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Achievement and Experiences of First and Second-Generation Students in a Rural

South Texas High School

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Abstract

Hispanic immigrant students face several challenges to academic success. The purpose of this sequential explanatory research was to identify academic differences that existed between first and second generation Hispanic immigrant students on the 10th grade Geometry End of Course scores in a public, rural high school in south Texas and to focus on the students' experiences in school. While no significant differences were found quantitatively, the qualitative analysis found that the participants had not encountered major obstacles as depicted in the review of the literature. Rather they utilized a resilient social network to counter obstacles and have positive school experiences.

Keywords: Hispanic; immigrant students, Latino students, socioeconomic status, rural education

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Introduction

Immigrants enter into the United States facing a variety of obstacles such as acquiring a second language, living in poverty, assimilating into a different culture, and the separation of family due to migration or deportation. Each of these variables in conjunction with immigrants' "non-White" label (Cline & Necochea, 2010; Lee, 2007) are challenges for academic success. When educators view students' deficiencies as resources, immigrant students do not struggle to learn English. Immigrant students' proficiency will depend upon the effective implementation of the bilingual program and the English language can serve as a fundamental foundation for academic success (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Schools can ease the English acquiring process by perceiving and using students' native language as a resource (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

English learning difficulties can be reduced when students' native languages are incorporated into the learning process through the support of a bilingual program that allows immigrant students to maintain and grow their native language for social interactions and academics. Goldenberg (2006) indicated that students transfer information and concepts into other languages when native language is used for instruction.

Family separation is a common characteristic of immigrant life often taking place when parents of immigrant children arrive in the U.S. illegally. Additionally, family separation may also occur when children are sent to live with relatives in the U.S., while parents remain in their country of origin or as parents migrate in search of employment. In one study, Mexican children between the ages of 9-14 who were separated from their mothers averaged a separation time of less than two years (Suarez-Orozco, Bang, & Kim, 2010). Dreby (2007) concluded that fathers are more likely to interact less with the family and be

more absent since they spend most of their days working outside of the home, while the mother generally stays at home. Therefore, children were more likely to adapt to the father's absence; however, due to a deeper maternal attachment, students were less likely to adapt to separation from their mothers (Dreby, 2007).

Students with a low socioeconomic status (SES), like many immigrant students, may be perceived differently by teachers, which will have an effect on the teacher-student relationship (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009). Maele and Houtte (2011) found that teachers have lower expectations for low SES students than they do for students with high SES students. Hallinan (2008) indicated that students feel they do not have the potential to succeed when teachers have low expectations for them. The author also concluded that students would either strive to prove the teacher wrong or continue feeling incompetent. Teachers play a significant role in creating teacher-student relationships that impact overall achievement in positive ways. In other words, student learning can be impacted by their SES.

Purpose

Despite the Hispanic population continuing to increase in numbers, their academic achievements have declined. The emphasis of this study is to identify the academic differences of Hispanic immigrant generations on the 10th grade Geometry State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) End of Course (EOC) scores in a public, rural high school in south Texas. This study also identifies obstacles and positive opportunities encountered by Hispanic immigrant students and their impacts. The study benefits educators by identifying variables that can improve Hispanic immigrant student performance.

Conceptual Framework

A review of literature identified a number of factors that have an effect on Hispanic immigrants' educational attainment. Among these barriers were those relating to language, family separation, and socioeconomic status (Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn 2009;

Zhuge, 2012; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2011). Research has shown that Hispanic students do perform lower when compared to other ethnic groups (Adams, Robelen, & Shah, 2012; Reardon & Gallindo, 2009; Greenberg, 2012). Few studies were found on first generation and second-generation Hispanic students' academic achievement and school experiences. This research sought to identify if a significant academic difference exists between first generation and second-generation Hispanic immigrant students in a rural south Texas high school.

This study also documented first and second-generation Hispanic students' high school experiences. Academic data was retrieved from 10th grade STAAR EOC scores, and experiences were documented through a series of student interviews. Efforts to foster an increase in academic support must be guided by both the quantitative and qualitative data of this study. Data focusing on student achievement and school experiences was collected and analysed to examine differences between the two generations.

Methods and Procedures

This research of first generation and second-generation Hispanic immigrant students in a rural south Texas high school utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodology. The quantitative portion of the research sought to find if academic differences existed between first and second-generation, Hispanic immigrant students. The qualitative part of the study researched the students' experiences while attending school.

