“WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?”: TEACHER AND PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON LATINO/A MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Diana Pitcher

A Thesis

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Committee:

Christopher Frey, Advisor
Margaret Zoller Booth
Alberto González
Christopher Frey, Advisor

This study takes a qualitative approach to address the central research question: How do teachers and parents make sense of Latino/a middle school students’ social interactions and their impact on their own perception of academic success? It is further guided by the following sub-questions: 1) How do parents and teachers see themselves as contributing to student/school success? 2) How do parents and teachers define success differently? Four frameworks are employed to assist in addressing the research questions, including Bourdieu’s (1986) social and cultural capital frameworks, Stanton-Salazar’s (1995, 1997, 2001) school-centered social capital model, and Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence theory. These frameworks help explain the gap in access to certain opportunities, the power of institutional agents and peer groups, as well as the ways in which dominant culture can utilize minority culture skills for its own benefit.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted in one small city in Northwest Ohio, USA to learn more about teacher and parent perspectives on Latino/a students’ interactions and successes in school. Interview participants included middle school teachers, and English and Spanish speaking parents.

Findings from this case study showed that, contrary to research discussed in the literature review, teachers work diligently to form individual relationships with their middle school students. Efforts are made to communicate and include parents in decisions regarding their children’s needs, and parents feel comfortable and respected by school staff. Recommendations and future research suggestions are provided in the discussion chapter to conclude the study.
To the underserved, the under-represented, and the voiceless.

May this work be a step in the right direction of recognizing and acting on the struggles faced by minority and immigrant parents and their families in the U.S.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that an achievement gap exists between minority students and their White peers in U.S. schools (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Often attributed to cultural deficiencies and belief systems that are incompatible with academic success, the issue usually comes down to unequal opportunities to learn (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). Minority students are most likely to attend schools that are poorly equipped, lie within extremely impoverished districts, lack necessary educational materials, and have teachers with less experience or with inadequate credentials (Hill & Torres, 2010; Conchas, 2001; Flores, 2007).

While minority students face challenges in education, Latino/a students face distinct barriers to academic success. Latino/a students make up the largest ethnic/ racial group in the U.S., and are the most segregated in terms of school enrollment (Hill & Torres, 2010). Those who are recent immigrants have higher achievement motivation and are generally more positive about the opportunities in store for them (Hill & Torres, 2010). However, these students are often faced with a language barrier, making it difficult to perform well early in their U.S. academic careers. Later generations of Latino youth perform more poorly than their first-generation Latino peers, “as they become more acculturated and as they face greater levels of racial discrimination” (Conchas, 2001, p. 478). Students face barriers at each generation, and the perceptions of these students by their schools and teachers only exacerbate their struggles.

Terminology

In the writing of this study, the term Latino/a is utilized when discussing the population in question. Recognizing the thoughts and arguments of Latin Americans themselves, the term Hispanic negative connotations, and many people choose to avoid the term “because they do not
like to be reminded of the colonial past” (González & Gándara, 2005, p. 394). González and Gándara (2005) continue their explanation:

Another reason for disliking the term ‘Hispanic’ has to do with the fact that by alluding to the old Spanish empire, it ignores the present colonial relations between the United States and Latin America and the subordinate position of people of Spanish-speaking origin in the United States (p. 394-395).

This term is utilized by the U.S. Census Bureau in its categorization of racial identity, and connotes a concept of uniformity and Whiteness, more associated with Spain than the cultural and racial diversity that defines the region of Latin America. As a result of research on the topic and a demonstration of solidarity with the population, Latino/a seemed the most fitting term for the purposes of the study.

While the selection of Latino/a as a term connotes a gender binary for those spoken about in the literature, it represents the most widely recognized term in the field. While not the most progressive term, such as Latinx used within the field of critical studies, Latino/a is most often utilized in the education field. Additionally, when speaking of populations that are not the White or dominant culture within the U.S., the term minority is used throughout the thesis to refer to these populations. While there are other options to address the populations discussed, such as minoritized or non-dominant, the selection of “minority” has been made to coincide with the term most frequently used within the field of educational research.

**Rationale for study**

Recognizing the documented achievement gap as well as the gap in the research on middle schools, the study was conducted to investigate both topics in order to contribute to both fields of research. Guided by the main research question, the study investigates how teachers and
parents make sense of Latino/a middle school students’ social interactions and the impact it has on their perception of academic success.

While the study focuses on students, I made the conscious decision to interview the main adult figures in their lives, teachers and parents. I believe it is important to hear from both parties about the observations, understandings, and expectations of the students in their care, especially in the differing contexts of the role of a teacher and the role of a parent. Looking further at the cultural differences between U.S. and Latin American ideals, I found it important to better understand the ways in which teacher and parent practices overlap or greatly differ from one another. Where studies utilizing teacher interview data are fairly commonplace, parent perspectives on education are less represented in the research. This is especially true of minority parents, including those that do not possess the skills to speak confidently in English. With this in mind, I wanted to include the voices of Latino/a parents, both English and Spanish speakers, to create a more well-rounded account of the ways that adults frame their students’ interactions and how these interactions may impact their impression of academic success.

Immigration policy and its impact on the Latino/a population has been an interest of mine since my undergraduate career, devoting my senior year to a thesis detailing the negative effects of U.S. immigration policies on Latino/a youth in the U.S. After graduating with my BA in Human Rights and a concentration in Latin American & Iberian studies, I spent the next two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in South Africa, focusing on education and community resources. It was in this country that I witnessed yet another achievement gap, primarily between students residing in urban environments and poor Black students in the far-reaching rural sectors of the country. This experience provided a first hand account of the detrimental effects of inequitable resource allocation on the academic prospects of rural youth. The experience stayed
with me well into my return to the U.S., as I began my studies toward my MA in Cross-Cultural & International Education. My academic focus in the program highlights Educational Development and Marginalized Populations, an emphasis that is relevant for the study and population at hand.

The study focuses on the Midwest at the middle school level, both of which are under-represented in the existing literature. Much of the research consulted in the literature review chapter was drawn from studies in states like California and Texas, and were conducted at the high school level in minority-dominant schools. The present study recognizes the lack of research at the middle school as a primary motivation, while also realizing the established Latino/a population in the Midwest that is not well accounted for in existing studies. The case provides an analysis of both areas of research, and serves as an effort to begin to bridge the gap in the academic research.

Much of the existing research on Latino/a student achievement and lacking Latino/a parent caring/ involvement is based upon stereotypes and behavior perceived through a White, middle class lens. In many of these instances, students are performing at a lower level than their peers and are disproportionately under-represented in higher education as a result of what is depicted as a failing and deficient approach to education. This study, however, demonstrates a different perspective. Teachers and parents illustrate a set of more unexplored options for this population: opportunity and choice. Through their testimony, participants describe their own support, leading to what they portray as a sense of openness and choice, a “sky’s the limit” approach to opportunity and higher education.
Organization of thesis

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter I: Introduction is a summary of the research and includes sections on terminology choice, rationale for the study, and an explanation of the organization of the thesis. Chapter II: Literature Review provides an in-depth investigation into existing research and findings related to Latino/a students. This chapter examines the factors that influence Latin American immigration to the U.S., through previous guest worker and immigration legislation as well as home country push factors. The chapter proceeds to discuss the perceptions held by various actors in the school: teachers, Latino/a students, and Latino/a parents. The middle school philosophy and its unique characteristics are highlighted, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of Bourdieu’s (1986) theories of social and cultural capital, Stanton-Salazar’s (1995, 1997, 2001) school-centric social capital model, and Derrick Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence theory.

Chapter III: Methodology describes the methods used for conducting qualitative case study research. It begins with a presentation of the research questions guiding the study and the distinctive features of a case study. The case setting is defined, followed by an explanation of the process by which participants were selected and recruited to the study. Ethical considerations are recognized and explained, and the chapter concludes with a description of the coding process and the analysis of data collected.

Chapter IV: Findings presents the findings from the data collection process. The findings are divided into six themes with supporting sub-themes. The first theme is “Bridging the gap: teacher caring in the classroom,” which discusses the ways in which teachers support their students and try to establish individual relationships in their classrooms. The second theme explores “Institutional agents in the school building,” focusing on the ways in which teachers
and peers serve as sources of support and knowledge of accepted or encouraged practices.

Theme three highlights “Adoption of dominant culture traits/ acculturation: gains and losses,” recognizing the importance of English language acquisition and dominant culture practices in order to fit in and succeed. The fourth theme examines “Latino cultural capital” and some of the ways that beliefs are recognized or valued by teachers. “Family impact on education” is the fifth theme, and descriptively explains parents’ perceptions of teachers and the ways in which they help their children to succeed. The final theme is “Challenges/ barriers” and identifies some common stereotypes that plague the Latino/a community, while additionally discussing factors that impact school performance, as well as struggles that Latino/a parents in particular face.

Chapter V: Discussion concludes the thesis with an analysis of findings. Theoretical frameworks by Bourdieu (1986), Stanton-Salazar (1995, 1997, 2001) and Bell (1980) are utilized to explain the findings and their relevance to the literature consulted in the context of the main research question. Following analysis, the chapter highlights recommendations at the case level, and suggestions for future research into the topic that would prove beneficial at the local and national levels.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews research on issues and findings related to Latinos/as in the U.S. and within the U.S. education system. Given immigrant populations by state, much of the research discussed has been drawn from studies conducted in California and Texas, where Latino/a dominant schools presented opportunities for case studies. The first part of the chapter focuses on the three major groups of interest in this study: Latino/a students, Latino/a parents, and teachers in U.S. schools. Each population is discussed in its own section, elaborating on perceptions of and by each group to better inform the relationships that impact academic achievement. The second half of the chapter examines Bourdieu’s (1986) conception of social and cultural capital, as well as Ricardo Stanton-Salazar’s (1995; 1997; 2001) school-oriented explanation of these forms of capital, and concludes with a discussion of Derrick Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence theory.

**Latino/a immigration to the U.S.**

While the Midwest as a region has historically attracted ethnically Mexican and Mexican-American migrants to settle in the region, this was not the term selected to define this group throughout the thesis. For this study in particular, Latino/a was more fitting in order to encompass the differences between participant parents, and Latino/a should not be seen as a substitute for Mexican-American. Latino/a as the central term to describe the participant population was selected as a participant-driven necessity, as parents self-identified under a variety of headings and identities. Their experiences and countries of origin are not monolithic, and this word choice seeks to support that diversity.

Immigration from Latin America to the U.S. is not a new phenomenon, but one that has come increasingly into the spotlight in recent decades. From the time of cession of northern
Mexico following the Mexican-American War, the place and status of Mexicans in the U.S. has had somewhat of a pendulum effect. At times they were welcomed and their labor recognized as vital to the sustenance of our own economies, and at others they were viewed as lesser through a lens of racial hierarchy and stereotype (Ngai, 2004). The use of the term Latino/a in this study recognizes the immigration of families and individuals from the Latin American region as a whole. In the Midwest, most Latino/a immigrants are of Mexican descent, therefore requiring the inclusion of specific information about Mexican immigration and policies most relevant to the population in this region.

Guest worker legislation such as the Bracero Program (1942-1964) recruited Mexican farm laborers to work on farms “in twenty-six states, the vast majority in California, Texas, and other southwestern states, and dominated crops such as cotton, citrus fruits, melons, lettuce, and truck vegetables” (Ngai, 2004, p. 139). The program involved some 4.6 million workers and was presented as an alternate form of support to the Allied forces during the Second World War. Due to the poor treatment of many workers by their employers, the Bracero Program created a growing class of undocumented immigrants. Workers that entered the U.S. with documents to work became undocumented following the desertion of their contracts due to employer mistreatment. What was intended as a program to curb undocumented immigration ultimately created larger numbers of undocumented immigrants in the long term.

Deserting a contract resulted in a bracero worker transforming into a “wetback,” a term that carried with it negative connotations. Where critics associated the term with all forms of “misery, disease, crime, and many other evils,” the establishment of “the ‘wetback’ as a dangerous and criminal social pathogen fed the general racial stereotype ‘Mexican’” (Ngai, p. 149). The effort at enforcement of undocumented workers began in 1954 with Operation
Wetback, “conceived and executed as though it was a military operation” (Ngai, p. 155). The operation resulted in tens of thousands of apprehensions and deportations, as well as the unlawful deportations of U.S. citizens, mistakenly swept up in raids and not given the opportunity to prove their citizenship.

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act, or the Immigration Act of 1965, ushered in a new era of quotas for the Western Hemisphere that had not existed under prior legislation. Where the region was previously exempt from imposed quotas under the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, the new Act gave the region as a whole an annual quota of 120,000 with no stipulations for particular countries. The policy changed again in 1976 when Congress imposed country quotas of 20,000 on the Western Hemisphere. Workers remained of great importance to the Southwest, even as new legal actions limited the available workforce for the region. The early 1960s saw 200,000 documented bracero workers as well as 35,000 legal admissions for permanent residents, so “the transfer of migration to ‘illegal’ form should have surprised no one” (Ngai, p. 261).

Championed by some as a fair and liberal approach to immigration, Hart-Celler “promoted both greater inclusions and greater exclusions” (Ngai, p. 263). Once again, through financial need on the part of Mexican workers and workforce need on the part of agricultural operations in the Southwest, the 1965 Act created a growing undocumented population in the U.S. The annual quota served to “recast Mexican migration as ‘illegal,’” and deportations of Mexicans from the U.S. grew at alarming rates in the years following Hart-Celler (Ngai, p. 261).

The number of deportations of undocumented Mexicans increased by 40 percent in 1968, to 151,000. The figure continued to rise: in 1976, when the 20,000 per country quota was imposed, the INS expelled 781,000 Mexicans from the United States. Meanwhile, the
total number of apprehensions for all others in the world, combined, remained below 100,000 per year (Ngai, p. 261).

What was intended to create more equal opportunity for immigrants to the U.S. resulted in an alarmingly unequal focus on Mexicans as a national group and the deportation of tens of thousands.

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) presented an opportunity for undocumented Mexicans to gain legal status by proving uninterrupted residence in the U.S. since 1982. Referred to by some as an amnesty program, the intention behind the Act was to limit the number of undocumented workers in the U.S. The IRCA imposed sanctions on employers who hired workers without proper documentation, and as Mexican workers gained legal status along with their documents, they were able to seek employment in other less labor-intensive sectors. The open positions in these manual jobs left vacancies, and those willing to work for the low pay represented a new wave of undocumented immigrants. Another attempt at restricting undocumented immigrant flow proved impossible due to employer reliance on cheap labor, and the numbers of Mexicans and other Latino/a workers in the U.S. once again swelled.

The 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was intended to quell undocumented immigration from Mexico to the U.S. by creating favorable economic conditions to provide Mexicans with job opportunities in their own country. However, the agreement has had the opposite effect. Instead of creating economic prosperity,

Peasant agriculture has been eviscerated by the arrival of agri-business and the lifting of restrictions on the sale of peasant land. Industrial employment has been eviscerated by the closure of hundreds of plants unable to compete with the transnationals under the new free-for-all trade regime (Portes, 2006, para. 3).
Faced with little opportunity on the home front, many Mexicans migrated north. As with other proposed solutions aimed at curbing undocumented immigration, this agreement only ended up exacerbating the problem: “Before NAFTA, undocumented Mexican immigration came mainly from four or five Mexican states and a limited number of mostly rural municipalities. Since NAFTA, migrants have originated in all Mexican states…” (Portes, 2006, para. 3). With a total of 31 states and one federal district, NAFTA caused a six-fold increase in migrant-sending states, quite the opposite of its intended goal.

More recently, due to unsafe home country conditions and bleak economic outlooks, many immigrants have left their homes in Latin America in search of a more promising future for their families in the U.S. The majority of Latino/a immigrants come from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These three Central American countries are recognized collectively as “the Northern Triangle,” one of the most dangerous regions in the world, with some of the highest murder rates.

In a report by the Pew Research Center, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) data points to the fact that many arrivals at the southern U.S. border “can be attributed to poverty and regional violence in three Central American countries” (Gonzalez-Barrera, Krogstad, & Lopez, 2014, para. 1). The statistics provide further specific evidence of the truly dangerous nature of these nations, and why individuals and their families seek to escape:

San Pedro Sula in Honduras is the world’s murder capital, with a homicide rate of 187 homicides per 100,000 in 2013 driven by a surge in gang and drug trafficking violence. For the entire country Honduras’s murder rate was 90 per 100,000 in 2012, the highest in the world. In 2011, El Salvador was not far behind at 70 (Gonzalez-Barrera et al., 2014, para. 5).
To provide comparable data, the homicide rate in the U.S for 2012 and 2011 was just 4.7 per 100,000, further demonstrating the level of uncontrolled violence in the region (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012).

Poor economies are an additional push factor; poor job prospects drive many Central Americans to the U.S. Data from the same report cites that “overall, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are among the poorest nations in Latin America with 30%, 26%, and 17% of their people living on less than $2 a day, according to the World Bank” (Gonzalez-Barrera et al., 2014, para. 6). These factors drive the need for resettlement in a safer and more economically prosperous country, which many hope to find in the U.S. The Latino/a population in the U.S. continues to grow at one of the fastest rates of all ethnic/racial groups, having increased “nearly ninefold, from 6.3 million [in 1960] then to 55.3 million by 2014” (Stepler & Brown, 2016, para. 4). With Latino/a/Hispanic student numbers growing at a rate higher than other races/ethnicities in the U.S., the achievement gap and the factors influencing it are of chief importance to understand if a remedy is to be reached (NCES, 2016).

**Latino/a immigration to the Midwest**

Many immigrants from Latin America settled in the South and Southwest region of the U.S. because of the availability of jobs in the agricultural sector. The states with the highest Latino/a population are located mainly in this region, including California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Florida, and Colorado, with more than 20% of their population identified as Latino/a (Stepler & Lopez, 2016). These states were considered the standard sites for Latinos/as in search of jobs, particularly in the area of agriculture.

Immigration to other destinations began to grow before midcentury and into the latter half of the twentieth century. “The Latina/o community of NW Ohio dates back to the 1940s and
followed a more dispersed pattern of settlement than in other midwestern cities” where migrants took part in the agricultural and industrial sectors “more so than in the rest of the Midwest” (González, Chávez, & Englebrecht, 2014, p. 53). From 1950 to 1970, American employers “aggressively recruited” Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans as laborers in the steel and auto industries located in the Midwest (McConnell, 2004, p. 33). At the same time, “corporate canneries had opened in the Midwest… and required more workers than the available labor supply in the area could supply” (McConnell, p. 33). Even with increasing demands mid-century, the greatest wave of Latinos/as would arrive in the 1990s. To put this into perspective, consider the following statistics:

Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population grew in all regions of the country. However, Midwestern states registered the highest rate of growth (81 percent), followed by the South (71.2 percent). By 2000, 8.9 percent of Latino families in the country resided in the Midwest, up from 7.7 percent in 1990 (Vásquez, 2010, para. 2).

The population growth of Latino/a immigrants in the Midwest can be explained by job opportunities in agriculture, food processing, and assembly line production, which opened doors for workers with few years of formal education searching for manual labor jobs in the U.S. Toledo, the main city in the Northwest region of Ohio, “historically has been at the heart of manufacturing and agriculture in the Midwest,” serving as a central point of interest for Latino/a (im)migrant workers (González, Chávez, & Englebrecht, 2014, p. 52).

