

4-1-2008

A Closer Look at Latino Adult Immigrant Experiences and Their Educational Aspirations

Natasha Rosa
Trinity College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Rosa, Natasha, "A Closer Look at Latino Adult Immigrant Experiences and Their Educational Aspirations". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2008.
Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/141>

*A Closer Look at Latino Adult Immigrant Experiences and Their Educational
Aspirations*

Natasha Rosa

Ed 400 Senior Research Project

Educational Studies Program and Hispanic Studies

Trinity College

December 2007

Professor Dyrness

Introduction and Significance:

Issues of immigration are currently in the national spotlight due to the ICE raids which are occurring nationwide. Looking at the gradual but significant increase of immigrants in the United States it is important to note that since 1965 there have been formal admittance of 20 million immigrants (Trueba & Bartolomé, 2000, pg.17. One of most important demographic changes of this influx of immigrants is the tremendous growth of the Latino population in the United States. This large number of Latino immigrants with formal admittance however does not recognize immigrants who participate in “illegal” forms of entering the country, many of whom account for a large number of immigrants presently in the United States. The increase of immigrants has transformed the face of numerous communities across the nation and has slowly reshaped the identities of those who immigrated and those who were here.

Looking more closely on a local level, according to the 2006 Census, here in Hartford 20.8% of those living in this city are foreign born. Even more astonishing is that of those 20.8% foreign born Hartford residents approximately 66.6% of them are not United States Citizens (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2006). Another percentage that further demonstrates the large extent that immigration has affected Hartford is the fact that here in Hartford the percentage of households that speak a language other than English at home is 45.8%. In addition, it is important to note that of those 45.8% who speak a language other than English at home, 35.8% of them speak Spanish (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2006). Analyzed together, all in all these percentages definitely illustrate the real fact that schools here in Hartford now have to restructure themselves in

order to acknowledge this change. Whether or not schools are indeed dealing with the arousing immigration issues is in itself a very difficult question to answer.

Although the topic of immigrants and their aspirations towards education is one that has been greatly studied, I have found through the literature review that there has not been much research done pertaining to adult immigrants and their educational aspirations upon arriving to this country. However, it is very crucial to learn more about the thousands of adults who are coming to the United States, in this case Hartford, and try to understand how many of these immigration experiences can in fact affect the individual physically, emotionally, and psychologically. For it is many of these “non-citizen” immigrants who are continuing over-represented in low-income service sector jobs and are in many ways not expected to do otherwise.

For this reason, this research project does in deed speak volumes about what encourages many adult Latino immigrants to seek an education in a new place that can initially be somewhere very scary and foreign to them. By pursuing their education, this new wave of adult Latino immigrants can actually be able to seek out higher paying jobs, new careers, and can change the face of the workforce of the American society. In addition, by becoming educated here in the United States adult Latino immigrants can encourage and motivate their own children to also continue educating themselves and pursue higher achievements than they themselves did. In effect, having more well-informed adult Latino immigrants here in Hartford can potentially increase achievement rates of Latino immigrant children who don't seem to fare well in the United States education system.

Research Questions:

My research project looks at Latino adult immigrants who have come to Hartford as adults, how their immigration experiences have affected their aspirations for an education, as well as where do these Latino adult immigrants turn when seeking an education. Therefore my research questions ask: How does a Latino adult immigrant's immigration experience affect their educational aspirations in Hartford? And, where do Latino adult immigrants turn when seeking an education?

Thesis Statement:

My thesis statement argues that while many of the adult Latino immigrants in my study indeed faced obstacles upon their arrival to the United States, they all seemed to agree that they saw it necessary for their own and family survival to seek out some form of education. In fact, I found there was a wide range of educational needs that were communicated from my interviewees in order to ensure that survival. For example, they sought out ESL classes to strengthen their English skills, computer literacy classes at the public library, as well as nursing classes to become a home attendant.

