

The Impact of School Organization and Structure on the Academic Success Mexican Immigrant Students: The Perceptions of Mexican Descent Students

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School structures and organization can segregate students into programs where they feel slighted and ignored or can create environments of acceptance and success. Efforts at reorganizing school structures and organization are often conducted with little or no input from the students affected by such change. Through the use of narrative analysis, this article presents the perception of successful Mexican descent students in regards to the organization and structures of the high schools they attended. Their perceptions include structures and organizations that marginalized them, as well as those that made them feel accepted and motivated them.

Introduction

School organization and program implementation play a paradoxical role in regards to the marginalization of Mexican descent students. On one hand, such structures can be used to segregate students into programs where they feel slighted and ignored. On the other hand, school structures and organization can create environments of acceptance and success. Efforts at reorganizing school structures and organization are often conducted with little or no input from the students affected by such changes.

The organization of secondary schools, as we know it today, has been in place for many years. Schools tend to be organized along departmental lines with little or no interaction between departments. Students proceed through a predetermined program of coursework that provides little or no room for individual needs. The organizational structures tend to limit the amount of contact time that students have with individual teachers, which lessens the development of supportive relationships (Boyer, 1983; Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1987).

Such programs can contribute to the lack of success experienced by Mexican descent students. Thomas and Collier documented that schools successful in assisting linguistically

diverse students developed and implemented quality programs that included all areas of the "Prism Model" (Collier, 1995a; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002).

The Prism Model, while explicitly targeting language acquisition for school, proposes four elements that need to be present in order for linguistically diverse students to experience academic success. The four areas are a) Social and Cultural Processes, b) Language Development, c) Cognitive Development and d) Academic Development.

Social and Cultural Processes are the surrounding environments that represent the school and community. Issues such as socioeconomic status, discrimination, and gender impact upon the language acquisition and academic achievement of all students. The interaction of students and the relations of power within the school settings fall under this category. This also tends to be the area least addressed in the schools. Language acquisition refers to the subconscious development of all aspects of oral language as well as the metalinguistic knowledge of oral and written language accomplished through formal instruction. Schooling is heavily based on language, therefore students need to develop their abilities in the language of instruction to the same level as that of native speakers. Academic and cognitive development at the

secondary level are based on the concept that the students should be functioning at grade level. Students who lag behind in their cognitive development find it difficult to function effectively in challenging coursework. On the other hand, the simplification of academic concepts restricts the amount of cognitive growth a student may achieve. Consequently, to obtain full academic potential, students must be challenged. Any adaptations due to language needs should challenge the students at the appropriate level. In order for any program to reach its full potential, all four areas listed above need to be addressed. If one is emphasized at the expense of the others, the student will lag behind (Collier, 1995a; Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002).

Narrative Analysis

This research project used narrative as the base for the study. Narrative is seen as one means of understanding human experience or "to conceptualize the self" (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 135). Narratives provide for the stories of participants to be seen in relation to the development of their lives through the process of emplotment (Ricoeur, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1991). Emplotment takes single events and places them together in a configuration that leads toward a conclusion. (Polkinghorne, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984; Freeman, 1998). It is through this process that the narratives of the participants are brought together in order to understand their perceptions as to how they have arrived at their current situations. Often times what is perceived is not what actually happens when taken from an "outsider's" perspective. Yet, perception is what actually enters into the understanding of an individual and has a strong impact on how they see themselves in relation to others and events (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1991).

One area of weakness in the literature dealing with program design and implementation is the perspective of Mexican descent students. Narrative analysis allows for the students' perceptions to be presented in a

format that informs such development.

Participants

The participants in the study were 32 Mexican descent college students who had graduated from high schools in the United States. Mexican descent was defined as someone who could trace their ancestry back to what is or was the country of Mexico. It should be noted that for the original purpose of the study the participants were chosen based on the length of family residency in the United States. This was done in order to explore potential differences between the generations. There are times when their experiences are very similar and others where they are quite different in the areas being covered by this report.

The participants in this study were students at several colleges and universities. College students were chosen due to the focus of the larger study, factors involved with the successful completion of secondary school. They had completed high school at different locations throughout the western portion of the United States. Their recruitment occurred through contact with student organizations such as MEChA. All who met the criteria of being of Mexican descent and having completed high school in the United States were interviewed. The experiences presented are strictly those of the participants.

Data collection and analysis.

Data collection was accomplished through interviews with the participants. The interviews were organized around what Denzin (1989) defined as Nonschedule Standardized Interview protocol. This type of protocol has a predetermined list of required information but the interview allows for the dynamics of the interaction to determine when and how each question would be addressed.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. After transcription, the data were analyzed using a system similar to the process proposed by Spradley (1980). This began with

the data being coded into sets of categories using some that were predetermined and others that developed through the transcription and coding processes. Next, the coded data were organized into meaningful hierarchical units. The final portion of the analysis was organizing the coded units into a structure that demonstrated the appearance of certain traits within and between the different subgroups.

