

# The experience of Latino students attending Northfield High School

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## Abstract

Latino students make up 2.3% of the total 1,249 students attending Northfield High School (NHS). Background information on Latinos in the United States, dropout statistics and a series of observations and interviews reveal that Northfield High School's Latino students are at-risk. Latino's experiences at NHS are framed by applying sociological theories, especially Cultural Ecological Theory, Constructivism, accommodation and Structuration Theory to analyze the situation and propose solutions to improve the overall Latino experience. This paper proposes that Latino accommodation facilitated by intentional action by NHS, teachers, and students along with increased extracurricular involvement will help more Latinos have positive experiences at NHS.

“Today, teachers are free to create a school in generic terms that provides one basic type of ladder for all students. Elsewhere in the country, the ladder differs in terms of its components (displaying regional or subcultural variations), but most tellingly in terms of its height. Continuing with this imagery, though the ladder always is an American ladder, leading to American places, it does not lead all those who climb it to the same heights of power, wealth, and opportunity” (Peshkin 1991: 40).

## Northfield High School

### A view from the cafeteria

The girl I was supposed to interview was late. So I sat alone in the corner of Northfield High School's old cafeteria waiting, taking in the school's personality. One young man surprised me when he walked past wearing a Yonsei University sweatshirt; he must have gone on Global, I realized. This professor's son, along with the Japanese exchange students chattering at a nearby table made it clear to me that Northfield High School (NHS) students have a lot of international experience. Not to mention the students I was there to interview, whose families have immigrated from countries around the world. And yet it seems, as one informant told me, that the NHS student body is made up of pastors' and professor's kids. The latter observation seems more likely for Northfield, a small Minnesotan town full of PhD's and professionals. Nothing is what it seems, however, as I realized while camped

in the cafeteria that afternoon. Northfield High School is a complex place, with students born in Mexico and Minnesota.

There are a lot of cliques at Northfield High School. For instance, an NHS graduate I interviewed described to me the “rednecks,” (self-selected name) who only talk about car racing and snowmobiling, hang out in the shop and have been known to make negative comments about minorities. Close inspection reveals subtle boundaries between groups. For example, students choose the cafeteria in which they eat according to an unspoken hierarchy between groups. At NHS, all freshmen and sophomores eat in the old cafeteria and the new cafeteria attracts a “cooler” crowd. Despite social boundaries manifested in cliques and space-use decisions at NHS, all students share one building, play sports as ‘Raiders’ and jump up from their meals at the same bell.

Through talking with teachers, I gathered a profile of Latino students’ social interaction at NHS. Specifically, the Mexican students are a tight group. In particular, the Latino girls are always seen together while Latino boys seem to branch out more. Although there are a few white students who are friends with the Mexicans, overall Latinos usually hang out with Latinos and whites usually hang out with whites. As the charts below indicate, NHS does not have many Latinos for whites to befriend. Of the 29 Latino students, there are eight freshmen, nine sophomores, five juniors and seven seniors. Broken down by gender, there are seventeen females (five freshmen, six sophomores, one junior and five seniors) and twelve males (three freshman, three sophomores, four juniors and two seniors). All this compared to the total 1,249 students attending NHS. Overall, Latinos make up 2.3% of the total NHS student body.

NHS Student Body                      # of Males at NHS

# of Females at NHS

(information provided by the Northfield District Office)

### Inferior Status of Immigrants Latinos in the United States

There are thirteen million Mexican immigrants legally living in the United States (Rong and Preissle 1998: 97). The poverty rate among those immigrants is 29.7%; median family incomes scrape \$21,548 for households where sisters, brothers, cousins and parents live together (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 50). What is unique about Mexican immigrants is that they are young. The

median age is 29.9, so along with adults there is also a growing population of Latino youth in the United States (p. 50). However, only 2.6% of Mexican immigrants are college graduates and a low 16.8% report speaking English well (p. 40). These statistics hint at how hard it is for Latino immigrants to succeed in America's education systems.

Minnesota is not exempt from the recent influx of Mexican and other Latino immigrants to the United States. In fact, Minnesota offers attractive employment for migrant workers in its meat and poultry-packing industry (Amato 1996: 39). Unfortunately, anthropologists have reported resentment towards the newcomers by Minnesota natives (p. 46). Amato recorded racist comments towards Latinos made by Minnesotans in a convenience store like, "They don't work." "They are lazy" "They come up here to breed-incubate. They get pregnant down south and bring up a whole group of pregnant ones. Four times \$750 equals a good living." "Some fit in and some don't." "Can't keep 'em in school." "They drop out." (p. 47) This paper delves into the last three comments in detail, exploring whether Latinos at Northfield High School face the same hostility displayed by the convenience store customers. Do Latino immigrants feel welcome at Northfield High School? Conversely, what is the response of Northfield natives (non-Latino students, teachers) to Latino immigrants attending NHS? The driving research question of this study is based on the last two questions, and is: What kind of experience do Latinos have at Northfield High School?

### Latinos in American high schools

Most of the Latino families in Northfield are originally from Mexico, which reflects the fact that there are currently more Mexican immigrants in the United States than from any other country (Rong and Preissle 1998: 97). The rapid arrival of Latinos demands American schools to respond to the changing face of its student bodies and forces educators (and senior sociology students) to critically evaluate whether our schools are meeting the needs of immigrant children (p. 98). There are a host of theories that address this very matter, centered on the debate of whether it is best to assimilate or accommodate immigrant students, frameworks that will be outlined in the next section.

I first became interested in NHS' Latino students a few years ago, when someone told me that only three Latinos have graduated from Northfield High School. I was shocked; how could Northfield, a college town that clearly values education, have high schoolers falling through the cracks at such an alarming rate? I heard that statistic early in my St. Olaf career and there were definitely more than three Latino adolescents living in Northfield by that time. In fact, I have since learned that Northfield's Latino community began forming up to fifteen years ago. If this is true, then why had so few Latinos

received high school diplomas? The actual numbers of Latinos who have graduated from NHS are as follows:

1997 – 2 (1 male; 1 female)

1998 – 5 (1 male; 4 female)

1999 – 2 (1 male; 1 female)

2000 – 6 (2 male; 4 female)

2001 – 4 (2 male; 2 female)

(information provided by the Northfield District Office)

I still can't believe how low graduation rates are, consequently this semester I decided to investigate the experience Latinos have at Northfield High School (NHS), intending to answer why NHS doesn't graduate many Latinos.

