LATINO STUDENTS DEFINING AN IDENTITY IN AN AMERICAN TOWN

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Abstract

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Based on indicators of educational achievement in the United States, Latinos have lagged behind most other demographic groups. This study explored Latino students’ social identity through a qualitative research design that privileged student voice as a vehicle to addressing educational disparities. The research design employed a phenomenological approach within the framework of practitioner research to explore students’ constructions of identity in reference to school in one suburban community. Research has shown that students’ experiences and sense of social identity can have significant impacts on academic performance (Aronson & Good, 2002; Moya, 2002; 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). As a Latino school district leader who desires to improve practice by better understanding Latino students in a suburban school setting in which they have a minority presence, in this study I created a forum where students could speak to their experiences and reality in that setting. This study’s conceptual framework was grounded in the following areas of scholarship: social identity theory, critical race theory, and the concepts of student voice. Data collection included interviews, focus groups, and identity mapping with 15 high school participants. The study resulted in four main findings: Latino students feel stigmatized and isolated; they perceived and replicated racial microaggressions; there are elements of school they appreciate; and institutional practices create and support bias. This study is only a start to
a fuller review and exploration of these themes at the school level. For such conversations to be productive, students’ voices must be included.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The city of Peakstown is a prosperous suburban community outside a major northeastern metropolitan center.¹ Over the past 20 years, Peakstown has become home to many Latino families. This population is also reflected in the public schools, where Latinos are now approximately 13% of the population.

Since the first Latino students reached classrooms, district and community leaders have perceived an achievement gap in academic performance between them and their White peers, who constitute a majority in the school and in the town. In turn, these leaders have introduced multiple programs, initiatives, and policies to correct these differences. Despite these efforts, school administrators and the community both report that an achievement gap persists between Latinos and their White counterparts. This gap is widest for Latino boys, who achieve at lower rates than Whites and are classified for special education services at higher rates than any other group in the district.² As a result, talk of closing this gap has been ongoing among formal leaders for more than a decade, and it has been a stated goal of the Board of Education for much of that time. However, these conversations have not included the voice of Latino students.

In 2010, I chaired an ad hoc committee of community stakeholders organized by the school district superintendent, charged with identifying factors that inhibited the

¹ Names and identifying features have been changed to protect subjects’ identities.
² Special education refers to a range of services provided to students identified through requisite testing as needing an individual education plan because of learning differences.
elimination of the achievement gap. Over the course of nearly six months, committee members gathered monthly to collect information from their own experiences and gather formal and informal data from their peers. The result was a comprehensive report that identified elements in the daily practices of schools and in the lives of Latino families that the committee believed compromised student success. The report also made recommendations that would impact student services. As in previous attempts, a critical oversight in our efforts was that students and families were not consulted in a meaningful way.

This failing is not unique in the research on Latino students or other populations of color. Latinos have often been positioned as subjects to be studied and not as active participants in the research itself (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Murillo, Jr., et al., 2009). Before district leaders continue to invest resources to close the achievement gap, it is essential to hear from our students. Knowing how they view their reality as members of Peakstown schools is an important first step toward solving the perceived underachievement problem of Latino students.

Research has shown that students’ experiences and sense of social identity can have a significant impact on academic performance (Aronson & Good, 2002; Moya, 2002, 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele et al., 2002). This is in large part because of the way others identify an individual or how an individual self-identifies, which frames the context of academic life (Steele, 2004). This includes a student’s identification with their racial or ethnic group, which has been shown to facilitate or inhibit academic achievement (Hurtado, García, Vega, & Gonzalez, 2003; Ogbu, 1997).
Freire (2000) proposed that the empowerment of the individual can begin by asking him to name his experience so he can understand his reality and change it if necessary. This study provided a space for Latino students to tell their own stories in a way that has been largely absent in formal and informal discussions of Latinos and their place in Peakstown. This study is exploratory in nature (Maxwell, 2012a; Schutt, 2011) and seeks to fill gaps noted from the ad hoc committee’s study of barriers to Latino students’ academic achievement. Beyond the confines of that previous effort, however, my purpose is to more holistically understand the experiences of the Latino students in Peakstown by asking how they make sense of their identity, define themselves as part of the school community, and perceive their condition.

**Significance of the Study**

For more than ten years, student achievement on standardized assessments has been tightly linked to an accountability system of punishments and rewards for schools and districts, largely because of federal policies outlined in the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act*. At the local level, the response has often been to impose a mandated curriculum that responds to testing standards, with interventions to support underachieving students (Contreras, 2009). As Montero-Sieburth (2005) advocated, this proposed study places Latino students—the subjects and “recipients of reform”—at the center of an investigation to better understand their school experiences. It draws on students’ lived experiences as the primary way of understanding the effects of practices designed to improve teaching and learning.
This study aims to redress an imbalance in traditional top-down educational models that often “do not take students [of color] seriously and—as a consequence— isolate them” (van der Valk, 2014). This is a pervasive pattern that Campano (2007) referred to as the “asymmetrical power dynamics between school and the community” (p. 54) that is typical of the relationship between immigrant students and schools. Such a dynamic leads to the silencing of students. This proposed study seeks to break that silence and include minority voices in the conversation.

Latinos are the largest, fastest-growing minority group in the United States (Brown & Lopez, 2013; Center, 2013). More than 50 million Latinos live in the United States, and the young population is steadily growing (Center, 2013; Fraga & Garcia, 2010). By 2050, Latinos are expected to represent at least 24% of the total U.S. population. In 2012, approximately one out of four births was Latino/Hispanic. In that same year, Latinos became the largest minority in our schools with about 25% of pre-K to grade 12 public school students identifying as Latino/Hispanic. These growth rates speak to a diversity transition, where minorities as a whole and Hispanics in particular will by sheer numbers take on a more influential role in the United States.

American schools are unique in their explicit mission to prepare young people for citizenship and life (Alba, 2013; Parker, 2003; Woyshner, Watras, & Crocco, 2004). As such, it is important to understand how and what Latino children are taking from their experiences in public education that impact their development into adulthood and as citizens of the United States and the world. Researchers have argued that by many
measures, the history of Latinos in American education has been troublesome (Alba, 2013; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

The Latino experience illustrates that in most settings the structure of schooling favors middle- and upper-class students from the majority population (Bar Haim & Shavit, 2013). In most traditional indicators of educational achievement, Latinos have generally lagged behind much of the population (KewalRamani, 2007; Lopez & Center, 2009; MacDonald, 2004; MacDonald & Monkman, 2005). This has generated compensatory programs, reforms, and efforts to improve student performance (Alba, 2013; Montero-Sieburth, 2005). Even before the No Child Left Behind Act, many of these changes began to emerge from the landmark study A Nation at Risk (Gardner, 1983). Since then, waves of school reform have focused on school organization, academic standards and curricula, teacher development, and parental involvement, in addition to the recent addition of high-stakes testing (Contreras, 2009; Montero-Sieburth, 2005).

This was a practitioner-based research study, in the tradition described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). As a Latino school district administrator, I placed myself in the position of learning from my students rather than simply examining them. In this study, practitioner research, which is characterized by a systematic, structured inquiry that aims to generate transformative knowledge to improve practice, was used to better understand the participants’ lived experiences (Ravitch, 2014). By highlighting the students’ voice, this study aims to realize the potential for practitioner-based research, which lies, as Ravitch (2014) wrote, “in the stories, in the data, and in the evidence that
emerges from a more relational, contextualized, collaborative and practice-centered kind of research” (p. 6).

Examples of Latino researchers in their own communities have emerged in a variety of classroom and school settings, but not without controversy (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Quiroz, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Of these efforts, Irrizarry and Nieto (2010) wrote:

The shift from being studied to doing the studying has not come without a perception that researchers studying communities with which they are connected often lack the objectivity necessary for quality research. We assert, to the contrary that Latino/a researchers offer unique and invaluable contributions to the field, amplifying voices that have consistently been excluded from the research. (p. 115)

Answers to the difficult questions that face the education of Latinos may well exist between the perspectives of non-Latino and Latino researchers, the latter of whom may bring an insider’s understanding to the often complex factors that motivate behavior and allow for epistemologies to emerge from the community (Murillo, Jr, et al., 2009; Rosaldo, 1993).

Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2011) stated that “a conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 7). The following section is composed of three parts. The first is a review of relevant scholarship informing the conceptual framework for this research. It begins with a brief look at the U.S. demographic shift, followed by an examination of the scholarship on Latinos in American schools and explanations of the achievement gap. The second section is a theoretical core of three interwoven theories
that propelled this study: social identity, critical race theory, and student voice. The final section explores the theories and research that radiate from the theoretical core and form an integral part of the understandings needed to contextualize this study and its findings. The topics covered here are aversive racism and microaggressions, perceived racism, internalized racism and devaluation among Hispanics, and institutional bias.

Review of relevant scholarship

The demographic shift and views of Latinos. In 2012, the last year for which estimates are available, the U.S. immigrant population was approximately 53 million, which included an estimated 12 million unauthorized immigrants—or about 16% of the U.S. population. This is almost double what it was in 2000. This growth has been one of the most significant demographic shifts in the United States in the past 40 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

For a historical comparison, consider the extraordinary waves of immigration the country experienced in the later 19th and early 20th centuries when, at its peak in 1900, 14% of the nation was foreign born (MacDonald, 2004). Most of these early immigrants came from eastern and southern European nations, as opposed to the White Anglo-Saxon groups that dominated U.S. society at that time. The new immigrants came largely to flee a variety of political and economic challenges in their home countries and fed the need for labor in the industrial revolution that drove the American economy to new heights during the later 19th and early 20th centuries (Chavez, 2013).

The arrival of so many new immigrants with different customs and languages led to a xenophobic backlash and restrictive immigration laws that sought to stem the flow of
arrivals from eastern and southern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These new laws favored the Nordic and Alpine nations of northern Europe. Such measures were in place until the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Dinnerstein, Nichols, & Reimers, 1996). With the 1965 liberalization of immigration laws, within the context of the broader Civil Rights Movement, American immigration changed radically, and more immigrants poured into the county from Asia, the Middle East, and most notably, Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean. Interventionist American foreign policy, such as the United States occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965, had affected many of these countries. These arrivals joined historic populations of Mexican-Americans, largely concentrated in the Southwest, along with other communities of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and to a lesser extent Hispanics of other national origins that could mostly be found in Northeastern urban centers (Reimers, 1983).³

Like Eastern Europeans before them, as their numbers increased throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and turn of the current century, Latino immigrants have faced a hostile stance in American society, which is echoed in the media and popular culture at large. Terming it the “Latino Threat Narrative,” Chavez (2013) wrote:

The Latino Threat Narrative consists of a number of taken-for-granted and often-repeated assumptions about Latinos, such as that Latinos do not want to speak English; that Latinos do not want to integrate socially and culturally into the larger U.S. society; that the Mexican-origin population, in particular, is part of a grand conspiracy to take over the U.S. Southwest (the reconquista); and the Latin women are unable to control their reproductive capacities, that is, their fertility is out of control, which fuels both demographic changes and the alleged reconquista [reconquest]. (p. ix)

³ The terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably.
These assumptions, Chavez asserted, have found their way into popular culture and politics. For example, debates on immigration played a prominent role in the 2012 presidential election and have been a cause for consternation in the two dominant political parties.

**Latinos in U.S. schools.** The history of Latinos in U.S. schools is significant in how it echoes current challenges. There have always been Hispanics in American schools. Historians can trace their presence to Spanish colonial times, the birth of the Mexican nation, and the United States’ earliest encounters with Hispanic populations in the 19th century as the country extended west into Texas, the rest of the American southwest, and California, all formerly part of Mexico (MacDonald, 2004; MacDonald & Monkman, 2005). As Latino and White groups came together, Whites instituted policies that systematically disadvantaged Latino students in ways not unlike the experiences of African-American students in the segregated south (MacDonald, 2004). Such practices, as documented in one ethnographic history, had the cumulative effect of promoting a parallel Latino system of school and society that existed alongside that of Whites (Menchaca, 1995).

In response to these conditions, Mexican-Americans advocated for change as early as 1929 through formal organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), which was joined by other groups in the post-World War II years (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). These efforts reached significant heights in a series of court cases pressed by organizations such as LULAC as early as 1930. In 1946 and 1948, before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Mexican-American groups were dismantling
segregation in several California districts (MacDonald & Monkman, 2005). Despite these early legal successes, Latino schoolchildren continued to lag behind their peers throughout the 20th century (Madrid, 2011).

In 1980, the federal government issued its first report highlighting a gap in achievement between Latino students and their White counterparts (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1980). The report presented Latinos’ high dropout rates and low scores on achievement tests. Various efforts to improve conditions moved apace. By the 1990s, however, progress was still elusive, leading the government to issue a similar report in which it called the situation of low academic achievement among Latinos a “crisis.” The President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans report, authored by the Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (1996), issued this warning:

> The magnitude of the crisis is unparalleled. According to every educational indicator, Hispanic Americans are making progress at alarmingly low rates—from preschool through grade school, from junior high through high school, and on into higher education. The cumulative effect of such neglect is obviously detrimental not only to Hispanics, but to the nation. (p. 6)

Implicit and explicit detrimental effects could result if the nation perpetuates the reproduction of an undereducated Latino population, growing in number but not in preparation to equally contribute to the civic life, economic growth, and well-being of the nation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

This is the same point raised by Alba (2013) when he asked who would replace the aging, largely White post–World War II baby boomer generation in the workplace. Retiring boomers, a highly skilled group, are exiting the workforce at a quickening pace.
Compared to other Western economies where populations are shrinking, the United States has a young adult population fueling its development. However, the lag in educational attainment of immigrant children, and in many cases second- and third-generation decedents of immigrants, would lead us to believe they will not be able to effectively contribute to the economic growth and development of the United States. Alba (2013) framed the economic imperative of improved educational outcomes as follows:

While educational credentials determine which tier of the labor market individuals can enter, school-taught skills are a plausible predictor of workplace performance, especially in jobs that require more than a secondary-school credential, and thus they also indicate potential for advancement. (p. 158)

Without effective educational success, the argument concludes, the country could be permanently disadvantaged.

**Student perceptions and explanations for the Latino achievement gap.** Several models have emerged to explain the underachievement of Latino students. Among these is a group that focuses on students’ affective domain, sense of identity, and achievement. These efforts have looked at the phenomena from macro and micro levels. An early representative of the broad-scale reflection is the work of Portes and Bach (1985), whose comparative analysis of Mexican and Cuban immigrants illustrated differing levels of social integration mediated by geography, race, and social capital. A complementary example of studies looking at the individual as the unit of analysis is Suárez-Orozco’s (1987) look at Salvadoran immigrants, whom he found to be guided as much by the conditions in their new setting as by the realities of their home country.
Taken together, these two early examples of studies that consider the experience of Latinos in the United States speak to individuals’ internal dialogue and efforts to make sense of their experiences within a larger social group, which in turn functions among many other groups. Both studies also reveal the variety of the Latino population, which varies not only in countries of origin, but also in immigration patterns, mobility, educational level, race, and languages of use, among several other indicators (Fraga & Garcia, 2010; Lopez, 2009; Portes, 2009). The heterogeneity of the Latino community is such that unique sub-groups merit their own studies to understand the complex factors that affect individual daily lives.

As it applies to schools and the concerns that gave rise to this study, there is an established debate in the literature about whether students’ identification with their racial or ethnic group facilitates or inhibits academic achievement (Hurtado et al., 2003; Ogbu, 1997). For example, Steele and Aranson (1995) observed and defined a phenomenon they termed “stereotype threat,” whereby African-American students performed poorly on academic tasks or became disengaged from school because they worried they would confirm preexisting negative assumptions about their scholastic aptitude. Researchers have replicated a stereotype threat for Latinos, and the stigma of low socioeconomic status and race has proven to have an effect on school performance similar to African-Americans (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Croizet et al., 2004; Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002). As a factor that affects self-esteem, stereotype threat has also been observed among high-achieving Latino students, who have been shown to have a lower self-
perception of their skills in reading and writing, attributable to negative stereotypes of Latinos (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

Additional explanatory models for the Latino achievement gap exist, including models that focus on the quality of inputs such as curriculum and teachers as well as levels of funding and availability of programs, in addition to the role of language of instruction (de Cohen & Clewell, 2007; Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Hurtado et al., 2003). The same is true of an approach that has reconceptualized the achievement gap as an opportunity gap (Huguley et al., 2007). Rather than look at the manifestations of the achievement gap at the school level, researchers studying the opportunity gap have detailed students’ social input when they arrive at school for instruction. This includes a look at how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, family structure, and social networks affect the achievement rates of some groups (Huguley et al., 2007). All of these models, however, ultimately rest on the stories of individual students. Without their perspective, we fail to learn from the most valuable source of information and change. Therein lies the greatest value of student voices and the focus of this study.

