

Mexican Immigrant Challenges in the United States Public School System: A Case Study of Two Schools

Caitlin Helgesen

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jean Hindson, Department of Modern Languages

ABSTRACT

Latino students are one of the largest minority populations in American schools today. This research focused specifically on Mexican immigrant students, as they constitute the majority of this group. In an effort to prepare teachers for Mexican students in their classroom, a case study was conducted of East High School in Green Bay, WI, USA and Fernando Montes de Oca (Escuela Secundaria General No. 14) in Guadalajara, Mexico. The case study consisted of surveys, school-related documents and current relative research in the field. The results indicated links between immigrant students' struggles to adapt to a new educational setting and systematical school day differences and/or varying cultural norms or expectations in the two countries; armed with the knowledge discussed in this research, teachers and administrators can develop ways to reach out to their Mexican immigrant students.

INTRODUCTION

America has always been a nation of immigrants, and the present era is no different. Countless immigrants continue to struggle to make a successful life for themselves in this country; "low wages, limited English skills, and recurring periods of anti-immigrant feelings all combine to place severe constraints on the general upward mobility" of immigrants (Garcia, 2002, p. 35). One struggling immigrant group in particular, the Latino population, is continuing to grow in America. Specifically, 2/3 of Latinos in America are Mexican in origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In fact, it is estimated that Mexicans make up one-fourth of the entire population of California and Texas, as well as one-fifth of Arizona and significant portions of many other states (Saenz, Morales & Filoteo, 2004, p. 10). What makes the Latino immigrant population, and Mexicans in particular, struggle more in American society than some other immigrant groups is that they are "represented as societal threats, thus causing them to be cast as illegitimate members of the community and undermining their claims for social and cultural citizenship" (Chavez, 2008, p. 178). As more and more people from Spanish-speaking countries immigrate to the United States, it becomes a pressing important issue to accommodate their struggles in our educational system. How we educate newly-arrived immigrants can have a large impact on their options in life, because "for children from immigrant families, educational outcomes play a key role in future social and economic mobility" (Suárez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2008, p. 51).

In an effort to help educate Mexican immigrant students, it is helpful to have background knowledge of the educational system. The school structures in Mexico and the United States follow a similar path: in Mexico, the most common progression is preescolar, primaria, secundaria, and media superior/preparatoria, or the equivalent of preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school in the United States. However, the levels of schooling often represent different grade levels. For example, in Mexico, it is very common for secundarias to run grades 7-9, while in the U.S. it is much more common for middle schools to run 6-8 or for students to attend a combined elementary/middle school from grades K-8. The preparatoria usually runs grades 10-12, while a high school often houses grades 9-12. Additional specific information regarding schooling in Mexico, the United States and many other countries is readily available from a website built to help place immigrant students into the Canadian school system (World Education Services, 2004). Since many immigrants are of low socioeconomic status and uneducated, some teachers may assume that all students are uneducated (Chavez, 2008, p. 41). Yet it is interesting to note that at least one researcher has hypothesized that the national Mexican standards may in fact be "as rigorous and conceptually demanding-perhaps more so-than typical U.S. curricula" (Macias, 1990, p. 301). In fact, another study found that having a history of schooling in Mexico and/or English Language Learner (ELL) instruction correlated with higher GPAs (Gonzalez and Padilla, 2001, p. 738). These findings suggest that the "formative experiences, tendencies, and expectations of country-of-origin education... constitute an important basis of students' total

educational careers” (Macias, 1990, p. 292). Taking this information into account, teachers cannot assume that all students from Mexico have come from poor educational settings. It must also be observed that socioeconomic disparities can have a large impact on the education available to the students; many must attend schools that are substandard to their non-Mexican-American peers (Ream, 2003, p. 238).

Researchers are always hunting for reasons why minority groups are behind their white counterparts in academic scores. Therefore, it is logical that many theories—and/or harmful rumors—are circulating as to why many of the Mexican-American students are struggling in American schools. People have gone so far as to falsely claim that parents of Latino heritage do not care or have no opinion in regards to their child’s education (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 81). The real issue may be that what appears to be lack of interest is in fact that sad truth that many Mexican immigrant students’ parents are trapped working long hours in jobs that offer them lower wages than their American peers, and often may have less than a high school education—which can make it difficult for them to help their children with school (Garcia, 2002, p. 35 & 59). Language barriers may also impede parent involvement in their child’s education. Ironically, it is often American teenagers, not immigrant parents, that teach immigrant students a negative attitude towards school, as “ethnographic studies have documented how the latter generations of many immigrant groups tend to share the ambivalence toward schooling that seems to be common among American adolescents” (Fulgini, 1997, p. 362). In addition, others have suggested, with much evidence, that many American schools can be blamed for trapping the students in academic tracking and not providing enough help for low language proficiency (Gonzalez and Padilla, 2001, p. 728).