Quantitative

Data for this study was collected from one rural south Texas high school located along the U.S./Mexican border. This study focused on 11th grade, which had a total of 408 students. A survey identifying generational status was emailed to students who were granted parent consent to participate. Scaled scores from the 2012-2013 STAAR EOC Geometry exams and students' identification numbers for those who completed the online survey were

received. The student identification number was used to match the geometry exam with generational status. Student identification numbers were replaced with random numbers to ensure confidentiality.

The total data collected from the quantitative section of this study included a total sample of 47 students (*N*=47) enrolled in 11th grade from one south Texas high school. First generation and second-generation are independent variables. In total, there were 17 first generation students who compromised 36% of the population and 30 second-generation students who comprised 63.8% of the population.

Qualitative

The qualitative data collection procedure involved open-ended, semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants who self-identified as first generation Hispanic or second-generation Hispanics on the quantitative survey. The researcher made contact with five participants who opted on the survey to participate in an interview. All interviews were conducted in an administrator's office located next to the school's main office. The purpose of the interviews was for Hispanic immigrant students to describe their school experiences. Each interview lasted no more than 45 minutes. A total of five interviews consisting of two males and three females were conducted. The interview participants were purposively selected based on meeting the criteria based on generation status, gender, and performance level. The interviews were recorded on audio and transcribed verbatim.

Results

Quantitative

The dependent variable was a scale score of the standardized STAAR Geometry exam. First generation students had a mean on the Geometry exam of 4276.89 and a standard deviation of 354.79. The mean for second-generation on the Geometry exam was 4418.87 with a standard deviation of 376 (Figure 2). A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to

evaluate the relationship between generation statuses on academic achievement. The independent variable, generation status, included two generations: first generation and second generation. The dependent variable was the state exam Geometry scores. Although second-generation Hispanic immigrant students scored slightly higher (M=4418.87, SD=376) than their first generation peers (M=4276.89 , SD=354.79), the ANOVA was not significant: $F(1,45)=1.61$, , $p=.2$, $p\eta^2 =.035$, a small to medium effect size. There were no significant differences between generation statuses on the Geometry EOC.

Figure 1. Scaled scores for First and Second generation Hispanic students in Geometry
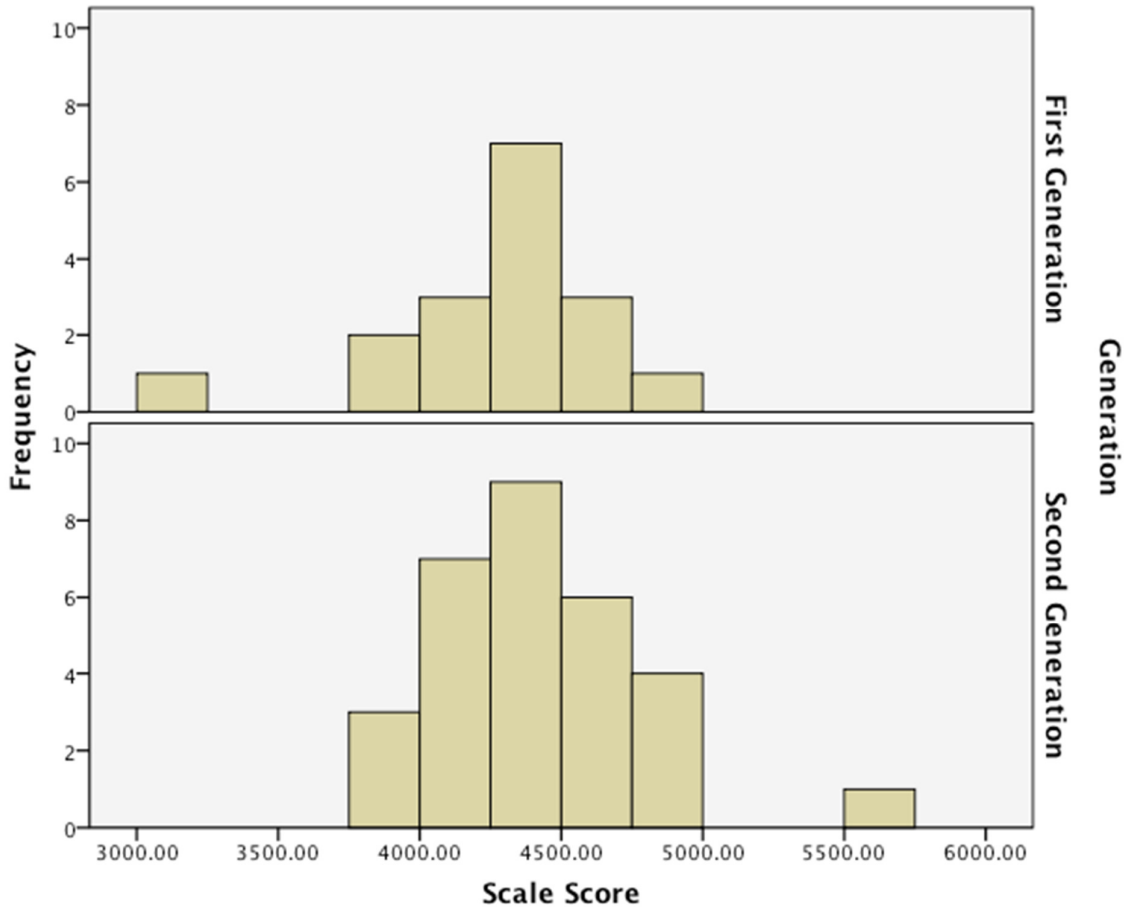
Qualitative