Engaging students has allowed researchers to further explore aspects of students’ understanding of themselves in schools. Several studies have given students the opportunity to narrate their experiences with school in their own words, or at least as co-constructed accounts with researchers (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Irizarry, 2007). For example, Quiroz (2001) used narrative inquiry to explore how Puerto Rican students described their lives in eighth grade versus 11th grade. In another study, Diaz-Greenberg (2003) collaborated with Latino students in an action research study to explore factors
that led to the conditions in their school, and how they perceived their reality within that context, to bring about a desired change.

Together, these three areas of scholarship speak to the extraordinary times and conditions for Latinos living in the United States. The story of Hispanic immigration, historical struggles, and manifestations of an achievement gap are integral threads of individual stories—stories that reflect how these individuals affect and are affected by the world around them. Likewise, the experience of Latinos in Peaksville is a dynamic interaction between individuals who have their own identity, yet share a group identity as Hispanics. This will affect how they see themselves and how they interact with other groups in the public sphere.

**Theoretical core.** From the preceding, it is clear that Hispanics’ racial and social identity has impacted their trajectory in the United States. With this in mind, three theories form the core of this study’s conceptual framework: social identity theory, critical race theory, and student voice. What follows is a review of all three.

**Social identity theory.** Social identity offers a perspective from which to view how Latino students define themselves, as individuals and as a group, within the context of a setting where they form a distinct ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and language minority, as the students in this study do (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Critical race theory provides a framework for analyzing the patterns that emerge when such differences in race, ethnicity, language, and class come together (Bernal, 2013). Lastly, student voice and counter-storytelling expand on the value and appropriate use of students as sources of knowledge able to reflect on their own
experience (Cook-Sather, 2006). In the pages that follow, I provide a summary of and my rationale for their inclusion in this study. Figure 1 shows a graphic representation of how I see these domains working together.

Figure 1: Graphic representation of the study’s conceptual framework

The purpose of this study is to understand how a distinct group of students, largely perceived as members of a low-status group (Latinos), see themselves within the context of a larger community that is dominated by a higher-status group (mostly Whites) to better understand Latinos’ experiences as students. Questions of identity are often articulated through “mediating” institutions, such as schools (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner & Oakes, 1986). It is “within the varied forms of cultural production at work in the public sphere that identities and subjectivities are ‘made’” (Hall, 2002, p. 2). As such, an American high school like the one at Peakstown is a prime site at which to explore Latino students’ social identity.
Social identity theory offers a broad view of interpersonal and intergroup relations and processes, which may inform the condition of Latino students in a multi-ethnic, multi-race setting. Previous research speaks to the importance of social identity as it relates to academic achievement, especially as it applies to marginalized groups (Aronson & Good, 2002; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For example, we know that at-risk students who build strong relations with teachers or participate in after-school activities are more connected and likely to stay in school (Ozner, et al., 2008). Therefore, Latinos and other minority students are at a disadvantage when they are not part of or represented in the mainstream. This is compounded when they may be subject to overt or subtler racism, or exist outright as a less valued group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Steele et al., 2002).

Social identity theory has given rise to multiple offshoots. Tajfel (1979) defined the basic concepts in the field, along with Turner (1985), who later articulated social categorization theory, one of the main extensions of this approach. Social identity emphasizes the role of identity in intergroup relations, and self-categorization focuses on the mechanism that facilitates group identity. The following pages provide a full description of social identity theory and how it related to this study.

When the concept of social identity emerged, the field of psychology was largely individualist in its orientation (Turner & Oakes, 1986). This view argued that the individual was the sole psychological actor and that social realities were a construction of complex relations in which individuals engaged. Tajfel (1979) viewed this as a central
weakness in the view of social psychology at that time and presented his understanding and the central questions he sought to answer as follows:

Social categorization is still conceived as haphazardly floating “independent variables” which strikes at random as the spirit moves it. No links are made or attempted, between the conditions determining its presence and mode of operation, and its outcomes in widely diffused commonalities of social behaviour. Why, when and how is social categorization salient or not salient? What kind of shared constructions of social reality, mediated through social categorization, lead to a social climate in which large masses of people feel they are in long-term conflict with other masses? What, for example, are the psychological transitions from a stable to an unstable social system? (p. 51)

Tajfel advocated for a broader view of social psychology and its impact on the psychology of the individual. He argued that the individual and society are one and the same, not isolated actors, and that a dynamic relationship exists between the psychology of individuals and their interaction with society that impacts and defines both. For example, consider the sense of identity a football player takes from being not just a football player, but also a player who is part of a team. Within the context of this study, Tajfel’s approach suggests that to better understand the target population of Latino students, it is important to view them both as individual actors and as members of a distinct group or sub-group identified as Latino students.

Tajfel (1979) differentiated between social identity and personal identity—the former term pertaining to the individual as an actor in society and the latter a view of the individual in individual or interpersonal settings. Social identity is “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1979, p. 140). Defining social identity in this way helped Tajfel explain how personal and social identity leads to
“ingroup” favoritism and prejudice, which can in turn lead to intergroup conflict (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). Ingroup is defined here as the social group to which an individual claims membership.

The theory of social identity proposes that it is this bias toward the ingroup that underpins ethnocentrism and all manner of status hierarchies that are often present in the dynamics of intergroup relations, be they sports teams or rival nations. It explains ethnocentrism, defined by Sumner as “this view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and valued in reference to it” (Wagner, Christ, & Heitmeyer, 2010, p. 364). Ethnocentrism pits the ingroup against the outgroup. Within the context of this study, because of their immigrant, minority, low-prestige status, Latino students constitute a “salient outgroup” (Wagner et al., 2010, p. 365) in contrast to majority Whites. It is yet to be seen to what degree that position affects Latinos as students at Peakstown.

The lines between ingroups and outgroups are not always fixed. The permeability of group definitions is closely related to the stability of group identity (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Breakwell, 1986, 2010). When members of a group with lower status see group lines as stable and permeable, they will often adopt the markers of the higher-status group and deemphasize their own group identity. However, some boundaries such as race and ethnicity are less permeable. How the identity of the lower-status outgroup evolves affects the individual. For some, the transition to a dominant group may leave those who have made the decision to pass with a marginal identity not fully belonging to any group.
Where the boundaries between groups are fixed, there is a range of potential reactions. In these situations, the low-status group may reject the higher-status group outright and attempt to redefine or seek out other points of comparison. These comparisons allow them to positively contrast themselves against the higher-status group or do the same with groups that occupy an even lower status. The effects of these perceptions, as described earlier, can manifest themselves in school performance.

Each person’s story has the power to instruct and illuminate. This study seeks to understand to what degree these factors may be a reality for students in Peakstown, where what it means to be Latino or White is defined by many factors, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and concepts of race.

**Critical race theory.** Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework developed by legal scholars to address social justice and racial oppression in the United States. CRT has its philosophical foundation in the neo-Marxist idea of critical theory, or *ideologiekritik*, advanced by the Frankfurt School in the first half of the 20th century. Critical theory maintains that dominant ideologies, or inherited ways of thinking, are at the root of what may limit human development. To address such limits, critical theory calls for a systematic analysis or critique of what is understood to be knowledge in an interdisciplinary manner (Geuss, 1981). This act of analysis, itself a form of knowledge, is an active process.

CRT is an examination of the points where race, law, and power in society meet (Yosso, 2005). It is a “collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relations among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001,
Extensions of this type of analysis have emerged in other fields, including Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), to address the conditions specific to Latinos within the context of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). Elenes and Delgado Bernal (2010) presented the case for LatCrit as follows:

LatCrit . . . emerged partially as a result of what some scholars felt was a CRT Black/White binary that did not allow the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, immigration status, and other important issues related to Latinas/os to emerge. (p. 35)

LatCrit is viewed as compatible to CRT, and not a replacement, although it addresses the conditions of Latinos that distinguish them from Blacks in the Black–White perspective.

As in legal studies, CRT and LatCrit, when applied together to education, are viewed as a framework to challenge the dominant views of race in schools by exploring how education theory and practice privilege or disadvantage certain racial or ethnic groups (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Bernal (2001) defined five themes of CRT in education research, which speak to this study.

1. *The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism.* CRT views race and racism as an endemic in society, yet it understands that racism is but one form of subordination, and class is another.

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology.* CRT challenges assertions that schools are unbiased and objective. Rather, it views them as institutions that mirror and are creations of their respective societies and thus mirror that society’s values and functions in the service of the status quo and society’s reproduction.

3. *The commitment to social justice.* CRT has a commitment to eliminating
racism and ending other forms of discrimination and subordination, such as
gender and class.

4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* CRT values the experiential
knowledge of people of color as legitimate and appropriate for the purposes of
understanding and analyzing racism in education.

5. *The interdisciplinary perspective.* CRT rejects a one-dimensional view of race
and racism, choosing instead to view race in its current and historical context,
in an interdisciplinary manner that can better capture the complex nature of a
lived experience.

CRT aligns on an epistemological and ontological basis with the overall research
design. The Latino students of Peakstown represent part of the historic migration to the
United States from parts of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. CRT
provides an effective analytical tool for the study of the students’ experiences because,
with race as a central factor, it illustrates the societal manifestations of group psychology
highlighted by social identity theory.

As explained earlier, social identity theory holds that the differentiation between
groups is motivated by the ingroup’s desire to assign value to its own attributes. Studies
have repeatedly linked this desire to assign value to the ingroup with outgroup derogation
(Brewer, 1999; Preston & Parker, 2013; Wagner et al., 2010), which, when immigration
is considered as a factor, often leads to anti-immigration bias, racism, and negative
stereotypes (Dovidio & Esses, 2001; Lee & Fiske, 2006; Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka,
2009). In exploring how these Latino students see themselves as members of the
Peakstown community, this study examined the point where immigration, self-identity, ingroup/outgroup, and school experience met in this setting.

CRT further supports this study in that it makes space for students’ voices, even if, or precisely because, they may be marginalized members of the school, district, or community. As such, the stories they tell inform what it means to be a Latino student in Peakstown. In this sense, students offer a critique of a system that usually only critiques them.

**Student voice.** Since the 1980s, a number of writers have noted the lack of student voice in discussions about teaching and learning. The concept gained greater currency in the late 1990s and the early part of the 21st century (Cook-Sather, 2006). This study used the Cook-Sather (2006) definition of student voice:

“Student voice” as a term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools. (p. 363)

In this sense, student voice implies a degree of *engagement, agency,* and *power,* which is supported by three premises: an acknowledgement of the individual’s right to have active participation in forces that impact life; empathy, understanding, and connection to others; and a commitment to dialogue or equal exchange (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004).

The concept of student voice closely aligns with the concept of counter-storytelling in CRT. This tool allows for the emergence of lived experiences that otherwise would not be heard (Delgado, 1989). These are typically the stories of those living on the margins of society, which is arguably where most Latino students see themselves. CRT sees individuals’ stories as legitimate and rich resources to shape policy
and practice because the dominant stories, or the stories that are told, come from people who are in the majority—in this case, Whites. These “majoritarian” stories carry “layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them to the discussion of racism” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 56). In the language of social identity, the stories told by those in the majority—the privileged ingroup—inherently favor the majority at the expense of minorities’ views, ideas, and perspectives. This study is a stance against that impulse. Student voice introduces into a critical conversation “the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies-in-practice” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). With respect to students’ social identity and how they see themselves in school, students’ voices can provide a unique perspective.

Critics of student voice contend that it is a lesser substitute for more traditional quantitative research (Cruddas, 2001; Lodge, 2005; Weiler, 1991). In listening to individuals, critics say, there is the danger that one voice can take on a dominating presence, resulting in one voice or a few voices speaking for a whole group (Weiler, 1991). Moreover, they caution that it is important to keep in mind that student voices may harbor their own prejudices and lack transparency (Cruddas, 2001). These potential pitfalls highlight the importance of validity and trustworthiness, both of which will be addressed in the coming pages.

However, with these concerns noted, individual student voices in a study of this nature can provide a direct understanding of lived experiences as only a firsthand account can. Human behavior is an amalgam of multiple contexts and sequence of events, of an
irreducible complexity, that cannot be framed by a quantitative formula; it requires the power of individual stories. As Brooks (2013) observed:

People are really good at telling stories that weave together multiple causes and multiple contexts. Data analysis is pretty bad at narrative and emergent thinking, and it cannot match the explanatory suppleness of even a mediocre novel. (p. A23)

Qualitative data has the power to develop nuance that numbers alone cannot.

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) stated, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” (Adichie, 2009, 10:08). This study was an effort to understand the experience of six Latino students who tell their own stories. These students were asked to speak to their reality as a first step to initiating a change.

**Contextualizing this study**

*Aversive racism and microaggressions.* When immigration brings groups together, aspects of social identity intersect with CRT. As explained earlier and as illustrated in the history of Hispanics in the United States, multiple forms of derogation can result from contact between immigrant and native groups. These include anti-immigration bias, negative stereotypes, and racism (Dovidio & Esses, 2001; Lee & Fiske, 2006; Pehrson et al., 2009). To properly reflect on the findings of this study, it is necessary to explore modern concepts of racism (Pettigrew, 1989). Two manifestations of modern racism informed the analysis of the data: aversive racism and racial microaggressions.

Aversive racism falls within the broader category of racism, which is defined as “an organized system of privilege and bias that systematically disadvantages a group of
people perceived to be of a specific race” (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002, p. 65) Racism is composed of three elements: first, it holds that members of a group have distinguishing race-based characteristics; second, it claims those characteristics make a group inferior; and third, it marries the negative attitudes and beliefs with the power to translate these feelings into disparate treatment that advantages one group and disadvantages another (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2010).

At the individual level, racism can consciously manifest itself through prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination (Feagin, 2006). In modern times, especially since the civil rights movements of the 1960s, so-called traditional forms of undeniable racism have become rarer; in its place are subtle expressions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Aversive racism acknowledges the persistence of blatant racism but also posits that racism can exist through unconscious, or implicit, biases that reflect the existence of racist sentiments in the individual being reconciled with personal standards or norms against bias (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Aversive racists “sympathize with victims of past injustice, support the principle of racial equality, and regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but, at the same time, possess negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks which may be unconscious” (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005, p. 618). In essence, they harbor racist sentiments that sometimes lead to action but consciously communicate and endorse equality and egalitarianism.

Aversive racists will not act in a clearly racist manner where strong social norms would prohibit it, nor would they make such behavior obvious to others and themselves. This would threaten the self-image they hold as non-racist, which is an image they want
to project and protect. Aversive racism might then occur when “an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race” (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 319). For example, White students choose to exclude a minority classmate from an activity because, they rationalize, there will be no other minorities there and they fear the minority classmate will feel ill at ease. These people may have good intentions but act in ways that can be destructive and then justify those actions through non-racist interpretations of their reality. Researchers have termed some of these types of actions microaggressions (Yossa, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal insults (Feagin, 1995). They are brief and “stunning” encounters that happen often to members of subordinated groups and impact their self-image (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Pierce (1969) introduced the term “microaggressions,” calling it “offensive mechanisms . . . which are designed to reduce, dilute, atomize, and engage the hapless into his ‘place’” (p. 303). Solórzano (2000) described them as “subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). These are a type of everyday exchanges that members of a dominant group may express unknowingly. They can be “subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (Sue et al., 2007).

Because acts of microaggression, such as “averted gazes” and “exasperated looks” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1992, p. 1283) or comments such as “You’re not like the rest of them” or “I don’t think of you as a Mexican” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 130), are difficult to grasp or define, they can also be difficult to correct. Yet, it has been proposed
that the effects of microaggressions, experienced on a regular basis, have a more
damaging cumulative effect than traditional forms of open, direct racism (U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). For African-American, Latino, and
Asian students, perceived microaggressions have been shown to result in a sense of
isolation and displacement (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000).
The shaded nature of microaggressions prevents perpetrators from recognizing “their own
complicity in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities and their role in creating
disparities in employment, healthcare, and education” (Sue et al., 2007).

Sue and others (2007) defined three types of microaggressions: microinsult,
microassault, and microinvalidation. For the purposes of this study, microassault and
microinsults are most relevant. Microinsults are small but explicit acts that demean.
These could be name-calling, avoidance, or otherwise intending to hurt the victim; the
actions may not be violent but are conscious and in this way similar to familiar, direct
expressions of racism. However, these are expressed on an individual level, in generally
limited, private, or micro situations that allow the perpetrator some anonymity. The
conditions for microinsults are those where “people are likely to hold notions of minority
inferiority privately and will display them publicly only when they (a) lose control or (b)
feel relatively safe to engage in a microassault” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Microinsults
communicate rudeness or insensitivity, or otherwise demean the victim’s racial or ethnic
background. They are often communicated unknowingly but are supported by a logic that
has an insulting message—for example: “Although he just came to this country, he is an
excellent student.” Non-verbal examples of microinsults could be a teacher repeatedly calling on White students while failing to engage others.

