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## A Mexican Woman's Journey in Becoming a Successful American Educator

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A Mexican Woman's Journey to Becoming a Successful American Educator

Lucy Ordaz Sanchez

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

Darlene H. Anderson, Chair  
Gordon S. Gibb  
Ramona Maile Cutri

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### A Mexican Woman's Journey to Becoming a Successful American Educator

Lucy Ordaz Sanchez

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, BYU

Master of Science

This self-study explores the question of “What factors in my life shaped my journey in earning an American college degree and becoming a successful educator in the U.S.?” This question is explored in the context of my own lived experiences. Results contribute to the field of immigrant studies and may encourage others who wish to transition from first generation immigrant to successful professional educator in the U.S. This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology to answer the research question. It used in-depth narrative interviews to elicit my responses to lived experiences from growing up in Mexico to my current teaching position. Thematic analysis was used to summarize and interpret the data. Data analysis yielded six themes that describe my journey to becoming a teacher in the U.S.: family influence, vision of life, role models, challenges, sources of support, and inner strength. Findings reaffirm the belief that it is possible for an individual who has recently immigrated to the United States and who may have experienced aspects of structural inequality to surmount difficult circumstances and achieve important life goals.

Keywords: cultural capital, hispanic American culture, immigrants, multicultural education, learning disabilities

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to thank God, my Heavenly Father, who has guided me throughout my life. I believe He has placed me in specific places to experience and meet amazing people along the way that have had an influence on who I am today.

I must thank my family. My parents who always had our education and well being in mind and sacrificed so much for us to get the best education possible. They are the ones that taught me that education was a priority and something attainable. They taught me that I could achieve what seemed impossible if I worked hard and asked God for help and guidance. To my mother who has believed in me even when I've doubted myself and who with her typical "esa es mi Lucy!" "Tu puedes!" "You can do it!" "My daughter no have problem," cheered me on through the toughest times. To my brothers whose examples of dedication I've tried to follow and whose love and constant support has gotten me to this day. To my loving sister, your unconditional love has been like a lighthouse during my stormy days. Los amo!

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## INTRODUCTION OF THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis, *A Mexican Woman's Journey to Becoming a Successful American Educator*, is written in a hybrid format. The hybrid format brings together traditional thesis requirements and journal publication formats. The preliminary pages of the thesis reflect requirements for submission to the university. The thesis report is presented as a journal article and conforms to length and style requirements for submitting research reports to education journals. This thesis format contains two reference lists. The first reference list contains references included in the journal-ready article. The second list includes all citations used in the Literature Review (Appendix A). An interview guide consisting of 44 questions is found in Appendix B.



## **Background**

Students from Mexico comprise a small percentage of U.S. college enrollments. International students studying in undergraduate and graduate institutions of higher education in the U.S. numbered over 764,000 in 2011–12, or 3.7% of the total enrollment, a percentage relatively unchanged since the turn of the century (Farrugia, Bhandari, & Chow, 2012). Students from Mexico numbered about 13,900 in 2011–12, or 1.8% of the international students enrolled, and majored in a variety of fields of study ranging from business/management (22%) to intensive English programs (2.6%). Females constituted 37% of Mexican student enrollment. Education majors comprised 3.1% of the Mexican enrollment (Farrugia et al., 2012) compared with 6.1% total education majors in U.S. colleges and universities in the same period (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). With 97% of Mexican students enrolled in majors other than education, it seems notably uncommon to attend a U.S. college or university for a degree in teaching. I was part of that small percentage of Mexican students that attended a U.S. university for a degree in teaching.

There wasn't ever enough money at home. I wasn't the best student, and learning was not always easy nor did I have good study habits. These challenges made things harder and often overwhelming when I was accepted to BYU. I lived paycheck to paycheck often with no money left in the bank a couple of days following payday. I spent hours at the library trying to do homework, reading long chapters at a time. Several times I was one of the first ones in the library or asked to leave because it was closing time. There were many times that I thought of giving up. I didn't want to wake up at 3:00 a.m. to go to work; I didn't want to force myself to stay awake in class when my eyes were heavy. I didn't want to save every penny to pay tuition; I wanted to

eat a big steak instead. Through hard times I kept reminding myself that I wanted and needed to keep going; I wanted to be a teacher.

This vignette demonstrates the struggles I've engaged in to understand my own multi-year journey from difficult circumstances in rural Mexico to respected middle school teacher in the U.S. As I turned to the literature to better understand my own journey and place it in the context of others' experiences, I found a lack of descriptive or explanatory information or a detailed study of the complex history of a male or female teacher who rose from difficult circumstances in one country to become a successful professional educator in the U.S. Not finding existing accounts in the literature and struggling to make sense of my own lived experiences resulted in conceptualizing my experiences as what Whitehead (1989) calls "a living contradiction" (p. 89). In an effort to explore the tensions and insights of my own living contradiction, I embarked on this self-study of my journey as an immigrant student to my current position as a successful teacher in the U.S.

This self-study has the potential to provide valuable referents for individuals in similar circumstances who desire to accomplish similar goals, and for researchers and others seeking insight into various aspects of immigration and assimilation. This study explores the broader question of "what factors in a Mexican woman's life shaped her journey to earning an American college degree and becoming a successful educator in the U.S.?" I explore this question in the context of my own lived experiences. Results contribute to the field of immigrant studies and may enlighten and encourage others who wish to transition from first-generation immigrant to successful professional educator in the U.S.

The conceptual framework for this study derives from contemporary immigrant integration theory (Lee, 2009). Immigrant integration theory has progressed from deficit models

that defined successful assimilation as processes of overcoming homeland and native cultural ways of thinking to contemporary asset models that value cultural diversity and contributions (Portes & Manning, 2012). Current integration theory does not assume that immigrants will melt into the dominant society but may instead integrate in different ways for different groups over several generations (Alba & Nee, 1997). This study posits that my experiences fall within the immigrant integration themes of ethnic community and social network. Ethnic community refers to the ways that groups and individuals identify and distinguish themselves from others (Alba, 2005). Social networks are the relationships between individuals centered in family, friendships, occupations, and other associations (Alba & Nee, 1997). The study predicts that my experiences are most likely explained in terms of ethnic and linguistic affiliations and evolving social networks between home and eventual adult residence in the U.S.

### **Literature Review**

Mexican immigration to the United States historically brought individuals and families to the southern border states of Texas, Arizona, and California. During the mid-20th century, the majority of immigrants were male agricultural workers moving through the latitudes with seasonal crops or mine workers who settled in the American Southwest (Durand, Massey, & Capoferro, 2005). This pattern changed dramatically in the late 20th century when immigration increased rapidly in other states in the U.S., including Utah, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and New York (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). This led to increased permanency for Mexican immigrants in new areas, with associated impacts on politics, culture, and communities in fields such as social services, school enrollment, legislative representation, print and digital media languages, and church membership (Durand, 2000).

I was one of those Mexican immigrants who came to Utah, changing the demographics in my neighborhood, school, and church, thus having a noticeable influence in the community like and with the rest of my fellow Mexicans. The first couple of years after I immigrated, I didn't see as many Latina/os as I see now. Back then it was exciting to run into somebody and feel a connection without even knowing them. Now we are part of almost every neighborhood, every school, impacting the culture and politics in Utah to a greater extent.