During the same time that the increase in immigrants was taking place, job opportunity in the meatpacking industry expanded substantially in the rural Midwest as evidence of the industry’s rural industrialization strategy (McConnell, 2004). The opening of new meatpacking plants was one opportunity within the food processing industry that encouraged Latinos/as to
migrate to the region. Immigrant workers were generally not unionized and more willing to lower wages than other workers; this made especially appealing to employers. Authors Millard and Chapa (2004) explain the pull factors that characterized many new residents:

Generally, the rural Midwest has two paths leading Latinos to settle there. Some Latinos arrive first as migrant farmworkers, returning annually for many years and eventually settling in the region, often to work in food processing… Others, with no previous Midwestern experience, move directly to a Midwestern town to work in a specific plant, whether in light industry or food processing. Newcomers of the first type are often Mexican Americans, whereas those of the second type, in many cases, arrive directly from Mexico (p. 10).

The Midwest and its corresponding industries provide benefits that other regions of the country cannot, from cost of living to hourly wage. As a region, the Midwest is more affordable than the Southwest. McConnell (2004) cites that “In general, the cost of living in nonmetropolitan areas is approximately 16 percent less than that in urban areas” (p. 37). Additionally, factory jobs in the Midwest were more appealing than agricultural work. “Factories for butchering and packaging meat offer year-round jobs that pay at least $6 an hour – much higher and more stable earning than those available to most seasonal workers” (Chapa, Saenz, Rochín, & McConnell, 2004, p. 49). These jobs represented greater stability, higher pay than other industries, and are located in less costly areas, all serving as rationale for the increased Latino/a workforce that followed its development.

Newly settled Latinos/as in the 1990s constituted a new population of residents in the Midwest. As discussed above, this population had either previously migrated seasonally in search of work, or had come directly from Mexico. In both cases, the consequences of a
transitory lifestyle and individual background conditions impacted the process of settling down in a new place. Authors Millard, Jefferds, Crane, and Flores (2004) explain the factors that set them apart from other more established Latinos/as in the region:

Newly settled Latinos tend to be economically precarious, most speak very little English (even if they have lived for years in the United States), their children generally are not doing well in school, and many live in substandard rental housing. They are relatively isolated as a group and socially separated from Anglos by the language barrier (p. 86).

Due to parents’ own low levels of formal education, working in these types of industries becomes a necessity to support the family financially. Given the living conditions necessitated by generally low rates of pay, the long hours and physically taxing nature of the work, and the language barrier that separates the population, these families and their children are a world apart from dominant society and culture.

**Latino/a students in U.S. schools**

In areas outside the rural industries of the Midwest, Latino/a students typically attend school in urban environments where their parents are most able to find jobs. In these environments, students are most likely to attend minority-dominant schools that are poorly equipped, located in the most impoverished districts, and lack instructional materials and highly qualified teachers (Hill & Torres, 2010; Conchas, 2001). In addition, students are not afforded access to Advanced Placement (AP) and other college prep classes like their peers attending more affluent schools. In this instance, Latino/a and other minority students are often diverted away from the college preparatory track, and more encouraged to pursue classes in a vocational field.
In minority-dominant schools and districts, teachers often view and treat their Latino/a students as deficient. Tracking “usually begins in the early grades when students, especially those whose English verbal skills are not as developed as their mainstream peers,” are placed in the slower groups to ‘help remediate their deficiencies,’” a decision that sets them back in successive years of schooling and ultimately results in lower performance overall (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 97). The disparities between White, Black, and Latino/a students begin as early as the first grade, when reading instruction begins. Those that come to school with some reading background, often from homes that encourage and actively support this practice and/or have had the privilege of attending strong preschool programs, will remain in more advanced positions throughout their academic careers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). The students placed in lower level reading groups are often confined to these groups, as “the boundaries between reading groups formed early in the first grade often become insurmountable barriers to advancement among reading groups thereafter” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 91). As students advance upward through elementary school and into middle and high school, their tracked route and general level classes often close them off from accessing more challenging prerequisites for college entry.

Complicit in the tracking scheme are teacher perceptions (and sometimes prejudices) of minority students, particularly on Latino/a students for the purpose of this study. A primary reason for these views of minority culture students compared to dominant culture White students is the differing cultures in which they were brought up. The teaching profession in the U.S. is characterized as White and middle-class, thereby determining the expected standards and behaviors that coincide with this dominant culture (this will also serve as evidence for the disconnect between teachers/administrators and Latino/a parents). It is this mindset that drives
the perception that Latino/a students do not care about school, and have little respect for the authority figures that teachers represent (Valenzuela, 1999). With tracking and teacher perceptions at least partially responsible for lower student performance, overall expectations for students are lower as well. With lowered expectations come fewer opportunities and less choice when it comes to class selection, higher education, and job choice/ opportunity later on in life.

While at school, students depend on their teachers for support, guidance, approval, and care in their academic and personal endeavors. When one or more of these components is lacking, students may lose faith in their own ability to succeed, as shown in the following quote: “The sons and daughters of the poor realize that their access to high-paying jobs is limited. As a result, they withdraw from academic pursuits” (Mehan et al., p. 153). With a lack of perceived options from a guiding adult figure, academic efforts may seem futile when higher education and job security seem out of reach. But what is most often felt to be lacking is a sense of care from their teachers.

Research suggests that many Latino/a students feel a lack of care on the part of their teachers. In the schools that they often attend (urban, minority-dominant, under-resourced, less qualified teachers), teachers are tasked with “massively long class rosters… insufficient numbers of desks, books, teaching materials and space” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 67). These circumstances lead to high levels of stress on teachers, which in turn result in students feeling neglected and unfairly treated as burdensome to their teachers. Overworked teachers who see few positive outcomes in their classes can be overcome with frustration, causing them to lash out in inappropriate ways as seen in the following quote from a teacher in Angela Valenzuela’s three year ethnographic study set in a Latino/a-dominant inner city high school in Houston: “The main problem with these kids is their attitude. They’re immature and they challenge authority. Look at
them, they’re not going anywhere. I can tell you right now, a full quarter of these students will drop out of school come May” (1999, p. 64). These types of denigrating comments perhaps reinforce the actions that the teacher points out to further isolate the two factions.

At times, students also feel a difference in treatment from their teachers based on race. Buriel’s 1983 study conducted in a southern California school district found that, after controlling for socioeconomic status, achievement, and English proficiency, “Mexican-American children received less teacher affirmation following correct answers than their Anglo-American classmates” (p. 894). Drawn from a more recent qualitative study, a Latino immigrant student Ricardo describes his experience in the Graphics Academy and AP classes:

My teacher…goes up to [an] Asian student, looks at his work and says, ‘You could do better.’ With me, however, he simply says… ‘It’s all right.’ But he never says I can do better, right? He is like telling me, for me [as a Mexican], it is all right. Like if I cannot do better than that, that is the best I can do. And I do not like that (Conchas, 2001, p. 486).

In these instances, students feel an element of racial bias in their interactions with teachers and the expectations (or lack thereof) that they anticipate from them. The findings in these studies represent actions that may have further implications than just lack of praise on an assignment.

**Middle school philosophy**

Academic studies consulted for this review have been drawn mainly from high schools in the U.S. due to the lack of scholarly writing about Latino/a students in the middle school setting. Considering this lack of research on the topic, it is important to understand the ways in which middle school is distinctly different from its predecessor elementary school, and its successor high school.
The middle school structure began in the early 1960s in response to the push for junior high schools in the 1940s. The concept of junior high schools was presented as “specialized schools for students in Grades 7-9 [which] would better prepare young adolescents for high school by exposing them to a high school-like environment without the trauma of placing them in the same building as older teenagers” (Bedard & Do, 2005, p. 660). Middle school supporters argued that sixth grade students would gain from being separated from elementary school students; these supporters “believed that the social, psychological, and academic needs of young adolescents are distinct from young children and older youth” (Bedard & Do, p. 660). It was out of this argument that the middle school was born, paying particular attention to the needs of 10- to 15-year-olds.

According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA), an education for adolescents must adhere four main principles: the education must be “developmentally responsive; challenging; empowering; and equitable” (NMSA, 2010, p. 13). In order to meet these principles, the NMSA outlines 16 characteristics divided into three sections, all of which are necessary in supporting and empowering middle school students. The sections are centered on the topics of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; and Culture and Community. Some of the more salient tenets for the purpose of this study include the valuing of students, the varying of teaching approaches, the structuring of organizations necessary to “foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships,” an inclusive environment that provides guidance from an adult advocate, and family involvement in children’s education (NMSA, p. 14). These characteristics recognize the potential that actors have at each stage of the educational process, from teachers and students in the school building to parents and family members at home.
The middle school model is driven by the development of a unique structure of the school day, as well as a more individualized approach to serving students. One of the ways that middle schools ensure a personalized approach is through the construction of student teams; a group of teachers serve as instructors for a set group of students, giving them the opportunity to focus on this particular group and its needs. “By creating teams, staff have daily interactions with a subset of the student population, making the middle school experience less intimidating and creating a stronger sense of belonging” (Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2004, p. 6). At a time of great change and influence, students are able to develop friendships within their teams and feel more supported by their teachers.

While teaming provides a sense of support and confidence for students, the mindset of individualized success is perhaps strongest at the middle school level. Student teams allow teachers to better monitor their progress and struggles, but the general mindset at the middle school level involves a great deal of care on the part of teachers.

Students understand the degree to which adults in their schools are invested in them…

Staff members carefully track individual students’ progress and work collaboratively to make sure that each student is provided the additional services they need in order to be successful (Picucci et al., p. 8).

This level of schooling is distinct from elementary and high schools in that special attention is paid to the sense of belonging felt by students, as well as the individualized approach to their journey to success. One might say that the time spent in middle school helps to build the relationships and gain the tools that lead to future academic success, with teachers and peers alike.
The middle school level is also a time when students’ ethnic and racial identity (ERI) takes form. During this time, an individual’s affirmation, or positive feelings toward their ethnic-racial group increases, particularly for Latino/a and African American youth (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For White students this is not often the case, especially when they are members of the dominant culture (Zoller Booth, Frey, Deom, & Gerard, 2015). The process of identity development of minority students varies based on the type of school that they attend, as explained by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014):

…among Latino adolescents, ethnic identity affirmation may increase significantly from middle to late adolescence for youth attending predominantly White schools, but that ethnic identity affirmation may not change over time among youth attending schools where the majority of students are from ethnic minority groups (p. 31).

This identity may also take on a different form for the sheer number of racial and ethnic identities that the title “Latino/a” takes on: “The heading of ‘Latino’ includes indigenous Mexicans, Black Dominicans, and Italian-descent Argentinians, for example” (Umaña-Taylor et al., p. 33). Latino/a is a simplified manner of identification for the purposes of data collection in the U.S. However, it also serves as a way to exclude or overlook certain groups, especially ethnic groups. It is at this time that students may begin to refer to themselves as Mexican American, or Oaxacan, or Quiché, especially if they attend schools that are predominantly White in their racial composition.

**General perceptions of Latino/a community**

The Latino population is often perceived as lacking the skills to succeed in an academic setting. Where teachers perceive students to be lacking in the adequate drive and preparedness to perform in school, as discussed above, Latino/a parents are seen in much the same light. Perhaps
the most common claim about parents is their lack of involvement in their child(ren)’s education. This claim is made against Black, Latino/a, and poor White parents, but in the case of Latinos/as in particular, it is said that their culture values education less than others (Mehan et al., 1996; López, 2001).

The White, middle-class characteristics discussed above are equally applicable to the claims made against Latino/a parents. It is very often cited that these parents are unenthusiastic, incompetent, and generally uninvolved and uncaring regarding their children’s education (Mehan et al., 1996; Ryan et al., 2010; Albarran & Conchas, 2016; Durand & Perez, 2013; De Gaetano, 2007; de la Piedra, Munter, & Girón, 2006, López, 2001). Involvement in the school “treats all parents as if they had the same needs or the same experiences as White, middle-class parents” (De Gaetano, 2007, p. 146). Teachers often possess a somewhat standard view of involvement, in which “parents spend the evening gathered around their children’s homework” (de la Piedra & Girón, 2006, p. 71). This concept is one envisioned through the same White and middle-class lens, relegating a standard based on practices of a particular race and social class. In engaging with this viewpoint, parents who don’t work standard 9-5 jobs (as a result of low levels of education and need to support their families) are immediately labeled as less caring and less mindful of their children’s education.

Where teachers expect a certain type of student and parental involvement, they often fail to recognize cultural differences on both accounts. Mehan and colleagues find that “parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students have been chided for failing to participate in the schools in numbers comparable to majority group parents” (1996, p. 160). For both students and parents alike, there is a discontinuity between their previous experience and the new environment in the U.S. Whereas parents’ perceived lack of involvement is often blamed for students’ poor
performance, Conchas suggests that “…school factors such as teachers’ low expectations and lack of cultural awareness, a curriculum that does not reflect the life experiences of minority youth, and the lack of institutional support systems, [are seen] as contributing to low academic performance” (2001, p. 476). As teachers and administrators stigmatize parents and children, it creates barriers to those that are indeed interested in playing the accepted and expected role of an “involved” parent.

Another judgment about Latino/a parents in particular is their resistance to taking the time and effort required to learn English proficiently. Some attribute it to resisting assimilation, suggesting that they have no intention of learning customs and fitting in with U.S. culture (Quirocho & Daoud, 2006). The concept of not learning English ties in with the perceived opposition to subscribe to the acceptable and recognized forms of involvement that Latino/a parents are said to lack. Taken together, these impressions establish Latino/a parents’ role as contrary to dominant U.S. culture overall as well as contributing to the failings of Latino/a students in regards to academic success.

**Latino/a parent perceptions of school**

Navigating the U.S. system of schooling is often perceived as a struggle by many Latino/a parents, especially those that are recent immigrants to the U.S. Having gone through the system themselves, dominant culture U.S. parents are more advantaged when it comes to understanding norms and expected behavior. But for many Latino/a parents, the dominant culture and its demands are often out of reach or beyond the scope of their cultural practices.

It is well documented that teachers often perceive Latino/a parents as unengaged based upon the White, middle-class, and Eurocentric lens of expected parent behavior in the U.S. (Hill & Torres, 2010; Durand & Perez, 2013; De Gaetano, 2007). However, Latino/a parents are
indeed involved, albeit not in the typically recognized fashion. The driving forces of parent involvement in Latino culture comes from home, beyond the walls of a classroom where U.S. teachers expect parents to demonstrate their presence and impact on their children’s academic lives. One such value is that of *educación*, a more comprehensive term than its English counterpart. This concept asserts, “moral, interpersonal, and academic goals are not separated, but intimately linked” (Durand & Perez, 2013, p. 60). Here, education for academics and education for moral growth are condensed into a single process, one that does not exclusively take place within a school, and involves parents in providing examples as role models for their children. Similar “culturally embedded values” include: “*ganas*, the drive and will to succeed; *empeños*, the dedication and commitment to the task or goal; and *estudios*, which is diligent study, effort, that will bring success” (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 105). With these examples, Latino/a parents’ involvement extends beyond the school itself, in helping to shape the type of people and students that their children become.

Culture plays a large role in Latino approaches to education. One particularly important aspect recognizes teachers as respected professionals in their field. In this sense, “many Latina/o parents, in particular foreign-born, have high respect for teachers and believe that teachers have more expertise teaching than they, as parents, do” (Albarran & Conchas, 2016, p. 114). This point is further illustrated in a qualitative interview conducted by Good, Masewicz and Vogel (2010): “In Mexico, teachers consider students as an extension of their own family and refer to them as *my* children… As parents, we trust their judgment; we believe what they tell us” (p. 330). Given this trust and confidence in the authority of teachers, parents do not question their practices; this lies in stark contrast to American parents, who will step in when and where they feel it necessary. Additionally, Latino/a parents “are often uncomfortable with the notion of
being ‘equal partners’ with teachers on the academic aspects of education” (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 100). They see their role as taking place in the home, and teachers’ in the school.

Involvement in the U.S. is most often depicted and understood as formal, where parents are physically present in the school and classroom. However, informal involvement is most relevant when discussing Latino/a parents. This type of action refers more to the “unspoken messages given to children about the importance of schooling” (De Gaetano, 2007, p. 149). Despite lack of knowledge or familiarity with school practices and expectations, Latino/a parents are involved by establishing educational practices in the home. In a qualitative study conducted by Durand and Perez (2013), participant Dana explains how she supports her young son with counting and reading: “Sometimes when we are climbing – we live on the 5th floor, so we have to take the stairs – we count the steps, like one by one… and I read to him a lot… we have games that we play that are with letters and numbers, so I think that helps him, too” (p. 63). Another mother explains how she checks her child’s backpack every day, reads with him, and helps him to recognize letters and numbers (Durand & Perez). These are just two instances of parents’ involvement outside of school, but represent a large faction of Latino/a parents who demonstrate their participation in the ways they feel most comfortable.

Some actions may be entirely separate from homework help. In a six-month qualitative investigation, Gerardo López spoke repeatedly with the Padilla family about their own involvement in their children’s academic lives. López asserts, “through a traditional [White/dominant culture] academic lens, the Padillas appeared to be largely ‘uninvolved’ in their children’s education” (2001, p. 422). The Padilla parents worked as migrant farmworkers, whose involvement was demonstrated through consejos, as discussed earlier. This advice showed their children the hard work their parents endured, and the involvement in this instance was teaching
their children a learned “appreciat[ion of] the value of their education through the medium of hard work” (López, p. 422). The academically thriving Padilla children gained a sense of awareness from their parents’ experience with little formal education through a “transmission of sociocultural values” (López, p. 428). This type of involvement from a migrant worker’s perspective shows a dramatically different, but nonetheless effective, form of support in the academic realm than teachers would typically recognize.

Even in instances when parents come to school to meet with teachers, many report feeling unwelcome and disrespected when they make the effort to demonstrate involvement in a way that is recognized by the dominant culture (Hill & Torres, 2010; Durand & Perez, 2013; De Gaetano, 2007). Parents’ own education plays a potential role in how they experience going to the school, as

…more affluent, educated parents did not question their membership and advocacy within the school and often felt more entitled to time with their children’s teachers and school administrators, while less educated, working-class families considered children’s school lives to be ‘a separate realm, and one in which [parents are] infrequent visitors’ (Durand & Perez, 2013, p. 67).

Based on factors such as class, level of education, and time in the U.S., different parents had different experiences with school interaction, where “low-income parents were hesitant to discuss or voice concerns regarding school-related issues because of feelings of insecurity and inferiority with school personnel and curricula and because of their own negative experiences with school” (Durand & Perez, p. 69). Often rooted in the issue of low English proficiency and the perception of parents as uncaring, low-income immigrant Latino/a parents are more likely to report these feelings of substandard treatment by teachers and administrators. As a result of
parents’ own education combined with years living in the U.S., Durand and Perez note, “parents’ voices tend to become stronger and more frequently utilized” when advocating and collaborating with teachers on behalf of their children (p. 70). This may also be a function of creating larger networks with other parents, as well as learning about and acculturating to the U.S. system of schooling.