The findings of the analysis are presented in this report using selected participants' responses as representative samples. These are presented in "Dialogue Boxes." It should be noted that the responses found in the Dialogue Boxes appear as a result of the analysis procedure explained above.

School Organization and Structure

School organization structures and placement procedures often created environments that led to feelings of subordination, exclusion, and cultural invisibility. Mexican descent students, Chicano and Meicano, were placed in courses that they did not find challenging, and allowed to remain in them without effort to move them to more advanced courses. They were often tracked in low-academic programs based on assumptions about the intelligence of Mexican descent students, excluding them from participating in college preparation programs. The curriculum included little, if any, mention of Mexican or Chicano history and culture.

Assumed Lack of Intelligence

Though seldom explicitly stated, many of the schools attended by the participants created an ambience that appeared to assume that Mexican descent students lacked intellectual ability. Other possibilities for low academic achievement, such as language, were discounted or not explored. As can be seen in *Dialogue 1*, ELL students were placed in content area classes based strictly on their language ability. Many of these students had learned the content materials of these courses in Mexico and

were not challenged. Consequently, they found little or no purpose for attending.

Dialogue 1

S: It never surprised me when the new immigrants were pushed out, you know. I don't think I could have withstood the kind of terrible stereotypes of them. There was a time when if you were in ESL it was taken that you were also stupid, you know. Not that there was a language barrier, it's just that you don't know anything. And that your education is inferior. (2nd Generation Male)

While the lack of English language was used to place recent immigrants into less challenging classes, school had no such convenient excuses for the Chicanos. The rationale for their placement was more complicated, commonly believed to be based on stereotypes. This projected the idea that Mexican descent students were not intelligent enough to meet the challenge. The first participant in *Dialogue 2* speaks of how she was not only expected to take only the basic classes, but there was actually some resistance to her enrolling in more advanced coursework. In order for her to take advanced courses, she had to prove herself academically capable.

Dialogue 2

S: I think my, being Hispanic; I had to prove myself more, you know. That I was capable of being in these classes. Because when I first did go to high school, I was told that I couldn't go on the accelerated track. That basically I wasn't going to go to college. So that there was no need for me to take these college courses. Or anything of that nature. That I should just take the basic courses. So I had to

prove myself a little bit before.
(3rd Generation Female)

S: There probably were harder ones that I probably could have got in to. But it's not like they didn't suggest them. I don't know if I'd want to take those harder ones (laugh). So maybe I didn't pursue it. That's why they never even talked to me about it.(3rd Generation Male)

The second participant brought in another side of the issue, that the students themselves helped contribute to the assumption they were not capable of high academic achievement. This student saw the actions of the school staff and organizations as "truth" when they did not attempt to place him in more advanced courses. These counselors had attempted to place Mexican descent students in advanced classes only to have them refuse or transfer out after a short period of time. Because of this, they could assume he should not take such classes. These feelings, while they could be considered reasonable to him, do indicate the possibility that other Chicano students would be adversely affected by such assumptions.

Lack of Challenge in Curriculum

Another area of structural marginalization related to the assumed lack of intelligence was the placement of Mexican descent students in non-challenging courses. To complicate the issue further for recent immigrants, the schools only offered the advanced coursework in English. Students who entered the local school systems with a strong content area education but with little or no English were relegated to basic or remedial classes where they would have little hope of advancing to college level courses.

Dialogue 3

S: Like, my classes were too easy for me. And that's because I didn't take hard classes. I took band. Easy classes. Instead of taking more advanced classes. I guess. More priority was given to other students.

C: Then nobody, nobody really thought you could handle those higher classes?

S: They didn't pay attention. And like I never took math. So then when I did take one math, it was kind of hard. Because I had never taken it. (2nd Generation Female)

Mexican descent students were often ignored when it came time to place students in the advanced classes. Many students felt like they would be placed in advanced classes only after all other students had been considered. The participant in *Dialogue 3* felt she did not have the status needed to be in the more advanced classes. Other students did not understand the true significance of advanced coursework or what was required to become part of them. Overall, the Mexican descent student population felt, or were made to feel that the advanced classes were not for them. Some students recognized that the courses in which they were placed were too easy, but because of the lack of any effort to move them to more challenging ones, the students choose to remain there. The first quote in *Dialogue 4* is an example of this. Due to the lack of high expectations, she was able to progress without much effort. When these feelings are combined with the feelings of being excluded from class, Mexican descent students felt that they were not being prepared for college or a positive future.