**Perceived racism.** In the face of microaggressions such as a White person moving away from Blacks on a train or a minority child not being invited to a classmate’s party, a question arises: How can members of an outgroup attribute racist intentions to actions the perpetrators themselves see and may intend as non-racist? As Mellor and others (2001) explained:

The perpetrators and the victims of subtle and covert forms of racism probably have different perceptions and understandings of interactions, due in part to the nature of contemporary racism, which may be marked by conditions of ambiguity, and the denial on the part of the perpetrators. (p. 474)

Essed (1991) has posited that there are two kinds of knowledge at play in the identification of racism: situational and general knowledge. Situational knowledge refers to the individual’s understanding of acceptable behavior in a particular context. This can be inherited in the familial setting or developed during social interactions. General knowledge of racism is obtained through society at large, such as schools and the media. This eventually forms part of how the individual makes sense of the world and attributes expectations for behavior in various situations.

Essed considered general knowledge the most important in deciphering the ill-defined nature of actions that illustrate microaggressions. Essed (1991, 1992) defined this general knowledge as the accumulation of repetitive, familiar situations experienced by individuals over many episodes where race has been a factor. It is a combination of the individual and group experience. As such, individuals can interpret actions through the lenses of their individual and group histories and current experiences in matters of race,
power, and discrimination. Each new episode tests the individual’s general knowledge of racism, which is important to note given the nature of modern racism.

Studies have suggested that individuals are able to differentiate between situations motivated by racist and non-racist factors (Essed, 1991; Louw-Potgieter, 1989). To do so, they use situational and general knowledge to interpret events and draw conclusions. In essence, they conduct an analysis subject to logical rules before determining whether or not something is racist. Although interpretations may differ, the weight of perceived racism is real and valid for the victim (Essed, 1991). Gaining a better understand of this victimization warrants an exploration of those observations of microaggressions to identify and rectify where elements of racism may exist.

In this study, many actions fit the description of microaggressions as perceived by the individuals. Similar situations were perceived differently given individuals’ situational and general knowledge. Exploring these differences is valuable because little literature exists that examines Latino youth’s varied interpretations of racism at school (Benner & Graham, 2011; Córdova & Cervantez, 2010).

Empirical studies on the subject of Latino perceptions of racism have produced mixed results, possibly because they articulated variables such as acculturation and assimilation in different ways (Finch et al., 2000; Perez et al., 2008). For example, some studies show that students who are more acculturated—generally those who have resided in the country longer—report more experiences with discrimination (Stone & Han, 2005). Other studies show that recent immigrants more commonly report discrimination at school (Edwards & Romero, 2008; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). In one study,
Benner and Graham (2011) found that students who reported being the primary language brokers for their families more often reported perceived discrimination. This echoes other studies that have found that students’ translating for their parents may not always be a positive experience (Wu & Kim, 2009). In the process of translating for others, adolescents encounter discrimination more frequently and become more attuned to microaggressions. These are all examples of how situational and general knowledge of racism may impact perceived racism. They also explain the variations observed in this study, and underscore the value of listening to Latino students’ voices.

**Intragroup discrimination among Hispanic immigrants.** Although research on discrimination between American Whites as the ingroup and Hispanics as an outgroup is well documented, intragroup discrimination among Hispanic immigrants has not been extensively researched (Córdova & Cervantez, 2010). In the following paragraphs I present three perspectives on intragroup discrimination among Hispanics. As factors that may undergird intragroup conflict, I consider internalized racism and devaluation, as well as the historical context of racism in Latin America, and explore research of similar behaviors among other minority groups. Lastly, I look at the concept of covering as an alternative explanation for some behaviors observed in stigmatized populations (Yoshino, 2002).

The concept of internalized racism and devaluation as a factor of intragroup conflict is well established in studies of minorities (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Crocker & Garcia, 2010; Feagin & Vera, 1995). Manifestations of stereotype threat discussed earlier are examples of individuals internalizing the negative markers
associated with their own group, and it is these prejudices that they may apply to each other. Among the few researchers who have examined this behavior among Latinos are Rosembloom and Way (2004), who documented perceived discrimination between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as well as between foreign-born Hispanics and U.S.-born Hispanics. Likewise Benjamin (2007) looked at how young Mexican-Americans used Spanish as an identity marker for *mojados* (wetbacks), and how this identification affected students’ association in self-selected groups.

Intragroup conflict is not uncommon among immigrant groups and minorities as a whole (Crocker & Garcia, 2010). Several studies, although limited in number, have looked at intragroup conflict among Asian-Americans and African-Americans. For example, Pyke and Dang (2003) studied this reality among Korean-Americans in a look at how Koreans used the term “FOB” (fresh off the boat) to denigrate recent arrivals as very ethnic, and the term “whitewashed” to disparage Koreans who were considered too assimilated and thus too white. Kingston (1989) and Tsai and others (2000) explored a similar dynamic among Chinese people who had recently arrived and those referred to as ABCs (American-born Chinese). Lastly, Clark (2004) looked at how African-Americans have historically favored light skin over dark.

In the case of U.S. Hispanics, historical patterns of racism in the Latin American context provide another perspective on intragroup relations. In much of Latin America, overt racism is still common against Black, indigenous, and mixed-raced people (Fortes, 2002; López, 2008). This often separates individuals and whole classes from full economic, political, and social participation. Although race interacts with other variables
such as gender and class, it has a unique role in many Latin American societies in establishing social rank and hegemony (López, 2008). Race can privilege Whites as well as others whose phenotypical appearance resembles Whites.

The historical origins of Latin American racism lie in its past as a series of colonial outposts of the Spanish empire. As Spanish influence and authority spread and the empire matured, racial mixing increased between European Whites, indigenous people, and imported African slaves (Graham, 2010; Wade, 2008). To secure European dominance, a racial caste system was created with Whites occupying the top of a social pyramid and members becoming steadily darker down to the base, with Blacks and indigenous people occupying the very bottom of the pyramid (Hooker, 2005).

Although the caste system was complex as generations of mixed-race people continued to intermingle, the unifying principle was the elevation of Whites and the phenotypically White (Graham, 2010; Hooker, 2005; Wade, 2008). Racial privilege in Latin America, however, did not rest on the purity of the bloodline. In the United States, the sociological and legal principle of the one-drop rule, which asserted that a person with one drop of Black blood was a Negro even if they looked White, emerged and was defined in the 19th and 20th centuries (Applebaum, 2003). However, the appearance alone of being White or having phenotypically White traits has conferred higher status in Latin America (Hooker, 2005).

As in the United States, many of these prejudices have been socially ingrained and reinforced in Latin Americans, to the point where racist behaviors are sometimes unconscious, automatic responses that affect Hispanic populations in our country today.
(Hooker, 2005). The historical function of race in Latin America, as well as what we know of internalized racism and devaluation among minority and immigrant groups, should be considered as we look at relations among participants in this study. The concept of covering, however, presents an alternative view that should also be considered.

Yoshino (2002) presented covering as one of the ways a minority group might negotiate the tensions between assimilation and discrimination. Covering occurs when the member of a minority group does not hide the underlying identity, but rather downplays its importance. Yoshino explains covering as follows:

The term and concept come from sociologist Erving Goffman’s ground breaking work on stigma. Goffman observed that even “persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma . . . may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large.” Thus a lesbian might be comfortable being gay and saying she is gay, but might nonetheless modulate her identity to permit others to ignore her orientation. She might, for example, (1) not engage in public displays of same-sex affection; (2) not engage in gender-atypical activity that could code as gay; or (3) not engage in gay activism. (p. 769)

Goffman’s original example of covering was Franklin Roosevelt: most everyone knew Roosevelt primarily needed a wheelchair to get around, yet he chose to place himself at the table before welcoming others for a meeting.

Among the many examples Yoshino (2007) cited are experiences of an African-American who choose to stress his college degrees and job in banking to communicate that he was a “good black,” and a Korean-American who chose to major in English in part to highlight her ability to master her second language, thereby becoming more “American.” The analogous behavior among Hispanics could be a student who may choose not to speak Spanish or associate with other Latinos, not necessarily because he
holds prejudices against them, but because he chooses to ameliorate his ethnic identity in the face of majority Whites.

Within the scope of this study, the behaviors of participants may have various underpinnings, some of which may not be easily discernable. All participants, however, are part of an immigrant group that is negotiating a place and identity as a minority. As such, the studies presented here illustrate that among the factors that impact the behaviors of stigmatized populations are internalized devaluation, historical racism, and covering.

**Institutional bias.** In a school or school system, which is where the participants in this study find themselves, and given the evolution of modern racism, it may be difficult to identify any one person or policy that most directly affects any one of the subjects. Taken in isolation, the factors that affect the lives of the students profiled in this study may not in and of themselves seem like significant barriers to success as generally defined in American society. Taken together, however, the many barriers can more easily be perceived as a system of hindrances that limit the potential of any one individual. This is the essence of institutional bias, defined as “those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce group-based inequities in any society. An institution may be biased whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have biased intentions” (Henry, 2010, p. 427).

Institutional bias involves practices that discriminate and occur at the institutional level and helps explain how changes in explicit racism in general society have not been met by a similar reduction in disparate outcomes between groups in a range of broad measures (Henry, 2010). For example, explicit discrimination against African-Americans
has been on the decline since the civil rights movement in the mid-20th century (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), yet a greater number of African-Americans are incarcerated today than in 1950, and earning capacity, mortality rates, and education rates for African-Americans still lag behind those of Whites (Kaufman et al., 1997; Pieterse et al., 2012). Of intergroup processes, institutional bias is one of the least explored by social scientists (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), but the examples are plenty in our own society.

Much like microaggressions, institutional bias is often invisible to the dominant group, and because institutional bias is not necessarily the “sum of individual level prejudice” (Henry, 2010, p. 430), theories concerning individual prejudice and discrimination may not apply at the level of broad social analysis. When theories of individual racism are applied to institutions, the findings often shift responsibility for disparate outcomes to members of the aggrieved group rather than the institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). For example, in an attempt to explain the lack of women in top management positions, studies have reported that women often self-select to leave corporate positions to marry and raise families (Webster et al., 2011). If the situation were examined more broadly, researchers would also find that many women in the United States make these choices because, as in other industrialized societies, they often earn less than their male counterparts, maternity leave is limited, and well-priced, quality daycare is often lacking (Schueller-Weidekamm & Kautzky-Willer, 2012). This does not mean individuals are not responsible for their choices. However, Henry (2010) observed, “A softer stance for identification of institutional bias would note that group-based
differences in outcomes may be a sign of institutional bias at least in part, although they cannot be viewed as a perfect indicator” (p. 429).

A range of theories have evolved concerning the causes and perpetuation of institutional bias (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Henry, 2010). They have come from a range of disciplines, such as economics, sociology, and psychology (Feagin, 2006; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Jones, 1997; Strack and Deutsch, 2007). Below are presented just a few of these theories.

- **Constructed groups and constructed memories.** Sociologist have argued that just as groups are socially constructed (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), so are the categories and labels we ascribe to them as a group (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Although there is little empirical evidence behind this theory, the argument is compelling (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Jones, 1997). Even if it is not acknowledged, as is the case with individual-level microaggressions, a set of collective assumptions and labels has built up around certain groups in society. To this is added constructed memories, or “collective memory” (Henry & Sears, 2002). Members of dominant groups tend to minimize or reconstruct histories of discrimination and bias against other groups, often relegating it to a past so distant as to be inconsequential. This allows them to see the current reality as a level playing field for all groups. As with constructed groups, there is little empirical evidence to support this notion in the functioning of institutional bias, but it echoes similar constructs at play.
that are empirically proven components of individual forms of modern racism (Henry, 2010; Henry & Sears, 2002).

- **Cultural bias.** The values of a society’s dominant groups will inevitably be privileged in their institutions. Where these do not match the values of less powerful groups, those groups are at a disadvantage. For example, the individualistic ethos in American society may run contrary to other cultures’ collectivist approach (Jones, 1997). A collectivist person (who emphasizes family and community) in an individualistic society may be compromised in social institutions that favor an individualistic approach (Feagin, 2006). In our context, Latino students have reported that one of the challenges in attending university is the reality of having to move away from family and home, which for some takes precedent.

- **Economics.** Many studies have proven that, when faced with choices, individuals do not act as purely rational actors, absent of emotion, weighing costs and benefits (Mansbridge, 1990; Strack & Deutsch, 2007). However, although it may have limitations in explaining individual behavior, rational decision making may be better at describing the forces at work in markets, as well as those at the institutional level (Mansbridge, 1990). The strongest argument for economic forces at work in institutional bias may be that biases have an economic advantage for business, particularly when biases are non-group-based practices (Strack & Deutsch, 2007). For example, if a bank or insurance company has a greater chance of profits and reduces risk when it
operates with more financially stable individuals, it will proceed in that manner. This often leaves many underprivileged groups without access to these resources.

- **Social capital.** Most common in sociology and political science, this approach to institutional bias holds that some groups’ social networks allow for more efficient access to resources that allow them to succeed. These groups are then more advantaged than others (Feagin, 2006). Outgroups may not have the relations, connections, or contacts that allow them to bridge their drive for success with opportunities to achieve it (Feagin, 2006).

**Summary.** This section has laid the groundwork with a history of Latinos in U.S. schools, demonstrating how their racial and social identity has affected their trajectory and how some researchers have explained Latino academic underachievement. These fundamental understandings led to the study’s core conceptual framework as three connected theories: social identity, critical race theory, and student voice. Together, these theories help interpret the development of the individual as an interplay between that person as an independent actor and as a member of a group in contact with other groups, within a larger sociohistorical context. Finally, I explored additional theories and research that radiate from the conceptual core and form an integral part of the understandings needed to contextualize this study and its findings. Theories of aversive racism and microaggressions, perceived racism, internalized devaluation and racism among Hispanics, and institutional bias informed my analysis of the data collected.
Research Questions

With the understanding that improving conditions for Latino students is an important area for research, policy, and practice, this study introduces the voice of students into the conversation. The study spoke to how students between the ages of 15 and 20 see themselves within their larger high school community. The study focused on two broad research questions and several sub-questions.

1. How do Latino students identify themselves within the larger school community?
   a. In which groups do Latino students see themselves as members and why?
   b. How do they describe the groups to which they belong?
   c. How do they describe the groups to which they do not belong?
   d. How do Latino students believe others describe them?
   e. What do the groups with which Latino students identify communicate about Latinos’ place in the school community?

2. How do Latino students describe their experiences at Peakstown High School (or within the Peakstown School District)?
   a. How do they describe their experiences in classrooms, clubs, sports, and other school-related social settings?
   b. How do Latino students perceive district programs and policies to address their academic and social concerns?
   c. How do students perceive their experience in school as learners and members of the school community?
Methodology and Research Design

Research paradigm and rationale. This qualitative study was based in a practitioner inquiry model, framed within a phenomenological approach. The questions this study set out to answer lent themselves to qualitative methods for their ability to capture and understand the meaning that events, situations, and actions have for participants from their own perspective (Cresswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2011). The questions were designed to gain an understanding of how Latino students perceived their social identity in the school setting and how they saw themselves as students.

This study was within the practitioner research paradigm because I played a dual role of researcher and administrator with district-wide responsibilities that encompassed the setting, and had, as an ultimate aim, the opportunity to improve practice. Practitioner research in this study is employed as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), wherein the “practitioner is simultaneously a researcher who is continuously engaged in inquiry with the ultimate purpose of enriching students’ learning and life” (p. ix). Practitioner research encourages reflexivity and a consideration of positionality to bridge the researcher and practitioner roles to maintain the greatest degree of integrity (Anderson, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ravitch, 2014). In line with critical race theory and student voice, this empowers and includes diverse perspectives in questions of practice and policy to ensure informed changes (Anderson & Herr, 1999). Such research is marked by defined methods that generate high-validity data that can lead to real
change. These data, exceedingly local, could serve as counter-stories in contrast to prevailing assumptions (Ravitch, 2014).

The work is framed by a phenomenological approach in that it is designed to identify the essence of students’ lived experiences. Willis (2007) stated that phenomenology is “focused on the subjectivity of reality, continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them” (p. 53). Because the study is about exploring and understanding Latino students’ identity formation in the context of public education, phenomenology affords an opportunity to gather individual perceptions and understandings through inductive methods. Within this overarching design, I used identity mapping, interviews, observations, and a focus group as parts of my data collection strategy.

The privileging of the voices of the Latino students in this study is significant in that they have had few, if any, opportunities to share with school leaders their education experiences within the district. In the field as a whole, listening to Latino students in particular is a small but important and growing focus of educational research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Murillo, Jr., et al., 2009). I argue that to make real and lasting change in the experience of Latino students in this setting, we must provide an opportunity for them to speak for themselves. I intend to use my position to bring that voice to other district leaders.

Setting. Peakstown High School is the setting of this study. The school is in a suburban community outside a major northeastern city. Socially, economically, and geographically, the town that surrounds the high school is among the most privileged in
an area of already privileged communities. Peakstown, however, differs significantly from its neighbors in that its population includes a sizable Latino population that is often less affluent than the rest of the community. Twenty years ago, Peakstown was a community of the new Latino diaspora (Wortham, Murillo, Jr., & Hamann, 2002). Traditionally a White, Anglo-Saxon enclave, Peakstown began to receive more Latinos who came to work in homes as domestics, at local restaurants as kitchen staff, and in other sectors of the service economy. Since that time, the Latino population has remained relatively stable, matured, and developed a history in the community. Part of that history is a real and perceived sense of underachievement.

