

# INTRODUCTION

***Many Hispanic people think they can't be good in science. I thought I couldn't, but I can.***

—Angie Moreno, “Rural Girls in Science” participant  
(*Migrant Education News*: 1998, p. 9)

What else has this young woman thought Latinas can't be good at? What do young people everywhere learn about the possibilities their futures hold? Where do they learn that they will be best served by becoming accountants, or computer programmers, or doctors, or secretaries, or field hands, or mothers? For whom is the list of possible selves most constrained? For whom is it nearly endless? How are these possible selves constrained, and what effects do these understandings of the world have on young people's choices as they make their way toward adulthood?

This paper explores the experiences of Latinas in the United States' educational system. We utilize the concept of “possible selves” to investigate the lives of Latinas in school, at home, and with their peers. Communities formed by families, peers, and schools provide a social context in which possible selves are imagined and changed over time. In some cases, possible selves are constrained by these contexts; in others, they are broadened. Furthermore, we suggest that elements in each of these social contexts can be education-encouraging and affirming, or education-discouraging and dismissive. This will be the focus of much of our discussion.

This first section will provide an overview of our governing concepts—Latinas, education, and “possible selves”—and trends in Latina/o educational participation. The second section is a more in-

depth discussion of communities (families, peers, and primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools) and their relationship to the educational process. The third section focuses on individual traits, such as self-confidence, and explores how individual experiences are shaped by educational variables. The fourth and last section offers conclusions and recommendations for school personnel, families, and policy makers.

## **WHY A FOCUS ON LATINAS?**

The United States is growing increasingly diverse, with the Hispanic<sup>1</sup> population showing—and projected to show—the most dramatic population increases in the 21st century. The Hispanic population grew more than seven times as fast as the rest of the nation between 1980 and 1990 (53 percent growth) and is projected to double from the year 2010 to 2050, from 39.3 million to 80.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau: 1993b).

The Hispanic population is also much younger than other racial and ethnic groups. Fully one-third of Hispanic Americans are under the age of 15. By the year 2030, Hispanic students will comprise an estimated 25 percent of the total school population, at 16 million. This trend, while especially pronounced in California and Texas, is occurring in all major cities and urban public schools throughout the nation (President's Advisory Commission: 1996). The Hispanic American population between the ages of 5 and 13 years is projected to increase by 47 percent between 2000 and 2020, whereas the African American population of children aged 5 to 13 years is projected to increase by 15 percent. The White population of 5- to 13-year-olds is projected to decrease by 11 percent in the same period (U.S.

Department of Education: 1997). Latinas now constitute the largest “minority” group of girls in the United States, not including those living in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Substantial demographic shifts are increasing the presence of Hispanics in the United States population—especially in public schools. Yet graduation rates, college enrollment, and traditional achievement figures—among other, less quantifiable indicators—suggest that public schools are currently not meeting the needs of this growing, and diverse, student population. Notwithstanding increases in educational achievement, Latina/os continue to lag behind other ethnic minorities and Anglos on most measures of success, including educational attainment and its extension, economic well-being (Adelman: 1999; Secada, Chávez-Chávez, García, Muñoz, Oakes, Santiago-Santiago, & Slavin: 1998). Latinas, for example, comprise fully 25 percent of the female population of California, yet 61 percent of Latinas aged 25 to 44 have no high school diploma, 24 percent are graduates, and 15 percent have gone on to postsecondary education (Latino Coalition for a Healthy California: 2000). In 1999 the U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley proclaimed the educational achievement of Hispanic Americans a national priority (Riley Cites: 1999).

Research and data on Hispanic Americans, however, rarely focus on how students within this generic group differ by country of origin, class, region, or, more relevant for this paper, gender. Because national data are rarely disaggregated by sex and race and ethnicity, we know little about how the educational needs, achievements, or problems for Hispanic males may differ from those of Hispanic females.

This paper will review the educational status of Latinas, both in comparison with their male counterparts and in comparison with their peers in other racial and ethnic groups.

