

# Stories of Struggle and Hope: Lived Experiences of Puerto Ricans in Chicago Schools

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative research project highlights the experience of ten Latina/o students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The youth interviewed attended a range of types of high schools; including schools categorized as general education high schools, college preparatory schools, magnet schools and one alternative school. The author conducted life history interviews with ten individuals who identify as Puerto Rican and experienced part or all of their high school years in CPS. The methodology of life history served to provide deeper understanding and analysis of the educational experiences surrounding peers, teachers, counselors and family. This article will provide a brief overview of historical educational practices and policies impacting Puerto Rican children that will help frame the experiences of the youth interviewed. The stories highlighted in this article focus on the youth's experiences while in high school. However, the method of life history provided many rich stories about their lived experiences outside of school which are as important in analyzing their stories of this critical time in the lives of many youth. Their stories were analyzed for a larger study (Davila, 2005) and several themes emerged in that study. In this article the themes of student agency and resistance theory are highlighted.*

## Introduction

*Liberating memory represents a declaration, a hope, a discursive reminder that people do not only suffer under the mechanisms of domination, they also resist. (Freire, 1988)*

This paper highlights the school experiences of Latino students in Chicago. Education scholars have recently begun utilizing qualitative research methods and/or a critical education framework as means to gather and interpret rich data regarding the schooling experiences of Latinos. It is important to continue to grow this body of research and highlight the voices and experiences of the lived experiences of Latinos. There is much more work ahead in order to make change happen within the structure and culture of schooling to best serve Latino students' academic and social needs. This article is an attempt to begin to make that change by highlighting the voices of Latino students, specifically Puerto Ricans in Chicago, and by bringing

their lived experiences to the forefront of the education research community. The lived experiences discussed in this article provide rich examples of the ways in which youth create spaces to express themselves despite being part of structures and systems that are not designed for them. The context of Puerto Ricans in Chicago is one of struggle and hope that dates back to the 1940s and is still present today. Many of these struggles and hopes are grounded in school experiences and while the school system in Chicago has a history of inequity, the Latino community in Chicago has resisted. "National attention was focused on Chicago [in June 1988] when former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, called the Chicago public school system the worst in the nation" (Vasquez, 1994 p. 13). It is critical to consider what it means to belong to any group or institution that is known as the worst in any category, nonetheless the whole nation. The stories that are shared in this article occurred in this context, yet these youth share stories of hope and provide their own insight into several

themes such as fear of difference, patriarchal assumptions, the role of family in educational decisions, and the ways they resisted educational practices that were not supporting their goals. These themes are the focus of the "High School Counter Chronicles" section.

Through my experiences as a former student in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and as an advocate for education equity,<sup>1</sup> I have observed and experienced many of the inequities within the structure of CPS. The inequity starts early for many Latinos in CPS and unfortunately these inequities are found at every level of education. Some of the issues include longer waitlist for early childhood options in Latino neighborhoods, use of assessment tools that are not culturally relevant, lack of bilingual and bicultural teachers and staff, and overcrowded classrooms in many predominately Latino schools (Davila and Aviles de Bradley, 2010).

Latinos represent the fastest growing minority group in Chicago and is the largest in the country (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). Despite this fact, Latinos in Chicago today experience

the same educational problems that many voiced concerns about back in the 1960s. The disparities impact a lot of Latino children in Chicago, as the district is not designed to function well for all its students.

During the 2009-2010 school year, 41% of CPS's students identify as Latino and 15% of teachers are Latino. In comparison, 9% of the student body identify as White and 49% of teachers identify as White. (Chicago Public Schools, 2010). The lack of Latino teachers and staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists) is a critical issue nationwide and in Chicago and research has shown the significance of having a diverse teaching faculty (Lipman, 2006). Some of the other critical issues impacting Latino children in CPS include a lack of quality early childhood opportunities, lack of bilingual curriculum and assessment tools that are culturally relevant, and high "pushout" rates (Davila and Aviles de Bradley, 2010). Many community based organizations<sup>2</sup> in Chicago have worked to battle issues impacting Latinos in CPS and while victories continue to come from these grass roots efforts there is still much work to be done. It is a tumultuous task to capture lived experience within an institution as large and as bureaucratic as CPS. Thus, this qualitative research project cannot highlight the experiences of the 500,000 children in the district, but only provide a glimpse of experiences unfolding within CPS.

The experiences of these youth highlight the way their agency served to help them navigate through and resist certain policies and practices that were not serving their needs. The concept and theory of resistance are useful in examining the school experiences of Puerto Ricans because resistance theory brings forth the integral role agency plays in the social oppression experienced on a daily basis in the institutionalization of schooling. Thus, to explore the schooling experiences of Puerto Ricans through the lens of resistance theory, one must understand how dominance and power work within the institution of schooling. In the US, Puerto Ricans and other oppressed groups are divided and segregated through institutional racism, classism

and sexism. Only rarely do educators consider the fact that "as a collective, Puerto Ricans have the highest poverty rate, lowest house-hold incomes, and lowest labor force participation of all Latino groups in the United States" (Mercado & Moll, 2000, p.297). Therefore, in hopes to transform the current oppression of Puerto Ricans, as well as other oppressed groups, the concepts of agency and resistance need to be surfaced within the discussion of schooling.

