The Silencing of Latino Student "Voice": Puerto Rican and Mexican Narratives in Eighth Grade and High School

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Narratives of 27 Puerto Rican and Mexican students, written first in eighth grade then again as juniors in high school, address the important question of "Who am I?" and illustrate school-sponsored silencing, with students' critiques of their educational experience ignored by both the elementary and the high school. The narratives also provide a window into the high dropout rates of Latino children, the reasons behind students' academic decisions, and interventions needed to change negative schooling processes and outcomes. By giving witness to these voices, we as readers help ensure that through their writing, these Latino adolescents do not just speak but that they are heard.

In sixth grade my teacher was Mr. S. Mr. S. had a stick. If you were talking or something he would hit you with it. His stick's name was "George." He had wrapped it in tape so that when he hit you it would hurt more. In seventh grade my teacher had red hair and when she spoke to someone she always spit at that person. Since she retired we got a substitute until the principal could find another capable teacher. So our teacher for a long period of time was Mrs. R. We used to call her "chocolate chip" because she had a big mole on her upper lip. After Mrs. R. we had another teacher who we thought was going to be our permanent seventh grade teacher. She lasted about two days I think. Then she left for an eighth grade class . . . and the teachers kept changing. That seventh grade was so confusing I didn't learn a thing but I tried.

My worst experience was in 5th grade. I got stupid in Math. I had a very low I.O.W.A. score. I didn't know how to divide. When my teacher used to call on me to do a division problem, which I couldn't do, I started to cry. He used to yell at me. So I sometimes just didn't go.

I didn't understand anything until 4th grade. Then I got a regular [nonbilingual] teacher and it was awful. He was so mean. He would act like we were in the army and make me stand for punishment in the closet. I hated regular class.

These statements are excerpts taken from eighth grade "autobiographies" and offer a profile of poor and working-class Puerto Rican and Mexican students at their point of entry into Lares High, a predominantly Latino high school in Chicago. The autobiographies are part of the students' school files made available to me while engaging in an ethnographic study of Lares from the end of the 1990-91 school year...
through the 1991–92 school year. From a sample of 54 eighth-grade autobiographies, 47 of the narratives were written by Mexican and Puerto Rican students, with 27 of these same students writing narratives again during their junior year in high school (1991–92).

The two sets of narratives offer a snapshot of Latino students' views of family, school, ethnicity, and future plans. I came across the narratives fortuitously during a conversation with one of the high school counselors. Describing her views of the social and academic problems that plagued so many of Lares' students, she explained that when she had occasion to look at a student's file she sometimes found her or his "autobiography" helpful in her efforts to address "acting out" in school. According to this counselor, the practice of having students write an autobiography at the end of their eighth-grade year had become institutionalized in the three elementary feeder schools that provided the majority of Lares' students. The assignment was given by each elementary school's English teacher. The narratives, which averaged six pages in length, were not graded. Intended to provide insights into the lives and experiences of prospective freshmen students, the autobiographies were sent to the high school counselors as part of students' academic files.

In subsequent conversations with the other high school counselors I inquired about these narratives and discovered that although all of the nine counselors knew of the narratives, only two or three of them acknowledged having read the narratives. Unfortunately, even those who did read the narratives were moved to do so only when dealing with a problem student (i.e., a student who in their view exhibited antisocial or antischool behavior). Thus, it is fair to say that the high school counselors framed their use of these narratives, and therefore undoubtedly their interpretations of the texts, as tools for dealing with some problematic behavior in need of resolution.

As my interest in the narratives became apparent, I was offered a sample of the eighth grade autobiographies, which had been collected by the counselor with whom I first spoke. I intended to use them only to enhance my understanding of the attitudes and behaviors of the high school students with whom I interacted. However, as I read and re-read the narratives, I became increasingly frustrated that these scenarios of schooling and critiques of the educational experience were never heard. I was therefore compelled to analyze these narratives by what Ellis and Bochner (1996) call the "ethical pull" of converting information into experiences readers can use, and by the idea that academic work should in some way make a difference, if only to provide a conduit for these student voices.

The narratives tell us much more than why a particular high school student might be in some type of institutional trouble. Rather, the voices in these narratives represent an incredibly rich source for understanding Latino youth. By filing the narratives in folders never to be seen or heard again, educators had effectively silenced these students' voices. Even the teachers who assigned and read them apparently focused on style and
the demonstration of grammatical skills, attending to the narrative form rather than to its substance. Here, I bring these self-stories forward as a means of informing us about how Latino youth make meaning of their lives and address the important question of “Who am I?” within the matrix of social relationships in which their lives are embedded.

Voice, Silence, and Power

According to Carol Gilligan (1982) and Brett Blake (1997), voice implies having power over the presentation of reality and meaning, and the ability to construct, articulate, and therefore shape one’s experience as it is presented to others. Just as persons exhibit multiple selves that are situated in different contexts, so too do they exhibit multiple voices (e.g., the public voice versus the private voice, the voice used with friends versus with teachers in school). Richard Ruiz (1997) cautions us to remember, however, that voice is not synonymous with empowerment nor is language synonymous with voice. Rather, language is merely the tool through which voice is expressed. For voice to be empowering, it must be heard, not simply spoken.

