

Immigrant Hispanic/Latinos Teachers' Perception of Education

Young Suk Hwang

Eun Ok Baek

California State University, San Bernardino

Konstantinos Vrongistinos

California State University, Northridge

Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association,  
Montreal, Canada, April 2005

Correspondence concerning this paper should be directed to the first author at the following address: Young Suk Hwang, Ph.D., Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, California State University, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407 Tel: (909) 880-5672 Email: [yhwang@csusb.edu](mailto:yhwang@csusb.edu) Fax: (909) 880-7040

### Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine five immigrant teachers' perceptions of education. This research, especially explored (a) participants' motivation of their teaching career choice, (b) their motivation to become a teacher in the USA, (c) challenges they faced in the USA, (d) how they overcame the obstacles they faced, and (e) suggestions for USA teachers who are teaching Latino children. The data was collected using open-ended questions and were analyzed using content analysis. Findings provide evidence that the immigrant teachers utilized a combination of resilient factors and social concerns to reach their professional goals.

## Immigrant Hispanic/Latinos Teachers' Perception of Education

The purpose of the study was to examine five immigrant teachers' perceptions of education. In particular, this research explored (a) participants' motivation of their teaching career choice, (b) their motivation to become a teacher in the USA, (c) challenges they faced in the USA, (d) how they overcame the obstacles they faced, and (e) suggestions for USA teachers who are teaching Latino children.

Research shows that Hispanic/Latinos will emerge as the largest U.S. minority by the year 2050 (Baruth & Manning, 1999). Public schools in San Bernardino County, California are a clear example of a community experiencing this rapid increase in Hispanic population, but lack of fully qualified teachers. There are over 70,000 English Learners in San Bernardino County schools and more than 50% are Hispanic. San Bernardino County is home to many immigrants who have been certified as teachers in their home countries. This pool of teaching professionals can provide an excellent source of qualified teachers for English Learners in our county. They often do not have trouble finding work because of their bilingual skills; however, they are unable to enter the teaching profession in this country for a variety of reasons such as lack of understanding of certification. Therefore, researching the characteristics of highly motivated and qualified immigrant teachers is necessary for the future adjustment of school programs that adequately reflect the needs of the community.

Recently, much research related to active and meaningful learning has yielded significant insights and has led to theories concerning the theme of resiliency (Luthar, 2003; Masten, 2001; Taylor & Wang 2000). Broadly defined, resiliency refers to individuals who optimize their learning despite economic, cultural and social barriers. Studies showed the positive relationship

between resiliency and academic success of Latino students (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). This might be particularly true for immigrant teachers who wanted to become a teacher in California and who gained admission to a credential program at a California State University. However, compared to the amount of research on resilience, there has been little research on the nature of immigrant teachers. Therefore, more extensive examinations of highly motivated immigrant teachers' perception and voices of education were deemed warranted.

As a first step toward understanding immigrant teachers' resilience, this study examined five immigrant teachers who had teaching experiences in their countries and overcame difficult barriers while they pursued their teaching credential at a university.

## Method

### Participants

Five immigrant teachers (four women and one man) served as the participants for this study. The participants were recruited from the Center for Teacher Professional Development (CTPD) sponsored by US Department of Education at a state university in southern California. CTPD has been providing stipends and mentoring systems to those who had teaching experiences in their home county and want to finish their teaching credential program in Southern California. CTPD has rigorous selection criteria for selecting its participants such as high GPA, high teacher efficacy, high self-regulated learning, years of teaching experience, and bilingual or multi-lingual abilities. The selection of informants for this study was made on a voluntary basis. During the presentation of the results the researchers used aliases to protect the participants' confidentiality.

J immigrated to the USA two years ago from El Salvador Central America because he lost everything he had due to an earthquake in his county. He came to the US with his wife and

son. He had worked in education for 20 years as an elementary teacher, principal, superintendent, and administrator in his county.

Y was born in Mexico and came to the United States about ten years ago because her mother lives in the US. She never thought that she was coming to the US to live because she was so happy with what she was doing and felt very comfortable in Mexico.

V was born in Mexico City. She came to the United States in 1989 because she married someone who had a job in the USA. (“I had a good job there (in Mexico), I was close to my family; I had good friends, so he was the only reason why I came here.”)

S came because her family lives in the USA. She and her husband were elementary school teachers for six years in Mexico.

E taught elementary school for seven years in Mexico and came to the United States about three years ago because her husband had a job in the US. Currently, she is enrolled in a English as a Second Language program at a university.

### The Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to generate narratives about thoughts and perceptions of education. This study is a part of immigrant teachers’ perceptions of education. The following five open-ended questions were included in this study: (a) Why did you become a teacher? (b) Why do you want to become a teacher in America? (c) Challenges you faced to become a teacher in the USA (d) How did you overcome the obstacles you faced? (e) Are there any suggestions for US teachers who are teaching Latino children?

