Resiliency and Success
Migrant Children in the U.S.

Encarnación Garza
Pedro Reyes
Enrique T. Trueba
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MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES
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Preface

Awareness is meaningless unless it inspires and is followed by change. This study was about a long-ignored and yet well-researched group of people. The image of this group has been constructed in a way that locks them in a perpetuating cycle of failure. Consequently, many educators are convinced that the children of farm workers (the “ghost workers”) will never be able to fly to high-achieving positions. Sadly, many of these students are led to believe that they are intrinsically inferior, or that it is their fate to follow the path of hopelessness that has been imposed on them for generations.

The attrition rates among the migrant student population have been phenomenal, and we know enough about the factors that contribute to this failure. Educational practitioners have been exposed sufficiently to this type of research. It is here precisely where the problem rests. The subliminal messages about the alleged inability of Hispanic children to succeed in schools are abundant and frequent. However, in spite of these predominant messages, there are many stories of success that have not been told.

With this in mind, the main purpose of this study was to elucidate the amazingly successful life journeys of academically invulnerable migrant students. One of the goals of this study was to invite readers, educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to transition from a primary phase of awareness to a more advanced phase of transformation and commitment to change. It is critical to use this awareness and sensitivity in a way that generates significant changes in attitude and behavior. We
want to raise the expectations of educators about the talents, capabilities, and competence of migrant students.

Who are these children? In many cases these students have been referred to as the “invisible children,” or the children of “ghost workers.” Being invisible is not the worst of circumstances because it at least implies that they exist, even if they cannot be seen. However, in other instances, they are not even acknowledged. They are treated as if they do not exist at all. This mystery child is known as the “migrant student.” There is a misconception that because of technological advances in agriculture, migrant farm workers are being displaced. Educators need to accept that this special population is increasingly growing in numbers. These students have long been in our schools and will continue to be there for a long time.

The literature is rich with accounts about the plight and demise of the Hispanic migrant student. Many studies have been conducted to explain why so many Hispanic students are failing in schools. Their poor achievement record has been consistently linked to a variety of sociocultural factors that compel Mexican American students to academic failure. The assumption of these findings is that the Hispanic child does not have the necessary competencies, values, and personal characteristics to succeed in America’s schools.

Though Hispanics long preceded the present dominant group, they have remained foreign in their communities and invisible in their schools. Historically, they have not been expected to become participating members of the American way of life (Carter & Segura, 1979). The following quote illustrates similar views from a teacher in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1960s:

They are a good people. Their only handicap is the bag full of superstitions and silly notions they inherited from México. When they get rid of these superstitions they will be good Americans. The schools help more than anything else. In time, the Latinos will think and act like Americans. A lot depends on whether we can get them to switch from Spanish to English. When they speak Spanish they think Mexican. When the day comes that they speak English at home like the rest of us they will be part of the American way of life. I just don’t understand why they are so insistent on using Spanish. They should realize that it’s not the American tongue. These children may seem backward at first but it’s not their fault. They just don’t understand
what is being said in class. They are bright but they don’t speak our language. (Madsen, 1966, p. 106)

By focusing on the reasons for failure of Hispanic students in a system designed for mainstream white upper- and middle-class children, these types of studies have failed to generate effective long-term solutions. These students have been placed in demeaning and stigmatizing remedial pullout programs that have served to perpetuate negative teacher attitudes and low expectations about Hispanic students.

Not much emphasis has been given to Hispanic students who have overcome the obstacles and barriers impeding success. Little is known about the Hispanic student who is academically invulnerable (Alva & Padilla, 1995). If little is known about the successful Hispanic student, much less is known about academically successful Hispanic migrant children in U.S. schools. To address this problem, we have undertaken this project to probe into the lives of academically invulnerable Hispanic migrant students.