Although these Latino children had two languages, they had no voice, at least in matters related to their schooling. They spoke through their narratives but no one listened. Despite a careful reading of the literature on narrative inquiry (Denzin 1994; Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994; Richardson 1994) my attempts to do justice to the data (i.e., to get closer to the texts and to be open to their messages) undoubtedly remain only moderately successful. Because I am primarily interested in the schooling experiences of Latinos and how these experiences contribute either positively or negatively to students’ academic decisions, I continue to interpret text segments as they connect to schooling. I also bring to this story my personal history as a third-generation Mexican American. My ethnic identity and beliefs about what schooling is supposed to be are unquestionably interwoven with my interpretations of the narratives.

According to Michelle Fine, school-sponsored silencing refers to the formal and informal ways in which the school controls “who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled” (1991:33). By listening to 27 of these voices, first as eighth graders, then again as juniors in high school, we get a glimpse of the process of school-sponsored silencing as students write about schooling and their futures. These autobiographies afford us an opportunity to hear how students construct schooling and identity, to discover the factors that influence such constructions, and to understand why a “student identity” often fails to sustain Latino youth through the schooling process and set them on positive career trajectories. We also begin to understand how Latino students define success, both in school and in life, how and possibly why these definitions change over time, and the role of the school in these changes. The narratives act as a window into the seemingly intractable dropout rates of Latino children, the reasons behind their academic
decisions, and the interventions needed to change these persistently unfavorable directions. By giving witness to student voices, we as readers help ensure that these Latino adolescents do not just speak, but that they are heard.

Constructing "Self-Stories": The Data

Although my primary source of information is the student narratives, the narratives are embedded within an educational ethnography focused on the impact of schooling on Latino students' academic decision-making. Therefore, a brief profile of Lares High School and the fieldwork is warranted. At the time of the study, this predominantly Latino high school enrolled approximately 2,900 students, largely of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and increasingly, Central American descent. The school's low-income enrollment hovered around 65 percent, with a graduation rate ranging between 27 and 35 percent. The statistical indicators of this school reveal all the characteristics of a central-city high school serving largely impoverished students. The community within which these adolescents lived and attended school was typical of an inner-city community with high rates of poverty, crime, and unemployment (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1991). The fieldwork in Lares occurred over a year and a half and included formal and informal interviews with students.

Table 1.
The Structure of Student Autobiographies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selves</th>
<th>Average No. Pages</th>
<th>Selves</th>
<th>Average No. Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Juniors in High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican (20)</td>
<td>Puerto Rican (27)</td>
<td>Mexican (16)</td>
<td>Puerto Rican (11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Birthplace</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
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<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Ethnic Origins</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Days</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Educational Experience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Plans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Future Plans</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life in Ten Years</td>
<td>*</td>
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<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean No.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Pages</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Symbolizes that this category was not part of the narrative
—Represents less than a page written on this topic
teachers, administrators, and staff (including some parents), as well as extensive observations of the general daily life of the school (e.g., classrooms, school activities, hallways, staff and school council meetings).

In addition to the elementary autobiographies, two of the high school English teachers who had included an abbreviated version of this assignment in their classes also provided me with copies of those narratives. With junior narratives in hand I was able to return to the counselors and match the 27 narratives with those written by the same students in eighth grade.

Similar in structure to each other, the eighth grade and junior narratives are also conveniently isomorphic to Edwin Farrell's (1994) conceptualization of the selves he argues are necessary for inner-city students' success in school (see Table 1). Farrell (1994) suggests that although adolescents, like adults, have multiple selves (e.g., the ethnic self), the integration of three roles or selves is necessary for student academic success: a family self, a student self, and a career self. However, Farrell maintains that while the development and practice of each of these roles is important to young people, only two of these selves are critical for inner-city students to develop and sustain a student identity: the student and the career self. Although the selves are never formally defined by Farrell, a paraphrasing suggests that the family self develops and exists in relation to the primary social group, which can be nuclear, single parent, or extended. The family can be a significant support system as well as a major source of tension in the development of this self. The student self develops through secondary relationships in school, with young people engaging in interactions where there is greater social distance and less affect between persons. This self is often performance-based and can create pressure and stress as well as provide tremendous satisfaction, self-esteem, and empowerment. The career self is projected as future worker in the adult world. Even more than the other two selves, this self is in its embryonic stages, particularly in elementary and middle school, and consequently more fluid as students experiment with who and what they will become in later life.

Farrell's framework is used here as a heuristic device to guide examination of the narratives and how Latino students present the selves argued by Farrell to be so important for academic success. Clearly there are considerations when analyzing narratives assigned by teachers and written during classroom time. Unlike the private writing contexts described by Blake (1997), in which fifth-grade girls also wrote in journals outside the school setting, the autobiographies analyzed here are situated in the public context of the classroom. I did not have access to the students' eighth-grade English teachers to ask questions about their introduction and explanation of the narrative. I do not know the extent to which teachers guided the content of the narratives by offering examples or suggestions to students either as a class or individually. Therefore, I was forced to make certain assumptions about the narratives.
First, although these are personal narratives and they were not graded (at least not in elementary school), the written discourse is situated within a public context of known evaluation and infused with a history of teacher-student interaction that undoubtedly influenced narrative form and possibly content.

