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# Encouraging Latino Students through Relational Teaching: A Case Study in Lawrence, Massachusetts

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A Case Study in Lawrence, Massachusetts

Ohilda Difo

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### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank God. Less than three years ago I prayed for the opportunity to be sent out to preach his kingdom come to the nations and... He did it! He sent a girl from Lawrence, Massachusetts to attend a university in Portland, Oregon for a master's program in International Development. Through this program, I have traveled and met beautiful people in Oregon, Canada, Italy, Spain, France, Peru, Ecuador, and the Galapagos Islands. It has been an experience that only He could draft. Alleluia, thank you Lord!

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**Abstract**

Within the next 10 years, the majority-minority ratio in the United States will shift, and people of color will outnumber white Americans. In 2014, for the first time in history, a majority of students in K-12 were children of color. Although the student demographic of public schools has changed, the demographic of teachers and the style of teaching remain archaic and catered to white students. This qualitative study focuses on the lowest educated population in the U.S. – Latino youth. The project is a case study on a highly concentrated Latino community in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where 71% of its children live in households with an income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level and 33% of residents age 25 and older have not completed high school (Community Commons, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This study explores what factors influence Latino students' educational attainment from the perspective of former high school graduates and dropouts. Five different focus groups were created from this population, which allowed for discussions on the Latino student experience, access to resources that factored into school completion and the role of local leaders. Through these discussions and participant suggestions, this research draws conclusions on ways to improve Lawrence's youth development practices in hopes of counteracting the city's high dropout rate.

*Keywords:* education, Latino, youth, dropout, high-risk, students of color

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Background Information .....	6
Purpose of the Study .....	10
Research Question .....	11
Terminology.....	11
<b>Literature Review .....</b>	<b>12</b>
History of Education for Students of Color .....	12
Student Engagement .....	14
Student – Teacher Relationships.....	16
Interrelationships and School Belonging.....	18
Segregation Remains .....	19
The Cost of Dropping Out .....	23
The Growing Latino Population .....	28
<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>28</b>
Theoretical Framework.....	29
Research Focus .....	29
Selecting Participants.....	30
Instrumentation .....	32
Methods of Data Collection .....	34
Methods of Data Analysis.....	36
<b>Results .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Social Support.....	38
Student Profile .....	46
School Factors.....	49
Classroom Dynamics .....	52
Community Factors.....	58
Family Characteristics .....	63
<b>Analysis and Discussion.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>67</b>
Research Limitations .....	70
Future Research .....	71
References.....	73
Appendix A.....	84
Appendix B.....	85
Appendix C.....	86
Appendix D.....	88

Despite national education reform efforts, the failure rate of low-income students of color is alarming. There is significant research within educational literature on Latino and Black youth, particularly related to school dropout (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latino and Black youth, ages 16 to 24, have the highest dropout rates in the United States, 12.7% and 7.5% respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2013). Many researchers have studied the effects and factors of why this population checks out early, and a wide range of after-school programs have been created to reduce the number of youth at-risk for dropping out. Yet, the challenge for U.S. schools remains and it requires that the system change from within in order to meet the needs of its diverse students.

The demand for urban schools to be culturally responsive in providing quality education to ethnically and economically diverse students in the United States has been a problem. One such example is my hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where “social problems, limited access to health care, crime, unemployment, lack of positive role models, a flawed school system, high stakes exams, and cultural differences” makes mastering algebra the least of a typical teen’s concern (Jennings & Santiago, 2005, p. 93) Although most public schools in Massachusetts rank at or near the top in the nation, the school district in this impoverished former mill town is known to be “chronically” low-performing (ESE, 2014a). Seven years ago, only 40% of high school seniors graduated within four years making it the worst district for producing high school graduates (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [ESE], 2014d). The purpose of this research is to explore the narratives of Latino residents in Lawrence, their experiences in an underperforming school district, and the

implications of mainstream school culture on the growing number of non-white students across America.

### **Background Information**

Over the past 30 years, the city of Lawrence has experienced unprecedented growth in its Latino population. The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau reported that Latino immigrants from Spanish speaking Caribbean countries and the in-migration from all other Central and South American countries put the total Latino population at 73.8% of Lawrence residents, about 77,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). These statistics however do not take into account the high number of undocumented immigrants that do not partake in national or governmental documentation of any sort. Residents claim that the population is more accurately 100,000 city residents and the Latino population is more closely reaching 90%. This latter demographic is portrayed in the school district data with approximately 91% of 13,880 students identifying as Hispanic (ESE, 2014c).

At the national level, Latinos are the fastest growing minority group and make up approximately 23% of U.S. youth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The national dropout rate for Latinos has decreased over the years, but Latinos remain the lowest educated in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2012). In each year from 1990 to 2012, the dropout rate was lower for Whites than for Blacks and Latinos. For Latinos, specifically, the dropout rate is 12.7%, which is triple that of Whites (4.3%) and double the rate of African Americans (7.5%) (CPS, 2013). Across America, the Latino youth experience is disconcerting as they not only have high dropout rates, but also high levels of poverty, high unemployment rates, and low graduation rates (Moeller, 2010). These challenges are significant and pressing not only for the nation but

especially for local communities with a high Latino population. The increase of Latino students within schools around the nation requires that communities adjust appropriately to the change.

The United States formal education system is nearly two centuries old and it has come a long way from private lessons to elite, white, male children. Yet, the system still has many kinks that have to be worked out. Less than a century ago – about 60 years – the collapse of school segregation was initiated with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* court ruling. For a brief period of time, the courts successfully transformed schools around the country, mainly in the South. These integrated schools opened the doors to opportunity for black Americans across a broad spectrum of life. However, those efforts of school integration have been largely abandoned and America's schools are more segregated now than they were in the early 1970s (Hannah-Jones, Zamora, & Parris Jr., 2014; Johnson, 2014a). Consequently, children in communities with a high concentration of minorities, such as Lawrence, MA, find themselves under resourced and lacking the ability to offer youth equal access to quality education.

Lawrence youth are at a disadvantage in multiple avenues. For instance, roughly 71% of the city's children live in households with an income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) (Community Commons, 2013). This rate compared to the affluent neighboring towns paints a stark picture for the social and economic well-being of Lawrence youth. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income for a family in Lawrence is \$32,851 (2015). In contrast, Lawrence's neighbors of Methuen, Andover, and North Andover, which are predominantly White, average an income that is more than two and three times higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Children below 200% FPL in these towns rank at 25% for the city of Methuen which holds a greater number of minority populations and below 10% for both Andover and North Andover (Community Commons, 2012). Residential segregation too often



leaves poor and minority schools with lower quality facilities, large class sizes, and less effective teachers, which leads to poor academic outcomes and diminished later-life success (Johnson, 2014a). The graduation rates of each city are indicative of this unjust inequality. The average four year graduation rate for each of the city's public school districts from 2006 to 2014 was: 95% for Andover; 94% for North Andover; 80% for Methuen; and 50% for Lawrence (ESE, 2014b, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f). This context presents a harsh reality for Lawrence residents and its future. The combination of racial segregation and concentrated poverty can be toxic without addressing the school and non-school educational needs of most disadvantaged children. This toxicity is exacerbated further when in the midst of a financial crisis everyone is focused on the loss of financial capital than the need for human and health capital investments (Johnson, 2014a).

The Lawrence School District is listed by the U.S. Department of Education among the lowest graduation rates in the state of Massachusetts (ESE, 2014a). According to census figures, 33% of Lawrence residents have not completed high school and only 11% of adults age 25 or older have at least a Bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The dropout rate in Lawrence is a bleak 12.6%, six times higher than the state average (ESE, 2014d). These numbers, however, are unreliable. Not only has the definition for dropout change and affect the measurement for dropouts but, there is also a major discrepancy when comparing the dropout rate with the enrollment numbers from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade during the school years between 2006 and 2014. The fact that more than a third of the students seem to be lost from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade leads one to question the 12.6% dropout rate reported. Nonetheless, the stats for on-time graduation rates by the Department of Education show an improvement in the past decade – the dropout rate has been cut by more than half and the graduation rate has increased by 27 percentage points in the last nine years (ESE, 2014d). Yet, at-risk Latino students are leaving

school at an alarming rate in Lawrence and across the nation, which contributes to the growing number of uneducated Latinos. In the report, *The Making of Community: Latinos in Lawrence, Massachusetts*, Janneth Diaz expresses education as one of the “most significant predictive indicators of the success or failure of the city’s youth” (Jennings & Santiago, 2005, p. 89). If this is the case, public education in Lawrence has been failing its children since the mid to late 1990s.

The city’s only local high school, Lawrence High School, lost accreditation in 1998, and in 2011, the Department of Education placed Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) under state receivership and control (LPS, 2013; Santiago & Jennings, 2005). This means that the Commissioner of the Education Board appointed a receiver, with no end date, who is vested with the powers of the school district’s superintendent and the local school committee (LPS, 2013). The receiver is Jeffrey Riley a White male and non-resident of Lawrence. According to the Department of Education, LPS sums its teaching force at 1,827 and of those only 23% are Latino, and 74% are White (ESE, 2014h). This disproportionate representation of Latinos among the teaching faculty and administration creates a relational gap, which propels a systemic dysfunction that has plagued the public schools of Lawrence. This phenomenon is not unique to the city of Lawrence. The need to diversify the teaching workforce has received national attention since the mid-1980s, when educational leaders shed light on the clashing student-teacher demographics (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). The effort to diversify the pool of teachers, however, has not kept up with the rapid growth of students of color (Gomez & Rodriguez, 2011). As a result, the racial/ethnic gap between students of color and their teachers has increased over the years. In 2011, the Center for American Progress released a study on teacher diversity and found that students of color made up more than 40% of the school-age population, while teachers of color were only 17% of the teaching force (Boser, 2011). Three

years after the study, students of color made up half of the nation's student body but teachers of color were just 18% of the teaching profession (Boser, 2014). That is a 1-percentage point increase from 2011 to 2014. The significant diversity gap between students and teachers is a problem for students, schools, and the public at large.

### **Purpose of the Study**

According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), a student's decision to drop out of school is influenced by several different factors and is often the resolution to a long process of disengagement from school. Garcia-Reid, Reid, and Peterson's (2005) study recognizes that many Latino youth enter school at an educational disadvantage, mainly because English is not their primary language. Other factors that prevent educational attainment are: poverty, exposure to crime and violence in their local environment, poor academic instruction, lack of social support, low societal expectations, and no healthcare or a lack of resources (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005; Riley, 2008). With an enrollment of 90.6% of students from low-income families, Lawrence is no exception to many of the factors contributing to youth disengagement from school (ESE, 2014i). For this reason, the cross cutting issues that confront Latino youth in Lawrence must be approached intentionally and tactfully.

The young people of Lawrence are widely perceived through a deficit lens where their intellect and capacities are questioned – especially when judged by standardized testing. However, the youth is neither disengaged from education nor disinterested. Rather, many educators and leaders fail to see the promise and potential of these young adults because there is a cultural disconnect. Through this study, the factors that influence academic success are drawn

from interviews with former Latino high school graduates and dropouts. The aim of this study is to improve the education experience for Latino students in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

### **Research Question**

This research project calls for innovations in pedagogy to support neglected Latinos, in particular *at-* and *high-risk* youth, within unsupportive academic spaces. The main question that led this study was: What factors influence Latino academic success? The research is based on the youth community of Lawrence and the experiences of former Latino students in an underperforming school district. From the onset, I have been guided by my personal experience as a community member and former Latina student of the Lawrence Public School system. Since the students' voice is often overlooked in education reform practices, I sought the individual and collective narratives from these individuals.

### **Terminology**

As widely used in education literature, 'at-risk' youth are characterized "as living in impoverished, inner-city neighborhoods where they experience multiple stressors (physical, psychological, economic, and social) that make them more likely to drop out of school, use drugs, engage in violence, and become incarcerated" (Watson, 2008, p. 6). Throughout this study, due to the negative connotation with the term high-risk, the term is used interchangeably with terminologies such as underprivileged, underrepresented, or underserved youth.

In this study, I focus on Latino dropouts that are "disconnected" or "disengaged" youth. The two terms are used to refer to the same population of young adults, from ages 16-24, who are not enrolled in school nor working (Rendón, 2014). Also, for the purposes of this research,

urban is synonymous to the underserved, poor, marginalized and the ethnic minority (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sánchez, 2006).

### **Literature Review**

Researchers have found that although individuals have unique reasons for dropping out, several influences ranging from family background to school characteristics are highly interrelated in a student's decision to leave (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009; Valencia, 2011). In this text, the context in which a student disengages from school will be examined, considering at times the social arrangement between teacher and student that might either amend or reproduce the circumstances associated with leaving school.

### **History of Education for Students of Color**

In the 1950s and '60s, due to social activism, scholars began to research the relationship between ethnically diverse students and the education system owed to the high attrition rates within the country. At this time, theories on educational attainment shifted from the inferiority paradigm, which assumed that "visible racial/ethnic people are limited biologically and are genetically inferior in comparison to Whites" (Carter & Goodwin, 1994, p. 294; as cited in Gallenstein, 1998), to the cultural deprivation paradigm. The latter paradigm compared "visible racial/ethnic populations with a White standard to determine various ways they are deprived and deficient" (Gallenstein, 1998, p. 3). The result was inadequate educational practices that aimed to improve poor and low achieving students such as Head Start and bilingual education (Gallenstein, 1998). The outlook was that in order to succeed in the nation's school system the

“deficit cultures needed to acculturate to the ‘American’ way” (Carter & Goodwin, 1994, p. 302; as cited in Gallenstein, 1998).