Many Americans, including popular media outlets, complain that the way that Latino immigrants often maintain their first language, rather than assimilate completely into American culture, is harmful to society (Chavez, 2008, p. 21). Romo and Falbo argue that the real issue is that “American schools have failed to educate Mexican-origin students so that they can assimilate into the rest of U.S. society” (1996, p.135). That is a powerful accusation, and one that should not be just tossed aside without consideration. With this in mind, what more can American schools do to ensure the success of their Mexican-American students? Saenz, et al. “call on policy makers in particular to devote more attention to the plight of Mexicans in such areas as education, training and employment” (2004, p. 17). Related to this issue is the great debate of whether to attack the problem with English-only education, or some type of ELL program. It is common for students in European countries and around the world to be fluent in more than one language, so it is interesting that many Americans feel so strongly in favor of citizens only speaking one language. Regardless of the method used to learn English, it is clear that eventually language barriers are overcome by immigrant students, despite being surrounded by their native language at home. According to Fulgini, “the motivation and effort exhibited by first and second generation students enable them to overcome their more limited exposure to the language” (1997, p. 360). Therefore, the fact that many of these students are struggling in American schools is not simply an issue of the lack of fluency in English, but rather a conglomerate of social and economic factors.

One aspect of the above problems that teachers have control over is their own attitude and reactions towards Mexico and immigrants from Mexico. Today in America it is all too common for educators and policymakers to make judgment calls on Latino immigrant students despite a severe lack of knowledge about their past educational experiences; these teachers and administrators are guilty of formulating “educational decisions in student assessment, curricular planning, and instructional behavior” without this important information (Macias, 1990, p. 292). Teachers need to realize that they play an important role in the lives of these adolescents, “reproducing or *interfering with the reproduction of class, racial, and gendered inequality*” (Stanton-Salazar, p. 161). Stanton-Salazar italicized those words for a reason: teachers have the power to break away from hurtful mindsets encouraged in society and the media. Teachers and administrators should be given “training in recognizing and coping with misunderstandings, insults, racial and ethnic conflicts, and hurt feelings” and in turn share this knowledge with their students, in an effort to create more social harmony in the school (Romo & Falbo, 1996, p. 140).

The foundational question for this research centers on what teachers and administrators can do to help their Mexican immigrant students. A key way is easily accessible to all teachers, regardless of school funds—building personal relationships with their students, which goes a long way to help their learning (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2008, p. 64). Teachers need to be role models, since Latino students are lacking them in the popular media. Chavez believes that the United States is home to the Latino Threat Narrative, or overarching, common beliefs in this country against Latino people; he observes that the Latino Threat Narrative masks the successes of Latinos while ignoring their challenges in educating themselves in order to further their economic potential. But Chavez feels that there is an even darker side to America’s prevalent use of this mindset, because it implies that people of Latino heritage “deserve the obstacles they face because the threats they allegedly pose render them undeserving and illegitimate members of the community” (2008, p. 184). Obviously, teachers need to consciously decide not to adhere to the Latino Threat Narrative that is so popular in today’s media and society. They can choose instead to

reach out to their immigrant students by paying “close attention to their progress as learners and through thoughtful, sincere efforts to improve their academic engagement in every way possible” (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008, p. 64). In fact, as shown in the research done by Stanton-Salazar, “adolescents gave testimony that caring and nurturing relationships with school personnel provided the necessary conditions to persist in school or to survive an emotional crisis” (2001, p. 167).

Since Mexican immigrants constitute the majority of the Latino immigrant group, this case study focused specifically on the factors that may affect the transition of students from Mexico to the United States. The case study consisted of surveys, school-related documents and current relative research in the field, with the intent of collecting data that revealed links between immigrant students’ struggles to adapt to a new educational setting and systematical school day differences and/or varying cultural norms or expectations in the two countries. Armed with the knowledge discussed in the available literature and research, as well as the following case study, teachers and administrators can develop ways to reach out to their Mexican immigrant students. If teachers are educated about the school system in Mexico and the problems that immigrant students face while transitioning to the United States, they may be able to help these more disadvantaged students succeed. In particular, knowledge concerning the daily practices and societal expectations explored in this study may provide an opportunity for teachers and administrators to connect with immigrant students on a new level.

METHODS

Sample

The case study required samples of students in the third year of secundaria in Mexico and in 9th grade in the United States. In addition, the school in the United States needed to have a significant number of Hispanic students in general as well as Hispanic students with limited English proficiency (LEP), as reported by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). With these parameters, East High School in Green Bay, Wisconsin, U.S.A. (grades 9-12) and Fernando Montes de Oca No. 14 in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico (approximately grades 7-9) were selected. The former from this point on will be referred to as EHS, and the latter as FMO. According to the Wisconsin DPI’s website, in the 2007-2008 school year, EHS reported 21% of its student population as Hispanic and 13% as Hispanic students with LEP; therefore, EHS fit the criteria for the immigrant population. Access to EHS was gained through prior district and principal consent, as well as signed student release forms; access to FMO was gained through prior vice principal consent. The class samples and data collection dates were chosen through prior teacher and administrator consent and collaboration with the researcher. The surveys administered were completely anonymous; no data was collected that could link participants to their surveys. Nowhere was it recorded who participated in the surveys beyond the signed release forms of the students from EHS, which were collected and stored separately from the surveys.