A second assumption is that I as researcher also participate in constructing the students' reality. In my attempt to comprehend Latino student experiences, I rely upon prior research and focus my attention on the self-stories as they relate to success in school. Thus, the construction and presentation of these self-stories involve a collaboration of several voices: those of the student, the teacher, and myself. The teacher constructs the text in assigning and guiding the autobiography. The students construct the text through the meaning they attach to the narrative segments, selecting, editing, distorting, or embellishing both the assignment and the events described. I construct the text by focusing on those aspects of students' lives most clearly related to school success, and undoubtedly, readers will also construct these texts by bringing to them their personal and intellectual experiences.

Finally, regardless of whether I believe that I am reading "voice," I am reading the text of voice—text that has been contaminated by language, the form deemed appropriate by the canon and by the teacher, and my editing. Thus, at best, this is a picture of voice, not the voices themselves.

These self-stories recount a variety of experiences from which Puerto Rican and Mexican students derive their interpretations of schooling, with their interpretations shifting between elementary school and high school. As their own biographers, students construct, mark, edit, and dramatize certain events while ignoring others and we are occasionally led to question the truth-value of their self-stories. Indeed, to the extent that they represent retrospective analysis or "memorias," we can ask what is the value of these narratives? As Irma Olmedo points out in her analysis of narrative research, "If an important objective of doing life narrative research is to understand the cultural values of the narrators, the truth status of the individual stories may be less important than the value they are trying to support in the telling. The objective facts of the narratives may be less critical than the subjective value that they are affirming." (1999:366).

The autobiographies reveal the subjective experience of students and their constructions of schooling, how they create meaning of these experiences, and how they cope with schooling. As eighth graders, Latinos offer accounts of predominantly negative schooling experiences, even in the public context of classroom writing and with the narratives directed by the school's agent, the teacher. Elementary students also offer an abundance of self-recriminations for academic failure such as the statements cited at the beginning of this article.
However, unlike the "uncaring students" described by Angela Valenzuela (1999:78–80) in her study of Mexican students, in spite of their negative experiences in the classroom and their confusion regarding the future, no eighth grader expressed a desire to leave or to quit school, nor did students question its utility. To the contrary, in forecasting their future, elementary students expressed what Bram Hamovitch (1996) calls the ideology of hope—the belief that opportunity in our society exists for everyone and that if they work hard they will be rewarded with social and economic mobility. Without exception, students projected themselves as future workers contributing to society and enhancing their own lives in the process. By the time these Latinos were juniors in high school, however, the ideology of hope was no longer discernible and students had developed a critical framework within which they regarded the school as culpable in their failure to achieve academically, offering a mix of self-recrimination and resentment of the school and its agents. The anger that many of these students revealed is apparent not only in their narratives but also in their interviews.

Teachers in high school don't care about us. I think that they do not like us. They never answer questions and they make you feel stupid for asking. They never offer to help you after class. After a while, you just stop asking.

They [teachers] ignore students. They treat us Hispanics different than they treat white people. They would rather deal with white people. And one teacher, he will just tell it to you. It makes me so mad but what can we do?

As these Latino students progressed through school, the negative descriptions of schooling emergent in eighth grade became consolidated and magnified, typifying what Valenzuela characterizes as the "interplay between subtractive cultural assimilation and student disaffection" (1999:93). What evolved was a story of Latino adolescents struggling to define and sustain identities as family and ethnic group members, students, and future workers. The narratives tell us how the school context influences these identities in typically negative ways. There also is a shift in the focus of blame for school failure. As juniors, students demonstrated a loss of optimism about their futures. Although several students failed to show an understanding of the critical connections between school and work, those who did understand this connection no longer assumed that opportunities would be afforded them.

Clearly, it is important to understand not only the conditions under which these narratives were written but the contents of the narratives as well. Even in the public context of classroom writing, what do these students' accounts reveal about their schooling experiences, perspectives, identities, self-esteem, and goals? Understanding these features of students' lives as they are presented in written discourse is critical to transforming these conditions.
Family/Familia

It is in the family section of the narratives where students identified themselves as either Puerto Rican or Mexican and provided some description of their birth (21 of the 27 students were born in the U.S.). This also is the section in which narrative differences between the two ethnic groups are most pronounced. The eighth-grade narratives offer an illustration of familism (i.e., the behavioral and psychological configuration of commitments to family life), particularly for Mexican students, with descriptions of ties to extended family members, recognition of the family as a social resource, abbreviated family histories, and comments on Mexico. In fact, one of the most extensive sections of the Mexican autobiographies is the description of family, with this section averaging two pages. Just as Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Carola Suarez-Orozco (1995) found in their work, these Mexican adolescents showed a deep sense of obligation toward and sense of the family as the most important aspect of their lives.

Puerto Rican students on the other hand wrote cursory descriptions of family life, providing little more than the age, birthplace, and name of each family member. Whereas 18 of the 20 Mexican eighth graders wrote in some detail about their birth and family, only seven of the 27 Puerto Rican eighth graders elaborated on family, offering descriptions of interactions with family members and the importance of these persons in their lives. A second distinction of the Puerto Rican narratives is the salience of parent joblessness. Whereas Mexican students described their parents as role models, little mention was made of joblessness. The Puerto Rican narratives explicitly mentioned joblessness, with nearly half the Puerto Rican students (11 of 27) characterizing the head of household as unemployed or looking for work. Finally, only six of the Puerto Rican students described a nuclear family with both parents present in the household (again compared to 18 of 20 Mexican students). Consequently, for Puerto Rican students, the unemployed parent referred to was typically the mother.