**Why Is This Study Significant?**

We have approached the study of migrant students from an ethnographic perspective, using qualitative approaches that require fine-tuned analysis of ethno-historical and interview data. We feel that this approach is essential to understand modern American society and its schools. We must first understand immigrant families and their children, who constitute the greatest portion of new students in the largest cities of this country. We cannot begin to plan appropriate pedagogical approaches for migrant students until we realize that (a) they are here to stay, (b) we know very little about them, and (c) their home language and culture are being discarded by schools, and educators are losing the most powerful means to reach these students. According to Alva and Padilla (1995), most of the current research of Hispanic students has focused on how sociocultural factors contribute to their failure in school. These studies have helped to develop and to justify acceptance of the dangerous and damaging deficit model. In educational circles, this model is often referred to as the culturally different paradigm. It is accepted by many teachers and condoned by many school administrators as a way to explain why minority students fail to perform according to standards.
Many educators assume that the failure of Hispanic students in school and their subsequent poverty can be naturally attributed to their racial or cultural inferiority. Much of the literature has focused on the alleged deficiencies of the Hispanic child, fostering attitudes of racial prejudice (Carter & Segura, 1979). Teachers have been reading such literature for a long time. For example, Gamio (1930/1971) wrote, “The mental capacity of the Mexican child is probably normal, although some investigators conclude that he is mentally inferior to an American child of the same age” (p. 72). In another study conducted by Taylor (1934), a teacher commented, “Some Mexicans are very bright, but you can’t compare their brightest with the average white children. They are an inferior race” (p. 202). In dealing with culturally different students, schools historically have either ignored them or have imposed upon them a curriculum designed to eradicate their identities and “Americanize” them.

There are several implications inherent in this paradigm. The most obvious one is that accepting cultural difference as an excuse for failure implies that children who are culturally different are inherently less competent, less intelligent, less capable, and less motivated than the children of the more affluent, dominant culture. It suggests that unless they change their culture, values, and physical appearance, they have little or no chance to be successful in school. Teachers who accept this paradigm are also saying that nothing is wrong with their pedagogy, teaching practices, methodologies, or with the school system. Therefore, they will continue to operate the same way and students must learn to adapt to the programs available to them or fail. According to this approach, the solution for improvement is beyond the teachers’ and school system’s realm of influence and power.

Alva and Padilla (1995) suggested that there is a dire need for “multivariate paradigms” to guide educational research dealing with Mexican American students. This study examined how sociocultural, personal, and environmental factors interact to influence the academic performance of the successful migrant students. It will potentially provide educators and policy makers with important information about the coping resources related to success rather than the risk factors associated with failure. Finally, we must draw important theoretical and methodological lessons from this study of the unexpected success of the children of “ghost workers.”
The lives and education of migrant farm worker children, their parents and their families has always been a topic of intense passion in our lives. Given the pervasiveness of the deficit thinking in educational settings, migrant children are confronted with a phenomenal challenge to overcome the low expectations bestowed upon them by teachers and the educational system in general. This book defies and debunks the myth that migrant children are doomed to failure because of their lifestyle. This study illustrates poignantly how migrant students who succeed in school “beat the system” because of their migrant lifestyle—not in spite of it.

I want to express special thanks to my mother, Consuelo Garcia Garza, and my father, the late Encarnación Garza. Madre, muchas gracias por su apoyo y amor. Todo se lo debo a usted y a mi padre. Siempre fué un sacrificio para ustedes pero nunca dejaron de apoyarnos. Su ilusión siempre me dió gran esperanza. Desde el primer día que me mandó a la escuela, hasta esta fecha, su gran orgullo ha sido una inspiración. Muchas gracias. My parents could not help me with my schoolwork, and I depended on my older brother, Jaime and sister, Oralia. I thank them dearly. As a family, we worked together to survive. Thank you Magdalena, Juan, and Jorge. Special thanks to my wife, Rebecca, for her support and input as she read and edited my work every step along the way to the final draft. Finally, special thanks to the most important people in my life, my daughters Alissa and Alejandra, and my granddaughter, Anayi. I dedicate this book
to the memory of my daughter, Alejandra “Landi” Garza. She is forever in my heart and continues to be my inspiration.

Encarnación Garza

I would like to thank my wife, Gloria C. Reyes, for all the understanding and love she demonstrated as we worked on this book. I also want to thank my children, Pedro Jr., Damian, Jaine, Yulissa, and Yessenia Reyes. They have been a source of inspiration for me.

Pedro Reyes

I would like to thank all the families who participated in this study. They are a source of pride and inspiration to all of us. Thank you to Encarnación and Pedro for working together on this incredible project.