According to Ramsey, Vold and Williams (1989), during the 1970s the cultural difference paradigm led to the introduction of multicultural education (as cited in Gallenstein, 1998). This paradigm considered that differences within culture and language had a major impact on the school experiences of non-White populations (Ayala, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Martin, 1997). As a result, multicultural education programs implemented diverse instructional practices that reflected the racial and cultural backgrounds of various populations (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Gallenstein, 1998). Then, Ogbu (1992) considered how diverse minority groups adapt to mainstream society and introduced the idea that the historical backgrounds of minorities help to discover the cultural and linguistic barriers to belonging. The critical role of student belonging led researchers to examine the interrelationships of ethnically diverse students (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Many researchers then argued that the hindrance to learning was not necessarily a result of the students’ diverse culture and language (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Gallenstein, 1998; Trueba, 1988). Scholars began to recognize that minority students’ academic achievement was socially organized (Phelan et al., 1991; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rendón, 2014; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Therefore, in order for teachers to capitalize on the students’ talents, scholars recommended that they incorporate a context-specific approach and consider the ‘students’ social, linguistic and intellectual resources’ into the classroom dynamics (Scribner, 1995). These studies are fundamental to understanding how and why students of color leave school at higher rates than their counterparts.

### **Student Engagement**

Several studies have documented the importance of incorporating culture into the classroom, particularly in areas where the students are ethnically diverse and not of the dominant culture (Gallenstein, 1998; González, Huerta-Macías, & Tinajero, 1998). In many schools across the country integrating culture is often represented as recognizing a holiday or through the consumption of ethnic foods. However, the concept of culture is a lot more than eating traditional foods and appreciating traditional dress, it is a way of life (González et al., 1998). Culture has many definitions and affects everything people do in their society because of their customs, ideas, values, and normative or expected patterns of behavior. Hofstede (1991) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another,” it is not genetically inherited but learned with people who live or lived within the same social environment (pp. 21-23). Culture is undoubtedly a complex concept and as of yet no single definition has achieved consensus by scholars. Nonetheless, the following definition from Matsumoto (1996, p. 15) guides this study: culture is “...the set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012). This definition is also referred to as a person’s sociocultural knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 1998). Through the cultural experiences of life a person perceives and interprets the world and it is in this way that sociocultural knowledge is closely tied to literacy development and to the learning process in general (González et al., 1998).

González et al. (1998) described that learning for humans occurs innately through communication and interaction. Access to knowledge is provided through platforms such as “discussions, reading, writing, and listening [in which] we construct ideas about the world

around us and our place in it” (González et al., 1998, p. 30). Yet, not all cultures communicate and interact in the same way (González et al., 1998). Similarly, studies have shown that not all students learn in the same manner (González et al., 1998; Yu & Patterson, 2010). But schools as cultural sites themselves are known to more often than not promote the dominant culture and in turn overlook the learning style that may best fit their students (Martin, 1997; Trueba, 1988). This can be witnessed in the way schools support a “specific way of speaking, legitimizing only certain forms of knowledge, and by confirming particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world” (González et al., 1998, p. 30). In essence, schools have failed to meet the needs of culturally diverse students because they do not provide opportunities for learning that allows students to engage with the information in ways that are familiar or comfortable to them (Brown, 2008; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Research within the last decade has revolved around the fact that youth often feel disconnected or disengaged with their schooling (e.g. Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Cummings, 2012; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Park, Holloway, Arendtsz, Bempechat, & Li, 2012; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Given that urban youth often confront issues of poverty, violence, teenage parenthood, drug abuse, and imprisonment within their community their disinterest toward schooling is somewhat understandable (Cummings, 2012). However, the individual and institutional factors that contribute to a student’s indifference and decision to depart from school are in many studies “treated as relatively discrete” (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 224). For example, Valencia (2011) presented the dropout problem through two primary frameworks: the individual perspective and institutional perspective. Some of the individual characteristics, which are also recognized as ‘risk factors’ included race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and school-related behaviors such as low attendance and poor



grades (see Appendix A for a reference of citations). Institutional factors included problems primarily with schools and the student's family, such as family background, school size, location, resources, student body demographics, policies, and practices (see Appendix A for a reference of citations). Through these frameworks, Valencia challenged the idea that the dropout problem is most easily understood through school processes. However, this view holds that there is a methodological drawback in trying to 'disentangle' the effects of school-based and individual factors. On the other hand, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) argue that individual experiences and institutional factors are inextricably linked and 'co-constructed.' The authors conclude that the dropout problem is sociological in nature and 'co-produced' within social arrangements. Their study explains how, "through educational neglect and social and intellectual alienation, schools and school adults contribute to students progressive disengagement from school" (p. 221).

### **Student – Teacher Relationships**

A frequent element discussed throughout the literature involves the adults who facilitate and communicate interactions with the youth, namely teachers (Cummings, 2012). There is no question that teachers significantly affect students' level of motivation and ability to achieve in school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Yu & Patterson, 2010). One factor in this relationship is a teacher's culture. It directly "affects class dynamics in a number of ways," (Martin, 1997, p. 30) including the ability to effectively teach students who are culturally diverse from their own background (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Educational research has attempted to address this problem of discontinuity between students' experiences at home and in school (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Rendón, 2014). In the 1980's and '90s, researchers considered the speech and

language interactions between teachers and students and concluded that if students' home language is incorporated into the classroom, students are more likely to experience academic success (Ayala, 2012; Gallenstein, 1998). However, Villegas (1988) argued that these studies failed to deal adequately with the social context in which student failure takes place (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995). For over three decades, researchers have argued that the needs of students requires more than these kinds of micro-ethnographic approaches. Several scholars have written on the importance to link school and home-community cultures within the classroom curriculum as well as its delivery (e.g. Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ream & Rumberger, 2009; Rendón, 2014). Traditionally educators tried to “insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). This ideology eventually brought about culturally relevant pedagogy (Gallenstein, 1998).

Trueba (1988) also suggested that culture is crucially important, writing that in order to guarantee academic achievement in all youth learning environments, it is necessary to apply theoretical and practical approaches that:

- Acknowledge the importance of culture within classrooms,
- Restrain from stereotyping minorities,
- Support the resolution of cultural conflicts in school,
- Incorporate home and school cultures, and,
- Promote communicative and other skills that children recognize in order to engage in the learning process. (p. 270)

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) evolved from the understanding that teachers with diverse student populations needed to revolutionize the effects of cultural discontinuity (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This type of teaching recognized the effect that power and status relations

between minority groups had on school performance (Martin, 1997). Therefore, the approach is defined as a pedagogy of opposition, specifically committed to the collective empowerment of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP sets the stage for teachers to be non-judgmental and inclusive of their student's cultural backgrounds (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). However, although CRP recognizes the importance of culture in schooling, it does not acknowledge "race and racism as they relate to the sociohistorical pattern of schooling in the U.S." (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 66). In turn, when students perceive ethnic-based discrimination in school it largely affects their attachment or isolation within the learning environment (Yu & Patterson, 2010). Additionally, there is extensive evidence that school belonging is not only influenced through perceived stereotypes and discrimination but also by extracurricular participation and close relationships with social groups such as teachers and peers (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005, p. 295).

### **Interrelationships and School Belonging**

Yu and Patterson's (2010) study documented the academic motivation of youth from a cross-cultural perspective. In regards to factors such as peer influence, the authors found that regardless of race anyone whom students have a connection with will affect the individual's view on the importance of education (p. 325). The study concluded that educational success is based on a combination of peer influence and perceptions of teacher relationship. Extracurricular activity, however, was not a factor since it did not directly influence the academic achievement for participants than for non-participants of Latino and African American descent (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008 as cited in Yu & Patterson, 2010). Moreover, studies by Coleman (1961) and Wentzel (1989) found that teenagers typically referenced interpersonal connections as critical to

their school engagement (as cited in Faircloth & Hamm, 2005, p. 293). Friendship networks are shown to act “as prototypes for subsequent processes that influence educational attainment or school dropout” (Ream & Rumberger, 2008, p. 125). Another study by McGlynn (2000) also argued that retention had more to do with students’ friendships than their studies (as cited in Brown, 2008). She found that students considered it essential that their teacher could:

- Identify their name and know a little bit about them,
- Care whether or not they attended class,
- Be relatable,
- Had a sense of humor in class,
- Respect them and their opinions, and,
- Show interest in their teaching (as cited in Brown, 2008, p. 106).

Researchers continually show that students are most likely to be motivated and successful in contexts in which they have a strong sense of community within their learning environment (e.g. Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Yu and Patterson, 2010). This idea was the primary vehicle of skill development and interaction between teacher and student in prior history (Ryan & Powelson, 1991). It was a way to tie the student into the larger fabric of community. However, the lack of real world application and relevant curriculum content in schools is often suggested to explain student alienation and disengagement from the processes and institution of learning (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Park et al., 2012).

### **Segregation Remains**

Race based segregation is a structural factor that has influenced education as well. Despite the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine in

1954, American schools still remain divided and unequal. Although the problem of segregation has traditionally been a black and white issue, there has also been a steady growth in the segregation of Black and Latino students since the 1980s (Gandara, 2010; Orfield & Lee, 2005). This re-segregation of America's schools has inhibited the possibility of equal social opportunities for youth, even for the most engaged students (Hannah-Jones et al., 2014; Johnson, 2014b). Ream and Rumberger (2008) discussed how peers influence whether a student is engaged in healthy behavior or not. They found that if the pool of eligible friends for a student at a poor urban school is limited to other students who are similarly distressed by poverty and feel alienated within their studies, peer influence is unlikely to be positive (p. 126). According to Johnson's (2014b) study on the long-term impacts of school desegregation, students who spend their youth in segregated schools are more likely to be poor, go to jail, and are less likely to graduate from high school or to finish college. In addition, they are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods as adults thus dooming their children to repeat the cycle.

There is strong empirical data that the socioeconomic status (SES) of a community affects various life outcomes (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Lutz, 2007; Rendón, 2014). The outcome of most relevance to this study is the likelihood of a student dropping out of school. However, it is still unclear which neighborhood mechanisms contribute the most to a high rate of dropouts. Some scholars have suggested that perhaps the level of socialization or information exchange, seen in higher SES neighborhoods is what produces better educational outcomes (Ainsworth, 2002 as cited in Rendón, 2014). Conversely, a study by Rendón (2014) found that neighborhood SES is no longer significant after accounting for certain school factors. Rendón found that the student body demographic, specifically a higher proportion of Latino and Black students, was significantly associated with dropping out. Rendón's results concluded that "neighborhood SES

has indirect impacts on dropping out and that it is mediated through the school context and closely aligned with its racial and ethnic composition and unexamined related dynamics” (2014, p. 187). In general, the finding is consistent with other school effect studies that have repeatedly shown that schools with a high proportion of Latino and Black students – or highly segregated school contexts – are associated with poor educational outcomes (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rendón, 2014). Still, further exploration of the relationship between neighborhood SES and the compositional characteristics of schools is required.

The enduring consequences of life in a largely divided America can have devastating effects as it provides lavish opportunities to some while withholding them from others. One example was the construction of new schools across the U.S. to accommodate the rapidly growing Latino population. The majority of these new schools however were built in areas where the Latino presence was low (Ayala, 2012). This left Latino students to enroll in older schools, resulting in systems that were made up mostly of Latino students, had high student-teacher ratios, and with most of students’ families on federal aid (Fry, 2006 as cited in Ayala, 2012). White students, on the other hand, whom experienced a decline in their secondary public school enrollment, were directed toward the new schools. This flow of students not only mirrors the patterns of residential segregation, but also influenced the interracial and ethnic interaction that exists in schools today. According to Ayala (2012), there is evidence that whites attend schools that are predominantly white and very few of them attend schools that have a large minority population. This shows how America has “desegregated schools, yet segregated classrooms” (Johnson, 2014a, para. 12).

Today, segregation may not be as evident as 30-40 years ago. Contemporary segregation takes on a more nuanced form, but still results in destructive consequences. According to

Johnson (2014b), segregation has left poor and minority schools with lower-quality facilities, larger class sizes, and less effective teachers. This leads to poor academic outcomes and diminished success in the future for its students. Although few studies have documented an association between student body demographics and poor educational outcomes, in 1997, Cutler and Glaeser discovered that neighborhood segregation contributed to an increase in “idleness” or being disconnected. Later, Rendón (2014) concluded that a higher population of Black, Latino, or second-generation students increased the odds of being disconnected. Other scholars argue that socio-cultural values contribute to poor educational outcomes (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However this idea of an oppositional culture has been refuted and holds no empirical support (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009; Rendón, 2014; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

However, student demographics is not the only explanation for why there is a higher possibility of student disengagement in schools with mostly Blacks and Latinos. Scholars have pointed to resource inequities across schools as a factor, referring to the differences in quality and training of teachers, academic rigor, and course offerings (Orfield & Lee, 2005). This has been made a reality due to school finance systems that rely primarily on local property tax for per-pupil spending. Wealthy parents’ capacity to enhance and enrich existing school resources is greater than that of less fortunate poor families. Thus with the ongoing economic and racial segregation of our schools, the opportunity to receive a quality education is out of reach for most low, working class families. This system of inequality is unjust and continues to shackle children to the cycle of poverty, keeping them from discovering their true potential.

Ultimately, segregation has been correlated with a range of negative social, economic, and health outcomes. Segregated neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted and have liquor stores while having less access to quality hospitals and doctors (Badger, 2014; McMillian, 2014).