Rong and Preissle explain that "compared to other indicators, the dropout rate is a comprehensive measure of educational input, progression, and output, and...that it is the severe dropout problem that separates Hispanics from many other groups" (1998:108). It is worthwhile, then, to mention the problem of dropouts because it gauges an education system's successes and failures. Dropping out is a problem plaguing many of our country's schools, including Northfield High School. The adults with whom I spoke acknowledged that there is a problem with dropping out, even before students reach NHS and particularly among males. This to me proves that there is a problem with Latinos' educational experiences in Northfield. Sadly, I have also identified cases of racism at NHS, which, like dropouts, indicates the negative environment Latinos sometimes encounter at NHS. I will touch upon dropouts, racism and more later in the interview discussions, but for now I would like to give a background on the grave role dropping-out plays in determining immigrant children's success in American schools.

According to Ortiz and Gonzales, "although educational attainment levels have improved somewhat, Latino students continue to enter school later, leave school earlier, and receive proportionately fewer high school diplomas and college degrees than other Americans" (quoted in DeLaRosa and Maw: 1990). Only 62% of Latinos completed high school in comparison to the country's 86% average for people ages 18 to 24 (Ortiz and Gonzales 2000: 68). Mexican's high school graduation rate is 24.3%, the lowest among immigrant groups. (Rong and Preissle 1998: 108) Worse, of Mexicans who immigrated at the age of 17 between 1987 and 1990, 57% have dropped out (p. 109). Thankfully, trends indicate that dropout rates decrease the longer a child lives in the United States, especially if the immigrant achieves bilingual status (p. 109). However, the prevalence of dropping out highlights "downward assimilation" which Portes and Rumbaut describe as the ironic reversal of

immigrants' original aspirations for upward mobility in American society to the challenges of living in an environment that makes dropping out, or downward mobility in general, the norm for working class immigrants (2001: 252). In conclusion, every effort to prevent Latino adolescents from dropping out must be made in Northfield, for a diploma, even if earned with low grades, opens up more opportunities for students than no diploma at all (2001: 252).

### Existing theories

Portes and Rumbaut offer a comprehensive theory of the process immigrants undergo to integrate into American Society (2001: 267). Recognizing that "adapting and achieving in a new society cannot be attributed to any single factor; it is the way that individual and contextual forces are joined in a particular time and place that affects individual outcomes in a manner that is complex but not chaotic." (p. 268). To analyze the experience of Latinos at Northfield High School, it is important to keep in mind that adaptation is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors and that manifests differently in each student. As a general guide, Portes and Rumbaut outline a few patterns characteristic of all immigrant integration. Social capital is one such characteristic perpetually influencing adaptation defined as "...the ability to gain access to resources by virtue of membership in social networks and other social structures" (p. 353). Available resources may determine any number of things, ranging from the degree to which an immigrant can make ends meet (i.e. Northfield Food Shelf provides grocery supplements to low income residents, many of whom are recent immigrants) to levels of integration (through social interaction in clubs, church etc.). Opportunities and barriers in American society are the second factors affecting all immigrants. Combined, resources and opportunities/barriers determine the outcome of an immigrant's adaptation process. Positive and negative outcomes have particular bearing on immigrant children, for "these sets of factors play themselves out over time, conditioning the socioeconomic achievement and family stability of first-generation immigrants and, later, the career horizons and academic performance of their offspring" (p. 267). Therefore, social capital, opportunities and barriers are assumed factors influencing the future goals and academic performance of Latino students attending Northfield High School. While Portes and Rumbaut's pattern for immigrant adaptation is a helpful formula to consider in this study, frameworks like Cultural Ecological Theory and accommodation offer a more in-depth understanding of the specific experience of Latino students in American schools. These and other theories constructed in response to minority's educational experiences in the United States will now be reviewed.

Cultural Ecological Theory suggests that an individual's interaction with

environmental factors (i.e. discrimination, poverty etc.) determines what that person expects to achieve. For example, if a minority has experienced discrimination or poverty Cultural Ecological Theory argues, that minority will view school as an extension of their new society's oppression, and in turn underachieve. In other words, if an immigrant faces oppressive living conditions once living in America, that immigrant will not consider it possible to do well in school. If, on the other hand, immigrants maintain control and experience success after arriving in the United States, according to Cultural Ecological Theory immigrants will approach school as something doable (Rong and Preissle 1998:90-94). Extending Cultural Ecological Theory to school's environmental factors creates a model where a school's culture, if perpetuating oppressive patterns against immigrants, becomes the environment that convinces immigrants success is impossible. Schools should never discourage students that way! In the context of this paper's study, it is important to examine whether NHS creates an environment in which Latino students feel they can succeed or where failure is considered inevitable. To begin doing so, I will now explore two models for immigrant integration into schools: assimilation and accommodation.

As just mentioned, assimilation and accommodation are theoretical frameworks, each proposing different models for immigrant students to perform well in school. Let us first discuss assimilation. At its extreme, assimilation is the "rejection of one's roots and a disdain for whatever immigrants cannot change or disguise in themselves" (Rong and Preissle 1998: 12). Proponents of assimilation argue that "the extent that immigrants adopt the language and customs (housing, food, clothing, religions, and so forth) of the host country...and integrate themselves into educational, political, and social institutions" measures immigrants' ability to succeed in American society (p. 92). Therefore, assimilationists assume that immigrants are only capable of succeeding by shedding their own culture and replacing it with that of America's.