Enrique Trueba
THE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE AND RESILIENCY OF MEXICAN FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES

OVER THE LAST DECADE, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE United States has been that of immigration. Thousand of immigrants have settled in the U.S. and have brought in their families or developed new families. According to scholars,

immigration is the driving force behind a significant transformation of American society. In 1945, just fifty years ago, the U.S. population was 87% White, 10% Black and 2.5% Hispanic and .5% Asian. In the year 2050, the projection of the demographics of the U.S. will be 52.8% White, 13.6% Black, 24.5% Hispanic, 8.2% Asian. (Suárez-Orozco, 1998a, b, p. 6)

The impact caused by immigrant populations in our society and schools begins to be understood. Immigration has emerged as an important topic of global concern. Since 1965, the United States has formally admitted over twenty million new immigrants. The vast majority of new immigrants to the United States are non-English speaking people of color coming from the Afro-Caribbean basin, Asia, and Latin America. Moreover, new research has suggested that there are 2–4 million “undocumented” immigrants living in the United States; an estimated 200,000–400,000 undocumented immigrants enter the United States every year. Thus, immigrant children are the fastest growing sector of the U.S. child population.
This tremendous growth has significant implications for schools and society. Thus, this chapter explores in detail the issues and challenges associated with immigrants in the United States. Specifically, we analyze the context of migration to the United States. We review some of the challenges they face, and speculate on the factors that define the experiences of immigrants and how they survive in a world that is foreign to them. Finally, we explain why a significant number of immigrants succeed in spite of the obstacles they face in the United States. We focus primarily on immigrants of Mexican descent.

The Context of Mexican Immigration

The problems faced by Mexicans in what is today the United States did not start with the tens of thousands who came to do unskilled labor in the late 1800s. Certainly, many Mexicans were living in the Southwest prior to the annexation of Mexican territory by the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty of 1848, but many more have come since. The economic opportunities of North America have attracted Mexicans in search of employment in increasing numbers since the beginning of the 20th century. The U.S. Census of 1900 estimated that there were 103,393 Mexican immigrants. By 1910, there were 221,915; by 1920, 486,418, and by December 31, 1926, the official count was 890,746 (Gamio, 1930/1971).

Scholars have emphasized the significance of Mexican immigration in the entire immigration patterns of the last three decades. The rising numbers of legal and unauthorized immigrants and political refugees represent a pattern that is changing the texture of American democracy, the ethnic and racial composition of U.S. cities, and popular culture. The Mexican-origin population has grown at a steady and fast pace since 1980. Part of this growth is understandable because of the higher fertility rates of Mexicans (35–40% higher than those of Anglos) and the total number of children in Mexican families. Without immigration, in 1990 the total Mexican-origin population (the sum of the Mexican-born population and U.S. natives of Mexican parentage) would have been about 14% of its current size. This increase is clearly the primary result of immigration (González Baker, Bean, Escobar Latapí & Weintraub, 1998). The steady stream of immigrants from Mexico, along with other Latino immigrants, has become the single largest continental proportion (nearly 38%) of legal immigrants and an estimated 80% of undocumented immigrants.
All factors indicate that this flow of Mexican immigrants will continue at a rapid pace. Foreign-born persons of Mexican origin in 1980 constituted 15% of all legal immigrants; in 1990, 20.7%; in 1994–1995, 28.4%. The increase of the Mexican population in the United States between 1960 and 1996 is as follows: 1960, 1.7 million (1% of the total U.S. population); 1970, 4.5 million (2.2%); 1980, 8.7 million (3.9%); 1990, 13.3 million (5.4%); 1995, 17 million (6.6%); and 1996, 18 million (6.7%).

It is significant that the 6.8 million Mexicans born in Mexico and living in the United States constitute 38.2% of the total Mexican population and 25.8% of all the foreign born persons. Furthermore, between 1980 and 1996, 1.8 million became naturalized citizens (González Baker et al., 1998). In 1996, 12.4% of the total Mexican population in the U.S. was foreign born, and in 1996 alone 851,803 persons from Mexico became naturalized citizens of the United States. The number of estimated undocumented Mexicans in the United States in 1995 was 2.1 million (González Baker et al.).

Sixty percent of Mexican immigrants live in California. As has been recognized, a person’s educational level seems to predict economic level and employment. The highest rates of poverty are found among the populations with the least education—Mexicans, Salvadorians, Guatemalans, and Dominicans. New immigrant children face many difficult problems in their adaptation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). What has prompted this immigration to the United States?