Where teachers/schools see parents’ low English proficiency as evidence of dominant culture resistance, Latino/a parents feel frustrated and cut off as a result of their inability to speak the language. In a qualitative study highlighting costs to parents of not knowing English, Latino/a parents shared their thoughts on the impact that this had on their lives, especially in relation to their children’s schooling. One parent compares it to not having a limb: “…in the conditions that I encounter where I don’t know English, I really feel inadequate. It’s just like missing an arm, like swimming with only one hand” (Worthy, 2006, p. 140). Worthy further shares that many parents interviewed “lamented that they felt increasingly disconnected from school matters because they did not know English,” an interpretation very different from that referenced by some teachers about general parent neglect for dominant culture practices (p. 145). The author also makes note of the availability of free ESL classes, while simultaneously recognizing the distinct situations that immigrant parents face: “Long and unpredictable work hours, lack of reliable transport, and inconvenient class schedules and locations made it difficult to attend classes regularly. Top priorities were raising their children and making enough money to survive” (Worthy, p. 147). Presented with these facts, the obstacles faced by immigrant parents, perhaps new to the country and the culture, are quite different from the obstacles (and possessions, in the form of skills and intrinsic knowledge) that American parents face in their daily lives.
Theoretical frameworks

The concepts of social and cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu and Ricardo Stanton-Salazar are central in the explanation of student academic achievement. The study of both types of capital provides grounds for analysis regarding individual student performance and opportunity, as well as the impact that parent involvement may have on this same topic. The focus on social networks and cultural/ institutional understanding suggests that the achievement gap evident among Latino/a students shows room for potential improvement if the requisite changes are made. If networks are made more accessible to those minority students that may not arrive at school with the same embedded capital as their dominant culture peers, all students may have the chance to perform at a more equivalent level of success.

Social capital

Social capital, different from the tangible nature of human capital, is constructed and demonstrated through relationships and social networks. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, credited with the development of the concept, defines it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network” made up of relationships based on mutual interest or concern (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). This membership in the group “provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). The larger the network, and the more value the capital holds, the greater the potential opportunity for the group member. It should be noted that all individuals possess social capital, but not all capital is of equal value in a given field.

Similar to Bourdieu’s conception of the term, Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (1995) defines social capital in a more academic sense as “social relationships from which an individual is
potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly support that includes the delivery of knowledge-based resources, for example, guidance for college admission or job advancement” (p. 119). While Stanton-Salazar’s definition has an evident educational influence, the concept remains the same: benefits are gained by individuals from inclusion in particular social circles. Membership in more dominant groups often leads to greater opportunity and privilege, due to the connections and social standing of other members.

As members of the dominant culture, White middle- and upper-class citizens are those most endowed with social capital that is most greatly valued in U.S. society and the benefits that come with it. They hold higher status jobs, typically attend more privileged schools, and generally cast a wider net of potential sources of support. Research shows that “…middle-class parents capitalize on higher levels of the forms of social and cultural capital recognized and valued by schools in their interactions with children’s schools, positioning them to be more confident, vocal, and powerful in their involvement and their advocacy efforts” (Durand & Perez, 2013, p. 53). Power and ease of communication position these parents to be greater advocates for their children. Their higher levels of financial, social, and cultural capital allow “White, upper-SES, formally educated parents… to question teachers about their practices, ask for clarification, or advocate for certain issues” as a result (Durand & Perez, p. 68).

According to the conceptual definition, social capital is constructed and accessed through networks, most readily available to those members of the dominant culture and the dominant attitudes and behaviors that follow. Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2013) suggest “…the social networks accessible by working-class and poor families are less valuable than those of middle-class families for negotiating the particular institutional environment formed by the school” (p.
Those that possess this type of capital are thereby more empowered: they are looked upon more favorably in society and are provided with greater access to valued resources.

As a result of smaller networks and less overall opportunity, lower-class and minority populations usually find themselves outside the reach of the same type of valued social capital access that middle- and upper-classes enjoy. Often resigned to low-status jobs, these populations find themselves separated by occupation and residence from higher-status individuals. Lower rates of overall education confine lower class and minority populations to particular jobs, often located in urban areas. In the context of education, these students will often attend schools that are ill equipped to provide them with opportunities in preparation for higher education. This population is comparatively disempowered, and their lack of access to valued social capital will often result in cyclical lack of opportunity if not remedied by exterior forces.

While not as deemed valuable in the same way as dominant culture forms of capital, Latino/a social capital still functions to serve many of the needs of the population. Many immigrant families decide to settle in the same region or community as friends or family. Those who have a better understanding of the process, and have established some of their own connections since they arrived, provide assistance. “Once in the United States, Mexican immigrants tend to reside in dense ethnic communities where useful information about public resources and employment are widely exchanged by trusted peers in the social network” (Valdez, Padilla, & Lewis Valentine, 2013, p. 307). Where the social ties outside the ethnic community in which they live may be much more limited, the community ties serve to benefit them in ways that are most pressing, while also providing an environment of comfort and familiarity.

Institutional agents play an important role as gatekeepers to accessing social capital benefits. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) define these agents as “those individuals who
have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly or to negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities (such as information about school programs, academic tutoring and mentoring, college admission, and assistance with career decision making)” (p. 117). In the school setting teachers inhabit this role, holding the power and decision-making capacity to provide students with access to the connections they possess. However, teachers are more likely to support and advocate for students who adopt or adapt to the accepted norms and behaviors of the dominant culture of students. The more a student is able to exhibit these characteristics “(i.e., White, middle-class, male-centric discourse, with its stress on individualism) ... the greater the probability that teachers and school personnel will communicate high academic expectations, assign good grades, while providing academic support and genuine encouragement” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1073). Not fitting the mold can prove detrimental to students who show promise in less mainstream ways.

Even when teachers do not actively seek to single students out, the structures of the dominant culture intrinsically do so by not valuing the strengths that students demonstrate outside of the dominant culture norm. In turn, “since such methods and procedures do not function to highlight the intellectual resources and talents of low-status children, these children are often assessed as poor performers (i.e., students with low intellectual/academic ‘ability’)” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 18). These assessments often result in fewer offerings of institutional support for these low-status students.

Supportive ties with institutional agents represent an integral component of academic success in the educational system. Studies show that these ties lead to positive outcomes in the workforce based upon relationships and capital gained during adolescence. However, “when lack of access to institutional funds of knowledge is combined with perceptions of discrimination,
self-elimination is a likely result” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 118). Social capital is accessed through individual and network communication, but when there is a weak help-seeking orientation, the result is often further distancing oneself from the opportunities enjoyed by social capital beneficiaries. Low-status students, particularly Spanish-dominant Latino students are most “unlikely to report a desire for academic support or assistance from school personnel” (Stanton-Salazar, Chávez, & Tai, 2001, p. 71). The authors of this study point to what they term the “detrimental effects of lower social class and racial segregation on adult help-seeking and networking behavior” and how these divisive factors allow the same type of hierarchy to establish itself in the school setting as well (Stanton-Salazar et al., 2001, p. 53). This is especially the case in schools whose population is overwhelmingly composed of minority students, most notably located in urban centers across the country.

Returning to the ideal student that teachers most often advocate for, minority-dominant schools and students are not likely to possess the capital (social or otherwise) to perform these roles. “Simply put, low-status students embedded in conflict-producing or uncaring social relations in urban schools are the least likely to cope with academic and life distresses by building relationships with, and seeking help from, school personnel and academically-oriented peers” (Stanton-Salazar et al., 2001, p. 53). As adolescents, individuals are impacted by the treatment they receive from others as well as the evaluations made of them by adults and peers alike. In settings where they feel slighted and ostracized, students will internalize these perceptions, which will often present themselves negatively in terms of help-seeking practices and academic aspirations.

Social embeddedness is to be expected for dominant culture students, as this represents an overlay of their different networks and the opportunities that can be extracted from each. For
low-status students though, tapping into the benefits of different networks “requires mitigating processes (set into motion by the exceptional individual, by the community, by institutional agents, or by all parties working either collectively or independently),” presenting a host of challenges to those who may already be untrusting of or not feel welcome within the circles that they must access for a chance at upward mobility. Stanton-Salazar, Chávez, and Tai (2001) studied the help-seeking orientations of Latino and non-Latino high school students in an urban setting. The notion of help-seeking orientation focused on three measures: confidence in the support process, interpersonal openness, and desire for academic support. Their findings demonstrate key results within gender, English proficiency, and academic performance variables:

Boys, relative to girls, consistently reported lower confidence in the support process, less willingness to share personal problems with others (i.e., less openness), and less desire for personalized academic support from school personnel…

Immigrants with the lowest levels of English proficiency are quite unlikely to report a desire for academic support or assistance from school personnel…

Low achievers – arguably the most in need of academic help – appear least inclined or prepared to engage the human resources of the school (Stanton-Salazar et al., 2001, p. 71-72).

Where Latino students often fit into several of these noted variables results, this population is at considerably higher risk of not developing orientations most directly correlated with positive academic outcomes in the U.S. The authors do recommend ways to engage all students in activities that provide access to social capital within the school, in order to foster relations between students and institutional agents. These activities could come in the form of after-school
clubs or other extracurriculars like sports teams; all represent opportunities to foster bonds between teachers and other like-minded students.

While institutional agents are often exclusively thought of as teachers in the school setting, peers are also recognized as agents with their own variety of capital to be shared and accessed. In their ability to understand and empathize in ways that adults cannot, peers play a vital role in establishing a social support that has been shown to “exhibit the potential for developing psychological orientations that may promote supportive relations with middle-class institutional agents (e.g., teachers)” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005, p. 384). Middle school is a time where peer influence is especially crucial in regards to both classroom peers and personal friendships. With this in mind, peers and friends have the potential to either positively or negatively influence a particular individual’s inclination to consult adult institutional agents, whether in the form of relationships, respect, or help-seeking orientations.

In a study conducted by John Goodlad and colleagues, junior high and senior high school students were asked to choose from 12 possible answers in responding to the question “What is the one best thing about this school?” The results were similar at each level:

At both levels, ‘my friends’ was the top choice, averaging 37% in the junior highs and 34% in the senior highs. ‘Sports activities’ ranked second (15% and 12%, respectively), and ‘good student attitudes’ – another question designed to tap into peer relations – placed third (10% and 12%). These percentages add up to an overwhelming 62% average in the junior highs… (Goodlad, 2004, p. 77).

It is important to note how highly friends rank in this study, paying particular attention to statistics for the junior high schools. Additionally, sports rank in second place, suggesting that the camaraderie established on a school sports team is another important source of comfort and
belonging, especially in a country that values sports beginning when students are in school. This study, among others, reveals the significant role that peers play in the eyes of their friends.

These same peers also influence one another in relation to attitudes toward school and academic aspirations. Gallardo, Barrasa, and Guevara-Viejo (2016) showed “clear support for the link of positive peer relationships and academic achievement among adolescents,” suggesting that connection to peers roots students more firmly in the school environment (p. 1644). Having strong peer support translates to social embeddedness discussed earlier. Even if a student does not come with many of his or her own social capital networks, having friends that do deepens the social embeddedness of all involved. This embeddedness thereby “provide[s] the resources necessary to foster developmental gains and school achievement” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005, p. 410). Utilizing each other’s access and experiences, students’ own beliefs and practices can be transferred to and internalized by those in their friend group. Peers also have an impact on minority students’ accrued cultural capital.

**Cultural capital**

Cultural capital, also developed by Bourdieu, is similarly more symbolic than it is tangible in its initial form. This form of capital can be related to a national culture or understanding the cultural workings of an institution, and may be converted into more tangible gains as it is exercised. Bourdieu explains three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital represents the knowledge acquired over time as a result of living within a particular society or culture. Bourdieu suggests that it “implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation,” and that is most fittingly demonstrated as symbolic capital (1986, p. 85). As a result of its learned-through-living nature, it is “subject to hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised, or even invisible” (1986, p. 86). This is perhaps the most
taken for granted form of cultural capital, as it manifests itself in learned practices and
acceptable/valued behavior of a particular place. Objectified cultural capital is a more visual,
tangible form of capital, demonstrated through material possession and an appreciation of the
cultural value that the object contains. The final type of cultural capital is institutionalized, and
refers to an institution’s recognition of an individual’s cultural capital through academic
qualifications or professional experience. It “confers on its holder a conventional, constant,
legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” and establishes their adherence to and
understanding of the particular culture (Bourdieu, p. 88).

National culture capital is most relevant in the discussion of language use and
proficiency, in this instance English, and can be considered a type of embodied cultural capital.
Low English proficiency on the part of students hinders their performance in school, and
additionally restricts them from reaching out and forming valuable friendships with English
speaking peers. For parents, low or no English proficiency cuts them off from helping with
homework or reading practice in the target language at home, as well as contributing to a
potential sense of alienation when it comes to communicating with teachers or other school
personnel. Immigrants are faced with an additional obstacle to obtaining valuable U.S. cultural
capital in dealing with and understanding the environment and inner workings of schools. This
form of cultural capital is better understood as knowing which classes to take, when and how
often to meet with teachers, and extracurricular activities that may be available, all of which
ultimately leave the decision maker more in control of their academic trajectory.

Latino and other minority students most often live in urban areas where their parents are
most likely able to find jobs (Hill & Torres, 2010). As a result, they attend schools that are ill
equipped to provide them with opportunities in preparation for higher education. In rural/
small
city settings where minority students attend school with a large number of dominant culture peers, they may benefit from shared access to the social and cultural capital that their peers possess. However, in schools where they represent the dominant population, the lack of dominant cultural capital serves as a barrier in a similar instance to the lack of social capital. Different from not having social connections, not having the cultural capital to navigate the U.S. education system represents an equally damaging barrier to opportunities that lead to greater future access and success.

Where cultural capital refers to language proficiency and knowledge of institutional agencies, it also encompasses characteristics of the dominant culture. Whereas middle-class students grow up immersed in the culture and the school system, minority and/or immigrant students are not endowed with this same knowledge, or this same embodied cultural capital. It becomes the job of the minority student “to forge the necessary relationships with key agents in the school” (Conchas, 2001, p. 479). Not only must they forge relationships in instances where other students experience them naturally, but they also take on the task of what sociologist John Ogbu refers to as “the burden of acting White.” In Ogbu’s definition, this concept is one that emphasizes “the demand that they adopt certain ‘White’ attitudes and behaviors in White institutions or establishments” (Ogbu, 2004, p. 21). In that regard, “the acquisition and display of middle-class cultural capital by minority youths is crucial, since it is viewed as evidence of accommodation and conformity” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 120). It is this acculturation to the dominant culture that is integral for students as teachers find these individuals more favorable to support and mentor.

In his two-year investigative study, Gilberto Conchas tracks the experiences, progress, and achievement of Latino students at a minority-dominant high school in California. Baldwin
High School offers a range of classes from general studies through AP and occupationally focused Academies; Conchas interviewed Latino students at each level within the school. His findings corroborate the theories of Stanton-Salazar and colleagues in the realms of peer support, lower capital of minority students with exclusively minority student peers and friends, the power of teachers as institutional agents, and the desirability to mentor students who display dominant culture conformities to school practices.

Interviews with Latino students in Conchas’ study spanned the low-status general class up to the higher status Academy class. The opportunities they were presented with came from within their classrooms: from the access they were provided as a result of their academic performance and interactions with teachers and administrators. In general level classes, Latino students felt the pressing weight of racial stereotypes in defining the students with no background on them personally. “‘If you walk into a class that is majority African American and Latino, you know it’s bad, because they are lazy and dumb… It is like a pyramid, you know, the supreme of the supreme on top and the rest down the way’” says Rocío, a Salvadoran immigrant in response to racial stereotypes and program demographics at the school (Conchas, 2001, p. 486). Minority students are stigmatized as lesser (both less deserving and less willing) and this paints the impression that others have of them as well as the impression that they internalize of themselves.

Not all students internalize this stigma: some fight it in an attempt to create bonds between themselves and institutional agents in the form of school personnel. However, even extra effort does not always pay off. Jorge, an immigrant Mexican American student, feels that institutional agents do not value him the way they value other (higher status) students:
I don’t think they care because I have been filling out slips to go see my counselor. I sent like four from September and they still have not called me. Every time I go there, he’s at lunch or is with other students and during class he has no time for me (Conchas, 2001, p. 489).

The general level classes, as is the case with most general level classes at minority-dominant and White-dominant schools, consist mainly of tracked minority students. With little guidance or support from teachers, these students are expected to fend for themselves. In the case of Jorge, a general level student who is actively reaching out to his guidance counselor for the services that he specializes in, he is unable to lift himself above the general pool. While we are not told what Jorge has been trying to meet with his counselor about, the act of denying him the access he deserves as a student is a source of potential alienation from institutional agents in the future, and an internalized sense of lesser worth as a student and a person. Both examples are common in the case of minority students, and serve as a central cause for the recurring minority student achievement gap in our schools.

Programs that provide support in navigating institutional systems “teach aspects of the implicit culture of the classroom and the hidden curriculum of the school” (Mehan et al., 1996, p. 81). As explained by author Jean Anyon, the hidden curriculum refers to the differing curricular, pedagogical, and pupil evaluation practices [which] emphasize different cognitive and behavioral skills in each social setting and thus contribute to the development in the children of certain potential relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work (1980, p. 90).

While structures like tracking bolster the impact of the hidden curriculum, programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) seek to expose and dismantle it. The
program selects promising students to provide with additional supports to transition them “from low-track to academic-track status” (Mehan et al., 1996, p. 149). These efforts include strategies for note- and test-taking, as well as guidance from institutional agents on the processes of college and financial aid applications.

In addition to the support provided by adult institutional agents, students are assembled into a like-minded, motivated, and potentially racially-similar team of students that they might not otherwise have access to. These students establish a system of accountability and support that may not have existed before. Marta’s home and school life have different expectations of her: family members at home expect her to get married, and among her friends at school, she is expected to attend college. She “attributes much of her academic success to the girlfriends she has cultivated in AVID… ‘Everyone is really motivated to go to college. It really helps to be around others that want to go. It makes you want it more’” (Mehan et al., 1996, p. 151). Programs like AVID are powerful in their approach, and demonstrate that social and cultural capital can be gained and utilized at any level if provided the proper tools to succeed.

Interest-convergence theory

Recognizing the distinction in power and access between dominant and minority cultural populations, interest-convergence theory provides explanation for dominant culture behavior in light of minority culture concerns. In his writings on Brown v. Board of Education, Professor Derrick Bell posited the concept of interest-convergence in his analysis of the undertaking to address racial segregation in U.S. schools. Relating to the Brown decision, the principle that Bell devised asserts “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). He continues, “…the fourteenth amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective
racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites” (Bell, p. 523). In this evaluation, change will only be brought about if it does not drastically challenge the position and power of Whites in society.

The decision in *Brown* is seen by Bell as one must be understood taking into account the value of the decision to Whites in the U.S. at the time. In addition to those who were “concerned about the immorality of racial inequality,” he cautions the reader not to exclude the ideals of “those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation” (Bell, p. 524). In the interest of defending the ideals that we preached abroad, it was important for foreign relations to demonstrate just how important they were on our own soil as well, recognizing “the basic American principle that ‘all men are created equal’” (Bell, p. 524). Bell highlights an underlying agenda in the embrace of racial equality, emphasizing its value when it is of use to the White population, in this case the dominant culture. This display of control by one culture over another demonstrates a power hierarchy where the dominant culture influences recognition of the minority culture, at the behest of first finding value for its own benefit.