Mexicans have long struggled to assimilate into American society. One reason for this is that many Mexican immigrants live in Hispanic neighborhoods, never having the chance to enter mainstream American society. What's more, Latinos who have lived in the United States for a long period of time and know English "may still drop out of school because they are discouraged by the negative educational or employment experience of others of the same ethnic group; they do not see the payoff from a high school diploma" (Rong and Preissle 1998: 93). This claim supports Cultural Ecological Theory in that 'negative educational or employment' experiences influence Latino's goals more than learning English or successfully living among non-immigrants. It is such a shame that both Latinos who assimilate and those who do not are

negatively impacted by discrimination directed at Latinos. Cultural Ecological Theory also applies to Latino adolescents for even in Northfield, my interviews revealed that although most Latinos at NHS report having positive experiences at school, there are students who have had negative experiences. Therefore, all Latino students at NHS are negatively influenced by the cases of bad experiences in turn hindering the group's success as a whole.

Some scholars argue that assimilation does not offer immigrants the best formula for success in the United States. Instead accommodation, as defined by Margaret Gibson, "the selective adaptation and rejection of varying elements of U. S. culture by immigrant groups" (quoted in McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer 1994) is presented as the best model. Put into an education context, accommodation asserts that successful students select elements from American culture and combine those elements with their original culture to form a new identity; "the academic success of children of immigrants depends on acquiring some values and orientations of American culture, but avoiding full cultural assimilation into mainstream U.S. popular youth culture with its distraction that work against educational attainment" (Rong and Preissle 1998: 114). For instance, American teen culture is based around music and clothing trends, materialistic pursuits immigrant teenagers will succeed more without; however, American high schools encourage participation outside the classroom, a vital ingredient to educational success among non-immigrant children and one Latino adolescents should adopt to achieve success in American schools. The integral role extracurricular activities plays in determining immigrant student's success will be highlighted in more detail later. Portes and Rumbaut support the accommodation concept explaining, "Children who learn the language and culture of their new country without losing those of the old have a much better understanding of their place in the world" (2001: 274). Accommodation boosts self-esteem, educational and occupational dreams and academic achievement (p. 274). Evidence supporting the accommodationist model that immigrants who selectively construct their identity perform best at school is seen in statistics related to language choices. Specifically, "the dropout rates for monolingual English youth...are twice the dropout rates of bilingual speakers: 40% for monolingual English speakers versus 21% for bilingual speakers among low-income youth, and 50% for monolingual English speakers versus 18% for bilingual speakers among high-income youth" (Rong & Preissle 1998: 109). Clearly, abandoning Spanish, a central feature of Latino culture, hurts Hispanic's academic success as seen in higher drop out rates among monolingual Latino youth.

Schools have the giant role of determining which pieces of American culture are most important for Latino students to learn and promoting a supportive environment in which students can accommodate. Schools must weigh cultural

values and priorities to decide what Latino students should reject or adopt into their identities. Punctual, consistent attendance to classes and practices is an example of an expectation American schools stress to which many Latino students fail to adhere, perhaps because Latino students have more responsibilities at home. Brokering a balance between cultural values is difficult; nonetheless, schools must wrestle with cultural differences and decide which values to impart on Latino students, because incorporating pieces of American culture is half of accommodation's model. Facilitating accommodation is essential, because my findings at Northfield High School demonstrate that the most successful Latino students are those who have accommodated, having chosen pieces of American culture, like involvement in sports or clubs, to combine with key Latino characteristics, ranging from cooking Latin American food at home to speaking Spanish. These findings support accommodationists' claims and I will therefore use accommodation as the ideal plan for Northfield High School's Latino youth. Two questions will be addressed in the remainder of this paper: to what extent does Northfield High School's structure, teachers and students already facilitate accommodation for its Latino students and what changes can be made as means of ensuring that immigrants accommodate, offering the best possible experience for Latinos at NHS?

Two theories propose ways for students to reach accommodation. First is Constructivism, which models a process where students engage in their host country's society, afterwards reflecting on how their own culture differs, in the end constructing a personal perspective. It involves immigrants' "constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing" their understanding of American society in order to decipher their new identity. "Humans are viewed as active selectors and builders of knowledge through their interaction with others, their reflection on such interactions, and their attempts to relate developing ideas both to previously learned ones and to those held by others" (Rong & Preissle 1998: 95). In the case of Latino students at Northfield High School, the students bring a strong understanding of Latino culture to NHS, where they are introduced to Minnesotan ways and must reconcile the two. Each student I interviewed responded differently to the challenge faced with integrating Latino and American culture. However, as previously mentioned, those students who accommodated were the most successful. The logical question to ask is how did the successful students reconstruct their identity so that they perform well in school? More importantly, how can a model be set for all Latino students to follow that will best facilitate Latino's accommodation process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of their role as Latinos at NHS? Answers to these questions will be proposed in the discussion, as I explore the role of teachers and extracurricular activities in



helping Latinos grapple with frustrations, successes, misunderstandings and questions involved with forming their own identity.

Giddens' structuration theory outlines the path to action students, teachers and schools can take to help Latino students accommodate. Structuration theory asserts, "[t]he constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality...the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize," or "the moment of the production of action is also one of reproduction in the contexts of the day-to-day enactment of social life" (quoted in Giddens 1984:25-26). Therefore, agency (or action) and structure are interdependent (Ritzer 2000: 389). Giddens' theory "accords the agent great power," implying that individual actors can change the institutions in which they live and work (p. 390). Structuration also propels a "concern for changes in institutions," since its model gives people the power to create structures that either harm or benefit themselves and others (p. 392). What this means for Latinos is, if a school is preventing their success in any way, the people involved with that institution have the power to rearrange its structure to better meet Latino's needs. Hopefully, this is a choice people want to make! Nilda Flores-Gonzales suggests that schools should encourage extracurricular involvement among high-risk students, a way to improve school structure to better serve Latinos; her findings show that "extracurricular participation and student retention are inextricably linked. The students who were involved in extracurricular programs had lower dropout rates than those who did not participate" (2000: 88). Therefore, if a school's extracurricular activities exclude Latino students, according to structuration theory, teachers, students and administrators can collaborate to change a school's extracurricular structure to include more Latinos. This is a practical goal for schools and one that will make a significant impact on improving the experience of Latino students. Such steps would take brave recognition that there is a problem and even braver actions towards change.