My name is ____ and I was born September 14, 1973. I was born in Chicago.
My mother's name is ____. She was born 1/17/59 in Puerto Rico.
My brother's name is ____.
My mother is unemployed but she is in school and trying to find work.
My name is ____ and I was named after my father. But he doesn’t live with us. My mother and father were born in Ponce. I don’t really have a big family. I have two brothers and a sister. My two brothers are named ____ and ____. One is 19 and the other is 16. My little sister is ____ and she is 12. My mother doesn’t have a job right now but she keeps looking so that she can support us.

It is important to emphasize that Puerto Rican students did not describe family negatively; they simply did not offer much description beyond defining who was in the family, the family member’s relationship to the student, and the family member’s age. Missing in most of the Puerto Rican narratives was the portrayal of the family as the network of social capital reported here by Mexican students.

In asking why the two sets of narratives reflect a different focus for these Latino ethnic groups, I considered the salience of employment in the Puerto Rican narratives as simply related to suggestions by the teacher assigning the narrative. However, this does not account for the different ways in which Puerto Rican and Mexican students wrote about their family members. With respect to joblessness, it is possible that living in an ethnically mixed Latino neighborhood, the Puerto Rican children compared their family situations with other families where mothers worked in the paid-labor force. Ultimately I situated these expressions of family within the larger picture of each ethnic group’s situation in the United States.

More than other Latino ethnic groups, Puerto Ricans have experienced a decline in two-parent families and reduced economic status, whereas in 1990 (the time when these autobiographies were written), less than 20 percent of Mexican families were single-parent families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). Compared to other Latinas, Puerto Rican women have experienced the greatest changes in domestic life, with the highest rates of being single, divorced, widowed, or separated (Ortiz 1994). For example, the rate of Puerto Rican female headship of families almost tripled between 1960 and 1985, and is currently around 40 percent. Census data reveal that unmarried Puerto Rican mothers are less likely to be employed. For those who are employed, the median income of Puerto Rican female-headed families in the late 1980s was around $12,000, less than half that of all Puerto Rican families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

These statistics are interesting and may even be useful in interpreting the emphasis on mother’s employment by Puerto Rican students; however, given the small number of students who are writing it is difficult to know whether there is any meaning beyond the narrowest interpretation. Despite the differences found in Mexican and Puerto Rican descriptions of family life, these nuances are not found in other narrative sections.
Ethnic Origins/Identity

No Latino, assimilated or bicultural, escapes the quandaries and paradoxes of prejudice, paternalism, or personal dissonance, and their effects on identity. Carving an identity involves struggles between one’s ethnic group and the dominant group, as well as within one’s ethnic group. It is an ongoing dilemma of negotiation, resilience, and angst. Latino identity has been extensively researched and discussed (e.g., Bernal and Knight 1993; Murguia 1991; Oboler 1994; Oquendo 1998; Padilla 1985; Rodriguez et al. 1991; Santos 1998). This research has both personal meaning and implications for understanding the contents of these narratives.

In the elementary narratives, Latino children’s ethnicity emerges primarily in descriptive statements about their birth, parents, or travel to this country. Here students simply indicated their background in statements such as “I was born in Puerto Rico,” or “My mother and father are from Mexico,” without extended discussion of their ethnicity. However, the topic of ethnic origins was a formal part of the high school narratives; as juniors, students often wrote about their ethnic identity as an ongoing construction involving both a critique of the larger society and societal views of their ethnicity. Although most Latino students exhibited pride in their ethnicity, ambivalence within the same narrative also was expressed. These narrative segments resonate with Issacs’ (1975) assertion that our “snowman” of ethnicity, that elusive source of our identity, is simultaneously a source of pride as well as humiliation, particularly when we discover that our snowman is abominable to other groups.

In their narratives, comparatively more Puerto Rican students (six of 11) than Mexican students (three of 16), described this ambivalence. However, these differences are likely inconsequential as I was unable to draw any connections between students’ other family, friendship, or school situations and their statements about ethnicity. Nevertheless, Latino students made clear their awareness of their marginality and of how abominable their snowman of ethnicity is to the dominant society:

I am from the beautiful island of Puerto Rico. I was naturally born here in Chicago but my family has taught me my heritage and to be proud of what I am and where I’m from. Puerto Rico holds a lot of memories and with all those memories there is a lot of love.

Later in this same narrative segment the student wrote,

Sometimes I do not tell people I am Puerto Rican especially if they cannot tell because I know that many people do not like us or think we are very smart. It makes me feel bad but I know who I am and that I should be happy with that.

Two other Puerto Rican students wrote,

My nationality is best known as the loud-mouthed and badtempered gang-bangers and drug dealers. Although I love being what I am it is embarrassing
to know what most people think of us. I feel that if I try very hard and become the best person that I can be, I can change how people look at us.

People often think I am white. I am proud to be Puerto Rican and when I am with my brother, I speak in Spanish so that they will know I am Puerto Rican. It is not a good thing to say but I have to admit that I am afraid of whites. I do not like to be where there are no Puerto Ricans and I don't think that white people want us to be there. It hurts me to know what whites think of us, that we are all stupid and do drugs. We don't.