Increased immigration impacts gender roles and responsibilities as new arrivals experience different cultural expectations. Data show that a much larger percentage of immigrant Mexican women work outside the home in the U.S. than do in Mexico, often to pay the costs of immigrating after their husbands have settled (Parrado & Flippen, 2005). Better-educated women are employed at significantly higher rates in Mexico than their less-educated counterparts, but this advantage dissipates among immigrants to the U.S., where jobs for first-generation Mexican women tend to be low paying regardless of education, impacted in part by undocumented status and lack of facility with English (Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

In my opinion, there are many reasons underlying the lack of financial earning potential, some of which have to do with limited vision and long-term goals. One summer in elementary school I decided I wanted to work in the field picking strawberries. That summer I earned fifty dollars after working three months. I realized then that I needed to do more than work in the fields for the rest of my life, and education was the answer. The father and grandfather of one of my coworkers and friends were working in the same field. My friend told me that he would be graduating from elementary school soon and that he planned to continue working at the fields with his father and grandfather. I could not understand why he was willing to give up an education for such a mediocre future. Working in the strawberry fields and meeting that group of

friends opened my eyes to job-related paths that did not require an education. I saw how a lack of vision and/or role models could have a lifetime influence in the lives of others; not only kids my age but adults who seemed to be content staying where they were and who had no higher expectations for their lives. Because I lived a block away from the strawberry field manager, I got picked up first and we would continue to pick up workers in different locations until the truck had 15–20 people on board. In one of the conversations I had with the two managers as I rode in the cabin of the truck, one made a comment about how a boy my age had a crush on me. They suggested that I should date him and that we could even get married in a year or two. I couldn't believe what they were suggesting. Getting married by the age of 15 sounded like the most ridiculous idea ever. I looked at them and in all seriousness and told them their suggestion was not an option since I would be graduating from high school and then college and that I planned to marry a professional like myself—perhaps a doctor, a teacher, an engineer, somebody that had an education and the same goals as I did. They laughed. They repeated what I had said and they laughed again. They mocked me and said I would not accomplish my goals, that I would marry young and be their next-door neighbor. Why they were putting me down and why it seemed so hard for them to believe what I was saying was beyond me; I did not see my goals as being impossible to achieve. That moment I promised myself that I would meet my goals. And I promised them that one day I would send them a wedding invitation and I would be sure to let them know what degree my husband had achieved.

The impact of higher education on the employment of Latinos is of interest. In 2012, 65% of U.S. Latina/os graduated from high school and one-third of the graduates completed bachelor's degrees. The same year, 92.5% of whites graduated from high school and 34.5%, or 37% of the number of high school graduates, earned bachelor's degrees (U.S. Department of

Education, 2013). These data indicate that U.S. Latina/o students who graduate from high school go on to 4-year degree programs at lower rates than Whites and attain fewer degrees. The percentage of Latina/os receiving bachelor's degrees has increased over the years, but the gap between Whites and Latina/os has widened (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In 2012, 17% of Latino workers in the U.S. had bachelor's degrees compared to 36% of White workers, showing that the percentage of Latino workers with bachelor's degrees is less than half that of White workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).

### **Reasons International Students Attend College in the U.S.**

International students attend college in the U.S. for a variety of reasons. Hazen and Alberts (2006) found that students at a major university named quality of education and available funding as the top two reasons for coming to the U.S. Half of the respondents also desired to experience the culture, and a significant percentage believed a U.S. college degree was important for work opportunities in their home country. Likewise, a nationwide three-year study of international undergraduates revealed that their first and foremost concern was academic quality (Noel-Levitz, 2008). Latin Americans constituted the highest percentage of international students stating that career and work opportunities in America—and the lack of such opportunities at home—were the strongest reasons for staying in the U.S. upon college completion (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Respondents who did not stay in the U.S. ranked feelings of cultural alienation, differing understandings of friendship, and prioritizing family over career as reasons to leave the U.S. and return home upon graduation (Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

When my brother was in elementary school, he was asked what he wanted to do when he grew up and, without hesitation, he said he wanted to attend Brigham Young University (BYU). Years later, he was the first of the grandchildren from either side of my extended family to attend

college. He would write us letters and tell us how beautiful the campus was and how amazing it was to be getting a higher education. He would always end his letters by encouraging us to do well in school so that we, too, could one day attend BYU. His dream and goal became mine, as well. I wanted to be like him and attend college. I, too, wanted to get out of our small town and do something more, get an education and encourage others to do so. My parents always told me how an education would open new doors for me, how my life would be different. Somehow it was an untold fact that getting an education in the United States would be better for us. My parents wanted the best for us even when they could not afford it. They knew somehow things would work out if we set our minds to it.

### **Reasons International Graduates Teach in the U.S.**

Immigrant teachers—defined as those who immigrate for college and then stay to teach or as credentialed teachers who immigrate to teach—list a variety of reasons for teaching in their adopted countries. Latina/o immigrant teacher candidates attending college in southern California reported desires to help Latinos from other countries overcome marginalization and make the transition to living in America (Hwang, Baek, & Vrongistinos, 2005). Immigrant teachers in Canada reported similar desires to advocate for immigrant children and to help them negotiate minority group experiences (Bascia, 1996). Immigrants in Australia were recruited to balance teacher diversity with increasing student diversity (Cruickshank, 2004) and to fill unmet local demand for mathematics teachers (Seah, 2002).

When I finally graduated with my degree, I knew I would be teaching in the U.S.; there was no question in my mind about it. I felt that I had a duty and the ability to connect with Latina/o students and I hoped to become a life changing influence in their lives. Because of my

background, my life experiences, and my desire to make a difference, I hoped that I could make a positive impact.

### **Challenges of Immigrant Teacher Candidates in College**

Immigrant teacher candidates in U.S. colleges face the same challenges reported by international students in other fields. The greatest academic challenges are usually reading, writing, and speaking academic English with sufficient facility to complete course requirements satisfactorily (Chen, 1996). I consider myself very fortunate because I had the opportunity to attend a bilingual school from my elementary years through high school graduation. Because of my English proficiency, I did not have to take the Test of English and Foreign Language (TOEFL) assessment. However, even after mastering English and while taking my first English class, it was brought to my attention that I was not a good writer. All my English papers were full of questions about what I was trying to say, suggestions, and what seemed like never ending critical red markings. I felt like a failure every time I had to write a paper.

No less challenging are the psychosocial stresses created by separation from family and social support systems that serve to confirm and validate immigrant students' senses of identity and belonging (Funaki, 1995; Sandhu, 1994). A couple of my siblings lived in Provo when I started BYU, but soon after I arrived, they moved away. I was constantly in communication with them, on the phone or via email. But even though they were my constant source of support from a distance, I often felt lonely. The need to be closer to family and the loneliness I felt were often in the back of my mind; and many times this resulted in a desire to drop everything, quit school, and move closer to family.

Differences in culture, customs, academic principles and practices, and college life can leave students feeling alienated, anxious, and disconnected from their peers and professors,



making it difficult to establish mutual understanding and friendships (Sandhu, 1994; Solorzano, 2010; Urrieta, 2007). There were many times when I felt utterly alone in an auditorium full of students. I knew I was different in many ways, and the other students seemed to know that, too. Connections and friendships were not an easy thing to acquire. Some days when there was an empty seat next to me, students would see it, look at me, and too often move on to look for another place to sit. When this was not the case, and somebody took the seat next to me or a professor had an interaction with me, without fail one of the first questions would be, “Where are you from?” When I answered, “Mexico,” comments such as, “But your English is so good,” or “Oh, I knew a Mexican kid in my school once, I wonder if you know him,” were shared with me. It always bothered me because I felt that because I looked different, they thought I had to be from somewhere other than the U.S., and that because I was from Mexico, they thought I would know all Mexicans. Additionally, the assumption seemed to be that all Mexicans would have a heavy accent when they spoke English.

Students of color get a glimpse into the world of unconscious racism with comments like the following: “You’re not like the rest of them. You’re different.” “If only there were more of them like you.” “I don’t think of you as a Mexican.” “You speak such good English.” “But you speak without an accent” (Solorzano, 2010, p. 125). In particular, writers have documented perceptions of discrimination among Latino students when they do not feel accepted and valued by faculty and other students (Hurtado, 1994). Rich (1994) described the devastation that occurs when the existence, voice, and contributions of various communities or groups are omitted from the curriculum and classroom discourse:

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a

different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (p. 199)

Sometimes called racist nativism (Huber, 2009), the failure of U.S. college students and faculty to embrace immigrant teacher candidates essentially serves to devalue or dismiss their cultural resources and potential contributions to preservice preparation. Whatever the reasons for teaching in a new country, immigrant teachers bring important cultural capital to their work.

### **Immigrant Teachers' Cultural Resources, Values, and Traditions as Assets in Teaching**

Teachers are faced with the challenges of teaching, developing cultural awareness, identifying pedagogical approaches, and even adjusting curriculum content to meet the needs of all students. Cartledge and Kourea (2008) stated, “the dramatic increases in culturally diverse pupil populations, particularly ELL students, make cultural competence imperative for school personnel. Culturally indifferent teachers, who are unaware of their biases and how these beliefs affect their teaching, are educational liabilities” (p. 365).