This article will (1) discuss the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study; (2) provide a brief discussion of the Puerto Rican experience in Chicago Public Schools; (3) highlight the lived experiences of the youth coupled with analysis; (4) present my own autobiography which will help frame my positionality in this research project; and (5) discuss implications of this research project.

### Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

Within the field of education research, life history research is an alternate method that has more recently been used in works delving into the lives inside schools, including the life stories of teachers (Darder, 2002; Nieto, 2004; Pak, 2002; Schubert and Ayers, 1992), peers (Padilla, 2003), students (Michie, 1999; Padilla, 1997; Pak, 2002), and parents (Olmedo, 1999). While these scholars have begun to complicate education research with the "messiness" of life stories, the overwhelming amount of research in education has concentrated on methods that silence the complex diverse experiences unfolding in schools. The nature of the "messiness" spills over into constructs of validity within life history research. Lather's (1986) insight on validity in a postpositivist era aids in reconstructing the concept of validity within traditional studies:

We recognize that just as there is no neutral education there is no neutral research, we no longer need to apologize for unabashedly ideological research and its open commitment to using research to criticize and change the status quo. The development of data credibil-

ity checks to protect our research and theory construction from our enthusiasms, however, is essential in our efforts to create a self-reflexive human science (p. 67).

Lather's insight on the subjectivity of research and where validity comes from is a discussion that needs to be pushed to the forefront of education research, in other words, the complexity she describes needs to become part of the discourse. A detrimental aspect of traditional research related to the schooling experience of Latinos in public schools is rooted in cultural deficit models (Nieto, 2004). Life history research can present counter-stories that challenge homogenous perceptions. Casey (1995) states, "now it is difficult to imagine a scholar who has not noticed the many new publications featuring life stories and narratives" (p. 211). Thus the process is in motion to shift the discourse of schooling from positivist universal grand narratives to postpositivist entangled complex lives. Life history interviews conducted with ten Puerto Ricans who attended CPS constructed a story of resistance regarding their lived experiences in school, which is the focus of this article.

My own autobiography (included later in the article) helped me better understand the way in which the process of life history interviewing awakens not only the lives of the participants, but the life of the researcher as well. Listening to some of the life stories told by the participants underscored my own experiences. Juxtaposing their stories with mine presents the way their stories and mine served as dialogue within this life history research. At times, I had a shared experience while other stories exemplified the complexity of each individual's meaning to school. Although I am describing some of my stories as my own ideas about my own life, I am well aware of the natural entanglement of the conversations of the participants and other lives explored in the literature that help me frame my experiences into the larger picture of Latinos and their school experiences. Shared story telling is part of what people do during their daily conversations; it is in this context of dialogue that one exposes

their thoughts and within that process, constructs meaning. However, when the conversation of schooling is explored within education research, daily conversations are overshadowed by theoretical insights that predetermine what is supposed to happen in schools, or by enormous data sets that misrepresent the complexity and diversity of each student's life story. Accordingly, research in education can recognize the significance of the daily conversations unfolding in schools that serve as knowledge about schooling and life through methods such as life history.

In the conversations that unfolded as part of this research project, each of the participants shared some insight on their experience with a school system that worked against their needs while in high school. Some described an intentional attempt to modify the systematic school structure to help them, while others described acts of resistance without deliberate or conscious intent to resist the school system. As Freire (1988) espoused, it is the role of the critical educator to couple this discussion of critique, with one of possibility.

Resisting educational inequities that continue to plague the public schools in the US is a vital strategy of academic and social survival for Puerto Ricans, as well as other disenfranchised youth (Nieto 1998). However, within the dominant ideology in US schools, as well as other social institutions, resistant behavior has a negative connotation. Compliant students are rewarded, while students who may question policies and think critically about their interests within the structure of schooling are quickly labeled as problems. Furthermore, students from non-dominant racial and social class groups, such as Puerto Ricans, are further penalized when they resist school norms. This is supported by the fact that students in inner city schools who resist school policies are more likely to be forced to deal with law enforcement and police officers, while students in affluent schools and of the dominant class are usually disciplined within the confines of their schools (Anyon, 1997). For example, a third grader from a Chicago Public School brought a marijuana joint to school and the

school officials called the Chicago police; the boy was arrested because the school did not have a current phone number on file for the eight-year old.<sup>3</sup> The process of disciplining this boy, according to Anyon, would have played out differently had this boy been White and affluent. Without the necessary transformation of schooling in the US to provide education in the interest of their students, students will continue to resist. Thus, educators should think critically about the strategies of resistance that students utilize within educational institutions, and how these acts of resistance along with the schools' responses to student agency/resistance speak to the development of Latinos identities within the school context. The entangled complex lives of the Puerto Rican youth that lent their experiences to this research should be placed within a context of their shared histories within the city of Chicago. The resistance of Latinos and other groups to coercive education policies must be supported and understood in historical, socio-political contexts of the lived experiences of Latinos on US soil.

