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# The Sociocultural Experiences of Mexican American Recent High School Graduates: Civic Education and Its Social Impact on the Success of Bicultural Youth

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the analysis of three interviews with Mexican American recent high school graduates to understand how three specific factors of the U.S. education system have benefited their life trajectory. These three factors include positive student-teacher relationships, engagement in extracurricular activities that foster civic engagement, and attention to bicultural education. Literature reports a positive correlation between the aforementioned factors and overall life success for all students but specifically bicultural students. The results of this research support this finding by looking closely at positive schooling experiences three Mexican American students shared. These schooling experiences propelled each of the participants to be accepted to a four-year university. Having joined a jump-start program in order to better prepare for college these participants continued to show engagement with practices that characterize a more successful experience in life fiscally, emotionally, and civically. Thus, education systems which build, and foster environments of self/global awareness, positive student-teacher relations, and community engagement produce better livelihood outcomes for bicultural youth. This is important due to the increasing rates of bicultural youth in the American school systems. When

imaging reforms of school in the future, the three aforementioned characteristics should be considered.

*Keywords:* Mexican American, Bicultural, Civic Education,

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## **Introduction**

In the summer of 2019, I followed a qualitative research approach to better understand the experiences of recent Mexican American high school graduates as they pertain to their academic and social success. Literature supports the direct correlation of positive schooling experiences with bicultural youths' ability to participate in civic engagement, their exposition to the nature of higher education, and access to instructors who foster honesty and high expectations from students in the classroom. Multicultural children are the primary benefactors of healthy student-teacher relationships in classrooms<sup>1</sup>. When multicultural children experience such relationships and are offered opportunities to pursue higher education as well as participate in civic engagement then this predicts the likelihood of that child's increase in overall quality of life<sup>2</sup>. This is critical because of the rise of multicultural and multilingual children in the United States school systems.

To better chart specific experiences or circumstances which foster civic engagement, positive teacher relations, and exposure to higher education for Mexican American youth, this research begins by understanding how Mexican American youth feel primarily as students in the U.S. education system. The research questions guiding this inquiry aimed to identify aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> Garza, Rubén. "Latino and White High School Students' Perceptions of Caring Behaviors: Are We Culturally Responsive to Our Students?" *Urban Education*, no. 3, 2009, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa García Bedolla, and Luis Ricardo Fraga. "Latino Education, Civic Engagement, and the Public Good." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 36, 2012, p. 23.

the education system that participants perceived to affect their interest in school the most such as class curriculum, peer participation, and a teacher's ability to care for their students. The main purpose of inquiring about these cultural experiences was to determine what agency U.S.-born Mexican American students feel they possess concerning their status as bicultural participants of U.S. society.

The methodology followed to conduct this study consisted of three one-hour long interviews of three Mexican American recently graduated high school students matriculating to college. After reviewing the literature relevant to the civic education and participation of Latino/a students in U.S. school systems, participants' interviews were combed for themes relating to their socio-cultural relation to civic education. Three themes were identified as recurring factors in the participants' experiences and their interaction with civic engagement as well as positive experiences at schools: a) participation in extracurriculars including service programs, b) reliability on and encouragement from teachers and c) aspects of family culture including but not limited to income, attachment to community and self-perceptions of ethnicity<sup>3</sup>.

Participants' experiences in each of the three themes were positive indicators of their inclination to be civically engaged with their communities and the world. Participants' parents were cited to require that each of the participants attend and succeed in college. Though each participant was a product of a low-income family, this inequality acted as a catalyst to pursue higher education and engage civically with their communities in ways such as "educating others who didn't receive the help we did." Participants with siblings who had attended or failed to attend college were also more inclined to engage academically and socially. This positive reinforcement created a desire for participants to engage and perform well academically.

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa García Bedolla, and Luis Ricardo Fraga. "Latino Education, Civic Engagement, and the Public Good." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 36, 2012, p. 23.

Participants also expressed having "good-enough" relationships with semi-permanent teachers in their school system who encouraged them to be productive members through strict nature and genuine concern for students. The Upward Bound program acted as a final reinforcer for students to pursue higher education and civically engaged with one's community. Each of these students had participated either as a member or leader in a civic organization on campuses such as the Gay-Straight Alliance, student council or school protests which also indicated a positive correlation between academic success and overall higher quality of life.

## **Background**

The Latino/a population is the fastest-growing population in the country today, yet they are the demographic least likely to vote or participate in politics in the United States<sup>4</sup>. Research provides that Latino/a adolescents are most likely to grow up in poverty, with rates from 50% among Latino children in the U.S. and 75% among immigrants from Mexico and the Dominican Republic<sup>5</sup>. As a result, Latino/students are most commonly placed in low-income schools with little funding and lack of resources ranging from mentor support to unhygienic facilities. The lack of insufficient resources fosters environments of indifference for student preparation and success<sup>6</sup>. Multicultural and multilingual children who are more likely to lack such resources at home suffer significantly from a school's inability to provide such resources. When multicultural/multilingual children are denied these resources, they are guaranteed a lower quality of life.