The Latino community in America tends to have an inner cultural strength that helps individuals adapt and progress and acquire personal empowerment (Ai, Aisenberg, Weiss, & Salazar, 2014). Livas Stein, Garcia Coll, and Huq (2013) provided evidence supporting the idea that strong connections with family lead to higher levels of academic achievement, responsible behavior, and college attendance. Other research shows strong correlation between English proficiency and level of education on mental and physical health (Ai et al., 2014). Religious attendance additionally has a direct effect on strong mental health (Ai et al., 2014).

It is important to recognize that all new teachers, including immigrants, bring unique histories that reflect their own understandings. Teachers' culture, race, class, and personal

histories shape their cognitive frameworks or worldviews and thus influence their relationships with students (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speigman, 2004). Some writers refer to this as a sense of *place*, or immigrant orientations to the familiar with regard to location, environment, social mores, learning theories, curriculum, and instruction (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Orr, 1992). Since immigrants are by definition displaced people, their senses of place combined with the traditional role of teachers as purveyors of culture can be discordant in their new settings (He, 1998), or can cause natives to see the newcomers as mentors for minority students, but not the general school population (Bascia, 1996).

Conversely, when seen as assets that enhance opportunities for all learners, immigrant teachers' sense of place can help them not only advocate for culturally and linguistically diverse students but also add richness and depth of understanding to native students' worldviews (Bascia, 1996). Research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse teachers positively affect minority student attendance, school completion, and preparation for college through culturally relevant teaching, advocacy, and personal mentoring (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). It has been suggested that this occurs as a result of a cultural match with minority students in which immigrant teachers serve as role models for academic achievement and higher career expectations (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). However, match is not universal; no one culture fits all others. Gordon (2000) noted that differences in language, color, education, and cultural capital add complexity to the concept, and warn against overgeneralizing the theory of match. Moreover, Bhatia and Ram (2001) contend that culture itself is difficult to classify. It is not fixed, but can vary at individual, family, community, and regional levels (Gjerde, 2004).

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to tell the story of a Mexican woman who came from very difficult circumstances, immigrated to the U.S., and became a successful American teacher. A secondary purpose is to provide a model for what immigrants and underprivileged or marginalized individuals may achieve if they focus their desire and efforts on obtaining necessary education. Though much research literature reports various aspects of immigration's effects on first-generation individuals, there is a paucity of information regarding the successful transition of a woman from a poor family to becoming a respected professional.

**Study Question**

The study addressed one question: What factors in my life shaped my journey to earning a college degree and becoming a successful American educator? The methodology used to examine this question is explained in the following section.

**Method**

I employed self-study within the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology to answer the research question. Phenomenology is a broad field of qualitative research used to describe phenomena as retrospectively reported in first person by those who experienced the events (Manen, 1990). Phenomenology addresses a range of experience types, from thoughts and imaginations to social experiences and other outward activities (Smith, 2013). Hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology goes beyond this description to explain the meaning of lived experiences via text or some other symbolic representation (Manen, 1990). The aim is to identify and describe significance by developing deeper understandings of individuals' lived experiences. The phenomenon in this study was my journey from childhood in one country to my status as

professional educator in another country. Study findings constitute the textual interpretation of my experiences within the scope of the study question.

### **Subject**

I was the study subject, an adult Mexican female who immigrated to the U.S. in 1998 and completed higher education at BYU, a private, faith-based institution in Utah. I am the youngest of six children. I was born in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, and raised and educated through high school in a small town in northern Chihuahua, Mexico. I grew up in difficult financial circumstances, but as a child played “teacher” and dreamed of the day that I would become one. I graduated from high school and was accepted to BYU. My college years were not easy economically, emotionally, or academically. After enduring struggles common to international students, I graduated and was hired by a local middle school in the state of Utah. I have been teaching at this particular school for five years as a family and consumer science teacher. My personal motivation to be the subject of the research comes from my desire to share my story. I wanted to use my life experiences to show how I was able to rise from difficult circumstances to become an educator. I wanted to find and pinpoint the strongest influences that attributed to achieving my goals and becoming an educator. It is my hope that with this study Latina/o students will be influenced and encouraged to earn a college degree regardless of their life experiences.

### **Setting**

The research was conducted in my home, a setting comfortable to both the interviewer and myself. The interview room was unaffected by street noise or other distractions. The interviewer and I sat in comfortable chairs near each other with the recording device close by as the interview took place.

## Characteristics of Self-Study

LaBoskey (2004) identified five characteristics of self-study: self-initiated and focused, improvement aimed, interactive, using multiple methods, and trustworthy. These characteristics, explained below, provided direction to the study.

**Self-initiated and focused.** That self-study is “self-initiated and focused” is LaBoskey’s (2004, p. 842) first characteristic. The data consist of narrative verbal reflections that I later transcribed, in response to specific narrative prompts (i.e., interview questions) on the following topics: (a) What do my recollections reveal about my early experiences in my home and with family? (b) What do I perceive to be the most influential aspects of my childhood? (c) What were the circumstances surrounding my immigration to the U.S.? (d) What were my college experiences? and (e) How have my career decisions impacted my long term goals? Each question had a subset of more specific questions. Select subset questions under my main narrative prompts pressed me to share stories about my past and present. For example, one prompt was “what role did religion play in your life, and what role does it play in your life now?”

**Improvement-aimed.** LaBoskey’s (2004) second characteristic of self-study is “improvement-aimed,” occurring in two ways (p. 844). Teacher educators who engage with this self-study are positioned to better support Latina/o students with difficult circumstances. Educators will also gain a commitment to educate the “whole student,” which would require knowing “what challenges they face,” the experiences they go through, and how their culture and past experiences influence their development (Borrego, 2008, p. 3). They will also be better positioned to develop deeper understandings about how to identify and use the funds of knowledge public school Latina/o children from difficult circumstances bring to the classroom.

**Interactive.** “Interactive” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 847), the third characteristic of self-study, is represented in the study. I collaboratively, with a committee member, analyzed my memory narratives using three steps. First, my response to each narrative prompt was cut and pasted in an Excel chart. Using this chart, I generated an initial list of emergent themes. Then the themes and the data allotted to them were forwarded to a research committee member who critiqued both the themes and the quotes linked to them. Working together, we then collectively negotiated the themes and topics arising from our analysis. The process involved refining the themes by discussing the data that supported them. In the third step, I verified the themes by looking back at the data to confirm the decisions previously made. When disagreements occurred, the varying points of view were discussed in light of the data. Following additional discussion of the themes, adjustments were made until an agreement was reached.

**Multiple methods.** A fourth characteristic of self-study is that it can incorporate multiple methods (LaBoskey, 2004). Since video and interview transcriptions served as my data for this self-study, I analyzed my story individually and collaboratively by looking for reoccurring patterns and identifying themes.

**Trustworthy.** The fifth characteristic defines validity as a reliable process leading to inferences that can be trusted and are worthy of replication (LaBoskey, 2004). Mishler (1990) noted that the “essential criterion for such judgments is the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods and inferences of a study or tradition of inquiry, as the basis for our own theorizing and empirical research” (p. 419). Researchers have also suggested that taking an interactive approach to data collection and analysis can lead to the development of “trustworthy exemplar findings” (Cutri, Manning, & Chun, 2011, p. 303). Cutri and colleagues likewise explained that they worked together to identify common themes until consensus was reached; the

authors believed that “establishing verisimilitude” by this means and “publically sharing [their] research text . . . helped establish [their] findings as trustworthy” (p. 301).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected via a video and in-depth interviews to elicit my responses to lived experiences ranging from my girlhood in Mexico to my present position as middle school educator. The video referred to as *Testimonio* was used to briefly tell my life story. *Testimonio* is a “map of consciousness” (Elenes, 2000, p. 115) and can be used to look deeply within to change the inner, colonized self while bringing about collective change. It has been pointed out that “by telling, people recall what has happened, put experiences into sequence, find possible explanations for it, and play with the chain of events that shapes individual and social life. Story-telling involves intentional states that alleviate, or at least make familiar, events and feelings that confront ordinary everyday life” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 1).

Through a narrative interview, the interviewer asked direct questions to prompt my stories. The interviewer asked a specific question about a particular event so as to have me share the story about the event. The interviewer then became an active listener, refraining from interruptions but asking questions as needed to extend or clarify responses (Kvale, 2007). Kvale also explained how the interview is a conversation, with a purpose and structure that is determined by the interviewer. Because the conversation goes beyond every day exchange, it is a professional interaction and “becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge” (Kvale, 2007, p. 7).