### Sociohistorical Context: Puerto Ricans in the "United States"

Many Puerto Ricans in the continental US have held on to their culture as a means of creating/maintaining unique identity (Nieto, 1998; Padilla, 1987; Rodriguez, 1991). This adherence to one's ethnic culture is often a tumultuous struggle due to the methods of assimilation and deculturalization that US institutions have practiced on Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in the US. Some examples include the attempt to replace Spanish with English as the majority language, or instilling US patriotic values instead of Puerto Rican (Spring, 2001). Carlos<sup>4</sup> (one of the interviewees) relives his experience with American patriotism in high school:

Puerto Rican patriotism was unheard of. We always were told and also showed, you know, that America [USA] is it; we had all the flags, the pledge and also those Uncle Sam posters; there were also teachers who use to be in the Army

and they would always tell us, you know, the guys, that it was the thing to do. Besides that we also had the whole Constitution test thing; I mean they make sure everyone who goes to high school knows about American patriotism. They don't care if we know math and all that. (Interview; Carlos<sup>5</sup>, 2001)

Carlos's story on Puerto Rican patriotism is critical to put into sociopolitical context since Puerto Rico has had such a unique political relationship with the United States. While all Puerto Ricans born on the island are US citizens, the citizenship status has been described as a second class citizenship (Padilla, 1987). Although Puerto Ricans are US citizens the lived experiences of Puerto Ricans who have migrated from the island have a shared story of living on the margins in the United States (Padilla, 1987). While considering the methods of deculturalization used by the United States towards Puerto Ricans, the issue of the ways in which youth engage in identity formation within their school experiences is essential. Throughout the history of the US, many ethnic groups have faced similar issues of deculturalization, including African Americans, Japanese Americans, Native Americans and Mexican Americans to name a few (Spring, 2001). Schools were used as instruments to assimilate all the groups mentioned into lifestyles valued in the United States, such as speaking only English and focusing on individual gains. From 1900-1930 many policies were instilled into the Puerto Rican public schools for the purpose of "Americanizing" the Puerto Ricans. Aida Negrón De Montilla's book, *Americanization in Puerto Rico and the Public-School System 1900-1930*, provides a list of these policies (Spring, 2001). A few examples of such policies include:

1. Attempts to expel teachers and students who engaged in anti-United States activities;
2. Attempts to use teachers from the U.S. versus local teachers;
3. Replacing local textbooks and curricula with ones reflecting the way of life in the United States.

These policies served to marginalize Puerto Rican culture through the strategic removal of anything that could be interpreted as "Puerto Rican." The policies listed above provide a historical sociopolitical insight into the public schools in Puerto Rico. Accordingly, it is imperative to recognize the historical experiences of Puerto Ricans who were part of the public schools in Puerto Rico who then migrated to the US. Overall, it is critical to take into account the history of Puerto Ricans with the US. to gain a better understanding of the experiences Puerto Ricans face in US schools today. As Ambert and Alvarez (1992) explain, "Puerto Ricans have a unique colonial history and a unique set of circumstances that bring them to the mainland" (p.34).

In *Puerto Rican Chicago*, Felix M. Padilla (1987) recounts the historical struggles of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and current issues that continue to face the community. In discussing gentrification, Padilla suggests that Puerto Ricans were aware that their communities were being displaced and tried to resist with grassroots movements. Many communities organized forums to educate the people about their rights and to help them understand how much their homes were really worth (Rinaldo, 2002). In spite of these efforts, the gentrification of the Puerto Rican communities in Chicago is still occurring (Meiners and Reyes, 2008; Ramos-Zayas, 2003).

*While life history may not offer definitive proof of any particular theoretical proposition, it may stand as a "negative case" that can be used to falsify theories that do not jibe with it. Life histories may cast light upon the subjective side of institutional processes. That is, they can reveal how institutional arrangements are reproduced, sometimes unwittingly, through activities that are locally meaningful to the actors involved. Because they are comparatively sensitive to the temporality of social life, life histories may produce data uniquely suited to formulating theories of general social processes like socialization and social change. Finally, life histories may serve to reveal lifestyles, points of view, and social circumstances we would otherwise never encounter. (Weinberg, 2002, pp. 75-76)*

Weinberg lends insight to the multi-layered function of life history research. I will loosely use the three functions he details above - (1) negative cases can falsify grand theories, (2) life histories provide insight into the reproduction of institutional arrangements and (3) the standpoint of the youth will bring forth issues that may otherwise be silenced. This section of the article will include four high school chronicles, each focused on a different high school experience. Some will consist of one participants' life story and other sec-

tions will include several participants' stories. I will open sets of short stories with a piece of theoretical insight that does not jibe with the life histories of the participants and close each section with an interpretive interruption. The interpretive interruption will provide a space where I can closely analyze the story without interrupting the flow of the narrative. To assist in placing these counter-chronicles in lived context, the ages of the participants and some information on their high schools are provide in Tables 1 and 2 (below).