If, on the other hand, multilingual/ multicultural children can capitalize on positive student-teacher experiences, exposure to higher education and civic education then they are more

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa García Bedolla (2010) *Good Ideas Are Not Enough: Considering the Politics Underlying Students' Postsecondary Transitions*, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*,15:1-2, 9-26, DOI: [10.1080/10824661003634914](https://doi.org/10.1080/10824661003634914).

<sup>5</sup> Torney-Purta, Judith, et al. (2007) *Latino Adolescents' Civic Development in the United States: Research Results from the IEA Civic Education Study*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, no. 2, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Darling-Hammond, Linda. *How Teacher Education Matters*. *Journal of Teacher Education* 2000; 51; 166.

likely to pursue higher education. By pursuing higher education multilingual/ multicultural children are more likely to develop better self-advocacy and agency allowing them to alter the negative environments of which they came from as well as similar environments of those who follow them through political and social activism<sup>7</sup>.

In this study, I focused on the socio-cultural experiences of recently graduated Mexican American high schoolers to learn more about the way inequities in the school system have shaped their experiences with civic engagement. Literature supports the direct correlation of positive schooling experiences with an increase prediction of civic engagement in a student's future. Therefore, this project attempts to relate the exposure to higher education, the participation in civic education, and the development of positive teacher-student relations of three Mexican American high school graduates from San Antonio, Texas to their desire and ability to pursue higher education.

## **Student Profiles**

### *Student A*

Student A had recently graduated from Harlandale High School in San Antonio, Tx and was on her way to the University of Corpus Christie to pursue medicine. She identified as Mexican American primarily because she was more familiar with her Mexican ancestors three generations-down. Harlandale High School is in the southside of San Antonio, a historically low-income, predominantly Mexican American populated sector of the city. Harlandale ISD has a student population of roughly 15,000, 97.8% who are Hispanic, 74.8% who are considered at-risk, 87.3% who are economically disadvantaged and 17.7% who have limited English

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa García Bedolla, and Luis Ricardo Fraga. "Latino Education, Civic Engagement, and the Public Good." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 36, 2012, p. 23.

proficiency<sup>8</sup>. This student had two siblings, an older brother, and a younger brother. Her parents had both graduated from high school but had not gone to college. More recently, her mother worked in retail while her father, who was disabled, acquired small physical labor jobs when he could. This indicated that her household had only one steady income.

This student also stated that she had lost her mother to cancer when she was a freshman in high school, further escalating an income crisis. In the past, her parents had worked as migrant farmworkers with her grandparents. She indicated her monolingual status, being unable to speak Spanish fluently due to her grandparent's and parents feeling that English was the dominant language of the country they were living in and therefore the only necessary language to understand. She did, however, clarify that she understood some Spanish and therefore was a heritage speaker.

This student expressed that her motivation to pursue higher education was a collection of several factors that had affected her family. One, her eldest brother decided not to attend college and instead followed a career path. Two, she was able to join Upward Bound, a program that helps low-income, minority students learn about the college application process and assists them in finding universities that fit their needs. Three, she felt she had to set an example for her younger brother to continue pursuing high school for him to continue pursuing higher education

#### *Student B*

Student B grew up mostly on the west side of San Antonio, Tx, another low-income, Mexican American borough. She attended John F. Kennedy High School which is in Edgewood ISD. Edgewood ISD has a student population size of roughly 10,400 students, 97.4% of students

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy, Ryan, and Annie Daniel. "Harlandale ISD." *Texas Public Schools*, The Texas Tribune, 5 Apr. 2019, schools.texastribune.org/districts/harlandale-isd/.

are Hispanic, 74% at-risk students, 93.2% economically disadvantaged, and 19.7% possess a limited English proficiency<sup>9</sup>. She had moved several times in her adolescents and exhibited some discomfort over this challenge. Similar to the first student, student B's parents were working class. Her mother had two jobs until she had to care for student B and her younger sister. Her father who had been a member of the marines was trained to work in a specific field but often had trouble keeping a job for more than 2-3 years. Again, this indicated that the family usually had one steady income.

Student B chose to identify herself as Hispanic rather than Latina because she associated the term Latina with her mother as a generational term. Like student A she was not fluent in Spanish and had a difficult time understanding it. This cultural divide contributed to her disassociation with the term Latina. Student B's parents also felt that Spanish was unnecessary because English would be the language that supported them the most. Similarly, to student A, student B held some resentment toward their inability to speak or understand Spanish as well as their family members or peers.

Student B expressed that she began to think about college when she was exposed to the concept by Upward Bound in eighth grade. Student B's parents did not complete a college education. Her mother attempted to go to college but had to quickly drop out due to her pregnancy with student B. None the less, student B had been exposed to college by her distant relatives such as *tias* and *tios*. Though she did not spend a lot of time with her extended family her mother shared her relative's experiences when student B began to inquire about college.