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “LATINAS”?**

When researchers talk about Latina/os (or in the lingua franca and U.S. government parlance, “Hispanics”), they are referring to a diverse population of individuals and groups. Under this rubric are included people who descend from inhabitants of Mexico, countries of Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Most of this population is composed of people of Mexican descent. Puerto Ricans<sup>2</sup> and Cubans are the next largest groups, followed by people from Central and South America and the Dominican Republic. Of these populations, about 21 percent of Central Americans and 67 percent of Mexicans were born in the United States, indicating a continuing influx of these populations to the United States. (See Sidebar One.)

All Latina/os experience the effects of documentation and immigration status—even citizens born in this country encounter people who stereotype them as immigrants and treat them accordingly. For those not born in this country, their status with the U.S. government affects their access to social services such as health and education, and can provoke worries that they and their families will be returned to their country of origin against their wishes.<sup>3</sup>

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EDUCATION?**

This paper focuses on kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12), with the bulk of our comments centering on public education. Given that nearly half of Latina/os aged 15 and older have less than a high school education (U.S. Census Bureau: 1998) and that more than 90 percent of Latina/o children attend public schools (U.S. Department of Education: 1998a), this focus should come as no surprise. We discuss private, parochial, and alternative schooling (such as the General Equivalency Diploma) when information is relevant. At the college level, we discuss Latinas’ educational experi-

ences in community colleges, liberal arts schools, state schools, and universities.<sup>4</sup>

*Most teachers tend to think of attending college as the only measure of success after high school. They will often denigrate jobs in construction or fast food and look down on community or junior colleges. The message for the student who wants to be a refrigerator repairman is clear: high school is only for the college-bound. The kid doesn't see the point and starts flunking.*

—Toni Falbo (Vail: 1998)

We will discuss educational success in the terms used by most experts who study education in the United States: measures such as persistence rates, grade point average (GPA), scores on standardized tests, time to degree completion, and enrollment rates in various academic tracks (remedial versus college-preparatory classes, for example). These indicators nearly universally test a school's success with only one aspect of education: the formal curriculum. Schools transmit three different types of curricula: the formal curriculum (or content-based instructional goals), the informal curriculum (or culturally dictated goals surrounding in-class

behavior and attitudes that are not formalized in the curriculum), and the evaded curriculum (subjects, such as peer relations and harassment in school, avoided by most schools in their formal curriculum) (AAUW Educational Foundation: 1992). Informal and evaded curricular issues are often overlooked in, or separated from, the discourse about school achievement.

These measures also emphasize individual achievement and do not allow for conceptualization of success or failure at the group level (such as the family or community level). Yet any discussion of educational success must necessarily take into account the context in which success is defined and understood by Latinas themselves. Students from non-Anglo, non-middle-class backgrounds—many of whom are the first in their families to make it to, much less through, high school, or to consider college—often have ways of organizing their lives and defining success that are not tapped by traditional measures of achievement. For example, rather than measuring their success through individual grades or uninterrupted school enrollment, students can see themselves as part of a larger collective (a family, for example) whose overall success is compromised by individualized definitions of achievement or success. If success were measured at the family level, high school graduates who go to work may be judged successful—especially if their work ensures that other siblings will be able to persist in school. Researchers have observed that these realities and

<b>Sidebar One: Selected Characteristics by Country of Origin</b>							
<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Puerto Rico</b>	<b>Cuba</b>	<b>Dominican Republic</b>	<b>Central America</b>	<b>South America</b>	<b>Spain</b>
Percent of Hispanic population in the United States	<b>61.2</b>	12.1	4.8	2.4	6.0	4.7	4.4
Percent who hold a BA or BS degree	6.2	9.5	16.6	7.8	9.0	19.5	<b>20.5</b>
Percent who graduated from high school	44.2	<b>53.4</b>	<b>56.8</b>	<b>42.6</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>70.7</b>	<b>76.7</b>
Percent born in the United States	66.7		28.3	29.4	21.0	25.1	<b>82.6</b>
Percent who speak English very well	49.1	<b>58.6</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>36.3</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>45.4</b>	<b>68.1</b>
Percent of families headed by a female	18.2	36.6	16.3	<b>41.2</b>	22.6	18.0	18.0
Percent of families in poverty	23.4	29.6	11.4	<b>33.4</b>	20.9	12.0	9.7