At least three important economic factors influence immigration. According to Enrique Dussel Peters (2000), Mexico’s principal strategy to improve its economy has been control of the inflation rate and the fiscal deficit, as well as import liberalization and the attraction of foreign investments. Accordingly, these changes are supposed to stimulate incentives for economic restructuring. Second, the Banco de México pursued orthodox and restrictive monetary and credit policies to achieve the main objectives of the strategy. The nominal exchange rate was used as an anchor to control inflation, which resulted in a depreciation of the exchange rate. Third, México approved the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement on January 1, 1994. Accordingly, this strategy brought inflation and the fiscal deficit under control until 1994, and the country attracted massive foreign investment. However, the economy has not been able to integrate its growing population into formal employment. In fact, the Mexican economy not only has failed to integrate
the growing economically active population but also has massively expelled labor power from several activities. Dussel Peters (2000) indicated that “employment growth [during 1988–1994] has been far below the levels achieved before 1982.” In sum, this strategy resulted in an increasing social, economic, and regional polarization, because only a few branches and export-oriented sectors have been able to benefit from these policies.

Neither employment nor real wages in Mexico are the only causes of immigration to the United States, it is at least possible to say that there is a vast potential of labor power in Mexico that is willing to work and desperate enough to join the informal labor market and to cross the border to the United States. The increasing gap in GDP between Mexico and the United States since the 1980s seems to sharpen this tendency. (p. 71)

On the other side, the economic demand for Mexican workers along with the economic needs of Mexican families have jointly resulted in the increase of Mexican immigrants. The shift from agricultural (often seasonal) jobs to urban, more stable employment (a pattern in previous decades when U.S. employers closed unionized plants and opened up new ones) gave Mexican-immigrant supervisors the responsibility of hiring and firing portions of the workforce. This increased the numbers of kin and countrymen in the plants. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) legalized many of the undocumented immigrants and permitted them to bring their families. This migration, then, has produced significant stressors.

**Immigration Stressors**

In the United States, most Latino families live in urban centers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). The first challenge for them is survival. Although most enter legally, many stay past their legal time period in order to work and to support their families. Those without proper documentation live in constant fear of discovery and are ready victims for exploitation (Smolowe, 1997).

The immigrant who comes to the United States from a rural village or small town in Mexico or Latin America is often completely overwhelmed
by the contrasts found in modern U.S. cities. In many Latino communities, the cultural worldview of the church, the society, and the school are all one and the same. The major institutions are in agreement about who you are and how you are to live your life. This is changing in the larger Latin American cities, to the dismay of many Latinos.

The process of leaving their familiar homeland, family, and friends is often a traumatic experience occasioned by economic or political necessity and dreams of a better life. Crossing the border without documentation can be dangerous and expensive. Many have been robbed, raped, beaten, and left for dead in their effort to cross to the United States. Many Central Americans come to the United States traumatized by war and suspicious of all government officials. Some estimate that one out of every three who cross the border illegally is caught and sent back.

The acculturation process involves acquisition of language and the predominant values and behaviors of the host society. This process is also a source of distress. The importance of the home language for the psychological survival of Mexican immigrants cannot be overemphasized. Their ability to retain a measure of self-identity and personal integrity, to communicate and to pass on to the next generation their values and lifestyle, depends on their ability to retain the home language. The native languages, cultures, religions, art, values, lifestyle, family organization, children’s socialization patterns, and worldview constitute the survival kit for many immigrants. It is through language and communication that immigrants stay connected to their home country and ancestors (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Trueba, 1999; Trueba, Cheng & Ima, 1993; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990; Trueba, Rodríguez, Zou & Cintrón, 1993, Trueba & Zou, 1994).

Immigrants often see the worse parts of American society: the slums, the back alleys, the inhumane living conditions of farm workers, the backbreaking jobs that no one else wants. The immigrant experience of America is often one that is without mercy, without justice, without compassion. With time, some may see a different picture of the United States. They can see that there is also a lot that is good in the United States, and that their experience of the shadow side of our society is one-sided. This is best expressed by immigrants who have been in the United States for many years and who have been able to make a living and support a family. There is a sense of thankfulness for a chance to make a better life than was possible in their homeland.
Also, immigrants experience significant prejudice attached to their race and ethnicity. They are forced to become experts in psychological and economic survival by adapting to a new life style and acquiring second and third languages. America’s obsession with race and ethnicity feeds the obvious anxiety about the increasing waves of immigrants of color, especially Asians and Latinos. Thus, race and ethnicity continue to be at the center of public discourse and political debate. McLaren (1995) described how the American “predatory culture” configures public discourse and modern life in order to pursue the exploitation of less technologically developed individuals:

In our hyper-fragmented and predatory postmodern culture, democracy is secured through the power to control consciousness and semioticize and discipline bodies by mapping and manipulating sounds, images and information and forcing identity to take refuge in the forms of subjectivity increasingly experienced as isolated and separate from larger social contexts. (p. 117)

Race and ethnicity will determine a person’s relative status and chances for success. Race and ethnicity can predict residential information, and residence can predict educational achievement, income, dropout rates and suspension rates, size of family, mortality trends, incarceration, tendencies to violence, and use of welfare. The American banking policies, justice system, investment policies, and even the distribution of resources and liabilities (from the location of banks, grocery stores, movie theaters to that of waste disposal, prisons, and nuclear sites) use that information to make decisions. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have emphasized, social class and gender considerations alone “are not powerful enough to explain all the difference (or variance) in school experience and performance” and consequently “race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States” (p. 48–49). Then, schools become the only vehicle to achieve mobility in the social and economic strata. What challenges do immigrant children face in American schools?

School Performance of Mexican Children

By the year 2030, White students will constitute about 30% of the total public school enrollment and Latino students will represent the largest
The Immigration Experience and Resiliency of Mexican Families in the United States

group, 44% of the total enrollment (Valencia, 1991). Other school demographic projections suggest that the White school-age population will decrease in the United States, while the Latino school-age population will continue to increase. Latino children (5–17 years of age) numbered 6 million in 1982 (9% of the national youth population); by 2020 they will increase to 19 million (25%). The Latino school-age population will triple in 28 years (Valencia). Foreign-born persons of Mexican origin in 1980 represented 15% of the U.S. population; in 1990, 20.7%; and in 1995, 28.7% (González Baker et al., 1998). This trend, often called the “brownization” of North America, has raised fears in some that the new immigrants, now at the bottom of the economic ladder, may remain unassimilated in enduring pockets of poverty.

Much of the future of these immigrants depends on schools, and according to some researchers (Orfield & Eaton, 1996), schools are not ready to handle this problem. According to the Harvard Project on Desegregation (Orfield, Bachmeier, James & Eitle, 1997), between 1970 and 1994 Latino school enrollment has increased significantly in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Mexico, and New Jersey. Additionally, the isolation of Latinos has increased.

According to C. Suárez-Orozco and M. Suárez-Orozco (1995a, 1995b), and Suárez-Orozco (1998a, 1998b), immigrants must face at the same time problems of stress, housing, and racism. M. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995b) explained as follows:

The obvious difficulties that most migrants face include language inadequacies, a general unfamiliarity with the customs and expectations of the new country, limited economic opportunities, poor housing conditions, discrimination, and what psychologists term the “stresses of acculturation”….Despite these obstacles, many migrants often consider their lot as having improved from what it was in their country of origin. Because of a perception of relative improvement, many migrants may fail to internalize the negative attitudes of the host country toward them, maintaining their country of origin as a point of reference. (p. 325)

Indeed, immigrants hold their belief of improvement by visiting their villages of origin and displaying some wealth conspicuously (showing new trucks, good clothes, and spending money). The Suárez-Orozcos
(1995b) have suggested that immigrants do not see their new life in terms of the ideals of the majority society but in terms of the “old culture,” thus holding to a “dual frame of reference” (p. 325).

Parents’ naïve notions about the politics of employment, organization, and politics in schools; their perception of societal demands for cultural homogenization; and the acceptance of an inferior status are not shared by their children. Their children feel an ethical responsibility to react and fight back. Much of what happens in gang struggles and street violence is related to marginalization (Vigil, 1989, 1997).

Many Mexican families reflect in their new lives a change not only from one country to another, but also from a rural to an urban setting. The added dimension in the United States is that in order to acquire the necessary sociopolitical knowledge of appropriate conduct in urban settings, immigrants must first acquire communicative skills in a second language. Unfortunately, Mexican immigrants are forced to take jobs that are physically exhausting and leave them little time to acquire communicative skills in English. Consequently, children (as soon as they learn some English) must play adult roles in making momentous decisions for their parents. Mexican immigrant children who are socialized in a new linguistic and cultural environment without help in the development of second-language skills and cognitive abilities required for high school achievement. As the popular song goes, “el gringo terco a sacarnos y nosotros a volver [the gringo is stubborn to get us out and we are stubborn to return].”