As the Latino/a population in the U.S. continues to grow, the need for appropriate communication and support in and out of the classroom becomes increasingly important. Bourdieu’s (1986) social and cultural capital theories demonstrate that while some forms of capital are more valued than others, each individual possesses capital that should be recognized and utilized. Stanton-Salazar (1995) highlights the particularities of social capital within the context of education, substantiating the power and access that dominant culture members hold in the realm of relationships and academic opportunities. Bell (1980) argues that minority demands are accepted when the dominant group sees it in its own interest to oblige. Power and cultural
hierarchy play determining roles in the realm of educational opportunities and attainment. While these statuses will always exist, it is necessary to acknowledge the strengths of minority cultures in order to work more collectively toward a goal of equity in education for all.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This case study explores the social interactions and perceived success of Latino/a middle school students through the eyes of their parents and teachers. Interviews were conducted to investigate the central research question: How do parents and teachers make sense of Latino/a middle school students’ social interactions and its impact on their perception of academic success? The guiding sub-questions are focused on the concept of success: 1) How do parents and teachers see themselves as contributing to student/school success? 2) How do parents and teachers define success differently?

The method

This investigation followed the design of a case study, which typically takes on a more descriptive and active approach than the observational approach that defines ethnography or other types of qualitative research. Creswell (2012) defines case study as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (p. 465). The nature of a bounded system controls the parameters of the case being explored, and allows for the investigation of multiple sources of information from within the boundaries assigned. Creswell and Poth (2018) cite Thomas (2015) when he argues, “Your case study is defined not so much by the methods that you are using to do the study, but the edges you put around the case” (p. 96).

The case study is unique in its approach in that it helps the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the case through collection of various types of data. These data may include interviews, observations/notes, scholarly reports, and relevant documents (Creswell, 2012). In this way, the case is studied and interpreted from sources outside participant interviews, thereby creating a more complete picture.
From a school perspective, studies written about middle school are greatly lacking in comparison to elementary and high school studies. This process allowed for more in-depth focus on the tenets of the middle school philosophy and what role teachers play in the lives of their Latino/a students. Hearing from teachers also produced greater insight into what takes place inside the school building and adds to the research on how middle school functions differently from other levels of schooling. While research attention is paid to parent voices, those of minority population parents are often overlooked. Immigrant parents in particular face distinctly different barriers that are unique to their experience, and the more their voices and stories are shared, the better we may understand how best to serve them and their children in the education field.

The case

Research for this case was conducted in a small city in northwest Ohio. Participants include parents and teachers of Latino/a middle school students. This case is set in the small city of “Nyack,” a pseudonym. The city’s racial makeup is roughly 85% White, 6% Black, 5.5% Hispanic/ Latino, 2% mixed race, and 1.5% Asian (City-Data.com). The city is home to a state university, which hosts domestic and international students. Data provided by the U.S. Census demonstrate that the Latino/a population, both foreign- and U.S.-born, is growing at the state and national levels. In 2000, Hispanic or Latino identification made up 12.5% of the U.S. population in 2000, and 16.3% in 2010. In the Midwest, it was recorded as 4.9% of the regional population in 2000, and 7.0% in 2010. In the state of Ohio, Hispanic or Latino residents made up 1.9% of the state population in 2000, and 3.1% in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). This information can be found below in Table 1.
Table 1. Latino/a population in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Latino/a population</th>
<th>% of national population</th>
<th>% of Midwestern population</th>
<th>% of Ohio population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011.

According to Ohio Department of Education rankings, Nyack is considered a suburban district, with 34% of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and 18% minority students. Of a total middle school student population of just under 700, 350 students are considered economically disadvantaged. Nyack Middle School enrolls 84 Latino/a students, based on information gathered during an October 2016 (fiscal year 2017) headcount procedure conducted by the state Department of Education, up from 65 in fiscal year 2016, and 52 in fiscal year 2015. This population continues to grow each year and based on these numbers, Latino/ Hispanic students constitute their own category as part of the state’s gap closing initiative.

Where Latino/a students are making up more of the student population each year, teachers do not match these demographics. NCES data from the 2011-2012 school year indicates that in the state of Ohio, 92.6% of teachers are White, 5% are Black, and less than 2% are Hispanic, suggesting that most minority students will not be taught by a teacher who looks like them (NCES, 2017). State data for this middle school indicates that it employs one Asian teacher, and otherwise comprises an entirely White staff (Ohio Department of Education). These data may reflect school or district reported statistics. Where one teacher in the study identified part of his heritage as Latino, no teachers at the school were identified as Latino/ Hispanic on the Department’s report. This may demonstrate a discrepancy in how teachers self-identify and how
schools or districts report their data, though it is difficult to tell how this particular data were obtained.

This case is distinct from those consulted in the literature review, as scholarly research at the middle school level is lacking when compared to elementary and high school studies. It is additionally more specific because it focuses on the experiences of Latino/a students in the Midwestern U.S., whereas other studies tend to focus on states and cities located in the South and Southwest where the Latino/a student population is much higher. Despite its various differences from the bulk of research about Latino/a students, it is valuable in its focus on a region that has seen an increase in the Latino/a population in recent decades (Millard & Chapa, 2004).

**Ethical considerations**

In studying human subjects, it is the researcher’s responsibility to recognize that their research has the potential to cause harm or discomforts to the participants. The researcher undertook measures to protect and inform participants, ensuring that potential risks were minimized for all involved. This type of sensitivity to participants is essential to the qualitative research process.

**Informed consent**

All parent and teacher participants read and signed an informed consent document prior to the start of their interview. The document provided a description of the study, explained its purpose, and highlighted the measures to ensure each participant’s anonymity was maintained throughout the course of the study and its subsequent write-up. Participants were given time to read the document and ask any questions they had before signing. Parent informed consent documents were available in both Spanish and English.
Confidentiality

To allow all participants to speak freely in their responses to interview questions, pseudonyms are used throughout the study where participants are directly quoted. The names selected were done so arbitrarily by the researcher, and contain no identifying information about the participants. The site location, including the town and the middle school studied, has also been provided with a pseudonym.

The recruitment process took place through the assistance of gatekeepers (discussed below), so a single person made the initial contact. By making recruitment more private than public, the researcher was able to reach out to potential participants who fit the role that she was seeking. Participants were also less likely to be identified as we were provided with a direct line of contact instead of through a widely broadcast call for participants. Interviews with participants were conducted in a one-on-one setting in a location of their choice, as yet another way to maintain confidentiality as well as comfort for the participant.

Participant selection

Participants in this study included parents of Latino/a students and their middle school teachers. In an effort to learn more about the perceptions of middle school students’ social interactions from an outside perspective, the most fitting approach was to consult the adults who spend the most time with the students in question. In selecting these two particular groups of participants, it was the researcher’s goal to provide a platform for voices that are often absent from much of the research in the field. A total of seven parents and nine teachers/administrators were interviewed. Table 2. on the following page provides a concise list of relevant participant data.
Table 2. Participant data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Self-identified race/ ethnicity/ heritage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Role (son or daughter in middle school)</th>
<th>Time teaching/ living in Nyack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4th year at middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>15 years in town, 1st at middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>8 years total, 4 at middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Panamanian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Parent (son)</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Parent (son)</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Parent (son)</td>
<td>4.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>9 or 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Parent (son)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Parent (son and daughter)</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>Peruvian</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Parent (son)</td>
<td>1 year 8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>27 years in area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Parent (daughter)</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both groups of participants were recruited using purposeful/purposive sampling as a starting point. This type of sampling makes a deliberate selection of participants, as they are most likely to “provide insight into the phenomenon being investigated due to their position, experience, and/or identity markers” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 96). In identifying parents and teachers as the main participants, it was useful to approach organizations where these individuals would be most easily accessed. Creswell (2012) describes the intentional nature of this type of sampling, and emphasizes the seeking out of sites where they would most likely be found. The initial use of purposeful sampling gave way to the incorporation of snowball sampling as the study progressed. In this type of sampling, the researcher makes use of participants’ own social circles, asking them to recommend other individuals to be sampled. In this way, the researcher utilizes participant connections to approach and recruit other participants that they may not otherwise have had access to.

**Gatekeepers: Individuals and organizations**

In hoping to recruit participants, the researcher recognized the need to draw from relevant organizations and individuals in positions of authority to serve as a liaison between the researcher and the desired participants. These individuals are referred to as gatekeepers, defined by Creswell (2012) as “an individual who has an official or unofficial role at the site, provides entrance to a site, helps researchers locate people, and assists in the identification of places to study” (p. 211). The use of a gatekeeper was useful in recruiting both parent and teacher participants, as the researcher was able to draw upon the relationships and the trust that individuals maintained with the gatekeepers, thereby being granted access to schedule interviews with them.
Parents decided the identification of their child as “Latino/a,” and their recruitment took place through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. For the recruitment of parents, the researcher was assisted first by a local Latino/a community interest group, whose director identified potential interview subjects and initiated contact between the two parties. The researcher serves as a tutor for this group, assisting students with homework on a weekly basis. It was this involvement with the community group that assisted the researcher in approaching the director to assist in the recruitment process. Additionally, the middle school principal offered his support in the recruitment of additional parents. Through collaboration on the writing and translation of an opt-in letter by the principal and the researcher (written in both English and Spanish to reach all potential participants), the principal utilized his status and interest in the study to reach out to parents of students at his school. As parents were interviewed, they offered to share information about the study with friends who fit the same criteria, thereby widening the pool of potential participants.

The recruitment of teacher participants was conducted in much the same manner. The researcher began by meeting with the district’s Director of Teaching and Learning as well as the Superintendent to explain the study and its purpose. When both individuals expressed interest and consent for the project, the researcher met with the middle school principal to explain the study and organize a strategy of recruitment for teachers. The principal gave his approval for the study to take place within the school, and openly encouraged teachers to take part in order to learn from the results of the study. At the conclusion of their interviews, some teachers offered to reach out to others in an attempt to expand the interview participants. In this way, gatekeepers at the top levels of management for each site initiated the process as gatekeepers, and individual
participants assisted in reaching out to others whose experience would add to the knowledge gained in compiling the study.

**Open-ended interviews**

Interviews are one of the cornerstones of qualitative research, and are often carried out in the form of open-ended questions. As opposed to close-ended questions that look for yes or no responses, open-ended questions encourage participants to draw from their experience and speak freely and at greater length, giving them a greater sense of power as they have a role in directing what and how much is shared. In addition to the open-ended nature of the interviews, they are also semi-structured in their approach. This means that while there is a general structure that the interview follows, there is provision to “offer researchers significant latitude to adjust course as needed” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 92). This type of interview style requires researchers to “be active listeners and co-participants in the process, as opposed to structured interviewers who simply ask a question, record the response, and move on to the next question regardless of the participant’s response” (Saldaña & Omasta, p. 92). In both the open-ended and semi-structured concepts of this study, researcher and participant played active roles in sharing and capturing information relevant to the case.

The crafting of interview questions went through several rounds of edits as my advisor and I collaborated to frame them in a way that invited personal reflection and elaboration. I tried to engage with all participants and ask them to explain as much as possible in order to take on more of a learning role than agreeing or disagreeing. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the participants to expand on their responses as much as they saw fit, drawing from their experiences and making it so that no answer was incorrect.
Interviews for this study lasted anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes, depending on how much the participant wanted to share. While some questions were similar, the questions asked to each group came from different scripts, prompting different recollections and experiences. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on which language participants felt most comfortable with, and questions for parents were written in both English and Spanish. All teacher interviews were conducted in English, and three of seven parent interviews were conducted in Spanish. Interview transcriptions were completed in both English and Spanish, and were transcribed within a week of the date that the interview took place. To ensure accuracy of translations, a native Spanish speaker, bilingual in English and Spanish, was consulted to verify the researcher’s own translation. Any errors in translation are recognized as the responsibility of the researcher.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and their transcription was the first step in the data analysis process. Each interview was transcribed within several days of when it was conducted, and the audio file deleted after the conclusion of the transcription. Interviews were read through several times before the initial round of coding began. Creswell (2012) characterizes the coding process as a way to break down and make sense of the data gathered in the interviews. The process involves narrowing rich text into codes and later into more descriptive themes in order to express central ideas to the study. Themes should be devised in a way that “…identify… codes that the participants discuss most frequently, are unique or surprising, have the most evidence to support them, or are those that you might expect to find when studying the phenomenon” (Creswell, p. 245).
The first round of coding was inductive, in order to identify common sentiments or repeated themes across interviews. Induction is a form of examination that is “open-ended… going into an inquiry to learn as you go, formulating answers as more information is compiled” (Saldaña & Omasta, p. 9). The process allowed for the creation of preliminary themes that were beginning to emerge. A second read-through of the interviews exposed concepts or ideas that were perhaps different from the early themes, but still noteworthy in their ideas. A third layer of coding took place next, this time with a deductive approach, this time “the conclusion [is] drawn after considering all the evidence or data” (Saldaña & Omasta, p. 9). This process sought out examples from the interviews that supported the social capital, cultural capital, and interest convergence theories guiding the study.

Finally, the codes were taken together and themes were drawn from them, using the formula explained above by Creswell. The frequency with which they were mentioned was taken into account, while also noticing stand-alone ideas as well as explanations that were supported by prior research or theoretical frames. The researcher ultimately created a total of six themes accompanied by one to three subthemes. Supportive data used in the findings chapter are presented in the form of verbatim quotations. For those interviews conducted in Spanish, the quotations is included in Spanish in italics, and followed by an English translation. All translations were completed by the researcher.

**Establishing credibility**

In order for a study to be valued for its merits, the researcher “compiles bits and pieces of evidence to formulate a ‘compelling whole’” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 256). The results of a study must be convincing to readers, ensuring that a thorough process was conducted throughout. To establish credibility “‘the weight of evidence should become persuasive’” (Creswell & Poth,
p. 256). It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine the guidelines for beginning and carrying out the study. In this sense, a researcher must be well versed in the existing literature, spend an adequate amount of time actively gathering data in the field, and an appropriate number of participants are consulted to have an adequate understanding of the research questions under review. This concept is referred to as data saturation, an instance when the researcher feels as if they are no longer learning anything new from their data collection. If they feel that notes and responses are beginning to repeat, it is necessary to consider whether enough data has been collected at this particular site (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The trustworthiness of a piece or study is determined based on the steps taken to demonstrate credibility of the work following the collection of data. To do so, it is important to enlist the feedback of outside sources and participants themselves through processes like peer review and triangulation. Guidance from peers and knowledgeable faculty represent a level of expertise provided to ensure accurate and detailed research and data collection (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Triangulation involves the consultation of multiple sources of data, of which peer review could be one. In this method, “the researcher makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell & Poth, p. 260). The review of multiple sources and perspectives provides for a more complete study.

To ensure their words were being represented honestly, the researcher consulted with participants when clarification was needed. In the event of an incomplete thought or an unclearly worded response, the participant was contacted and further explanation was provided. This technique allows participants to take on a more active role in the research process and verifies that their words and experiences are exhibited in a way that best reflects the individual. Additionally, a native speaking Spanish peer was consulted to assist in the process of
transcription, to assist the researcher who speaks Spanish as a second language, but does not have native speaker status. These consultations allowed the researcher a greater sense of confidence in the thoughts being expressed by interview participants.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The findings in this chapter are divided into six themes and supporting sub-themes for each, as a way to organize and highlight the most salient points discussed by study participants. The first theme is Bridging the gap: Teacher caring in the classroom and includes sub-themes entitled: Being a cheerleader, Let’s talk about you, and I’m not sure how to talk about you. The second main theme, Family impact on education, includes an important recognition of parents’ Respect for teachers/ perceptions of their role, and Hopes and definitions of success. Theme three is Institutional agents in the school building, and highlights the concepts of the middle school Teaming ideology, and Peer influence. The fourth theme is Latino cultural capital, which comprises discussions of Spanish as advantageous for English speakers at school, as well as Cultural practices/ customs recognized. Theme five is Adoption of dominant culture traits/ acculturation: gains and losses. This theme discusses English as a need to fit in/ succeed, as well as Cultural loss. The final theme is Challenges/ barriers. The corresponding sub-themes acknowledge Outside factors’ impact on school, Empathy/ understanding parent struggles, and Lack of multicultural sensitivity. Guided by open-ended questions, responses from parents and teachers were used to address the central research question: how do parents and teachers conceptualize Latino/a middle school students’ social interactions and its impact on their own perception of academic success?

The six main themes are organized in a way that allows them to build off one another. Beginning with an explanation of the ways in which teachers describe their caring behaviors in class, this section is followed by examples of ways in which parents describe their actions and involvement on the home front in relation to their children’s academics. Returning once again to the school setting, a focus on institutional agents demonstrates the power and influence of
connections and valued capital on the part of adults and students alike. A discussion of the most recognized forms of Latino cultural capital is followed closely by the traits most valued in the dominant culture here in the U.S., combined with the process of acculturation into dominant society. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of challenges and barriers that exist despite the positive ways in which teachers and parents work together and individually to support student academic success, leading in to the final chapter discussing recommendations and applicable future research.

**Bridging the gap: Teacher caring in the classroom**

During the day, teachers become some of the most important adults in a student’s life. In order to feel motivated in their academic endeavors, it is important that students feel supported by their teachers. As discussed earlier in the literature review, it was feeling cared for that drove students to work hard, while not feeling cared for caused them to question the need to perform well at all, especially in the face of racial stereotypes. While many teachers in this study described their actions as those that they would take regardless of a student’s race, they provided specific instances of times that they had more openly supported the Latino/a students in their classes.

One teacher, Alison, spoke about her efforts with a particularly frustrated student. She explained that the student’s mother hadn’t had positive interactions with the school in the past, and that the perception had seemed to influence the student’s attitude about school. Instead of writing off the disgruntled behavior in class, Alison resolved to take steps of her own in an attempt to better reach the student who she believed was capable of more. She explained:

I really spent a lot of time talking with her one on one; she’s the one I always stood in the doorway to greet in the morning, I always checked in how the weekend was… I always
made sure that no matter what I graded, on hers I could find a positive comment, or I put a sticker on it; just really I thought ‘okay if you feel special, and if you feel that I see you, maybe you’ll work for me.’

Alison’s efforts were successful; so much so that she noticed an improvement only in her own class, and not in the classes of other teachers on the team. “I worked really hard with her to be more open, trusting, friendly, and she was more successful with me.” The efforts made by Alison to be an ally for this student seemingly changed her outlook and made her more receptive to the concept that a teacher could indeed be caring and concerned. The relationship built here is one such way that this sense of caring was demonstrated.

Another example of relationship building comes from Barbara, in her explanation of meeting new students. As a guidance counselor, she is responsible for assisting students with various matters, from academics to social and emotional issues. Specifying her approach in one-on-one sessions, she describes that

With every student I have to first get to know them a little bit and I work from where they’re coming from, not just where I think they should be… because everyone’s life is different, and everyone’s values are different, so everyone’s success is going to look a little bit different too.