Flores-Gonzales found four reasons that impede students from participating in extracurricular activities. They are: "limited funds, school size, participation criteria, and limited access to extracurricular activities" (Flores-Gonzales 2000: 93). In the case of Northfield High School, I think only limited access to extracurricular activities applies to student involvement (or lack thereof). That is to say, NHS is well funded by Northfield residents. In no way does NHS compare to decrepit urban schools on which so many studies focus. Nor is 1249 students an outrageous enrollment number. According to Ornstein, student bodies over 1600 are considered large and report less participation than schools with fewer than 800 students (Flores-Gonzales 2000: 95). 1249 falls between 800 and 1600; more importantly, Northfield High School doesn't

exhibit a “loss of personal or school identity among students,” characteristic of schools that are too big (quoted in Ornstein 1990). As evidence, I offer the many NHS sweatshirts I saw on students or the friendly interaction between teachers and students during study hall where I conducted my interviews, which demonstrated to me a sense of school pride and community. Flores-Gonzales’ third factor is participation criteria. While it is true that NHS charges a fee to all students involved in activities, students can qualify for a fee waiver if they receive reduced lunch. Even so, students of low economic status might feel deterred by the fee, perhaps out of embarrassment. Avoiding such feelings among immigrant students is something teachers can be particularly sensitive to at NHS. The biggest factor I see affecting NHS extracurricular participation is limited access to activities. Specifically, how aware are Latino students of try-out dates or club meeting times? The conclusion section of this paper will elaborate more on the positive effect extracurricular participation has on at risk-students. I will take this assertion and apply it to Latino students attending NHS, proposing a plan to get more Mexican immigrants involved at school, in hopes of improving the experience of all NHS Latinos.

## METHODOLOGY

My methodology was a combination of interviews with students and staff of Northfield High School and observation of ROG (Reaching Our Goals), a mentorship program for Latino high schoolers in Northfield run by St. Olaf students. I joined ROG as an introduction to Northfield’s Latinos. My introduction was swift and chaotic; when I walked into Library room 502 for my first ROG meeting, there was a group of girls gossiping loudly in Spanish in the corner, a few kids scratching the blackboards (my ears!) and a handful of guys dressed in baggy jeans leaning back in wooden desks, busy looking cool. Within five minutes, the students paired up and dispersed with their mentors to do homework or just hang out. I was left in the dust, but invited back to ROG’s Saturday excursion to the Mall of America.

ROG, as mentioned above, is a mentorship program between Olaf students and the Latino high schoolers at NHS. Kirstan Ketter, a sophomore Ole, founded the program this year after working with many of the Latino families in town over the summer and hearing parents’ wish for someone to help their kids with homework. The program now meets every Tuesday night from seven to eight. Olaf vans pick up and bring home the twenty-or-so middle school and high school students every week. Tuesday nights are meant for homework and no play is allowed. Twice a month, on the other hand, ROG takes excursions where no homework is allowed. As a result of students often forgetting to bring their homework on Tuesdays, Kirstan set a new rule requiring mentees

who forget their homework to look for scholarships and college information on the computer with their mentors. This says a lot about the program's purpose; although relationships between mentors and students are relaxed (mentors swear, ask about boyfriends etc.), there is a very real sense of guidance, where college students set an example of success and encourage the kids to get good grades, work hard, stay out of trouble and dream. It's important to mention that the majority ROG's mentors are multicultural students, some of whom expressed to me their passion for showing mentees "that if I can do it, so can you."

I gladly took on an active role in ROG as I observed the students, becoming Diego's mentor, going on the Mall of America field trip and driving the vans every Tuesday. (All names used in this report are pseudonyms to protect the informant's anonymity) Through ROG, I got to see a fuller side of the students' lives. During van rides I drove past students homes in Viking terrace and overheard mentees chatter about cute mentors, break-ups, art projects. Once, the middle schoolers were showing the drivers their new report cards when I heard a boy with a dark fuzzy mustache with all "F's" say his teachers "don't like" Hispanics. Comments like that struck me as an invaluable glimpse into the real experience Latinos are having in school, kindling my interest in the topic.

All of the students interviewed were ROG participants. Most of the mentees are in middle school, so there weren't as many high school age students as I would have liked to interview. Nor did I get to interview males attending NHS. Those I did interview ranged from two undocumented Mexican males trying to enroll at NHS, a female exchange student from the Dominican Republic, a female sophomore from Mexico, an undocumented female senior also from Mexico and lastly, a female mentor who graduated from NHS last year. I interviewed the Ole in the Cage during chapel, the two trying to enroll during ROG and the rest, either during their study hall or lunch at the high school. A map of NHS is included after the conclusion to which readers may refer to see the school layout and marked interview locations. Interviews lasted from a half an hour to an hour and were conducted in English, Spanish or a combination of both languages according to the interviewee's preference. The questions I asked students are as follows:

#### Interview questions for students

1. Name, grade, age, length of living in US.
2. Who do you hang out with?
3. What is your relationship like with non-Latino students? (i.e. in classes, in the hall)
4. If language is a problem, how does it affect your school day? (i.e. does it

make your classes harder?)

5. Does the school help you if you need extra help?
6. What is your relationship like with your teachers?
7. What is it like having immigrant parents? (How well do they speak English? Do you have to translate for them? What language do you speak at home? What do they think of High School?)
8. What is it like being a Latino at NHS?
9. Do you feel included/welcomed at school? (i.e. Are you in activities?)
10. Have you ever experienced discrimination at school?
11. What do you want to do after you graduate? (and, does the school help you with your goal? If not, who does?)