Dialogue 4

S: It was easy to get by, you know. I can pretty much bull my way through the whole, just writing, making essay

questions. I did sentences. Just barely, just, you know, barely did it. And it was acceptable. I don't feel like I had any high expectations. So I didn't try. (3rd Generation Female)

Other students didn't realize that the curriculum was too easy until they had graduated and moved on. *Dialogue 5* demonstrates the frustrations felt by one of the participants when he discovered how unprepared he was for college. He had taken, and passed with good grades, courses that he believed would prepare him to enter his chosen field at college. Instead, he was placed in low-level courses, which significantly extended the time it was taking him to graduate from college. Dialogue 5

S: I was in like Algebra and geometry and all that stuff. I got good grades. But by the time I got here to college, they put me back in like the first math class. I had to go through all the math all over again. Started me out in low English. Had to do all these prerequisites. You know what I mean. I would like to just, if I was a high school student, just come straight into college. Just taking the classes that you need. Not take all of these prerequisites. (3rd Generation Male)

Low-Level Academic and Vocational Tracking

Another format taken by schools that provides the perception of assuming Mexican descent students are not capable of high intellectual work is through the tracking of Mexican descent students into low academic and vocational programs. These programs included ESL, special education, remedial, and vocational training. Many times this occurred

without the notification or approval by the students or their families. While filling a true need within the school system, many of these programs were perceived as where Mexican descent students *should* be placed to limit their impact on the rest of the school population. The result was perceived as detrimental to the progress of these students.

The participants in *Dialogue 6* relate their experiences in regard to these placements. The first notes that special education became the program where many of the "Mejicanos," or more recent immigrants, would be placed. As discussed earlier, from the students' perspective the lack of English language was interpreted as being a lack of knowledge; therefore special education was the ideal place for them. Dialogue 6

S: I think most of the Mejicanos were like in special education classes. And ESL classes. They were placed in those courses. (3rd Generation Male)

S: After they got out of ESL, stuck in more programs, like for the ESL students. Like the American History class. It was in English and in Spanish. And they got in classes the same way. With someone that speaks Spanish there that can help them. So they, they were like getting really lazy. Not doing any homework pretty much. Because they were like, in Spanish and in English, it was kind of easy. (1st Generation Female)

If ESL or bilingual programs were available, they often were viewed in a similar light: the students in them were not challenged. The quotes in *Dialogue 6*, demonstrate that these classes were perceived by some of the participants as essentially an academic "crutch"

for the students. Instead of challenging them, they were given little or no homework. They were not being encouraged to learn English. They were allowed to be “lazy” without any efforts to push them to higher levels.

Vocational programs were the final program type that appeared consistently. They can and do play a valuable role in the education of Mexican descent students but , do become an issue when school structures and organizations make assumptions about the potential of such students and place them in vocational programs because further education is not possible (*see Dialogue 7*).

Dialogue 7

S: And I, I went to him (counselor) one time to change my schedule. Because he wanted me to take woodshop instead of typing. And I took typing instead of woodshop. Because I build things, like with my dad and stuff. Help him out. But I know typing would have helped me out a lot more. Why I needed it. Computers and everything. (3rd Generation Male)

School Environment

The overall environment of a school can have a major impact. Schools which develop the structures and programs needed to assist Mexican descent students in becoming members of the school community are likely to have higher ratios of graduates (Nesman, Worthington, Gomez, & Lee, 2000). The programs and structures that were perceived to be helpful to the participants came in many different and distinct formats, as will be seen below. Overall, the most important factor for the participants was a feeling of being accepted for who they were. The participant in *Dialogue 8* indicated that one of his schools, while perhaps not academically the best, was open to him and his friends. Being a minority at the school was

not seen as a negative.

Dialogue 8

C: And how accepted did you feel at the school by the teachers?

S: I felt very accepted. I had a black teacher for health. And I just loved that class. I just never really had been exposed to having so many teachers who were minorities. You didn't feel like a minority at all there. It is kind of like stepping into the future just for an instant. Where everybody is accepted. Nobody really looked down upon you because you were a minority. And I kind of realized that. Because, you could tell that they were lacking funds for certain things. But, I really felt accepted at the high school. (3rd Generation Male)

Support Classes

Support classes were a contribution to creating a more positive school environment. These support classes included ESL classes to help those who had recently emigrated from Mexico, academic support classes that advanced students' academic achievement, and classes that helped prepare students for their futures. Once again, it should be noted that these same types of classes were often perceived as marginalizing Mexican descent students, inferring that how programs were perceived had an impact on academic growth.

ESL

The first area of support, ESL classes, was very important for First Generation immigrants. They contributed to the positive environment in two related ways, English language and peer support group development. As noted by the participant in *Dialogue 9*, ESL classes were one of the few places in the school

where recent immigrants felt they were fully functional, where they felt comfortable using their limited English. Consequently, these classes were a very important part of the school day.

Dialogue 9

C: How did you feel about the ESL class?