Barbara’s approach focuses on establishing a baseline to instill comfort and recognize prior knowledge/experience on the part of the student. By doing so, she is more able to measure growth in individual students by tracking them from varying starting points. In this sense, all students can be motivated by their own personal growth instead of achieving based on a set scale for the general student body. Barbara says that she strives to see through the eyes of her students and best serve them in the most appropriate manner, an approach that many teachers explained.
about their actions in the classroom. Teachers made a concerted effort to highlight the ways in which they meet expectations outlined in the middle school philosophy, emphasizing the importance placed on individualized attention and the creation of relationships with students.

**Being a cheerleader**

Sometimes care was embodied in the modification of assignments to motivate students in their accomplishments. Elaine’s class centers on oral presentations, and here she illustrates her own strategy with respect to students presenting, especially those who do not speak English as their first language.

I insist that they still get up and present, but we start slower, like they present just in front of me, or I’ll stand up there with them while they present, or we’ll have a partner stand up with them while they present… I try to be a really big cheerleader, be incredibly positive, and even if it didn’t go incredibly well, I tell them how well they’ve done, how far they’ve come, because it’s a big step, it’s scary to do that.

While holding these students to the same requirements as their peers, Elaine stated that she takes the extra step in the lead-up and follow-up to the completion of the task. Recalling her own student teaching days, Elaine cites the “adrenaline running” and empathizes with her students: “I still get up there sometimes and feel that. It’s hard.”

She further specifies her actions taken with English language learners, saying that she “comfort[s] them a lot and I make sure they feel like they’re achieving a lot.” She explained that her efforts are not only channeled into English language learners, but all of her students, as she makes a plan to reach out to parents and share aspects about their children’s performance in class. She shares an instance of a call home to a parent just before Christmas break regarding a very quiet student’s presentation in class:
He got up and he did the best presentation he ever did. He went on and way past the amount of time, and he’s so quiet. So I called mom… and she started crying. She was like ‘you just made my holidays! It’s so much better, he’s just so quiet. I’m so proud!’

This form of praise signifies teacher caring at a level that transcends just the students in class, but involves parents to share in the successes of their children. It encourages and motivates students and parents alike to keep up the behaviors and attitudes leading to success in the classroom. In her admiration of this student’s achievements in class, the U.S. cultural expectation and conceptualization of success is recognized, where being successful is embodied in participation and verbal fluency.

Let’s talk about you

Caring is further exemplified when teachers make the effort to learn about students’ home culture and language. A teacher who shares some cultural background with Latino/a students uses this to his advantage when establishing bonds in the classroom. Luis, while not bilingual in English and Spanish, is familiar with customs that allow him to strike up conversation with students differently than other teachers:

My dad is [Latino]… my whole dad’s side of the family and all my aunts and uncles, I’ve been around that different culture, so maybe I can relate to them a little bit… when you find out something that’s a commonality between two people, it opens that door. And that’s what you want to do in education; you want to try to connect to the kids as much as you can.

Luis discusses the need for a sense of respect for a teacher, and that the discovery or construction of a commonality aids in that process. “I’m trying to teach them something, so I guess they’ll listen to me more if they feel more connected to me.” This sense of connection between teacher
and student is arguably the first step in the establishment of the strong and healthy relationships characteristic of successful and motivated students.

Another teacher, Alex, talks about engaging with a student who was new to the school district and the country:

We have a student right now from Peru, and I just try to talk to him about growing up in Peru. That has, I think, built a relationship with him; knowing some of their cultural background, enough at least to start a conversation with the students is helpful. Taking the time to research a student’s country of origin to be able to have a talking point shows the teacher’s effort to engage with and learn about that particular student. The same teacher describes his poor Spanish skills as a way to connect with the Latino/a students in his classes:

I think not being embarrassed to be like ‘I want to speak Spanish better than I do,’ and being honest with the kids about it is good. So when something comes up and I can learn it, I try to let them teach it to me.

This example gives autonomy to the student, allowing them to share knowledge and take pride in their culture. It also presents an interesting approach by Alex: even when he is not fully confident or knowledgeable, he still makes the effort, even when he may be wrong as in the case of learning Spanish from his students. Finding common ground to discuss and learn from one another is a point of action that many teachers made note of actively doing in their classrooms.

I’m not sure how to talk about you

Where all teachers demonstrated efforts to engage with and learn from their Latino/a students, some teachers showed a hesitation in how they spoke about this same population. When asked about characteristics of the Latino/a population in the school, Elaine tried to mentally formulate a list of students that she considered Latino/a. After talking with me about the ways in
which she saw them as hard workers, she explained “I kind of felt bad, because I’m stereotyping—you know from what I think, I didn’t get a list or know where to find it.” When asked about whether or not the community was welcoming to this population, she shared her belief that there is “a nice mix of, you know, different nationalities, I don’t know the right word to use. Excuse me if I’m sounding ignorant.” In talking about different populations of students, Elaine seemed to second-guess herself about how she understood her students’ backgrounds, as well as what was acceptable to say aloud when discussing them.

Other teachers used cautious and outdated terms when referring to students’ races, especially when considering the “mixed” friend groups that they commonly saw. Laura says that the Latino/a students she was thinking of had a variety of friends: “Typically other Caucasian students? I’m trying to think and I can’t think of any Latino students that I often see with African American students.” Barbara relates her story about a Latino student to his involvement in sports: “And I think the factor is he came in right away and he was involved in sports: he was on the football team and the basketball team. And if you think about it, who tends to be the most populated group on those sports teams, you the know the Cauc--- the middle class Caucasian people.” The terms selected here by both teachers suggest a discomfort, even a need for pause mid-sentence to make sure words are chosen carefully. While teachers overwhelmingly demonstrated the ways in which they worked to build relationships with their students, issues of racial classification seemed to make them uncomfortable about making generalizations about different populations within the school, and perhaps fearful of using a term to describe a group that was not politically correct.

Along the same lines, it is important to note that the responses recorded by teachers are self-reported instances. With no classes observed, it is not immediately clear how widespread or
often these examples take place in the classroom. However, the depth of the examples suggests that teachers are cognizant of the power of caring and relationships, thereby abiding by the central characteristics of the middle school philosophy.

**Family impact on education**

Where teachers represent the most important adults in a student’s life during the day, their parents play an equally vital role at all other times. Prevailing research about Latino/a parents suggests that others interpret their behavior as lacking care and involvement in regards to their children’s education (Albarran & Conchas, 2016; Durand & Perez, 2013). However, many teachers in this study described positive family influences as a major source of support for successful students. This position was supported by parents’ own descriptions of their involvement with their children in relation to schoolwork and instilling values. Interviewed together, Diego speaks of the ways in which he and Paola work with their children at home:

> Paola reads to the kids. And she will have them read back to her. With my little one, she will do the colors. And I will say her name, or her last name, and have her copy me. With Guillermo, when he gets confused, she’ll come right up behind him and help with his work.

In a combined effort, this couple supports their children on the home front in ways that build upon knowledge gained at school. Both Julia and Shirley used the term “*estar pendientes*” which Julia described as “*como... preguntandole cada dia, como le fue, no dejar un dia sin preguntarle*—like... asking him every day, how everything went, not go a day without asking.” In this way, they remain an active part of their children’s lives and maintain a sense of constant communication in order to provide support as necessary.
Other parents establish expectations of their children as their way of assisting academically. Gloria has set expectations for her children, and the values she pushes seem to be internalized by them as well:

I think a parent should be right there with them, truthfully. When my kids come home, they know it’s homework before anything else because you’re not going to get anywhere if you don’t go to school… If they have a problem with an assignment they go to the teacher and find out what they did wrong to bring it back up. And they bring it back up so they know pretty much what to do and what not to do.

Not only has she instilled strong study habits that have come to be something of a habit, but she also aids in the relationship they have with their teachers. In ensuring that they ask when they don’t understand an assignment, Gloria explains a process that simultaneously strengthens the bond that her children feel is comfortable and accessible with their teachers. These kinds of relationships are integral when accessing and utilizing the capital that teachers possess as institutional agents, especially as students reach high school and are thinking about options for higher education.

On a more personally reflective level, Cynthia discusses the ways in which she has tailored her own involvement from learned experience and struggles of her own:

I have them do it on their own, to be independent, not to be always laying their homework on me for me to give them the answers… My dad was one that would help me with my homework. Then when I went to college it was really hard for me because I struggled not to have that help there by my side. And now, you know, I’m doing that for my child.
Instead of being an enabler, Cynthia places the responsibility on her children to complete their homework themselves with guidance. With this explanation in mind, it is clear that she expects higher education to be a part of her children’s future.

In a description of present family struggle, Gloria uses this trial to instill an appreciation and respect for school:

I tell them that’s what my problem is: yes I graduated high school, but I didn’t go any further. And now we’re struggling… like I said, right now we can’t even pay the bills, we’re homeless right now because we couldn’t afford anything. I told them ‘you want to end up like me, not being sure where you’re going to be staying tonight…’ If you don’t want to be like that, you’ve gotta go to school. And have goals.

Utilizing a hard-hitting reality, Gloria references the present situation to her advantage to motivate her children and teach them about the consequences of their actions related to academics. Using personal family struggle is yet another way that some Latino/a parents have emphasized the importance of education to their children. Taking into account some of their life experiences (migrant workers, hourly wageworkers, etc.) some parents are able to employ these narratives to their advantage.

**Respect for teachers/ perceptions of their role**

According to cultural practice, Latino/a parents hold the teaching profession in high regard. Of seven parents interviewed, only two spoke of meetings with teachers that they themselves had reached out to schedule. All others explained that they went to the school when they’ve “had” to, expressing a more Latino perception of school involvement as initiated by the teacher. Further, in respecting teachers and their profession, Latino/a parents trust the teacher and
their actions in their realm of the school, while parents resolve themselves to involvement on the home front.

When asked about the characteristics of their ideal teacher, parents’ responses were somewhat varied. In the words of Julia:

Para mí lo más importante en un maestro es que, aparte de los enseña, que es como amigable. Como que juega con los niños… con quien se puede jugar, pero también tiene el respeto de ser maestro. – For me the most important in a teacher, apart from teaching them, is that they are friendly. They play with the children… someone who can play but also has the respect of being a teacher.

Her perception of a teacher recognizes a balance between a level of familiarity with the students, while also still retaining a sense of regard for the teacher and their role as such.

Shirley’s desired balance of traits is slightly different. Her response includes both praise and critique of teachers in the U.S. compared to her home country.

La enseñanza acá es muy diferente a la enseñanza en Perú. Los profesores en Perú, en colegios del gobierno, no son tan dedicados a su enseñanza como acá. La enseñanza acá es excelente. La relación entre profesor y alumno es… son amigos. Son de confianza. Pero a veces hay problema en eso, que… en mi opinion, no siempre se debe dar mucho autoridad al niño. – The instruction here is very different from the instruction in Peru. The teachers in Peru, in government schools, aren’t as dedicated to their instruction as here. The teaching here is excellent. The relationship between teacher and student is… they’re friends. They [teachers] are reliable. But sometimes there’s a problem with that… in my opinion, there shouldn’t be so much power given to the student.
Shirley finds a balance between the good that she has seen since coming to the U.S., while still recognizing that there were positive aspects of practices in Peru. She retains a sense of respect for the teacher and their role, while also elaborating on ways to maintain that sense of control recognized in her home culture. This demonstration of valuing characteristics from both cultures serves as an example of early acculturation in accepting U.S. practices in the classroom.

**Hopes and definitions of success**

All parents want to believe that their children are successful, especially in school. It is quite often quantified in measurable means like receiving good grades. However, parent definitions of success were much wider than the narrow definition provided by teachers focusing solely on academics. When asked to define success for her son, Julia explained it as more than just good grades.

_En todo, como en los grades. Está teniendo buenos grades. En esports, está siendo muy bien ahora. Le pone las ganas de hacerlo. Y por eso ahora habla un poquito más, con los maestros, con los coaches; pregunta cuando yo le pregunto algo, si no lo sabe, lo pregunta. Antes, no preguntaba. Ese cambio es como éxito._ – In everything, like his grades. He is getting good grades. And in sports, he’s doing really well now. He’s interested in doing them. And as a result, he talks a bit more now, with his teachers, with coaches; he asks when I ask him something, and if he doesn’t know, he asks. Before he wouldn’t ask. That change is success to me.

Her definition of success is distinct from that of other parents, but her son’s journey seems distinct as well. For her, the steps he has taken and the growth shown since he started at the new school lead to more successful outcomes, such as good grades as one example. His excitement
for participating in sports and the coming out of his shell are traits that she views as positive and valuable in being successful in other aspects of life as he grows up.

Admitting that a child is perhaps not successful is a difficult feat. In Shirley’s impression, her son has the capacity to be successful, but he isn’t demonstrating it due to lack of application to his work. “Si tuviera más empeño por lo que él puede hacer, lograría muchas cosas. Es un niño muy inteligente, muy hábil para todo... la falta más... más interés en los estudios.” – If he put more effort or were more dedicated, he would achieve a lot. He’s very intelligent, very capable… the only thing missing… is more interest in school.” In mentioning his strengths, Shirley recognizes that her son has the capacity to be a good student, that he is clever, but that he lacks motivation. Even in identifying his low drive in school, she does not let this deter her from thinking about his future opportunities.

College was mentioned by all parents when asked about their hopes for their child(ren). However, their specific hopes were varied as they elaborated more. Graciela spoke of her daughter getting “su título y su carrera – her degree and career,” where Gloria said she “want[s] them to at least graduate high school and go to college so that way they can become something.” Both mothers seem to leave the decision to their children in what they ultimately want to become, but recognize the importance of a college degree in getting there.

In addition to hoping that he maintains his good grades and continues on to college, Julia hopes that her son “siga haciendo sports, que tenga la oportunidad de jugar mucho – continues doing sports, and that he has the opportunity to play a lot.” Considering the dramatic change she noticed in him since moving to the new school and getting involved with sports, she hopes that his newfound success and growth continues through the avenue of playing and interacting with his team.
Shirley lists college last in her expressed hopes for her son, after noting that he wants to work for NASA one day. She begins by listing personal attributes that she sees as beneficial for him to have a greater impact on others: “Que sea un hombre de bien, para la sociedad. Que siempre ayuda el prójimo. Que sea un hombre que se pueda realizar como ser humano, como profesional – That he will be a good man, for the good of society. That he always helps others. That he is a man that becomes a good human being, and a professional.” Again, his professional identity is the last included description that Shirley provides, focusing instead on her hopes for him as a contributor to the greater good. Parent explanations of hopes expressed aspirations linked to their children’s individual personalities as well as future success as professionals in a field of their choosing, implying the importance and recognition of choice and opportunity on the part of the children.

Institutional agents in the school building

In the school setting, teachers are central as institutional agents, holding vital knowledge that helps students navigate the inner-workings of the educational environment. Sometimes this comes in the form of sharing information about certain classes or the process of college admissions, while other times it can simply be shown through assistance in the classroom to more clearly emphasize behaviors that lead to success. Laura discusses the ways in which her approach to student issues may differ from other teachers:

Some teachers are more direct than what I am. Often times if I am addressing a student about something, say missing work, I typically address that as something like ‘hey can I talk to you about something, what’s going on with this…’ Where another teacher might say ‘I don’t know what’s going on but this needs to get taken care of.’ And not that that’s right or wrong, but depending on the student, it can be perceived… they can take that
differently. And some students are going to shut down on that… I think we all connect
with the kids in our own way.

While the interview question was particularly crafted to learn about the ways that teachers
interact with their Latino/a students, Laura follows up by saying “I don’t think that we deal
differently because a student is Latino, it would be that we deal differently with a student
because we know they have extenuating circumstances.” In describing one teacher’s use of
humor and another’s tough and straightforward approach, she highlights the ways in which
teachers deal with students ultimately to address issues that may be impeding successful
performance in their classes. This comment may serve as further evidence of an avoidance of
categorizing students by a group identity, and instead focusing on each as an individual.

While teachers describe their actions in class in ways that depict them as institutional
agents, similar descriptions of them come from parents on the home front. Describing her own
child’s relationship with a particularly special teacher, Gloria shares the following story:

When they go to him saying ‘I don’t get this,’ or ‘I don’t understand,’ he says ‘okay let’s
see what you’re doing wrong’ and the teacher will sit there and figure out where they’re
going wrong and make them understand it.

With several children presently in school, her youngest child mentioned this teacher in detail. He
was described as making the class fun, in addition to his patient and understanding demeanor.

Speaking of institutional agents, teachers like this establish the roots that foster strong
communication skills between teacher and student, ultimately leading to more connected feelings
about school and typically better academic performance.

Teachers also serve as institutional agents for parents in their efforts to reach out and
inform them of opportunities and guide them in ways to assist their children. After sharing her
recent guidance office survey of students asking about their needs and interests, Barbara discussed the ways that she is trying to help students to take part in activities outside the school day: “Another thing I’ve been working on is to make sure those students are getting involved. First of all making sure those families are aware of what programs are available to get them connected.” In striving to help students, Barbara recognizes the need to explain the programs to parents and bring them in to the conversation in order to help them make informed decisions. On the topic of sports teams, she elaborates on the ability to waive “pay to play” for students whose families cannot afford the cost. It is through her knowledge of the system that she is able to reach out and reassure students and their families that lack the financial means or general knowledge about opportunities and assist them in enrolling or taking part.

Elaine’s plan for the beginning of a new school year is to reach out and make contact with the parent(s) of each student in her classes. “That was my goal… always start with a positive, so the next time you call or email, maybe they open it up and they’re excited to see it or they know, hey, this person is an advocate for my kid.” The initiation of a positive and welcoming relationship early in the new school year establishes Elaine as an advocate for parent and student communication throughout their time in her class. Perhaps the first time a teacher has reached out in this way, the implications make for a stronger connection between the school and home environments.

The part that teachers play as institutional agents in their reaching out to parents has proven to be a strategy that makes them feel comfortable conversing with their children’s teachers or coming to the school for meetings. Shirley talks about her interaction with her child’s teachers and demonstrates her high-regard for those that she meets with: “Cuando yo pido información o una reunión, los profesores están allí siempre... Las veces que voy al colegio, me
When I ask for information or a meeting, the teachers are always there... The times that I’ve gone to the school, I have been attended to... As a whole, I find the teachers to be extraordinary people.” As a relatively new resident to the area, Shirley may not know the teachers as well as some others who have had several children go through the local school system, but still feels comfortable and able to approach them for meetings or questions. Gloria, a more established resident, speaks of her relationship with the teachers as a bit deeper and longer in the making. “So they [teachers] know who I am, and they know that I push school, so they’re going to do what they can to help my kids.” This cooperation on prior occasions creates an opportunity for Gloria to not only feel comfortable sharing her goals with the teachers, but has established an open line of communication between the two groups, allowing for the goals at home to also be recognized and instilled in the school.

**Teaming ideology**

One of the hallmarks of the middle school philosophy is the concept of teaming. With roughly 120 students on a team, team teachers gets to know their students over the course of the school year: their strengths and weaknesses, as well as ways they can step in and help. The principal Matt breaks down the strengths of teaming: “Every kid is on a team with five teachers, and those teachers meet every single day and they talk, they problem solve, they come up with solutions.” Team teachers hold a lot of responsibility and as Luis explains, “Because we’re on teaming, we don’t let them slip through the cracks.” Following this supportive line of involvement, Luis talks about how every student is accounted for and provided the support they need to do their best.
Luis goes on to discuss how the teaming meetings translate into interactions with students. He explains that,

If someone’s upset, the teachers say you know ‘X was upset,’ and we’ll try to figure it out, see if we need to talk with a counselor. You know if you’re having any issue, we have a pretty good feeling; we’re able to grab you, help you, do what we can to make you successful here.