A trained researcher not affiliated with the study conducted the interviews. The interviewer and I sat in comfortable chairs near each other with an audio recorder within reach. After reading and signing a consent form, the interviewer began the process by activating the



audio recorder and orally reviewing the purpose of the study. The interviewer then asked the first question and gave me time to respond. As I completed each response, the interviewer asked following questions as appropriate to elicit further detail. For example, after answering the question, “How did you obtain your current position?” the interviewer followed with, “How long have you held your current position?”

The interview guide consisted of 44 questions accompanied by planned prompts by which the interviewer sought to extend or expand detail as appropriate (see Appendix A). The number, type, and detail of questions correspond to the breadth and depth of my personal history with regard to the study question. Questions addressed six major biographical topics, including home, family, self, immigration, college, and career.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a process used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). I chose this method due to its flexibility and because it “can be applied *across* a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (p. 78). The authors reiterated that thematic analysis should be seen as the “foundational method for qualitative method for qualitative analysis” (p. 78). The researcher needs to be flexible and use judgment in order to determine what will be considered as a theme. The process begins as the analyst looks for and notices issues of potential interest in the data and patterns of meaning. As the analyst is writing, the analysis is already in progress.

Braun and Clark (2006) list six phases of thematic analysis: (a) familiarizing with data, (b) producing initial codes, (c) looking for themes, (d) examining themes, (e) naming and defining themes, and (f) creating the report. In the familiarizing with data phase it is critical that the researcher be immersed in the data to a point that the patterns and meanings are actively

recognized. Reading and rereading the data are necessary as patterns might be shaped as this is done. This process is a time consuming but crucial step because it provides the base for the rest of the analysis.

The generating initial codes phase begins as the researcher is familiar with the data and develops a list of what was found and what about it is interesting. In this phase initial codes are produced based on what appears to be interesting to the analyst. This coding process helps organize the data into meaningful groups. This phase requires the analyst to decide whether the analysis is data-driven or theory-driven (Braun & Clark, 2006). Data-driven themes are based on the data and the researcher approaches the data with specific questions in mind. The authors give a key advice for this phase: “(a) code for as many potential themes/patterns as possible (time permitting) – you never know what might be interesting later; (b) code extracts of data inclusively – keep a little of the surrounding data if relevant; and (c) remember that you can code individual extracts of data in as many different ‘themes’ as they fit into” (p. 89).

The third phase begins after all data are coded and identified in a list. In this phase, instead of focusing on codes the researcher focuses on themes and the relationship between codes, themes and the different levels of themes. At the end of this phase, the researcher has a collection of possible themes and sub-themes supported by the data.

At this point the analyst reviews the themes. During this phase it will be clear that some possible themes are not in fact useful, and some themes may be combined with others or broken down into separate themes. Two levels of refining and reviewing the themes take place, with re-coding as appropriate. At the conclusion of this phase, the researcher will have a good idea of the themes, how they fit together, and the story the data are telling.

Once the thematic map of the data has been established, the defining and naming themes phase begins. In this phase the analyst determines the principle of each theme. Paraphrasing the data content is not enough; this phase requires deciding what is of interest. Each theme needs a detailed written analysis, including the story that each theme tells. Sub-themes may emerge and be useful for giving structure to a large and complex theme. At the end of this phase, it is important that themes be defined.

The last phase is producing the report. In this phase the themes have been established, allowing the analyst to complete the final analysis and written report. Sharing the story based on information gathered from the data is what convinces the reader of the quality and validity of the analysis. The write-up should not solely provide data; examples and extracts are included in the analytical narrative to illustrate the story extracted through an examination of the data.

### **Findings**

Data analysis yielded six themes that describe my journey to becoming a teacher in the U.S.: family influence, vision of life, role models, challenges, sources of support, and inner strength. Themes are interpreted within the conceptual framework derived from contemporary immigrant integration theory (Lee, 2009). Each of the themes is explained in detail below.

#### **Family Influence**

When my parents became members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon), they spent a lot of time with the missionaries. Through their interaction with them, they met a missionary from the Mormon colonies in northern Mexico. He would always talk about his town and about the bilingual school it had. My parents felt they needed to move to Chihuahua so we could learn how to speak English and have a better education in a bilingual school. They wanted us to be bilingual because it would give us more opportunities. My father

and mother sacrificed their comfort and the opportunity to be near their families and were willing to sacrifice whatever they needed to start over away from the place they knew as home. So two weeks after I was born and after praying about it, they packed up and left everything behind but their faith to venture to this unknown place that they thought would provide us with better opportunities. Despite the circumstances, my parents instilled in us the importance of working hard and attaining the best education possible. So my educational journey began in a bilingual school.

We were constantly reminded of the importance of education. We would not walk out the door without my mom saying, “saca cienes” (“get a 100%”). If we showed an assignment or the report card with a 90%, she would ask us, “Where are the other 10 points?” We were constantly reminded that homework and education came first; then we had to practice piano and whatever other instrument we played. We not only had to take piano lessons, but also be part of our school band playing an instrument. We had to be the best students, the best kids. My father had to drop out of 3rd grade to help his father. And my mother dropped out of high school. They didn’t want to drop out; they both loved school. Because of their experience and their struggles, they knew first hand the importance of getting a better education to have a better future. The importance of education was a constant message from them. They both taught me that I had to work hard to get what I wanted.

My family was a critical asset in my journey. I find that having such a supportive and encouraging family with strong and goal-oriented parents is what has helped me aspire, work towards, and achieve personal and educational goals that I would not otherwise have achieved. Livas Stein et al. (2013) agreed, stating that strong connections with one’s own family leads to higher levels of academic achievement, responsible behavior, and college attendance.

## **Vision of My Life**

Growing up I played being a teacher and dreamed of the day I would become one; I lined up my stuffed animals and dolls and used the chalkboard given to us by my dad to teach my toys. I wanted to be a teacher. It was during middle school in chemistry class that I promised myself that I would become a teacher. This was right after the teacher had humiliated me in front of the class, which made the students laugh. After they had quieted down, and following their laughter, I sat in my corner seat with pain in my chest and tears rolling down my cheeks. I sat there in silence holding back the tears. That day I promised myself, “I will become a teacher!” I wanted to be a teacher who believes in her students, a teacher that encourages and loves her students for who they are and for what they can become.

I had two amazing teachers that were an inspiration and a support through hard times. I wanted to be a teacher that was knowledgeable, sweet, and tender like they were. I wanted to be a teacher that would accept students and love them just the way they are with their middle school awkwardness, mood swings, toughness, and attitude problems and at the same time encourage them to become a better version of themselves. I remember wanting and needing a teacher that would just love me. I wanted somebody to finally tell me good things about myself instead of asking why I wasn’t getting good grades or why I wasn’t like my siblings. I wanted an adult to connect with me. Because I felt I needed that and I didn’t get it, my desire was to become that kind of teacher. It was my desire to be the teacher I wish I had had. I remember thinking, “I’m going to be a teacher that believes in her students.” I promised myself that I would become the teacher I knew I could be and that I knew my kids would want or need.

My parents instilled in me a desire to work hard and attain the best education possible. Receiving the letter of acceptance from BYU brought tears to my eyes. Excitement filled my

whole body. I was going to get a higher education. Now I consider graduating from college one of my highest achievements because it wasn't easy, but I stuck with it and accomplished my goal. Graduating from college allowed me to become an actual teacher. It meant achieving the American dream, purchasing my home and having the comforts that I now possess.

Part of my motivation for becoming a teacher stemmed from my desire to help students like myself, struggling to feel included and loved in school. This vision was realized following my acceptance to BYU and after receiving the opportunity to teach in an ethnically diverse school. At this point in time, my vision expanded to include connecting with Latina/o and minority students and to become a life changing influence in their lives. My experiences were therefore similar to those of immigrant teachers reported by Hwang, Baek, and Vrongistinos (2005) and Bascia (1996). These teachers reported desires to help Latina/os from other countries overcome marginalization and successfully make the transition to living in the United States.

### **Role Models**

My father and mother sacrificed the little wealth they possessed to start over from scratch. They left behind a good job and the house they owned and sacrificed being with their families in their home state. Even though my parents were not able to attain the education they would have liked or wanted, they knew the importance of education. If I had to choose just two things that I learned from my parents, it would be to work hard and gain an education.