S: Oh, we loved that class.

Because it the only time we had opportunity to study. And to learn some language. And that way we could communicate.

And that was the time we could talk to the teacher. Or to ourselves. That was important. (1st Generation Female)

Certain ESL programs combined language needs with academic needs, providing additional support for content area classes. The participant in *Dialogue 10* noted that through his ESL courses he was introduced to concepts related to American history and social sciences. While these topics were not fully developed at grade level, they did provide language that was needed in other courses, as well as background information.

Dialogue 10

S: We basically learned about history and all of the subjects. That are in school and stuff. But we learned in a much more, I would say easy way. I mean, not hard stuff, you know. Because our English was still developing. But we learned like Republican. Civics and stuff. Republicans. Democrats. Stuff like that. Just little stuff like that. And just so we could build a lot of confidence for some other of our classes. (1st Generation Male)

ESL classes, as was noted earlier, can

also be used to isolate First Generation immigrants. Their positive aspects can be overcome by school needs to place what are viewed as difficult students into classes. Consequently, the value of ESL classes can be dependant upon students' perceptions of intent and purpose.

Academic Support

Schools that helped Mexican descent students progress provided additional academic support. The forms that this support took varied in accordance with the demonstrated needs of the students. These classes, similar to what was stated about the ESL classes, could be perceived as good or bad. If implemented in such a fashion as to isolate those of Mexican descent from other students, it marginalized them.

Select schools offered tutors to help students who were having troubles due to language needs. Other schools developed special programs focused on the needs of a particular student group. *Dialogue 11* documents how one school implemented a program that was aimed at Chicano students, providing them with classes that they could take together as a group, decreasing the need for students to choose between academic success and their friends.

Dialogue 11

S: And in school, they did this program for Chicanos. It was basically for Chicanos. Where they took classes together. It's basically like ESL classes. But it was all Chicanos in those classes. They could take speech all, all their classes together. So they could graduate. So I think that in my school they did a pretty good job of graduating Mexicans and Chicanos. Because all my friends graduated. And most of the Chicanos graduated from the

school. It was to keep them in school. For them to graduate. I think it was learning about Chicano History. But they would also learn about math and stuff like that. And they, they graduate lots of Chicanos. (1st Generation Male)

Other schools implemented classes that were directly linked to programs geared towards helping minority students graduate, such as Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA). Teachers actively involved in such programs would encourage students to participate and take more advanced classes. Other classes were developed that would introduce students to career alternative that required college education, providing them with the opportunity to explore possibilities.

A third way in which schools provided academic support was working with the students in personalizing their progression through the system. Two participants, in particular, had programs designed that helped them meet their goal of graduating. In the first case, the participant moved to a new school after ignoring potential problems at her former school. She found that she was at risk of not graduating on time. But, as she stated in *Dialogue 12*, the school worked with her by providing access to the courses needed for graduation.

Dialogue 12

S: There (at the new school), I actually had to work hard to graduate. They gave me the opportunity. They said, "If you want to graduate in one-year, we can give you to work to graduate next year." I was kind of behind in credits when I switched over districts and had to catch up. Crompton, in Crompton I only had so many credits when I switched

districts. They needed more. Required more. So, they gave me, you know, chances to graduate.

C: And what type of chances were they?

S: Night school classes. Homes study classes. (2nd Generation Female)

The second participant went in the opposite direction. She, too, changed districts, but found that she could graduate early. Rather than attempt to slow down her progress, the school encouraged her to complete early and move on to college.

Prepare for Future

One area that was common among the participants was that their schools had classes and/or programs that helped them consider their futures. Many of the participants took advanced placement or college preparation courses during their high school careers. While they were often part of a small Mexican descent population in such classes, they did receive credit towards their college degrees.

Another type of course that appeared in some schools was aimed at providing practical skills in preparing for the future. Several of these classes gave career assessments, introduced students to different types of careers, and gave simple training in skills needed, such as interviewing. The participant in *Dialogue 13* was involved in a senior English class with the explicit goals of preparing the students to write needed documents, including college application essays and scholarship requests. As she noted, this helped motivate her to apply for scholarships and college entrance because the essays were already completed.

Dialogue 13

S: And we had this English course. And it's for seniors. And they just help, help you do your résumé. And then an

essay for scholarships. And the university. And that kind of encouraged me. Because I had my essays done. (1st Generation Female)

In addition to classes that encouraged students' progression through school, several participants were involved in programs that contributed towards their planning for the future. Several of the schools attended by the participants, in partnership with local universities, were involved in pre-colligate programs attempting to encourage more minority students to complete their high school and attend college. The two participants in *Dialogue 14* speak of how these pre-colligate programs influenced their high school career by providing technical assistance in applying for college and financial aid, becoming aware of different programs, and providing contact persons to assist them in the future. All this was based on the assumption that high school would be completed.