Like several of the Puerto Rican narratives, Mexican students described visiting Mexico and being proud of their heritage. Nevertheless, awareness of living on the margins also is evident:

I am a Hispanic who doesn't know much about his background. I guess alot of Hispanics don't know much about their background because it is not advertised much in history. There are sometimes when I do not like people referring to me as a Hispanic because it means that I am a minority and in a way that hurts.

Beverly Tatum (1997) points out that we all hold multiple, dominant, and targeted identities simultaneously, but it is the targeted identities that capture our attention. Why? These are the identities that mark us as the "other," and represent difference, with difference existing within a social, economic, and political hierarchy of meaning that translates as "less than." These targeted identities allow identification and subsequent marginalization, not only being pushed between two cultures but also placed on a social, economic, and political hierarchy. That is why the association of being an Hispanic with "it means that I am a minority" is troublesome to the Mexican student.

Insofar as students' narratives represent more general struggles surrounding Latino ethnicity, they alert us to the difficulty of achievement of any kind when children demonstrate ambivalence regarding a fundamental—and unchangeable—element of their identity. Without an awareness of ethnicity, how it operates in our society, and how children are situated because of it, it is impossible to create liberating learning environments that allow children to successfully transition from family and community to the unfamiliar world of school. And, as Davidson (1996:4) points out in her examination of student narratives, schools are "cultural arenas" that have a significant and direct impact on the creation and re-creation of students' ethnic and racial identities.

Schooling

The experiences described in the narratives analyzed here suggest that schooling is a confusing and punishing experience for most of the students, both as eighth graders and in high school. Just what makes schooling so unrewarding? The eighth-grade autobiographies signal specific types of experiences—mobility between countries, cities, neighborhoods, or
schools—that make adjustment to new environments necessary but difficult. The narratives also make mention of corporal punishment; difficulties with language acquisition, with acculturation and biculturalism; and relationships with teachers. Indeed, students typically evaluated a given school year in terms of their experiences with the teacher. Negative descriptions revolving around each of these issues dominate the narratives of both Puerto Rican and Mexican students, with the most notable and poignant narrative aspect being the tendency of eighth graders to look to themselves as the primary cause for failure in school. Statements such as those at the opening of this article, signaling difficulties with some aspect of the learning process, are ubiquitous. By the end of their elementary school experience, these Latino students took responsibility for their academic difficulties, or, as one student put it, for getting "dumber and dumber in school."

**Bilingual Classrooms**

One profound early educational experience in the narratives involves the process of second-language acquisition. As eighth graders, students frequently wrote about language proficiency in an obscure manner, talking about "regular" classes or stating that they didn't remember anything until a particular grade.

I don't remember what happened in kindergarten through third grade. All I remember is that I was in a bilingual room from kindergarten through fifth grade. The fifth grade was the scariest because it was a new change for me. I didn't know anyone in the room. The work was more difficult but I managed.

When I went to kindergarten I was very scared. I started crying and didn't want my mom to go. My teacher would call on me and I would start crying because I didn't know what she was saying.

I learned through talking with freshmen high school students that such comments were simply ways of expressing a student's lack of facility with English and her or his placement in or transition from bilingual classes. These statements referred not only to language use but also to the confusing process of acculturation.

Elementary bilingual classrooms, although recognized as not "regular," were typically described as a safe haven relative to the "real" classroom. As elementary students, Latinos appeared to understand, consciously or unconsciously, that the mainstream classroom was the point of reference—the norm by which they, as nonmainstream students, were academically, culturally and socially marginalized. Thus, an interesting dualism presents itself: The conceptions these students held of "bilingual" at once provided safety and familiarity, even as "bilingual" was recognized as not "regular" or "real." The word *bilingual* was used only occasionally in the narratives; it is unclear how much of a negative connotation these expressions (bilingual, real, regular) embodied, at
least in eighth grade. However, my fieldwork in the high school makes clear that within the Latino student population a status hierarchy emerged with bilingual students lower in the social hierarchy than those students who were able to negotiate the school environment in English (see also Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995; Valenzuela 1999).

The high school narratives indicate a negative social status associated with being bilingual, with U.S.-born or English-competent students derisively referring to recent Mexican immigrant and Puerto Rican students from the island as “los inmigrantes.” In fact, these students were isolated within a small number of classrooms on a particular floor of the school building. In this way, the bilingual program could be regarded as a school-within-a-school, self-contained and smaller in size. However, this school-within-a-school existed in a status hierarchy of students and teachers who typically received unequal access to human and material resources, with obvious consequences for both academic and social outcomes.

The research literature is clear that the lower the level of students’ English proficiency, the greater the likelihood that Latinos will drop out of school (Hispanic Dropout Project 1996; National Center for Education Statistics 1995; Whitworth 1988). Although many factors exogenous to the school play a role in this process, what is being illustrated here is the role of the elementary school and the fact that this process begins prior to high school. Indeed, nearly 40 percent of Latino students who drop out do so before the eighth grade (ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education 1995; Solis 1995).

Teacher Mobility

Along with the issues of language proficiency and acculturation, students wrote about frequent changes in teachers during the school year, predominately in elementary school but sometimes in high school, as well. Comments such as those in the opening epigraph of this article, written by a Mexican eighth grader, were found in 12 of the original sample of 47 elementary narratives and eight of the 27 junior narratives. Although educational researchers have long chronicled the significance of student mobility in attempting to explain dropout rates for urban youth, teacher mobility (i.e., the impact of absenteeism, turnover, temporary or unqualified teachers) has been virtually ignored.