Narratives of academic achievement often represent a surprising success where failure was expected. It seems that the retention of the home language and the acquisition of the second language, if accompanied by high literacy levels in both English and Spanish, constitute a powerful factor affecting the successful adaptation of Mexican immigrants and their understanding of the complex U.S. social, economic, and political systems. Their ability to handle text related to those systems for the family (contracts, government documents, bank documents, hospitals documents, immigration papers, and so on) is contingent upon their bilingualism and biliteracy.

On the other hand, the rapid marginalization of other Mexican families (especially youth) is accelerated by their problems understanding American institutions, accompanied by the lack of literacy and language proficiency skills in both languages. This marginalization often starts long
before they arrived to this country. Their naïve notions about the politics of employment, the organization of schools, the demands of society, and the legal and economic system often result in tragic consequences: incarceration, loss of income, ignorance of civil rights, and other abuses. The lack of linguistic and literacy skills may reflect an abrupt transition from rural to urban settings, from simple village life to the life in the large metropolis. This transition is accompanied by culture shock and deterioration in mental health.

Another serious challenge facing Mexican immigrant families at their arrival is the isolation, neglect, and malnutrition experienced as they look for employment. As if this were not enough, the lack of legal documents is a source of anxiety every day with the increasing raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. They feel vulnerable but cannot seek help from social agencies, even if they qualify for assistance. Frequently, workers do not have health insurance or welfare, and they do not have access to a physician prior to or just after childbirth. The deplorable housing conditions (from shantytowns to crowded garages) increase the chances of health problems, child neglect, and child safety problems. In urban areas, the safety of the entire family is jeopardized in dilapidated, drug-infested housing. These conditions are also conducive to early recruitment of Mexican children into gangs and their school dropouts.

The experiences of discrimination, of verbal and physical abuse on the part of mainstream children, and the predominant opinion among teachers that Mexican children are low achievers certainly does not help. These experiences create for immigrant children a difficult setting in which they must redefine themselves in the United States. In the search for a new personal identity, Mexican youth often feel pressure to reject their family, language, and culture. These symbolic “self-rejections” and the formation of a new cultural identity do not necessarily result in embracing North American values or higher levels of English literacy. The traumatic experience of being uprooted and the confusion about family values, personal survival, coupled with the need for peer support, is bound to lead many young people to become affiliated with gangs and to disregard the codes of behavior prescribed by mainstream society. In fact, the increasing marginalization of Mexican youth is reflected in the high rates of dropout and incarceration. A number of scholars have recently dealt with these problems of adaptation in the context of the school environment (Bartolomé, 1996; Bartolomé & Macedo, 1997; Delgado-Gaitan,
Research has shown an intimate relationship between the successful adaptation of Mexican immigrant families to U.S. society and the academic success of their children. For example, a recent study in central California (Trueba, 1999) showed that the most serious problem faced by the children of immigrants is the alienating experience of schooling; the rapid marginalization of these children; and their confusion regarding personal identity, cultural values, social acceptance, the ability to achieve, and overall self-worth. Consequently, if children manage to retain a strong self-identity and remain part of the sociocultural community, they can achieve well in school. Parents usually provide protection so that their children maintain their identity and cultural values.

For example, sometimes a Mexican family takes drastic measures to salvage the moral character and overall well-being of a youth by taking him or her back to Mexico for a period of time to complete his or her education, to re-acquire Spanish, to work under supervision, and even to marry. There are some cases when the entire family returns to the Mexico for an extended period of time (2 or 3 years) in order to re-educate teenagers in the family values. There are a number of repatriated ex-farmworkers in central Mexico (the states of Colima, Michoacán, and Jalisco). In contrast, many alienated Mexican immigrant children in major metropolises (e.g., Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Houston), cannot manage to retain their home language and culture or their familiar cultural institutions and networks. Some seem to survive the trauma of American schooling and to achieve well.

**Resiliency**

Contrary to initial optimism and ethics of hard work, Mexican families do not always escape poverty. The number of children per immigrant family is higher than among other families. The economic and health needs of Mexican immigrant families are greater than those of families born and raised in the United States. Neither economic problems (often associated with the lack of steady employment) nor the frequent verbal abuse and prejudice of bosses and neighbors deter them. Mexican immigrants know they are tough and determined, and they are proud to survive in the worst of circumstances. These physically and spiritually
strong individuals articulate their own voices and feel important individually and collectively. What makes these individuals succeed when they face tremendous challenges in the United States? We propose the concept of resiliency as a possible explanation.