Dialogue 14

S: One of the best things too that my school did in terms of getting is prepared for college was bringing in the pre-collegiate program from the university. It came by and we had the presentations and they gave us a lot of information. And they were like contact persons for college. So, they made it a lot easier. So, I think just the fact that they brought, that they allowed that into the school, it was the best thing (2nd Generation Male)

S: The pre-colligate program, which is basically for Hispanic students. And first generation college students. They kind of helped along the way.

C: And how did they do that?

S: They had summer programs to help you prep for college.

They helped you get your financial aid in. They helped you waive the applications for colleges. So you didn't have to pay for it. Because we were all poor students in there. And the also told us when we had the deadlines in for the applications. For the financial aid. For scholarships. And the numerous resources. (3rd Generation Female)

The other means that school had in preparing Mexican descent students for their future was vocational training. This was mentioned as one of the means used to marginalize Mexican descent students, yet these perceptions of marginalization were not universally held by the participants. Vocational training was accepted, and welcomed, when it was seen as opening potential careers, as opposed to being funneled into low-status employment areas. Several of the participants became involved in such programs. The two involved in *Dialogue 15* did not feel they were being relegated to stereotypical roles for Mexican descent people.

Dialogue 15

S: I mean, I went to career education center for half a day. For 9th and 10th grade.

C: So it's a vocational?

S: Yea. It's like, yea, I guess yea. I did engineering there.

C: What type of engineering?

S: It was just regular engineering. Regular. I took it for two years. And by the end of my 9th grade year, I had all of my science and math credits done. (3rd Generation Male)

S: But, I did the cosmetology. Cause I wanted to do it. You know, when something gets into my head, if I want to do it, I'll do it. Maybe I will reject it later on. But, you know, why should you reject a license that can help you in your way. Even for your family, you know. Cutting your family's hair. Which I do now. (1st Generation Female)

The first participant took part in an engineering program, even though the other Mexican descent students were enrolled in more traditional programs. The second participant chose to be trained vocationally as assurance that she would be able to assist her family financially, if needed. Neither of the two felt they were being forced into the programs; rather they were there because of their personal decisions.

Cultural Support

Many of the participants attended schools that provided cultural support through special classes. The participant in *Dialogue 11* spoke of the special program that had been developed in his school to assist Chicano students in graduating from high school. One aspect of this program was classes that taught Chicano history. Many of the schools with a large Hispanic population had developed similar classes. One participant attended several high schools, but was able to find Chicano or Mexican American History classes at the schools with large minority populations.

The value of Chicano History classes was very visible with Second and Third Generation participants who had lost the Spanish language, and who lacked a strong understanding of their heritage. The participant in *Dialogue 16* spoke of how these courses allowed them to better understand their history and culture, areas that were often neglected in

the mainstream courses. As a result, Mexican descent students became more aware of their heritage and became, "Stronger as a Chicano."

Dialogue 16

S: Oh, that. That was one of the best means of at the time when I was in high school. And that was a great class. I wish I had taken it a bit earlier in my high school career. It was a really good class. It taught all the things that you didn't learn in history class, or you know, geography. Or things of that nature. And it was just a really good class. That was the one thing that I didn't get in high school. Maybe it did make my identity feel stronger as a Chicano. That was that one class. Definitely. (3rd Generation Male)

Other participants did not have access to such course, but were able to receive cultural support from certain classes. One participant was at a school that offered an African American history class, which was attended by the majority of the Mexican descent students as the only opportunity to explore different histories and cultures. Often these were mainstream classes with teachers interested in making all of the students more aware of the diversity around them. The participant in *Dialogue 17* gave an example of such a class. He was in a literature class that read the works of authors from many parts of the world. Reading about Chicanos with a different history caused him to reflect upon and explore his family and cultural history.

Dialogue 17

S: The truth be told, Rudlofo Anaya's "Bless Me Ultima" doesn't really tell my story. But what it did is it told me, "Wow, this is a Chicano with a

completely different experience from my own." And opened my eyes to the fact that I have a very, very diverse community. And that seeing the multiple ways that my community is helped me to locate what we know about. We know about those from New Mexico. They've been here generations upon generations. And were here even before the Europeans got here. Since my father's not from New Mexico, I wonder what his history is and where he descends from. And that helped me to, that began my interest in my own genealogy and my own family history. Then it kind of fanned out to my cultural history. But reading the different kinds of literatures in that class really. It opened my eyes to how much every group had to offer that was being ignored, you know, in education. (2nd Generation Male)

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities were the single greatest school factor noted by the participants in helping them overcome being marginalized. Similar activities and events at the community level were also viewed as being one of the keys for progressing through school. The participant in *Dialogue 18* noted that extracurricular school activities kept him from becoming involved in gangs. He noted that some students would come to school because there was nothing else to do, but, because of not being involved in extracurricular activities, the streets became their after-school escape, which led to more serious problems.