Although students rarely stated (or possibly knew) why they had different teachers, the teachers being described were probably substitute or temporary teachers. Thus, in addition to coping with their own geographic mobility, culture shock, and language difficulties, Latino students attempted to acclimate to a school environment within which their teachers also were in flux. Whatever the causes, several students faced substitute teachers whose skills and commitment to the particular class may have been quite limited. The combination of student and teacher mobility heightened what was frequently an already unstable existence.
for these Latino children, forcing them to negotiate schooling within social contexts that may very well have been too fluid for successful academic development. Within these shifting contexts, students attempted to establish meaning, learn a new language, make friends, take exams, and learn, with none of these structural conditions under their control.

Despite descriptions about not knowing anything, disliking a teacher, or having an embarrassing or confusing classroom experience, the tenor of eighth graders' descriptions of schooling was benign in comparison to what they wrote as juniors in high school. As eighth graders, students did not accuse teachers of being racist or uninterested in their education. By the time these students are juniors however, perceptions of apathy, injustice, and racism become apparent, as students recognize how profoundly these conditions affect their educational lives, and many are convinced of teachers' general lack of interest in their educational progress. The written discourse of these Latinos as juniors alters from mere description of teachers or classroom events to the assessment of teachers and school, with anger permeating these newly voiced sentiments and expressed disdain for the schooling process itself. Student voice in these narratives allows us to see the shift from self-blame for their academic failure to blaming the educational institution for failing them.

Variously stated causes for boredom give meaning to students' anger. In an interview describing her "most boring" class with an interim music teacher, a Latina honors student provided this link between boredom and anger:

[He does] nothing but show videos and television programs. He keeps telling us that he is waiting for his school that he was sent from, to get him back, that his boss over there is trying to get him back, and that he hates it here. And I hate the class. I mean, I like learning. I love learning. I just don't like school.

Both the written discourse in junior narratives and student interviews are replete with the perceptions of teachers who either stated explicitly or conveyed in some other manner their lack of interest in teaching these students. In an interview with a student describing a nonbilingual math class, the student stated:

So she's teaching a class speaking Spanish and you know then she'll start speaking English and go back and forth. And there's a lot of people that don't understand [Spanish]. I do understand but still it's hard sometimes to keep up with her. Then when we have trouble with the homework and we go and bring it to her and ask her to explain how a certain problem's suppose to be done, she gets mad. You know, all hyper and everything. She says, 'I already explained that once,' you know. You know, some teachers get mad and that discourages kids.

Added to these written and verbal commentaries are my own observations while in the school. During this time, I witnessed certain teachers repeatedly leaving classrooms unattended for the majority of the
class period, only to discover one of these teachers having breakfast in the cafeteria. Two other teachers regularly conducted work extraneous to their school positions (selling real estate) during classroom time.

With experiences and perceptions such as these, it is not surprising that as juniors in high school these Latino youth failed to manifest strong positive school affiliations. Rather, students appeared to have discovered what Mura calls "the liberating power of anger" (1988:147). As eighth graders, students engaged in self-denigration, internalizing failure in school and directing anger at themselves instead of at those responsible for their failure. As juniors, Latino students finally engage in resisting oppressive acts that they vividly described in eighth grade. Through their written discourse, juniors self-consciously acknowledged their situation and their frustrations and resentments. According to Mura, the oppressed can only be liberated once they "own their rage at their condition and those who have caused it" (1988:148). The narratives provide a means for Latino students to do this; however, a voice is only heard when there is someone listening. One way in which the loss of voice is particularly noticeable is in the narrative sections connecting school with future goals and work aspirations.

Connections between School and Work

Although relatively little research has focused on how school contexts affect Latino adolescent identity development, even less has addressed the development of career identities among Latino youth (De Leon 1996). Thus, it is imperative that we examine the nexus between Latino adolescents' development of a student identity with their projections of self-as-worker. Analysis of the narrative sections on career and future plans helps us understand how Latino students experienced this process, and why, so often, the schooling-career connections critical for future educational and occupational success are either missing or inadequate among Latino youth.

Future Plans and the Self-as-Worker Identity

In the past two decades, educational researchers have focused on what is referred to as the school-to-work transition, asking how is it that students connect their schooling with work plans and how this connection translates into future occupational success. The underlying assumption of this research is that there is a positive relationship between students' valuing of school and school outcomes, and their economic or occupational prospects. It is the high school that typically presents the focus for studying this transition (Arum and Shavit 1995; Borman 1991; Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Rosenbaum 1996; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Nevertheless, it is appropriate to assume that the links between career aspirations and establishing an educational pathway for attaining those goals begins at a much earlier stage.
In her review of the literature on the status of Latino youth, Solis (1994) points to a mismatch between the educational plans and occupational aspirations of Latino students, with this disjuncture mitigating Latino students’ prospects for economic mobility. Such a lack of connection also is apparent in the narratives of Latino students. Here, I combine eighth-grade responses to the categories, “Future Plans” and “Life Ten Years from Now,” to examine the self-as-worker or the projected self. Although gender differences exist with respect to future careers, with the majority of students choosing traditionally gender-related occupations, the most important feature of the narratives is what Lois Weis (1988) calls the “fantasy futures” described by these eighth graders and the leveling of aspirations these students demonstrate as juniors.