Segregated neighborhoods are also less likely to have parks and often lose out when it comes to jobs and public services (Hannah-Jones et al., 2014; Serwer, 2009). On top of this, residents have a higher infant mortality rate and number of premature births (Britton & Shin, 2013). Segregated schools are less accomplished, hire less experienced teachers, and tend not to offer kids the classes they need to compete for admission into college (Black, 2014). In their book, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself*, Steve Corbett, and Brian Fikkert discuss the historical injustice perpetuated by the funding system of public education in the U.S. The authors also noted that inadequate funding is not the sole problem of failing schools but that there is a direct correlation between cultures of poverty such as ghetto nihilism and poor student performance. And the truth is that: “Even if there were not any current racial discrimination—and there is—the plague of historic discrimination is perpetuated via the American educational system” (2012, p. 173).

### **The Cost of Dropping Out**

The decision to drop out of high school is known to have great influence on the overall success of an individual (Yu & Patterson, 2010). Although African Americans also fare poorly in the nation’s schools, Latinos are the lowest performing and are most likely to dropout (Gandara, 2010). As stated by Darling-Hammond (2007), the importance of this issue is “beyond the presumed links between improved graduations rates and improved conditions among minorities” (as cited in Ream & Rumberger, 2008, p.123). It has been suggested that the “low secondary and postsecondary educational attainment of Latinos explains not only their low mobility patterns but their entrapment in a cycle of poverty” (Ayala, 2012, p. 1037). Dropouts experienced a poverty rate of 31%, which is seven percentage points higher than students with a high school diploma



and double the rate of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011). The focus on high school non-completers is of great concern because of their negative effects on the youth themselves, communities and society as a whole.

Research demonstrates that youth without a high school diploma often experience trouble finding work, making them three times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). The young adults often face a wide array of adverse employment, which directly effects economic status and indirectly influences access to health care and community resources (Yu & Patterson, 2010). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that non-high school graduates earned a median income of \$480 per week in early 2014 whereas adults with a high school diploma earned \$660 a week (ESE, 2014i). The difference monthly is about \$700-750. High school dropouts in Massachusetts earn almost \$10,000 less per year than high school graduates (ESE, 2014i). In 2005, the average Massachusetts dropout earned \$456,000 less in a lifetime than the average high school graduate (ESE, 2014i). The Center of Labor Market Studies reported that dropouts are less likely to work as young adults and over the course of their lives. However, if non-high school graduates do obtain employment they often work for fewer hours and are hired at lower hourly wages. Given these facts, over the long-term, the average dropout spends longer periods of time in poverty. Yet, the young adults are not the only ones who suffer economically from their decision to leave school. Society also pays the price as under resourced youth are more likely to rely on government support (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012).

**Opportunity youth.** Recently, there has been research documenting the status of youth who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market. Belfield et al. (2012) described these young adults as 'opportunity youth.' The term is representative of the fact that

the adolescent's potential, in regards to human capital, is not being fully realized socially or economically. Opportunity youth may have dropped out of high school or college, been involved in the criminal justice system, have mental or health conditions that have inhibited their activities, or have care-giving responsibilities in their families. The researchers estimated approximately 6.7 million (17%) American youth, age 16-24, as opportunity youth. Most of the youth were found to be disproportionately male and from minority groups, although substantial rates were found for all youth groups. Nonetheless, through information from national surveys, the authors calculated the immediate and lifetime economic burden of each opportunity youth for both taxpayers and society. The authors found that there was "lost earnings, lower economic growth, lower tax revenues and higher government spending" associated with the youth (p. 1). Their calculations estimated that each opportunity youth imposed an immediate taxpayer burden of \$13,900 per year and a social burden of \$37,450 per year (in 2011 dollars). The economic burden depends on the age of the youth. Only one-fourth of the burden is incurred in youth (up to age 24) while the majority of the burden, which is considered potential loss, occurs afterward (see Table 1). Belfield et al. found that the economic potential of the opportunity youth cohort is very large – estimating the aggregate taxpayer burden amounts at \$1.56 trillion and a social burden of \$4.75 trillion (in 2012 dollars). The cost of dropping out of high school has increased overtime for both the dropouts and society at large. Therefore, the dropout dilemma should be of concern to all members of society because the consequence of not investing in our youth is detrimental to all of us (Belfield et al., 2012).

Table 1

<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Taxpayer Burden of Each 16 Year Old Opportunity Youth</b>	<b>Social Burden of Each 16 Year Old Opportunity Youth</b>
Ages 16-24	\$13,900 annual burden each year	\$37,450 annual burden each year
Ages 25-65	\$148,790* lump sum burden	\$461,020* lump sum burden
Lifetime Total	\$258,240* lump sum burden	\$755,900* lump sum burden

**School-to-prison pipeline.** The financial cost of high dropout rates for society can also be seen in our incarceration system (Tavakolian & Howell, 2012). It is a fact that dropouts are much more likely to be incarcerated than those with a higher level of education (ESE, 2014i). According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s 2003 report, in 1997 about 41% of the nation’s inmates had not completed high school or its equivalent (Harlow, 2003). The Center for Labor Market Studies report, based on the 2006-2007 American Community Survey, estimated high school dropouts as more than 63 times more likely to be institutionalized than four-year college graduates (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). Dropouts were reported to comprise a disproportionate percentage of the nation’s prison and death row inmates – approximately 68% (Amurao, 2013). This trend where kids—mainly racial minorities and children with disabilities—are being funneled out of the education system and into the juvenile and criminal justice institutions is known the as school-to-prison pipeline.

The idea of students being ‘funneled’ comes from the United States’ prioritization of incarceration over education. For many students, inadequate resources such as overcrowded classrooms, inexperienced teachers, or lack of textbooks can often lead them to leave school. However, there are also harsh policies and practices that fail to meet the educational needs of students (Elias, 2013). Across the nation, school districts embraced the zero tolerance policies

after a handful of publicized school shootings. These policies encourage police presence at school, harsh tactics such as physical restraint, and automatically impose severe punishment regardless of the circumstances (Amurao, 2013). Under these policies, rates of suspension have increased dramatically over the years—from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000—and the punishment has been mostly inflicted on children of color (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], n.d.). African American students, for instance, are 3.5 times more likely than their white peers to be suspended or expelled (Elias, 2013). Moreover, about 70% of students involved in “in-school” arrests or referred to law enforcement were Black or Latino (Amurao, 2013).

Another unfortunate lead to the pipeline is that schools may encourage students to dropout in response to pressures from state funding to score well on standardized tests. Educators may push out students who score lower on these tests in order to improve the school’s overall test scores (Amurao, 2013). Then, there are the disciplinary alternative schools, which are growing in number across the country. Often times these schools are run by private or for-profit companies and do not have to comply with standard educational qualities such as minimum classroom hours and curriculum requirements (ACLU, n.d.). As a result, these policies and practices often do a lot more bad than good. Removing children from school and lowering the expectations does not improve their behavior. Instead, it greatly increases the chances that they will drop out and wind up in jail. Mathematically speaking the cost of incarcerating a person per year versus educating them is far greater (Elias, 2013; Tavakolian & Howell, 2012), therefore it makes more sense that Americans put more effort into educating children than pushing them out of school.

### **The Growing Latino Population**

The Latino community continues to play an increasing role in shaping American society, as they currently are the fastest-growing and youngest minority group in the United States (Moeller, 2010; Nora & Crisp, 2012). According to U.S. Census Bureau population estimates as of July 1, 2013, there are roughly 54 million Hispanics living in the United States, representing approximately 17% of the U.S. population. By 2060, it is projected that the Latino population will be 128.8 million, which means that 3 in 10 people in the U.S. will be Latino. Already 22 states declare Latinos as the largest minority group. In 2012, approximately 74% of Latinos five and older reported to speak Spanish at home. The poverty rate among Latino households is 25.6% coming second to the poverty rates of Blacks. In 2012, 23.3% of elementary and high school students were Hispanic, but only 6.8% of college students were Hispanic. Hispanics 25 and older with a high school education is 64%; with a bachelor's degree or higher 13.8%.

Considering the projection of the Latino population in the United States, it is critical that more attention be given to the delivery and content of education within the nation's schools. These institutions are no longer homogeneous and must continue to shift with the times. All stakeholders should value the diversity and distinct styles of learning within its students. It is time to make education relevant and invigorating for all. This requires a greater effort to understand and accept diversity within the classrooms.

### **Methodology**

After careful consideration of what would be the best approach for collecting data on the on Latino student experience I decided to inquire directly with one of the most vulnerable populations – high school dropouts. I did this through qualitative, semi-structured interviews that

assessed the Latino experience in high school as well as what needs, if any, were not being met by the educational school system. The goal in gathering student feedback was to make viable recommendations that could improve student support practices within schools and the community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since high school dropouts are traditionally disregarded this research was meant to amplify their voices and experiences. Through this study, I sought to understand the participants' experiences considering their interaction with the school system; therefore the methodological paradigm that best fit was the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that research is "a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them" (Mertens, 2009, p. 61). For this reason, it was important that participants understood why I was conducting this research. Also, it was important that they knew that I identified as Latina and that as a fellow community member I sought to understand their experiences and use our voices to create awareness as well as recommendations for enhanced practices. In this chapter, I describe further how I approached a predominantly ethnic minority community, Lawrence, Massachusetts, in order to understand and explore the city's education culture as experienced through students who eventually left the institution – explicitly, Latino high school dropouts.

### **Research Focus**

The community of interest was dropout youth from Lawrence, MA, because it is nationally recognized as poorly performing and failing to meet national standards for achievement. Through this research, I wanted to share the Latino students' perspective and

experience of high school that led to their decision to part from school. Additionally, I thought it was beneficial to include students who were successful and that also returned to work with youth in the city. What I hoped to learn from talking to these participants was how their own perceptions matched or did not match with the perceptions and experiences of the dropout youth. Overall, I investigated the factors that contributed to Latino youth dropout with the idea that the youth would be better engaged in their schooling with support from a larger representation of leaders who look like them as role models.

In order to capture these experiences the research worked best as a qualitative project. I implemented a deductive approach with a case study research design, using qualitative primary data with subsequent qualitative data analysis. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its exploratory, open-ended, and flexible methods (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 24). The qualitative design allowed for a deeper understanding of meanings and experiences. Moreover, coupled with the constructivist paradigm, this design permitted a subjective standpoint in order to value multiple experiences within a given situation as equally valid. Through personal reflection, stimulated across the researcher-participant dialogue, hidden meanings of truth are encouraged and can be recognized (Ponterotto, 2005). By working within this paradigm, it was anticipated that an in-depth knowledge of the participants' social and cultural realities might be obtained.

### **Selecting Participants**

Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, former Latino students expressed their perceptions and experiences within schools in the city of Lawrence. The hope was that through these interviews, former students and current community residents felt empowered by their courage to talk about their experiences and gain an understanding that encouraged reflection and

future engagement in these conversations. Through a snowball sampling method, two groups of individuals were contacted via word of mouth, social networks, email and/or telephone calls. The maximum of participants sought was fifteen for each group with the hopes of holding three focus group interviews with about five individuals each. Group size was purposefully small in order to manage and generate rich discussions. The first group, termed “opportunity youth”, was composed of individuals who were over the age of 18 and identified themselves as dropouts from a high school in Lawrence. The second set of participants, which I call the “community leaders,” consisted of professionals over the age of 18 who graduated from a high school in Lawrence and worked with local youth. The participants were not recent dropouts/graduates because I hoped that the years would allow them to be more reflective and critical of the decisions exercised during their high school years. These were the necessary attributes in order to provide a snapshot of the similarities and differences between high school graduates and non-completers. Nevertheless, the experience described by the former dropouts is the main focus of this investigation.

The sample was a purposive and non-probability selection in order to bring light to the unheard voices of underserved youth in the community. The sample consisted of a maximum of 30 Lawrence residents, dependent upon recruitment success. The participant requirements for the opportunity youth group were the following:

1. 18 years or older;
2. Latino or Hispanic; and
3. Attended and dropped out from Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) or has considered dropping out of a LPS.



The second set of participants, the community leaders, consisted of adults, both female and male, age 21 or older. In order to qualify for this group, adults had to:

1. Have received or obtained their 9-12 education in Lawrence;
2. Currently work with Lawrence youth; and
3. Latino or Hispanic descent;

The goal was to interview and attain data from a total sample size of 5-6 focus groups with five to six participants per group. This target was chosen based on the anticipated ability to collect data over a 2-week period. The recruitment of potential participants began through emails and social network sites. Any self-identified participant was asked to sign up for any of the available time slots offered through the *Doodle* scheduling website. The process for recruiting community leaders was a lot smoother than recruiting opportunity youth. Participants from both groups postponed or were ultimately a no show. Nonetheless, a total of 16 individuals were successfully enlisted and scheduled for an interview – nine community leaders and seven opportunity youth. Each interview was performed in a contrived setting and once the consent forms were signed there were no participant dropouts during the data collection.

### **Instrumentation**

After signing the consent forms and answering any concerns or questions from the participants, the interview began with a short questionnaire to gauge the participant's background information. The questions were close-ended, which regarded demographic information such as gender, age, and education (see Appendix B). Additional questions included information about the students' and parent's involvement in their education. The questionnaire was followed by a 50-70 minute semi-structured group discussion. The interview questions were

designed to gather information about the former students' experience in school which included a scope of their student-teacher relationships, self-identified issues that influenced school success or dropout, resources (un)available within the community, and their opinion on community member participation in youth development. The discussion questions for both the community leaders and opportunity youth were similar except for three questions. The first section of questions displayed below are those which were similar to both groups, the second section shows the questions asked specifically to the opportunity youth, and lastly the questions tailored to the community leaders can be found in the third section.