The repeated use of “we” signifies an ownership taken by teachers over the students in their classes. Here they are established as institutional agents, with the responsibility and ability to make the school experience as positive and supportive as they can through their personal connections with students as well as the networks they belong to.

Parents also recognize the benefit of teaming at the middle school. Guillermo was a new 6th grader after having spent his elementary years at different schools in the area. He struggled with his grades and wasn’t receiving the type of attention that his parents felt he needed and deserved. That changed when he entered middle school.

Ten of them are working with him, compared to elementary… And they all communicate with each other about Guillermo, they all email each other. So it’s one giant cycle of helping Guillermo. It’s like a group of helpers for him.

Paola, whose child is on an Individualized Education Program, describes the scope of the teaming setup for the benefit of Guillermo. “This year he’s actually doing well, his grade report was all A’s and then one C and a D. That’s the best report card he’s ever had. Ever.” Paola attributes much of Guillermo’s success to the impactful attention his team teachers paid to his needs, and the corresponding actions taken to help him do well.
Peer influence

Adults are not the only individuals that can serve as agents and influence in a school setting. As principal, Matt is responsible for helping to oversee new student orientation as well as the process of their integration to the school. He describes the transformation of one Latina student over the course of her three years in the school:

She came into our school in 6th grade speaking no English, and didn’t know anybody… She was smart, but we weren’t seeing it. She didn’t find friends at first… She was definitely engaged with her friends, and by the time she left here as an 8th grader, she was thriving in school… I contribute a lot of that to just becoming comfortable with the environment, a welcoming social group that just brought her right in.

While she was described as being smart to begin with, Matt attributes a lot of her success to being comfortable and having a group of friends that influenced her positively. He included other aspects of her identity as a student that included raising her hand and answering questions in class, signs of adapting to the expected/recognized norms of successful students in U.S. culture.

It is also important to note that seven of the nine teachers interviewed make explicit reference to the racially and ethnically diverse peer groups at the school, a potential source of shared capital amongst students of different social and cultural backgrounds.

Where friends can serve as ways to build an individual up, they can also function to tear a student down. Matt’s example of positive peer influence was countered with an instance of more damaging peer influence:

The problem sometimes with middle school is you become who you hang out with, and the crowd that this student hangs out with now is not a positive environment for this student. And unfortunately you’re seeing in the student, who again is a very bright
student, a lot of potential, sinking down to where his friends are right now at that same level… The norm in that group is to not do the homework, the norm in that group is to not participate, the norm in that group is not to get involved in different extracurricular activities.

Socializing and establishing a comfortable group of friends is vital to the development that takes place at the middle school level. The emphasis here is on comfort: fitting in and being understood, regardless of the negative effects that may take place simultaneously. The student is still present at the middle school “so the story isn’t finished yet. But it’s certainly a work in progress,” according to Matt.

Parents also see both sides of the impact of peers. Both Spanish-speaking and relatively new to the school district, Julia and Shirley share stories of their sons’ peer interactions and the impact it has had on them in and out of school. Julia explains that, “Sus grades son mucho mejor que en la otra escuela… Aquí dice que tiene más amigos. Siempre es muy callado, pero parece mejor ahora – His grades are much better than in the other school… Here he says that he has more friends. He’s always very quiet, but he seems better now.” Her son, who she describes as “quiet” several times throughout the interview, has shown a marked change in his grades as well as his confidence in speaking with others. Both appear to be attributed to his wider and seemingly comforting circle of friends.

Shirley does not provide as enthusiastic a story. In reflecting on his friendships, she describes her son as

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Es muy buen niño, tiene un corazón muy grande. Pero a la vez es este... como, es llevado por las amistades entonces. A veces hay amistades buenas y amistades malas, y pues hay que saber en caminar. Y a veces... es difícil. – He’s a very good boy, with a very big
heart. But at the same time, it’s like he is held back by the friendships. Sometimes there are good friendships and bad friendships, and you have to know when to walk away. And sometimes… it’s difficult.

In the struggle of navigating a new country and a new culture, monitoring her son’s progress within the same struggles proves to be draining. Whereas Julia describes her son as “quiet,” Shirley describes hers as having “a big heart” and being “capable,” “intelligent.” The impact of his friends deals a particularly strong blow to the promise that she sees in her son.

**Latino cultural capital**

Cultural practices, valued capital, and recognized behaviors differ, even within the same country. In the case of U.S. cultural practices compared to Latino/a cultural practices, differences abound. One such demonstration of this differing capital is the recognition of collectivist principles over individualist ones. Coon and Kemmelmeier (2001) found that “members of the three largest minority groups (African, Asian, and Latino/a American) are both higher in collectivism and lower in individualism compared to European Americans” (p. 349). Latin American culture recognizes and acts in support of the collective group rather than the individual, and this sentiment was echoed in several parents’ comments, especially regarding English language proficiency. Shirley explains the way that some people view an on-site translator at school as a non-necessity:

> Entonces es un favor dicen, y si lo sé, pero ante una situación que muchos Latinos en el colegio, y que no todos han llegado en la misma manera. O sea no se puede decir es un favor. Que no todos tienen la misma capacidad de estudios, los que han llegado. – They say it’s a favor, and yes I know, but facing the situation that there are many Latinos in the school, and not all have arrived [in the U.S.] in the same way. In other words you can’t
say it’s a favor. That not all of them [immigrants] have the same ability, those who have come.

In this sense, Latinos/as as a whole are discussed, and her own personal struggles with the English language are explained as part of the collective Latino/a immigrant stressor. Taking it to a more personal level, Graciela uses “us” to describe the same issue of translation for those who do not speak English fluently: “Si me gustaría que cada reunión, hubiera un intérprete. Porque pues no todos hablamos ni tenemos el inglés, entonces sería bueno. – I would like if there were an interpreter at each meeting. Because not all of us have the ability to speak English, so that would be good.” Both mothers are fairly recent arrivals, so this concept of collective struggle may be presented more strongly as the cultural values of their home countries are still firmly rooted in their belief system.

Where individualist perspectives dominate in the U.S., one teacher provided a collective comment about Latino/a students and their commonalities. Teachers in this study typically strayed away from generalizing student populations, but Alison made an interesting observation. “They speak a common language,” she states. “They don’t have conversations about shopping at the Gap, they have conversations about shopping at WalMart… I think language, common life experiences, that social vernacular that they all speak, they have that same living experience.” By grouping them in this manner, Alison’s analysis suggests that they may stick with each other before they feel comfortable in the new school environment for the sake of having so much shared understanding. Recognizing their sameness helps to illuminate some of the struggles that are particular to this population of students, perhaps serving as a platform to better understand their background and needs in an educational context.
While recognizing a central sameness to focus on shared struggles, the above quote may also serve to generalize the Latino/a experience. An earlier definition by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) explains, “…‘Latino’ includes indigenous Mexicans, Black Dominicans, and Italian-descent Argentinians…” thereby condensing a region of origin, with all of its cultural diversity, into a single term (p. 33). Where this mindset could be beneficial in identifying ways to approach similar issues, it is perhaps dismissive of some of the differences that varying cultures value and exercise, thereby removing their uniqueness and reducing them to a single label.

**Spanish as advantageous for English speakers at school**

In most instances, the Spanish language loses its value in the face of dominant culture U.S. schooling and everyday communication, as English serves functionally as the national language. However, in the face of assisting low English proficient parents and students, teachers and school administrators value and admire those who can communicate and translate from Spanish to English and vice versa. Having grown up speaking 2-3 languages, Michelle explains her role as a trusted go-between for Spanish speaking parents, as well as a go-to translator when one is not available for school meetings: “I’ve had meetings actually where I was used as a translator between administration and parents. They [parents] know they can come to me to communicate if they cannot communicate with someone else, I can pass on information.” She serves as a sense of comfort for parents in their ability to communicate with her in their home language, while she takes on a more beneficial service role for the administration.

Students themselves are sometimes used as translators or liaisons for parents or other students. In one instance, a new student was paired with a bilingual student to help ease his transition to the school, as explained by Barbara:
One student came to us and spoke minimal English at the time. And we had another Latino student in the building who has been in our district for a couple of years and is part of the ESL program and doing very well with English. So I went back and totally readjusted his schedule to pair him up with this other student… Here’s this student who doesn’t know a lot of English but we have this person in the classroom who can help him out… It just broke the ice for him [bilingual student] because he was always under the radar and then he became the hero.

Barbara paints the bilingual student’s assisting of the new student as a victory for both the school and the student himself as he “became the hero” through using his first language to aid in communication. Another student’s bilingualism was utilized for the benefit of Spanish-speaking parents who would need to communicate with administrators in the main office. In a way, this student was elevated for his utility, recognized more so than before: “[Jorge] help us, we need you,” Barbara explains. Elaine recalls a past student who she described as a caretaker to his sister and mother, both learning English, and the way his language skills were valued: “They used to call him down to the office when they had parents that couldn’t speak English. And he would translate for, not only his own parents, but other parents in the office.” Here, Spanish was seen as a bridge for greater communication and academic success when brokered by students themselves, a demonstration of interest-convergence theory in action.

**Cultural practices/ customs recognized**

Where some of our U.S. cultural views exist in direct contrast to those of other regions, recognizing these differences, as well as the existence of potential language barriers, are important ways to create a closer relationship between teachers and parents of different cultural backgrounds. At the middle school, Alex notes the consciousness of teachers to the language
barriers faced by some students’ parents. “I think teachers have become very conscious of making sure we’re communicating in primary language, rather than secondary languages or anything like that whenever we can.” This mindset on the part of teachers and administrators recognizes parents want to be involved, regardless of the prevailing idea that they are Latino/a and “uninvolved.” Bringing them in to the conversation demonstrates that just because their English proficiency is low and communication is a barrier does not mean they don’t have things to offer in their own culturally and linguistically appropriate way.

A further example of this grasping of cultural practices also comes from Alex. He recounts an interaction with a Latino student who addressed authority in a manner different from the familiar U.S. approach. “I think the thing I struggle with too, was not understanding body language, or different… maybe the idea of not looking me directly in the eyes as a very kind of White culture thing. I’ve worked with Hispanic kids who, it’s sort of insulting to look an adult directly in the eyes. So I had to get over that.” This element of self-reflection allowed Alex to understand the expectations placed on his students and how they were taught to address adults. His consciousness on the topic can help him to better relate to students of various cultures, and makes him a resource for other teachers who are perhaps less knowledgeable about varying cultural practices.

**Adoption of dominant culture traits/ acculturation: gains and losses**

Cultural practices have their strengths within different contexts, but when living within a dominant culture different from that with which one identifies, the process of acculturation becomes especially important in order to fit in and succeed. Several teachers described characteristics that are commonly recognized in U.S. schools as being correlated with successful behavior. When asked to elaborate, they provided examples of students that best demonstrated
them. Laura talked about a Latina student in her class in terms of success: “She’s super successful: always raises her hand, always participates, always does great work.” In response to a question about what makes a student successful versus not, Luis elaborates that it was demonstrated through “participating in class, doing your homework, asking questions.” In reference to personal characteristics that led to success, it was these types of responses that were most common among teachers.

Through the eyes of the teachers, success seems to translate to school knowledge: how to act, what to do to be recognized. While the students they describe are surely smart, their descriptions suggest that the success has just as much to do with knowing the process as possessing the cognitive skills. In the phrasing of the questions for teachers about successful students, it is natural that they would respond in a way that is related to success in the classroom. It is interesting to compare these responses with later parent responses on the definition of success, recognizing the similarities and differences that exist between the two groups.

**English as need to fit in/ succeed**

For Latino/a students new to the country, learning English is imperative to the process of acculturation. It also proves vital in the areas of academic success and establishing friendships. To function and perform well in school, not having a strong command of the language leaves students lacking in their abilities and opportunities. Stated plainly by Luis: “I’d say a minority of them can’t speak English, most of them can. With the kids it’s, to communicate, they need to use English.” His use of the word “need” emphasizes the importance of the development of this skill for all means of communication.
The obstacles faced by students who struggle with English are clearer to see in the classroom. Elaine provides an example of a new student with an evident language barrier, making it difficult for her to complete assignments in class:

She tried really hard, but you could tell, some instruction, some things we were going kind of quickly and she had a hard time… On open-ended projects she’d want more instruction, which I don’t blame her; and some learners want that, even if they don’t have a language barrier. But she would be nervous to ask.

Elaine recalled walking around the room and seeing the student looking at other students’ work to get an idea of where to begin. “It wasn’t in a terrible ‘I’m gonna steal your work’ way,” Elaine explains. But the struggle and the distress experienced by this student were clear.

An additional reason for the need for English proficiency is so that students may better fit in with the school population and establish friendships with English-speaking peers. As the World Languages teacher for the middle school, Michelle notices that “Hispanic students are more willing to want to learn the target language and leave their language aside, with other kids so they can blend in better.” While Michelle envisions English learning as a way to blend in, the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher sees it as a gateway to friendships. Kristen expresses concern about her students speaking in Spanish amongst each other. When asked about language use in school, she explains “I do see them using Spanish when they’re with their other Spanish speaking friends. I don’t know if that plays a role, makes them appear unapproachable? That’s my worry.” She uses examples of current students to illustrate the difference in language learning styles and the impact on their ability to make friends:

[One student] just listens and he learns from hearing and speaking, so he picked up English right away, which has helped him to fit in at the middle school. My other
student… I see his learning style as more written and kinesthetic. And he’s just having a problem learning the language. And it’s harder to make friends when you can’t talk to them.

Where acculturation is sometimes seen as the shedding of cultural traits for the sake of new ones, this type serves as an addition in order to better succeed within the dominant culture.

Acculturation can indeed incorporate new traits and practices while retaining original ones, but in some cases the newer dominant culture takes precedence, resulting in the diminishing importance or recollection of cultural or linguistic knowledge and skills.

**Cultural loss**

In the process of acculturation toward the dominant culture, aspects of home linguistic and cultural practices may be lost. Kristen shares a story of Spanish-speaking friends who are struggling to retain their practices at home: “They are saying that they try to speak Spanish at home and their kids are just English, already forgetting their Spanish even though they’re such little kids.” The struggles of holding on to language are evident in both scenarios of parents speaking or not speaking English, she says. “If the parents don’t speak any English that causes struggles, or if the parents do speak English that also causes different struggles in keeping their culture and their language.” Acculturation can have long-term benefits for fitting in and access to opportunity, but this example shows how it can be detrimental to home culture.

The acculturation by students and not parents can result in somewhat of an eclipsing of the role that parents play as authority figures in the family. When students possess the ability to speak and understand English when their parents do not, they are endowed with power that some teachers noticed. Matt discusses the lack of day-to-day communication in Spanish, and emphasizes the role placed on students as translators.
Something that’s been really helpful is having the son or daughter, the student, go home and explain to their parents the information. So if I have a document that needs to be signed, or information to go home, I’ll put ownership on the student… The intimidating thing is that you don’t really know what’s being said when that kid goes home, but for the most part that’s been really helpful.

Matt acknowledges the element of uncertainty when students are trusted with the responsibility of sharing school information at home as the surest means of transmission. Luis makes a similar statement in his perception of the parent/child relationship in Latino/a families: “You see things you’d see from any kid. Maybe a little more sneaky because they know that their parents don’t speak English, so they can get away with a little bit more.” In these hypothetical situations, both teachers admitted the possibility of students gaining an upper hand in their communication with parents as a result of the differing levels of acculturation and language proficiency between parents and their children.

While some aspects of culture are lost or minimized, others remain strong. When asked about their perceptions of the relationship between Latino/a students and their parents, the most common answer related to respect and family first. Alison envisions it as “very close-knit… this family bond that is what comes first, before any other outsider.” Matt suggests from personal experience “it’s been a very strong relationship, good family involvement, the opposite of that would be outside the norm.” Where other teachers described it as “loving but intense” and coming with “high expectations,” the collectivist theme of the family shines through despite the effects of acculturation. The cultural value of *familismo* refers to “family closeness, cohesion, and interdependence… and the commitment to the family over individual needs and desires” and
plays an important role in family decisions and support, visible both inside and outside of the household (Durand & Perez, p. 65).

**Challenges/ barriers**

Despite the evident strengths and efforts being made to support Latino/a students in this study, challenges and barriers still remain relevant both in and out of school. Research on the Latino/a student achievement gap is well documented, and notions of these students as deficient and apathetic often negatively impacts their feelings of self-worth and opportunities for upward mobility in society (Valenzuela, 1999). As summarized in the literature review, Latino/a students are perceived to be ambivalent about their studies, have low English proficiency as immigrants in U.S. schools, and disrespect for authority figures. The theory of stereotype threat takes on relevance here, defined by Owens and Massey (2011) as minority students’ underperformance “because of pressures created by negative stereotypes about their group” (p. 150). This threat can cause students to fall into the stereotype, or actively seek to defy it, often depending on the level of support in their school environment, as well as their own feelings of self-worth and capacity.

The concept of stereotyping was raised several times across interviews. Perhaps most detrimental of all is when students self-ascribe a stereotype to themselves, either as a joke or a sincere sentiment. While only mentioned once in all interviews conducted, the issue of using culture as a crutch came up for one teacher. Elaine explains how a student defines himself using culture as an excuse for deficiency.

He was very smart, and he, a lot of times, would say ‘what? I don’t understand, I don’t understand’ but I believed he did. On typing days he would just fly through it, amazing, really well. He thought he got a lot of laughter by being ignorant, you know, ‘oh I don’t know, I’m Mexican… I don’t speak English.’ That was his crutch.
The ease with which this stereotype is accepted and propagated establishes Latino/a students as either outstanding cases in the event of academic success, or the expectation of mediocrity in the case of an average or below average student. These stereotypes are not only reserved for the school setting.

When sharing her hopes for her children, Gloria specifies that she doesn’t want them to fit the mold of what she calls the “stereotypical Mexican.” “There are people that still look down on Mexicans, ‘oh they’re just a Mexican.’ And I don’t want them to give people… I don’t want them to be the stereotypical Mexican where they just work a menial job and get by.” Where Elaine cannot control the reliance on the stereotype that her student alludes to, Gloria discusses how she utilizes her role as a parent to actively instill values in her children that stand in direct contrast to what she calls “the stereotypical Mexican.” In this case, the stereotype threat serves as a source of motivation in order to act and perform in ways that do not feed the stereotype.

Stereotypes at the community level present a struggle between the settled and migrant/newly arrived immigrant communities, despite the overwhelming response from mostly White teachers that framed it as welcoming for Latinos/as. Evidence to the contrary came from members of the impacted population, speaking from experience, both witnessed and personal. Gloria explains the view of migrant workers from members of the community that see them as lesser as a result of their transient lifestyle.

If you are a migrant worker, a lot of the town looks down on you. Because of the fact that ‘oh they’re not here for long anyway…’ And a lot of people have that perception of ‘they’re illegals so they’re trouble, they’re gonna do something wrong.’ So they hold on tighter to their kids, and their purses, and that type of thing.
She makes sure to specify that this treatment is reserved mostly for men, and is not reflected in the treatment or assistance made available to migrant students. However, the damage to a member of the family unit could be just as harmful to the children, even if not directed at them in particular.