In Kagan’s work (1984), white middle-class youth formulated ideas about their future roles with attention to specific pathways to professional careers (e.g., pediatrician, electrical engineer, journalist). Unlike their middle-class counterparts, Latino eighth graders indicated immature career plans and vague ideas of future work. The emphasis is on the material possessions or “fame” obtainable through a chosen job or career rather than the characteristics or intrinsic value of the occupation (e.g., skills, challenges, benefits). Nor did students indicate more than a superficial understanding of the career, as illustrated by comments such as, “I’d like to be an architect because it’s easy work. All I would have to do is sit down and draw a sketch of a house.” Students tend to select careers that are highly visible, meaning those careers they are most likely to encounter from viewing television (e.g., an NBA basketball player or a famous model, doctor, or clothes designer).

Although the typical future portrayed by both female and male students of both ethnic groups very much typified the so-called “American Dream” (i.e., marriage, two children, a home with two cars, and travel), prominent in these narratives were the emphasis on celebrity and fame coupled with statements of wanting to be a somebody. It is easy to infer that the aspirations of fame and celebrity, and the desire to be a somebody, reflect the fact that these Latinos did not currently see themselves as important. An alternative explanation for this expression is offered by the Suarez-Orozcos in their examination of achievement motivation among Latino adolescents, where Latino youth regarded “becoming somebody” as “a reparative act that would alleviate parental hardship” (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995:157), thus tying achievement motivation to the family self.

Other ways in which future plans and life in ten years take on the character of fantasy futures rather than achievable goals included students’ lack of awareness of the necessary pathways for achieving their goals.

By the time I am 23 or 24 I will be successful, living with my quintuplets and husband in Puerto Rico. I will be a veterinarian and live in a big beautiful house that will last a real long time.
I would like to be a cartoon animator because I enjoy drawing a lot. In ten years, I will be grown up and I will probably see some of my friends making the big bucks. They will be lawyers, architects, doctors, writers, cops, or police men and women, but I will be an animator, with God's help of course.

Even students with more practical goals appeared confused with regard to the processes involved in achieving their goals. It is difficult to determine from these narratives whether students began to formulate a sense of self-as-worker as early as eighth grade, or whether these responses were merely stimulated by the assignment. Equally difficult to determine from the narratives is whether students' aspirations were poorly articulated because they had not given them much thought, or because they had not been assisted in understanding the connections between schooling and career.

Although the ambiguous connections between schooling and future careers demonstrated by eighth graders might be explained as a consequence of immaturity, we would expect that by the time students were juniors, those connections would be more clearly delineated. Indeed, changes in career goals are apparent in the later narratives. As juniors, these Latino students had become more pragmatic; but their aspirations had been seriously dampened, as goals shifted from optimistic long-term orientations to short-term objectives with the implication of acquiescing or settling for less. No longer did students look beyond the horizon to becoming a famous basketball player, doctor, lawyer, or model. As juniors, their focus had shifted to more immediate concerns of going to college or getting a job—any job—after graduation. Of those students who did mention careers, the high status occupations to which they aspired as juniors had changed to nurse, preschool or elementary teacher, accountant, and data processor. Only two persons wrote about wanting to be a zoologist or a lawyer and virtually no one mentioned NBA basketball player, clothes designer, architect, or doctor, let alone fame and celebrity. What remained from the eighth grade autobiographies was occasionally expressed as the desire to "be a somebody," transformed in students' junior year into "make something of myself." The military also emerged as an avenue of opportunity, with several students linking military service to a college education. Even in those few cases in which goals remain elevated, they were tempered by such qualifications as "if I can afford it," or "but I probably won't make it."

One cannot help but question the powerful role the school plays in these dampened aspirations. Indeed, juniors described how school counselors had assisted them in modifying their goals. One student described his change in plans to attend college:

The counselor [the school's only college counselor] shows you a book with all of the fees and tuition. It's kind of discouraging when I looked at the prices. I just can't afford it.
Another student conveyed the incongruity between his coursework and his future goals based on his counselor’s advice:

I wanted to be a zoologist. I like animals. But I have one science course. My counselor told me I didn’t need anymore science. Instead I took typing to graduate.4

What makes these statements so poignant and troubling is that unlike the more critical students, interviews with these two students revealed their belief that the counselors were doing their best to help them to achieve. This belief persisted despite the fact that both counselors failed to provide adequate guidance for students to realize their goals. The college counselor failed to relay information beyond providing the first student with a book of colleges and fees (e.g., alternatives such as community college or need-based grants), while the other counselor focused on “easy electives” in persuading the second student that typing class was more important for graduation than taking another science class.

Conclusion

Like the immigrant Latino adolescents in the studies of Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (1995), the eighth grade Latino students profiled here also indicated optimism about their social mobility. However, these predominantly U.S.-born students evidenced a pronounced change between eighth grade and their junior year as academic, future work, and even ethnic identities began to reflect the “subtractive effects of schooling” (Valenzuela 1999).