Because of housing patterns and the fact that there is no bussing, the Latinos in Peakstown are largely concentrated in two elementary schools. In the school with the largest Latino concentration, the Roosevelt School, 45% of the school population is Latino, and 40% qualifies for federally funded free and reduced-price lunch. On state exams, it is the district’s lowest-performing school. This is in comparison with the Wilson School, located in one of the wealthier sections of town, where 98% of the population is White and nearly 100% of students score proficient or advanced proficient on state tests. Roosevelt School has been stigmatized as “the Hispanic school,” and many readily say this is why property values in the school’s catchment area are lower than in the rest of Peakstown. As the students leave the elementary schools, they feed into one middle school and one high school. Latino students are often referred to as “Roosevelt kids.”
The diversity at Roosevelt is reflected in the high school, which is approximately 78% White, 14% Hispanic, 4% Black, 2% Asian, and 2% other. Thirteen percent of students enrolled in the district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, with most of these being students of color, particularly Latino. Fifty-five percent of Latino students are from Costa Rica or were born in the United States to Costa Rican immigrants. The other Latino students represent most all Latin American countries, with larger concentrations coming from Mexico, Colombia, and Central America.

In the most widely reported standardized assessment, the state’s language arts and math exams, results show a gap between Whites and Latinos. In the fourth-grade language arts exam, only 21.9% of White students scored partially proficient. By contrast, among Hispanics, more than twice that number, 48.9%, scored partially proficient. Similarly, in the 12th-grade language arts exam, only 1.9% of White students scored partially proficient. However, among Hispanic students, the number jumped to 9.5% scoring partially proficient. In the fourth-grade math exam, only 9.5% of White students scored partially proficient. By contrast, among Hispanics, 40.4% scored partially proficient. In the 12th-grade math exam, only 8.9% of White students scored partially proficient. Among Hispanic students, 15% scored partially proficient.

Hispanics are also identified at a greater rate than Whites for special education services. Although they comprise approximately 15% of the total population, Hispanics account for 24.5% of all students in special education. This means that almost a quarter of Hispanic students—126 out of 518 registered in the district—have a special education classification. By comparison, only 9% of White students have a special education
classification, a number more in line with national averages (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

The classification is disproportionately applied to Latino boys. The district has been cited for the overrepresentation of Latino boys in special education twice in the past five years.

**Participant Selection**

Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that in qualitative studies, sampling is a complex process that concerns not only who will be considered participants, but where they will be interviewed, how, and through what processes (p. 28). They term the decision-making process and ultimate answers to these questions, which lead to the identification of a pool of potential participants, “purposive sampling.” Purposive sampling involves the definition of boundaries that identify aspects of what a researcher can study given the particular set of conditions at hand—a frame to help understand the parameters of what one seeks to understand. I identified five characteristics as appropriate for selecting the key participants in this study: race/ethnicity, years at Peakstown High School, poverty level as defined by the federally funded free or reduced-price lunch program, teacher recommendation, and parental permission (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years at High School</th>
<th>Poverty Level</th>
<th>Teacher Recommendation</th>
<th>Parental Permission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officially identified as Latino or Hispanic: self-identified as Latino or Hispanic</td>
<td>Enrolled in tenth grade or higher; enrolled continuously for a year or longer</td>
<td>Qualifying for federally free or reduced-price lunch</td>
<td>Deemed to be at risk for academic failure</td>
<td>Permission to participate from parents or guardians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research question focused on Latino students and was bounded by boys who were officially identified as Hispanic or Latino in school records by their parents or guardians. I have chosen these formal categorizations as criteria because they provide a stable measure of how individuals view their ethnicity. The question of race and ethnicity is a complex one for Latinos. “Latino” and “Hispanic” are both terms mandated by the federal government for identifying Americans with roots in Spanish-speaking countries. However, neither term has been fully embraced by Hispanics (Lopez, 2013). Most Latinos identify by their family’s country of origin rather than the prescribed pan-ethnic labels. Nonetheless, many in the Hispanic community accept the federal labels. Others identify simply as American (Taylor, Lopez, Martinez, & Velasco, 2012).

How Latino students self-identify is sometimes also affected by their phenotypic interpretations of race—whether they appear Black, White, or Hispanic—and in some cases is also mediated by ethnolinguistic variation, or the degree of fluency a Latino has in Spanish (Bailey, 2000; Itzigsohn & Dore-Cabral, 2000; Portes, 2009). The official school-level identification of students as Hispanic is generated when a student registers and the family chooses to check the box that lists them as Hispanic. Beyond this formal identification as Hispanic, how students label themselves in the course of data collection may speak to the central question in this study.

In addition to race, participants in the study were in the tenth grade or above and had been enrolled at the school for more than a year. The main reason for this requirement was to reduce concerns related to a transition to a new school. A student’s
first year in a new school often carries a host of complicating variables, which are multiplied for immigrant students (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009). Although students in this study were also once new to the school, there is a decreased likelihood that they were in the midst of that transition at the time of this study, although their perspectives may be informed by it.

Lastly, all participants qualified for federally funded free or reduced-price lunch. This indicator has long been used as a proxy for identifying students who may be at risk for academic failure; this is in large part because of the correlation between family income and academic success (Singham, 2013). Because the district had expressed a concern with the achievement rate of Latino boys and because they are overrepresented in special education, I chose to focus exclusively on boys after consulting with the district superintendent.

Cresswell (2012), Morse (2003), and Kuzel (1992) have suggested that the optimal number of participants in a phenomenological study can range from five to 25. Kuzel (1992) held that a phenomenological study should include 15 participants to increase the probability of finding “disconfirming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation” (p. 41). With these recommendations in mind and given the limits of time, I conceived the study as an extended exploration of school experiences with six Hispanic males who all met the stated criteria.

Based on a review of demographic data, 55 students were in the pool of potential participants. I sent out an invitation in English and Spanish to the entire pool to introduce potential participants to the research project (see Appendix A for the invitation to
participate). Participation was voluntary. At the high school, I met with subsets of the 55 students or reached out to them by phone; each was encouraged to ask questions at that point or at any other time during the study. Teachers also recommended students and allowed them to meet with me for a brief informational meeting during the first few minutes of their class time.

Seventeen students expressed an interest in participating, and I met with each one individually for an introductory meeting, during which I shared the scope of how they would be involved as full participants and they had an opportunity to present questions or comments. Six of these students agreed to be full participants (see Table 2). Each obtained a signed parental consent form (see Appendix B). Eight more agreed to be part of a focus group, although eventually only six participated in the actual interview; all participants had signed parental consent forms.

Table 2: Main Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Years in District</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Language Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johnny</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Costa Rica/Panama</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danilo</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delio</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisco</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mateo</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with the initial invitation, parental permission slips were provided in English and in Spanish. The district superintendent and the high school principal reviewed all forms and granted permission for the study. To minimize any potential harm or risk to
participants from exposure of personal data, as explained to participants and their parents, names have been changed in this report. Other identifiers such as place of employment, teachers, and the community itself have also been given pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study’s data collection strategies were based on grounded theory. Methods in grounded theory consist of a systematic analysis of data from which a theory or theories emerge. This calls for methods that are defined yet flexible enough to allow for changes that may be necessary as data begin to yield relevant information (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). Using this as a guide, data collection methods included identity mapping, interviews, observations, and a focus group interview. Analysis included a systematic review and analytic memos to identify salient understandings as these began to appear in the data collected.

Interviews and identity mapping. Full participants each had two to three interviews, two of which lasted at least 60 minutes. The interviews were generally conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the participant’s preference. Three participants only spoke Spanish. The balance of the participants was bilingual, but dominant in English.

The first interview began with the completion of an identity map that pinpointed the groups with which the student identified as a member. Identity mapping allows the researcher to understand how reality is mirrored in the mind of the subject (Futch & Fine, 2012). Researchers have found mapping to be a useful inquiry method to identify the perspectives of research participants (Fine, Stoudt, & Futch, 2005; Futch & Fine, 2012;
Zaal, Salah, & Fine, 2007). The theoretical support for identity mapping comes from the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), cognitive processing theory (Teasdale & Barnard, 1995), and theories of self-regulation (Siegert & Taylor, 2004). The map was a graphic organizer that participants used to identify their group membership, roles, qualities, and attributes. The subject was at the center and from that point radiated separate aspects of the individual’s identity (see Figure 2).

![Sample identity mapping graphic organizer](image)

Figure 2: Sample identity mapping graphic organizer

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by an individual interview protocol using open-ended questions related to the specific research questions, as shown in Appendix C (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The interview format followed McNamara’s recommendations (Turner, 2010), which he has distilled into eight principles: (a) the location must have few distractions; (b) the purpose of the interview should be explained; (c) the terms of confidentiality should be addressed; (d) the format of the interview
should be reviewed; (e) the interviewer should explain how long the interview will usually take; (f) the subject should be informed about how to contact the interviewer at a later date, (g) if needed; the interviewer should ask if the subjects have any questions before the interview starts; and (h) the interviewer should rely on something more than memory to recall subjects’ answers. The interviews, which were recorded, took place on school property during free periods or immediately after the school day ended.

Observations. I observed participants during 5 classroom periods and two hours of non-instructional activity in the lunchroom, in study hall, and in the halls during transitions, arrival, and dismissal. In addition, other students who met the criteria were informally observed in the same school during a two-week period prior to the formal data collection to gain insights about the general behavioral patterns of the students in this school setting. The interactions among the students and between students and teachers were the focus of all observations.

Observations of student–teacher interactions were framed to capture participants’ experiences with three goals: (a) to better understand and describe elements of participants’ day to which they ascribe different values by directly experiencing them under the conditions that participants regularly experience them (Emerson et al., 2011); (b) to capture interactions that could convey behaviors not communicated in the data from the student interviews; and (c) to confirm or disconfirm data from participant interviews.

Document review. To gather appropriate demographic data and develop the student profiles, I reviewed student documents that provided each participant’s academic
history and context as a student. Participants’ current programs of classes, transcripts, and attendance records were reviewed. For some participants, the review extended to additional records such as educational evaluations.

**Focus group.** Midway through the cycle of interviews with individual participants, I conducted a focus group that lasted 100 minutes, including a ten-minute break, with a separate cohort of boys who met the same criteria as the full participants (see Table 3). In consideration of tensions noted during individual interviews between Hispanics dominant in Spanish and those fluent in English, all focus group participants were fluent in English. As noted by Folch-Lyon and Trost (1981), the focus group functioned to collect a range of opinions from the individuals on many issues. As in the semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussion was guided by a set number of questions, as shown in Appendix D, but allowed for expanded discussion of ideas that emerged during the interview. The dynamic between participants in groups allowed emerging theories to be expanded and refined. As Rubin and Rubin (2011) recommended, the group interview was scheduled for a limited time. As facilitator, I encouraged and guided the conversation to improve the degree to which the discussion was focused and complemented by the voices of all participants. The focus group provided an opportunity to explore the themes that emerged during individual interviews and allowed for a refinement of questions and areas to explore.
Table 3: Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Years in District</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Language Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bryam</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagoberto</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteban</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data analysis. Identity maps were collected from and reviewed with participants during the first interview sessions. Individual interviews and the focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Translations of interviews I conducted in Spanish were reviewed by a certified translator, who was also a native Spanish speaker who had worked extensively with Latino families in the area. Data generated in earlier interviews, as well as observations, shaped the questions asked in subsequent interviews and in the focus group.

Transcripts were coded using NVivo software to identify patterns. I began with deductive codes reflected in the interview questions. Gradually, interpretive codes emerged inductively and began to inform a fuller understanding of the participants (Maxwell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Throughout the coding, I attempted to balance individual participants’ experiences and potentially broader conclusions about the group. This is a tension inherent between critical race theory and student voice on one side, both of which honor the individual’s story, and on the other side phenomenology, which pushes the researcher toward a more general expression of a shared phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007).
In the first attempt at data analysis, I set 23 codes. In subsequent rounds, overlapping codes became evident, and I developed broader categories. In discussions with Dr. Marilyn Tinari and a collaborative group of peers engaged in analysis of data sets, these descriptive codes developed into more interpretive codes that attempted to capture “the bigger story” (Tinari, 2014). Through this work and additional analysis, I arrived at a working list of interpretive and descriptive codes in four categories that formed a theoretical construct of what I observed (Glaser 1992; Kendall, 1999). These code families were the basis for the study’s primary findings.

**Researcher roles and issues of validity.** The position of the researcher can impact data collection and analysis, and this is particularly true in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). The presence of potential bias does not itself compromise the validity of a study. Hammersely and Atkinson (2007) explained that the aim is not to gather data that is free of bias because it does not exist; rather, identifying these threats to validity provides a marker against which we can check our inferences and assumptions as the research collection and data analysis proceeds. In the iterative nature of phenomenological and various other methods, I had multiple opportunities to check my observations, assumptions, and conclusions with subjects through additional interviews and member checks.

I incorporated measures to address the trustworthiness of data as framed by Lincoln and Guba (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2008). Trustworthiness runs parallel to the concept of reliability and validity in quantitative research and is anchored
in the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of data (Morse et al., 2008). Below are a number of measures I took to address trustworthiness in this study.

- **Credibility.** I led member checks with study participants to confirm the accuracy of how I presented their thoughts and opinions.
- **Transferability.** I provided a detailed review of my research process so others can determine the generalizability of my findings to their settings.
- **Dependability.** I reported any changes or anomalies in the research process.
- **Confirmability.** I relied on research peers with varying degrees of expertise in the subject to challenge my conclusions and assertions.

These steps were necessary to address how my own position and identity could affect me as the researcher. As Zeni (2001) said of practitioner research, “the ethical safeguards of the outsider doing qualitative research are subverted” (p. 155). Consequently, in this study, I had to account for my position as a principal and leader in the district because my position could have compromised what participants chose to share. Being transparent with participants and their parents from the start was intended to help reduce concerns and build trust. To address any concerns that might arise, I partnered with another member of the district staff, a Hispanic teacher and community leader, as a person available to parents or participants who had any questions or concerns and wanted to remain anonymous to me. I also met with students in the school, not in my office or a district office. Most meetings took place in private study rooms in the school library, except for the focus group interview, which was conducted in a conference room at the public library. Although my position could be a complicating factor, having an
awareness of this potential allowed me to harness the power that access and position can bring when considering internal issues in an organization.

In addition to my position as a school leader, I was also conscious of my social identity, including race, education, nationality, language, and sexuality. The study participants were Latinos whose history, language, and sometimes economics and appearance set them apart from the school’s mainstream Whites. Although I am Latino and fluent in Spanish, I am also openly gay, degreed, and a documented American, and many consider me White in appearance. In these ways, I was privileged in relation to the position of my participants at the time of data collection. Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) held that it is important to acknowledge how the researcher fits into the hierarchy of privilege to mitigate threats to capturing the authentic voice of participants. I have done this by choosing an approach that honors the participants’ voice and by instituting practices such as member checks that limit my own voice.
Chapter Two: Findings

This research set out to ascertain how students identified themselves within the larger school community and how they saw themselves as students at Peakstown High School. It sought to understand which groups they claimed membership in and why, along with how they saw themselves as Latinos. It also looked to collect data about how the students perceived their experiences as learners. The identity maps, interviews, observations, and review of documents provided information that allowed me to develop a portrait of each student. From these portraits, it is evident that the six students in this study share many common experiences and outlooks that have shaped their views as members of the school community. Each has a unique history and set of experiences, as well as similarities. Both are presented in this chapter, but they have similarities that will be explored in the analysis section of this chapter through a series of individual portraits, followed by an analysis. The following is based on information gathered from four sources: an identity map, the student file, student interviews, and student observations.

Student Portraits

Delio. Delio was 16 years old and in the tenth grade when he was interviewed. He was from Honduras and arrived in Peakstown when he was 14. His family consisted of a mother, father, and younger sister, who was in the third grade. At this time, Delio’s parents had lived in the United States as unauthorized immigrants for ten years. His father and mother studied in Honduras but did not finish high school. His father was a
dishwasher at a local restaurant, and his mother worked for a company that cleaned homes in the area.

Delio was raised by his grandparents in the suburbs of a secondary city in Honduras. He saw his father only once after his parents immigrated to the United States. Although Delio did not see his mother in person during this time, his family exchanged letters and spoke periodically on the phone. His parents kept track of him through those conversations and introduced him to his sister, whom he got to know only through pictures because she was born in the United States. More recently, in the years before he came to Peakstown, he saw his family through Skype, which his parents accessed via the Internet connection of a friend and which Delio accessed for a fee at a local Internet cafe.

Delio’s family decided to send for him after his grandfather died. In Peakstown, they explained, he could be with them, attend school, and escape la violencia, the violence of his hometown. When talking about home, Delio described a town where security was precarious, murders were common, and the presence of gangs was constant. His daily routine in Honduras consisted of getting from home to school and back again—quickly to avoid danger. Sometimes in the afternoons or on Sundays, he would gather with his friends; otherwise, he stayed home or in his backyard.