**I. Questions asked to both 'opportunity youth' and 'community leaders':**

1. How would you describe your high school experience?
2. How would you describe the experience with your teachers?
3. As a high school student, was there a particular mentor(s)/teacher(s) that influence you? If so, how?
4. As a high school student, please describe the ethnic/racial dynamics within your school.
5. What do you believe are some of the benefits of having Lawrence natives involved with youth development?

**II. Questions tailored to the opportunity youth participants:**

1. What factors influenced you to leave your high school education?
2. Looking back, while you were in high school what resources would you have preferred to be available to you in Lawrence?
3. Moving forward, what would you like to see within the schools in Lawrence?

**III. Questions tailored to the community leader participants:**

1. What factors influenced you to finish your high school education?
2. Given your experience with Lawrence youth, what are some of the challenges you have witnessed among them today?
3. What recommendations do you have to enhance the resources available to Lawrence youth?

**Methods of Data Collection**

During the course of two weeks responses were collected through five 30 to 90 minute group interviews and a 10 question close-ended questionnaire. The group interviews were scheduled considering the availability of participants noted on the *Doodle* sign up sheet. Once a group of three or more participants were available for a given time slot, I emailed the informed consent form and called each participant to confirm their scheduled group interview date, time, and location. At this time, I thanked the participants for their interest in the study and briefed them on the best way to reach me if they had any questions or concerns. After these interviews were scheduled any additional participant was scheduled around the corresponding set meetings or if needed, an alternate individual interview was offered. No individual interviews were performed.

There were a total of nine “community leader” participants, split into two focus groups. The first focus group consisted of five individuals and the second had four participants. There was one participant who was a no show. In regards to the “opportunity youth” interviews there were a total of three focus groups. The opportunity youth participants were in totality seven individuals. Two of the opportunity youth focus groups were composed of two individuals –

approximately 2-3 participants did not show up to each interview. Lastly, the third group consisted of four individuals but while reviewing the informed consent one of the participants was dismissed because she did not meet the necessary requirements. In summary, a total of five units of data were collected with 16 participants.

Table 2

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>No Show</b>
Opportunity Youth – A	2	3
Opportunity Youth – B	3	2
Opportunity Youth – C	2	3
Community Leaders – A	5	-
Community Leaders – B	4	1

The interviews were conducted in a public or private setting considering the participant's comfort. Incentives for interviewee participation included snacks and water. After food and a brief introduction by each participant that included sharing their first name, name of high school, and year of graduation, participants were handed two hard copies of the informed consent form. I read the consent form aloud and asked participants to keep one copy for their records and hand me a signed copy. In the consent form, I provided personal contact information in case participants wanted to follow up after participating in the study. Following the signature of the consent forms time was allotted for any questions or clarifications. Then, the questionnaire was given to each participant, after all participants completed the questionnaire; I proceeded to set the tone for the discussion. I encouraged participants to listen to one another's perspectives and respect the different experiences shared. I also mentioned that not all questions had to be answered by everyone but if inclined to share all experiences were welcome. Finally before beginning the discussion, I asked the participants permission to turn on the audio recording device. After each session, the voice-recorded interview was transferred and copied to an

external hard drive. The recording was later transcribed verbatim into print and used as data for open coding (see Appendix C for a list of codes and definitions).

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

In evaluating the coded data from the narratives the method of experiential thematic analysis was exercised (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The method involves a systematic, six-phase process as developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). During the data analysis, transcriptions of audio recordings were generated from the group interviews. The first phase involved immersion with the data by reviewing the transcripts and questionnaires in order to become familiar with the information. The second phase was focused on developing codes for the data, which is a process of identifying any areas of interest or relevant information to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The code is commonly a word or brief phrase that “captures the essence of why a particular bit of data may be useful” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 207). In coding the data, the approach utilized was complete coding in which the information was read, listened to, and coded any relevant pieces, such as words, sentences, phrases, or opinions related to the research question. Additionally, the relevance of coding was measured by how many times key terms were mentioned, if the participant explicitly stated that a key element was important, or if the data confirmed evidence found in previous published literature (see Appendix C, D). The third step in the analysis process, as directed by Taylor and Ussher (2001) involved examining underlying patterns and developing themes from the coded data (as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013). The fourth phase of the thematic analysis method required for a review of identified themes. The developed themes should have a clear focus, scope, and purpose and be relatively discrete. Here the relationship between themes is produced and should provide a rich, coherent,

and meaningful picture of dominant patterns in the data that address the research question. The fifth phase requires defining and naming the themes, which involves checking whether the themes fit well with the coded data (see Appendix C). Lastly, the final phase is writing and finalizing the analysis.

I was interested in the themes that were common through all of the focus groups; therefore, the themes that were more common were given precedence. This criterion for selection was not intended to attribute greater overall explanatory value to themes on a quantitative basis; it simply made it possible to focus attention on the common, homogenous, popular themes, which was the specific interest of this study.

## **Results**

This section focuses on the similarities and differences among the community leaders and the opportunity youth as they discussed the various elements of their personal educational attainment process. The analysis of interviews with opportunity youth and community leaders revealed six key themes on school achievement (see Table 3). The key point among these was the perceived critical significance of interpersonal relationships (or social support). It is important to note that when a theme is discussed within this chapter, some quantifying language will be used to discuss its prevalence across the data. However, these terms are not in any way an attempt to count the instances of a theme's occurrence, but rather to provide some indication of the strength or consistency of a theme. Figures accompany each theme in order to compare and contrast the overall discussion among community leaders and opportunity youth (see Appendix D for the tallied results). Each figure is comprised of two diagrams labeled A and B. Diagram A represents the overall occurrence of a theme's elements for the distinct focus groups. Diagram B

shows the cumulative percentage in which these topics were discussed whether as risk or protective factors.

In order to understand the results developed in this section it is important to define risk and protective factors. Risk factors are “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that increase the likelihood that a negative outcome will occur” (Central for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009, p. 3). Protective factors are conditions or attributes in individuals that help deal more effectively with stressful events; increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards; and “promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future” (CDC, 2009, p. 3). These two terms are critical in understanding the context within each theme. Several excerpts from each focus group are also shared to preserve the participant’s voice but all names and places have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.

Table 3

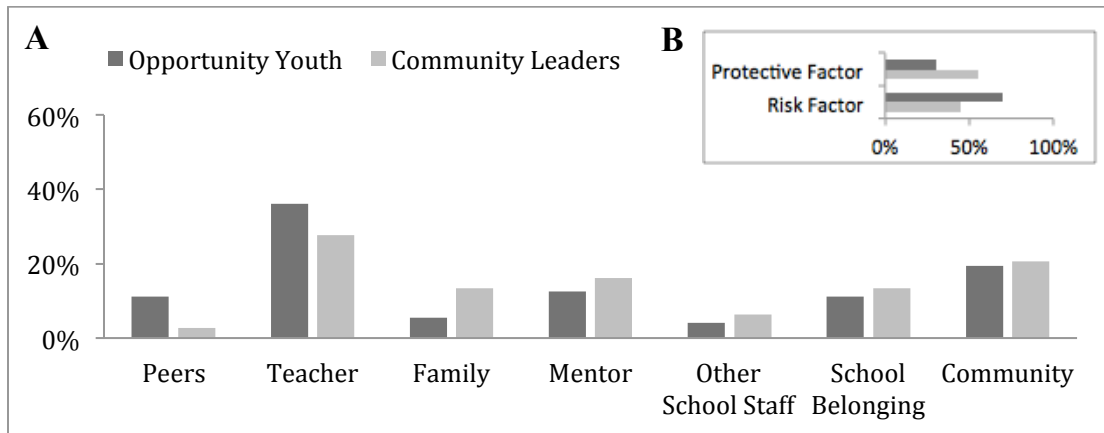
*Discussion of topics and overall context of themes.*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Opportunity youth (%)</b>	<b>Community leaders (%)</b>	<b>Risk factor (%)</b>	<b>Protective factor (%)</b>
Social Support	41	39	54	46
Student Profile	31	19	56	44
School Factors	14	9	85	15
Classroom Dynamics	7	12	77	23
Community Factors	4	11	80	20
Family Factors	3	10	94	6

### **Social Support**

All participant focus groups stressed the importance (risk and protective) of interpersonal relationships. In average, the discussion among groups was approximately 40% focused on the students’ social interactions with peers, teachers, other school staff, mentors, and community

support (see Appendix D for tallied results). Also coded within this theme was the participant's sense of school belonging. The opportunity youth discussed social features more so as risk factors (69%) than protective ones (31%; see Figure 1B). Meanwhile the community leaders discussed more positive interpersonal relationships than negative relations.



*Figure 1.* Average percentage of occurrences for each element within the social support category.

**Family support and peer influence.** Through the interviews, participants revealed that social support had a significant influence on their high school completion, decision to dropout, or to transfer from high school. For opportunity youth, the tendency in which they spoke about the diverse relationships was more about the need for support and encouragement. For instance, Maria shared that a more supportive role from her parents could have propelled her forward to work harder and maintain focus in school: “I think if my parents woulda pushed me more, maybe like support me.... Some of the decisions that I made in those years would be different” (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria). Other participants such as the community leaders often felt this exact same void from their parents. However, for many of them the void was filled by mentors,



staff, and those willing to provide guidance. Peers, however, influenced some opportunity youth like Maria, Carmen, and Griselda to disregard their education.

In consensus with Yu and Patterson (2010), a few of the participants were clear on the effect that their peers had on their view of education. Maria shared how she was usually not in school because she was with her boyfriend at the time: “I was with my baby daddy, so yea I was never in school. It was just to talk to your friends and hangout pretty much” (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria). Carmen gave another example concerning the influential power of friends:

*A lot of friends of mine [were] doing the same thing...It was because of friends [that] I was like “Okay, we can skip class together. We don’t have to go to school today, let’s hang out instead.” (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

Griselda also mentioned how her group of friends also eventually dropped out of high school:

*Same here, friends, definitely um most of the girls from my--- it was like five of us [pause] [...] We all dropped out. Not at the same time but--- You know, we started skipping school and stuff [...] I think friends are a big thing. (Opportunity Youth 2, Griselda)*

The following excerpts show that friendships can act as prototypes that influence either educational attainment or decision to drop out from (Ream and Rumberger, 2008). As shared through Yessica’s experience below, community leaders had more positive influences from their friends. In this excerpt Yessica shares how she and a friend (Stephanie) pushed one another to be better scholars:

*Stephanie and I were very close and we both were very focused in what we wanted to achieve and I think we used to compete [on] who got the highest grade and I used to try to beat her all the time or she would beat me. I think that was a huge factor to wanting to do better because I didn't want to fall behind Stephanie and Stephanie didn't want to fall behind me. So that was a big motivation for both of us. (Community Leader 8, Yessica)*

For some participants that were not receiving the support they needed from their family and friends, caring individuals such as teachers, other school staff, mentors, and the community often intervened. This encouragement and support was common for the community leaders but

was missing for some the opportunity youth. Most of the community leaders regarded their experiences with school staff and community members as uplifting and helpful:

*For me, Mr. Weaver, I really saw him as like that dad figure. I wanted to make him so happy. I wanted to do the best on my test because I knew that he was going to be like "I'm proud of you" and I didn't have that. (Community Leader 2, Selena)*

*...When people started to kind of let me know that I had a lot of potential, I thought it was great because my mom had never used that kind of language [...] My mom never said to me "I am proud of you" [...] And so I had all these people making me feel really good about myself [but] my mom was really old fashioned. (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

*I feel like I had similarly to some of your experiences. I think um I had individuals in my life again who could provide words of affirmation, who were saying: "You're a bright student. You have a lot of talent. I think you could, you know, you can go far. You can get ahead." [...] I think I found people who were very encouraging... they were more like coaches. They were more like your cheerleaders, you know, and friends. I thought that there were friendships there. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Words of affirmation were critical in the relationship established between teacher and student. These excerpts show that not only do teachers affect the students' motivation and achievement in school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Cummings, 2012; Yu & Patterson, 2010) but so does family support and culture. Family influences will be explored further in another section however their emotional and physical involvement was captured within this theme.