Literature Review:

As I stated earlier, the topic of immigrants and their aspirations towards education is one that has been greatly studied. For this reason, I was able to find various studies that were conducted that looked to shed light on what educational aspirations Latino immigrants have while being in the United States, especially Latino immigrant youth. For instance, Portes et. al, (1978) sought out to examine what were factors were significant in determining what occupational, economic, and educational aspirations

Cuban and Mexican immigrants who recently arrived in the United States. The specific objective of this study was to examine the distribution of aspirations among recent Cuban and Mexican immigrants while taking into consideration the assimilation and status attainment processes they are affected by. The data for the study done by Portes et. al (1978), came from samples of immigrants interviewed at the point of arrival in the United States during the Fall of 1973 and Spring of 1974. In total, 822 Mexican immigrants and 590 Cuban émigrés were interviewed.

Essentially they found that for both Mexican and Cuban recent arriving immigrants their past attainment experiences was one of the major determinants of their aspirations in the United States. They also noted that their past education is a strong predictor of all three Cuban aspiration variables stated above and of Mexican occupational aspirations. An additional finding of this study was that past occupation also had substantial effects on occupational aspirations in both samples and past income is the major determinant of Mexican income aspirations. The findings of this study also noted that knowledge of English also has considerable effects on all Mexican aspirations and on educational aspirations in the Cuban sample.

Looking at this study, I am able to recognize how my study would be an update and current look at Latino immigrants and their educational aspirations to Portes et. al's (1978) study which was done thirty years ago. My research project goes further than this one which only looked at Mexican and Cuban immigrants because I was able to get perspectives from various Latino groups. My study is also explores another aspect to Latino adult immigrants by not only focusing on where particularly they are from, but

also considering closely the actual immigration experiences and if they have effects on their aspirations to continue their education.

Similar to this study Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (1995) looking at achievement motivations and attitudes Mexican youths had toward schooling. In their study Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) tried “to assess Latino achievement motivation independently of immigration and minority status by comparing Mexican youth in Mexico, immigrant youth, second-generation youth, and white American youth” (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995, Pg.155). Their specific research questions were: “How do the motivational dynamics and attitudes toward school of Mexicans in Mexico differ, if at all, from those of immigrant and second-generation students? And, how do they differ from those of white Americans? (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995, Pg.155).” Their findings noted that the “Mexican youths in Mexico and Mexican immigrants displayed much higher concerns with achievement than either white Americans or second-generation Mexican Americans (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995, Pg.181).” In fact, they stated that they were surprised to find an achievement motivation of white American youths that is even lower than that found in earlier studies.

One way that my research project is expanding on this study by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) is I will be focusing my analysis on Latino adult immigrants and their immigration experiences rather than immigrant youths. By immigration experiences, I am referring to three different experiences which my interview questions all touch upon. First, the experience the Latino adult immigrants had arriving to Hartford,

second the actual process of coming to America, and finally their experiences in their home country.

Vernez and Abrahamse (1996) entitled *How do Immigrants Fare in U.S. Education* conducted an equally revealing study pertaining to immigrants and their educational aspirations. Throughout the study they “compared the participation and performance of immigrant children and youths in the U.S. educational institutions to that of their native counterparts overall and within each of the four major racial groups: Asian, black, Hispanic, and white” (Vernez and Abrahamse, 1996, pg.13). They got their data from “High School and Beyond” (HSB), which is a “national representative sample of more than 21,000 10th graders and 12th graders that were first interviewed in 1980 and followed over a six-year period through their high school years, graduation, and post-secondary education in U.S. colleges” (Vernez and Abrahamse, 1996, pg.13). The authors found that the immigrant children and parents of all racial/ethnic groups studied have higher educational aspirations than their native counterparts. However, they also noted that these aspirations are three times greater between immigrants and natives of Hispanic origin than it is between immigrants and natives in other groups (Vernez and Abrahamse, 1996, pg.14).

This study definitely provided substantial evidence so a comparison could be made between racial/ethnic groups and by doing so illustrated the difference in educational aspirations amongst them. My study however provides special focus on the experiences of Latino immigrants who come as adults, a group who has not been sufficiently investigated.