His journey to the United States lasted approximately two months, during which time he traveled from his home through Guatemala and Mexico, making several stops along the way. He finally crossed the border in Arizona, where friends of his family collected him from a man he called el guía, the guide, who transported him across the border. Delio did not speak to me of the journey other than to say he crossed the border at
night. After several days in Arizona, he boarded a bus to St. Louis with snacks and a cell phone, which his father used to call him. When he arrived, he recognized his father instantly. After a few hours together in St. Louis, father and son began the trip in his father’s car to Delio’s new home.

The trip home took several days. After seeing his mother for the first time in ten years and meeting his sister, Delio settled in. It was September, and with his parents at work and his sister at school, he spent the first week on his own during the day. Looking from the window and walking out in the evenings with his father, he liked how peaceful his new community was. Delio also noticed the clean sidewalks and new cars.

At the time of this study, Delio’s family was living in a three-room apartment in an attic; the other two floors of the house were also occupied by Hispanic families. The home was located in one of two areas where most Hispanics who resided in the town were concentrated. This district was several blocks square and composed almost entirely of multi-family homes; most were rental properties with owners who lived elsewhere. After a few weeks, during which Delio met relatives and family friends, his father took him to enroll in the high school. His father was able to produce Delio’s report card from the eighth grade, which placed him in ninth. The guidance department recommended courses and allowed Delio to choose from a menu of offerings, most of which were unfamiliar to him. The process of choosing classes was new to him.

Classes for Delio were challenging. When interviewed for this study, he was taking a full range of academic classes, earning mostly Bs and Cs, except in Heritage Spanish, a class for students whose native language is Spanish. In the fall of 2014 he
earned an A in this class. Delio spoke limited English and had qualified for ESL services. Because no content area classes were conducted in Spanish and there was no bilingual education program, all of his classes were conducted in English. He was having a particularly difficult time with physics:

Math I can do; I can figure it out. But physics is hard because of the language. The teacher tries. She comes over, and she will ask me if I understand, but I don’t say anything. Sometimes, another ESL [student] in the class, who understands more than me, will translate, but I just don’t get it.

During his two daily ESL periods, which English-language learners (ELLs) must take as prescribed by federal law, Delio received general English-language instruction. A retired volunteer teacher periodically came to ESL classes to tutor the students in math and science, including physics. The volunteer gave instruction in the content area, and the ESL teacher provided an approximate translation. Still, Delio said, “it’s hard.” The ESL teacher agreed. After observing the ESL class when the tutor visited, the ESL teacher reported that, not being a native Spanish speaker, she found some of the physics language difficult to translate. Although she was quickly developing a bank of words, she said she mostly grasped at her limited Spanish vocabulary to explain specific terms.

In ESL, Delio was communicative and sometimes too talkative, which during one visit required the teacher to call his attention several times. He described the ESL teacher as a “mother” to ESL students. The ESL room was small, with space for about ten students. Brightly decorated with student work, its walls seemed more like those of an elementary classroom than the other sparsely decorated classes at the high school. The teacher often divided the students into smaller groups. In those instances, Delio usually sat next to another tenth-grader from Mexico, who was also with him in physics class.
They both attempted to follow the physics tutor, and in between jokes, they took notes as
the tutor solved a homework problem on the board.

In other classes, which had about 20 to 25 students, Delio appeared at ease but
kept mostly to himself and did not generally speak directly to his teachers or other
students. In physics, math, and social studies, he was one of four or five Hispanics. In
math class, the teacher lectured and periodically posed questions for students to consider
in pairs. In those moments, the teacher stopped by Delio, who had partnered with another
ELL student. To the teacher’s questions, Delio smiled without acknowledging if he
understood what had been said. With his “thinking partner,” Delio reviewed what was
assigned for homework and attempted to read the corresponding pages listed on the
board.

After class, the professor said he did not expect Delio to complete the assignment
but would give him credit if he attempted the work. Delio knew that if he tried to
complete a homework assignment, the teachers would usually give him a passing grade.
He also anticipated that if the class were assigned a presentation or a group project, as
with other instructors, this teacher would not require him to join a group, which made
class “very easy” for Delio. He saw most of his teachers as wanting to help him. Most,
with few exceptions, came over often to check on him during class or invite him to come
to after-school tutorials. Because he had to walk home—a 40-minute walk—and because
of the language barrier, Delio never stayed after school. Some teachers never checked on
him, and at least two were chastising when he asked other students who spoke Spanish
for help during class. Delio explained:
They think I’m just talking, so they want me to be quiet. But I’m not talking really. I’m trying to clarify the assignment. They just think I’m not paying attention, but I am. It frustrates me a bit, but I have to move ahead.

In all classes, Delio sat with other ELL students. Because of scheduling, many ELL students shared a similar grouping of classes, so Delio was never the only ELL student in any course. In Heritage Spanish, his last class of the day, all students were Hispanic. This class combined American-born Hispanic students with others who had been in the country for years and may be fluent in English along with students like Delio who in official school documents were referred to as “P.O.E. students.” P.O.E. stands for port of entry and indicates that this is the student’s first school experience in the United States.

The Heritage Spanish classroom was clearly divided. As in most other classes, students could choose their own seats. There was a group of Hispanics who were American born or fluent in English and another group of more recent immigrants who had not yet mastered the language; these were the P.O.E., ELL students, which was where Delio found himself seated. The differences between the groups went beyond linguistics. There was a noticeable difference in the dress and appearance of ELL students compared to other Hispanics. The former dressed mostly in faded, washed jeans and tops, worn sneakers, and coats; the latter generally wore more fashionably faded jeans or khakis, crisp tops, and trendy footwear. These differences were also broadly displayed in the cafeteria.

During lunch, approximately 400 students crowded into the cavernous space filled with folding lunch tables, and more students were in the senior lounge, a concourse with
seating reserved for 12th-graders. From a distance, Delio and other ELL students were an easily identifiable group tucked into one corner of the cafeteria. In the gathering of largely White faces, Delio and his 15 to 20 tablemates were set apart not only by their clothing, but also by their generally darker hair and skin color. Near them was a small grouping of other Hispanic students, whose appearance approximated the White majority. Among the Whites were some Asians and African-Americans, although most of the ten African-Americans sat at one table. The senior lounge was almost entirely composed of White students.

In Delio’s identity map, he listed two groups he believed himself to be a part of at the high school: “Honduras” and “Futbol.” He did not necessarily consider himself part of a Hispanic group:

We Hispanics are from a lot of different groups. You have those that are born here and speak English and then you have those like me that came [to the United States] at an older age. I don’t talk to [the Hispanics who speak English]. They are mostly Ticos [Costa Ricans]. Sometimes, I might ask them a question in class if I think they understand something I don’t, but most of the time, I speak to Jason [another ELL]. He speaks a little more English than I do.

Beyond limited interactions in class, Delio said English-speaking Hispanic students were just like “Americans,” or White students, because “son un plato aparte”—they are a wholly different thing from ELLs. When asked what high school groups he was not part of and were not listed in his map, he hesitated. After a pause, looking at the map, he said, “Ah, los blanquitos? Yo no hablo con ellos, y tampoco ellos me hablan” (The White kids? I don’t speak to them, and they don’t speak to me either).

When Delio first arrived, he explained, he made several attempts to speak with White students but was at a loss; the White students tried as well. The lack of a common
language and shared interests proved too great a barrier. At this point, he did not see a need to talk to White students, whom he saw as almost part of another school:

I didn’t have the language, and they didn’t have the language, and there is nothing to talk about. Each person has their group of friends, and the same is true of us. I have my friends now, and so I really don’t need to talk to [White students]. It’s like we have different schools. They have their own things, and we have ours.

When asked to describe what he considered “his” things at the school, Delio named the soccer team, whose games he often attended, and his friends in ESL class. English-speaking Latino students were not apt to attend soccer games, Delio explained. He saw them as having their own activities and places to gather.

Ricardo. Ricardo was a 19-year-old senior from El Salvador, where he had lived in a large city with his parents and younger siblings. Two and a half years before this study, Ricardo came to Peakstown to live with his brother, a young man in his late twenties who had lived in the United States for a number of years. Although his brother immigrated without proper documentation, he was able to legalize his residency. Through his brother, Ricardo entered the country and settled legally.

In Peakstown, Ricardo lived in his brother’s small apartment. In September 2014, Ricardo’s brother and his wife were about to become new parents and could no longer provide Ricardo a space. So he moved to a rented room by himself, paying for the space by working every evening in the kitchen of a local restaurant. During warmer months, he primarily worked with a landscaping company, with hours and wages that were more appealing. He was particularly skilled at pruning and removing trees. Ricardo’s hands, which were thick with shadows of cuts on both sides, showed scars from this work. He
was tall, dark-skinned, and hulking in size and physically stood apart when compared to his peers, most of whom were younger and smaller.

When Ricardo arrived at Peakstown in the middle of the school year, he was placed in the second semester of ninth grade and qualified for ESL services. After he completed tenth grade at the end of the school year before this study, he was able to secure his high school record from El Salvador. With credits from that transcript that Peakstown was willing to recognize, Ricardo was promoted to 12th grade in the fall of 2014. This thrilled him:

I was happy because they realized I was not a kid. I needed to move on, but I had been placed in a class with kids. I was excited to know that now this would be my last year.

The added work responsibilities, however, were beginning to take a toll on his academics. Although the previous year he had earned mostly Bs, he had Cs during the 2014–2015 academic year, which bothered him. Ricardo admitted to often being tired. Depending on his rotating work schedule, he was at the restaurant from 4:00 p.m. until midnight on at least three days after school. On those nights, he got home around 1:00 a.m., at which point he might do some homework and then sleep until 6:00 a.m. before starting class at 7:45 a.m.

When observed in classes other than ESL, Ricardo was quiet. In each class, he sat near a back corner of the room with other ELL students. In math, a subject he reported as a favorite, Ricardo quickly opened and closed his notebook when the teacher came by to check homework. “Rafa, que paso?” (Ricardo, what happened?), the teacher asked, almost rhetorically, in heavily accented Spanish as she passed. This teacher, Ms. Black,
and her class were favorites because she “cared about how he did in class.” Ricardo explained:

She told us at the beginning of the year that she knows math would be hard because the class is in English. But she came to ESL class and spoke to us in front of Miss Sergeant [the ESL teacher]. [Ms. Black] said she would work with Miss Sergeant if needed. Ms. Black also told the ELL students at the start of the year that she needed to practice her Spanish and that her husband was Colombian.

Most of the students in his ESL class were in this math section, and as the teacher walked down the line of student desks, she peppered her speech with Spanish phrases.

Another class Ricardo enjoyed was history. In this class, the only one in Ricardo’s schedule designated especially for ESL students, the teacher gave each student an outline of the lesson for the day with key vocabulary highlighted. English-speaking and ESL students were represented in equal number. As the teacher lectured, Ricardo typed in words from the outline into his smartphone, using a free translation application. In the margins of his outline, he wrote notes in Spanish and continued to translate most of the outline during class. At the end of the period, the teacher asked the ELL students, “All good?” Ricardo gave him a thumbs-up while others answered affirmatively.

Ricardo was most communicative in his ESL class, where he was alert and talkative to a fault. In the first of two periods allotted to ESL every day, the teacher led the class through the writing of a five-sentence paragraph using a hamburger as the graphic organizer. Ricardo scribbled in his notebook while taunting a classmate he jokingly called “burro” (jackass), which caused others to laugh and earned him a slight reprimand from the teacher. Before the independent work period ended, he asked permission to plug his phone into the teacher’s charger, which the teacher allowed. When
his chance came to share his paragraph, while others had written about the value of a
video game or soccer club, Ricardo presented a paragraph about hamburgers.

Using the teacher’s hamburger-shaped graphic organizer, Ricardo wrote his topic
sentence in the bun: “The hamburger has many things.” As soon as he read it, his
classmates laughed. His supporting details followed. In the picture of a sauce, he had
written, “The hamburger has ketchup.” Where there was a meat patty, he wrote, “The
hamburger has beef” and “The hamburger has lettuce.” He delivered these lines with
comic precision, and his classmates laughed each time. The teacher quickly sat Ricardo
down by putting her hand on his shoulder without comment. When the class ended, she
called him over and said, “You know these guys look up to you. I expect more from
you.” To this Ricardo said, “But my work was good. It was good.”

When he returned to ESL class for his second period of the day, Ricardo dozed
during the time set aside for students to work on homework from other classes. After
class, the teacher said, “I know Ricardo works. I’m not going to push it.” Ricardo
explained his time in ESL:

It’s stupid. It’s too easy. I like my teacher, but ESL doesn’t prepare you for real
class. In the real class, they give you these big novels and books you have to read.
They don’t ask you for a paragraph. It’s too simple. Anyway, my jokes keep the
class interesting. It brings it a little bit of life, my humor. Second period I was just
tired. Don’t expect me to say anything at the end of the day.

At the end of the day, having finished during a study hall another worksheet from the
ESL teacher, he returned to her room. She accepted the worksheet and asked him to come
back ready to work tomorrow. “I know he’s tired,” she said. “I can’t ask him to do more.”
Like other ESL students, Ricardo navigated the day surrounded by White students, which he referred to as “Americans,” but he exchanged contact almost exclusively with other ESL students, except for his teachers. When asked if there were ever an opportunity for him to speak to non-ESL students or if they spoke to him, he said:

No. Why would we talk? We can’t talk because we don’t have the same language. It would be interesting and even good for both of us; they could practice Spanish while I practiced English. A lot of them take Spanish classes. But we don’t have conversations.

Ricardo described the American students as “rich.” He was particularly impressed that the clothes many wore seemed new and varied. But the clothes were nothing, he said, compared with their homes, some of which he had seen during his work as a landscaper.

“Son hijos de mami y papi, para que me van hablar?” (They are their parents’ spoiled brats. Why would they talk to me?), he said with a broad grin.

These students, Ricardo said, almost certainly would perceive Hispanics to be “lazy” and a “mess.” The same, he thought, was true of teachers. Ricardo conceded that some Hispanic students were loud and often made a fuss in the hallways or the cafeteria. He said, “In class, some Hispanics don’t hand in assignments on time, or they walk in late. People notice that.” This, he believed, had an effect on teachers:

I can see it in their faces when I walk in. I heard one teacher on the first day of school say to another teacher, “I’m dying. I have the ESL section.” This was in history class. There were four ESL students there. I was in the class, and I did my work, but it was hard for other students.

Ricardo worked hard in class to give a different impression of Hispanics, and he felt that he had succeeded in part because he worked hard to hand in every assignment: “I don’t
know what they think of the others, but I hope they think different about me. I do my assignments. I’m not like those other kids.”

Ricardo found the high school to be clean and appreciated its safety. Compared with schools in other communities, he noted, there were no guards or metal detectors at the doors. He had only seen one fight at the school, and that was between boys who appeared to have been drinking. He said that in the school he can walk freely and without fear.

Despite this, Ricardo admitted it was difficult to connect with most students. The school, he believed, sometimes does not see him at all. He compared his experience at times to being a ghost:

[Whites at the school] are not bad people, but you are like a ghost. If you don’t speak English, no one sees you or goes to talk to you. It’s a very American thing. They will not approach you. It’s like you are not there. I just want to be seen.

Ricardo wanted to be seen but admitted he could only get this from other ELL students like him and his math and ESL teachers.

This invisibility extended to Ricardo’s counselor, whom he said he had only seen at the beginning of the year to get his program. When asked about the counselor, who was Hispanic and the school’s only bilingual guidance counselor, Ricardo explained that she spoke halting Spanish but could communicate with him. The real concern for him was that she was mostly concerned with college-bound students. Ricardo had never thought college was an option, and this had not been a discussion with anyone in the school. He had seen flyers for school fairs but chose not to attend, saying “It’s not meant for me. It’s meant for someone else—someone who can actually attend college. That’s
not me.” He had not yet determined what he would do when he graduated and could not with certainty remember the day of graduation.

He never mentioned to his guidance counselor or any other teacher that he was living on his own. His believed his ESL teacher found out from another student. Although Ricardo debated sharing with at least one of his teachers to explain an absence around the time of his move, he ultimately chose not to share that information. He could not see what was to be gained by communicating his situation and was afraid it might jeopardize his or his brother’s immigration status.

**Danilo.** Danilo was a 17-year-old student from Ecuador whose immediate family consisted of his mother and father. Both of his parents completed high school in Ecuador and had attended some college classes. His father was a school custodian, and his mother was a secretary at an accountant’s office in a nearby Hispanic community. Danilo said his parents chose to live in this community because of its security and reputation for excellent schools.

Until two years before this study, Danilo was in Ecuador being raised by an aunt. His parents had immigrated to the United States several years earlier. It took them nearly five years to settle and secure a green card for Danilo, who came to Peakstown when he was 15. Danilo liked his new community, which he described as orderly and clean. The school was equally safe and very different from the schools his relatives attended in other communities. He said:

> I have my friends, and we have classes together. We walk home together. Sometimes, we hang out on the weekend. In Elizabethtown [a nearby city], the high school has a fight a day. It’s peaceful here. The sports teams are great. We have great teams.
Danilo had been part of the soccer team for a year and a half. It was one of the groups with which he identified most strongly. In his identity map, Danilo listed his groups as soccer, Union Hispna, ESL, Hispanic, and Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish. Soccer was listed in bold letters. It was, Danilo explained, the Hispanic sport of the high school:

It’s not that there aren’t White people on the soccer team. There are, but there are also Hispanics. It’s the team with the most Hispanics. Other teams have no Hispanics at all. Really, the only team for Hispanics is the soccer team.