As a young girl I remember that my second grade teacher, Mrs. Farnsworth, made me feel loved and that I could do anything! In middle school, Profe (Professor) Velez made history come to life! He was caring but strict. His positive written comments on the top right of my assignments were a joy to read and his constant encouragement a blessing in my life. These two teachers became not only my role models, but most importantly my inspiration.

Both of these teachers were part of my culture and because of that understood my background and my strengths. Achinstein and Aguirre (2008) suggested cultural responsiveness has an impact on whether teachers become role models for their students. Additional research investigating developmental assets of “ethnically diverse populations” has identified the family as a critical influence strongly impacting a child’s academic and social outcomes (Livas Stein et al., 2013, pp. 240–241).

### **Challenges**

My challenges started at a very young age. Two weeks after I was born my family embarked on the journey to the northern part of Mexico in search for a better education for us kids. As a result we left behind everything: our extended family, a comfortable house, and friends. We traded it all for one of the coldest winters in Chihuahua, with no extended family and little money. For a time we lived in a run down cheese factory infested with rats and cockroaches. We wore pass me downs, too large or too small, but that’s all we had and that’s what we wore. Eventually, we moved from that house into a house that had two small bedrooms, a kitchen and living room and an entryway that became the girls’ bedroom. It had a single bed that I shared with my teenage sister. In order to get to my mom’s bedroom, the boys’ bedroom, or even the bathroom, one had to go through our room. This house did not have plumbing or a bathroom sink. We had a bucket that collected the water under the faucet. To take showers we would warm up the water and fill up a bucket and pour it on ourselves. Eventually we were able to get a shower installed, a water heater, and then a bathroom sink. After several years of living in this house we were asked to move out and were given three months to find a new place. My parents had kept the house they owned in Oaxaca but at this point they knew they had to sell it. My father and my brothers built our new house in three months. I’m not even sure how they built

the house without knowing anything about construction and without having a lot of time.

Sometimes they were working until late at night with little light and waking up the next morning really early.

In addition to the above challenges, getting good grades did not come easy for me. I was not the top student in high school. As a matter of fact, I lacked interest. I would sit in the back of class always talking and misbehaving, teachers and students always noticed me because of it. It was painful and frustrating. In my chemistry class I would get the usual “porque no eres como tus hermanos? Ellos se sacaban puros cienos en mi clase” (“Why are you not like your siblings? They all got 100% in my class.”). One day I was having difficulty understanding a concept. I was brave enough to raise my hand to ask a question. Unfortunately, that made my science teacher so frustrated that he lashed out at me saying, “Miss Ordaz, I don’t think you’ll accomplish much in life except perhaps flip burgers at McDonald’s.” Everyone laughed. As the class quieted down I sat there in my corner seat with pain in my chest and tears about to roll down my cheeks.

But my college years were not any easier. My days began at 3:00 a.m. working my custodial job until 8:30 a.m. Classes were from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. I would then head home, work on my homework, and head to my second job from 5:00–10:00 p.m. I spent endless hours in the library, reading and reading, but nothing would click. To make matters worse, financial challenges were ever present.

I felt lonely, overwhelmed, out of place, and extremely tired all the time. I often felt inadequate because I didn’t have the study skills that seemed to be prominent on campus. I remember thinking to myself, “What am I even doing here? I’m not even a good student.” Not a lot of people would talk to me. A lot of people seemed to be looking at me all the time. I remember thinking, “Maybe I really shouldn’t be here. I don’t think they think I should be here.”



I recall a few times when professors ignored me. I would be in line to ask questions and they would go and help somebody else. Sometimes I would want to say, “I’m standing right here,” “I was next in line,” and “I’m not invisible.” Often I would give up and just leave. As I did, I questioned if I should continue trying, if it was even worth it to be struggling so much.

Struggling with classes was an ongoing problem. Finally one of my teachers suggested that I visit the accessibility center. I didn’t even know what that was! She explained that they test you, they label you, and they can provide help if needed. Following her suggestion, I finally went to the accessibility center and was tested. I had a learning disability in math. Even though the test results did not actually show a learning disability in other areas, the scores were very low, so they decided to provide me with additional accommodations. At first it was very embarrassing to have somebody sitting by my side taking notes as I listened and recorded lectures. I felt like something was wrong with me and that I needed to hide the fact that I needed help. This situation was harder and even more overwhelming in smaller classes because everybody started asking who the new student was and wondering why she showed up mid semester. How could I tell them it was just my note taker? Thankfully the volunteers were very sensitive and would just introduce themselves and state they were auditing the class.

I finally graduated and was offered a job at a local middle school. My excitement didn’t last long when I was informed mid-semester that my work visa had been denied. This forced me to resign before we were out for Christmas break. I was devastated. All the hard work to get my degree and then to have my dream so short lived. It didn’t seem fair or right. Because of this situation I fell victim to depression; every day seemed like a battle to function, to find joy in the work that I was doing, because I no longer worked directly with students.

Through my college years I felt the cultural alienation that Hazen & Alberts, (2006) referred to as a reason that Latin American students leave the U.S. and return home upon graduation. I also had the stress that comes from being away from family and the lack of social support that Funaki (1995), Sandhu (1994), and Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, (2006) described. But just as the teacher candidates reported in Hwang et al., (2005) and Bascia (1996), I too had the desire to stay in the United States. I had the desire to help Latina/o students transition into this country and the desire to advocate for immigrant students, as I could also function as a role model for them. Achinstein and Aguirre (2008), suggested that this can happen because of the cultural match between minority students and immigrant teachers.

### **Sources of Support**

Through the different challenges that I experienced, I consider myself blessed with the many sources of support that I had and continue to have. Some were simple acts of concern and others were crucial in helping me get to where I am now.

My family was and continues to be a very strong source of support in my life. When I was a young child, my mother would play with me when I wanted to pretend I was her teacher. She's always been sweet, loving, and understanding through the good and the tough times. My father worked hard to give us the best he could offer, and my siblings have given me a good example, encouragement, and guidance to help me through the different stages of my life.

While living in my small hometown in Mexico and while my parents were struggling financially, our ecclesiastical leader offered us a tiny old house that he owned, and he told us that we could live there without paying rent until I graduated from high school or even longer. Even though the house was small and seemed crowded for a family of six, it was a step up from the rat-infested cheese factory. After that, by way of many miracles, my father was able to buy a lot,

and with no construction experience, he, my brothers, and some of my dad's friends built the house mentioned previously. It had three bedrooms, a bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen; it was large and very spacious compared to the other tiny one we had.

Even though finances were always tight, I was able to attend the bilingual private school owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It had elementary, middle, and high school so my bilingual studies began at a very young age. That was a source of support because from my earliest years, I was getting the best education my parents could offer. My father became a teacher, and because he was a school employee, we were able to get half of our tuition paid for.

My faith and religion are, have been, and will forever be a huge source of support. My faith grew as I did. At a young age I was taught to pray, to ask God for blessings, guidance and support. As I got older, I put those teachings and beliefs to the test and on my own, found out that God did listen to me, and He loved me and because of that love, He would be my source of support from that day on. When things got hard during my studies, I prayed for support. When things got tight financially, I prayed. When miracles happened and things worked out, I prayed in gratitude. When I felt lonely and missed home, I prayed. Having my faith and religion has guided my life and decisions, and it's given me support through my challenges.

I was pleasantly surprised when I was accepted to BYU. I did not believe that my high school grades were as high as those of other students. I was happy to be accepted but nervous about how I would do as a college student. Because good grades didn't come easy, one of my professors suggested that I visit the accessibility center. Prior to this experience, I had no idea about learning disabilities and that accommodations could be provided to students. I was relieved to know that I had a learning disability. I was provided a note taker. I was allowed to record the

lectures. I was given time and a half to complete my tests. Receiving these accommodations resulted in a change that was like night and day for me. I had never felt so smart. It proved to me that I wasn't just dumb or lazy, as I had previously been labeled and believed myself to be. There was something real keeping me from learning the way others did and from doing better in school. It helped a lot to realize that it wasn't me. I wasn't dumb. With accommodations I made the honor list.

As I started to become more comfortable with my ability to be a successful college student and as I continued to discover how I learned the best, I decided to join a performing group called *Living Legends*. This group consisted of Native Americans, Polynesians, and Latin Americans that performed their native dances. As I joined the group, I felt like I had finally found where I fit in. I wasn't different. I didn't have to prove myself. I didn't get staring looks that made me feel that I was in the wrong place. I fit in. I was accepted and embraced as a member of the group. I made life-long friends who accepted and embraced my differences. I was part of something and I belonged there. It gave me a sense of empowerment.