While I was at NHS I met two teachers who I ended up interviewing. I also interviewed Northfield School District's minority liaison, but due to her busy schedule we were unfortunately unable to meet in person. Instead, I emailed her the list of questions for school faculty, which are:

Interview questions for school faculty

1. Name, position
2. What is your role with Latino students at NHS?
3. Does the school have any conditions, policies designed for minority students?
4. Do you try to help blend Latino students with the rest of the student body and include them in the "typical" High School experience?
5. Are your expectations different for Latino students?
6. What problems or challenges do Latino students face at NHS?
7. Why have so many Latinos dropped out?
8. What measures does the school take to assist the Latino students and help them succeed?
9. Do you think the school is adequately meeting Latino students' needs?
10. What changes, if any, would you like to see in NHS to improve the experience of its Latino students?

The wide variety of ages, gender and perspectives of each interview gave depth to my field research. As did the time spent volunteering with ROG. With more time, I would have liked to interview more males, some non-Latino students and administrators to broaden my understanding of the experience of Latinos at NHS. The District office was very generous in providing statistics on the number of students and graduates from each grade. Having numbers on dropouts would have also been helpful. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the limits of my perspective as a white St. Olaf College student from Illinois

who has only experienced Northfield on the periphery, which started me at scratch in understanding the problem at hand. Next I will discuss my findings and analyze their implications on Latino student's experience at NHS.

## DISCUSSION

### Teachers

Galguera informs us that while American students continue to diversify, teachers on the other hand remain white (90.7%) and female (74.4%) (1998: 411). This presents a challenge for both teachers and students, as teachers must find ways to reach students of all ethnicities, and students are often asked to learn from adults with very different ethnic identities than their own. Regardless if teachers and students are of different ethnicities, schools remain the place in which an environment conducive to success must be cultivated. Restating Cultural Ecological Theory, if Latino students perceive discrimination against Hispanics present at school, they will deem it implausible to succeed. Thus it is partly up to teachers to create a discrimination-free environment, where students can believe in their potential to perform well in school. As previously mentioned, accommodation, the process of combining aspects of Latino and American culture, is the best model for Latino students to achieve success. Teachers can help Latinos accommodate in two ways: by educating Hispanics about Latino culture in class and encouraging extracurricular participation. I interviewed two white, female Spanish teachers at Northfield High School. Let me tell you about their perspective on the Latino experience at Northfield High School, finishing with suggestions to help NHS teachers facilitate Latino student's accommodation. Linnea is a recent Olaf grad, in her first year teaching at Northfield High School. I gathered some helpful insights into what Latinos are like in the classroom from our interview. Linnea teaches Introduction to Spanish and has three native speakers as students, whom she reports are very successful in her class, although she notes problems with completing homework. Also, the student's grammar is poor in general, probably because bad Spanish writing skills compounded by the fact that the Latinos have only heard English makes writing in English a difficult task. Behavior wise, Linnea reports that Latino girls lash out at each other during class. I noticed similar problems at ROG when, for example, four girls spent the van ride home fighting or the time I heard a girl say loudly, "la odio" (I hate her). It seems the girls always talk about others and are often confrontational. Linnea believes the Latinas have grown up in families where mothers are very domineering and that makes the girls' behavior hard to deal with. Here we see the practical implications of Mexican culture meeting American expectations of classroom

behavior. Thankfully, Linnea has a global perspective gained from her great St. Olaf education and thinks her colleagues are also very good with the Latinos.

There are a few key Latino families Linnea told me attend NHS, like the owners of Las Delicias, a restaurant on Division Street. On the other end of the spectrum, there are undocumented students whose illegal parents sometimes whisk their children out of NHS' classrooms at a moments notice. For example, the man who fled an accident scene near Lakeville (events that hit the news) was the father of one of Linnea's students. The day after the accident, the girl was gone. Latinos also have to leave school to follow migrant parents, or visit relatives in Mexico. This leads to inconsistent learning for the students and is a source of frustration for teachers.

Danielle, a veteran Spanish teacher at NHS also mentioned frustrations NHS teachers have with Latino students. It's hard for teachers to keep putting in extra work to help Latinos with their schoolwork (extra work due to the language barrier) when students come and go so often. "Why bother?" some teachers wonder. Thankfully, a new pattern is emerging now that a few Latinos have come, stayed and graduated so that the staff is starting to see successful models on which to base their hopes and in turn put in the extra work again to help Latinos succeed. Likewise, Danielle notes a shift in Latino families' attitudes towards working sons. High school aged males aren't expected as much to contribute to household income, perhaps because the value America places on education is penetrating Mexican households through Latino children attending school. Females, she says, have always had a fighting chance of graduating. The combination of encouraged teachers and available students marks an effort, unintentional as it may be, on the part of students and teachers to graduate more Latinos from NHS.

If Danielle could change one thing at NHS, she would do away with cliques. The cliques, at the high school and in town she says, may make it hard for Latino students to blend with non-Latinos. However, she has seen Latinos successfully befriend Anglo students and believes it is each student's choice to make friends of different ethnicities. To facilitate such a choice, Danielle makes students interact in her class, noting that encouraging native speakers of English and Spanish to help each other with language has forged friendships between ethnicities in the past. Danielle commented that she is using her corner of the world to break down ethnic borders. In so doing, she is supporting Social Identity Theory, which applies especially to teenagers and their relationship with peers and teachers. It "shows that in most situations people hold more positive attitudes toward their own group than toward other groups, that is, they demonstrate in-group bias" (Phinney, Ferguson and Tate 1997: 955). More importantly, Social Identity Theory also demonstrates that if

people think highly of their own group, then they are more likely to have good opinions about other groups. Therefore in the case of Latino adolescents, it is important to foster within them a sense of identity of which they are proud, so that they not only identify positively with other Latinos, but also with members of other groups. Positive relations between different social groups in schools will result in better performance by all students (Phinney, Ferguson and Tate 1997).