Finally, a study by Noyma DebBurman (2005) is quite similar to the one I conducted explores educational attainments of adult immigrants while looking at variations by generation, age-at-immigration, and country of origin. In her study about educational attainment among adult immigrants she uses current population survey (CPS) data, specifically 1990 census data and analyzes educational achievements amongst foreign-born and native-born individuals in the United States. In this study they found that an average immigrant was 41 years old and has had 11.7 years of schooling, and has been in the United States for about 16 years. While on the other hand, although the average native was also 41 years old, they had a higher educational level (13.2 years of schooling) compared to the average immigrant. DebBurman (2005) also emphasizes that “an important point to note is the large percentage of Hispanics in the foreign-born sample,” which happened to be 40% of the foreign-born adults (DebBurman, 2005, pg.46).

Overall, DebBurman (2005) found that there indeed is a correlation between educational attainments and the age at which you immigrate. She states, “Immigration after 12 is associated with a lower educational level relative to natives, with those immigrating in the 13 to 19 age group exhibiting a particularly large negative differential with their native counterparts” (DebBurman, 2005, pg.77). In other words, the later in life you immigrate, the lower your educational attainments are when compared to other generational immigrants. Interestingly, another finding that is particularly relevant to my study is that being a black or Hispanic immigrant is associated with a lower educational attainment.

While DebBurman's (2005) study reveals to me several grounds by which adult immigrant educational attainments can be affected, for instance one's age, gender, marital status, and race, it however does not delve into how the actual process of immigrating can have repercussions on the individual. For this reason, my qualitative research project provides actual oral histories and real stories about the Latino adult immigration experience. My project also brings immigration incidences to an existent community who is in reality try to deal with the sudden influx of a new demographic group. The interviews that come from my study in fact give voices to those who probably would have never had the opportunity to tell their story and further illustrate how adult immigration is a real phenomenon affecting real people.

Methodology:

My methodology consisted of in-depth interviews with my participants which lasted between forty-five to sixty minutes. Because of the nature of the questions that were asked and the length of each interview, I consider my project to consist of life histories of each individual who participated. The interview guide was divided into three categories of questions (immigrant experiences, perceptions of U.S. school system, and educational programs) which would initially answer three research questions (see Appendix A attached below). However, after going through the data it was evident that the immigrant experiences and educational programs sections yielded in richer information which led me to use my participants' observations about the U.S. school system as evidence to further support two of my research questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and given a coded number to assure anonymity for my

interviewees when I returned to analyze them. Each participant signed an Informed Consent form and were allowed a moment before and after the interview to ask any questions for clarification.

After having several conversations with my interviewees before I conducted any interviews I was well aware of the fact that some felt a bit uncomfortable and intimidated about me being a fluent speaker in English. Because of this fact I made a point to offer the option of speaking in English or Spanish or both, whichever language made them feel more comfortable speaking. I was also familiar with the fact that when an individual has the opportunity to communicate in their first language they are able to say exactly how they feel without feeling judged or self-conscious about what they are saying. I also made a conscious decision to assure my interviewees that I was not concerned with their legal status here in the United States as a way to help them feel more comfortable with me and answering the questions. My decision to do so is primarily based on the fact that none of my research questions require me to ask whether or not they are “illegal,” thus making the answer to this question an unnecessary one. Furthermore, that it is difficult to have an individual answer my questions honestly and openly if they had feared that I could potentially report them to government officials.

I conducted eight interviews with eight Latinos who have come to Hartford as adults who have searched for educational opportunities. Originally, I planned to recruit my participants from community programs that provided educational opportunities to adult Latino immigrants, but due to time conflicts between their class times and my own academic obligations I relied primarily on word of mouth from the individuals I first interviewed. Essentially, I used snow-ball sampling to recruit my sample pool which was

not limited to adult Latino immigrants who have children. My reason for doing so was primarily because I felt it would be interesting to hear what all my participants had to say about the school system in the United States while at the same time trying to understand how they are arriving to these perceptions if they indeed do not have children or first hand experience. However, as my research questions changed, I used the data my interviewees were able to provide regarding their perceptions of the U.S. school system to support my finding that their children and families were major in deciding if the Latino adult immigrant pursued their education.