Speaking from the perspective of lived experience and ostracization, Shirley interprets the ways in which settled Latino/a immigrants express hostility toward more recently arrived immigrants from the same culture and region of the world.

*Nuestra misma gente nos trató de atacar. Con, para que nos vayamos de acá, nuestra misma gente a veces los que están años acá. Para ellos es como nosotros somos enemigos; no somos los enemigos, sino sus amigos al llegar de acá – Our own people tried to attack us. In order for us to leave; our own people sometimes do that, especially those that have been here for years. For them it’s like we are enemies; we are not the enemies, but friends that have come here.*

The description takes on more than just unfriendliness, enough to make Shirley feel as if she is being “attacked” for being new. Despite the similar language, culture, and knowledge of the immigrant struggle as a Latino/a, this difference in capital serves as an added source of stress in an already difficult and alienating process of trying to belong.

Where most teachers expressed a favorable view of the community in relation to Latino/a residents, one teacher elaborated a different perspective. Kristen could speak to students fitting in within the school, but had a more difficult time doing so for the community at large:

*The funny thing is I don’t get a sense of the Latinos in the community. So I don’t know if it’s the way that Nyack is to them, or if it’s the way that it’s set up, but I’ve lived other*
places where there have been Latino populations and I see them at church, at the grocery store. But in Nyack, I don’t see them at all.

She is a relatively new resident herself, but still explains the absence of Latinos/as in the community as quite different than other places she has lived. In light of other comments by participants about stereotypes and seemingly fixed identities of settled versus new/migrant, this account may be indicative of a larger norm of comfort in the established nature of the community.

**Outside factors’ impact on school**

Apart from the endeavor to learn English for new immigrant students and the general stressors of daily middle school life, there are factors outside of school that serve as barriers for Latino/a students. Family background as far as involvement plays a role, but family socioeconomic status has an academic impact as well. Alison mentions the overlap between Latino/a and economically disadvantaged, as well as the effect this might have on future endeavors for these students.

Most of our Latino kids are economically disadvantaged kids. And the frustration is that they’re coming without the tools to learn, many of them, and so how do you circumvent that?... I think a lot of them are coming from generational poverty issues, and so you’re looking at this whole long term poverty situation where it’s what we can do today, what we can do to survive through today.

While not painting the culture as one that is deficient, Alison instead recognizes the way in which need (even “to survive”) may keep a family rooted in a particular economic status over years, perhaps generations. Additionally, her comments suggest a lack of valued cultural capital, in not having had the experience to fully understand or realize higher education opportunities
that exist. In this sense, the capital that is shared may be more for the benefit of steady work and family support than a less familiar, less accessed capital related to higher education, thereby limiting the tools that students arrive at school with to further their own education.

As an immigrant student new to the country, the process of navigating school, culture shock, and other feelings of upheaval or confusion weigh heavy on those faced with a language barrier and learning an entirely new culture. The adjustment initially proved difficult for one student that Barbara worked with. “There’s a lot of anger in the household. And of course the cultural differences, where the family seems to be considered more middle class where they came from, now they’re not.” The student is struggling academically considering the factors he is grappling with at home. The strain placed on the family and the student as they deal with the culture shock of a new country is made all the more challenging as home country and new country expectations do not align, making it increasingly difficult to settle down and accept the changing characteristics around them.

When asked about a student that was not as successful in her classes, Laura spoke about a boy whose focus was directed elsewhere. He wasn’t a bad student, she explained, just off-task behavior, which makes sense because of course there are other things on his mind other than ancient history… So in some cases it’s that education isn’t important at home, but in his case that wasn’t the case. It was that he’s had a rough life, and there are just other things that have taken precedence over education; probably need.

This student was grappling with his family’s situation of homelessness, one that struck a chord outside the realm of shelter alone. The family had fallen on difficult times, and the uncertainty and changing environment was enough to distract anyone from their primary focus. Similar to Alison’s explanation, this narrative illustrates a sense of necessity that sometimes overtakes
where a teacher expects a student to direct their focus. The teacher recognition of this factor as a disruption to his education represents another way that caring is demonstrated, as she takes the time to acknowledge and empathize with his struggles.

**Empathy/ understanding parent struggles**

Limited English proficient (LEP) parents face much of the same culture shock that their children do, but often without the same necessity or ability to learn the language. Balancing work, family finances, and caring for children makes seeking out and regularly attending ESL classes extremely difficult. Speaking from the perspective of a LEP parent, Shirley explains how her limited English skills make her feel ineffective:

*Es un poco desesperante para mi. Porque no puedo transmitir todo que realmente necesito... No, de hecho que yo voy a poner más empeño de mi parte para poder yo transmitir esas ideas a ellos, personalmente. Estudiar el inglés. Es una parte de mi que necesito.* – It’s a little frustrating for me. Because I can’t communicate all that I really need to… I am going to be more determined on my part to be able to express those ideas to them, personally. Studying English. It’s an important part of what I need.

Her account is not unlike the relative helplessness that other immigrant parents feel; however, either is her strong determination. She sees learning the language as one of the best tools to fully communicate and advocate for her son, and expresses ownership over the task.

Where stereotypes exist about immigrants resistant to learning English and to the process of acculturation, teachers recognized the stress and difficulty that parents face in taking steps toward English proficiency. In his role as principal, Matt talks about the documents sent home with students for parent review, as well as verbal communications shared district-wide.
A lot of letters that come from the state, on the ODE (Ohio Department of Education) website. There will be letters in Spanish. But on our day-to-day communication… There’s a lot of communication that’s just not done in Spanish and I’m thinking for a family that only speaks Spanish, they’re getting bombarded with information that they have no idea what it means. It is a lot to think about.

His inclusion of the word “bombarded” acknowledges the struggle, if no more than trying to put himself in the shoes of LEP parents in an empathizing role. Further, the self-reflection at the end of his comment suggests that, having come to this realization, there may be future communications made more accessible to a wider linguistic audience. While the reference to the Spanish language documents on the ODE website is helpful, it doesn’t take into account that internet access may not be as constant in some homes as others, perhaps creating need for other avenues of access for LEP parents.

A final teacher account frames LEP parents as courageous in their constant presence at meetings and their efforts to be involved despite barriers.

Mom didn’t speak English. And so the neighbor came [to translate], but she came to conferences and really wanted--- and that was huge. Because if I didn’t speak the language, I don’t know that I’d be brave enough to put myself out there and do that.

Here Alison shares details of a meeting between parent and teacher. These types of meetings are commonplace to those of us who grew up speaking English and understanding school expectations of parents. But for someone who was not raised with either of these forms of capital, the demonstration of preparedness and determination is all the more admirable. Reverence for a parent facing these barriers in the way that Alison has demonstrated surely...
creates a stronger bond between parents and teachers, making parents feel comfortable and welcome despite their newer resident status.

**Lack of multicultural sensitivity**

In a stand-alone comment about the state of multicultural awareness, Alex believes that more could be done in the area of training. “We’re a very diverse nation and we don’t teach a lot of diversity in education,” he says. Drawing upon his own example of a Latino student not looking him in the eyes (and later learning the significance as a sign of respect to adults from someone else), he admits that “this is one of those eye opening sort of things, I never learned that in college or anywhere else.” He elaborates further:

I don’t know how sensitive everybody always is… I don’t want to say a lack of sensitivity to the culture, it’s a lack of understanding of the culture I guess… I hate saying it’s a fault of anybody’s, but the fault lies in the teacher training part of it.

Where teachers’ comments about their interactions in and out of the classroom were generally positive, there were still instances of discomfort or hesitancy in regards to the discussion of race and some of the less widely understood components of cultural values. Latino/a culture, while representative of a large portion of the minority population at the school, is not the only one present, and would be just one of several worth discussing further.

While it may be said that teachers could benefit from more training on the topic of diversity and strategies to more comfortably and confidently address differences in their classes, some teachers noted the evidence of acceptance and comfort on the part of their students and others in the community. Alex makes the point that “As communities like this become more and more diverse, these kids are growing up with each other… I think the more the kids are exposed to it, the more okay they are with it.” Several teachers shared the details of their own children’s
friend groups, including friends who came from different countries and cultures, and also spoke
different home languages. In a final classroom snapshot, Elaine shares a moment of support
between two students:

Some students that had language barriers, other students were really okay with that…

There’s one student I have in mind. She wasn’t like all star, A+, best student in the world,
but she stepped up and said ‘I’ll be your partner, we’ll do this together’ and went to sit
with her [student with language barrier] because she was a little nervous to speak in front
of the class.

Interactions like this are seemingly carried out with ease, as if they are second nature. While
some examples from this particular case study are markedly different from research in the field,
they show that opportunity for growth and fostering of understanding are within reach, as the
middle school mentality lends itself to the concepts of care and inclusion, opportunity and
choice.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This study explored Latino/a middle school students’ parent and teacher perceptions of student social interactions and how they may impact academic success. The researcher investigated this topic to better understand the middle school setting in the face of underrepresentation of studies in the field, as well as the effects on Latino/a students at this level of schooling in the U.S. The discussion in this chapter highlights the interview findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the literature consulted, and utilizes Bourdieu’s (1986) theories of social and cultural capital and Stanton-Salazar’s (1995, 1997, 2001) social capital and institutional agents framework. These theories help to explain the roots of social interaction, systems of support, and the impact that these relationships have on demonstrations of academically successful behavior and outcomes.

Literature revisited

Drawn almost exclusively from minority-dominant high schools in states with substantial Latino/a resident populations, studies referenced in the literature review established an environment defined by social and cultural hierarchies. In these studies, schools and their staff regularly deem Latino/a parents as uncaring and unengaged in their children’s education, effectively declaring the culture deficient in its relation to academic goals. Cultural beliefs and practices are scarcely recognized, and parents are cast off as uninterested in helping their children and equally uninterested in or resistant to learning English. From a student perspective, many report being treated as lesser than other students, as they are tracked into lower level classes from an early age and experience a detachment from the teachers who they depend on to guide and support them. For Latino/a parents and students alike, the divide between school and
home, high/valued levels of social and cultural capital and low/unrecognized levels, is sometimes enough to discourage trying altogether.

The parameters that defined this study were quite different from the literature consulted. Perhaps most striking is the focus on middle school, where the earlier studies depicted high schools. The demographic makeup of the surrounding areas differed as well, where the case took place in a much Whiter, more suburban locale than the minority-dominant high schools and their relatively homogenous neighborhoods. These characteristic differences are vital to recognize in accounting for the major inconsistencies between the study’s findings and the literature consulted.

Nyack Middle School emphasized an environment of respect and support, regardless of students’ backgrounds, strengths, or weaknesses. Teachers described how they poured their efforts into supporting and building up their students. Alison discussed the ways in which she expended additional effort to break through a Latina student’s thick, exterior shell. She shared that if she’d been a younger teacher, “I would have fought with her. I would have seen it as a battle of wills, and I was going to win.” But instead, she saw more in this student than she outwardly demonstrated. Alison was the only teacher with whom the student changed her attitude: “I see her in the hallway and her face kind of lights up, and then she kind of goes back to her angry, dark…” This effort to reach an individual student reflects the student accounts depicted in the literature review. When they felt like their teacher didn’t care enough to get to know them and understand their background, they questioned why it was worth trying at all to work for someone who didn’t have their best interest in mind.

In similar examples of proven teacher caring, Elaine described herself as a cheerleader for her ESL students, while Luis used their shared home cultures as a point of connection. And
even when Alex had no common link with his Latino student, he still took the step to research some of the customs on his own, just to have a topic to begin discussion. In the sense of embodying the central characteristics of the middle school philosophy, these teachers recognize the individual victories that come along with more individualized attention and encouragement.

Parent regard for Latino cultural practices and beliefs, especially the more recent their arrival in the U.S., was very well correlated with findings from previous literature. These parents (especially those whose interviews were conducted in Spanish) held the opinion that a teacher’s role was to be respected (and not questioned by means of meetings or constant communication), and also through demonstrated educational involvement in more unconventional ways by the U.S. standard but more widely practiced in Latino culture.

**Social and cultural capital exercised**

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social capital emphasizes the importance of social networks and the entitlements that come as a result of membership within a particular network. It is noted that while all individuals possess some level of social capital, not all capital is given the same value or recognition. The most recognized forms of social capital are understood and enjoyed by those in the higher status class of the dominant culture, who presumably have more formal education, higher paying jobs, and more extensive networks at their disposal. Interviews with parents in particular demonstrated the effect of social capital on interactions that parents made in the community.

Parents interviewed for this study differed in the amount of time they have been in Nyack or the U.S. For those that have had a more extensive presence/ are more Americanized in their beliefs, the concept of scheduling a meeting with teachers was commonplace. This speaks to both social and cultural capital manifestation, as they are more likely to adopt more culturally
recognized school involvement practices, as well as feeling at ease to do so. “They know who I am,” Gloria says. She had an older daughter go through the middle school and high school system, so the teachers and administrators are people that she is familiar with from that prior experience. “They’ll text me or call me if he has a bad day,” Paola explains. “They’ll tell me.” Paola was responsible for scheduling meetings with the teachers to ensure that her son’s IEP was helping him to improve in his classes. Her network at school, as an involved parent, includes the team of teachers that her son Guillermo works with during the day, as well as the principal and guidance counselor when necessary.

Newer residents to Nyack did not have the same relationships with the school. Perhaps as a result of their more recent settling in the U.S., their predisposition to retain beliefs more relevant to Latino cultural practices were most evident. In this sense, they were more likely to only schedule meetings with teachers when necessary, demonstrating their respect for teachers and the profession overall. However, they still accessed social capital through their networks, in most cases more associated with need. When discussing potential barriers to school and home communication, Spanish-speaking participants mentioned a friend or family member that they call on for help with interpreting English to Spanish meetings. Matt also highlighted this point in his discussion of having a hired school translator: “I think that would be a good next step. A lot of families are comfortable with a certain individual… And so we like to honor that.” The necessity for a school interpreter would present itself especially in the cases of families that are brand new to the area and have not yet established the social capital networks to reach out in their time of need.

The vital importance of acquired cultural capital is substantiated clearly in this study. All teacher participants were asked to describe a successful Latino/a student in their class, and what
they believe contributed to that student’s demonstrated success. While several teachers
mentioned family support or family environment as a contributing factor to successful students,
more than half referenced more individual skills aligned with the culturally accepted behavior
that is characteristic of successful students. Luis identifies a successful student as someone who
is “participating in class, doing your homework, asking questions.” Laura thinks back to a girl
who “always raises her hand, always participates, always does great work.” Barbara talks about a
student who found her niche among friends: “she seems to be self-motivated, and… self-
satisfied, wants to do well.” Matt illustrates a student who was “thriving in school, always
answering questions.” Elaine discusses a male student who “just worked really really hard and
asked questions when he needed to.” Perhaps different from some of their parents’ perceptions,
Latino/a students have identified and embraced the qualities that are expected and valued in the
dominant society in the U.S. Their acculturation in this regard is evident, serving as a gateway to
more supportive and communicative relationships with teachers as they move into higher
education.

**Institutional agents and peer networks**

Institutional agents can refer to adults and children, and both have the capacity to pass on
knowledge of institutional resources and opportunities, as explained by Stanton-Salazar and
Dornbusch (1995). Teachers play the role of institutional agents for the benefit of parents and
students, as they help to navigate the school system and provide relevant information about
school-related opportunities. We see this in the way that they address students, depicted through
the words of a teacher and parent.

Laura illustrates the ways in which different teachers interact with their students. Some
she describes as being straightforward, others stern, one utilizes humor. She comments on the
motive of these varying approaches, recognizing mainly that they happen when there are conditions that require them. “I don’t think that we deal differently because a student is Latino, it would be that we deal differently with a student because we know they have extenuating circumstances.” The mindset is, to borrow the words of another teacher, “not let them slip through the cracks,” no matter who it is. Gloria recounts a story of a teacher that her son has class with, who works with students individually until they understand the content. Both instances demonstrate the ways in which teachers advocate for their students through their guidance and actions.

Institutional agents outside the classroom prove to be central in their efforts to include and inform all students and their parents of extracurricular opportunities as well. Barbara’s explanation of her efforts to connect students and their families to opportunities illustrates one such example. Sports teams are recognized as establishing a means of belonging and a predetermined friend group for team members, and Barbara mentions the waiving of “pay to play” (parent financial investment in equipment, uniform, transportation fees, etc.) as an attempt to involve more students in the supportive environment that these activities offer. Especially for students who are new to the district, or perhaps the country, the experience of being part of a team is a way to bring them out of their shell, as was the case with Julia’s son. She includes his involvement in sports in her definition of his personal success, commenting on how his confidence has grown as a result. Sports and other extracurricular activities present an opportunity for students to share friendships and bond over similar interests.

The bond over similar interests can be constructive or destructive, and presents itself as a very strong influence in the lives of middle school students. At a pivotal phase in their adolescent development, comfort and friend group belonging are important determinations of behavior and
academic orientation. Teachers and parents described successful students by their behavior in school, but included important details about the influence of peers on this performance as well. Those that were illustrated as successful made mention of personal attributes, but were usually included in the recounting of their membership in a group. Depictions of students who were not successful were varied in their rationales, but more than one pointed to the friend group as a source of distraction and negative influence. Even when a child is “a very bright student, [with] a lot of potential,” friends can overpower the intelligence and the capability that a student demonstrates. While students should certainly be able to choose their own friends, it would be beneficial if they had additional opportunities to explore their interests outside the school day.

Research and personal anecdotes from participant interviews indicate the sense of belonging created as the result of being a ranking member of a team, as compared to a smaller friend group. With the mentality of a team being driven by a sense of support and camaraderie, participation, especially at the middle school level, seems valuable for students to establish a more firmly rooted positive orientation toward school. This may be especially true for students whose own friend groups do not display the characteristics of academic support and participation that more successful students are provided. In Matt’s characterization of the student who is “sinking down to where his friends are,” the student might benefit from being part of a more controlled and encouraging environment in order to realize his own potential.

*Ser or estar?: Consulting native speakers*

A central aspect of student acculturation in the U.S. is learning English for the purpose of communication, in the academic and social sense. In order to better adapt to the dominant culture, it is important to take on its primary characteristics. Part of this process of acculturation often includes a concentration on the target language, and less reliance placed on the home
language, in this case Spanish. Students are encouraged to shed their Spanish, at least during the school day, to better focus their efforts hearing, speaking, and grasping English. According to Linton (2004), “parents’ education decreases the probability that second- and third-generation Chinese and Latino children will be bilingual” (p. 295). As parents learn English themselves and the native language is not necessary in the home, they view it as a hindrance to learning English, holding students back from fluency in the more important language in the U.S.

Bilingual students are more favorably recognized when they are learning a language in addition to English, as English is recognized as the language of communication in the U.S. Portes and Schauffler (1994) found that “although many parents of upper and middle class backgrounds encouraged their children to learn Latin, French, or German, bilingualism on the part of recent immigrants was frowned upon” (p. 642). Students are not valued as highly for their bilingualism if Spanish is their primary language, unless the institution serves to benefit in some way from the linguistic knowledge of its students. This idea is the central premise of interest-convergence theory, where the dominant culture more openly accepts the minority culture and/or its demands when the dominant culture identifies a potential benefit for itself.