Class-sized samples of American and Mexican students were required, as well as a class-size Mexican immigrant student sample from an ELL classroom. ‘Class-size’ was defined as the number of students in one particular class at a given time rather than a specific target number. An administrator and a relatively small sample of teachers from both schools were also included. The category of ‘administrator’ was defined as a principal, vice principal or guidance counselor at the school. Based on those requirements, the seven sample categories were: Students from the United States (US), Teachers from the United States (UT), Administrator from the United States (UA), Mexican Immigrant Students from the United States (UI), Students from Mexico (MS), Teachers from Mexico (MT), and Administrator from Mexico (MA). Students that had emigrated from Mexico but had already transitioned out of ELL classes were included in the UI rather than US sample.

Data Analysis Procedures

Various forms of data were used for this case study: field notes, school handouts and surveys. Field notes were taken at both schools; the field notes were designed to record personal observations and side comments made orally by teachers and administrators. The field notes were ultimately only used to address the difference in the systems of course selection and in the manner of transitioning from class to class during the school day; both issues were raised by FMO staff and therefore asked orally of staff at EHS. The field notes were analyzed quantitatively through direct comparison and contrast. In addition, both schools provided school year calendars and course selection guides, which were analyzed quantitatively by direct comparison of measurable attributes, such as number of class periods per school day.

The main source of data was gathered from surveys. The surveys were taken at the respective schools during the school day and took about 25-35 minutes to complete. Students responded to the surveys during a scheduled class time. Teachers and administrators were given surveys at the start of the school day, which were taken individually on their own time and returned anonymously to a designated location that same day. Surveys were

administered in Spanish in Mexico and in English in the United States, with the exception for UI, who were given the option of taking the survey in either language; oral instructions and support followed the same course. The main part of the surveys for all sample categories was identical. In addition to the core questions, US, UT and UA were given additional questions addressing Mexican immigrant students, while UI were given questions addressing their immigration. UA and MA also responded to questions about routine school day practices.

The surveys were designed to include a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions addressed closed ended questions about academic path, homework time, and rating of personal success. The quantitative questions were analyzed by standard tallying of responses and the ensuing reporting of percentages. The qualitative questions addressed open-ended questions about school purpose and typicality, parent/teacher involvement, and issues surrounding Mexican immigrants. The qualitative questions were analyzed by the constant comparative method, as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 126-149). The surveys were labeled by category and number and then typed. Survey responses were then separated by question, and each response was placed on a note card with complete labels so as to facilitate tracing of data. For each survey question, the responses were organized into categories that emerged from the data, rather than from preconceived categories or a specific research hypothesis. Each response was then adhered to a large piece of paper, grouped by category. The category was then given overarching rules of inclusion for responses in that category. Categories were continuously analyzed and modified until the researcher felt that the analysis was complete and that a set of conclusions had arisen from the data.

Students in the UI category gave responses about their school in Mexico and their school in the United States; their data was split accordingly and included in the Mexico and United States results. Occasionally, data was not substantial enough for use: due to the small sample size, if a sample group had more than 25% of responses falling into the N/A category, that group was not included in the results. These cases have been clearly labeled in the results, and most commonly involved the UI category.

RESULTS

School Day Routine and Practices

Major questions about the school day routine were asked of the selected administrator at both schools (Table 1). In general, the number and length of classes was rather similar, with some differences in who determines the curriculum (the federal government in Mexico versus mostly the state along with other governing bodies in the United States). It should be noted that FMO has two school shift options, the morning and the afternoon shift, which essentially function as separate schools within the same building; EHS also has four campus options for taking classes due to a district-wide policy allowing students to take classes at various 'academies' (Table 2). In addition, vacation periods occur at similar times but for different durations (Table 3).

Table 1. Daily Schedule (as reported by MA and UA)

	FMO	EHS
Curriculum determined by	The government through the Secretary of Public Education (SEP)	State, District, Academic Departments
Periods/day	7	8
Length of one period (in minutes)	50	51
School day hours	1:30 PM until 8 PM	7:30 AM until 2:58 PM
Open hours (lunch, study hall)	30 minutes for lunch; cannot leave the school	51 minutes for lunch; open for grades 10-12, not for 9 Study hall is one of the 8 classes assigned

Table 2. Daily Schedule (as determined by the 2009-2010 Course Selection Sign-up Sheets for Grade 9)

	FMO	EHS
School Shift Options	-Morning shift -7:00 AM until 1:20 PM -Afternoon shift -1:40 PM until 8:00 PM	-Only one shift option -7:30 AM until 2:58 PM -Night class offered at Preble: -Digital Media/Digital Media (CEP) -Keyboarding -AP Music Theory
Campus Options	1	4

-All at same school

-Most or all classes are taken at same school
 -To offer more classes, schools specialize in a particular academy: Education (West), Engineering & Manufacturing (Preble), and Health Services (East)