Throughout my college years, I had great professors and a few very amazing ones that I felt truly cared about my learning and progress as their student. I remember an English teacher in particular. Writing wasn't my strength; I enjoyed it, but I knew I had plenty of room for improvement. She would tell me she really enjoyed my papers and that I was a good writer. That alone was a big help. She would give me suggestions on how to improve, and where to go to get extra help and support with my writing. She helped me see that I could be a good writer and because of that I put more effort into it. I look back and think that she was a great support and help as I continued to improve something that I already enjoyed.

It was my last semester, and I was ready to do my student teaching. One of my mentors was not only doing what was required of her as my mentor but she went beyond and became a support and a positive influence in my life at that time. She trusted me to know how to run things in the classroom and saw my potential as a successful teacher. When she was ready to retire, I was one of the first ones to hear about it, and she said, "I'm going to retire this coming year and I want you to come back and apply; I will put in a really good word for you because you were here and you did a great job." Because she was assuming I would get the job she made sure to train me through all the ins and outs about the school and how she ran her classroom and projects. Throughout this time it was more like *when* you get the job not *if* you get the job. When I got the job, she took the time to contact me and give me her personal information so I could connect with her whenever I needed help. I'm not in touch with her as often anymore but I think we still have a good relationship.

My students are a constant source of support. I love them. I think about them when I'm not in school. I worry about them and I pray for them and their families. I call them children, my children. I build relationships with them; then I teach. I feel that I have a good relationship with them. I enjoy my job because of "my children" and the interactions I have with them. It's fun. I cherish the connections that we make, the influence I have, the love that we share, and the happiness these connections bring. When things have been really hard and overwhelming in my personal life, "my children" have been my source of support, my happiness. It is in Room 126 where I feel the happiest.

I find myself connecting with my students at a unique level because of experiences that I've gone through. I clearly remember being that age and I remember how hard it was. I try to be there for them in the same way that I wished my teachers had been for me. "My children"

sometimes tell me how happy I make them feel. But the opposite is true; they are the ones that make me happy.

Having a strong connection with my family as a source of support motivated me to engage in responsible behavior and attend college (Livas Stein et al., 2013). Attending a bilingual school and coming to the United States already knowing the language was not only an advantage, but also supported my mental and physical health (Ai et al. 2014). Ai et al. (2014) also pointed out that having faith and religion as a support can be very beneficial. In addition, my faith gave direction to my life and remains a source of peace. Funaki (1995), Sandhu (1994), Schwartz et al. (2006) confirmed these findings noting that social support systems contribute to a strong sense of belonging and identity. That is what the group *Living Legends* was for me. My culture, race, socioeconomic background, and personal history have strongly influenced my relationship with my students, consistent with earlier findings (Achinstein et al., 2004).

### **Inner Strength**

My mom is very sweet. It's one of her strengths. I believe I was lucky to get that same strength from her. It is easy for me to love my students, to communicate with and try to understand them. A principal once asked me, "Could you teach others to be like you?" I told him that a lot of it had to do with my personality and the value I put on relationships. That's what I saw and learned from my mom and it was easy to imitate because it came so naturally.

I often call parents to tell them how well their kids are doing. Many times it surprises them. They don't say, "Thanks for teaching my child"; instead they make comments such as, "Thanks for caring for my child" or "Thanks for taking care of him/her."

Because my job and my students are a big part of my life, I share with them parts of my life that they don't get to see at school. I tell them about things that I like to do, the fun times and

even the sad times. I remember one time in particular during a lesson about families, I shared the sadness I felt about my parents' divorce. Following this, I took a second to clear my throat because I choked up. A student raised his hand, and with tears in his eyes said, "Miss Ordaz, I'm really sorry." Later, I met his parents at parent teacher conference. I started telling them how well he was doing in class and shared this story with them. When I finished telling the story, his mom was crying and commented, "I can tell that you know my child. You don't just teach him; you really know him. You know who my son is and this is the first time a teacher has recognized his qualities, not only his grades or his work, but all of him."

I try to find something very unique about each student to share with him or her verbally or in a note at the end of the trimester. With some kids it might be as simple as, "I like how you always say good morning" or "I like how you try to hide your smile when I make you laugh." As an example, one of my students would raise his hand with his palm and fingers perfectly straight and with his arm positioned parallel to his body. At the end of the semester I told him how unique it was. He said he wasn't even aware of it. During parent teacher meetings, I try to share with the parents something unique about their child, rather than just telling them how their child is doing in class.

Ever since I can remember I have stood up for those in need of an advocate. In high school I got kicked out of class for engaging in this kind of action. The teacher was putting the student down, and I couldn't just sit there and let it continue. I told the teacher that the way he was treating the student was inappropriate because the student was a child of God and should be treated as such.

My students know that I will advocate for them. A similar story repeated itself a couple of years ago. One of my Hispanic students walked in and with his head down said, "Miss Ordaz,

my teacher called me a mess up.” I picked up the phone and called his teacher; my voice cracked a few times. I apologized for getting emotional and for caring so much. “Don’t apologize, Lucy. We need more teachers like you,” the teacher said.

I have always enjoyed learning. At an early age I would notice when a teacher had a well-disciplined and well-organized classroom, and I would enjoy those teachers and classes more. For example, I had a teacher in high school that I had a very hard time with. It really bothered me that he didn’t seem to have enough backbone to control the class. He had no discipline in his classroom. I purposely misbehaved, hoping to make the teacher aware of the problem and convince him that he should correct his students. It never happened. He never set boundaries. It was a disappointment. As a result, I hated being in the class.

I try to make sure that my students know the rules and that respect and discipline are expected in my classroom. We can have fun, laugh, and joke around, but when I’m ready to start class and it’s time to learn, my students know it. Behaviors and actions in my classroom have either positive or negative consequences. I feel it’s important for students to know what to expect in a classroom not only when it comes to academic learning but also with respect to behavior.

My father always worked very hard regardless of his job. I learned to work hard by following his example and tried to do my best in whatever job I took. I received my first job in middle school. I told my mom that I wanted to pick strawberries to earn some money. She told me that I didn’t need to work, but I really wanted to, so she agreed. I worked very hard with the other women in the field. We picked strawberries with the men for about three hours or so and then we packed the strawberries to be shipped out. Every week the equivalent of \$2.00 was awarded to the person who picked more buckets of strawberries than anyone else. Because women didn’t usually work as many hours as the men, the women didn’t have much of a chance



to win the bonus. However, to everybody's surprise, I won the bonus one week and my name was carved on a log alongside the names of the men who had previously won. I was ecstatic. A week or so later I became very sick and my Mom told me not to work in the fields anymore, but I kept going. I couldn't give up. My summer savings for working 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., six days a week for 3 months totaled close to \$50.00. I was proud of what I had done, but I knew that I had to continue with my education. I could not be content with working a job like that for the rest of my life.

In college, I did custodial work because that's what paid the most. It was hard physically and mentally to constantly be so exhausted. There were many days that it hurt just to wake up in the morning and I would cry as I forced myself to get out of bed and head off to work.

I attribute part of my inner strength to my cultural background and my religion, as both influenced how I feel about myself, my abilities, and my capacity to achieve (Ai et al., 2014; Livas Stein et al., 2013). As Ai et al. (2014) pointed out, Latino communities tend to have an inner cultural strength that helps members of the community progress and achieve success. My family provided the foundation to my religious beliefs. My strong connections with my family continue to fuel my aspirations and desire to achieve (Livas Stein et al., 2013).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, my findings fell into six themes, family influence, vision of life, role models, challenges, sources of support, and inner strength. Initially I predicted the major influences in my life would fall within ethnic community and social network (Alba & Nee, 1997). Family influence and some sources of support occur within my social network, and role models and other sources of support fall within my ethnic community. However, my vision of life, my challenges, and my inner strength are within-person concepts that do not fit the two

overall influence categories. This finding suggests that the conceptual frameworks for similar studies should include person-centered concepts of influence to help interpret the results.

My early experiences influenced the vision for my life. Many experiences were positive, and others were experiences that became challenges. However, I believe it is because of those challenges that I developed inner strength and my vision of life was clearly set. It is thanks to those challenges that my character and personality were shaped and I became the person that I am today. I think back and I realize that I am not where I am *in spite of* what I experienced but *because of* what I experienced.