The resiliency of Mexican families and communities is an important concept to understand this book. Its sociocultural and psychological basis and its intimate link to the collective commitment to maintaining their language and a sense of “community” are central to our discussion. Without this resiliency, children of Mexican immigrants would never understand the importance of their ethnic identity and their historical relationship with ancestors. Mexican immigrants are proud of retaining their language and culture.

Women’s role in this retention process requires endurance and determination, as shown not only in their daily agricultural labor but also in their capacity to organize themselves into a political force to negotiate with the school and to fight for their children’s education. They seem to learn quickly how American society functions. They also know how to motivate their children to achieve academically. Their apparent oppressive daily work in the fields and packing houses may be in clear contrast with their own self-worth and their enormous prestige in their home village in Mexico. They must work hard under precarious conditions that affect their health significantly; they suffer from arthritis, bronchitis, allergies, malnutrition, and high blood pressure. But this oppression does not seem to break their spirits or to jeopardize their determination to succeed.

What are the circumstances under which some families can do so much with so little, and continue to do more? What makes some members within a family more resilient to adversity and gives them strength?

Resilience is defined as the ability to confront and to resolve problems and the capacity to utilize personal or social resources to enhance limited possibilities (Cochran, 1992; Rutter, 1987). However, resilience does not ensure that all stressors will be resolved—people can be resilient in some circumstances and vulnerable in others. Factors identified with resilience include: (a) affectionate ties within the family, including a strong network support system of family and friends (b) the active search for external support systems, such as churches and other services (e.g., mental health services) and (c) personal characteristics. These factors generate self-esteem and self-efficacy while sustaining and reinforcing resilience.
Social Network Support

Families negotiate risk situations through the utilization of personal or societal resources. The presence of support networks has proven to be very beneficial. The social support provided by these networks of family and friends has been found to have positive effects on the health and well-being of the patient and the caregiver (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Relationships with kin, friends, and acquaintances form an interactive network exchange of goods, affection, and various types of support important for individuals and families. For example, studies have shown that these networks help families survive in times of harsh economic conditions (Stack, 1974). Other studies have indicated that the social support provided through networks reduces psychological distress (Gore, 1981; Hirsch, 1981). The role of networks is especially important among immigrants. The migration experience is a stressful experience, which affects each family member differently. The migrant typically enters society at the lower levels of the social strata, and primary group relationships are altered (i.e., separation of part or the total family).

Families are the starting point in all biography (Denzin, 1989b). How they contribute to the success or the failure of their children has been attributed to such differentials as disciplinary and parenting styles, socioeconomic status, the possession of cultural capital, and class lifestyles. Families are thought to have enormous influence on a student’s success at school (Baumrind 1978; Clark, 1983; Hess & Holloway, 1984). The extent of this influence has been predicated on the fact that “American education is structured to serve children who have had the average family experience or better” (Comer, 1988, p. 28).

What usually happens to those who do not have this “average family experience” has been categorized with the problematic aspects of education, such as dropping out of school. Contradictions to the norm provide researchers with an opportunity to see what is different from the stereotypical images of failure or success.

Clark’s (1983) study found that no matter whether the family units comprise one or two parents, are wealthy, or are welfare recipients, those with successful children have authoritative parenting styles. These parenting styles are warm yet provide rules and regulations which lead the children to secure and trusting relationships that are transferred to the school setting. Clark also noted that families whose children are low
achievers in school have authoritarian (dominating and demanding) or permissive (inconsistent) parenting styles. Children in such families display a greater degree of despair, pathos, lethargy, and psychological confusion than do children from homes with authoritative parenting styles, and they transfer these characteristics to the school setting.

Middleton (1987), in an analysis of family and school, showed that the creation of cultural capital is fraught with contradictions. Cultural capital is the knowledge that children acquire from sources other than the school that enables them to survive in society and succeed in school. Middleton showed that family dynamics produce, for example, the sexual division of labor that also operates at school. One of the factors in success is having access to resources that provide the know-how to be successful in the formal system. Having access to resources wherever they exist is clearly important to success.