Rong and Preissle support Social Identity Theory: “When educators design programs to address the initial adjustment of immigrant children, they also need to invent strategies to help these children draw strength from their home cultures, develop sense of their ethnic and immigrant identities, and nurture and maintain the native languages that can serve as resources” (1998: 115). Rong and Preissle’s suggestions return this discussion to the first step teachers can take to help Latino succeed in school: that is, help Latino students understand Latino culture. Along with offering ESL classes, teachers should incorporate Latin American history and traditions into courses to give Latinos a firm understanding of their roots. The second step teachers can take to help Latinos integrate is to encourage Latino participation in extracurricular activities. Students will benefit from involvement; teacher’s positive impact on Latino students can extend into activities, as coaches and advisors “develop close and nurturing relationships with students...[often encouraging] students to take school seriously, and [offering] unsolicited, but often constructive advice to students” (Flores-Gonzalez 2000: 91). In sum, teachers at NHS can play an integral role in restructuring the school’s activities to include more Latinos, action Giddens’ structuration Theory encourages. Also, teachers’ classrooms are instrumental in the process proposed by Constructivism (construct, deconstruct, reconstruct), enabling students to reach their potential. It is time now to turn the focus to the students and their experiences at Northfield High School.

## Students

A pattern emerged from analyzing students’ interviews, which revealed that students reporting positive NHS experiences had incorporated segments of American culture into their Latino identities. At last we see accommodation’s recipe for success come alive! This section will fuse the stories of Pamela, Lori, Rosana, Diego, Juan and Annie with accommodation theory to highlight trends discovered in this study that support the accommodation model for Latino success. The coming discussion will also suggest that factors other than adopting American culture and maintaining Latino identity play into student’s school performance, like socioeconomic status (SES), race discrimination and family structure. Portes and Rumbaut support this idea, laying out three criteria

determining the degree to which immigrant students will attain success in school: the persistence of racial discrimination, labor market stratification and the concentration of minorities in the inner city (2001: 55). Although Northfield is rural, socioeconomic disparities and racial discrimination could certainly apply to Latino student's performance at NHS. America's market has polarized into concentrations of highly professional jobs and unskilled labor opportunities. Latino students are faced with the tough reality that with an American education, they are over-qualified for the unskilled jobs their parents often work and yet, without an advanced degree, highly professional jobs are unattainable. Since there is no middle market to which second generation immigrants can aspire, immigrant children gain little with an education without a college degree (p. 56). Therefore, striving for success in high school has little appeal. Second, if a student lives in an environment where race discrimination exists, then they are likely to perceive the possibility of upward mobility skeptically, a concept already presented in Cultural Ecological Theory. School performance suffers when students believe their ethnic identity is paralyzed in a predetermined status (p. 55). Let me show you now how socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, family structure and accommodation levels affect the students I interviewed school performance.

Pamela

Pamela is an exchange student from the Dominican Republic spending a year, post high school graduation, learning English at NHS. I surmise that Pamela comes from a higher socioeconomic status than the other Latino students, judging by her ability to pay for an exchange program and by her cute shirts, stylish jeans and braces. Pamela is an excellent model for success as a result of accommodation whose case also highlights socioeconomic status' impact on integration, a variable factor influencing Latinos at NHS.

Since moving to Northfield, Pamela has adopted English, school activities and American friends into her life. For example, Pamela speaks English all the time with her host families, at school and with friends. Pamela is active in Diversity Club, the newspaper and Prom committee. On the other hand, Pamela has also maintained her Latino identity by attending ROG and being friends with the Mexican students, although Pamela admits that outside of school she only hangs out with Americans. Even so, Pamela claims to mix easily with the Mexican group because Mexico and the Dominican Republic's cultures are more similar to each other than either is to the United States. Both countries speak Spanish and have "bailes, fiestas, y festivales" (dances, parties and festivals) and are "religiosas" (Catholic countries). Mixing Latin American culture and elements of Northfield High School together completes the accommodationist model and it should come as no surprise that Pamela was one of two Latinos interviewed with positive experiences at NHS.



A number of reasons might explain Pamela's easy transition into Northfield High School. First, exchange students arrive at NHS enthused, ready to take the initiative to immerse themselves with their host's lifestyle. This implies that it is mainly Latinos' choice to become involved, however, and although perhaps partially true later interviews will reveal "choice" as a simplistic explanation for Latino integration. Second, Pamela comes from a well-off family, an advantage few Latino students can boast. In part because of Pamela's privileged upbringing, integrating with American students was not intimidating; she's intelligent, poised and used to fitting in. Not to mention Pamela has high personal goals, with plans to attend University in "mi país" (my country) next year. Pamela's socioeconomic background equips her to understand American school system's discourse, which emphasizes upward academic achievements. Third, teachers at NHS are "extra extra super nice" and have helped Pamela tremendously by letting her complete homework slower or by helping her English. Other students reported good things about teachers too, as we will shortly see. Pamela therefore represents successful integration achieved through accommodation and the multifaceted foundation a high socioeconomic background provides. As the bell rang signaling the interview's end, Pamela thanked me for the chance to participate in my study, said she'd be thinking about the last question, winked and melted into passing period.

Lori

Lori is easy going and quiet, and preferred to conduct the interview in Spanish.

She's 15, a sophomore and immigrated from Mexico two years ago. I would say that Lori has a neutral relationship with NHS, neither hating nor loving her experience. She has no connection with NHS besides being thankful for its good education, indicating that Lori has not accommodated. Lori also maintains a purely Latino identity, a fact surely affecting her lack of integration. Lori's experience is also affected by family structure, because she lives with an older sister and brother, without parents. Family structure, living by Latino culture and failing to adopt American characteristics make Lori an at-risk student, for she has little tying her to school and is therefore prone to slipping out of the system unnoticed and becoming a dropout statistic.

Portes and Rumbaut assert that family composition affects immigrant children's adaptation to American society (2001: 49). In Lori's case I think it isolates her, literally and figuratively. She often feels alone because her brother is always with friends and her sister is married, has kids and works every afternoon. This leaves Lori in front of the "tele" (TV) by herself most days. On a more abstract level, Lori has no adult encouraging her schoolwork. In fact, Lori reports that it is hard to attend high school in the

United States when no one at home understands what going to high school in America means. True, Lori's parents would not understand her experience more than her siblings, but parents are more invested in their children, and would probably try harder to understand.