Most Hispanics on the soccer team were recent arrivals, and like Danilo, most were ESL students. When asked to list his friends on the team, Danilo listed all Hispanic boys, who happened to be in ESL classes with him. They were, he said, “the team’s team.” Of the other teams at the school, Danilo could only recall football and baseball as having one or two Hispanic athletes, whom he did not consider Hispanic because they did not associate with other Hispanics.

Although he did not consider his White teammates openly racist or discriminatory, he felt at times there was discrimination:

You have the White players and Hispanic players. Even though we [Hispanics] are almost a quarter of the team, sometimes half of the players on the field, when there is an announcement about soccer or a certificate awarded to the team, it’s always an American [White] student who is asked to represent us.

Distinctions also exist in how the team socialized. He recalled the following incident:

When we won the county games last year, there were a lot of parties in the houses of my White teammates, and Latinos weren’t really invited. There was a weekend where there were three parties over Friday and Saturday night; we [Hispanics] didn’t go to any. “Party at Brady’s House,” one email read. I didn’t even know where Brady’s house was; none of us had ever been there. By Sunday on
Facebook, you could see all the pictures of Brady’s party and the two other parties. It was all White people.

Danilo communicated that the situation bothered him a bit but that he would not have expected anything different given his experiences.

Danilo could think of no direct instances of discrimination, but he was bothered by racist comments posted online earlier that year. Yik Yak, an application that allows anonymous posts, had recently become popular at the school. Although it was blocked by the district’s web service in school buildings, students could post comments outside of school. After a winning game, another Hispanic teammate showed Danilo a post in which the soccer team was referred to as “team beaner” and a particularly tall player was called “churro legs.” It was disappointing, Danilo said, that in place of any criticism, those posts got a few-dozen “upvotes,” or stamps of approval, before newer posts distracted everyone’s attention. There were no “downvotes.”

The team did not discuss the comments, and Danilo did not bring them up to anyone. “Who knows?” he said. “It could have been one of our players who posted it, right? Or maybe one of them gave [the post] an upvote.” During Danilo’s time on the team, he said he had never been part of a talk about race, ethnicity, or racism. He believed the team had never discussed race or racism.

Danilo never mentioned the Yik Yak posts to the soccer coach or any other school staff, nor did he mention his sense of discrimination. He said he was not comfortable enough with his coach to do so. Asked what would make him feel comfortable enough to talk about being Hispanic at the school, Danilo said the school would have to talk about it because “no one does,” and he wondered if they cared to:
If I’m the only one talking about it, then it’s my problem. If we [Hispanics] are talking, then it’s our problem. It’s not their [Whites’] problem. Plus, I don’t think there is time for this. There is a lot going on in school. It’s a White town, and that’s it.

Danilo’s academic program included the requisite ESL classes, along with AP Spanish, World History, Algebra 1, and Physical Education. Although he was earning Bs and Cs in his classes, he said he could be doing better. He said he was behind academically and might not catch up. He explained that many of the school’s White students took algebra during their freshman year. Out of 20 students, Danilo’s class was predominantly Hispanic, with five African-American students and only three Whites. He believed this was a “slow track” academically. The same was true of history class, where he was grouped with other students he perceived to be low achieving.

In the lower track, Danilo said, teachers expected less of the students. The assignments were easier, and the teachers were less demanding. The teachers were friendly, he said, but they did not ask a lot of him. As an example, he shared that in his history class, the teacher assigned a project and presentation. When the teacher reviewed the project’s requirements and several students asked for an alternative, the teacher gave the option for students to complete a group essay instead of the project and presentation. Danilo joined a small group of students as the class was breaking off, and during lunch, one of them typed an essay using information from their history text. Although Danilo was not proud of this, he said he felt he had no choice: “I was not going to be the only one asking for a project.”

Because of his limited English, Danilo believed college was not a viable option. In part, he faulted ESL classes that were not rigorous enough:
I’ve been here for two years, and I’m still in ESL. I don’t feel like they are helping me move out of ESL. I just think it’s the same thing over and over. The lessons are the same lessons every year. They don’t prepare us for other classes.

College in Ecuador seemed equally daunting for him. He imagined that if he compared his academic preparation to classmates he left behind in Ecuador, it would be lacking:

I don’t think I’ve done enough here, and I only have a year and a half to go, and I don’t think I’ll catch up. Meanwhile, in math, I have classmates in Ecuador taking trigonometry. I don’t have that kind of preparation. So if I took the tests to go into college in Ecuador, I would not be ready.

Instead of college, Danilo was considering a trade school, possibly to be an electrician. He believed that if he could get into a trade school, graduate, and secure a job, he could continue to learn English and save money, with the hopes of eventually going to college.

Danilo said his guidance counselor had not had a conversation with him about college. He believed that discussion might come during his senior year and planned to discuss trade school then. In part, he said, this was why he did not attend a recent college fair aimed at minority students. When asked how often he saw his counselor, Danilo said it was rare. They had a brief meeting at the beginning of the year with a group of students. When she spoke to Danilo, he recalled that she was more interested in what he was doing on the soccer team than in class. Since that initial meeting, Danilo saw her a few times in passing in the hallway.

In family gatherings, Danilo’s peers envied the fact that he attended this particular high school. They understood that the school had more resources than most. This was most evident to them on the soccer field and Danilo’s training camp, where he had access to excellent facilities. His uniform was crisp, and the school could afford transportation to matches around the county and state. For adults in Danilo’s family, the fact that the
school was a White school indicated that it was a superior setting compared to high schools with more minority students.

Danilo, however, believed the school had presented both opportunities and limitations. He enjoyed soccer and his friends, but when he considered his academics, he wondered if he would not have been better served by staying in Ecuador to finish high school and college. He felt that with just a year and a half of schooling before graduation, he would not be ready to leave high school and would not have the skills necessary to succeed:

I know I can do more. Just because I’m learning English doesn’t mean I need for everything to be easy. I need to learn English to compete in regular classes. I think maybe it would have been better to stay in Ecuador, even though I would not tell my parents that at all. I just didn’t have the opportunity. The best I can do now is to take advantage of the next year and a half and see how I can set myself up for work after high school. College may come, even if it’s not immediately after my senior year.

Francisco. Francisco was an 18-year-old senior whose family was from Colombia. Born in the United States, he came to the district in the sixth grade and had been enrolled in the high school without interruption. He lived with his father, who was unemployed, and mother, who was a superintendent in the apartment complex where they lived. After school, Francisco worked at a local gym in the weight room, where he was an apprentice trainer working 20 to 25 hours a week.

When he got to Peakstown, Francisco qualified for ESL services and was placed in an advanced ESL class. He remained an ESL student through the first year of high school. He proudly identified himself as Latino. Francisco believed his experiences were like those of many other Hispanics, although in some ways it was different:
Honestly, I’m Hispanic and all that. Hispanic 100%, but I don’t really go through what Latinos go through. I feel like all the Latinos that speak very good English ... they get to mix with other people. If you don’t speak English, you are going to be put in a box. You’re going to get put in a box no matter what. But if you don’t speak English, you are in there [in the box]. Some people stay in that box. Plus, I don’t look Hispanic. I look . . . White. That means that when I wanted a job, I was able to get a job right away.

Francisco phenotypically appeared as a White American. He was fair skinned with light brown hair and blue eyes. Standing in an area reserved for seniors, he pointed to other White Latino students who had secured after-school employment in local restaurants and shops. He said:

If you are dark, you are going to have a bit of a tougher time in this town. It’s a White town. Don’t get me wrong. It isn’t like if you are Hispanic-looking, you won’t get a job, but if you want something other than supermarket cashier or washing dishes, it helps if you are White.

In school, Francisco’s friends were almost entirely Latino. Although he socialized with some Whites, his only non-Latino friends were African-American. He explained that the economic differences between Latinos and Whites were too great to bridge and said he could not see himself mixing with Whites at school, nor would Whites mix with him:

Let me put it this way: With the kids that are economically sound, you’re lucky to be friends with them, but chances are you’re not. They’re never going to say, “Hey, buddy, why don’t you come to my house, check it out.” They’re not going to be like, “Oh yeah, let’s go over to my house, man. My big house, it’s open for everyone.” It’s not like that at all. Unless they know you and you have the same things, chances are you will not be with them.

In classes, Francisco noticed a similar behavior. Students tended to associate with others like themselves. Although he had never experienced open racism, Francisco had seen eyes rolling when some White students were assigned to work with Hispanics. He
had also observed how some Hispanics were ignored when the class had to self-select work groups. Most of what Francisco identified as discrimination he terms “insults.”

It’s not really discrimination, but it’s a different treatment. It’s like when they came by to talk about the girls’ golf club in PE class. There were like 15 Latina girls and maybe five White girls in my section. The girls [presenting] turned to the five white girls in the class. They were not talking to anybody else. [They] were like, “Latina girls won’t be going for golf.” How do you know that?

One of the few instances when Francisco felt that an action was overtly racist involved a social studies project in ninth grade. Groups were assigned a national holiday to discuss with the class. A group of White students chose to dramatize Labor Day by depicting two Latino landscapers. The presentation elicited laughs, but the teacher said nothing. The incident still upset Francisco:

I didn’t say anything. I was pissed. If that was me today, today I would say something. At the time, I was too young and didn’t understand. But I found it embarrassing. Not all Latinos are landscapers, stupid. What the fuck? At the time, I had to take it. I would not take that now.

Francisco believed most White students saw Hispanics as landscapers. When asked to share how he thought White students might describe Hispanics, he said “stupid,” “lazy,” and “loud.” When pressed to explain what things gave him this impression, he admitted that not all White people behave the same. He said:

I feel like some are good, some are bad, some are not so good, some are not so bad. I’ll kind of just refer to it as that. Some are very nice and respectful, and the other ones are just assholes.

Different from the student he was in the ninth grade, Francisco said he was now more attuned to and less tolerant of “insults.” He described how the year before, a non–English-speaking student from Colombia moved into his building and started classes at
the school. The student could only order pizza in the cafeteria because he did not have the language to order sandwiches or hot meals. Francisco discovered this after observing the new student over the course of a few days. After some banter, the new student admitted he could not order anything but pizza, so Francisco tutored him on how to order a sandwich.

The next day in the lunch line, the student haltingly attempted to place his order. The African-American cafeteria worker said, “Speak clearly! I don’t know what you are saying.” Hearing this, Francisco jumped in. He yelled at the worker and placed the order for his friend:

That was just crazy. I was like, “You think he’s not ordering lunch because he wants to take up your time? You hear he can’t speak English. Listen.” I couldn’t take that.

When asked why he was more sensitive to perceived slights now, Francisco said he believed that with the number of years he had been in this town and school system, he had learned that things were not always equal. When they were not, he could take action. However, he saw some racism as pervasive and cutting Hispanic lines as well:

Listen, all the Ticos who speak English are White, and all the ESL kids . . . OK, not all the ESL kids, but a bunch of them are Indians or Black. You know they got black in Guatemala and Honduras. They are dark. Ticos look down on all that. It isn’t just Ticos. It’s everybody really.

Francisco believed that English-speaking Hispanics in the school, who tend to be White, routinely distanced themselves from ESL students because they were generally darker, indigenous, or poor. He cited one example of a recent immigrant girl from Nicaragua:

Eliana is beautiful and White. All her friends are White, too. Not Americans but Latinos who are White. You see her, and she hangs with that crowd all the time. You don’t see her with no indios [indigenous people].
Among his peers, Francisco was a leader. He was articulate, quick thinking, and charismatic. Observed in the cafeteria, he easily mixed with many Hispanic students, African-Americans, and some Whites. He knew others’ histories and interests. As he circulated, he matched a student who needed help finding a job with one who had a lead and listened to a girl’s trouble with her friends. As he walked the hallways, Francisco greeted everyone and was full of energy. In class, he said, this energy worked against him:

There are two issues, all right: One, I’m lazy. Another one is, the big one is, I can’t pay attention. I think I have to go to the doctor for that and see if I can . . . It’s just hard to pay attention. If it’s something squeaking, I’ll look over and . . . and I’m done. I brought that up to the teachers . . . my principal and all that, and they told me . . . They kind of tried to help, but it never happened. They just say, “Why are you so disruptive? Why can’t you pay attention? Why can’t you do this?” I was like, “I can’t pay attention in class. You guys don’t understand, I need help.” Then they were like, “Oh, well, why don’t you go see a teacher, or why don’t you go do this or that?” [The teachers] don’t give me enough time. They won’t take maybe a step back with me, personally. Probably with other people, they would take a step back and go, “Oh, alright” and agree and help them. It didn’t happen for me.

Academically, Francisco struggled throughout his school career. He had repeatedly approached the maximum number of absences allowed in a marking period and had passed his classes routinely with Cs and Ds. In eighth grade, at the urging of a teacher, the school district opened a process to determine if Francisco needed special education services. The case was closed when his mother failed to appear at two consecutive meetings and he moved on to the high school.

With few prospects for college, Francisco was planning to join the armed forces and had interviewed with recruiters for the Army and Marines. His guidance counselor
had not met with him to review options after high school, but Francisco let her know earlier in the year that he was thinking of going into the service. When asked how he felt about the support from his guidance counselor, he said:

I think she could take more time to check in on me even if I’m not going to college. You think a guidance counselor is there to help you and all, but that’s not the case. They will pick who they want to help, and it wasn’t me. Now I’m like, forget that. I got my own thing. I make my own plans. I’m not dwelling. I’m not there.

When asked to reflect on his experience in the high school, Francisco said he believed the school prepared him well in that it gave him many opportunities. He said he was not always able to take advantage of those opportunities and was stereotyped as a “bad seed.” He credited only one person at the school with understanding him and engaging him as an individual: his assistant principal during his freshman and sophomore years:

He wasn’t, “Aww, let me pat you on the back.” He always faced me in a man-to-man situation, and he told me the truth and... You know what? He did. He did. He actually did. He took me in one day and said whenever I needed him, he would be there. He was never one that jumped to the point to get me in trouble and all that. He even told me that when he heard about me, he said, “This kid, I’ll clock him. I’ll take him down.” He even told me personally, he was like, “Oh yeah, this kid, this troublemaker, I’ll clock him,” because that’s how he used to talk. That’s how he used to refer to me, not that he [ever] hit anybody. Then he was like, “Oh man, this kid is very cool. This kid’s a nice guy.” Everybody else here, they just think I’m a waste of time, or they’re scared I’m too loud.

**Mateo.** Mateo was an 18-year-old senior who was born in Costa Rica. He came to the United States at age three and had always been in the public schools. Mateo lived with his mother and father in a small apartment; an older brother who battled drug addiction had been in and out of the home for several years. The family lived on a small,
inconsistent income. No one in the family had legal residency, and Mateo believed the lack of proper documentation had limited their earning capacity. Mateo worked regularly as a waiter at a restaurant on the weekends or weekdays, and for the past several years, he had secured a stipend as a summer intern in the high school’s main office, where he worked closely with the school secretaries and administration.

Mateo was active in Union Hispana, which was the only formal school group he joined. In his identity map, he listed as the groups with which he identified Union Hispana, Friends, Costa Rican, Senior, and Student Representative. He identified most strongly with this group and his friends, who were all Latino, but did not consider Hispanics as a group in and of themselves. He explained:

Well, how do I say it? Hispanics are a very exclusive group. There are many types of Hispanics. You have people like me who speak English, you have American-born Hispanics, you have American-born Hispanics whose parents speak English, you have ESL, some jocks, too. The majority is Costa Rican, but you have Mexico and some Cubans there too. Not all of those groups always mix.

Mateo had not joined any sports teams or clubs because most of them met after school, when he either worked or went home. The district did not provide transportation, and bus service was unavailable or infrequent. On many days when he could not get a ride from his parents, Mateo had to walk to school in the morning or home in the afternoon. The approximately four-mile walk from the high school to his home took about an hour. Many days, he walked both ways. Because the restaurant where he worked was on his way home, work hours on Thursday and Friday nights were good ones to schedule. He would leave school and walk about a mile and a half to work and often got a ride home from a coworker.
In groups both large and small and in one-on-one conversations, Mateo presented as a confident and impressive speaker. Because of this and the fact that he was known to the school administration through his summer internship, he had served on several committees, including at least two high-profile committees in the past year—the selection committees that recommended the hiring of the new director of guidance and the supervisor of world languages. On the committee that interviewed candidates for the director of guidance, Mateo was one of 18 adult committee members who included the superintendent, school administrators, guidance counselors, and parents. The committee had collaboratively composed questions to ask candidates, and each member presented the questions to those interviewed when they visited. Mateo recalled the experience:

I was given the question about minority students. The candidates didn’t know we had minorities in Peakstown, and they pretty much said they had no experience with minorities but were willing to learn. They had no idea how to work with minorities. It was disappointing, but I didn’t expect different. [The director we hired] was good in many ways, and I hope she makes a difference, but I don’t know. I’m sorry, but they are racist. If not racist, they don’t understand.