**Student-teacher relationship.** Figure 1 shows that both opportunity youth and community leaders regarded their connection with teachers as the most influential of the social components. Yet, as previously stated there was a notable difference in the context teachers were discussed among groups. From the opportunity youth discussions, the student-teacher relationship was not as encouraging and supportive as shared by the community leaders. The opportunity youth shared mainly negative interactions with their teachers and described them as unsupportive, careless, frustrated, and biased:

*I also think there some teachers that don't really care about the students they just wanna get paid basically and that's it, like, they're just doing their job. (Opportunity Youth 2, Griselda)*

*They would treat me a different way [...] my relationship with the teachers was kind of bittersweet [pause] they didn't really like me 'cuz they felt like I was the distraction of the class. (Opportunity Youth 4, Anthony)*

*[...] If they were in a bad mood they usually like take it out--- sometimes they take it out on you and it's like it gets to a point its like "Really?" (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria)*

*...A lot of separation... I mean if you didn't want to learn if you were just sitting there... you were a part of a group, that's how I felt, you were a part of a group, you were a clown or something or you just weren't a good student. (Opportunity Youth 5, Edgar)*

Favoritism by teachers was apparent to mostly all participants. The opportunity youth were often discouraged by the behavior of their teachers towards them. For opportunity youth, being singled out as one of the 'bad' kids often led to misconduct and lashing out at the teachers: "...it used to be like a lot of confrontations with teachers, getting sent to the office, 'cuz they treat you a certain way..." (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria). Conversely, community leaders regarded their student-teacher relationship more so as a protective factor. Although they too recognized teacher favoritism most of them were on the 'good' receiving end of the spectrum and benefited from their student-teacher relationship:

*Aside from class, I would see them outside of class and they'd give me words of wisdom and stuff. But sadly, teachers knew who were the ones who were going to succeed as well so I think kind of um I wouldn't say played favoritism but kind of invested a little more time in the ones that they knew were going to succeed. (Community Leader 6, Sara)*

Other factors within the student-teacher relationship involved being able to relate to their teachers or being more connected to them. These types of comments often intertwined with the 'classroom dynamics' theme, which takes into account the teacher or school's efforts to include the students' sociocultural knowledge in their learning experience. However, many of the participants shared wanting more of an investment from their teachers, whether it was to know

their names or more of their background. For example, Layla who eventually transferred out of Lawrence High to a private school talked about her experience while in a summer program:

*The teachers all really wanted to get to know you personally... Everyone knew your name, which was something that was very different for me because when I was in Lawrence High I felt like people didn't really know each other's names. (Opportunity Youth 7)*

Here, Layla contrasts a rich relationship with school members and staff where the teachers invested in her as opposed to the community at Lawrence High. This data replicates the findings in the study by McGlynn (2000), which argues that retention, has more to do with students' friendships than their studies (as cited in Brown, 2008).

**Community support.** The majority of the community leaders felt supported by their teachers as well as encouraged to perform their very best and in result they often did. These participants also described being greatly supported by the community as another protective factor. Many of the community leader participants were offered assistance through youth programs that influenced school achievement. Whereas opportunity youth reflected on needing such support because they were often lost and in need of guidance with their schooling experience. Yessica, one of the community leaders, recalled the help she received from a program director who motivated her to look beyond high school graduation:

*Dave Stevens was huge for me. Dave used to work at (youth program)... He helped me with my FAFSA... he took me on all my college tours... he would give me scholarship information and opportunities... he reviewed all my college applications. (Community Leader 8, Yessica)*

On the other hand, opportunity youth expressed needing that kind of encouragement in high school:

*"The support and help, you know, to stay in school and do good in school and graduate 'cuz I never had that. I mean it was expected from me but it wasn't like enforced" (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria).*

There were two exceptions within the opportunity youth participants. These young ladies did not dropout rather they were encouraged by teachers, other school staff, and community partners to transfer out of the public school system and into a private high school: “When I was in that program, I guess I did pretty well and they invited me to apply to the school and I got in and I got a full scholarship to go there” (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla). Samantha also transferred out from the high school in Lawrence and explained her decision-making process to relocate considering she had to repeat a year at the new private school:

*For me that was a really hard decision. All my family was really against it [but] I had a lot of mentors both in Lawrence High and in Upward Bound kind of like encouraging me, you know, “It’s just a year, [there’s] gonna be better opportunities somewhere else than, you know, not wanting to lose a year and stay in Lawrence High.” (Opportunity Youth 6, Samantha)*

**Mentors, school belonging, and other school staff.** Furthermore, participants indicated that mentors were scarce in their high school experience. Many of the participants discussed in some form not having a person to help guide them through their social dilemmas in high school and wishing that there were someone who had walked along side them to figure out their place within the system. Several of these comments were tied to their sense of school belonging and their ethnic identity:

*So, it’s sort of like when you go to these high schools, I wanted to know: “Should I be White?” You know what I mean, you have that battle: “Am I supposed to be White because I want to be smart and I want to go to college and I want to do this or can I just be a smart Hispanic? You know what I mean, you battle with that sort of like identity thing. And so my mom--- I was the first one, you know what I mean, to [go] to high school and I didn’t feel that support. (Community Leader 2, Selena)*

*...There was really like no one [who] took me like, you know, “This is who you are, this is what you’re suppose to be doing, if you need any help or anything I’m [here] for you.” (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

The majority of participants were born to immigrant parents and therefore were the first generation to attend school in the U.S.. Many of them explained feeling unsupported and socially

confused because most of their guardian(s) or parent(s) did not know how to be involved with their education. (Parent upbringing is further discussed in the ‘family background’ section).

Relationships among other school staff were also brought up during the group interviews. Some of the relationships were supportive and others were not. For example, Griselda and Carmen (both opportunity youth) described their guidance counselors as useless, unwelcoming, and un-relatable. While other students, mainly the community leaders, remembered their counselors as going above and beyond the call of duty to assist them in entering college. Another factor of social support was school belonging. This element was defined as the students’ sense of belonging and considered whether or not they felt accepted/welcome or as a part of the school. The participant’s level of school pride is also consistent with this theme. Sense of belonging is a factor that researchers commonly report allows students to feel a consciousness of relatedness and community, which often motivates students to be successful. A few of the students shared how comfortable they felt at their school because of its student body composition, which is a factor that is further explained in the ‘school factors’ section. Nonetheless, here Elizabeth shares her sense of belonging because of the student demographic at her high school:

*When I got [to Lawrence High], I was so relieved because it was probably the first time in a few years that I felt accepted by my peers, understood. I was surrounded by people like me. (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

There were not many community leaders that did not feel accepted by their school community except for Selena who was one out of the two students who did not attend the local public high school:

*[...] Academically it was good, [...] I felt like um you know that part of it was good but not socially. I felt like an outcast. I really felt how different I was there. I was involved in like volunteering throughout high school um like (the local hospital) and um I did (youth program) but I didn’t get involved in anything with school. (Community Leader 2, Selena)*

The student body composition at Selena's private school was different than the public school. The staff demographic was also homogeneously white and Selena describes feeling like an outcast in that community. In turn, this lack of belonging at school seemed to prohibit her from being involved in any extracurricular activities at school. Conversely, Layla, one of the opportunity youth who transferred and had a 'good kid' reputation amongst the teachers had mixed feelings about her sense of belonging because she was greatly supported by the instructors but was not as widely accepted by her peers:

*I felt like I belonged because the teachers really liked me, I was very involved, and I ran track. But in terms of like socially I felt very much like an outsider because I was doing very well. (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla)*

Many of the opportunity youth described feeling alienated and/or a sense of hostility from their teachers:

*I used to leave school all the time. I didn't feel fit for it. I just [pause] I didn't feel wanted. (Opportunity Youth 5, Edgar)*

### **Student Profile**

Both opportunity youth and community leaders highlighted individual factors as fundamental components of school achievement. This category consisted of elements that could be characterized by the student's background and attributes such as grades, attendance, conduct, aspirations, mental health, teenage pregnancy, and a few others (see Appendix C, D for further details). Altogether this category was the second most influential theme. However, within this theme there was also a substantial disparity in the context it was discussed amongst both groups. For community leaders, the individual aspects were distinguished heavily as protective factors – approximately 70% (see Figure 2). On the other hand, opportunity youth discussed elements from this topic as mainly risk factors. There was, however, one notable element at opposite ends

of the spectrum for community leaders and opportunity youth and it was the ‘aspiration’ component. Aspiration meant that the participant was focused on school; it captured whether or not they were self-motivated to succeed or perform well. Most community leaders were highly motivated to graduate and looked forward to their plans after high school – mainly college or getting out of Lawrence. Opportunity youth talked about being discouraged and rarely spoke about trying their best in school.

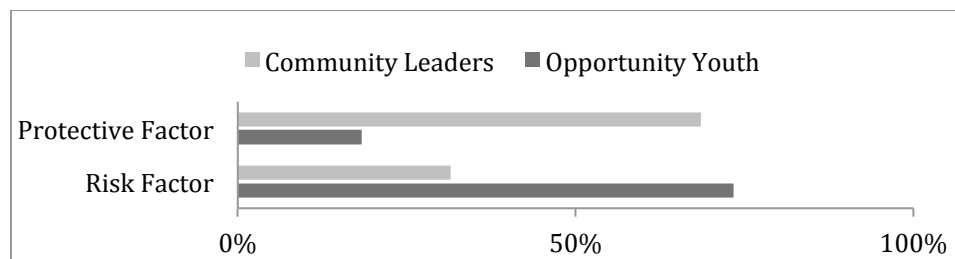


Figure 2. Average percentage of context (risk/protective) for the student profile category.

During the group interviews, several of the participants discerned whether or not school was a priority to them as well as their willingness to succeed or perform well. Approximately 70% of the opportunity youth participants shared that school was not a priority to them:

*I could say that [my] high school experience was pretty much just to attend school - just to say I went to high school. (Opportunity Youth 4, Anthony)*

*...All I used to do is skip school like not even pay attention to teachers, like just go to be present, you know, so that they don't call you house and then [I would] just leave. (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria)*

*I'm just gonna go but I wasn't really focused liked that and I dropped out [my] freshman year. (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

The lack of teacher support coupled with a lack of interest for school resulted in poor grades and low attendance rates for many of these students. This behavior also ensued misconduct and disciplinary action.



A few of the participants also shared feeling lost within the school system and frequent references to self-esteem issues were noted within the discussions. Self-esteem was defined as the students' confidence in self and their trajectory towards educational attainment. The former students described instances in high school where they felt disconnected or confused about their educational experience:

*...But anyways my experience through the old Lawrence High... I was already lost. I was lost already. I didn't know what I wanted. They put me in classes... [the] thing [is] you go through high school [and from the beginning] you should know what you want. You know, 'cuz that's what's expected obviously you should know what you want. (Opportunity Youth 5, Edgar)*

*I wasn't feeling confidence in myself or whatever and I just didn't know what to expect in a high school. So [as] the months [passed] by I felt like I was stuck. I didn't know where [I was] educational-wise, with friends, and everything. There [were] a lot of influences and I went through a lot of phases in high school. I just kind of [fell] back little by little... (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

There is a lack of motivation in most of the excerpts recorded from the opportunity youth. However, the community leaders highlight optimistic aspirations, good grades, and behavior. Their responses emphasized the importance of self-motivation and ambition towards academic success.

*I was fueled by a lot of negative emotions but I was trying to pursue something that was positive for myself. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Other individual factors that were discussed briefly by participants were teenage pregnancy, mental health, employment, language proficiency, and grade retention. There were two teenage moms in the opportunity youth group who discussed the difficulties of juggling school and a newborn baby. For both of them, having a child to take care of played a major role in their decision to leave school:

*Well, I left, I dropped out because I was missing a lot of days for skipping school and doing all this stuff I wasn't suppose to be doing and they were gonna [hold] me back. So*

*I was already missing so many days ‘cuz of my son, ‘cuz in the beginning he used to get sick a lot. So, I just decided to dropout... (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria)*

*I tried going while I was pregnant, for a month, and it just didn’t work out. I had alota pressure going on, you know, becoming a new mom, being a teenager, and having to be on point and everything with school and everything. So, it was hard. (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

Community leaders also recognized that for many Lawrence youth teenage pregnancy is a major issue.

**School Factors**

School factors regarded concerns that were characterized solely by the institution such as its size, location, resources, and student composition (see Appendix C, D). When referencing this theme, the risk factor was well above 50% for both opportunity youth and community leaders (see Figure 3B).

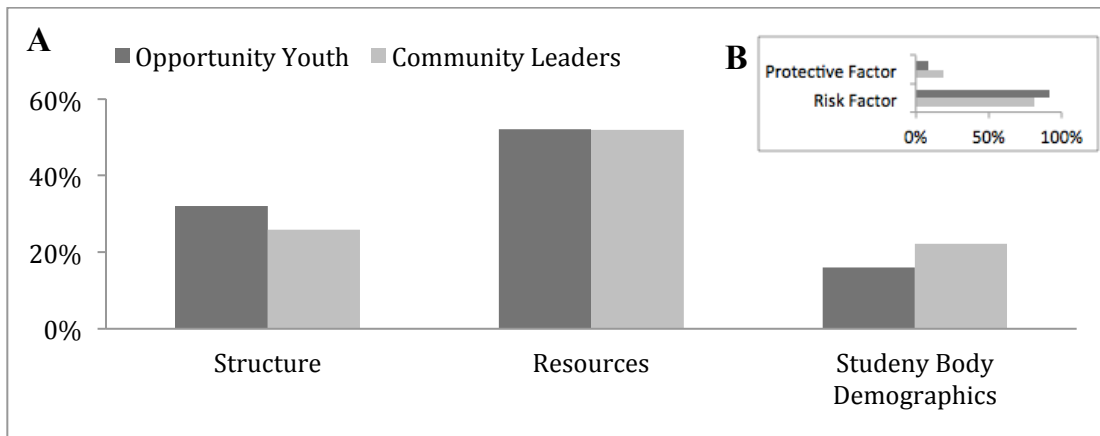


Figure 3. Average percentage of occurrences for each element within the school factors category.