Table 3. 2008-2009 School Year Calendar

	FMO	EHS
First Day	August 18th	September 2nd
Last Day	July 3rd	June 9th
Winter Break	December 22nd to January 6th	December 24th to January 2nd
Spring Break	April 6th to April 17th	March 23rd to March 27th
Summer Break	July 6th to August 15th	June 10th to August 31st
Number of Extra, Separate Vacation Days	8	9
		9 half-days as well

Parent/Teacher Involvement

Regardless of country or immigrant status, the majority of students reported that they felt their parents were very involved in their education (US: 74%, UI: 79%, MS: 79%). Help and support were the top responses as to why for all three groups; a few US and MS also reported that their parents helped pay for school, and a number of US also noted that their parents expected high grades. Similarly, many students, regardless of country or immigrant status, felt that teachers supported them by helping them and clearing up confusion (US: 38%, UI: 53%, MS: 54%). However, a few US added that teachers only help if the student initiates the process. When it came to moral support from teachers, feelings were mixed: while many students reported that their teachers gave moral support, a similar number also noted that only some teachers did, and that the others did not care. In addition, US and MS agreed that teachers prepared students with skills to continue learning/finish school (15% and 14%, respectively). 36% of MS also stated that teachers supported them by sharing their knowledge and teaching, while 26% of US felt their teachers helped guide them when choosing classes and 15% reported that their teachers pushed them to receive high grades through behaviors such as checking their grades or calling home.

Homework

The amount of homework assigned to students per week was also asked of all groups (Figure 1). More than half of the Mexican survey respondents collectively felt that students at FMO only received approximately 1 to 2.5 hours of homework per week. In contrast, the American survey respondents were spread across the spectrum, from 1 hour to more than 8 hours of homework each week.

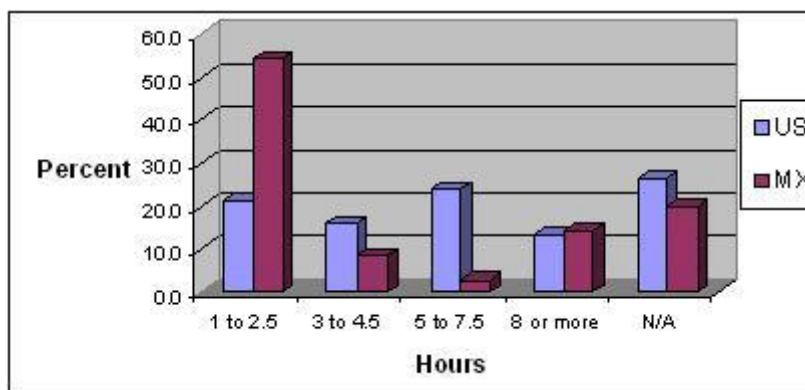


Figure 1. Hours of homework per week per student; responses categorized as N/A were statistically high for UI and therefore not included in the results.

Typicality of the Surveyed School

The survey asked respondents to consider the typicality of their school in comparison to others in the country. All teachers and the administrators from EHS and FMO responded that they would consider their school typical of schools at that grade level in that country; 74% of American students and 85% of Mexican students agreed (not including UI due to a statistically high number of N/A responses). When asked why, some interesting patterns emerged from the data. A few Mexican respondents mentioned that everyone at the school was Mexican, with no evidence of diversity; almost a third of American students mentioned diversity was a factor at their school, with half of these students saying that diversity was common for all American schools, and the other half noting that EHS had more diversity than most. Miscellaneous, single responses from US as to why their school would not be typical included EHS having lower socioeconomic status students, and issues surrounding being overcrowded and underfunded; for MS, teaching style and sheer number of schools making comparison impossible were cited.

Purpose of Schooling

When asked who attended the school, the majority of respondents from the United States and Mexican groups as a whole answered students and/or students at the appropriate age/level. In addition, about 28% of the US and UI survey groups combined noted that students were required to attend, as opposed to only about 4% of MS and UI survey groups combined. Interestingly, 32% of UI felt that school was not obligatory in Mexico, yet no mention of this was made by MS, MT, or MA. This statistic is further undermined by the fact that during the survey process, a UI student spoke this answer aloud (see Limitations); it is unknown whether or not this affected the other survey respondents. In any case, the immigrants themselves appeared to feel that school attendance was more forced at EHS than it was at their individual Mexican schools. Whether or not this observation was merely a personal feeling or an actual fact cannot be determined through this study. Beyond this, about 22% of US and UT combined felt it worth noting that anyone can attend EHS due to it being a public school; of those respondents, nearly all mentioned that all races attended, while a third mentioned students from all S.E.S. statuses attended.