Whether the eighth-grade narratives represent merely an immature stage of career development or fantasy futures, the goals they express are optimistic and lofty. Yet as juniors, these same students failed to convey the optimism or elevated career aspirations they described in eighth grade. Rather, their plans reflected a dramatic shift from a fantasy future to a disillusioned present and uncertain prospects for the future, and it is difficult not to sense resignation as 16 and 17 year olds surrendered their hopes and dreams. Certainly the connection between schooling and the work world remained underdeveloped for these Latino students. No particular institutional agent in the school was mentioned as assisting them in making firm connections between their aspirations, school, and work. Instead, students wrote about the ways in which school personnel actually thwarted their aspirations and engagement with schooling.

Combined with school records documenting chronic truancy, cutting classes, absenteeism, and academic failures, these personal accounts provide a picture of students disengaging from the schooling process.5 The same students who as eighth graders wanted to become a “famous doctor,” as juniors did not shift to a nurse or some other modified position, but rather to “if I graduate,” or “I’d just like to get a job when I graduate.” Eighth grade and junior narratives present images of and
experiences with school—particularly with teachers and counselors—as either antagonistic or apathetic to students’ educational progress. Those few students who retained their aspirations as juniors may have been able to develop and integrate Farrell’s concept of critical selves (a career and student self), in spite of, rather than because of schooling or assistance from school staff.

Moreover, despite Farrell’s assertion that only the student and career selves are necessary for the successful evolution of an academic identity, the family was clearly an important resource for these Latino students. As much of the research on Latino adolescents and academic achievement points out, it is the school that fails to capitalize on the motivational forces embedded in Latino family identities (Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba 1991; Matute-Bianchi 1991; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995; Valdes 1996).

As high school students, time and again these Latinos either wrote about giving up, discussed it in their interviews, or acted it out in the classroom and school setting. The embarrassment and confusion that students depicted in elementary school evolved into a constellation of psychological and behavioral manifestations observed in high school, such as yelling or swearing at the teacher or cutting class. The high school experiences portrayed by these Latino students (failing tests, being placed in low-ability tracks, criticism by staff, and socially distant or indifferent teachers and counselors), were generally so negative that it was difficult for them to tolerate the punishing aspects of schooling, particularly when the rewards of school were seldom acquired. Only the most resilient students could be expected to survive this process and graduate.

Thus, students respond to “failure” in a variety of ways. One manifestation is silence, when students remain in school but no longer actively engage the schooling process (Fine 1991). A second response is resistance to schooling and/or its agents, manifested as students’ disruption of, or development of oppositional identities in relation to the schooling process. Or, students may simply drop out of school (Gilligan 1982; Walsh 1991). In short, students give up, give in, or get out.

This article supports the research on Latino youth that suggests it is not education that these Latino students reject; it is the stress and alienating experiences of minority status associated with schooling. Moreover, the apparent disconnect between the family self and the student self reflects the lack of social capital between Latino families and the school. There is ample research to suggest that in the case of Latinos, drawing upon the family self and its centrality to the student self is critical to transforming academic opportunities for Latino students. Moreover, there is little in the student narratives reported here to suggest that the critical selves (i.e., student and career selves) are rejected by Latino adolescents, but rather that these selves remain undeveloped because they have received such little school-based support. In fact, the data suggest
that schools and their personnel consciously and unconsciously undermine Latino students in developing these critical selves.

One disturbing aspect of these Latino students' experiences is that the educational prospects for Latinos have not changed considerably over the past ten years. When the narratives were written by eighth graders in the late 1980s, and again in 1991–92 as juniors, the mean education for Mexicans was 9.9 years, and only slightly higher for Puerto Ricans at 10.2 years (National Center for Education Statistics 1995; Solis 1995). Nearly ten years later, only 54.7 percent of all Latinos graduate from high school, leaving us to assume that the experiences described in the narratives are still prevalent today (Hispanic Dropout Project 1998).

The use of narratives as a means of conceptualizing the self and the participation of the narrator, researcher, and reader, produces insights not only into the narrator(s) but into ourselves as well. As a pedagogical tool, this type of written discourse facilitates the expression of Latino student voice. The narratives also enable their authors—the "subjects"—to become researchers of their own lives, while allowing outside researchers to become subjects as students' narratives illuminate parts of our own identities and engage us in self-reflection. Perhaps most importantly, by validating the perspectives and experiences of Latino youth, narratives such as these provide an occasion for resistance to cultural domination, and for contesting the practices that structure school-based silencing.

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Notes

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1. Lares is a pseudonym for a Midwestern urban high school.

2. Although narrative quotations are verbatim, some minor editing with respect to spelling and punctuation have been made in order to avoid obscuring the author's meaning.

3. This type of uninformed comment was made with respect to other occupations such as being a lawyer or policeman, with students often writing descriptions that appeared to emerge from media images of these occupations.

4. During my study of the high school, I interviewed the college counselor and half the counseling staff. Having already interviewed the particular student quoted here, I asked the counselor about the "advice" the student described. Along with several others, the counselor volunteered renditions strikingly similar to the student's, and admitted attempting to readjust students' expectations.
The expressed motivation was the desire not to see students disappointed by nurturing unrealistic expectations.

5. An example of student attachment to schooling is provided by school records. During the first quarter (ten weeks) of the 1991 school year, a total of 30,000 cuts were estimated. Another indicator is in the school's distinction between failing grades with an “F” and an “F/A” (failure due to absence). The first quarter failures due to absences for freshmen students alone was 1,018 (out of 1,534), and only 389 “A”s.

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