The first set of short stories (Section A) told by the participants will exemplify Weinberg's (2002) notion of a negative case. According to Coles & Knowles (2001), life history studies are useful for understanding how 'mental constructs' can be challenged through dialogue with more experienced others. The dialogue presented here is compiled from two separate chronicles of two participants sharing their experience about multiculturalism and the strength of diversity; these stories challenge the fear of difference. Through close examination of the lived experiences unfolding in school, some participants offered stories that challenged the status quo. Assimilation is a critical concept to deconstruct within the conversation of Latino schooling experiences in the US because of the ideological indoctrination addressing "whiteness" in schools. Parker & Stovall (2004) argue that, "[a]s an ideology, White supremacy was imposed

## High School Counter-Chronicles

**Table 1: Ages and Schools Attended**

<b>Participants (Pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Age at Interview</b>	<b>School(s)</b>
Carlos	24	Riverside <sup>6</sup>
Marisol	27	Riverside
Yesenia	23	Riverside & Vocational Tech
Elizabeth	25	Riverside <sup>vi</sup>
Stephanie	26	Riverside
Miguel	24	North & Alternative High
Alejandro	20	Martinez High
Rodrigo	20	City College Prep
Arlene	19	Academic High
Lillian	26	Math & Science Academy

**Table 2: 1993-1994 Profiles on Chicago Public High Schools' Attended by Participants<sup>7</sup>**

Schools (Pseudonyms)	Type	Drop Out Rate	Average ACT	Latino	African American	White
Riverside	General Ed	51.5%	15.8	63%	17.9%	14.7%
Vocational Tech	Vocational	22.3%	17.3	31.6%	30%	28%
North High	General Ed	44.6%	15.9	46%	14.4%	26.3%
Alternative	Alternative	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Martinez	General Ed	61.7%	14.2	84.4%	11.5%	1.6%
City College Prep	College Prep	14.4%	20.9	31.3%	18.8%	32.2%
Math/ Science Academy	Magnet/ College Prep	19.3%	20	22.2%	29%	26.9%
Academic High	Magnet/ College Prep	6.9%	22.5	12.5%	53.5%	15.9%
<b>Chicago Public Schools</b>		<b>44.9%</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>27.5%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>11.4%</b>

in North America, as it was used hierarchically to rank races and justified horrific acts in the form of slavery, colonialist domination of land and populations, and forced assimilation” (p. 170).

The second section (Section B) explores the experience of deconstructing the patriarchal assumptions regarding Puerto Ricans. The life stories of two young women are entangled to shed light on the power and agency of women. The next section (Section C) offers the stories of four participants telling their experience regarding the transition from elementary to high school. Their voices speak to a practice of choosing a high school to attend based on the schools attended by other family members, offering an alternative perspective on how incoming freshmen “choose” which high school to attend. The final section (Section D) will serve as a narrative of resistance, offering a social circumstance that is silenced within the research of schooling, that is, the element of human agency within the students. In this story, a young woman shares her experience of challenging her high school counselor through a formal approach of letter writing. Altogether, the life stories highlighted below provide a glimpse of high school experiences for the participants that serve as theoretical touchstones (Becker, 2002). Becker (2002) states, “[i]f we know the case in some detail, as a life history document allows us to know it, our search is more likely to be successful; it is in this sense that the life history is a use-

ful theoretical touchstone (p. 82)”.

**Diversity vs. Assimilation**

*The central question is whether the public schools can serve, as they have done in the past, as the main instrument of assimilation for the millions of Hispanic [Latino/a] youngsters who now attend them. In this regard, the current fascination with multiculturalism and diversity in public education bodes ill indeed. (Chavez, 1995)*

**Arlene’s insight on difference...**

I think high school prepared me for life after high school because my school had so many different types of people, and I mean we had deaf people, we had people of different races, we had rich people and your ghetto, poor people. Then you had your milder, nerdy type, and that’s what the stereotype was and then... So I think it did. I think I just got... because a lot of people there were like upper-middle-upper class or kind of the more wealthy side, so I think I just got used to that whole materialistic mentality. So when I got into college I was like, okay, it doesn’t have to be like that. Being able to be around difference is a good thing because you see things differently...you know what I mean?

**Alejandro’s memory of learning about diversity...**

I remember in high school there was a celebration for *Cinco de Mayo*,

and all my Mexican friends would be going cruising with their flags and all that, like we do for the Puerto Rican parade...One year we represented with both flags the Mexican and Puerto Rican for the parade. First my friends were like no because we were not sure and then we did it. It was like we were learning from each other...and some people who do not know better are always talking smack about other people not even knowing any of their kind of people. I see that as ignorant... Me? I am always ready to learn about different people, you know?