There were various responses to why students attended school (UI responses were not included in this part of the question due a statistically high number of N/A responses). The most popular response for the Mexican survey groups was that students attended in order to have a quality education and/or graduation from the school (57%); in addition, about 11% mentioned that in Mexico, students are encouraged/required to attend school through the *secundaria*, which signals the completion of 'basic education.' Only 5% of the American groups combined also mentioned a quality education and/or graduation from the school. On the flip side, 56% of US reported that they felt students attended EHS in order to prepare themselves to continue studying and/or prepare for a specific level of education (high school, college, technical school, masters/doctoral program). When the category "To prepare for future employment/career path" is included in this statistic, that number rises to 68%. In contrast, only 11% of MS noted continuing studying as a response, or 18% when including preparing for employment. However, it may be that the MS students were reporting this answer in another manner: 29% reflected that students attended in order to learn life skills, which preparing for employment could be a part of (only 6% of US reported this same response). Perhaps the most interesting category reported—or not reported—was "For enjoyment/desire to learn." 29% of MS as opposed to 3% of US responded that they or students in general went to school for personal enjoyment and desire to learn. When later directly asked the purpose of school, the responses for both groups followed the pattern of the aforementioned responses: Americans reported similar numbers in support of "To prepare for future employment/career path" and "To prepare for a specific level of education," while Mexicans again had similar percentages for "To offer a quality education and/or graduate" and "To develop life skills." In addition, 26% of MS, MT, and MA reported that the purpose was to create better citizens. In response to all of the above data, it must be noted that 38% of US and UT felt that "To develop life skills" was important, while 43% of MS and MT fell into the category of "To prepare for a specific level of education." Therefore, it may be concluded that regardless of country, most respondents felt that the purpose of school is to prepare students for the future.

Extra-Curricular Classes

As recorded in the field notes and noted in the course selection guides, a notable difference exists in the purpose, options, and manner of choosing extra-curricular classes (Table 4). At FMO, these classes are known as 'talleres,' while at EHS they are known as 'electives.' Prior to entering the *secundaria* in Mexico, students rate and list their top three choices for their optional class (taller) in the order of preference. Administration places the students based on space and preference. Students must stay with their selected taller for the 3 years of *secundaria*. The goal of the taller is to give the students technical training in a career in the event that they choose not to continue on to the *secundaria* and go straight into the workforce. The manner of choosing electives at EHS is similar in that prior to entering high school, students choose their electives and academic courses based on personal choice, completed prerequisites and staff/parent suggestions/approval. Administration places the students based on

space and preference. Students choose new electives for each semester/academic year. Different electives are encouraged based on career goals, but in general, the purpose of the electives appears to be more to make a student well-rounded and prepare them for their career goals; whether they are trained in a specific field for work after high school is a voluntary rather than mandatory process.

Table 4. Classes (as determined by the 2009-2010 Course Selection Sign-up Sheets for Grade 9)

	FMO	EHS
Specialized Instructional Programming Options	-Mainstream	-Mainstream -Special education -ESL
Academic Rigor Options	- One level offered	-Regular and advanced
Required Classes	1. Spanish 2. Mathematics 3. Science (chemistry emphasis) 4. Mexican History 5. Phy Ed 6. English 7. Art 8. Civic Formation/Ethics 9. Resource/Study Hall	1. English Language Arts 2. Mathematics 3. Science 4. Social Studies 5. Phy Ed 6. Health
<i>not all classes are taken for the entire semester/year</i>		
Optional Classes for Grade 9	<u>Mainstream</u> : 5 talleres offered 1. sewing 2. cooking 3. computers 4. metal work 5. electric work <u>Special Ed</u> : N/A ESL: N/A	<u>Mainstream</u> : 79 electives offered 1. Agriscience/natural resources (9) 2. Art (7) 3. Business Ed/Marketing (15) 4. Family and Consumer Science (9) 5. World Language (10) 6. Music (11) 7. Technology and Engineering Ed (9) 8. Teen-Age Parent Program (5) 9. Other Courses and Work-Based Learning Courses (3) 10. Study Hall <u>Special Ed</u> : 10 electives offered 1. Adaptive Agriscience 2. Adaptive Art 3. Adaptive Computer Literacy 4. Adaptive Family and Consumer Science 5. Adaptive Music 6. Adaptive Tech Ed 7. Resource 8. Navigating Social Dynamics 9. Communication Skills 1 10. Life Skills-Vocational ESL: 2 electives offered 1. ESL Technology Education 2. Resource

As observed in the field notes, there was a notable difference in the manner of switching from subject to subject. At FMO, students remained in the classroom while their instructors switched rooms, with the exception of science classes (due to labs) and the talleres (which also required special equipment, such as computers). At EHS, the instructors remained in the classrooms while the students moved from room to room for all classes, with the exception of some special education and ELL classrooms.

Academic Path and Personal Success

Survey respondents were asked in what grade students chose their academic path (Figure 1, Figure 2). The majority of Americans responded during high school, as opposed to Mexicans answering during secundaria. This may partially result from the fact that students in the secundaria are not yet in the prepa (high school), so they would

include going to high school as an option, while American students surveyed were already in high school and therefore may not have considered going to (and finishing) high school as a step in the process.