Findings:

Throughout the interviews I conducted I was frankly shocked at how many of the immigration experiences were traumatic and frightening moments, but their dispositions were in fact very optimistic. For instance, Maria¹ quietly tells me her feelings and decisions about the actual day she came to the United States.

“Sí, mi experiencia es algo que nunca voy olvidar. Vine en un baúl de un carro. Había casi cinco de nosotros en un solo carro y fue muy difícil de respirar. O sea, la manera en que llegue fue ilegal pero fue mi última opción. Soy una madre soltera con cuatros hijos. Allí en mi país, ya no iba poder mantenerlos. Entonces, deje todo en Uruguay² y empecé una nueva vida.”

(“Yes my experience is something that I will never forget. I came in the trunk of a car. There were almost five of us in one car which made it difficult for me to breath. Because of this they way I arrived here was illegal, but it was my last option. I am a single mother with four sons. Over there in my country, I was no longer going to be take care of them. So then I left everything in Uruguay and began a new life (Maria, Interview 5).”)

¹ All names have been changed to assure anonymity of the participant.

² All places have also been changed in order to assure anonymity of participants.

It is evident that leaving her home country was not something she wished to do. Maria however recognized that she had her own family she needed to support and was going to find the means to do so. She picked up her established life and took the chance of coming to the United States. Again, her family was the primary reason for immigrating and eventually for taking a night job as a school janitor while taking ESL classes with her sister who also immigrated.

“Pues, el trabajo que conseguí tomas la mayoría de mi energía. A veces llego tan cansada que no me puedo mover. Pero cuando mi hermana sugirió que tomamos clases de ingles pensé que era una buena idea. Se me hiciera más fácil para comunicarme con los nativos de aquí. Creo que nosotras pensábamos que quizás nos iba ayudar. Al final no fuimos cada día. La verdad fue que me sentía incomoda a la edad que tengo tratando de aprender el ingles.”

(“Well the job I now have takes the majority of my energy. At times I get home so tired I can barely move. But when my sister suggested we take an English class I thought it was a good idea. It would make it a lot easier to communicate with those who live here. I think we thought it would help us out. At the end we didn't go everyday. The truth was I felt uncomfortable trying to learn English at my age (Maria, Interview 5).”)

In the rest of her interview Maria continues describing to me that she felt the actual teachers weren't very helpful and welcoming to them as students. Here Maria is a great example of a Latino adult immigrant who came to Hartford as a means to survival, struggled through her ESL classes, but illustrated to me that she still wanted to take advantage of the job opportunities available to her here.

Another piece of evidence that supports my thesis was the life story of Cesar.³ Cesar came to the United States from Honduras⁴ with hopes of his children being educated here and eventually attending college. However, he also aspired to taking classes at a college himself. In an excited but very matter of fact manner he described his attempted educational experiences here in the United States.

“Lo que me gustaría es tomar clases en la universidad. Pero sabes que, se me hace muy difícil porque no tengo papeles de aquí. Además, no he aprendido suficiente inglés para tomar las clases, sí las clases que me ha enseñado mi hija todas están en inglés.”

(“What I would really like is to take classes at the college. But you know what it’s really hard for me to that because I don’t have my papers [citizenship] from here. Anyway, I haven’t learned enough English to take the classes. Yes the classes that my daughter has shown me all were taught in English (Cesar, Interview3).”)

What’s fascinating to me is that Cesar is actually striving to go to college although he knows he may not be “qualified” to do so. In fact, I find he is being prevented from continuing the form of education he desires. The structural systems of the college are impeding on his opportunities to receive an education and were in a sense actually deciding for him what he could aspire to achieve academically.

Another finding that is worthy of noting was the fact that as my interviewees continuously described the importance of educating themselves here in the U.S. to be able to give their family what they themselves did not receive, there was also a sense of gratitude for getting the opportunities to even pursue their educational aspirations. For

³ All names have been changed to assure anonymity of the participant.

⁴ All places have also been changed in order to assure anonymity of participants.

example, Luis⁵ a young man from Peru⁶ who is currently working two jobs during the week, learning English on his free time at home, and taking ESL classes on the weekend. Luis communicated to me the fact that he was a well-educated person in his home country and had a completely different social class standing here in the United States, but was still very grateful and happy for where he finds himself in his life.