**Interpretive Interruption:**

Both of these stories offer a counter chronicle to Chavez’s (1995) statement regarding assimilation, these two Puerto Rican youth share experiences that speak to the ways in which many youth can experience public schools without losing their Latin identity. The magnet school Arlene attended had a range of class statuses within the school and her insight on difference highlighted this class diversity. On the other hand, Alejandro focused on the ethnic identities of himself and his peers when discussing diversity. Both of their experiences highlight the lessons we may learn in school, but in this case, the two students constructed their understandings outside of the classroom. When Arlene went to college, she used her lived experience with the students on the “more wealthy side” as an opportunity to better understand her-

self, realizing she did not have to buy into the “materialistic mentality” of her privileged counterparts. Alejandro and his friends contemplated “representing” with the Mexican and Puerto Rican flags side by side. Despite their doubts, they exercised their agency to construct a symbolic representation of Mexican and Puerto Rican unity. Altogether, Arlene and Alejandro’s experiences debunk Chavez’s (1995) comment above which describes the public schools as the vehicle to assimilate Latinos, because both of these Puerto Rican youth shared school experiences – albeit outside of the classroom – that highlighted diversity in public schools outside of an assimilationist ideology and within an ideology that not only supports diversity but encourages it. While Alejandro and Arlene complicate the idea of assimilation unfolding in public schools, the narratives shared in the next section complicate the discussion of gender roles for Puerto Ricans from the standpoint of the participants.

### Life HerStory; Mujeres in Context

*Puerto Rican culture traditionally stresses the importance of women submitting to male demands, and this factor may override any acculturation Puerto Rican females living in the US experience. (Orshan, 1996)*

### Yesenia’s story on the power of Puerto Rican women...

I owe everything to my mom, and I saw her as a powerful Puerto Rican woman that did not fall in hard times. She always stayed on her feet and showed me, you know, to be that way. Like I remember one time when we lost my stepbrother and everyone was falling apart, she stood up for the whole family and did what she had to do. It proved to me that the power she had was not just a power to say things should be done this way or that way. It was a strong power that women have because of their life and what we go through. Now when I think about when I was in school, it makes me think of growing up, and now as a woman I see the power we have

is the power my mom had...like with real life problems women are powerful, my mom, my aunts and, you know, us, the young women, I see us being able to cope and help others, not like men.

### Elizabeth on her early perception of women...

I remember being a little girl and wanting to be grown up and have a great job with a briefcase (chuckle). I always saw women as the ones in charge. Like at home, both my parents were teachers but for some reason I had the idea that my mom’s job was more important and at home she was in charge too...You know, it was a women’s world. Also my teachers in Puerto Rico were almost all women and I respected them. When we moved to Chicago it was even more like that because I saw all kinds of women in charge. Looking back I just really did not see like the whole women serving their men thing, our women work, you know Puerto Rican women. Now a lot of women my age are having babies and stuff and really it is not the Puerto Rican women staying home, it is more the White girls who...were brought up that way.

### Interpretive Interruption:

The insight of Yesenia and Elizabeth speaks to the early perceptions they had of women. Yesenia discusses the power and strength of women to come from “their life and what we go through,” while Elizabeth explains how she never experienced women being subservient to men. Both of these young Puerto Rican women construct a negative case against Orshan’s (1996) comment that the subordinate position of Puerto Rican females supersedes the process of acculturation of Puerto Rican women. Although Yesenia does describe women as hard working and being able to help others unlike men, she debunks Orshan (1996) because she draws on the strength women built through their experience helping others, instead of framing their caring personalities as barriers. Yesenia illuminates the human agency at the core of this persona and the necessary role the women in

her family played in keeping the family together. Bernal’s (2001) work with Chicana college students and her coining of “pedagogies of the home” speaks to the strategies that Yesenia and Elizabeth shared in their stories:

My analysis indicates that Chicana college students develop tools and strategies for daily survival within an educational system that often excludes and silences them. The communication, practices and learning that occur in the home and community, what I call pedagogies of the home, often serve as a cultural knowledge base that helps Chicana college students negotiate the daily experiences of sexist, racist, and classist microaggressions. (p.624)

The power that Yesenia and Elizabeth saw in their mothers within the context of patriarchal ideologies in the United States says a lot about the power of their “pedagogies of the home.”

### Following Family

*Whether these [Latino] youngsters displayed a lot of college potential or very little, the most common situation was that no one was helping them sort out their futures in any individual way. (Immerwahr, 2003)*

### Elizabeth follows her cousin...

I actually chose that high school because I had two cousins living here, and that is where they were going. So, I kind of, I wanted to go somewhere where I had somebody I knew - I didn’t want to go to any other school; by myself. So I remember one time I went to this like assembly where they had people talking to us about high school and I was not even paying attention.