Mateo’s mistrust of the staff, and guidance counselors in particular, was broad. It stemmed from several of his own experiences and those he had observed among other Hispanic students. The most jarring experience occurred the prior year when Mateo shared with his guidance counselor that his brother had come home after being away for several weeks. During these absences, the brother would routinely go on drug binges. When he returned, tension mounted, and arguments with Mateo’s parents were frequent. Mateo was used to this cycle and communicated this to the guidance counselor to explain.

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4 The questions were: “We have a growing immigrant community. What do you see as characteristics of guidance programs that can effectively support immigrant students and families? How would you go about determining how our Guidance Department might better serve Hispanic students?”
why he had been late to school several times in the previous days; the arguments, Mateo said, had kept him up. But Mateo was upset by what followed.

After he left the guidance office, the counselor called the state’s child protection agency to report suspected endangerment of a minor. The resulting investigation rattled both Mateo and his parents. In the days and weeks that followed, the family feared Mateo would be removed from the home, the parents might be arrested, or the whole family deported. The family still feared it had been left exposed because its presence had been registered with a state agency.

Mateo was initially angry that the call was made. But his resentment grew after the counselor and department failed to follow up with him in any way until an accidental encounter:

I understand that you have to make the call; it’s your job and all. Well, I don’t understand. OK? I don’t understand, but whatever. [The guidance counselor] makes the call and that’s it. That shit threw my family for a loop and nothing. Nothing from the guidance counselor. Weeks later, she seems me in the hallway, and she’s like, “Oh, how’s it going?” I was like, “What the fuck? How’s it going?” I didn’t actually say it, but I was [thinking], “You report my family to DYFUS5 and now you’re asking me how it’s going?” I just walked away. If you really cared, would somebody have asked me how I was? I refused to meet with her again, not that she was calling me either, but I just don’t trust her. I don’t have time for her. This year, I went to get my program [of classes] from her, and that’s it.

The guidance counselor was a White female, but Mateo felt race had nothing to do with the treatment he received:

It could have been Mr. Davis (his guidance counselor) or Ms. Montero (the school’s bilingual counselor). If you have a problem, they don’t really want to deal with it. They will deal with the student who has no problems. If you have a problem, I don’t think guidance is the place.

5 DYFUS is the Division of Youth and Family Services, the former name of the state’s child welfare agency, now titled the agency of Child Protection and Permanency.
When asked what would be the place in the school setting for assistance if one had a personal problem, Mateo cited his friends and several teachers but stressed that if the problem were serious, he would turn to his friends. He believed this was true even of the school principal, for whom he worked in the summer, and other administrators. He said:

I mean I appreciate Mr. Penny, the principal, as my co-worker, as my boss, but as a principal, I don’t think he does his job, to be honest. I think he’s just in his office or at meetings all the time. I never see him act like an authority. . . . I see him and I say, “Hey, Mr. Penny.” Obviously, you have respect for him because he’s your principal. The assistant principals, they just go around doing their thing. We say hi, and that’s it.

Mateo was a strong student. He had a 3.75 GPA and was taking AP Spanish and AP English. The previous year, he took AP History. The administration considered him to be at risk because of his home life and the fact that he had not registered any plans for college after graduation. Although he had not shared with administrators, Mateo was planning to go back to Costa Rica, where he intended to work and attend university, which is more affordable there than in the United States. Because he was not a legal resident, if Mateo were to attend college here, he would be considered an international student. As such, he would receive no government financial aid and would be subject to higher fees, even at state universities.

Mateo also believed an additional benefit of being in Costa Rica was that he would not be discriminated against for being Hispanic. Despite being an informal student leader and building academic success, Mateo felt discriminated against and weighed down at times.

Mateo: White students will not approach you. You have to approach Whites. In class, it feels like the teacher is teaching the White students, and everybody else there is extra. They are not bad, don’t
get me wrong. But it’s like if there is a question to answer, they will pick a White boy. They will not pick you [a Hispanic]. In the senior lounge, you have lots of groups together. If it’s a Black or Hispanic group, boom! You know Mr. Jasinky or Ms. Roman (assistant principals) are going to be there. It’s like they stand and watch. They don’t approach Whites. In class, a teacher assigned us to a group project, and all the Latinos were in one group. I told him straight up, “That’s racist.”

Interviewer: What did he say?
Mateo: He said it wasn’t racist, that he simply wanted to put together groups of people that were likely to work together. How does he know?

Interviewer: Did he change the groups?
Mateo: Not that time, but the other assignments he did.

Interviewer: How did that feel? The fact that he changed the assignment?
Mateo: It’s exhausting. I can’t be looking over my shoulder all the time. I shouldn’t be checking anybody.

Johnny. Johnny, a 17-year-old senior, was born in Peakstown to a Costa Rican mother and Panamanian father. He was a cheerleader and an openly gay student who lived with his mother and older sister. His parents divorced before his was four, and for the first few years of his life, he was sent to live in Costa Rica with his grandparents. For the next ten years, Johnny was shuttled between the United States and Costa Rica. “It all depended on what my mom was doing,” he said. “Sometimes, she could have me here and sometimes not.”

Johnny completed kindergarten and first grade in Costa Rica, then came to the United States, only to again find himself in Costa Rica. When he returned to Peakstown in the fifth grade, however, he stayed. That year, he was identified as an English-
language learner who needed special education. This qualified him for supplemental instruction in academic subjects and ESL.

Johnny graduated out of ESL in his first year of high school and regretted that he was not able to exit special education until the 2014–2015 school year. He believed that being in special education placed him at an academic disadvantage by limiting his choices, which was clearer to him now that he was applying to college:

I probably could have been in a higher math classes if I weren’t in special ed. They kept me in low classes because special ed teachers only taught low classes, even though I was getting As. I probably wouldn’t have struggled as much in the math section of the SATs had I been in a higher math class, had I like had a longer time to understand like Algebra 2, and all this and that. So I feel like the whole like special education thing kind of puts me back.

He believed his lack of English-language skills was what led to his original classification and argued with the school to leave special education the prior year. He explained that even though he outscored special education exams and was achieving a 3.5 grade point average, the Child Study Team that conducted the evaluations wanted him to remain in special education classes. He summarized his experience in special education and advocacy the prior year as follows:

They probably didn’t know what to do with me at Brayton [his elementary school]. They must have thought I was crazy. When I arrived, I would kiss and hug everybody, like I was in Costa Rica. What could [the Child Study Team] have tested? They tested me for special ed, and I didn’t even speak English or spoke very little; they tested me in English. That’s probably why I ended up [in special education]. Every year, my mom signed off on it, and she didn’t know what she was signing. She was just like, “Where do I sign?” So in tenth grade, I went to my meeting and said I did not want to be in special ed. The team insisted I stay in

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6 A full battery of intelligence testing is completed every 4 years, unless requested by a parent or school personnel. Johnny was tested in fifth grade, and again in the 11th grade, the year before this study.

7 Special education status is renewed yearly in a meeting with parents. Johnny’s mother attended every year and endorsed his participation, without the benefit of consistent translation. Parts of the meeting were often translated by a district employee, although documents never were.
special education but agreed to test me again. I was tops in the test, so when I got to 11th grade, they declassified me. But even then, with the high scores, the team wanted me to stay. Ms. Fish (a special education evaluator), she is a tricky woman. Like she really is. She doesn’t want people to leave, and she’ll smile until you say, “Okay, I’ll stay.” She pulled that on me, but I was like, “No, no, no, no, I’m not staying.”

In the 12th grade at the time of this study, Johnny was in all general education classes and had a 3.2 GPA. His classes included English 4, Senior Level; Environmental Science; Financial Literacy and Economy; Spanish Literature, Honors; and Algebra 2, along with Physical Education and Study Hall. He did not take AP Spanish to allow more time for Algebra 2, his most challenging subject. Although Johnny felt his success was recognized, he also believed that teachers and school personnel had at times underestimated him.

Johnny worked after school in a clothing store, averaging 15 to 20 hours each week. Most of these hours were during the weekend, which allow him to socialize and participate in cheerleading, which consumed most of his afternoons. He explained how he got to cheerleading in the following way:

I tried out for soccer in ninth grade, but I didn’t make it. So the cheerleaders’ coach, she used to be my counselor, she saw me hanging around the field and asked me if I wanted to try out. They needed boys. Basically, they need boys to catch the girls. At first, I thought it was just for girls, but the coach she, like, she made me join practice and I started going. Now I love it.

Johnny hoped to use cheerleading as a bridge to college life and was looking for schools with strong squads where he might qualify for financial aid.

In middle school, Johnny began to identify as gay. He described himself as very effeminate in those years. In the seventh grade, he began to wear articles of girls’ clothing. Johnny’s mother, a conservative woman, at first had difficulty accepting her
son’s sexuality. It was only after a family friend’s brother came out as gay that Johnny’s mother began to acknowledge his sexuality. Johnny said:

My mom is very practical. She is out there, and she wants the best for my sister and me. She’s pushed me to get what I need even before I said I was gay. So when I came out, it took a little bit of time to adjust, but she adjusted. Now sometimes, she’ll see me with a shirt she doesn’t like or pants she thinks are too tight, but I’m like, “It’s the fashion.” And that’s it.

At school, being gay had sometimes been a challenge for Johnny. He said no one was openly hostile, but often he had heard “faggot” and “fag”—if not directed at him, then in his general vicinity. Johnny had never had to face direct discrimination, in part, he believed, because of the force of his personality:

I’m a social butterfly. I know everybody, and I talk. I get what I need. I feel like because no one’s going to come knocking on your door like if you need help. As my mom always says, they gave you a mouth to talk, so talk. I feel if somebody came at me with some bullshit, I would go right back at them. But that’s not going to happen here. People are not that open about it.

Around the time of one interview with Johnny, one of the few athletes who identified as bisexual, a member of the track team, had written an editorial in the school newspaper calling for more tolerance in the school. Johnny made the connection to the treatment of Hispanics. The editorial writer explained that there were only a few “out” students because the school was not a welcoming community for gays. Johnny agreed:

Well, it’s true. And in that article, he says how teachers say they don’t see it. If you ask students, no one is going to say they are a homophobe. No one is going to say something bad about Hispanics either. If you ask White people what they think of the Hispanic students, I mean, I think that they’d be like genuinely nice about it. I don’t think that they’d say that, “Oh, we don’t hang out with Hispanics,” but I mean like, there are no Hispanics hanging out with White people.
Johnny described the Latino community as an “isolated” group, with only rare instances of crossing racial or ethnic lines:

If you look at us, I think that you’d probably think this is an isolated community because, in a way, you can sort of see it. Everyone just sort of like sits in their own pack. It’s like Latinos really don’t like mix with anyone out of Latinos, and, I mean . . . It, it happens, but it’s very, it’s often. You don’t really see, like, you know, like Latinos sitting with like, say, Caucasian people. Like, often you’ll see them sitting with other minorities, but like, like Black people, but like, you don’t really, like, see them with Whites.

Hispanics who do build bonds with Whites often weaken their ties to Latinos, Johnny said, citing two examples: Jason, who is on the track team, and Vanessa, an 11th-grade student. Jason became a winning member of the track team and developed a social group around others on the track team, mostly Whites. Vanessa, the only other Hispanic member of the cheerleading squad, socialized exclusively with other cheerleaders, almost all Whites, except for one Black member.

The behavior Jason and Vanessa exhibited may have been the product of any number of realities. The distance that grew between them and their Hispanic peers may have been accidental, or the product of a conscious decision such as the covering described earlier (Yoshino, 2002). To better function among Whites, Jason and Vanessa may have chosen to deemphasize their heritage. However, this was not how Johnny interpreted the behaviors. In Jason’s case, Johnny speculated this shift away from Latinos may have been situational. For Vanessa, however, he suspected it was the result of an active desire to pull away from what she perceived as a less valuable group:

Jason is like one of those like instances of people who just like want to be friends with Whites and really aren’t involved in the [Latino] community anymore. I can’t really say that he’s really been friends with like a lot of Hispanic people since middle school; like he knows them, but he won’t hang out with them. In part
I understand it. It’s like you grow up, like you just kind of find your friends and things you like, like sports and stuff. . . . I can also say like Hispanic people really don’t partake in a lot of extracurricular activities like sports, so I can see how Jason drifted away. Vanessa, she ran from Latinos. She came in middle school. I must say, she is beautiful. A stunning girl. Freshman year, she made the squad, and she was aggressive in ignoring [Hispanic] people, even me, and I’m on the squad. I do not socialize with her. The stories, or her ignoring phone calls from former friends and such. Terrible. By sophomore year, she had a White boyfriend, and that was it. You speak to her in Spanish today, if she chooses to hear you, like she will not respond to you in Spanish, or she like, she’ll say she doesn’t understand what you are saying. If nobody on the squad knew she was Hispanic, she would be fine. It’s like she’s disgusted by it. It’s like you are trying to wash off dirt. She wants to be nowhere near us.

Analysis

This study was guided by two overarching questions, each with smaller areas of focus. The two primary questions were the following: How do Latino students identify themselves within the larger school community? How do Latino students describe their experiences at Peakstown High School or in the school district? Through interviews with six participants, a focus group interview with a separate set of students, observations, and a review of student records, the participants explored these questions, reflecting on themselves and their experiences in Peakstown.

What each participant shared demonstrated intelligence and an impressive capacity to reflect. I was moved by their experiences and humbled by their trust. Each person had a unique individual history and a distinctive set of stories. Their lives were incredibly rich and complex. When brought together, patterns emerged that resulted in four major findings.
1. *Latino students feel stigmatized and isolated.* Participants consistently described themselves as isolated from the majority White students, teachers, and administrators at the school. Although the study focused on school-based experiences, participants also described a similar isolation in the community outside of school. They perceived this isolation as a dynamic function of relatedness; they opted to socialize among themselves because of their shared set of common experiences and culture and because they perceived that Whites could not easily relate to the same. Participants perceived negative stereotypes. They also at times readily ascribed the characteristics to themselves and to some other Hispanics in a way that was consistent with what the literature describes as internalized devaluation. All participants described consciously taking various degrees of actions and exercising behaviors to outwardly counter negative Hispanic stereotypes. The participants described group boundaries that for some Latinos were more porous and referenced Latinos who were more integrated with Whites and a smaller number associated with African-Americans.

2. *Latino students perceive and replicate racial microaggressions.* Participants reported experiences that are consistent with the definition of racial microaggression. Interpretations of these microaggressions differed between the two participants who were recently arrived and their more established counterparts who were fluent in English. Surprisingly, participants described or explained actions toward other Hispanics that similarly reflected racist acts.
3. **Latino students find elements of school they appreciate.** Participants expressed an appreciation for the school. They noted its academic reputation, general order, and resources. Several also cited individual staff they believed cared about their learning or well-being.

4. **Institutional practices create and support bias.** Participants discussed aspects of their lives that, when taken in isolation, seem to be obstacles that an individual could address. But when taken as a whole, these formed identifiable patterns of behavior supported by institutional practices that can create and support these obstacles. Participants lack information to inform decisions that guide their development or practical resources to make their development possible, and the school system did not provide adequate classroom resources or distribute these resources effectively.

**Finding 1: Latino students feel isolated and stigmatized.** The principal finding in this study is that the participants consistently felt isolated from the majority White students, teachers, and administrators at the school. In their daily experiences, participants interacted almost exclusively with other Latino students. Although the study focused on school experiences, participants also described a similar isolation in the community outside the school.

The participants perceived their isolation as a dynamic function of relatedness; they opted to socialize among themselves because of their shared common set of experiences and culture and because they perceived that Whites could not easily relate to them. In describing Latinos as a group, most participants repeated negative characteristics they believed Whites would ascribe to the group. Participants also readily ascribed those same characteristics to some Hispanics in a way that was consistent with what the
literature describes as internalized devaluation. All participants described consciously
taking various degrees of actions and exercising behaviors to outwardly counter negative
Hispanic stereotypes.

The participants also referred to group boundaries that for some Latinos were more porous. They referenced Latinos who were more integrated with Whites and a smaller number associated with African-Americans. In various ways, they saw these individuals as Latinos “in name only” and censured their assimilation as a rejection of their group identity as Latinos (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Breakwell, 1986, 2010).

**Finding 1a: Latinos are isolated within and outside of school.** Much of the evidence to support this finding came from participants’ identity maps, questions related to their peer interactions and friendship networks, and direct observation. In the identity maps, the participants listed groups in which they claimed membership. Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo, who are all English-language learners and have been in the country no more than three years, struggled to list groups at the school with which they identified, eventually listing no more than three groups each. Only one of these groups was composed of ethnically or racially diverse people.