Dialogue 18

C: Looking back on it now, what

would you say would be the biggest difference between you and your other friends that did graduate and the fifty percent that didn't? What did you guys have that they didn't?

S: Uh, maybe that support, I'd say.

C: Support?

S: In classes. And, I would say something after school.

Something to do after school....

C: So a lot of their problems were the street? The street life?

S: The street life. And they'd go to school. Because there was nothing to do in the morning.

Or something like that. Or hang around with their friends. (1st Generation Male)

School athletics.

The area of extracurricular activity that appeared repeatedly was involvement in school athletics. This covered participants from all generations, as well as both genders. Male participants played sports including baseball, soccer, basketball, and swimming. The female participants were involved in basketball, volleyball, track, tennis, and cheerleading. Combined, school athletics was viewed as being a major source of involvement at school.

It should be noted that recent immigrants were not always aware of the guidelines for participating in school athletics. School could have encouraged more participation by providing additional details in Spanish. Nonetheless, several of the first generation participants participated in school athletics, in addition to the majority of the second and third generation participants.

One of the major benefits of being in school athletics, as noted by the participants in *Dialogue 19*, was the opportunity to make new friends and have a common interest that crosses ethnic boundaries.

Dialogue 19

S: Oh, well I did sports And, and I guess and high school it would have been sports. I played soccer. Soccer being an international, worldwide sport, where you have excellent players from all kinds of cultural backgrounds. It's kind of, probably the least discriminatory sport in the world. So, just being here, playing soccer for my high school, goes around people from Mexico. People from South America. White people from here. All backgrounds. And we all got along. (2nd Generation Male)

S: I started liking cheerleading because my freshman year I didn't do anything at all. So I didn't have a lot of friends. I did, but not that many. The next year, when I started cheerleading and doing tennis, I met a lot of people in class that I didn't know before. And I just became friends with them. And they were involved in these after school activities. So I just helped them, when they asked me for help. (1st Generation Female)

The first participant was involved in soccer. He noted that it was an international sport in nature, allowing him to interact with students from many different backgrounds. The second participant, who mentioned having only one real friend her freshman year, became involved in school athletics during her sophomore year. Once again, this provided her with the opportunity to develop friendships, ones that extended beyond the initial athletic

organizations.

In addition to making new friends, school athletics provided the opportunity for Mexican descent students to demonstrate their abilities. Often, these students were intimidated in their classrooms due to a lack of English or perceived lack of status. School athletics provided a means for demonstrating ability to others, or as one participant stated:

I think sports is probably the most diverse. Where you felt like you had an even shot, I mean because the goal is based on talent, not race of any kind or intelligence of any kind. So, I think that way it's cool to play sports. Most of the Mexicans students, who got involved with the school, was through sports. And sports only. (3rd Generation Male)

The story of one participant documents the impact of being involved in school athletics. He spoke of playing baseball in Mexico, and then trying out for his high school team after immigrating. He felt his lack of English might cause some problems, but once he showed how well he could play, he was accepted on the team. Later, he was an integral component of a team that advanced in state competition, receiving All-State honors. He felt this helped others at the school accept him and make him feel welcome. When he was asked how being part of the team helped him. He answered:

How did that help me? It helped my confidence that I could do good in school. I mean, that was the big thing for me to tryout. And be accepted with that group. And when people liked me and stuff. (1st Generation Male)

The third lesson learned from his story was how becoming involved in sports provided

additional incentive to keep grades up at school. Many extracurricular activities required students to maintain a certain minimum grade-point average (GPA). If their GPA fell below the acceptable level, they became ineligible and could not take part in their activity. *Dialogue 20* documents how this participant, one who had been playing competitive baseball for many years, suddenly found himself ineligible to play. This caused him to stop and reevaluate what he was doing, and make the changes needed to become eligible once again.

Dialogue 20

C: And what happened that started making you think about the future?

S: It was just, 'cause incidents. Like, I started hanging out with my friends more. And not caring about school. And not even baseball. And it's like, and there was this time when I could not play baseball cause of my grades. And stuff like that. And so I went, "Oh. Wait a minute. What am I doing here?" And so that's where the turning point started. (1st Generation Male)

Clubs and student groups.

Clubs and student groups created a second set of extracurricular activities that helped encourage Mexican descent students to remain in school. The term "club" commonly refers to a group that was officially organized as a part of the school site. "Student groups" were similar, except for the organization not having official status at the school. In both cases, students were involved in the organization and direction of activities and events.

