the research question of how first-generation students’ high school experiences impact their motivation and aspiration to pursue college particularly in that the participants thought about their future in result of the stories they heard from their parents, families, and teachers. This was an unexpected finding in that the participants put thought into their reflection of their experiences of high school and making the revelation that those experiences caused them to think about the kind of life they wanted for themselves and their own families.

**Aprovechar las Oportunidades**

The participants expressed repeatedly that parental and teacher encouragement, along with programs which they were involved, helped them think about going to college. The participants were empowered throughout their high school experience through the institutional support received via the positive relationships they experienced with parents, teachers, counselors, and program personnel (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Making the conscious decision to meet the requirements and be accepted into a four-year university involved a strong level of determination from the participants. However, the fact that they could rely on institutional support made a strong impact on the participants: Attending college became an actual reality for them.

As reiterated throughout this study, the participants’ parents conscientiously reminded their children to take advantage of the opportunities that an education had to offer. Nevertheless, it was ultimately the participants who made the decision to pursue a college degree. This finding
directly addressed the research question in that whereas some students may have all the institutional support and institutional agents in the world along the way, not all of them take advantage of the opportunities. Indeed, social capital may empower students who have the drive to succeed, yet it is crucial to note that the eight participants made the connection between where they were and where they wanted to be. These participants made the conscious decision to break the chain of Latinos lacking a college education and working at jobs they dislike and/or do not offer opportunities for advancement.

The theoretical framework supports the findings, in that social capital is not the same for every student; Bourdieu’s (1986) theory emphasized the plight of students with lower social capital. They tend to possess less capital, overall, so their academic achievement is not nearly as noteworthy as their more affluent peers. The theoretical framework also enabled the researcher to address the research question concerning how first-generation students’ high school experiences impacted their motivation and aspiration to pursue college. Social capital theory was instrumental in analyzing the data and understanding the different types of resources that helped lead to the pursuit of higher education. Indeed, the results indicated that the different forms of social capital from which the participants benefitted, namely encouragement from parents and teachers, plus programs and resources, precipitated their desire for continuing education. Thus, Coleman’s (1988) theory, which focused on how family and community work together to produce social capital, bolsters the results of this study. Likewise, Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) theory specifically focused on how the working-class, who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, benefit from different social networks and institutional agents, such as those obtained by the participants. Although race is intertwined with social class, the participants did not assert that race or ethnicity impacted their motivation and aspirations to
pursue a college degree. For the participants, this desire to better themselves and pursue college was a combination of the strong bonds they forged with parents and teachers, along with the resources/institutional agents they encountered during their four years in high school, all of which raised their social capital.

**Limitations**

A major limitation of this study was its small sample. Originally the goal was 10 participants, but due to the participants’ school schedules and time this study needed to be completed, it was not possible. As previously mentioned in Chapter Three, only eight participants were part of this study because many students were just returning from spring break to start the fourth quarter. If more time had been available, data from 15 to 20 participants could have furthered the conversation of this topic.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

1. This study should be replicated in multiple schools in the same district and surrounding cities in southern California.

2. This study should be replicated with a larger sample size of other cultures and races of students in the same schools, such as African American and White, non-Hispanic students, Asians, and other races.

3. This study should be replicated in a longitudinal study over four years to determine if there are any changes in what impacts Latinos’ motivation and aspiration to pursue college right after high school.

4. This study should be replicated with a small sample of interviews of students from various races and/or ethnicities.
5. This study should focus on each race and/or ethnicity to determine all possible intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence high school students to pursue a college degree.

Conclusion

This sample of how Latino students’ high school experiences impacted their motivation and aspirations—pursuing a college degree, meeting the requirements to be accepted at a four-year university, and attending college—demonstrated how they drew on a combination of different types of relationships and resources throughout high school. For these students, it was partly the expectations and responsibilities they felt as members of their family that motivated them to attend college. In addition, the relationships the participants had with school personnel and the resources available to them were significant factors. For these eight first-generation Latinos currently attending a four-year university, I wish them the best in their journeys throughout college and careers, and I hope they continue to have a support network and to “aprovechar las oportunidades.”