### Carlos follows his sister...

From what I can remember, the main reason why I decided to go to the high school that I went to, was probably the same reason why I went to the grammar school that I went to, which was because it was the school in the neighborhood, both grammar school and high

school. When I came to Chicago I knew that it was basically you go to the school that was in the neighborhood, which was the only option that I basically had. Then for high school—in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I did really well, after 7<sup>th</sup> grade. After 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> I got moved to a regular English classroom—all English classroom during my 8<sup>th</sup> grade years. I was in a classroom and I graduated number one in my class out of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, so I did really well; I took some placement tests at different high schools, and I had the opportunity to go to different high schools, even private high schools. But my neighborhood school was not far from home when I was...again, I guess it probably had to do with my sister also because of the fact that she was already there. She went to the neighborhood high school [Riverview] high school in the city, in Chicago. She was there already, and that made it a lot easier as a transition. And even though I had the opportunities that I had, and my mother even wanted me to go, and my teachers were encouraging me. Because of what I had gone through, I think, coming from Puerto Rico to 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and then seeing the transition and how hard that was for me and how much I hated it...at first it was something really shocking, then like thinking about going to high school where I had already heard horror stories from my sister about the things that they could do to the freshmen in high school. So just thinking about all those things and her friends, listening to them about those things, and knowing that there was already her there, and her group of friends that I knew a little bit—I think all those things led to the fact that I ended up going to the high school that I ended up attending, which was [Riverview].

#### **Lillian follows her brother...**

Actually our neighborhood school was [Rathem] High School. But I guess...he had ...my older brother was there; they wanted me to go there. Which is really weird because my older sister went to a Catholic School ...that was actu-

ally closer to our house. And then with my older brother they decided to send him to public school and so...because they felt like it wasn't so bad, they decided to send me there. But then with my younger brother they ended up sending him also to the Catholic school.

#### **Stephanie follows her brothers...**

I went to [Riverview] High School all four years. The reason I went there: it wasn't - well, I was supposed to go to [Park] High because that was my district, but the only reason I went to [Riverview] was because all my brothers went there, so they got me in. It was the only reason I went there because of course [Riverview] was all messed up, not like [Park] High.

#### **Interpretive Interruption:**

The shared experience described above complicates the role family has on academic success/failure. Immerwahr's (2003) research with Latino high school seniors focused on the multitude of barriers these students face with college admissions. In this research Immerwahr (2003) found that while many of the parents discussed the integral role college would play in the lives of their children, many of the youth were not attending college. Many of the barriers discussed echoed the chronicles shared in this article, such as low expectations of teachers and lack of school counselors (focus of the next chronicle). However, the stories outlined above, strongly contradict one of Immerwahr's main findings – the lack of family support. The quote at the beginning of this chronicle speaks to the fact that many of the youth in the Immerwahr (2003) study expressed a lack of guidance (from home and school) about the process of attending college, the concept of “Following Family” was not discussed and while many of the parents might have not been aware of the processes involved in selecting a college, they could have been seeking safe spaces for their kids. Given the research on the percentage of Latinos who are first generation college students, for parents college may not seem safe because there is no family to

follow. More than two out of five [Latino] freshmen at four-year colleges are the first in their family to attend college, compared with about one out of five White freshmen (Schmidt, 2003).

Furthermore, while the choices of what high school to attend may have been limited for these youth, the family support present within the structure of school may have helped them better navigate their high school experience. For example, if schools can provide the support these youth need, then perhaps parents would not feel obligated to send their children to a school with which they are merely familiar without considering other factors. However, even if the school environment responded better to the students, it is difficult to determine how much the family members helping each other would compare to a supportive school environment. Therefore, the experiences shared on following family – which can also be explored at different education levels, including choosing a college – complicates the process of choosing a school. The “following family” chronicle above also serves as an example of parents resisting unwelcoming school environments. As Antrop Gonzalez, Velez and Garret (2003) found in their research with Puerto Rican youth in the Midwest.

We are led to believe...that large comprehensive urban high schools are still inequitably structuring opportunities for Latina/o students by not working to find ways to use the community-based resources, wisdom, and knowledge that students and their families already bring to school (Antrop-Gonzalez, Velez and Garret, 2003 p.9).

The parents of the youth in the “Following Family” story made it clear that their children would attend these schools, even overlooking scholarships and the option to send their children to schools that were closer to home. The family security provided by relatives at the school, or the convenience of having multiple children at the same school, superseded the opportunity to tap into a range of high school options.

#### **The Counselor and the (un)Counseled**

“...being placed in the low track often has long-lasting negative effects on these students, as they fall further and further behind their peers and become increasingly bored in school” (Stuart Wells and Serna 1996) .

*Q: Tell me about your counselor in high school.*

**Elizabeth:** I had a counselor and the only thing I remember [about] her [is] when I was applying for college - and I remember my stuff being delayed, and I was really worried because I wanted my stuff to be in and I remember... actually, I was a Senior, and I remember writing her this letter, and I was like...I have submitted this to you but I haven't heard anything, can you please help me out because I'm really interested in going to these colleges?