Many different types of clubs and student groups existed. Many of the participants were involved in performance type groups, such as choir, drama, and debate. Clubs based on academic interests, such as

Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA) and National Honor Society, were also very common. The third type of club or student group was based on common social or cultural interests, such as dance clubs and MECHA clubs, where one key component was to create a climate of support for each other. Similar to athletics, clubs and student groups provided the opportunity for the students to meet with other having similar interests, be involved in activities that kept them from the streets, and allowed them to feel like an accepted part of the school.

All but one of the participants took part in common clubs, particularly one sponsored by the foreign language or Spanish departments. These were the clubs that allowed them to speak to each other, as well as a few White students, in Spanish. They were able to bring food from their home countries to share with others. They were also able to participate in native musical groups, singing or dancing.

One characteristic that was quite common among second and third generation participants was the need to help organize and direct clubs that would better represent the needs of a particular type of Mexican descent student. These participants felt they were not fully accepted into regular school clubs and activities. They felt the incentive to organize groups and work towards creating a more accepting climate.

Dialogue 21 demonstrates these efforts. The first participant was involved in a student groups working towards the ultimate goal of creating a positive learning climate for all students. The ideal was in creating an open environment, encouraging students from many cultural backgrounds to share with others. As a result of such interactions, as seen with the second participant, students were able to talk with peers about common experiences.

Dialogue 21

S: The second half of my sophomore year we started a MECHA chapter out there. And

there were only twenty of us in the whole club. But that kind of gave us an opportunity to talk about the things we experienced. And that was a really healthy thing for us. (2nd Generation Male)

S: And then once I got to high school, I joined a bunch of activities like, we started a club. It's called United Cultures Club. And then I started that with the point-of-view of trying get people from the different ethnicities into that club and doing things. We had plays. We had barbeques. Things like that. (3rd Generation Male)

Two positive results were seen by many of the participants through their club participation, development of positive self-image and development of culturally appropriate activities. These two results were often related. Many of the participants spoke of how they became involved with clubs attempting to establish activities and programs of need to Mexican descent students. Some met with some resistance from the administration, but were able to overcome that and be part of programs that were successful, in their opinions.

One participant was involved in organizing a local chapter of MECHA, which the viewed as a political organization attempting to make changes. This led the group to make a march on the district administration building. They were joined by groups from other schools with a higher percentage of Mexican descent students, allowing this small group to feel involved at a larger level.

Another participant (see *Dialogue 22*) encountered an administrator who made it difficult for her and her group to organize an event that she felt was very culturally appropriate. The organization felt they needed

to have more exposure to topics such as drugs, gangs, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). By organizing themselves, Mexican descent students were able to present the desired forums. Upon completion, she expressed how it made all of the participants feel they had accomplished something, had become positive contributors to the school.

Dialogue 22

S: I started in July telling him (the principal) what "Up and Coming" was and what our agenda was. Or what we somewhat wanted to do for the next year. It took me up until about October to convince him that we could pull something off.... Because we had wanted to do 26 workshops on things such as career planning, HIV virus, sexually transmitted disease.... So he's like, "You're never going to pull this off. 26 workshops. We have thousand of students here. There's no way." So I wrote down his problems and discussed it with the group. We organized everything. And we presented solutions for all of his problems. And eventually he couldn't really say anything. So he said, "Okay, go ahead. Go with it." And we ended up having 26 workshops and Les Franklin of the Shaka Franklin Foundation came in and talked about his son's suicide. And just a lot of issues were presented that had never been discussed in the school before. After, it was such a good feeling because you had everybody involved. We assigned one person to each speaker and they had tasks to do for that speaker. At the end

of the day the newspaper came and took a picture of us all. And everybody felt so good. They're like, "Wow. I can't believe we pulled this off. This was great. I'm so glad that we did this." (2nd Generation Female)

Not all culturally appropriate activities were as radical as those mentioned above. Many times it was simple activities that made the Mexican descent students feel their culture was being accepted at the school. As previously mentioned, many of the participants took part in Spanish clubs organized by the foreign language departments. Many times, these clubs developed activities similar to *Cinco de Mayo* festivals which allowed Mexican descent students the opportunity to sing, dance, and share food from their culture.

At other times, activities took a slightly less traditional turn, which made them even more special for the participants. The two activities mentioned in *Dialogue 23* show how something simple can have a strong impact on students who often feel excluded. The first participant speaks of the surprise she felt when, during her senior year, the school sponsored a Mexican dance. First Generation Mexican students had often been ignored at that school, which meant the Mexican students who came to participate, were involved for the first time. *Dialogue 23*

S: They did have a Mexican dance. A real Mexican dance at my school, which I was really surprised at, my senior year. Because Banda is what was in. It's a type of Mexican dance. And it's what a lot of young people do. And so, they had a contest and everything. And that really got the Mexicans involved. Not the Chicanos, but the Mexicans that had been

pushed aside for such a long time. That got them involved. I think that was neat. (2nd Generation Female)