Participant profiles

The following paragraphs provide a background for each participant in order to better understand the information provided during the interviews. Pseudonyms were used for each participant for confidentiality purposes.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a second-generation Hispanic immigrant student. She enjoys being actively involved in extracurricular activities and has had great school experience. Elizabeth constantly strives to be at the top of her class and plans to attend college upon graduating from high school. She demonstrates pride both of her accomplishments.

Joana. Joana is a first-generation Hispanic student. She is proud of being a student who has never had any discipline issues with neither classmates nor teachers. She also takes pride for having good grades, being responsible, and has always liked school. Joana plans to attend college after high school.

Karla. Karla is also a second-generation Hispanic immigrant student. She is positive about her school experiences. Karla demonstrated enthusiasm about sharing her school experiences. Even though she encountered some challenges while in school, her determination and other factors helped her be a top student in her class. Karla wants to attend dental school after graduating.

Marc. Marc is a second-generation Hispanic student who. Marc is strongly focused on his grades and is always striving to have a high rank within his class. Marc answers were straight to the point accompanied by a well-expressed vocabulary. He works hard in school since that is a quality his mother has modeled. Marc plans to attend college.

*Carlos.*Carlos is a second-generation Hispanic student. He participates in several extracurricular activities and maintains high grades. Carlos is determined to attend college and become a physician's assistant.

Table 1. Research Participants

Interview #	Participant	Generation	Performance
1	Elizabeth	Second	Level II
2	Joana	First	Level III
3	Karla	First	Level II
4	Marc	Second	Level II
5	Carlos	Second	Level III

Qualitative Results

After coding and analyzing the collected data, a strong culture of help was identified for both first generation and second-generation Hispanic immigrant students that served students as support for positive experiences and educational success. These common themes included various support systems: (a) families providing support (b) guidance teachers offering academic assistance while providing moral support (c) classmates helping each other. Participants did not mention major obstacles that significantly impeded their learning. Figure 2. A graphic display of the various support systems that emerged from students' school experiences.
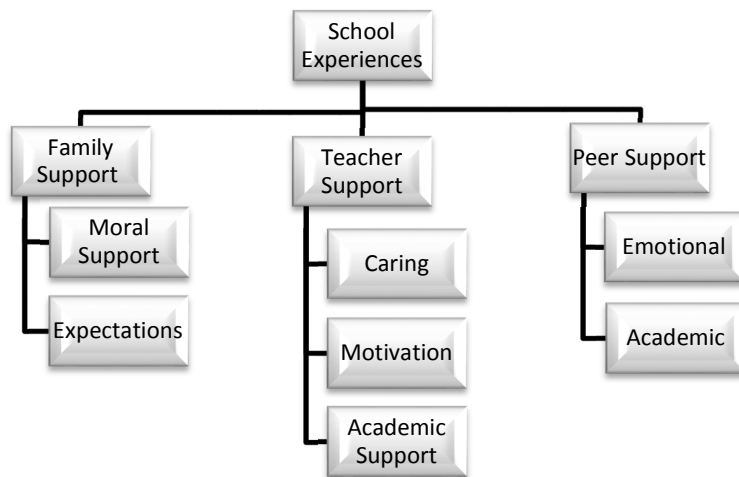
Family support. All participants at one point of the interview mentioned several instances of family being supportive. Family to respondents consisted of parents, siblings, and relatives. Participants' families were morally supportive and set expectations.