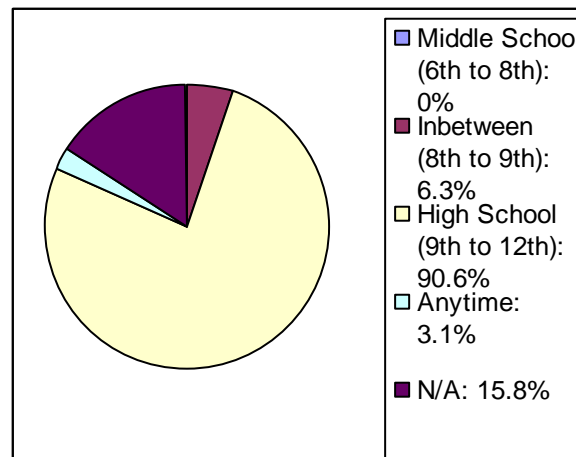


Figure 2. Grade American students chose academic path; responses categorized as N/A were statistically high for UI and therefore not included in the results

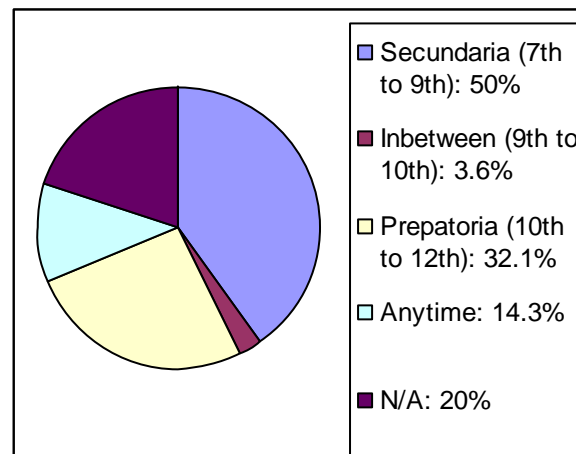


Figure 3. Grade Mexican students chose academic path; responses categorized as N/A were statistically high for UI and therefore not included in the results

All students responded to the question about their own personal academic path (Figure 4). For this question, Mexican students considered high school as an equivalent of the preparatoria (grades 10 to 12). The highest percentages for all three groups fell into the college category (US and MS numbers are even higher when you include those who intend to go to college and medical/graduate school). No respondent from US and MS survey groups intended to only graduate from high school as their academic path; this is noteworthy because 18% of UI felt that was their path.

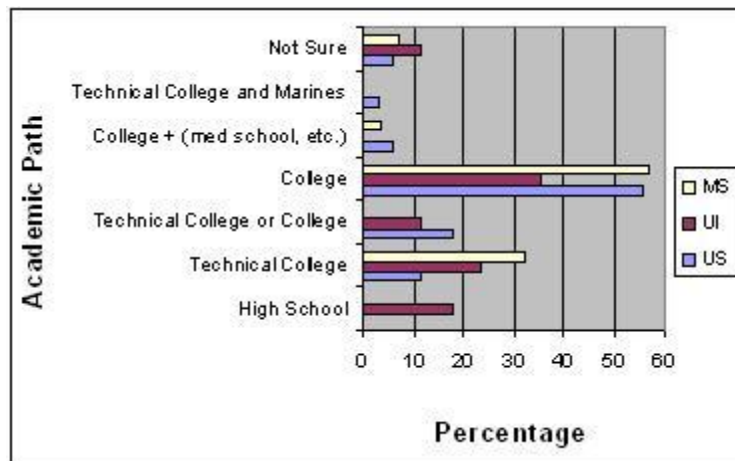


Figure 4. Academic path of surveyed students

Students were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 9, 1 being low, as to how likely they felt they would be successful in completing their reported academic path (Figure 5). Not a single student from Mexico rated their likeliness to succeed below a 7. Most students fell into the 7-8 or 9-10 category. About 32% of UI reported that their number had risen since immigrating to the United States.

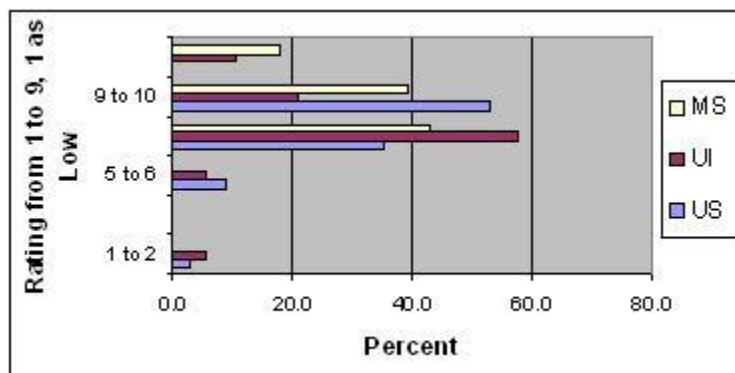


Figure 5. Student self-rating of success in chosen academic path

Issues Surrounding Mexican Immigrant Students

UA and UT were asked a variety of questions about the Mexican immigrant students at EHS. In response to how these students are assigned classes, UA and UT cited student’s previous success in school and credits attained, interest post-high school, and English/ELL levels of reading/speaking as factors. Academic supports mentioned as available at EHS included the ELL program, translators, bilingual classes, and alternative school. When it came to asking UA and UT what teachers/administrators know about their Mexican immigrant students’ past educational history, there were a variety of responses: that it depends on many factors, nothing at all, and nothing without personally asking questions. Lastly, when asked if teachers were given training on the Mexican culture and educational system, half responded in the negative and half mentioned optional staff development opportunities.