**Resources.** Many of the focus groups were in accordance when discussing the school’s resources as scarce. For the resources component, references to the following topics were coded: teacher quality, the student-teacher ratio, the building’s maintenance, the school’s budget, and

pro-school opportunities (or lack thereof). As stated in an earlier quote, several students perceived teachers as careless and interested only in being employed. This type of teacher behavior led many of the focus groups to speak on the quality of instruction at their school. In this study, teacher quality is represented by the combination of personal attributes (such as love of children, honesty, compassion, fairness) and professional attributes related to the pedagogical skills and practices of the educator (Strong, 2011). Both community leaders and opportunity youth shared their disdain for some of their teachers. Many of the former students were aware of their educators' disinterests to teach at their school and/or community and some of the teachers went as far as letting them know:

*I had a teacher who was a very, very, vocal man, very open about his opinions about certain like, you know, we had a Muslim student, he was very open about his opinion about him. We had girls, he treated them certain way, he was very demeaning, not only about Latinos but like always talking about, you know, "Lawrence used to be so much better and--- Lawrence back in the day." And we all knew what that meant and it was just very disparaging, everything out of his mouth was just like bitterness, and hatred, and like bigotry. (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

*Some teachers they were like really rude [pause] they were impatient because of other students so when you asked for help they were kind of like rude to you. (Opportunity Youth 3, Maria)*

In this next excerpt, Bryan explains the different types of teachers he encountered in school and how their demeanor translated to him:

*...There were some individuals that you go in and you could tell teaching is their passion – you could tell that is their vocation. You could tell that they really have a personality for youth. There are some individuals who are in there and they're just extremely bright and they're articulate but they have no social skills but they love being there. Then there are some people who are just there and they're trying to get a paycheck. I think there was a significant difference in how receptive I was to the teachers who were passionate. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Bryan focused on the personal attributes of the teacher while Elizabeth discussed more of the teaching strategies and classroom management skills:

*...I've had teachers, math teachers, who, you were there [sic], so that was part of your grade, just being physically there. And then, you would get an A for not causing trouble, you know. [...] No lie! I took Algebra 2 and I was like, I didn't learn anything. So, I went and spoke to this administrator and I was like, you know: "I didn't learn anything. I have an A+ but I don't believe in that A+. I know I don't know anything." And so, I had to actually advocate for myself with a group of my friends and I took it again... (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

For many of the opportunity youth, the student to teacher ratio affected their ability to connect fully with their educational experience. Edgar who talked about not feeling “fit” for school or feeling “wanted” referenced the student population at the high school as congested: “It was a big juggle with students. It was overpopulated [...]” (Opportunity Youth 5). Another opportunity youth elaborated further on the topic:

*I agree I feel like it was so overcrowded that you just got lost in the crowd like you could never really find a spot, like unless you were part of a clique or something and teachers knew you for either being a really good student or a really bad student, then, you were kinda just lost. (Opportunity Youth 6, Samantha)*

Another participant shared how programs outside of school provided engaging opportunities that were not available at their institution:

*We went on trips and field trips and [that's] something that I never imagined I would do at Lawrence High. (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla)*

**School structure.** The participants also discussed the structure of the school. This element noted any reference to the school’s size, location, or the school’s layout, which included things such as the class schedule and length of day. A few of the participants referred to the school location as dangerous:

*I was really scared because the impression I had of Lawrence High School was that it was like really bad and really dangerous and people were going to steal my stuff and I was gonna get jumped and like all these other stuff. (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

*They said, you know, “Don’t go to Lawrence High.” They told me: “You’re going to get robbed.” (Community Leader 2, Selena)*

When asked about their high school experience, one participant shared that the size of the school was overwhelming:

*Well for me it was very challenging. I came from New York to here and when I [got] to the high school I didn't know what to expect. I got into this like big high school where like there was new people. I wasn't feeling like confidence in myself... (Opportunity Youth 1, Carmen)*

Another topic that came up regarding the school was its layout. Some participants shared that the way buildings were set up in the new school caused the students to separate and also discouraged a unified sense of school pride, which often led to a negative sense of school belonging:

*I feel like what you said about like there wasn't a lot of stuff available for the Lawrence High, I feel like that was the biggest problem when we segregated 'cuz I went half two years old Lawrence High two years in the new Lawrence High. Once we segregated to the six schools, I feel like there was a lack of like unity... (Community Leader 3, Elizabeth)*

**Student body demographics.** Student composition was recorded when participants mentioned their classmates' ethnic makeup in relation to the school's atmosphere or their learning experiences. Several of the students regarded the school's student body demographic as encouraging and comforting:

*I felt like Lawrence High students [were] very comfortable ethnically because they [were] surrounded--- Lawrence High is like I would say 99.8% Dominican or Puerto Rican or Hispanic, you know, so it is comfortable, to have all those peers... (Community Leader 3, Elizabeth)*

### **Classroom Dynamics**

Participants mentioned three elements of classroom dynamics that were of importance to their education: multicultural education, home and school connection, and academic rigor (see Figure 4A; Appendix C, D). This category considered context-specific approaches to the students' learning. The opportunity youth discussed the components as solely risk factors (see

Figure 4B). Among the community leaders there was a 68 and 32% risk and protective factor, respectively, for the elements in this theme.

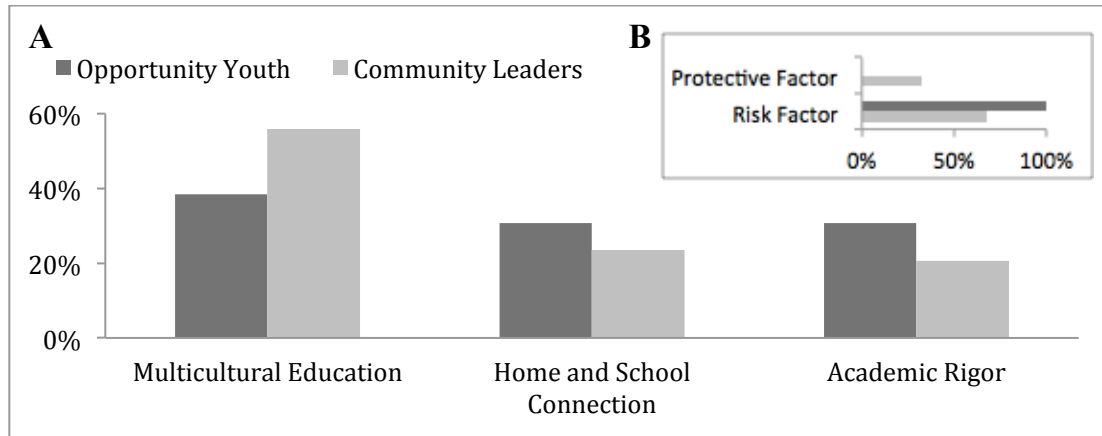


Figure 4. Average percentage of occurrences for each element within the classroom dynamics theme.

**Multicultural education.** Multicultural education encompassed any reference to cultural inclusion such as opportunities for students to learn in ways that are familiar or comfortable to them. These practices often reflect the racial and cultural background of students. Also included in this category were comments about the participant’s ability to relate to their teachers because of common interests or backgrounds. One of the participants mentioned how for many students having a common background to their teacher is a “big part” of making a connection. Yessica used her story as an example and mentioned her relationship with a teacher who was from Lawrence:

*That was a big part of their disconnect with their teachers was that none of them had the same background. I think that’s what made me interact so well with Mr. Rogers was that [he] was from Lawrence. Even though he was this old little white man he was from Lawrence... (Community Leader 8, Yessica)*

Furthermore, one of the community leaders who was a teacher shared how being relatable is an example of a protective factor for her own students at Lawrence High:

*When I first introduce myself to students, they are amazed by the fact that I was [in] their seat. I did everything that they're going to be doing and like you said it hits home. I am able to make that connection right off the bat. I don't have to work really hard to build one because it's already there and then we're able to joke around... (Community Leader 7, Lizbeth)*

Multicultural education was also referenced as a lacking feature within the classroom setting. Most participants spoke about wanting a mentor as noted earlier but one community leader in particular referenced needing a person of color to help make sense of the cultural and social dilemmas he experienced as a Latino male:

*I think that the tough part was really adjusting as a minority male and in that system. I think it went back to not having the appropriate social skills to learn how to deal with my identity issues 'cuz it felt like there were a lot of things in conflict. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Bryan came back to this idea further into the interview and stated the following:

*...at least now looking back at it, the type of coaching that I needed, I think I would have been more receptive to someone who was of color, who could talk about my social experience, and my ethnic differences, that's what I really wanted to understand. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

There were several references from the community leaders directed to lacking cultural and social understanding in regards to their learning. Selena shared the same sentiment explicitly when she said: "I feel that culturally, [...] we needed more help sort of integrating and finding ourselves" (Community Leader 2). Within this statement, Selena was also referencing the situation between her family's immigrant status and the school's resources, which could also be tied to the city's socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, like Selena many of the participants' family lacked the knowledge to prepare their children to integrate or exchange information with a culture that was not their own. Most of the participants lacked the skills that could be provided by a 'multicultural

education.’ In the literature multicultural education is referenced as a practice where teachers utilize the students’ social, linguistic, and intellectual resources in the classroom dynamics instead of leading the classroom uniformly and considering only the dominant culture’s way of learning and instruction (Gallenstein, 1998). Both opportunity youth and community leader groups showed that multicultural education was missing in their high school experience.

In the following excerpt another community leader shared her struggle to remain engaged when her teachers did not make the content presented in the classroom relatable:

*Then, I had teachers in between who were just kind of old and stuck in their ways, you know, they’ve been teaching a long time. They knew literature but they couldn’t really relate to their students. So, I was like: “I’m learning but this is so dry” and I didn’t feel like it worked for me but I had to do it and I was like “Might as well.” (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

Additionally, some of the participants described the teachers’ instructional content as irrelevant. One of the suggestions made by a community leader to enhance resources for youth in the community was that the context be tied to life outside of school. Here is his observation:

*I would say maybe more focus on academic skills, life skills, social skills ‘cuz those are relevant like why are you going to school? I’m learning about algebra. That makes no sense to me... to learn about algebra, or to learn about how I can figure out what the hypotenuse is. So, it just becomes irrelevant, “How am I going to use this to survive?” I think in Lawrence, you grow up on survival mode, like “I gotta survive.” (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

The last comment made by Bryan is interesting because he is considering the context in which he lives and the importance of the school’s education to connect with the greater community. Interpersonal attachments were once key to traditional schooling and used to facilitate a child’s engagement in learning (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). However, this lack of cultural transmission and skill development is the source to many students’ feeling of alienation and disengagement (Cummings, 2012; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Marquez-Zenkov,



2007; Park et al., 2012). For example, the next excerpt by an opportunity youth expresses a desire to have relevant content that considers his sociocultural knowledge:

*I don't think I ever fit in but that was just me. I was different from everybody else. I didn't know how to explain it. Not much people talked about what I wanted [pause] really wanted. [...] You know ask, raise the hands in class, you know: "Who wants to be this? Who wants to be that?" Nobody has the same brain. Everybody walks with different souls... (Opportunity Youth 5, Edgar)*

In this excerpt it is important to note that Edgar wanted to engage with his schooling however from his point of view there was no outlet to do so.

**Home and school connection.** Another element of the classroom factors was the 'home and school connection.' This element regarded any communication between the school and the student's home. This factor recorded the former students' desires to have their parents involved with their education. There were a few instances where participants recalled their teachers trying to connect with their parents or guardians. This attempt to reach out to parents often allowed for participants to engage better with their teachers and vice versa for teachers to understand their students' situation:

*...[Teachers] understood also that there was some stuff going on at home. So they would also try to cater to that, which was very helpful. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

*Justin Dennis was my homeroom advisory and teacher, again, he helped me in terms of taking me to visit schools, which he didn't have to. [...] He knew my parents and they were in constant communication. He helped me get into Boston University. (Community Leader 7, Lizbeth)*

None of the opportunity youth (except for the two transfers) reported any positive communication between teacher and parents. Most of them recalled negative communication, which regarded disciplinary action. Teachers would call home to set up meetings with parents about the student's misbehavior or low attendance. In the upcoming excerpt one of the community leaders shares the disconnection between school and home further. She describes her

situation at home with a working mom and compares her circumstances with her peers (majorly White):

*I couldn't relate to [teachers] because like he said, coming from a home where my mom works in a factory, you know, long hours, and here you are, you know, these girls have nothing compared to me so these teachers couldn't relate to me either. And they thought that it was me kind of like rebelling. So, I didn't have a good experience as far as that is concerned. I didn't have very supportive teachers. (Community Leader 2, Selena)*

Selena's event speaks to the need for teachers to implement some of the students' home-community culture in the delivery of classroom instruction (Ayala, 2012; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Rendón, 2014). The excerpt also shows the importance of interpersonal relationships for the student in order to bridge school and home culture into an engaging and motivating experience.

Digging deeper into the 'home and school connection' participants reflected on the reason why some of the students' parents might not be as involved as other parents in their child's education:

*There is that conflict of parents. Parents may not be involved because parents don't know how to be involved. There are some parents who just do not want to be involved but there are some parents who don't know English so why are they gonna go to school? They don't reach out to them, they may not translate whatever messages... (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

According to researchers, parent involvement is key to student success (Ayala, 2012; Brown, 2008; Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Schools play a major role in parent engagement especially within a highly immigrant community. Therefore, schools need to assure that they are reaching out to parents in a language that they understand and in a format that is readily accessible. Participants suggested that one of the implementations to programs available to youth be that of additional resources for their parents:

*A resource that I think would be beneficial for students in Lawrence would be a program that found a way to involve parents with the schools and help the parents feel like they*

*were part of their children's education. My parents are immigrants and so the education system in this country is obviously very different. So it was very foreign to them and they didn't know how to navigate it... (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla)*

*Having just that parent-teacher involvement is really really important. That's something I never got to see growing up. (Opportunity Youth 6, Samantha)*

**Academic rigor.** Lastly, the 'classroom dynamics' theme held an element referenced to 'academic rigor.' Through this component topics that were coded were related to how stimulating or challenging they found the subject material. For many of the participants, mostly the community leaders and the opportunity youth who transferred, the classroom content was not invigorating enough. A great number of these participants shared how they were not challenged by the instruction at their school. One participant explained her experience further:

*I did feel like they were just teaching to teach. For example, I had an Italian class, [the teacher] would just basically write words in Italian and then tell us what it meant in English and that was the class and [also reading] in Italian. I [was] just like: "Can we like do something a little bit more interactive?" (Community Leader 1, Juliana)*

The students' sense of engagement was of importance to their schooling. Therefore, there was a lot of emphasis on the teachers' quality of instruction.