*Q: So you couldn't just like walk in? You had to like, write her this letter? Did she have a heavy case load or...?*

**Elizabeth:** She didn't; I just actually think she wasn't helping me at all; and I went and told my homeroom teacher - my division teacher is what you used to call them in high school. And she helped me with the letter; and I told her I would do this letter and really that the counselor wasn't doing anything. She wasn't helping me with my applications. So when I wrote her the letter, it was typed and all, she appeared the next morning at my division room like all concerned about how to help me. It was the letter that got her to come; she never thought I would do that, you know? A student, a kid basically, and I had to go through all that instead of her just counseling me. I mean, that was her job. But there she was even before the bell rang with a concerned look on her face, and she actually told me it was not necessary for me to write the letter! Hello! This was my future. As far as I can remember, I only saw her twice...

*Q: Did she come to you and say I'm your counselor?*

**Elizabeth:** No, I didn't have any of that.

*Q: Ok, when you were meeting with her, I know it was just two times, like, what did you feel her thoughts of you were as far as being a high school student, her being your advisor, you being her advisee, that relationship?*

**Elizabeth:** As far as I can remember twice. I don't remember having a relationship with her, like she cared about me or what I did. She was just doing her job kind of thing.

*Q: Tell me more about what you think a counselor is?*

**Elizabeth:** I kind of thought because of the word counselor, what it meant, I always wondered. And I'm like, she is supposed to be my counselor, but this doesn't feel like I'm being counseled, you know? Another story was when I was seeking something out of my school? Because I also thought within my high school schedule I could have taken more classes. I only remember like English were the ones where the good teacher was, and maybe the Math one - but it didn't even prepare me for college; but other than that; you had like these study times, where you would go into a study hall session, so there was a lot of that which was a lot of waste of time.

*Q: People weren't actually studying then?*

**Elizabeth:** People were not actually studying at all; so it was a lot of waste of time. And then my senior year when I realized what a waste of time my high school was, they had, I don't know if you know, but they had like this work program, where you take I think, one less class and then you leave early and get a part time job - it's kind of like a business thing. So I said, let me get into this so I could gain something at least....

*Q: Do you remember what you did for that work/study?*

**Elizabeth:** The business courses that I took? It was like a business course, where they taught you like,

maybe a little marketing skills, or how to use the computers more - a little more technical - and then they helped you with like, job interviewing and to apply for jobs. Which then, I went out and applied for jobs, and then got this part time job at Jewel.

*Q: Ok. Do you think it was geared for everybody, or for students who, maybe weren't going to college?*

**Elizabeth:** That was geared for students who were not going to college, and for students who just wanted to work; and I knew I wanted to go to college and that was not something for me but I still went ahead and did it because I figured if I don't do this I am going to stay here in this high school with these little study halls where nobody studies; and I'd rather do something on my own...but yeah, that program was geared for a lot of high school students who were not really into school and who really just wanted to get a job right after high school, and I knew that that was not what I wanted to do, but like I said, I didn't want to stay in this school wasting time and filling up my schedule with study halls where nobody studied.

#### **Interpretive Interruption:**

Elizabeth's resistance highlights her agency in making a concerted effort to get the attention of her high school counselor and to modify the school structure to fit her needs. First, using a "vocational course" and the help of her division teacher to write a formal letter to her counselor requesting the counselor's services is a clear example of her modifying the school system. Furthermore, Elizabeth's consciousness of the uselessness of certain courses in high school and her efforts to make her courses useful highlights her agency. The counselor in Elizabeth's chronicle may have seen her as disposable but Elizabeth did not let the counselor's "ideology of disposability" (Darder, 2002) serve to dispose of her so easily.

The quote from Stuart Wells and Serna (1996) that opened this chronicle regarding the response many students have to low track courses is important to juxtapose to Elizabeth's experience. The work of Stuart Wells and



Serna (1996) provides a rich analysis of social class and tracking and many of the youth I interviewed echoed the findings of their study. However, Elizabeth builds on their research because it speaks to the agency of students to make their courses work for them even if they are considered low track classes. I want to be very clear here, I am not arguing that schools should place students like Elizabeth in low track classes. I am arguing that despite Elizabeth's placement she resisted the idea that she was not college bound. Elizabeth actually went on to college to earn a Bachelors then a Masters degree in school social work and is currently practicing in a predominantly Latino public school.

The lack of counseling as a resource was an experience highlighted by the participants regardless of the type of high school they attended. Placing her experience with poor counseling within the larger context of CPS – with a severe overcrowding problem and a lack of bilingual/bicultural counselors – helps to better understand their experiences within a critique of the poor structures keeping many schools in the district barely afloat (Davila and Aviles de Bradely, 2010).