An example of this plays out clearly within the school building in relation to Spanish home language speakers. Teachers make reference to a student who translates for his parents and others that come to the main office, a student who “became the hero” once he was matched with a monolingual Spanish speaker who was new to the district, and students that are trusted with the responsibility of translating forms for their parents at home. In these instances, these students are valuable in making sure that everyone is reached, whether they are parents or students themselves. The use of Spanish under other circumstances, whether between newly settled students, or within minority-dominant schools, is often viewed as a factor that sets them apart
from their dominant culture peers. In the context of translation for the school’s convenience, these students are viewed in a new light as they take on the role of interpreter. In these particular cases, Spanish is viewed as a tool that benefits the function of the school to include and inform parents and students of relevant information.

Anchored impressions/transforming goals

The U.S. ideal of success is the concept of “making it,” and that goal is most often achieved through schooling. Education is perceived as the gateway to upward mobility, and schools have the vision of higher education in mind as they prepare their students for the next level. When teachers in this study were asked to talk about a successful Latino/a student, their stories were derived from classroom interactions and characteristics that are looked upon most favorably in the school setting. Teachers saw school as a means to an end: students would “make it” by performing well in school, attending college, and securing a job. They cannot be faulted for their responses, as they were crafted in a way that asked about success from an academic standpoint. One of the more interesting analyses was the comparison of teacher to parent responses around the question of success.

Compared to the fixed mindset of teachers regarding student success, parents had much broader definitions and future hopes for their children’s success. While the interview took place centered on education, their responses about hopes for the future included topics that surpassed the simple “college” answer. Most parents did include college in their reply, but were more focused on characteristics that they believed would lead to success. Their ideals were not so much focused on the end as the means; they were interested in the process that leads to success and the ways in which their children would grow along the way. Sports led Julia’s son to come out of his shell and ask more questions of his peers and coaches; Graciela talked about her
daughter receiving a degree as a means to starting her career; Shirley hopes her son becomes an honest man for the good of society. These mothers incorporate more into their hopes than schooling alone, and hope for things that allow their children to grow, branch out, and benefit those around them. This mindset is reminiscent of the Latino/a cultural approach to collectivism, this time not so much in the sense of benefitting a group over an individual, but in the way that their goals expand more than just the one-track academic mind that is often designated when considering definitions of success. This emphasis on a wide range of possibilities and aspirations speaks to the concept of choice highlighted by the actions that teachers describe in their classrooms as well as the verbal affirmations made by parents about hopes for their children’s futures.

As a community, Nyack is relatively established in its structure and beliefs. The presence of a university creates stability within the city, and this steadiness is reflected in the local culture. Interview participants, both teachers and Latino/a parents, discussed the dichotomy between settled versus migrant/ new immigrant families to the area. One teacher indicated that she had no sense of the Latino/a population in town because she never saw them in public places. Becoming part of the community requires effort and acceptance by the established residents of Nyack, no small feat for outsiders.

The organization of the middle school shows some of the same rooted ideals, at least in some ways. Speaking with the ESL teacher who works between the middle school and the high school, it was soon clear that the schedules for students were different at each school. The high school devotes time to English language learners (ELL) by arranging ESL classes as part of their class schedule. By contrast, she explains to me that the middle school removes students from a class and she spends 45 minutes with students twice a week. The principal confirmed that the
classes they are removed from are not core classes, but instead study hall or art/ gym. When asked about why the high school and middle school differed, he agreed that it was a good question. “I don’t know the history of it because I’ve only been here four years, and it was like that when I walked into this job.” While this appears to be another example of established practices and implicit agreement, the ensuing discussion may suggest otherwise.

Instead of dismissing the ESL schedule as something that was out of his control, Matt spoke about plans for change. He explained that the high school schedule is more flexible, and this may allow for a designated ESL period.

Here [at the middle school] because we’re on teams, the class schedule is a lot more rigid, so algebra may only be offered third period. So to find one period for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders that can all be pulled out of class at the same time is a little more challenging. The rationale makes sense; middle school presents much stricter class scheduling than what is made available to students at the high school level. Matt shared the details of a proposal to schedule ESL classes at the middle school the same way that the high school does starting next school year. The plan would have ESL classes offered first and second period, and would not remove students from another class. “I’ve talked to our Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, and we both feel that that’s really important here.” This proposed change recognizes the needs of ELL students, and may serve as a quicker, more effective path to English proficiency than waiting for a scheduled class at the high school level.

Where the town is seemingly comfortable in its anchored principles, some of Matt’s actions as middle school principal are breaking the town mold. One of the larger anticipated plans that he shared was the formation of a district-wide equity team. To be comprised of teachers, parents, administrators, counselors, special education teachers and others, the highlight
of the committee about “really having difficult conversations with teachers, with students, with coaches, you name it,” Matt explains. He specifies taking action when inappropriate things are said:

…a lot of times they’re not intended to be inappropriate, but if you sit back and think about what’s being said whether it’s a student to a student or even a teacher to a student, what we have been doing as a district is really emphasizing those tough conversations.

Even in the planning stages, there is a clear direction that the committee will be taking its discussions. Matt highlights some of the sub groups that are of particular interest and necessity when the committee is developed: “they’re going to take a strong look on not just Latino students, but Special Education, economically disadvantaged, gender issues, etc. across the board.” When asked about the community itself earlier in his interview, Matt mentions several local organizations whose efforts are aimed at combating hateful behavior and developing a more inclusive environment for all residents. While the community certainly seems complacent in some ways, it also shows clear example of challenging implicit agreement and uncomfortable situations for the benefit of all its residents, and not just those who have called it home the longest.

**Recommendations**

ESL classes offered to ELL students are undoubtedly beneficial as a way to learn English in a structured school environment. But when benchmarks are not established and communication between the ESL teacher and classroom teachers is not taking place, how can progress be measured, and an appropriate level of challenge be incorporated? Barbara posed many relevant questions about the ESL program during her interview:
Are teachers aware of where they [ELLs] are in their English language [comprehension/proficiency]? Do we know? And then are we adjusting to their levels, and are we adjusting to make them successful, and to grow?... Are the teachers sharing with the ESL tutor what they’re seeing in the classroom? What accommodations are provided based on what the ESL tutor knows?

The questions were not asked in an accusatory tone, but instead in a manner of true concern. Where Paola described the team of teachers coming together to benefit her son Guillermo and his IEP, the same process should arguably take place for ELL students in tracking their progress overall. While some teachers spoke of students who made admirable transformations from the time they entered the school to the time they left in eighth grade, not all students learn in the same way or have the same tools. For those that are facing additional barriers or outside struggles, it cannot be expected that they know to ask for extra help or more challenging coursework, especially if they are uncomfortable with speaking English or addressing adult authority figures in accordance with Latino cultural norms. While perhaps not needed as often as the team teachers’ daily meetings about their students, it would be beneficial for team teachers to meet with the ESL teacher on a regular basis to monitor progress and adjust classroom approaches to students who are at different stages in their English language learning.

Returning to the theme of barriers, one teacher makes an interesting observation about an issue that she sees impacting Latino/a students and their families. She indicates that many of the Latino/a students also fall within the category of economically disadvantaged, as well as the fact that many are “coming without the tools to learn.” Finally, Alison elaborates on the idea of poverty: “I think a lot of them are coming from generational poverty issues, and so you’re looking at this whole long term poverty situation where it’s what we can do today, what we can
do to survive through today.” When this is the case, and parents experience these conditions out of need to support the family, it is increasingly probable that even if they were able to break the cycle of poverty, they may not possess the cultural capital to support their children in their academic pursuits. Even if a parent did possess the cultural capital to access higher education as an option, a student may not feel comfortable or adequately supported in their goals if they do not have a mentor or a role model to consult in the process; someone who looks like them, understands their culture, etc.

Considering the close proximity of a university in the same city that the case study was conducted, it would be beneficial to institute a mentoring program between the Latino Student Organization at the university and the middle/ high school Latino/a student population. In the process of this collaboration, middle and high school students would be able to familiarize themselves with the prospect of higher education, while simultaneously having someone to identify with as a current university student. Latino/a students in the U.S. will likely not be taught by someone who looks like them, so this could serve as an opportunity to see someone like them in higher education, making the idea more encouraging and attainable.

Sports have been examined and discussed by teachers and parents alike, and the support for the impact that they have on students is overwhelming. Teams are credited with providing an inclusive environment for similar interests, and they are also recognized for their role as healthy and structured environments for friendships and expectations like teamwork, camaraderie, etc. They present an excellent opportunity for students at the middle school level where student belonging is essential. While they represent a viable option for those interested in physical activity and recreation, not all students are athletically inclined. The middle school currently offers ten after-school clubs for its students; two of the clubs are for chess and video games, one
is about staying drug-free, one is for bible study, and one meets only once a month. Other clubs include opportunities for volunteer activities, art, or yoga. The principal explained that clubs change based upon student interest throughout the year. Although the act of documenting student interest is not known, one would hope that it follows a process similar to the one Barbara described. In her role as guidance counselor, she spoke of wanting to form groups to better target student needs. She set up laptops at lunchtime where students were invited to take a survey about the areas in which they would like additional support. Approaching the issue in this way allowed for all students’ concerns to be recorded and taken into account. The process was truly democratic in its strategy, and while student needs are certainly different from student extracurricular interests, both require appropriate guidance and support from institutional agents in the school.

**Future research**

Middle school studies are underrepresented in the research field, which served as a central reason for conducting the present study. This study is difficult to generalize, as it took place in an environment that is distinct from other regions and cases that have been previously documented. More specifically, it would be valuable to conduct research at minority-dominant middle schools in particular, much like the research that was consulted for this study’s literature review, which took place in mostly minority-dominant high schools. The findings from this case drastically contrast with the findings from minority-dominant high schools, and it is unclear if these differences arise from the differing populations within the schools, or from another factor altogether. It is difficult to understand what happens from the middle school level, defined by supportive and individualized support, to some of the scenarios described in the high school setting, characterized by animosity between students and teachers.
Even the philosophy at the middle school level, with its focus on support, inclusion, and relationship building, differs from the island mentality of high school, where students are expected to take on more responsibility for their own education. It would be fascinating to see the results of students attending a high school that takes on some of the principal middle school characteristics, especially for students that may struggle in a typical school environment. It is unclear at this point if such schools exist, but it would be beneficial to understand how they balance the two philosophies and see students through to graduation.

Finally, it would be valuable to study the results of a longitudinal investigation that followed students from middle school into high school, tracking their progress, relationships, and the degree to which they felt supported. The present research, especially for minority students, seems to focus on an environment that feels disjointed and aggressive (“students don’t care,” “parents aren’t involved,” etc.). Being able to follow the breakdown of hypothetically supportive middle school to independent high school might bring to light ways in which the transition from middle to high school may be eased for students, as teachers at the different schools expand conversations in order to bridge the gap from one school to the next.
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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Teachers---

1) What is your subject area?
   How many years have you been teaching at Nyack Middle School?
   Are you from here?

2) As I’m interested in learning more about Latino students in school here, tell me about some (unique) characteristics of this population here, in and around Nyack.

3) What is your general perception of this community (in Nyack)?
   Is it welcoming to Latinos?

4) Think back to a Latino student who was successful in school. What do you think contributed to that person’s success?

5) Think back to a Latino student who was not successful in school. What do you think contributed to the challenges that person experienced?

6) How would you describe your relationships with Latino students in your classes?
   a. Follow-up: in the school (extra-curricular, sports)?
   b. Follow-up 2: in the community (church, organizations, clubs, sports)?

7) How would you describe the relationships that other teachers have with these students?
   a. Follow-up: at the school level?
   b. Follow-up 2: at the community level?

8) What do you notice about the Latino students’ peer groups? Who are their friends?
   a. Potential follow-up: Do you see students interacting with those that are most like them?

9) How do you see Latino students using language (English and Spanish) in social interactions?
   a. Do you see a relationship between the students’ language use and ability and their academic achievement?

10) How would you describe your interactions with Latino parents?
    a. How do these interactions compare with how you interact with other parents?

11) When it comes to official school communication with parents, have there been efforts to communicate with them in languages other than English?

12) How do you perceive relationships between Latino students and their parents?

13) Within middle school classrooms, do you notice any unique differences between Latino:
Parents---

1) How long have you lived in Nyack? Describe the area to me (the people, the place, etc.)
   *Por cuánto tiempo usted ha vivido en Nyack? Describame el area (la gente, el lugar, etc.)*

2) Describe your ideal teacher. *Describa para usted el maestro ideal.*

3) What is the role that parents should play in their child’s academic life?
   *Qué papel deben desempeñar los padres en la vida académica de su niño?*

4) Describe your involvement in your child’s school life. *Describame su participación en la vida escolar de su niño?*

5) Describe their relationships with teachers. *Describa sus relaciones con sus maestros.*

6) Relationships with other students. *Relaciones con otros estudiantes.*

7) Do you think your child is successful in school? *Piensa que su niño tiene éxito en la escuela?*

8) How would you describe your relationship with your child’s teacher/teachers at the school? *Como la describe su relación con el maestro de su niño/maestros en la escuela?*
   a. (Potential follow-up): Would you like to know them better? Are there challenges that prevent you from working more closely with the teacher? *Quisiera conocerlos mejor? Hay algunos obstáculos que le impiden de colaborar más personalmente con el maestro?*
   b. What would an ideal relationship between yourself and your child’s teacher look like? *Como se parece una relación ideal entre usted y el maestro de su niño?*

9) What is your general perception of this community (in Nyack); is it welcoming to this population (anyone that identifies as Latino)? *Como es su percepción general de la comunidad? Es un lugar de bienvenida a esta población que se identifica como Latino/a?*

10) What are your own hopes for your child, academically or otherwise? *Cuales son sus propias esperanzas para su niño, academicamente o de otra manera?*
Introduction
My name is Diana Pitcher, and I am working with Dr. Christopher Frey as my thesis advisor. I am a student in the Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education (MACIE) program at BGSU. I am researching the parent and teacher perspectives of Latino middle school students’ experiences in a small Ohio school. I was encouraged to attend meetings of La Conexión in order to get to know this population by Dr. Alberto González, and am interested in interviewing you as a parent of a middle school child.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of Latino students, in one junior high school in a small, rural Ohio city. In talking with parents, I’m interested in learning about your perspective on your child’s education. While there is research on elementary and high school experiences of Latino students, there is less writing about middle school Latino students. This study seeks to add research to the field for this population of students. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant for your participation; participants will be contributing to the research in this field. There is also potential to create stronger bonds between the Latino community and the school itself through participation in this study.

Procedure
The study will be based on interviews with parents and teachers of middle school students. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. I would like to audiotape the interview with your permission. It will take place at a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will be conducted individually.
A third party may be present if you would like. The interview can be given in Spanish or English, depending on your preference.
You may be contacted to participate in a member check procedure, which will take approximately 30 minutes. Member check is an opportunity to review the transcript for mistakes or clarifications needed.

Voluntary nature
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the interview at any time, and may choose not to answer any questions. Whether or not you choose to participate will not impact future relations with me, Bowling Green State University, or the cooperating schools or agencies. Participation or withdrawal will not affect any rights to which you are entitled.

Confidentiality/ Anonymity Protection
The information you provide in this interview will not be linked to your name. All transcripts of audiotapes made during the interview will:
- Use a pseudonym (false name) to protect your identity
- Alter any additional information that may reveal your identity.
The audio recordings from the interview will be kept in a password-protected computer in my possession, and will be available to no one but myself. The signed consent forms will be kept in a
locked location in my office. Once the study is complete, the audio recording of the interview will be destroyed. No identifying information will be used, such as gender, country of origin, how long participants have lived in Bowling Green, etc.

**Risk or discomfort**

There are no physical or mental health risks to participating in this study. Some participants may feel uncomfortable sharing their information. The following steps will be taken to minimize any feelings of discomfort:

- Interview will be held in a mutually agreed upon location, allowing for you to feel safe and comfortable
- If at any time during the interview you would like to stop, advise me and I will stop the interview.
- If you feel uncomfortable at any point, ask me to stop the interview.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (845-264-3913), ([dpitche@bgsu.edu](mailto:dpitche@bgsu.edu)), or my Thesis advisor Dr. Christopher Frey, Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University at (419-372-9549), ([cjfrey@bgsu.edu](mailto:cjfrey@bgsu.edu)). You may also contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419-372-7716), ([hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu)) if any issues or concerns come up during the course of the study. Attached is a copy of the consent document for you to keep for your records.

**I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.**

Signature of participant:

_______________________________________________________________________________ Date: ___________

Printed name of participant:

_______________________________________________________________________________
Informed Consent for Teachers

Introduction
My name is Diana Pitcher, and I am working with Dr. Christopher Frey as my thesis advisor. I am a student in the Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education (MACIE) program at BGSU. I am researching the experiences of Latino middle school students in the United States from the perspective of their parents and their teachers. I am interested in interviewing you as a middle school teacher in a district that has a fairly sizable enrollment of Latino students.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of Latino students, in one junior high school in a small, rural Ohio city. In talking with teachers, I’m interested in learning about your experience in the classroom, and how you perceive the experience of Latino students in your class(es). While there is research on elementary and high school experiences of Latino students, there is less writing about middle school Latino students. This study seeks to add research to the field for this population of students. There are no direct benefits to you as a participant for your participation; participants will be contributing to the research in this field. There is also potential to create stronger bonds between the Latino community and the school itself through participation in this study.

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You may be contacted to participate in a member check procedure, which will take approximately 30 minutes. Member check is an opportunity to review the transcript for mistakes or clarifications needed.

Voluntary nature
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the interview at any time, and may choose not to answer any questions. Whether or not you choose to participate will not impact future relations with me, Bowling Green State University, or the cooperating schools or agencies. Participation or withdrawal will not affect any rights to which you are entitled.

Confidentiality/ Anonymity Protection
The information you provide in this interview will not be linked to your name. All transcripts of audiotapes made during the interview will:

- Use a pseudonym (false name) to protect your identity
- Alter any additional information that may reveal your identity.

The audio recordings from the interview will be kept in a password-protected computer in my possession, and will be available to no one but myself. The signed consent forms will be kept in a locked location in my office. Once the study is complete, the audio recording of the interview will be destroyed.
Risk or discomfort
There are no physical or mental health risks to participating in this study. Some participants may feel uncomfortable sharing their information. The following steps will be taken to minimize any feelings of discomfort:

- Interview will be held in a location that has been mutually agreed upon, allowing for you to feel safe and comfortable.
- If at any time during the interview you would like to stop, advise me and I will stop the interview.
- If you as the participant feel uncomfortable at any point, ask me to stop the interview.

Contact information
If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (845-264-3913), (dpitche@bgsu.edu), or my Thesis advisor Dr. Christopher Frey, Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University at (419-372-9549), (cjfrey@bgsu.edu). You may also contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419-372-7716), (hsrb@bgsu.edu) if any issues or concerns come up during the course of the study. Attached is a copy of the consent document for you to keep for your records.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Signature of participant: ____________________________ Date: ___________

Printed name of participant: ___________________________________________
DATE: September 6, 2016

TO: Diana Pitcher
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [882309-3] Latino Middle School Students' Social Integration and Academic Achievement, Through the Eyes of Parents and Teachers
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: August 23, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: August 22, 2017
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on August 22, 2017. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board’s records.