“O sea, estoy muy agradecido por todo lo que tengo aquí. Estoy trabajando y ganando dinero para lo que necesito y ayudando a mi familia como puedo. No me gusta quejarme de mi situación porque entiendo que hay personas que están viviendo una vida mucho más peor que yo.”

(“I mean, I’m very grateful for everything I have here. I’m working and earning money for what is necessary and helping my family in any way that I can. I don’t like to complain about my situation because I understand that there are persons who are living a life much worse than me (Luis, Interview 2).”)

Luis later tells me that his inspirations many times come from his family. He laughs as he tells me how his younger cousins even try and help him on the weekend when he’s practicing his English.

“Me hace reír en pensar como mis primitos tratan de ayudarme con mis estudios. A veces ellos me lean algunos libros, y te digo eso me ayuda muchísimo. Ellos me dan la voluntad de seguir estudiando cuando a veces no quiero.”

(“It makes me laugh when I think how my little cousins try and help me with me studies. At times they read their books to me and I can tell you it helps me tremendously. They

⁵ All names have been changed to assure anonymity of the participant.

⁶ All places have also been changed in order to assure anonymity of participants.

give me the will to keep studying when at times I don't want to (Luis, Interview 2).”

Here, Luis’ comments show how the positive encouragement he receives from his family, even the youngest members, further demonstrate to him how important learning English is not only for him but for those around him. Although studying for Luis may be physically draining for him, he let me know that he always found someone he loved ready to remind him that if he’s capable of moving here, he can accomplish anything.

“Estoy muy orgulloso por todo lo que ha logrado hasta ahora. Yo tuve que trabajar para llegar donde estoy ahora. Después de esta experiencia me siento más fuerte y afortunado por mis éxitos. Estoy más seguro ahora como un hombre que si puedes apoyar a su familia en frente de las dificultades.”

(“I am very proud for everything that I have accomplished until now. I have had to work to get where I am now. And after this experience I feel stronger and fortunate for all my accomplishments. I am sure now of who I am as man who is indeed able to support their family when when faced with difficulties (Luis, Interview 2).”)

When I asked Luis how he would describe his immigration experience, he hesitated at first. He then goes on to tell me that it was probably one of the hardest things he had to do in his life. In truth, Luis told me that had it not been for the hardships he was forced to overcome he is now able to continuing looking for opportunities. He told me that when looking back he feels as if he’s invincible and can overcome any obstacles that could possibly come in his way.

Another story that truly amazed me was of Julia.⁷ Julia a tall, dark skinned Latino immigrant from Dominican Republic⁸ came to Hartford at the age of twenty-one. She was also a single mother of a three year-old boy came to Hartford because her husband lost his job in her home country and he no longer could provide their basic necessities.

“Yo lloré bastante al principio, pero ahora estoy acostumbrada con la vida aquí. Ahora yo puedo darle a mi hijo lo que él necesita para vivir y ahora con tome el control. La vida no es algo que podemos decidir por nosotros mismos lo que va a pasar, y por eso hay que seguir adelante cuando se pone difícil.”

(“I cried a lot in the beginning, but now I’m accustomed to the life here. Now I can give my son what he needs to live and now I took control. What happens in life is not something that we can decide on ourselves, but that’s why we have to keep going forward when it’s rough (Julia, Interview 7).”)

Although Julia’s story is very sad largely because she had to leave her entire family, she seems adjusted to her life here. When I asked Julia where she sought out her educational experiences, she responded the library. Surprisingly, Julia was one of the few interviewees who actually mentioned any public service that she understood to be helpful to her.

“La biblioteca me ayudo tanto ni lo puedo explicar. Ellos tienen maestros que hablan español y que están aquí para ayudar a nosotros aprender muchas veces lo que deseamos. Yo vengo aquí todos los miércoles y aprendo como usar la computadora y el Internet. O sea, lo he encontrado muy amables.”

⁷ All names have been changed to assure anonymity of the participant.

⁸ All places have also been changed in order to assure anonymity of participants.