### **Community Factors**

The community factors theme encompasses the participants' neighborhood characteristics. Three elements were discussed within this theme: socioeconomic status, segregation, and recreational opportunities (see Figure 5A). Similar to the school factors theme, the opportunity youth referenced these elements completely as risk factors (see Figure 5B). Similarly, community leaders also spoke on these elements mainly as risk factors with only a 24% protective factor frequency.

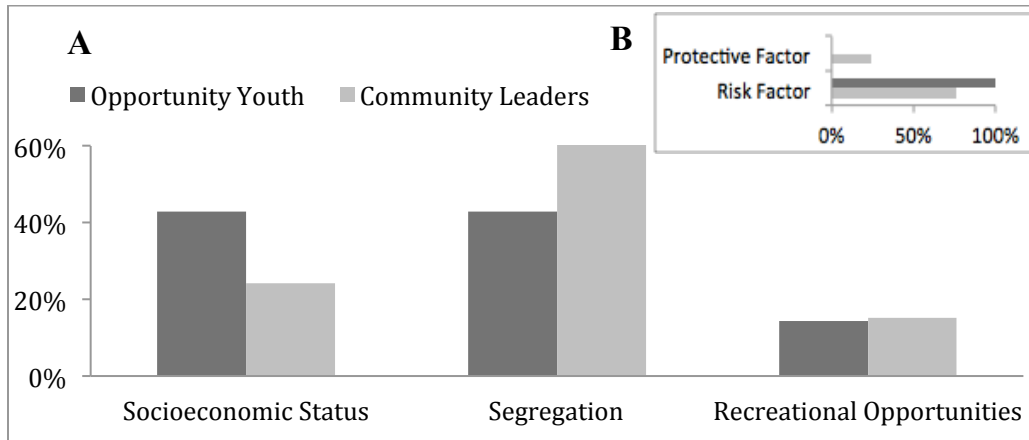


Figure 5. Average percentage of occurrences for each element within the community factors category.

**Socioeconomic status.** Participants recognized that the community they live in was impoverished compared to neighboring communities:

*Like when you are a student in Lawrence, no one actually talks about your social status, but you're aware that you're not rich. (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

One of the participants that transferred out of a school in Lawrence, shared her experience while visiting a private school:

*...when I stepped down to the campus I was shocked. I think I cried a little bit 'cuz difference between a campus that is so wealthy and Lawrence High was so shocking it was almost painful. (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla)*

Moreover, this participant further described how Lawrence lacks the resources to provide some of the proper services for families to be involved in the student's education:

*...I think that [at] Lawrence High with things [like] preparing a students for college and explaining what accreditation was or what AP classes or even the SAT... a lot of the responsibility fell on the students. I don't think that's fair on the students, like, they are kids that shouldn't be their job. It should be the job of the school, the administrators, and the teachers to bridge that gap for the parents, if the parents aren't knowledgeable. (Opportunity Youth 7, Layla)*

Other issues with financial resources revolved around a student's opportunity to be involved in extracurricular activities or partake in enrichment programs due to transportation. Participants

shared their personal struggles to get home after late evenings at school because of limited transportation: “Cuz you’re dealing with a poor community with poor people, you know, owning a vehicle it cost money” (Community Leader 9, Zaylin). The challenge is something that persists with students today:

*I run the robotics club at the high school and I told them this is an issue because we get out at 7:30-8:00 o’clock at night. I can’t have my North Lawrence students walking home. So, I was able to get a bus for them for South Lawrence and North Lawrence. But again, that’s only for the robotics students, what happens to all the other kids who are also at the high school? (Community Leader 7, Lizbeth)*

*Yea, I know a couple of students who don’t get involved after school. I don’t know if this is no longer the case because they couldn’t get a ride back. (Community Leader 8, Yessica)*

**Segregation.** Segregation was defined in this paper as a community with a high population of minority students and also the different outcomes as referenced in the literature that result from this phenomenon. Some of which, considering the literature, include: a prevention of socialization and information exchange in low SES neighborhoods, second-generation idleness, and poor educational outcomes in schools with a high proportion of Latino and Black students. Many of the respondents discussed instances where they felt there was a missing element in their learning:

*I had the assumption that only white people were happy. [...] Only white people can have like nice fancy cars, right, and that only they can have like an actual family. So in my mind, I’m like: “Yo there is a secret that they have, there is something they know [...] that we don’t know.” (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Bryan’s misconception that ‘only white people’ can have nice things is representative of the community’s residential segregation. In earlier excerpts, several students shared feeling confused about their identity and their place within the educational system. As shown in the literature and the excerpts below, segregation in regards to the relationship between student body composition and neighborhood SES needs further exploration. Nonetheless, this first excerpt was coded

within this theme because the participant implies that Hispanics from this community are not cared for and are unimportant and thus because Latinos know this they do not expect much from the school instructors:

*I would say that student from a community like this they expect teachers not to care 'cuz we're lower or you know from the place that we come from we're, you know, Hispanics and so they expect--- students expect teachers not to care, you know? (Opportunity Youth 2, Griselda)*

Participants also discussed their schooling experience in Lawrence and their transition to first semester in college and reflected on the challenge it was to keep up the pace. These instances were also coded under 'segregation' because there is a comparison between the education preparation at a dense ethnic minority community and a diverse community. For example:

*[...] and I hear that a lot. I hear that--- that no matter how great you felt like you were as a student at Lawrence High, that when you went to college, you really didn't cut it. You didn't really have, you know, you were struggling because you weren't really prepared. Your writing skills were not as good, your reading skills were not as good, your--- you know what I mean? I hear that a lot from [probably] every person that I know that went to college from Lawrence High... (Community Leader 9, Zaylin)*

Another example coded within this theme considers the outlook on oneself and their ethnic group due in part to segregation. Segregation as well as the socioeconomic status contributed to many of the participant's social identity crisis. The participants considered often their place within the education system, which could be tied to the lack of socialization and information exchange. In this excerpt Bryan considers his high school experience as a minority male in a private and dominantly white school setting:

*I thought: "Is there something wrong with my people or with me because I am not as smart." Then, I realized: "No, no, no that's not true. I am as smart [and] as talented. These kids have had an advantage that we have not had." (Community Leader 5, Bryan)*

Bryan never elaborated on what the advantage was but surely there was a distinction made between his ethnic identity and others.

**Recreational Opportunities.** Some participants mentioned the opportunity to partake in activities outside of school as influences to their educational achievement – this information was coded under ‘recreational opportunities.’ This element was important to the community factors theme because it referenced the accessibility of positive engagement within the local neighborhood and its potential to propel a student forward or backward in their educational attainment. Many of the community leaders found themselves involved in enriching programs that influenced school completion. However, a few of the opportunity youth found themselves participating in activities that were not positive but influenced the idea of dropout with its behaviors. In this excerpt, Edgar suggests what he thinks would be beneficial to the youth of Lawrence and calls for the community to open up their school resources and bring in community members in order to inspire the kids to stay in school:

*They're teens, you know, looking to have fun. They could open up more gyms, you know, get these kids occupied for the nightlife. You know? Maybe a lot of these kids wouldn't be influenced by drugs and other stuff. You got all these schools in Lawrence, why don't you open up the gyms? We got so much basketball players that never made it out of Lawrence, where they going? They're staying in Lawrence. What are they doing? They're influencing us. I was influenced by the greats. [...] That's one thing they have to do. They should bring back the graduates that, you know, how could you say--- they were special at the time but they didn't make it as stars. (Opportunity Youth 5, Edgar)*

This next excerpt is from a community leader who was very involved and motivated to pursue higher education. The element was more of a risk factor for opportunity youth but more of a protective factor for the community leaders (see Figure 5B). There were multiple responses from community leaders that conveyed meaning consistent with this code. For example, Yessica's statement:

*I also got involved a lot, in and outside of Lawrence High. I did theater--- I was really involved in the art academies so I did a lot of--- I was a TA for a while. I was part of Lawrence Community Works when it was first starting. I also did a college prep program called 'Passport' with Higher Education Resource Center and so I was very involved. I*

*also did a couple of programs that were run by the Family Service Center. (Community Leader 8, Yessica)*

### **Family Characteristics**

Participants referenced their guardians' background as another element to influence their high school aspirations. The family characteristics theme was made up by only one component, which was 'family background.' Under this component was coded any information on the family's education level, socioeconomic status, and its structure which considered whether or not the former students lived with grandparents, homeless, or on their own, etc. The topic was more so discussed by community leaders with roughly 10% of the group discussions coded under this theme. The opportunity youth spoke less about this topic with an average of three percent of the coded material. Moreover, approximately 94% of the coded data was categorized as risk factors.

A few of the community leaders referenced their parents' education level as a catalyst to their involvement in school. Whether it was because they had little schooling or pursued higher education their parents encouraged them to do their best in school and helped them by seeking opportunities for positive reinforcement and enrichment activities. Other parents however were not as involved. According to participant responses parents either did not know how to be involved due to lack of knowledge and understanding of the American school system and/or the guardians' cultural values clashed with their child's bicultural values. For example:

*[...] my mom was really old fashioned. So her focus was like you get home you should be cleaning, cooking, taking care of your little brother. Her focus was all domestic. So to her when I said to her I want to go to a boarding school, I wanna go live at school, she was like "What the hell for? Why?" (Community Leader 4, Elizabeth)*

Also coded within this theme was information about the participant's family. In the following excerpt Griselda shared how her siblings' education level encouraged her to leave high school:



*I think [pause] uh for me it was also too that, you know, my siblings didn't, you know, make it through high school and its not that I was thinking about that but I think it was like "Oh I can take the easy way out and just get my GED and you know I'll still go to college after." So that was definitely a factor. (Opportunity Youth 2, Griselda)*

Other information that was consistent with this code was the familial structure of Lawrence youth. Considering Lawrence is an immigrant city there are many unconventional family structures within the municipality. Often youth come to the United States to stay with an estranged family member or guardian, which influences their overall attitude and behavior. Within the city there is also a history of teen pregnancy, single parent homes, violence, and imprisonment that affects the family structure and trickles down to the students' school engagement. Below is data coded from a community leader when asked about challenges witnessed with youth today:

*I just--- speaking from a social worker's perspective, it's about the broken homes too in Lawrence. We have a lot of kids being raised by their grandparents who have different morals than what we would have as parents. We have primary caretakers that are older siblings that are 18 and are just kids themselves – mom's not home. There's only one parent. [...] Teenage moms. [...] So we have a lot of young parents who are like 32 years old with a 17 year old kid. (Community Leader 6, Sara)*

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The investigation of Latino high school dropouts and their educational experience brought about several significant areas of importance to educational attainment. Each of the six concepts described shared some common underlying topics – some of which included an emphasis on relationships, self worth, and a sense of harmony. All of these were closely associated with the theme of social support, which was the number one factor discussed among participants. Both community leaders and opportunity youth were adamant on the importance of interpersonal relationships when regarding their academic achievement. This finding coincides with research on relational-cultural theory and the Latino culture.

Relational-cultural Theory (RCT) was conceived by Jean Baker Miller's (1976) book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* to address the lack of relational experiences embedded in traditional models of human development and psychotherapy practices for women and persons in devalued cultural groups (Comstock et al., 2008). The theory highlights the importance of contextual and sociocultural experiences and their ties to peoples' psychological well being (Comstock et al., 2008). The RCT approach to helping and healing is "grounded in the idea that healing takes place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). Similarly, this pattern of personal growth can be seen in the data collected within this study, many of the participants regarded social support as a critical component to their school success or failure.

Interpersonal relationships were important to all of the focus groups in this study, which is representative of Latino cultural principles on family, shared connections, and community (Ruiz, 2006). The lack of these familiar cultural values within the education system is what often leads many Latino students to disengage and leave school. While western values emphasize individualism, Latino cultures, on the other hand, are collectivist. People in collectivist cultures tend to minimize individual identity and focus on the well being of the group. They also have extremely deep bonds with the various groups of which they are a part of, such as extended family, employer, and school (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). The United States is far more individualistic than countries in the Majority World. It is crucial that school staff and administrators not minimize cultural differences or assume that the middle-to-upper class cultural norms are superior to those of other cultures. Many low-income, African American, and Hispanic communities in the United States are less individualistic than middle-to-upper class communities (Corbett & Fikker, 2012). This cultural difference is often overlooked in cross-

cultural engagement and it is a reality that affects ethnically diverse students within the U.S. education system.

Since Latinos are the fastest growing cultural group in the U.S., providing education services to this community must shift with the demographic dynamic within the classroom. There has to be an inclusion of culturally relevant practices in order to engage these students. RCT can be used to understand the cultural factors that have an impact on Latino academic achievement such as social support. This information can also be utilized to prepare teachers to teach non-traditional students. In 2002, author Geneva Gay wrote an article on *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching* and stated that the mandate for change within the education system was both simple and profound. Simple because it required the system to be culturally inclusive and sensitive to ethnically diverse students' learning challenges. It was profound because U.S. education had yet to respond appropriately to ethnically diverse students. However, more than a decade later, the system remains culturally unresponsive to the educational needs of non-traditional students. Today, these students are still expected to "divorce themselves from their cultures and learn according to European-American cultural norms" (Gay, 2002, p. 114).