S: Only one time when I was in the high school. When I was a senior. They were going to have this celebration for *Cinco de Mayo*. And the teacher suggested to us, "What should we do to show them that you have pride in your culture?" So we suggested to do the *himno nacional* (national anthem). And *escorta*. To form a *escorta*,... the color bearers, yes. So we did that in front of the school in the theater. And I was so proud of doing that. Even after, the other students were saying, "I saw you". And I'd say, "Oh yes." I mean, I was really happy. (1st Generation Female)

The second participant was excited when a group of Mexican students were asked to participate in a school celebration of *Cinco de Mayo*. When asked what they wanted to do, the students came up with the idea of becoming a color guard for the Mexican flag during the playing of the Mexican national anthem. This provided the opportunity for the students to display their pride in Mexico, making them "really happy."

Conclusions

As can be seen in the perceptions of the participants, school programs and organizations can marginalize or provide strong support to Mexican descent students. The Prism Model developed by Thomas and Collier (1997, 2002; Collier, 1995) provides one framework for understanding this more clearly.

As mentioned earlier, there are four areas needing to be addressed in order for

Mexican descent students to reach their full potential: language development, academic development, cognitive development, and the sociocultural processes. All four need to be equally addressed and, when possible, provide development in both the native and English languages (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Collier, 1995a).

As can be seen through the eyes of the participants, secondary schools need to consider students' perceptions of their programs and structures in relation to the Prism Model. Providing programs due to government requirements or parent pressure are often perceived by students as reinforcing the negative stereotypes that already exist.

Language Development

Language issues appeared in regards to the perceived role of ESL classes and language requirements of mainstream curriculum. When schools developed language programs based on the concept that immigrant students were bringing language, knowledge, and different cultural understandings with them, immigrant students viewed their classes as positive portions of their day. When the classes were perceived as "holding tanks," language development possibilities lagged. School programs should focus on establishing quality programs that provide immigrant students with access to the language development needed in order to be academically successful.

Similar issues arose in how language was incorporated into the curriculum. Immigrant student participation, along with language development, was limited when the curriculum proceeded along traditional lines. Lecture and "read the chapter and answer the questions at the end" placed such students outside of their level of comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003). Curriculum centered on student interaction and discovery based activities assisted the immigrant students interact with their peers and their teachers, leading to more language acquisition

possibilities.

One final area that needs to be addressed is the development of the students' native language. Few of the participants were able to participate in courses that addressed their native language needs. Several were included in Spanish I and Spanish II classes as role models. In doing so, the programs neglected the particular needs of such students, which generally is the development of their reading and writing skills. This needs to be changed if we want the students to become fully bilingual/biliterate and reach their highest level of academic ability.

Academic and Cognitive Development

One area that appeared consistently throughout the study was the lowered expectations for Mexican Descent students. Due to English language abilities, many were placed in courses that did not meet their academic or cognitive needs. They were not challenged to expand their knowledge and understanding of the different content areas. Several believed they were ready for college only to find themselves enrolled in non-credit, remedial courses.

Schools need to explore ways to challenge all students. Successful programs often include coursework in the native language. Such coursework would provide the opportunity for immigrant students to proceed with their cognitive growth while adding English to their language repertoire.

Social and Cultural Processes

One key factor in Mexican descent student's lack of academic success is their feeling of being marginalized. Sociocultural processes at the school level provide opportunities to accentuate or overcome such perceptions. Extracurricular activities became one major outlet. All but one of the participants had engaged in such activities, which allowed them the opportunity to interact with their peers and demonstrate abilities that otherwise might not be seen. Many were involved in standard

activities such as athletics and music. Others were able to develop activities that met a perceived need such as a culture club or hip-hop music club.

Improving the sociocultural environment also requires schools to search for activities that meet the needs of all students, not just those who come from middleclass White, English-speaking families.

The Future

Mexican descent immigrant students make up a significant portion of the student population of schools spread across the country. Their numbers are growing and, even with the recent political efforts to limit their numbers, will continue to grow. Those directing the development of school programs need to consider these students. Many programs are used in secondary schools that have not studied their impact on such a population.

The next step is the creation and implementation of programs based on quality research. From the existing research, certain traits can be identified. (Collier, 1995b; Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2002; Gold, 2006; Lucas, Henze & Donato, 1990; McLeod, 1996). One example is a policy paper from the University of California's Linguistic Minority Research Institute (gold, 2006), which presented an overview of what schools should consider in regards to the education of linguistically diverse students.

Once such programs are developed and implemented, quality research needs to be conducted to document their efficacy. Such research should be conducted using strong statistical control measures. In addition, qualitative methodologies need to be used in order to examine what is occurring within these school settings. Combined, such research projects could then be used to improve the educational experiences of Latino immigrant students in schools across the country.

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