US, UT and UA were all asked what challenges they felt the Mexican immigrant students at their school faced. 84% cited language barrier as the biggest problem; 60% of UI felt likewise. Cultural barriers, differences in customs, and different school experiences were seen as challenges by both UI and the rest of the American sample groups. Challenges associated with a different curriculum, change in school intensity, and different rules were all cited by various US; racism was identified as a problem by US and UI, but not by UA or UT. 10% of UI reported having trouble meeting new people/friends and 15% felt they had no problem transitioning at all; 3% of US also mentioned those two categories. 6% of US, UT, and UA as a whole felt that illegal immigrant status and deportation was a challenge, though no UI mentioned this. One UI also mentioned the challenge of having half of his/her

immediate family living in Mexico, while the other half lived in the United States. 32% of the US, UT, and UA combined group listed miscellaneous problems, such as learning challenges, fighting, lack of role models, stereotypes, not having the supplies needed for school, not having a good connection/relationship with teachers, and so on.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

What can be gained through the results is first and foremost an appreciation for how many changes affect students when they are transitioning from school to school and culture to culture. Mexican immigrant students not only need to become fluent in English in written and oral forms, but they are often faced with major differences in how schools are run, in a wide spectrum from the time classes begin to the options and purpose of elective classes. In addition, it may be worth further studying when students need to choose their academic path and if schools in either country are mandatory (and more importantly, if attendance is monitored and enforced); the notable immigrant student attitudes towards feeling that school was obligatory in the US may in some cases be influenced by the fact that students in Mexico are encouraged to finish basic education (ending with the *secundaria*), but that not all students continue on to the *preparatoria*, or the American equivalent of high school. In addition, the fact that only immigrant students reported 'high school' as their academic path is particularly striking. More research needs to be done to determine why, but it may be hypothesized that the issues raised through this research influence this decision, which may reflect on students' self efficacy, or that many are expected to go into the workforce to help their families financially. In addition, since students in Mexico do have the option to end schooling after the *secundaria*, it is possible that some immigrant students may resent attending high school in the United States, particularly if they had chosen to follow a career path after 9th grade rather than attend the *preparatoria*. Another issue that should be noted is that regardless of immigrant status or country, the majority of students felt that their parents were supportive of their education; teachers and administrators in the United States should remember that the language barrier, among other issues, may mask support that they give their students. Teachers and administrators should not assume that just because a parent does not attend conferences or other activities that this means they are not supporting their children's education; it may be that they lack the time to help their son/daughter due to employment and language restraints.

Teachers and administrators can look into the following ideas to help students that have recently emigrated from Mexico. These students may need help the first week or two as they learn to navigate the halls and switch classrooms, rather than the teachers switching rooms as occurs at FMO. They also may struggle with the morning hours if they are used to the afternoon session. A glance at the elective choices for FMO versus EHS leads to the obvious observation that choosing electives in the United States may also be a complicated task, requiring help from a teacher and/or counselor, especially if the student needs ELL supports that are not available in all classes they might have an interest in taking. Mexican immigrant students may also be used to less homework given each week and therefore may need time to adjust to the homework load. One of the major issues that arose in various responses was the fact that FMO was homogeneous when it came to race and culture; EHS was described as racially mixed, with many cultures present. That fact alone could affect the ease of transition for new immigrants, who not only have much to learn about how to interact in new, culturally appropriate manners, but also may face heightened racism for the very first time. Students should be provided a support system for dealing with the cultural differences they face, whether that is pairing them with an outgoing American student in the classroom or simply discussing the important topics of race and racism and how it is present, even in the specific school setting they find themselves in.

Another way that schools may be able to help teachers and administrators reach out to their immigrant students is to include mandatory (or very highly encouraged) informational seminars built into professional development expectations. In fact, all school staff would benefit from learning about the Mexican culture and educational system. When a significant part of the school population consists of a particular group, such as the Mexican immigrant students in this research, informing staff is very important. Without proper knowledge, teachers may rely on stereotypes or not take the effort—or not know how—to reach out to the immigrant students. This idea of providing teachers with a means to learn about their students should not be just limited to Mexican immigrants: for example, if a significant number of students are Hmong in a school/district, teachers should also be given training on that particular group. If teachers can find a way to apply their acquired knowledge about their immigrant students into their classroom, they may be able to promote better student relations with the minority groups. In addition, students reported that some of their teachers did not care at all about them, and this clearly affected them negatively. Teachers need to be aware that even if they try to be supportive, they need to be especially careful not to unwittingly show any indication of judging a person based on stereotypes rather than his/her own actions. Unfortunately, some teachers may not seem to really care about their students; what the caring teachers—the ones that are willing to work hard to overcome obstacles facing all of their students, including their immigrant students—can do is make sure that

the students are supported by them in their classroom and in the hallways, and try to address flagrant immigrant judgment in their peers and students. Teachers/administrators have a lot of power to make decisions, which help or harm the immigrant student population, which can affect life decisions of those students. What teachers and administrators need to be informed about is that in general, the school systems in Mexico and the United States are comparable when it comes to academic path, purpose and core classes offered; this knowledge will help break the stereotype that Mexican immigrant students are probably illiterate and come from poor, one-room school houses. As in the United States, disparities exist between schools in Mexico, so the quality of education that was available to immigrants will vary from student to student depending on where they lived and their economic situation, but teachers in any school can do their best to work with students by providing a positive role model and trying their best to be compassionate, informed, and understanding.