Moral support. Participants often relied on a family member for moral support. Elizabeth expressed that in one incident she became overly stressed about a grade she had received. Elizabeth's mother indicated that the current high stress levels would make her stronger to withstand the stress from college. Elizabeth later mentioned how the Hispanic culture impacts the support she receives from her family by saying:

> *I think it is the family like I think more attached I guess. Well, my family is attached and they help me a lot. They communicate with me. They tell me what is right, what it wrong. They care for me and I feel I can do more things when I have support with me.*

Motivation. Joana stated that her older sister who attends college motivates her by constantly providing advice based on what she has learned through her experiences.

> *She cares a lot about school. She knows it is hard and motivates me. She always tells me if you want a high paying job, it is not going to be easy. If you want to be recognized, it is not going to be easy. If you want to have a doctorate, it is not going to be easy, but it will reward at the end.*

Karla's parents were supportive by being proud of her and the accomplishments she achieved. In return, her parents' pride served as a motivation to continue doing well in school:

> *And my mom is really proud of me because she knows I want to succeed. And she knows I really want to go to med school and like have my doctorate in dental school and like she knows I mean she is really proud of all the goals I have for myself. . .My dad is like he has always been proud of me.*

Marc describes how his mother and brother motivate and inspire him:

Well of course, my family has always motivated me to continue my education and always do my best in it. Definitely a big inspiration would be my brother. He is always been good in school, so I always look up to him.

Expectations. Elizabeth's mother does not hold a college degree but expects her daughter to go to college.

Well she expects for me to go to college. That even if I don't get a scholarship, that [I] will still be going to college. That I should not be worried about money.

The expectations from Joana's parents differed from the rest of the participants. While her parents were interested in her school performance and attending college, they were more lax about it. Joana stated the reason by saying:

They don't tell me, oh my God you have to do your doctorate in whatever you do. They know that I care and like they know I will go to college. They just are always there for me when I don't know. Like I'm not really sure what I want to be. I'm still undecided.

Marc's parents and older brother expected him to do well in school and frequently conversed with him about school. Marc mentioned the following about his mother inquiring about school:

Yes, everyday. Everyday I come from school, my mom asks me how was school or anything bad or good happen. My mom really worries a lot about school.

His older brother too had expectations; Marc said:

Well I know my brother definitely expects for me to go to college and graduate from college as well. I know my brother does expect that.

Similar to Marc, Carlos' parents also frequently inquired about his academic progress. Carlos' parents were interested in his education because they cared and want to see him succeed. Carlos noted:

> *My parents encourage me to do my best. They always tell me how did you do today?*
>
> *How did you do on your test?*

In references to why his parents had expectations to do well in school, Carlos said:

> *Because they want me to have a great life ahead of me, a great future. They do not*
>
> *want for me to always be stressed with payments and bills. They want me to have a*
>
> *worry free life as much as I possibly can.*

Teacher support. All participants describe how their teachers were willing to assist them with their assignments both during and after school hours. Teachers frequently provided moral support to the participants. At times when a participant experienced a challenge with schoolwork, the teachers intervened with motivational words. Strong teacher-student relationships existed in order for students to receive such support.

Caring. Elizabeth discussed positive experiences with a teacher who supported her when she was struggling with a class:

> *Yeah, she is not my mom but she like has helped me a lot with problems I have faced.*

Like Elizabeth, Joana got along well with her teacher and knew she could rely on her teachers for any kind of assistance. When questioned about the experiences she has had with teachers, Joana shared:

> *I have always gotten along with them like and I have never gotten in a fight with*
>
> *anyone or answered back and something like that. They have always treated me good.*

Motivation. Karla's experiences with teachers were positive because they provided motivation. In regards to teachers providing motivation, she said:

> *Yeah well all the teachers that I have had been really nice to me and mostly because*
>
> *they see that I am really determined. I am really determined in my studies and they*
>
> *see and they always give me positive compliments. They have always told me that*
>
> *don't let anything [keep] you from succeeding, you know.. .Yeah but like by not letting*

you down. I mean that by if you get a bad grade and everything and they just keep

pushing you so you can like get a better grade.