My lived experiences run counter to deficit theory, the belief that individuals representing the minority culture are more likely to underachieve academically than those representing the majority population. My self-study additionally provides an example of the application of “poverty funds of knowledge” described by Cutri et al. (2011, p. 312). My own funds of knowledge were enhanced by a number of protective factors including strong role models, motivation to succeed, and familial support. Current findings reaffirm the belief that it is possible for an individual who has recently immigrated to the U.S. and who may have experienced aspects of structural inequality associated with race and/or economic disadvantage, to rise above these and other difficult circumstances to achieve important life goals.

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## **APPENDIX A: EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW**

Mexican immigration to the United States historically brought individuals and families to the southern border states of Texas, Arizona, and California. During the mid-20th century, the majority of immigrants were male agricultural workers moving through the latitudes with seasonal crops or mine workers who settled in the American southwest (Durand, Massey, & Capoferro, 2005). This pattern changed dramatically in the late 20th century when immigration increased rapidly in other states in the U.S., including Utah, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and New York (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). This led to increased permanency for Mexican immigrants in new areas, with associated impacts on politics, culture, and communities in such fields as social services, school enrollment, legislative representation, print and digital media languages, and church membership (Durand, 2000).

Increased immigration impacts gender roles and responsibilities as new arrivals experience different cultural expectations. Data show that a much larger percentage of immigrant Mexican women work outside the home in the U.S. than do in Mexico, often to pay the costs of immigrating after their husbands have settled (Parrado & Flippen, 2005). Better-educated women are employed at significantly higher rates in Mexico than their less-educated counterparts, but this advantage dissipates among immigrants to the U.S., where jobs for first-generation Mexican women tend to be low paying regardless of education, impacted in part by undocumented status and lack of facility with English (Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

The impact of higher education on the employment of Latinos is of interest. In 2012, 65% of U.S. Latina/os graduated from high school and one-third of the graduates completed bachelor's degrees. The same year, 92.5% of whites graduated from high school and 34.5%, or 37% of the number of high school graduates, earned bachelor's degrees. (U.S. Department of

Education, 2013). These data indicate that U.S. Latina/o students who graduate from high school go on to 4-year degree programs at lower rates than Whites and attain fewer degrees. The percentage of Latina/os receiving bachelor's degrees has increased over the years, but the gap between Whites and Latina/os has widened (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In 2012, 17% of Latino workers in the U.S. had bachelor's degrees compared to 36% of White workers, showing that the percentage of Latino workers with bachelor's degrees is less than half that of White workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).

Students from Mexico comprise a small percentage of U.S. college enrollment. International students studying in undergraduate and graduate institutions of higher education in the U.S. numbered over 764,000 in 2011–12, or 3.7% of the total enrollment, a percentage relatively unchanged since the turn of the century (Farrugia, Bhandari, & Chow, 2012). Students from Mexico numbered about 13,900 in 2011–12, or 1.8% of the international students enrolled, and majored in a variety of fields of study ranging from business/management (22%) to intensive English programs (2.6%). Females constituted 37% of Mexican student enrollment. Education majors comprised 3.1% of the Mexican enrollment (Farrugia et al., 2012) compared with 6.1% total education majors in U.S. colleges and universities in the same period (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). With 97% of Mexican students enrolled in majors other than education, it seems notably uncommon to attend a U.S. college or university for a degree in teaching.

### **Reasons International Students Attend College in the U.S.**

International students attend college in the U.S. for a variety of reasons. Hazen and Alberts (2006) found that students at a major university named quality of education and available funding as the top two reasons for coming to the U.S. Half of the respondents also desired to experience the culture, and a significant percentage believed a U.S. college degree was important

for work opportunities in their home country. Likewise, a nationwide three-year study of international undergraduates revealed that their first and foremost concern was academic quality (Noel-Levitz, 2008). Latin Americans constituted the highest percentage of international students stating that career and work opportunities in America—and the lack of such opportunities at home—were the strongest reasons for staying in the U.S. upon college completion (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Respondents who did not stay in the U.S. ranked feelings of cultural alienation, differing understandings of friendship, and prioritizing family over career as reasons to leave the U.S. and return home upon graduation (Hazen & Alberts, 2006).

### **Reasons International Graduates Teach in the U.S.**

Immigrant teachers—defined as those who immigrate for college and then stay to teach, or as credentialed teachers who immigrate to teach—list a variety of reasons for teaching in their adopted countries. Urrieta (2007) talks about this shift in identity in his research:

Shifts in identity for example affect how people conceptually view and act in the world because of a reorganization in subjectivity. Part of the conceptual shift is about how people develop new understanding of themselves and their lives, including how they reinterpret their own pasts. People develop significant emotional investments in this new world and their new landscapes of perception. Shifts in conceptual identity production, however, were not uniform because people enter identity production experiences with different life histories . . . and conceptual understandings. (p. 127)

Latina/o immigrant teacher candidates attending college in southern California reported desires to help Latinos from other countries overcome marginalization and make the transition to living in America (Hwang, Baek, & Vrongistinos, 2005). Immigrant teachers in Canada reported similar desires to advocate for immigrant children and to help them negotiate minority group

experiences (Bascia, 1996). Immigrants in Australia were recruited to balance teacher diversity with increasing student diversity (Cruickshank, 2004) and to fill unmet local demand for mathematics teachers (Seah, 2002).

### **Challenges of Immigrant Teacher Candidates in College**

Immigrant teacher candidates in U.S. colleges face the same challenges reported by international students in other fields. The greatest academic challenges are usually reading, writing, and speaking academic English with sufficient facility to complete course requirements satisfactorily (Chen, 1996). International teacher candidates come with different levels of English language proficiency. In some cases students are fluent and a high level of proficiency and other times they are not, making their confidence to speak up in class or communicate with classmates and professors a challenge. Chen (1996) was able to describe how the foreign students feel with the perception they get from instructors and classmates:

How the instructors and classmates react to international students' speaking performance is an important feedback for the foreign students. If the instructors and classmates behave like they are interested in their comments, the international students would be more willing to speak out. However, if they feel that the instructors and classmates do not understand what they are talking about and show sort of no interest in their talking or are impatient, then the international students will maintain their silence in the learning process. (p. 11)

In addition to English proficiency, there is also the challenge in the writing skills for international teacher candidates. Often, even though their communication and writing skills are quite advanced, they still find it difficult to write required academic papers. Writing papers

becomes time consuming and exhausting when grammar and structure of English are the major problems in writing (Chen, 1996). Chen continues:

In writing, international students get feedback from their instructors from the way in which they comment on the paper. Some will write down the comment, “You have to improve your English writing;” some don’t make comments but carefully make corrections of grammar. Maybe the instructor wants to help them improve writing by correcting mistakes on their papers. (p. 13)

No less challenging are the psychosocial stresses created by separation from family and social support systems that serve to confirm and validate immigrant students’ senses of identity and belonging (Funaki, 1995; Sandhu, 1994). Differences in culture, customs, academic principles and practices, and college life can leave students feeling alienated, anxious, and disconnected from their peers and professors, making it difficult to establish mutual understanding and friendships (Sandhu, 1994; Solorzano, 2010; Urrieta, 2007). Students of color get a glimpse into the world of unconscious racism with comments from others: “You’re not like the rest of them. You’re different.” “If only there were more of them like you.” “I don’t think of you as a Mexican.” “You speak such good English.” “But you speak without an accent.” (Solorzano, 2010, p. 125). In particular, writers have documented perceptions of discrimination among Latino students when they do not feel accepted and valued by faculty and other students (Hurtado, 1994). Solorazano (2010) quoted another research participant saying, “There is this sense of feeling out of place. Not fitting in. It is a coldness that made an indelible mark on my graduate experience.” Another participant explained, “I felt alienated from the other students and faculty. They would avoid me, ignore me. It’s as if I wasn’t even there . . . sort of invisible (p. 128).” Rich (1994) described the devastation that occurs when the existence, voice, and

contributions of various communities or groups are omitted from the curriculum and classroom discourse:

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (p. 199)

Participants also expressed experiences with oppression. These varied, but generally were about race, class, gender, and body image. Depending on participants' specific experiences with oppression, some of these forms of oppression were highlighted more than others, but the oppressions were not mutually exclusive.