### *Student C*

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<sup>9</sup> Murphy, Ryan, and Annie Daniel. "Edgewood ISD." *Texas Public Schools*, The Texas Tribune, 5 Apr. 2019, [schools.texastribune.org/districts/edgewood-isd-bexar/](https://schools.texastribune.org/districts/edgewood-isd-bexar/).



Student C like student B grew up on the west side of San Antonio. He attended a high school also in Edgewood ISD but by the name of Memorial High School. Student C lived in a low-income neighborhood where most of the neighbors were supportive of achievements that families had made but also where the children of those neighbors often did not attend school after graduating high school. Similarly, to students A and B, student C had two working-class parents, one whose job was more permanent than the other. His mother worked odd jobs in the school district while his father worked in construction. Unlike the first two students, student C was bilingual. This was primarily because his father did not speak English, though he could understand it, and his mother spoke both Spanish and English. He spoke Spanish and English at home and school. Being bilingual seemed to define his social circles because he stated that with certain friends, "if they don't speak Spanish, they won't understand some jokes and it's just like I'm not going to translate some jokes for them."

Student C described himself as a well-behaved student claiming, "I wasn't one to cause trouble, I was more like I'm here for what I need to do." Student C continued to describe himself this way depicting a unique mindset to complete what he could to the best of his ability and leave high school behind him. He was intensely focused and determined. This might have stemmed from his exposure to higher education through his older sister's experience in college, especially her ability to make the Dean's list after struggling to adapt. Student C also described his parent's persistence for him to attend college stating, "my parents they were always like at a young age 'yea you have to go to get an education because we're struggling too much'."

Student C expressed that his parents had helped him pursue higher education by setting a good example of a good work ethic claiming, "my dad was unemployed but he never stopped working, he always got side jobs a little bit of everything to make sure he was paying for things

so I guess he taught me like never give up on things.” These experiences were unique to student C but were evident in student A and student B’s families as well.

## **Methodology**

### *Data Collection*

The methodology followed to conduct this study consisted of three one-hour long interviews of three Mexican American recently graduated high school students matriculating to college. After reviewing the literature relevant to the civic education and participation of Latino/a students in U.S. school systems, participants' interviews were combed for themes relating to their socio-cultural relation to civic education. These themes are similar themes to those prevalent in the literature reviewed for this study. Many of the studies cite the importance of a student's relationship with their teacher and the use of programs that stimulate civic engagement to broaden the experiences and desires of low-income and minority children.

### *Framework for Analysis*

Three themes were identified as recurring factors in the participants' experiences and their interaction with civic engagement as well as positive experiences at schools: a) participation in extracurriculars including service programs, b) reliability on and encouragement from teachers and c) aspects of family culture including but not limited to income, attachment to community and self-perceptions of ethnicity. Participants' experiences in each of the three themes were positive indicators of their inclination to be civically engaged with their communities and the world. Participants' parents were cited to require that each of the participants attend and succeed in college. Though each participant was a product of a low-income family, this inequality acted as a catalyst to pursue higher education and engage civically with their communities in ways such as "educating others who didn't receive the help we did." Participants with siblings who had

attended or failed to attend college were also more inclined to engage academically and socially. This positive reinforcement created a desire for participants to engage and perform well academically. Participants also expressed having "good-enough" relationships with semi-permanent teachers in their school system who encouraged them to be productive members through strict nature and genuine concern for students. The Upward Bound program acted as a final reinforcer for students to pursue higher education and civically engaged with one's community. Each of these students had participated either as a member or leader in a civic organization on campuses such as the Gay-Straight Alliance, student council or school protests.

## **Discussion**

### *Analysis of Data*

Participants' experiences in each of the three themes were positive indicators of their inclination to civically engage with their communities and the world. Participants' parents were cited to require that each of the participants attend and succeed in college. Though each participant was a product of a low-income family, this inequality acted as a catalyst to pursue higher education and engage civically with their communities in ways such as "educating others who didn't receive the help we did."<sup>10</sup> Participants with siblings who had attended or failed to attend college were also more inclined to engage academically and socially. This positive reinforcement created a desire for participants to engage and perform well academically. Participants also expressed having "good-enough" relationships with semi-permanent teachers in their school system who encouraged them to be productive members through strict nature and genuine concern for

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<sup>10</sup> McWhirter, Ellen Hawley, et al. "Never Give up Fight for What You Believe in': Perceptions of How Latina/o Adolescents Can Make a Difference." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 403–412. (Mentions how student civic engagement can be different than simply political engagement such as efforts to support community members.)

students. The Upward Bound program acted as a final reinforcer for students to pursue higher education and civically engaged with one's community. Each of these students had participated either as a member or leader in a civic organization on campuses such as the Gay-Straight Alliance, student council or school protests.

In the future, the project should focus primarily on ways students civically engage with local communities such as school, family or city. It would be better to observe how high school students initiate, support and continue civic organizations within these communities. It would also benefit the study to learn more about students' neighborhoods, and school districts to further inquire about economic and political factors that may hinder or encourage students to pursue higher education and civic engagement within their community.

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