The notion of connectedness is essential to Latinos and it is a fundamental piece in RCT. We have learned from the data in this study that students are seeking a sense of community and belonging in their school experience. Literature findings show that teachers are the ones that can have the most impact on student success (Cummings, 2012; Hermida, 2010). Therefore, it is critical to integrate non-traditional pedagogies in the classroom in order to help diverse students learn in a more inclusive way. Teachers should encourage, include, and value the cultures of both minority and mainstream students through relational teaching (Edwards & Richards, 2002; Hermida, 2010).

Relational teaching is created from Miller's RCT and applies its concepts of mutual engagement, empathy, and empowerment to education and the student-teacher relationship (Edwards & Richards, 2002). Relational teaching creates a meaningful connection between the student and teacher, providing a foundation for personal growth. It allows the teacher to invest and become more involved with the student in a supportive way. Teachers play a major role in student engagement yet administrators, staff, parents, students, and other community members could also benefit from the values of an RCT framework. Participants in this study mentioned all stakeholders as part of the school experience and, indeed, they too must be a part of the change that must happen in American schools for ethnically diverse students.

### **Conclusion**

Originally, this study sought to examine, the schooling experience of former Latino high school students and ways in which the community could re-engage Latino high school dropouts to keep them off the streets and away from a life of crime and violence. However, through analyzing the data collected it was clear that there were some gaps within the school system and the Latino students that needed to be addressed. I found that the lack or presence of authentic relationships and support for students was a major factor in their decision to either leave or complete high school. Latino students value encouragement and a support system to get them through high school. Yet, in a school that is more than 90% Latino, administrators were unaware of the social and cultural implications faced by the students. The school experience was not oriented towards building connections but rather completing tasks and performing well. A value that runs counter to the Latino culture and more closely with Anglo-American values.

As urban high schools throughout the United States are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse and the educators remain predominantly White, it is important to self-examine and reflect. The disengagement of students and dropout rate among poor and racial minority youth is a cultural and structural problem regarding all stakeholders within the community and education system. There must be a space to dialogue about what the school is doing to keep students and how the community can partner with the school to encourage youth to not leave their formal education. Changing the traditional mainstream culture of U.S. high schools will be difficult, but imperative if poor and racial minority students are to succeed in American schools. Considering the implications on a person's livelihood if they do not have a high school diploma it is imperative that this problem be addressed. The consequences are not discrete and will affect all of us as a people and a nation.

In light of these conclusions, the need to build cross cultural competency, collaboration, and reconciliation is evident. Teachers who want to encourage Latino students must genuinely care about knowing them personally and appeal to their style of learning. The teacher must be willing to connect with the student's home life and reach out to his/her parents. To motivate youth, the teacher must have meaningful curriculum that acknowledges the interests of students and utilizes their knowledge and experiences. To further engage youth, the teacher must create a sense of community in the classroom where they feel safe, included, and welcome. Other practices to improve Latino educational attainment in Lawrence includes diversifying the teaching force in the district. More Latino teachers would benefit students, parents, and staff. For students, a teacher that looks like them could be encouraging in multiple ways including leadership development. As shared by a participant in this study, Latino teachers can connect with students at a deeper level because of their shared background. Parental involvement could

also increase with a friendly face in the system that can speak the same language and clarify the educational practices in American schools. Lastly, among coworkers and also considering the student-teacher relationship, a diverse teaching force could encourage collaboration, cultural competency, and challenge any bias or covert discrimination between diverse ethnic backgrounds and social classes. The classroom should be a safe space for children to create, learn, and challenge the world orders of today. Teachers should not impose creativity and knowledge but challenge, encourage, and foster growth and experimentation with different styles of learning and thinking.

The low achievement of minority children in racially isolated inner cities also mandates a greater policy change effort for racial/ethnic and economic integration in schools. Research shows that adults who attended schools integrated by the federal courts in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s were less likely to be poor and less likely to go to jail (Johnson, 2014a). The access to greater resources in these integrated schools also improved adult health status and the likelihood that they would work in integrated places, live in integrated neighborhoods, and send their children to integrated schools. Contrary to popular belief, school desegregation had no effect on white students or their later-life across each of these outcomes (Johnson, 2014a). In short, the only tried, tested, and cost-effective solution to unequal and inadequate education is integrated education (Black, 2014; Johnson, 2014a). Integration works but America has to be willing to be uncomfortable in new waters and to work through the challenges that come with a new system. There are unlimited possibilities in collaborative work among diverse groups of people. Integration does not only benefit poor and minority communities, but also middle-income and white students. Integrated schools can prepare all students to navigate the multicultural world they will face in the near future. The alternative considers that Americans remain segregated and

racially isolated in cities throughout the country. If this is the case and one people has lesser, and fewer, resources and opportunities than another America has yet to live up to its Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”

### **Research Limitations**

This research had a few limitations some of which included sample size, generalizability, research design, and researcher bias. Firstly, this study was limited by its small sample size. That means that the findings in this study are not representative of the overall population of Latino youth in the Lawrence Public Schools district. A total of about 60 individuals were contacted to participate in the study. The response rate was high with approximately 40% of those individuals signing up for an interview date. However, there were no shows and a little more than half of confirmed individuals attended a focus group interview. Although the sample size was half of what was planned for this study, the consensus among the participants regarding educational attainment is strong (see Appendix D for the tallied results of each theme). An earlier start in data collection would have increased the time needed to interview more participants. Second limitation of this study was that the sample was limited to one city in the United States as well as its unique demographic of mainly Latinos from the Caribbean islands (see Appendix B for participant demographics). This research was intended to explore and serve the Latino population of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of Latinos across the United States. Yet, the findings in this study could stir up impactful dialogue on improving pedagogy for ethnically diverse children. Thirdly, the methodology within this study could have also included one-on-one interviews to elicit greater information and decrease potential sources of bias between participants in focus groups. The

focus group was a great way to encourage participants to speak up about their high school experience and allow personal discretion, however, these perks also contribute to data limitations. Lastly, there is the limitation of researcher bias in data collection and analysis. This project was dear to my heart considering my background as a former Latina student and educator at the local high school in Lawrence. I cannot deny that there is subjectivity in this research but there were precautions taken to reduce researcher bias. In order to stay true to the experiences of participants, the interview questions were consistent throughout all focus group interviews. In order to not influence responses, I did not share my views until the end of each interview. The participant's words were transcribed verbatim and included in the results section for accountability. Furthermore, codes and themes were uniquely defined to capture the participant's story. Each focus group interview was also reviewed and re-coded three times over for reliability.

### **Future Research**

Future research should look to develop teacher training and preparation for pedagogies that are relevant to ethnically diverse students such as relational teaching. This would include culturally relevant practices that present teachers with the tools to encourage the student to be an active participant in their learning. In the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's shares his educational theory, which is based on his desire to provide greater opportunity for the poor and oppressed people of the world. Freire's thoughts challenge the "banking" concept of education where students only receive, file, and deposit what is narrated by the teacher (1996, p. 53). Similar to Freire's ideas on education practices, this study shows that within the classroom there has to be dialogue and inquiry between student and teacher. Both parties have to respect



and give each other an opportunity for collaboration in the learning continuum. In the foreword of Freire's book, theologian Richard Shaull writes, "Education either conditions the younger generation into acceptance of society's status quo or becomes "the practice of freedom" through which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to transform their worlds" (Freire, 1996, p. 16). Freire and Shaull imagined a learning community where everyone benefited. This is the type of school setting that teachers need to be trained for. A school that encourages the natural learning of children from all walks of life to think 'critically and creatively' for their personal growth and ultimately the improvement of an unjust society. These strategies for inclusive teaching are some of the training qualities that need further exploration. The outcome of this kind of approach also requires more research.

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## Appendix A

## References for Individual and Institutional Characteristics that Affect Student Engagement

<b>Individual Characteristics</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Race/Ethnicity	Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Mello, Mallett, Andretta, & Worrell, 2012; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012
(Dis)ability	Dalton et al., 2009; Olivos, 2009
Socioeconomic status	Lutz, 2007; Rendón, 2014; Yu & Patterson, 2010
Language proficiency	Ayala, 2012; Becerra, 2012
School-related behaviors	Dawes & Larson, 2011; Featherston III, 2010
<b>Institutional Characteristics</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Family background	Ayala, 2012; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Marquez-Zenkov, 2007
School size	Brown & Rodriguez, 2009
Location	Ainsworth, 2002; Rendón, 2014
Resources	Erbstein, 2013; Ream & Rumberger, 2008
Student body demographics	Burciaga & Erbstein, 2012; Rendón, 2014
Policies	Brown, 2008; Villegas et al., 2012
Practices	Gandara, 2010; Gomez & Rodriguez, 2011; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Tavakolian & Howell, 2012

Appendix B  
Participant Demographics

Code Number	Focus Group*	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Race	Education	Year of graduation or expected year	Year of Drop Out
A4-104	OY	M	18-30	Dominican	Other	Some HS	2010	Junior
A3-104	OY	F	18-30	Dominican	-	Some HS	2011	Freshman
A2-105	OY	F	18-30	Dominican	Other	GED; Some college	2013	Sophomore
A1-105	OY	F	18-30	Dominican	-	GED; Some college	2009	Freshman
A5-105	OY	M	18-30	Dominican Puerto Rican	Other	GED	2009	Sophomore
A6-105	OY	F	18-30	Dominican	Black/ White	Master's Degree	2006	Freshman
A7-105	OY	F	18-30	Dominican	Black/ White	Bachelor's Degree	2005	Sophomore
B5-1229	CL	M	18-30	Dominican	Black	Master's Degree	2004	
B4-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican	Black	Master's Degree	2005	
B3-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican	Black	Bachelor's Degree	2009	
B2-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican	Black	Associate Degree	2002	
B1-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican	Other	Associate Degree	2012	
B6-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican Puerto Rican	White	Bachelor's Degree	2005	
B7-1229	CL	F	18-30	Puerto Rican	White	Master's Degree	2005	
B8-1229	CL	F	18-30	Dominican	-	Bachelor's Degree	2005	
B9-1229	CL	F	31-45	Dominican	Black/ White	Doctorate Degree	1989	

Legend: OY – Opportunity Youth  
CL – Community Leader  
HS – High School

Appendix C  
Codebook

Theme and Codes	Definition
<b>Classroom Dynamics</b>	<b>Context-specific approach that considers students' social, linguistic, and intellectual resources into the classroom dynamics – collective empowerment of students – teachers are inclusive of student's background</b>
Multicultural education	Opportunities for students to learn in ways that are familiar or comfortable to them - Instructional practices reflect racial and cultural background of students (e.g. bilingual materials)
Home and School Connection	School community reaching out to parent(s)/guardians(s) – home culture
Academic Rigor	Content material or instructional practices
<b>Student Profile</b>	<b>Students' attributes/characteristics to school performance</b>
Attendance	Presence in school (e.g. absence, skipping)
Grades	Academic achievement or performance
Behavior	Conduct, suspension, expulsion
Aspirations	Focused on school; self motivation to succeed or perform well
Teenage Pregnancy	Dependent child prevented from pursuing education
Mental Health	Mental well being such as depression, ADHD
Employed	Had to work while in school
Self-esteem	Confidence in self and the direction they are going, belief in their ability to get through school
Language Proficiency	Students' comprehension of the English Language
Grade Retention	Repeating a grade
<b>Social Support</b>	<b>Interpersonal connections as critical to school engagement – students' sense of social support/self-concept in regards to relationships</b>
Peer influences	Student's view of education due to friends – do they push towards success/failure?
Teacher	Social interaction with teachers
Family	Family involvement or support
Mentor	Person that could have walked hand-in-hand with student
Other School Staff	Relationship with counselors, coaches, security guards etc.
Community Support	Enrichment or college preparation programs; alternative school-related programs; programs that educate parents about school
School Belonging	Feeling accepted, welcomed, a part of the school (school pride)
<b>Community Factors</b>	<b>Neighborhood characteristics</b>
Socioeconomic Status	Poor neighborhood: lack of resources such as transportation
Recreational Opportunities	Non-school related activities in community
Segregation	Prevention of minority students from gaining social capital through socialization or information exchange

Appendix C  
Codebook

<b>School factors</b>	<b>School characteristics</b>
School structure	Location, size, organization of school layout including class schedules; length of day
School resources	Teacher quality; teacher-student ratio; building maintenance; transportation; courses offered; school budget
Student body demographics	High proportion of minority groups – opportunities for healthy engagement – no diversity
<b>Family Factors</b>	<b>Family characteristics</b>
Family Background	Family's education level, socioeconomic status, family structure



Appendix D  
Cumulative Talled Results for Focus Groups

Factor	Opportunity Youth		Community Leaders	
	Risk Factor	Protective Factor	Risk Factor	Protective Factor
<b>Classroom Factors</b>				
Multicultural education				
Home and School Connection				
Academic Rigor				
<b>Individual Factors</b>				
Attendance				
Grades				
Conduct				
Aspiration				
Teenage Pregnancy				
Mental Health				
Employment				
Self-Esteem				
Language Proficiency				
Retention				
<b>Social Factors</b>				
Peer influences				
Student-Teacher Relationship				
Family				
Mentor				
Other School Staff				
School Belonging				
Community Support				
<b>Community Factors</b>				
Socioeconomic Status				
Segregation				
Recreational Opportunities				
<b>School Factors</b>				
School Structure				
School Resources				
Student body demographics				
<b>Family Factors</b>				
Family Background				