In conclusion, it is the researcher’s hope that by sharing the findings of this study with the local high school (87% Latino student population) from which all the participants graduated, the staff, in turn, will be inspired to continue to guide and support students in pursuing college. The goal then would be to motivate and inspire all stakeholders, including parents, to work together to enhance the educational outcome of future Latino students.

As a teacher, the goal is to serve as many students in the classroom by guiding, supporting, encouraging, and helping students become prepared with the necessary tools to achieve social mobility. I am inspired to help my colleagues understand the different needs of these students. My ultimate goal is to work with administrators and district personnel in finding
more resources and programs for those students who perhaps lack the appropriate internal and external motivators.

Latinos are the largest, most rapidly growing ethnic minority in the US. Almost one in five students across the country is Latino; this number will increase to one in three by 2050 (Murphey, Guzman, & Torres, 2014). One crisis the country faces is that Latinos continue to lag behind other groups in obtaining four-year degrees. Thus, policies revolving around early intervention and building social capital in Latino communities are of paramount importance.

The policy of early intervention has the potential to change the overall intellectual development of children. Such early intervention should actually be sustained over time and even extend beyond K-12 education, if necessary. Preschool should be offered to the children of all Latino families, and school districts should help Latino parents understand the importance of literacy practices and teach them how they can help their young children at home by reading to/with them and by talking to their children about their ideas and interests, thereby leading to a stronger vocabulary, better communication skills, and a greater awareness of the world in which they live. Schools can assure parents that they can help their children even if they did not have a formal education or do not speak English. Reading to and with their preschoolers is just as beneficial in their primary language. Literacy is literacy, no matter the language being used.

A second policy that could help with the crisis involves establishing a housing policy that would diversify neighborhoods and schools. Such efforts would benefit Latino students who live in highly populated, low-socioeconomic communities. Providing transportation and empowering Latino students to attend schools outside of their normal boundaries may guarantee a better balance of different ethnicities and social classes. Latino students could then experience the opportunities enjoyed by students from higher social classes.
I find myself reminiscing about my own childhood experiences in navigating through K-12 in southern California. I do share similar experiences as the eight participants of this study. Although, I grew up without my parents around, I did have an aunt and my maternal grandmother who raised me and instilled in me that school was very important for my future. Similar to the participants of this study, I also had the encouragement from my family. Additionally, I also had encouragement from my teachers. I remember teachers in elementary would tell me nice things. I was told I was smart, that I was special, that I had a special spark in my eyes, that I was hardworking and studious. Having the encouragement and support from teachers as early as elementary impacted my life as a student in a very positive way. In middle school I also was constantly told that I was smart and hardworking; in high school my teachers and coaches also had very nice things to say about me. The support and encouragement I received from teachers and coaches through my K-12 journey was powerful in that their kind words inspired me to love learning and want to pursue a career of teacher. Their kinds words have continued to guide me all the way through graduate school. As a woman who self identifies as a first-generation Latina going to college and now pursuing a Doctorate in Leadership for Educational Justice, I must disclose I have my own biases about first-generation Latinos pursuing college. I must include that there is potential for bias in this study as I share a similar background as the participants do. Although, I attended K-12 in a different city, the schools I attended are in southern California and the demographics are similar in that they serve mostly Latinos and Blacks from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. As an educator, my goal is to inspire, guide, and prepare students for their future as my own teachers and coaches did for me.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Gate Keeper Letter

Email #1: Request for General Interest

From: Guadalupe Valero  
gvalero@rialto.k12.ca.us  (Ms. Valero is the gatekeeper and is only sending out this letter for the researcher, Cynthia Oliveros)
Subject: Ed.D. Study

Dear Student,

My name is Cynthia Oliveros and I am a student in the doctoral program at the University of Redlands. I am emailing you today regarding a doctoral study that I am conducting at the University of Redlands School of Education through the (institutions’ targeted populations.) The purpose of this study is to explore first-generation Latinos’ high school experiences. The intention of this study is to get a better understanding of what the determining factors are that help first-generation students overcome the challenges they face as they strive to succeed in high school, then obtain a college degree. The research will also seek to understand what influences may be impacting first-generation Latinos.

If you would be interested in potentially participating, could you please respond back to me at  
cynthia.oliveros@redlands.edu  with your name and preferred contact information? If you have a friend or classmate who would be willing to participate (or who is at least interested in finding out more about the study), could you please share my information with them and have that individual contact me.