Academic support. When asked what makes a good teacher, Marc explained:

Because they help me a lot. Another example would be Mrs. V uh…uh, she also

graduated from UTPA and she has been helping a lot, she has been helping a lot with

my chemistry.

When confronted with an academic challenge, Joana knew she could rely on teachers after

school to provide extra assistance. She said:

I will like if it is educationally like if it is a subject I will stay after school if I need

help in something with my teachers or I will try to Google it if I ever have anything.

After the researcher asked if her teachers were willing to stay after school to provide help,

Joana answered:

Yes, they really do.

Peer support. Respondents had a strong unity with their classmates in which theyand

helped each other with class assignments. Participants even formed study groups after school

hours to prepare for an exam. Chapin and Yank (2009) state that peer social support serves as

a rationale for minority students to overcome their obstacles. Students in this study were able

to associate with peers and seek help with each other.

Emotional. Elizabeth compared her close-knit family culture to that of her classmates:

Well in school we are like that, you can see others who are Hispanic help each other

out. We are not always competing, they care for one another so that really helps me

too. When I feel like not good enough they tell you no it is okay. They make it better.

Joana stated:

Well like whenever I have a problem I know they will be with me.

Academic. Elizabeth referred to her classmate experiences by saying:

> *. . . my positive experiences with classmates um well just being able to work with them*
>
> *when we get together like team work and stuff like that when we get into groups be*
>
> *social and it really does help you interact with people.*

Elizabeth provided an example on how they help each other:

> *Like yesterday, I had a test. We were reviewing me and a friend and we could call and*
>
> *text each other and stuff like that.*

Similar to Elizabeth, Joana counted on her classmates when she needed help with her class
work:

> *Or I like if I need something like help in a subject or something, I will just ask the*
>
> *smart students and they will help me.*

The researcher asked why they help each other so much with school assignments. Elizabeth
responded by saying:

> *It is just like because we want to see each other succeed you know like it is something*
>
> *we see in each other that we want to study and we all see determination in each other*
>
> *so that is why we help each other. Like if you can't do something, I will help you and*
>
> *then if like I can't figure out something, you can help me. It is just like a team.*

During the interviews, participants informed the researcher how teachers, family, and
classmates served as support to help them overcome obstacles. One participant described a
challenge that occurred while in middle school; others often told her that she could not
succeed because she was Hispanic. Nevertheless, the moral support from her teachers and
family members kept her focused. It could be concluded that participants benefited from
living in a Hispanic rural community where a culture exists that makes students feel accepted.
All participants voiced determination to be in the top ten of their class. This goal did not stop
them from assisting their peers or gaining knowledge or assistance from them. According to
the participants, their peers were always willing to share knowledge and provide assistance to

one another. The students' school experiences were positive, and academic performance was high.

Scholarly Significance

Even though the second generation scored somewhat higher in the EOC Geometry exam, the results of the analysis indicated no significant difference between first and second-generations. Quantitative data also indicated most students were performing academically well. The findings of this study did not indicate barriers encountered by immigrant students as mentioned in the review of literature. However, some of the findings on resiliency are consistent with the literature that indicates Hispanic immigrant students use a variety of resilient social networks to handle obstacles (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It appears that immigrant students have positive school experiences due to social networks that serve as support systems. Based on the results of the study, the participants relied on a strong safety net composed of family, teachers, and classmates that kept them on the road to success. Support consistently existed both at home and at school. The findings of this study could assist educators and school leaders to better understand and make use of the valuable support resources provided to first and second-generation Hispanic students enrolled in a rural high school.

Based on the study's conclusions, future research should interview a more diverse student population for each generation that includes more students performing at an Unsatisfactory Level in order to investigate whether low-performing Hispanic immigrants also have a supportive network. Hispanic immigrants' academic achievement and school experiences across multiple grade levels needs to be researched. A further study on the impact and benefits of immigrant students' resources and the impact of these resources on learning needs to be completed.

It would be noteworthy to shift the focus to identifying strategies that mimic the functions of these support systems. As research on Hispanic immigrants continues to grow, a better understanding of academic differences among generations and the role of support systems for the different generations is needed to become aware of how to positively impact their academic achievement.

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