LIMITATIONS

First and foremost, as a case study, it would be impossible to assume that what was suggested by the data in this study can encompass all Mexican and American schools, particularly since schooling in the United States is state-regulated rather than government-regulated as it is in Mexico; disparities between schools in each country also make it difficult to label any one school as 'typical' of schools in that country. In addition, the different structure of the school grades that the specific schools in the study (the Mexican group being the oldest grade at that school versus the American group being the youngest) may have impacted results. Some issues also arose during the survey process. The researcher was a non-native speaker of Spanish, though every effort was made to accurately represent the responses and survey questions. In addition, a possible bias in data arose during the UI surveys, when a student spoke an answer aloud; it is unknown if this verbal communication influenced other students to answer similarly or not. The possibility of bias was noted in the reporting of that particular data.

Sample groups' enthusiasm and thoroughness may have played a role in survey responses. US, UA, MS, MT, and MA all demonstrated enthusiasm and thoroughness when completing the surveys. However, the day the surveys were taken at East High School fell on the same day that semester grades were due, so UT enthusiasm and thoroughness was understandably lacking. In general, UI showed a distinct lack of interest and enthusiasm; some questions had to be thrown out completely for the UI sample due to a high number of skipped questions and/or lack of clarity, causing an insufficient number of responses. Some of this lack of enthusiasm may have been due to the fact that the class was a resource study hall, so the students may have been preoccupied with other tasks.

The original plan of the research project was to conduct qualitative personal interviews with teachers and administrators in addition to the surveys. However, due to time constraints, the researcher was forced to abandon the interviews and concentrate on the surveys; EHS was busy with semester grades, while only one day was available at FMO, which was secured as a research site after many schools denying the research proposal or being closed for vacations. Open ended personal interviews may have given further insight into the issues and strengthened the results, and would be strongly encouraged in any replication of this research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to thank the following: Dr. Jean Hindson, Austin Smith and Rich Bettini, for their faithful support and guidance through the entirety of this project; Dr. Greg Wegner, for his help understanding and analyzing qualitative research; María Sanchez, for her translation efforts; Mr. Ed Dorff, Mr. Matt Vandenhouten, Mrs. Linda Bornbach, L.E.M. Juan Carlos Vasquez Acosta, and L.E.M. Rosario Vargas Mora, for accommodating all the researcher's needs and being so welcoming and helpful; the Green Bay Public School District, for accepting the research proposal; and the UW-La Crosse Undergraduate Research Grants Program, for providing financial support.

REFERENCES

- Chavez, L.R. (2008). *The Latino threat: Constructing immigrants, citizens and the nation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fuligni, A. J. (1997, April). The academic achievement of adolescents from immigrant families: The roles of family background, attitudes and behavior. *Child Development*, (68)2, 351-363. Retrieved March 10, 2009 from JSTOR database.
- Garcia, A. M. (2002). *The Mexican Americans*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gonzalez, R. & Padilla, A. M. (2001). Academic performance of immigrant and U.S.-born Mexican heritage students: Effects of schooling in Mexico and bilingual/English language instruction. *American Educational Research Association*. 38(3), 727-742. Retrieved on October 9, 2008 from JSTOR database.

- Macias, J. (1990, December). Scholastic antecedents of immigrant students: Schooling in a Mexican immigrant-sending community. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 21(4), 291-318. Retrieved October 9, 2008 from JSTOR database.
- Maykut, P. & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophical and practical guide*. Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press.
- Ream, R. K. (2003). Counterfeit social capital and Mexican-American underachievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. (25)3, 237-262. Retrieved October 9, 2008 from JSTOR database.
- Romo, H.D. & Falbo, T. (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Saenz, R., Morales, M. C., & Filoteo, J. (2004). The demography of Mexicans in the United States. In De Anda, R. M. (Ed.), *Chicanas and chicanos in contemporary society*. (pp 3-19). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of U.S. Mexican youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Suárez-Orozco, C., Qin, D. B., & Amthor, R. F. (2008). Adolescents from immigrant families: Relationships and adaptations in school. In M. Sadowski (Ed.), *Adolescents at school: Perspectives on youth, identity and education* (pp. 51-69). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (2000). *Census 2000 brief: Overview of race and Hispanic origin*. Retrieved October 9, 2008 from www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/cenbr01-1.pdf.
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2009). Data of demographics and enrollment. Retrieved December 10, 2008 from <http://dpi.wi.gov/index.html>.
- World Education Services (2004). World education profiles. Retrieved December 11, 2008 from <http://www.wes.org/ca/wedb/index.asp>.