Besides wanting to learn English, Lori remains very Mexican. For example, Lori only has Mexican friends and mainly speaks Spanish. In no activities, Lori's interactions with American students are limited to a surface level. Sometimes "americanos" (Americans) sit and chat with her at lunch, which is "kind". Kind, "muy tranquila" (nice) and patient are words Lori used to describe Northfield High School's teachers and students, leaving me the impression that Lori is satisfied enough with NHS but by no means is she invested in her experience.

Sadly, Lori did share that her Latino friends have been discriminated against at NHS. Peshkin thinks, "one of the surest ways to antagonize students, regardless of the strength of their ethnic identity, is to stereotype students," which is exactly what happened to Lori's friends (1991: 184). A teacher once made a joke about Mexico in class and everyone laughed. Although the teacher did not mean to single out Latinos, Lori's friends still took offense. The joke uncovers discrimination I wish I didn't have to report existing at NHS, revealing that part of the Latino experience at NHS is in fact dealing with discrimination, whether directly or through comments aimed at a friend. However subtle, Lori's story is a red flag, because such discrimination could result in disastrous harm to Latino success at NHS. As previously discussed, Portes and Rumbaut have strongly demonstrated that if students experience even slight discrimination, they are likely to understand school as an extension of society's oppressive structures and in turn view academic success as unachievable, because of the race obstacles they have already encountered (2001). For Lori, discrimination is another strike she doesn't need.

Rosana

Rosana has been in the United States and at NHS for three years. Like Lori, Rosana has failed to accommodate. Her experience is more negative and her personality is harsher than Lori's, however, a unique factor influencing Rosana's ability to integrate into NHS. Because Rosana's personality is central to this discussion, allow me to recount the first events of her interview to provide a fuller profile of Rosana's character. Rosana's study hall teacher explained to the class that they would only be able to get snacks for the first five minutes because the cafeteria was closing early. I had barely heard the announcement when Rosana burst up, pushing her way through a sea of classmates into the cafeteria. By the time I caught up with her, Rosana was first in line impatiently working the register behind the check-out-counter herself, until finally a worker came to ring through her ice cream

sandwich. Rosana's case raises the important role adolescence plays in Latino student's adaptation process. I propose that Rosana's negative experience at NHS is a combination of zero accommodation and identity problems common to teenagers.

Since teenagers are already experiencing many physical, emotional and physical changes, the process of acculturation for immigrant children only compounds their adolescent identity crisis (Rumbaut 1994). Rosana exhibited strong feelings against her American peers. She ignores American kids, especially the girls she says, because she has overheard them make comments about her clothes, not realizing Rosana speaks English. I do not wish to trivialize Rosana's hurt feelings, but I wonder if her reaction is a race-relation issue or problems characteristic of adolescent interaction. Peshkin might interpret Rosana's attitude toward non-Latino girls similar to the way he described Teresa Martinez, an interviewee who emphasized the role of ethnicity in peer interaction more than other minorities. "This is the world as Teresa sees it. I wonder if the reactions from the Mexicans she mentions are to Teresa as Teresa or as Puerto Rican" (1991: 214)? I ask the same question of Rosana—are the Anglo girls reacting to Rosana as Mexican or as Rosana, a girl with a shirt they would never be caught dead wearing?

Suggesting that Rosana's character dictates the outcome of interaction with Anglo students more so than ethnicity is a delicate matter. Even if Rosana's bad style did incite the Anglos' comments, Rosana has suffered discrimination at NHS. Rosana's guidance counselor told her that at first he didn't think she would make it, because she didn't speak good English. Now he tells her he's proud of her, but in the meantime, surely the guidance counselor's skepticism influenced how he dealt with Rosana. Did Rosana sense her counselor's doubt? Either way, Rosana's adolescent development, interactions with peers and discrimination prevented Rosana from integrating into American culture. It came as no surprise when Rosana expressed her wish to return to Mexico to work after she graduates from NHS.

Annie

Annie joked that she is Northfield High School's Diversity Club poster child. Indeed, Annie's best friends were Chinese and African, and together her friends were team captains, student council presidents, Prom King, three sport athletes and in a plethora of other activities. Other students came to expect success out of Annie. Her laundry list of activities and the fact that Annie is now a freshman at St. Olaf College emphasizes the success a Latino student can potentially achieve at NHS. Annie's case is different, though, than the Mexican immigrants. Her mom was adopted from Ecuador into an American home; nonetheless, Annie grew up with a "good mix" between her Latino roots and involvement in American culture. For example, both parents speak

Spanish and she reported eating traditional foods at home. Annie's positive experience in both cultures is evidence of successful accommodation.

### Juan and Diego

Both Juan and Diego are seventeen-year-old Mexicans that have joined their families in Northfield over the last month. Their reasons for coming to America are to work and "terminar mis estudios y aprender el ingles" (finish school and learn English). I mention their stories today, because already, both Juan and Diego have stumbled upon obstacles in achieving their work and educational goals.

Work is a problem because neither have "papeles" (papers). However, Roberto is beginning a job at McDonald's soon; Alejandro is still searching. As far as school goes, Juan and Diego want to enter NHS to earn their diplomas. I got an inside glimpse into the enrollment process at NHS when I took Diego to get into classes. Kirstan, Diego, Joan, a guidance counselor and I met to discuss Diego's options: he could enroll at NHS in the Spring and receive no credit because it's too late in the term, take classes at the Alternative School now and begin at NHS next fall or finish at the Alternative School, which would give him an NHS equivalent diploma and the time to work. During the meeting I suspected the NHS staff was trying to deter Roberto from enrolling at NHS for reasons like "feeling uncomfortable," because he will start so old and wondered if "equivalent diplomas" was discrimination in disguise. Ortiz and Gonzales offer one group of researchers definition of segregation as "how school personnel advocate remedial education for Latino students who are enrolled below grade level, track them into non-academic activities, and teach them using uncertified and inexperienced teachers who are not Latino" (quoted in Donato: 1991). Certainly everyone at the meeting agreed Roberto should get his diploma, but the track on which he should be placed was debated. The choice between enrolling at the Alternative School and Northfield High School raises the fundamental question, is high school about the experience or the diploma? Is Pamela's experience better than Rosana's because she is on the Prom committee and Rosana is in no activities?