For those who are interested in participating, I will follow up with a second email that discusses the details of what would be involved in participating in this study, as well as a short 5 to 7 minute survey to complete and consent form.

Thank you and please do not hesitate to get in touch with me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Kind regards,
Cynthia Oliveros
Ed.D. Student
University of Redlands School of Education
APPENDIX B

Interested Participants Letter

Email #2: To Contact Specific Individuals who responded to First Email

From: Cynthia Oliveros, cynthia_oliveros@redlands.edu
Subject: Ed.D. Study

Dear (potential participant name),

Thank you for responding to my previous email. Once again, I am emailing you today regarding a doctoral study that I am conducting at the University of Redlands School of Education. The purpose of this study is to explore first-generation Latinos’ high school experiences. The intention of this study is to get a better understanding of what the determining factors are that help first-generation students overcome the challenges they face as they strive to succeed in high school, then obtain a college degree. The research will also seek to understand which intrinsic and extrinsic influences may be impacting first-generation Latinos.

Should you wish to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a four-part process: 5-7-minute pre-screening survey along with consent form, an individualized one-to-one interview of approximately 1 hour. A possible follow-up interview might be needed; you will be contacted if that’s the case, and a de-briefing session. All meetings and interviews will be conducted in a private room near your location.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, you are not required to answer all questions posed to you, and you can stop participating in this research at any time. All your responses will be kept confidential and will be made anonymous. Thank you for your time.

Would you be willing to participate in this study?

Please specify your availability and complete the following survey found with this link if interested in participating in this study.
https://goo.gl/forms/Uq35RQizracsfmsI3

Please note to conform with 45 CFR 46 related to protected groups, the following groups cannot participate in this research: children under 18 years of age, prisoners, cognitively impaired persons, individuals who are institutionalized, and pregnant women.

Thank you and please do not hesitate to get in touch with me if you have any questions.

Kinds regards,

Cynthia Oliveros
Ed.D Student
University of Redlands School of Education
Email #3: Pre-debriefing email

From: Cynthia Oliveros
Subject: Ed.D. Study

Dear (Participant Name),

Thank you for participating in the doctoral study regarding the high school experiences of first-generation Latinos. I will analyze and compare the information gathered throughout the interviews with those of other participants to identify any commonalities or themes that may be shared between the first-generation Latinos. Your participation has been greatly appreciated and could help me to better understand what factors have influenced first-generation Latinos to pursue a college degree.

Topics we discussed through this process may have led to uncomfortable or unpleasant memories. Should you desire counseling services for anxiety, depression, family conflict, or anything troubling you, contact your university counseling center located in the health office or call counseling services for San Bernardino County (909) 890-2299.

If you have any further questions about this study, or if you are interested in reading the findings, please contact me at cynthia_oliveros@redlands.edu and I will be happy to share them with you once they are analyzed.
APPENDIX D

Pre-Screening Survey

1. Do you self-identify as a first-generation college student?

2. What ethnicity do you self-identify as?

3. What year are you in your undergraduate degree?

4. How old are you? (If under 18 years of age, you will not participate in this study)

5. Are you male, female, prefer not to say, other?

6. In high school, were you part of any programs such as AVID, Gear-up, Upward Bound or Educational Talent Search or any other?
APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

Scrip: Hi I’m Cynthia. Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. This study intends to open a discussion regarding the experiences of first-generation Latinos and their high school experiences. I intentionally sought out first-generation Latinos who are current freshman or sophomores at a local university in southern California. I am particularly interested in understanding your experiences, positive and negative, within your high school years; and in how those experiences may or may not have played a role in your motivation and aspiration to pursue college.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering some of my questions, you can skip them. All information you share with me today will remain confidential. Do you have any questions? Do you have any objections for this interview to be audio-recorded?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td>You have identified as a first-generation college student. What let this to happening?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who were the people that influenced you about going to college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you find as challenges starting with freshman year up to senior year?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you find as opportunities starting with freshman year up to senior year?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe your overall experience in high school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Could you think of anything else that would help me better understand your journey in becoming a first-generation college student?</td>
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</table>

Thank you,
Cynthia Oliveros