Bold figures are the highest in each category; italic figures are the lowest.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau: *We the American ... Hispanics* (1993) (1990 Census)

measures of success are not acknowledged in many school contexts. We will discuss alternative formulations of success in more depth later in this paper, and we will explore the informal and evaded factors behind the numbers that measure success according to the formal curriculum.

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “POSSIBLE SELVES”?**

We use the concept of “possible selves” throughout the paper to articulate the interaction between Latinas’ current social contexts and their perceived options for the present and the future. The concept “pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future. These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social” (Markus & Nurius: 1986, p. 964). The concept assumes that only in social interactions with others (families, peers, school personnel, media, and so forth) do individuals cultivate beliefs about “the pool of possible selves” from which they imagine and claim their place in the world. Many accounts of educational experiences, particularly for girls, focus on the concept of self-esteem. We prefer the concept of possible selves because it explicitly draws on contextual factors. It acknowledges the influence of “individuals’ particular sociocultural and historical context and ... the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and ... immediate social experiences” (Markus & Nurius: 1986, p. 954).

The link between social context and the formation of possible selves is critically important to our ability to understand and explain the educational experiences of Latinas in the United States. This is especially true when we consider the extent to which possible selves are gendered: girls’ images of who they can and should be differ from those of boys. For example, pregnancy, housework, and stereotypes of “women’s work” and career options have an impact on girls’ possible selves in ways that differ from boys’ possible selves. Conversely,

cultural ideals about masculinity will affect how boys envision their present and future possibilities and their level of academic engagement or identification.

Other social characteristics such as class, religion, and residential patterns (rural, suburban, or urban) also affect the formation of possible selves. For children whose families’ values are congruent with those of the school and other community members, maturation leads to a gradual confluence of possible selves. Educational aspirations and priorities, in other words, mesh with those envisioned by family and community. Furthermore, middle-class Anglo students generally have access to resources that make a variety of current and potential possible selves seem like realistic ambitions. An affluent suburban Anglo girl with parents in the professions will have a very different sense of her future than a Mexican girl whose whole family works in the fields in rural California and whose parents have a fourth-grade education. The latter girl may find that the assumptions of the educational system conflict with other aspects of her identity (within her family, peer group, and community) and other possible selves. The difference may not be in what the girls aspire to, but in the degree to which that self seems a plausible goal: while both girls may value and aspire to college, the *perceived possibility* of it will differ markedly for the two girls.

Latinas may find that family, community, school, and peer expectations are more discordant for them than for girls of Anglo, middle-class culture. Family expectations that children, especially daughters, stay relatively close to home during and after high school conflict somewhat with a prevailing trend in middle-class culture for successful students to go away to college for four years. Similarly, the expectation that women postpone motherhood or marriage while completing an education may conflict with family or cultural norms of earlier marriage or more extensive family loyalties and commitments than is typical in Anglo, middle-class culture.

Individuals do not form possible selves with perfect knowledge or absolute power. Moreover, identity is always contested terrain—particularly for minorities whose relationship to the dominant culture has been marked by racism and ethnocentrism. The construction of a self that reflects ethnic identity is a constant struggle, particularly in contexts that attempt to de-ethnicize or subtract students' identities—for example, in schools that devalue or diminish rather than build on and nurture their students' resources in the family or community (Valenzuela: 1999). A multitude of possible selves—from school girl to family member—may be fraught with confusion and conflict. Conversely, this multitude may provide a fluidity and flexibility that allow a young woman to maintain comfortable relationships in a variety of settings that would otherwise seem contradictory—what Chicana feminist scholar and activist Gloria Anzaldúa characterizes as a dual, “mestiza” consciousness (Anzaldúa: 1987).