External Support

For the Hispanic population, religion has played a major role in its birth, history, culture, social life, and social institutions. Major historical events, such as the Spanish Inquisition and the Spanish conquest of the indigenous populations of the New World in the name of religion, have shaped the Hispanic population and its experience. Hispanic history and cultures are deeply rooted by religious dynamics and reflect the central role that religion has played in their development. Today, religion still plays an important role in the cultural and social lives of Hispanics in the United States. However, Hispanic religious life also reflects modern complexities and changes in a multicultural and increasingly religiously diverse society. Hispanics have begun to examine and to claim other religions, raising questions not only about Hispanic religious identity and life, but also about Hispanic ethnic identity and culture.

The immigrant who comes to the United States from a rural village or small town in Mexico or Latin America is often completely overwhelmed by the contrasts found in modern U.S. cities. When immigrants leave their home and come across the border, everything may be strange and unknown. One place with a certain familiarity, where there may be a lessening of that fear and anxiety, is in church. The church, the priest, and the Mass are all familiar to them. A welcoming church becomes an oasis away from the stresses of being in a foreign country. Although not
all church communities are welcoming, in the last twenty years the Catholic church and other mainline churches have made a concerted effort to provide Spanish-language services for Latino immigrants.

Latinos are bound together by a common language and religious tradition. On one hand, they have inherited something of the Latino indigenous spirit of their parents and grandparents: trust in God, faith in goodness of life, and a confidence in the rewards given to those who are respectful and obedient to their elders. On the other hand, there is also an American spirit within them, that rugged individualism that calls each one to make it on their own; to soar solo and to establish their own career, family, and home; to live wherever the job takes them; and to expect and demand justice and fair play. The job, the career, and the possibility of wealth and status take on a sacred character.

Religion, for Latinos, is also a mechanism for survival. It is the way to understand and put order to their universe. Religious beliefs and practices are for Latinos, like for many other cultural groups, a way of looking at the world that has been passed down from one generation to the next in order to give meaning and purpose to living. It touches the very core of who they are and helps them understand, survive in, and thrive in the world around them.

The church for Latinos can be a supportive community in the midst of strangers. The growing number of small storefront churches is testimony to the fact that when Latinos do not feel welcome in the mainline churches, they will leave and start their own. The point here is not the worthiness of one church over another, but the desire of Latinos to belong to a supportive and affirming group. In a new land with strangers all around, a different language, and different cultural ways, Latinos find comfort in their local church, where, for a brief time, they feel at home. For the vast majority of Latinos, this is the Catholic Church. But as more mainline and evangelical churches reach out and offer services sensitive to the needs of Latinos, it is only natural for them to go where they feel most welcomed and most at home.

**Personal Attributes**

Garmezy and Rutter (1983) showed that a combination of personal attributes and environmental factors support resilience. They identified eight protective factors as softening the effects of risk. Resilient individ-
uals had fewer and less long-lasting stressors in their lives than did those children who developed problems in later life. They had neither a criminal father nor a schizophrenic mother; they had easygoing temperaments, making parental criticism less likely; and they were female. Additionally, they had opportunities to assume responsibilities in school and thus achieved success; they had success, but not necessarily academic success at school; they had a warm, close relationship with an adult and thus had higher expectations; and they were planners with coping skills.

Garmezy and Rutter (1983) also found that protective factors form a triad of (a) personality-disposition factors that help children cope, (b) a supportive family environment in which at least one parent allows the child autonomy, and (c) an external support system that provides a model for positive values. They emphasized that human development is a dynamic process and that the human personality is a self-righting mechanism that engages in ongoing attempts to organize experience.

Protective-factor research has been influential in discovering what has eluded at-risk research. Many young people who suffer stressors in their lives do perfectly well, and some seem little affected by their experiences. For example, resilient children who have alcoholic parents do not develop problems with coping. Werner and Smith (1989) found behavioral characteristics that differentiate resilient children from children who develop problems with coping. These are characteristics of temperament that elicit positive attention from parents: at least average intelligence and communication skills, achievement orientation, a responsible, caring attitude, a positive self-concept, an internal locus of control; and a belief in self-help.

The second factor that can lead at-risk children to success is the self-as-agent construct, which proposes that the self is an active agent in the construction of one’s success (or failure). How people react to their environment, what opportunities are afforded them, and how the environment is changed by the self-as-agent are important for this study.

Spiritual influences in the family include both positive and negative learned practices. The positive practices are those we learn from various spiritual disciplines or teachers: faith, prayer, meditation, healing ceremonies, or even positive thinking. (Cross, 1995)
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