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participants consented to an interview and a time and date was established. At the scheduled time, the interview was conducted for approximately two hours each. Interviews were

audio taped and transcribed. Three researchers developed a coding system and any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

## Results

### 1. Why became a teacher?

Analysis of participants' motivation of their career choice yielded the following themes: intrinsic motivation orientation and family influence. Enjoyment of or passion for teaching was the most frequent category of response regarding the participants' career decision. All participants indicated intrinsic importance related to other people whom they can serve when they discussed their choice of career. For instance, J said, "I like to be a teacher. I have always have an inclination for teaching. I feel closer to people by being a teacher. To become a teacher you have to have "Mistika," passion for teaching. You have to love your profession. You have to love the children and the parents. You have to love the whole entire field."

Interestingly, all five participants also indicated family or teacher influences on their career decision. For instance, S said, "There are six members in my family. My oldest daughter, she's a lawyer but she was a teacher before. My brother, he is a teacher. I have two sisters. One is an engineer and the youngest is a school teacher. She works in Chicago. She did her masters in education and she got her PhD in education."

### 2. Why do you want to become a teacher in America?

All participants described teaching as their profession when they responded to reason of choosing a teaching career in the USA ("Well, that is my vocation. Something I have confidence in." "Teaching is not just a job from 7-3. Teaching is a part of life. You interact with the students. You create a world between the student, the parent, and you as a teacher").

They also want to help people from other countries. (“Teaching is what I love to do and I want to continue to be a teacher. There are a lot of opportunities that this county offers in which I can share my knowledge with other people/teachers. Especially, to help other Latinos and other people who immigrate to this country. That’s one of the goals that I want to accomplish. Share what I know with immigrants. I feel that we are marginalized in this county. First, love and passion for the profession, and secondly to help our own people”).

### 3. Challenges they faced to become a teacher in USA

All five participants come from a Spanish-speaking country and indicated language (English) as a challenge they faced in the USA (“Oh yeah, the language. I think it's the most difficult one”). At the same time they expressed difficulty of getting information about teaching credentials in the USA as a foreign teacher [“Well there is not enough information (on teaching credential) for us. It was very difficult for me to find out about the credentials and all that stuff. It took me years. I went to schools and I asked teachers and they didn’t know what I needed to do. I went and asked principals too, and they didn’t know”].

They felt marginalized in this society (“Marginalization is number one for being Latino. Number two is English, communication and the language barrier. Number three is the fact that you are Hispanic. People expect less of you, and people think that you are less intelligent than other people. You have been marginalized not just by the American population, but also by other Latinos. So, it’s like a competition thing, not only from the American people, but also from the same Latino people”).

### 4. How they overcame the obstacles they faced?

During the interview, participants emphasized how their family and other people contributed to their education in the USA. The participants received financial and emotional

support and encouragement from family, teachers, and friends. (“Some of them are adults and some of them are children, but comments from both of them make me want to pursue getting the credential.” “My husband, he has been very supportive... He never told me you cannot be because you don't have money. And my teachers from Cal State; they give me advice and the tools that I need.”).

They also actively looked for opportunities that would improve or help pursue their life goal (teaching). S went to her child's school and asked if she could work at the school. V also kept searching for a way she could earn a credential. Meanwhile, she took English courses at a community college and found one mentoring program, supporting foreign teachers to complete teaching credentials.

#### 5. Suggestions for USA teachers who are teaching Latino children

Participants were interested in creating a learning community among students, parents, and teachers. They believe that working with parents is the most important element for Latino children's academic success. (“Working with parents...First of all if the mountain doesn't come to me I will go to the mountain. This means I will be the active one. If the parents have to work I will go to the parents. I will go to their workplace. American society people are not people oriented. They are alone; they are individualistic. They need to break the cycle. But Latinos are people oriented and getting along with everybody is just in our nature”).



## Discussion and Educational Importance

The present findings are consistent with those of Gonzalez and Padilla (1997). Gonzalez and Padilla have identified the protective factors (personal and external resources) that enhance students' achievement (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). Personal resources include self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, whereas external resources include supports from others such as family, teachers, or mentoring systems. The current study also found both personal (passion and enjoyment for teaching) and external resources (family or teacher influence on their career choice), especially related to the participants' teaching career choice. The motivation of all participants' teaching career choice in this study was oriented in intrinsic factors such as passion and enjoyment for teaching and family or teacher influence.

In addition to the protective factors, the current study found a dynamic role of cultural factors related to their teaching career choice in the USA. Immigrant teachers in this study perceived social concerns as one of the important motivational factors. The participants' motivations are based upon not only enjoyment or others' influences but also their devotion and willingness to help others' lives. They also recognized creating a learning community among students, parents, and teachers as a key for Hispanic children's academic success.

Even though they possessed a high level of knowledge and experience in teaching, all participants in this study continued to struggle with language, social, and institutional barriers. They integrated family's emotional and financial supports with cognitive monitoring processes.

Overall, the findings showed that the five immigrant teachers' perceptions and motivations on education are complex. The highly resilient immigrant teachers' successes may not be absorbed solely by intrinsic motivation or others' support. Rather, they may orchestrate

and integrate all sources of personal, external factors, and social concerns such as willingness to help others and developing a learning community, to reach their professional goals.

Because of the small number of participants, the results of this study cannot be generalized to a larger group of Hispanic Americans or other groups. However, we believe that the immigrant teachers' motivation on education may represent patterns that might be verified in future studies with larger and more diverse groups.

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