There is a long history of studying abroad to attain higher education. Students from well-developed countries are encouraged to study abroad to enhance a cross-cultural learning experience and so it is with students from under-developed countries. Both types of students study abroad with the desire to acquire knowledge and techniques that would help them improve their home countries and in hand develop a better international understanding.

Sometimes called racist nativism (Huber, 2009), the failure of U.S. college students and faculty to embrace immigrant teacher candidates essentially serves to devalue or dismiss their cultural resources and potential contributions to pre-service preparation. Whatever the reasons for teaching in a new country, immigrant teachers bring important cultural capital to their work.

Another common feeling among the international teacher candidates is loneliness. As they move to a new country they often have few friends because they have no time to make new friends. They are not only dedicated to their studies, but they often have work to pay for their

schooling. Students who study in a foreign country face not only academic challenges but also cultural shock. In addition, the international teacher candidates may not be aware of all the academic principles and practices in the American educational system. According to Funaki (1995), there are three basic causes of culture shock: the loss of familiar cues, the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and an identity crisis. “It is assumed that the experience of culture shock may enhance sojourners cultural sensitivity toward both their respective cultures and the host culture” (p. 6).

### **Immigrant Teachers’ Cultural Resources, Values, and Traditions as Assets in Teaching**

Teachers are faced with the challenges of teaching, developing cultural awareness, identifying pedagogical approaches, and even adjusting curriculum content to meet the needs of all students. Cartledge and Kourea (2008) stated, “The dramatic increases in culturally diverse pupil populations, particularly ELL students, make cultural competence imperative for school personnel. Culturally indifferent teachers, who are unaware of their biases and how these beliefs affect their teaching, are educational liabilities” (p. 365).

It is important to recognize that all new teachers, including immigrants, bring unique histories that reflect their own understandings. Teachers’ culture, race, class, and personal histories shape their cognitive frameworks or worldviews, and thus influence their relationships with students (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglmann, 2004). Some writers refer to this as a sense of *place*, or immigrant orientations to the familiar with regard to location, environment, social mores, learning theories, curriculum, and instruction (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Orr, 1992). Since immigrants are by definition displaced people, their senses of place combined with the traditional role of teachers as purveyors of culture can be discordant in their new settings (He, 1998) or can

cause natives to see the newcomers as mentors for minority students, but not the general school population (Bascia, 1996).

Conversely, when seen as assets that enhance opportunities for all learners, immigrant teachers' sense of place can help them not only advocate for culturally and linguistically diverse students but also add richness and depth of understanding to native students' worldviews (Bascia, 1996). Research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse teachers positively affect minority student attendance, school completion, and preparation for college through culturally relevant teaching, advocacy, and personal mentoring (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). It has been suggested that this occurs as a result of a cultural match with minority students in which immigrant teachers serve as role models for academic achievement and higher career expectations (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). However, match is not universal; no one culture fits all others. Gordon (2000) noted that differences in language, color, education, and cultural capital add complexity to the concept, and warn against overgeneralizing the theory of match. Moreover, Bhatia and Ram (2001) contend that culture itself is difficult to classify. It is not fixed, but can vary at individual, family, community, and regional levels (Gjerde, 2004).

### **Conceptual Framework for This Study**

The conceptual framework for this study derives from contemporary immigrant integration theory (Lee, 2009). Immigrant integration theory has progressed from deficit models that defined successful assimilation as processes of overcoming homeland and native cultural ways of thinking to contemporary asset models that value cultural diversity and contributions (Portes & Manning, 2012). Current integration theory does not assume that immigrants will meld into the dominant society, but may instead integrate in different ways for different groups over several generations (Alba & Nee, 1997). This study posits that the research subject's experiences



fall within the immigrant integration themes of ethnic community and social network. Ethnic community refers to the ways that groups and individuals identify and distinguish themselves from others (Alba, 2005). Social networks are the relationships between individuals centered in family, friendships, occupations, and other associations (Alba & Nee, 1997). The study predicts that the subject's experiences are most likely explained in terms of ethnic and linguistic affiliations and evolving social networks between home and eventual adult residence in the U.S.

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## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Today is (date) and my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am interviewing Lucy Ordaz Sanchez to collect data for her master's thesis.

### Home

1. What is your full name?
2. When and where were you born?
  - a. How did your family come to live there?
  - b. Were there other family members in the area?
    - a. Who were they?
  - c. What were your living quarters like?
    - a. How many rooms, bathrooms?
    - b. Indoor plumbing, telephone?
  - d. How long did you live there?
  - e. Where did your family move to? Why?
3. Where did you grow up?
  - a. Did you live in more than one house?
4. What do you remember about your first house?
  - a. Describe your house.
  - b. How many rooms, bathrooms?
  - c. Indoor plumbing, telephone?
  - d. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
  - e. What do you remember about your neighborhood?
  - f. Why did you move from this house?
5. What do you remember about your next house?
  - a. Can you describe your house?
  - b. How many rooms, bathrooms?
  - c. Indoor plumbing, telephone?
  - d. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
  - e. What do you remember about your neighborhood?
  - f. Why did you move from this house?
6. What do you remember about your last house?

- a. Can you describe your house?
  - b. How many rooms, bathrooms?
  - c. Indoor plumbing, telephone?
  - d. What do you remember about your neighborhood?
  - e. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
7. What do you remember about your town?
- a. How many people lived there?
  - b. What do you remember about the school?
  - c. Stores?
  - d. Parks?
  - e. Other play areas?
  - f. Health care?
  - g. Clinic or hospital?

**Family**

8. What are the full names of your parents and siblings?
9. Describe the personalities of your family members.
10. Tell me about your father.
- a. What are your early memories of your father?
  - b. What do you remember about interactions with your father?
  - c. What did your father do to support the family?
  - d. What did your father do for recreation?
  - e. What were your father's talents?
  - f. What hobbies did your father pursue?
11. Tell me about your mother.
- a. What are your early memories of your mother?
  - b. What do you remember about interactions with your mother?
  - c. What did your mother do for recreation?
  - d. What were your mother's talents?
  - e. What hobbies did your mother pursue?
12. What stories have come down to you about your parents?
- a. Grandparents?
  - a. More distant ancestors?



13. Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?
14. What did your family enjoy doing together?

**Self**

15. What is your earliest childhood memory?
16. Did you have household chores?
  - a. What were they?
  - b. Which was your least favorite?
17. Did you receive an allowance?
  - a. How much?
  - b. Did you save your money or spend it?
18. What was school like for you as a child?
  - a. Where did you attend grade school?
  - b. High school?
  - c. What were your best and worst subjects?
  - d. What did you enjoy about school?
  - e. What did you not like about school?
19. Who were your childhood heroes?
20. What were your favorite songs and music?
21. What was your religion growing up?
  - a. What church, if any, did you attend?
  - b. What role did religion play in your life as you grew up?
  - c. What role does religion play in your life today?
22. Who were your friends when you were growing up?
23. How were holidays (birthdays, Christmas, etc.) celebrated in your family?
  - d. Did your family have special traditions?
24. Of all the things you learned from your parents, which do you feel was the most valuable?
25. What accomplishments give you a sense of pride or gratitude?

**Immigration**

26. When did you decide to move to the U.S.?
27. Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?
28. When did you arrive in the U.S.?

29. What did you do when you first came to the U.S.?
30. What challenges did you face in immigrating to the U.S.?
- a. Legal clearance
  - b. Leaving family and friends
  - c. Funding
  - d. Travel
  - e. Arrival and living arrangements

**College**

31. When did you decide to attend college?
32. Why did you want to attend college?
33. Why did you choose BYU?
34. When did you begin studies at BYU?
35. What was your major?
- a. How did you choose your major?
  - b. Why did you choose your major?
36. Describe your college experiences.
- a. Spanish and English language
  - b. American culture
  - c. Fitting in
  - d. Loneliness
  - e. Communication with family
  - f. Making friends
  - g. Social life and dating
  - h. Church
  - i. Campus culture
  - j. Course work
    - a. Assistance needed and used
  - k. Finances

**Career**

37. What is your occupation?
38. Talk about the effectiveness of your college preparation.

39. How did you obtain your current position?
  - a. How long have you held your current position
40. Talk about your relationship with your administrator.
  - Colleagues
  - Students
  - Student parents
41. What do you enjoy about teaching?
42. What challenges have you faced in your job?
43. What challenges do your students face in school?
44. What challenges do your students face in their homes and families?