(“The library has helped me so much I can’t even explain it. They have instructors here who speak Spanish who are here to help us many times learn about what we desire. I come here every Wednesday to learn how to use the computer and the internet. It’s to say, that I have found them here to be very helpful (Julia, Interview 7).”)

I found Julia to be very open to going to the educational programs that the Hartford libraries offered. The friendly and opened environment Julia described to me was what motivated her to continue going to their weekly technology classes. Her comments here further illustrated to me the necessity for a comfortable situation in order for the Latino adult immigrant to want to continue that particular program.

Conclusions:

It is hoped that this research project provides useful information regarding the implications that immigration has on adults and their aspirations to continue their education once they arrive to the United States. In all reality, the increase in immigration into the United States is occurring because there is a demand for their services in the workforce and until that demand lessens adult immigrants will continue to come. I think it is very important to address the needs of the community that is currently changing profoundly. For this reason, I hope that this research project will offer community groups, who provide educational opportunities to the immigrant community, insights as to reasons the adult population have the aspirations that they do. With these insights and understandings, community groups may then begin to structure their programs to meet the needs of the Latino adult immigrants who make use of their programs.

References

DeBurman, Noyna. Immigrant Education: Variations by generation, Age-to-Immigration, and Country of Origin. (2005) LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.

Goldenberg, Claude.; Ronald Gallimore; Leslie Reese; Helen Garnier. (Autumn, 2001) "Cause or Effect? A Longitudinal Study of Immigrant Latino Parents' Aspirations and Expectations, and Their Children's School Performance." *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 3., pp. 547-582.

Portes, Alejandro; Samuel A. McLeod, Jr.; Robert N. Parker. "Immigrant Aspirations." (Oct, 1978). *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 241-260.

Suárez-Orozco, Carola. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco. Transformations: Immigration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivations Among Latino Adolescents. (1995). Stanford University Press: Stanford, California.

Trueba, Enrique (Henry) and Lilia I. Bartolomé. *Immigrant Voices: In Search of Educational Equity*. (2000). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2006. Geographic area: Hartford city, Connecticut. Retrieved: September 24, 2007. <<www.census.gov.>>

Vernez, Georges; Allan Abrahamse. (1996). "How Immigrants fare in U.S. Education." RAND, Santa Monica, CA, Center for Research on Immigration Policy, pp.2-96.

Appendix A

Interview Guide for Adult Immigration Experiences

Immigration Experience

1. When did you come to the United States (Hartford)?
2. What were the reasons that you came to this country?
3. What country did you come from?
4. What was your profession in your home country?
[If unclear: what did you do for work?]
5. What do you do for work here in the U.S.?
[After answer: Do you plan to stay in this job or would you prefer another?]
6. How would you describe your overall experience of immigration to the U.S.?
7. Did you have family or friends here in the U.S. before you came?
8. Was there any place or person that helped you feel more welcomed or comfortable here in the U.S.?
If so, who or what was it? Did it make it easier for you to get accustomed here in the U.S.?
9. Once you arrived, what was the hardest part of coming to this new place?
10. Do you feel completely comfortable after being in the United States for the amount of time you have been here?
11. When you were in your back in your country how did you imagine your life here?
[After answer: How does it compare to what you're actually living now?]

Perceptions of US School System

1. Do you have children who are in school?
[If no] Well if you had children, would you send them to the Hartford public schools? Why or why not?
[If yes] What is your opinion of the public school system your child is in?
Is it in Hartford?
2. What have you heard about the schools?
3. How would you describe the school system back in your home country?

Educational Programs (Home country/US)

1. What was the highest level of education that you received back in your home country?
2. Have you sought out any educational experiences here in the United States?
[If unclear: For example ESL classes?
[If no: why not?]
[If yes ask each prompt one at a time: How did you find out about these classes? What was it like? How were the teachers? How were the classes formatted?]
3. After seeking those educational programs how would you describe your overall experience?
[After answer: Do you feel like you received the services that you were looking for?]
4. What made you want to pursue these educational opportunities?

5. Once you arrived, did you try going to any community programs to receive any services or to learn more about them?

Final Comments

1. Where would you like to see yourself in five years?