### Life History Autobiography: A Space to Entangle my Self

*Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it (Witherell & Noddings, 1991).*

I did not pick life history interviewing as a research method. It chose me. The use of storytelling during the interviews and my attempt to understand what the participants' stories meant, resulted in exploring my research within the methodological context of life history. I recall sitting in my advisor's office during my first year of graduate studies telling her stories of my school experiences, both as a teacher and a student, as they related to topics in my courses on education policy. During these conversations, I tried to figure out how the course content related to my lived experiences and pondered on the lack of education research that dealt with accounts of Puerto Rican

lived experiences. While conducting the interviews, I would share my own experiences as they shared theirs. This process of learning about my *self* led me to see a place for my story and use my life history as the lens to take in the research. Unlike the ink absorbed by a piece of paper displaying a set of questions on a survey, or the statistical program that absorbs life histories by mounting lives in neat categories, the lived experiences that a life historian meddles with continues to complicate ideas, perceptions, and points of view. Within my research project, the stories shared by the participants and those I shared with them changed the way I perceived lived experience as it relates to schooling and provided me with another way to look at my own life history.

I recall feeling that I had done something wrong during my first interview, because I offered my own experiences when the participant opened up with her own stories. In hindsight, I understand why that was just the natural thing to do; a dialogue or conversation was necessary to encapsulate the meaning she held to her experiences. From then on, I was there not solely as an interviewer, as the participants were not there solely as interviewees; rather, during the conversation we were there as co-researchers. In the process of the interview, through my questions and my input, I realize the narratives from the participants are co-constructed. Padilla (2003) sheds light on his autobiographic experience within his research: "Since I wanted to make myself available to them as they were making themselves to me, the reciprocal act of inquiry afforded me the opportunity to be critical about my lived experience" (p.25).

During the analysis phase, I realized that since I came to the interview data filled with my own stories, and because I had an endless repository to my own life history, I wanted to present their stories in the section above, *High School Chronicles*, to ground their experiences within their standpoint and not that of my own. Thus, I will explore some of my own chronicles side by side with the literature and stories from the participants that help contextualize my autobiographical life history.

The sharing of the lives of the participants brought my own learning and knowing of schooling to the forefront. I heard and saw myself in the story of the lived experiences of Mexican American students in Angela Valenzuela's (1999) *Subtractive Schooling*. Her book spoke to how I encountered most of my relationships with school, including the silencing of my native tongue and the countless uncaring teachers I dealt with. What kept me going? As I reflect on my school experiences, I begin to ask myself how I survived and strived in spite of the "Subtractive" practices I encountered. I have a few theories that have been enhanced by hearing the lived experiences of the participants.

### Implications: Suppression of Student Voice and Identity Development

As children are trying to navigate their way through public school systems across urban America, they are faced with thinking about who they are not only to themselves, but what others perceive them to be. Latino children trying to affirm their identities have dealt with the societal racist perceptions that saturate the culture of schools. The isolation of Latinidad in early school experiences creates barriers for the future civic participation of Latinos for generations to come.

The historical backdrop of education policies intended for Latinos in the US coupled with the work of scholars that address the discussion of identity formation in schools for Latinos from a class and race based analysis provide a glimpse of the intersection between education policy and racial/class constructions. The lack of opportunity available to Latinos in public schools sends a negative message to the Puerto Rican youth regarding their value as people.

The silencing of these student experiences with inequitable school systems tells another story about research: the story of power. Youth stories/voices/experiences unfolding in schools can inform policies and practices that function to better serve their needs. Knowledge selected for inclusion in the curriculum as a rule reflects the perspectives, tastes, and world views of powerful groups in society, while the lives and

concerns of the groups that are most marginalized are for the most part missing from the curriculum (Nieto, 2004).

While many conducting qualitative studies that explore student voice have critiqued the “romanticizing” of authenticity (Cary, 1995), student experiences must continue to be explored with various research designs that critically investigate and create space for their story. As Hones (1998) states, “[i]n a quest for an understanding of the Self and the Other, we can recover our memories, renegotiate our present, and reconsider the possibilities of change within our communities, our nation, and our world” (p.248). The stories that were shared in this article recovered the memories of a small group of Puerto Rican youth from Chicago. My hope is that educators and community members will renegotiate their present positions working with youth in urban schools and neighborhoods. Most importantly, we need to reconsider the possibility of change in those very spaces where too often children and youth are not heard or valued as integral to the policies and practices that shape the culture in urban schools and neighborhoods.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 See Davila and Aviles de Bradley (2010) for more on the advocacy work.
- 2 Some of these organizations are the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG) <http://www.ncbg.org> and Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) <http://pureparents.org>
- 3 Personal conversation with CPS teacher.
- 4 Although the interview data have not been introduced I will use some of the data to provide a deeper understanding of the connections to the sociohistorical context.

- 5 All participant names are pseudonyms
- 6 Half of the youth attended the same school because originally I planned on completing ethnography of Riverside, but my interviewees steered me towards interviewing students in other schools.
- 7 Chicago Public Schools. (2010, June 9). Retrieved from <https://research.cps.k12.il.us/cps/accountweb/Reports>

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