Before delving into an answer, allow me to tell the minority liaison's perspective to avoid criticizing NHS staff based on one meeting. From the outset of my research, it was clear that I needed to interview the infamous minority liaison, for any enquiry I made of teachers, ROG mentors, students or administrators, Joan Lizola's name came up, as if she alone is responsible for Latino students in Northfield. Assuming so is not a far cry from the truth—Joan's job at the high school alone involves acting as the adult advisor for Diversity Club, assisting Latino students with enrollment, special education

testing and interpreting for parent and special education meetings. The students at ROG and those I interviewed often talk about Joan, suggesting that her involvement reaches beyond organizing outings to college fairs and translating. Following are some of the insights Joan has on the experience of Latinos in Northfield schools relevant to this study of NHS.

Joan hasn't heard much about peer discrimination "other than normal comments for students that age about preppies and jocks thinking they are better than the rest." However, during a workshop last year with middle school students, Joan found interesting perceptions of Latino students for "the Anglo kids, when asked what they thought about Latino students they said things like "gang members, violent, fun, loud." Unfortunately, such stereotypes will undoubtedly carry over into the high school; reconciling assumptions with the truth is a big task, but clearly Anglo kids need to understand that not all Latinos in their grade are in gangs, because there is nothing bigger than fear of violence to prevent non-Latinos from interacting with Latinos. On a different note, Joan's thoughts on whether NHS is adequately meeting Latino students' needs are as follows:

I think we are getting better in giving ESL services, we now have the full day of Kinder and more things available in Spanish. Every year we get more Latino students and every year we improve in some way. We just sent out a parent survey in Spanish and I only have a few back so far but the comments look favorable. We need ways to get more extra curricular involvement. (emphasis added)

Indeed, the former italicized comment reflects a quiet consensus I have gathered throughout my research. That is to say, Joan implies there are problems by suggesting that the situation is improving, and is quick to follow with a "favorable" prognosis for Latinos' future. Never has anyone told me there is a problem. And yet, the teachers, students and mentors I've spoken with all hint that the Latino experience at Northfield High School could improve. Next I turn to the latter italics in pursuit of a solution. Joan Lizola concluded her interview by saying, "A student who is with me right now said they need to get more involved with after school things. That is a big need and maybe the colleges could help us with that..." a proposal with which this paper will now conclude.

## AMERICAN LADDER

Through my work as a Sociology/Anthropology major, I have learned that society is never static. Governments, social institutions, demographics and social trends are in constant flux. This paper represents the change immigrants

have sparked in American society. As the number of Latino immigrants continues to increase and the experience of each immigrant generation changes over time, how will America respond? This paper examined one perspective of America's response to immigrants, through Northfield High School's reaction to Latino students. Results reveal positive and negative experiences among Latinos attending NHS. Patterns in support of accommodation emerged from students' interviews, as illustrated by the fact that out of all the students interviewed, the two students that integrated American and Latino culture reported the most positive NHS experiences. The discussion raised issues such as socioeconomic status, family composition and adolescence as variables impeding students' accommodation. Since factors such as low socioeconomic status practically permanently affect all Latinos, accommodation appears impossible. However, I submit that such factors must be assumed and incorporated accordingly into strategies facilitating accommodation. Overall, the results of my interviews suggest that Northfield High School can improve its handling of Latino students.

Nilda Flores-González convincingly demonstrates that extracurricular participation has overwhelming positive advantages for students. Getting involved provides adult mentorship, reduces peer discrimination, improves self-esteem, invests students in school, gives students a taste of success, helps students dream and curbs drop out rates (2000). All these are changes that would benefit Latinos at Northfield High School. Thus, I return to structuration theory to inject ROG into its model already calling for intentional collaboration between teachers, students and administrators\* to restructure NHS, creating a space in which Latinos can succeed. Completing this study has shown me that action can result from ethnographic work and anthropological and sociological theories, a fact I've been skeptical about throughout my major. I am always impressed at how well defined and thoroughly presented social issues and communities are in Sociology and Anthropology, but I always wonder, what do sociologists and anthropologists do after publishing their theories or field work? This has been a source of personal frustration for me, because as a Spanish and Sociology/Anthropology major, I spend my days studying Spanish and the issues involving Spanish speakers around the world, but am left feeling helpless upon hearing that only two Latinos have graduated from Northfield High School—until now. This paper has given me the opportunity to put my Spanish skills and anthropological/sociological background to work. In response to my interviews proving NHS needs to change to better meet Latinos' needs, and to Flores-González's findings about the positive impact extracurricular participation can have on Latino students, I have compiled an information booklet on NHS student activities as a resource for ROG to enable the program to effectively encourage mentees to get involved.

The booklet includes: a list of fundraising ideas, 100 Activities at NHS, the Co-Curricular Activities Handbook, a list of coaches and the handout given to eighth graders at NHS orientation. Based on my findings and with the booklet's help, ROG will hold an orientation, particularly geared toward the many eighth grade participants, for mentees on NHS activities and participation procedures in hopes of helping students to see activities as accessible opportunities. Tom Graupmann, the Activities Director at Northfield High School wants to be included in the effort and ROG can use the list of coaches and advisors to contact other adults to attend the meeting. I envision a presentation of activities where students can hear in more detail about the activities at NHS, hopefully finding some that are attractive. Mr. Graupmann and NHS staff can answer questions and encourage students to feel welcome, wanted and valuable to NHS activities. Mentors can then refer to the booklet throughout the year to continue encouraging students to get involved on a one-on-one basis.

I also suggest ROG make fundraising participation fees an activity, as means of reducing costs and getting students active in extracurricular pursuits. Albeit a small contribution, I believe ROG can set in motion action towards change by helping students join NHS activities. The benefits reaped from involvement will add for Latinos a rung to the American ladder, elevating students to greater heights of achievement.

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