Delio listed “Honduras,” referring to other Honduran students; “futbol,” referring to the friends he watched soccer games with; and “my friends,” an accumulation of the peers with whom he came into contact most regularly, all of them students in his ESL class. Ricardo similarly listed “my friends” and “Union Hispana,” the Latino student union. In addition to these, Danilo, who was on the soccer team, listed his team, which, although predominantly White, had several Latino players. However, even here he considered his “friends” only the fellow Latino teammates:
Well, I know my American teammates, of course. Honestly, I don’t speak to them outside of the team much. I know them, and you know, I see them in the hallway and all, but I, they aren’t my friends. They aren’t close friends at all. We know each other and are friendly, but we’re not friends. If you ask me about “my group,” I’d have to say Jose, Marcos, and Jayson [Latino teammates]. That’s my group.

Francisco, Mateo, and Johnny, who are all fluent in English and have been in the country and school for an average of six years, sketched more robust social identity maps that listed various groups of interest at school. However, these too formed networks of largely Latino friends. For example, Francisco listed “my crew,” “YMCA,” “soccer club,” “Hispanics,” and “Union Hispana.” YMCA referred to all the students attending the high school who worked at the YMCA with Francisco. These workmates—he named ten—were all Latino except for two African-American students.

Johnny was the only participant who could identify within his network of groups circles that included Whites. These were mainly members of the cheerleading squad and football team:

I mean, I think that like I’m like sort of social. I, I’m very like friendly with everyone. I don’t really have any problem with people. People invite me to like sweet sixteens and stuff like that, so I think . . . I’m fine with everybody. So like, you know, I transition, like intertwine between groups. Whites are not my best friends. My best friends are, well, outside my family, my family are my best friends, but outside that my best friends are Melania, Jenny [Hispanic girls]. But are they [White students] my friends? Yes. I go to their parties. I know their moms. But that’s me. That’s not, like, everyone [who is Latino].

Johnny added that Whites had been more accepting of his sexuality than Latinos:

They all know I’m gay, and they have less problems with that than some, most Latinos I know, to be truthful. I mean, I have gotten like some rejection, or I feel the rejection, from some of my own people. But like Mrs. Colter [football booster and parent], she’s always been friendly, and we’ve talked. Like she’ll ask me about my costume at Halloween. I was all done up. She’s very open.
The group interview participants’, who were all fluent in English, could name White acquaintances but none that they considered part of their personal network of friends. Mario, a tenth-grader who participated in the focus group, stated his perspective in this way:

I’m not going to say that I’m not friendly with American students, or Whites, because I’m American too. And they are very friendly, but they are not my friends. I don’t hang out with them, but they are very nice. I don’t think, OK, some people may say they are not nice, but like I think they are, they have been with me nice. I just don’t have, you know, I don’t hang out with them.

In their lives outside of school, several participants said they have White coworkers who are friends at work. These included Johnny, Mateo, and two members of the focus group. Outside of these examples, the other participants could not name any Whites with whom they shared membership in a group.

In my observation, Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo socialized exclusively with other Spanish-speaking ESL students. This was most noticeable in the cafeteria but was also true in classes, while they walked the hallways, and during other structured and semi-structured activities such as study hall. In the cafeteria, Francisco, Mateo, and Johnny, also concentrated themselves among Latinos. The Latinos they associated with, like these three participants themselves, were also Hispanic students who were fluent in English. In the cafeteria and study hall, Francisco, Mateo, and Johnny also circled and had momentary exchanges with Whites and African-American students. However, in each setting, they returned to a circle of other Latino students after these brief approaches.

The divisions in the classroom setting were also stark. In all but one class, students repeatedly seated themselves along group lines. For example, in one history class with 20 students, two English-language learners sat next to each other in one corner,
four English-speaking Latino students sat in a separate area, and White students filled the gap in between. The only class where this did not happen was a science lab where the teacher had assigned partners, and some Latino students sat with White peers.

When observing the group, I noted similar divisions among Whites. For example, in one class, Johnny pointed to Whites and could distinguish between members of the football team, the swim team, and at least three other subgroups.\(^8\) Jose, a participant in the focus group, explained the groupings this way:

You know, we have groups everywhere. People hang out with some people they know, like from the teams. Like the kids who play soccer, they hang out together. Track, they hang out together. If you are in a . . . if you are in band, you hang out together. In the cafeteria, you see the different groups. Like you got the football players, or lacrosse, or the Hispanic students that, um, the ones that speak, like, no English, they hang out together.

When asked what makes the Latino student distinct enough that they would constitute a group, Jose said:

They’re Hispanic. That’s it. They, you know, they … they are Hispanic. That alone is different. That is going to bring them together. I see it everywhere.

**Finding 1b: Isolation is a function of relatedness and domain disengagement.** One of two reasons participants offered to explain their isolation as Latinos was an obvious one: language. This was true for English-language learners who could not communicate fluently in English. Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo all said some Whites have tried to communicate in the past but quickly retreated because of the language barrier.

\(^8\) Johnny identified subgroups among Whites, some with fixed boundaries and others less so. In addition to groups centered on athletic teams and other extracurricular interests such as theater and music, there were loose associations such as “Roosevelt girls,” referring to girls who had attended Roosevelt Elementary School. A guidance counselor explained that although the girls were several years removed from their elementary experience, they maintained tight bonds through other points of contact, such as common country club memberships, summer camps, and their parents’ business ties.
The participants who were fluent in English, however, described a sense of separation from White peers and adults at school that extended beyond language. Without placing a value on this reality, its mention often underscored a degree of dissonance. For example, Johnny, who in other instances described a high level of integration with Whites, particularly fellow cheerleaders on his squad, said:

I love them, and they like love me. I’m not saying they are like racist or discriminate, but like it is different. I noticed a long time ago. It was funny. Like when [White parents] spoke to other girls, they’d like ask about their parents, talk about their vacation, what they were doing, all. Don’t get me wrong, like we talked about fashion, and crazy shit at school, but nobody asked me about vacations or my parents. So one day, I was like, “I’m going to Costa Rica on vacation,” which I was. We talked about Costa Rica, and it was nice. I mean, I know my vacation in Costa Rica is not like their vacation in Costa Rica, but it was nice to talk. But yeah, it’s different.

This notion was echoed from another perspective by a focus group participant who described the familiarity that came from their interactions with Hispanic peers who shared a culture and background:

There is nothing like being with your own. You don’t have to explain anything to anybody. My man [pointing to another Latino] know me. He knows me. I don’t have to edit or explain. I can relax. With White people, I’m a little bit on edge, even here [in Peakstown]. Don’t get me wrong. Everybody here is very nice, but I just can’t, can’t be hanging out with [White people] if I want to relax.

The concept of being on guard around Whites speaks to perceived racism and internalized devaluation that in participants resulted in what has been referred to as domain disengagement, which can serve as a coping mechanism (Richardson & Shelton, 2003). I illustrate the point here by recalling Ricardo, who in addition to the limits of not speaking English, referenced Whites’ homes as signs of wealth that contrasted greatly with his life of poverty. In that instance, he called White students brats. In another
conversation, he expanded on this idea and directly cited his race and poverty, mixed with aspects of internalized devaluation (Feagin & Vera, 1995), as a reason to withdraw:

Look, they are brats because they are rich. They look at me and see that I’m Hispanic, I don’t have a great house, or a car. They look at me and must think, “Damned Indian! What are you thinking?” [Laughter] It’s a very different world. It’s sad, in a way.

The isolation in these last examples, which some researchers also term self-segregation (Crocker & Major, 1989), allowed the participants to find respite or support in their own group. We know from the research that this coping mechanism protects members of an outgroup by reducing contact with the ingroup (Nussbau & Steele, 2007).

**Finding 1c: There is a perception of a negative stereotype, internalized devaluation, and proving the stereotype wrong as a coping mechanism.** A secondary coping strategy for participants who perceived a negative stereotype was actively working to counter the negative perceptions. In the paragraphs that follow, I review several participants’ articulation of the Hispanic stereotype, evidence of the stereotype leading to internalized devaluation, and how students coped with the stereotype by aiming to prove it wrong (Fisher, 2005).

All participants were asked what they thought White students in Peakstown would say about Latinos or how they might describe them. The responses repeatedly highlighted a negative stereotype and indicated degrees of internalized devaluation (Feagin & Vera, 1995). The following question was posed to participants: If we asked an average Peakstown student, how do you think they would describe the Hispanic students in the high school? This was Mateo’s response:

Irresponsible, slackers, that they don't give a damn about school. [Laughter] That is what a lot of them would say. Maybe not to you. Maybe not to me. But, yeah.
We don’t do our work. We’re here taking up space. Oh yeah, we are “renters.” The adults in the office speak about the “renters,” which means Hispanics because most Hispanics don’t own their house, they rent. Renters are “disruptive,” they are “loud,” and they cause discipline problems.

Similarly, a focus group participant said:

That we are stupid and joke around. That we don’t want to study or can’t understand English. That we are loud in the hallways. There’s one thing if [as a White student you are] talking to your mom, and there’s like, there’s like one thing like, you know, you talking to friends. But I mean, I think that if . . . because I mean, obviously, people only really take in negative influences, and I mean I feel like I’m in a couple of classes with Theo [a White student], and there, there’s like a couple of like Hispanic kids who just happen to be like really loud and obnoxious, and that’s probably going to be the one thing that he goes to tell his mom or his friends. It’s like, “Oh, Hispanics are pretty like loud and obnoxious people.”

As this speaker continued, he revealed a tacit acceptance of the stereotype, and the five other focus group participants around the table nodded in agreement. He said:

Which, I mean, we are loud because, you know, we like feel . . . we feel, we feel the passion, but I mean, you know, like there’s, there’s a time and place, and I mean some people don’t really understand. . . Some people don’t know like the difference, and I mean like that just gets thrown into like a negative connotation and then you know, say, like a White student would just go ahead and tell people Hispanic people are annoying and obnoxious and loud and, and you know, he’d be right.

Johnny’s impressions and acceptance of this stereotype were as follows:

I feel like a lot of them would think that we’re like very rowdy and, and . . . like I don’t know. I feel like it’s like some of us just give like a, a really like negative like . . . you know, like I said like a negative outlook on like the way we are, and I just think it’s like, some teachers might think that it’s like the one Hispanic girl who decided to get in a fight that, that year, like they’re going to be like, “Oh, all Hispanic people are like that,” and I be like, “Why did you fight?” Meanwhile, I feel like teachers are like, “Oh, we should probably like just watch out how Hispanic people are behaving.” Like they'll just keep an extra eye on us. But I mean like I have had teachers who just really, like don’t really take it into consideration, and they’re just like, oh, we’re just like . . . most of the time we’re just average people.
Several participants reported taking action and exercising behaviors to counter what they saw as the negative stereotype, a coping mechanism like domain disengagement mentioned earlier. In his profile, I explained how Ricardo strove to do his assignment in an effort to avoid association with “those kids.” Among the participants, this type of explicit action in the classroom setting was common. Referring to what drove him in classes, how Bryam, a participant in the focus group, described his actions was telling:

What am I there to do? I’m there to show I’m not just some crazy “Jose.” Jose is the dude who is not going to be on time, who is going to be stupid, and not do his work. That is not me.

**Finding 1d: Latinos outside group boundaries face rejection.** The participants described group boundaries that for some Latinos were more porous. They referenced Latinos who were more integrated with Whites, and a smaller number associated with African-Americans. In various ways, they saw these individuals as Latinos “in name only” and censured their assimilation as a rejection of their group identity as Latinos (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Breakwell, 1986, 2010).

In Johnny’s profile, I recounted his thoughts on two such Latinos: Jason and Vanessa. Mateo described two other students, both sports figures: the Ortiz brothers. One brother, Ricky, has graduated and is in college on a lacrosse scholarship. The younger brother, Anthony, is a senior who also plays the sport. Mateo said of Anthony:

You know, they were extreme. Like were very careful about who they associated with. [Ricky and Anthony] even started dressing differently. I hung out with them like in middle school, and it was different. They started playing lacrosse then. In high school, come ninth grade, they start coming to school in khakis and shirts and Vineyard Vines. Ricky made the team and poof! They were gone. They never hung out with Latinos again. I debate if they are Latino because I feel like some
people naturally drift away from their own, but these guys were obvious. It was like a campaign. If they came to me today, I don’t know if I’d talk to them.

In the focus interview a similar student was mentioned. What follows is the exchange between three participants, highlighting the group’s struggle with Latinos outside group boundaries:

**Rodrigo:** What about Jonathan Rivas? You think he’s Hispanic?

**Dagoberto:** Some Hispanics just mix with other Hispanics. I don't think that’s really their fault. I feel like it depends on your parents. I feel like maybe if my parents were I guess wealthy, had a good job, that they would also want me to act a certain way.

**Rodrigo:** Like White? Act White?

**Dagoberto:** [Laughter] No. Not ghetto is what I’m saying. Jonathan’s mom doesn’t even speak Spanish to him at home, so how you going to want him to speak Spanish in school if his parents aren’t even planning that for him being a kid?

**Mario:** I guess you can’t blame them for not trying to hide it, but then again, you also have to see where their parents come from. If their parents are the type of people that also hide it, then their kids are going to be the same way.

**Rodrigo:** I’ve known them when they talk in Spanish. They would talk to people in elementary school. Her parents would talk to my parents, or some other people’s parents are Hispanic and would talk to them. She used to go to the meetings. She was even on that Hispanic meeting group.

**Dagoberto:** Well, I guess it’s not just Spanish. I don’t know about Jonathan Rivas, but no. I don’t see him as part of my group. He’s in another world.

All of the Latino students who participants named as being outside their group appeared White, including the young man who prompted the exchange in the focus group. For several of these students, it was also clear that they had stable homes and supportive families. This mirrors what research indicates about immigrants’ incorporation.
into the American mainstream: individuals who appear White and can count on some family resources tend to assimilate with Whites faster than others (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). When asked if they felt Latinos who integrated with Whites would have been as successful if they did not look White, most participants did not believe it would be possible.

Participants named few markers that identified individuals as Latinos or conferred group membership. Some mentioned speaking Spanish but conceded that some Latino students born or raised in the United States did not speak Spanish well. However, repeated association in the group seemed paramount.

**Finding 2: Latino students perceive and replicate racial microaggressions.** The second finding in this study concerns participants’ reports of experiences consistent with the definition of racial microaggression. These interpretations differed between the two participants who were recently arrived, Delio and Ricardo, and their more established counterparts who were fluent in English. These subtle insults were described as interactions experienced firsthand or observed between other Hispanic students with school personnel or White students. Yet, participants reported that Hispanics replicated the same behavior in their own group, describing actions toward other Hispanics that reflected similar racist acts. As in earlier pages, in the analysis that follows, I allow the students to speak for themselves by using descriptive quotes. This is particularly important here given the ambiguous nature of microaggressions. My analysis must only be considered in light of the participants’ own words.

**Finding 2a: In everyday exchanges participants perceived microaggressions.** In the student profiles, I recounted the experiences of several participants who cited examples
of everyday exchanges they considered insults that fit the definition of microaggressions: “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, 2010, p. 5). For example, Ricardo recalled hearing a teacher say, “I’m dying. I have the ESL section,” and Danilo told of being excluded from a soccer team celebration. Francisco recounted his outrage and outburst when a cafeteria worker spoke brusquely to a student who could not speak English, saying “Speak clearly! I don’t know what you are saying.” Asked if he could think of a similar situation in a classroom, Francisco said:

What does it look like in the classroom? Well, it’s like when somebody [Latino] with their accent says “ma-chine,” instead of “machine” and somebody [White] says, “Hmm, ma-chine,” and three assholes around him snicker. That’s a stupid joke. That’s what it looks like. I saw that, and the teacher didn’t do anything because it really . . . I’ve never seen anybody push it to that extend (sic). They pushed the envelope that close. I’ve never seen another student go so out of their way to make that new person feel like total . . . crap, for the teacher to have to step in.

In this exchange, Francisco sensed both a microassault in the targeted nature of the comment and a microinvalidation on the part of the teacher, who did not react or take action. When he explained how he felt the exchange was possible, Francisco encapsulated the nature of the microaggression:

The guys don’t think it’s cruel, right? Or maybe they thought nobody heard it. The teacher, the same thing. Honestly, I don’t know if he heard it [the teacher or the student], but I heard it, and it made me angry cause that’s just disrespectful.

A dividing line in how instances were viewed fell between the two participants who were recent arrivals, Delio and Ricardo, and the balance of the group, who had been here for some years or were American born. The most common example of this occurred
in situations where the participant was excluded, another type of microassault. For example, Delio recalled a science class where the students were organized for a type of debate. He shared this in response to a question about what stood out for him about his first science class in the school, an experience he had already said he found challenging:

You know, it was just not knowing the English or being able to figure it out. That was before I knew any English. One day, the professor created teams, and everybody moved to one or the other side of the room. I didn’t understand what was going on, so I just stayed sitting. I was cool, OK? Watching the debate was funny. Every now and then, the teacher would say, “Delio!” I had no idea what the heck was going on, but it was funny.

Delio did not name this as a racial situation, but when asked how he felt, he said:


Although not directly named, the exchange provoked anxiety and reinforced a limitation.

To note the difference between how a recent immigrant such as Delio might interpret a possible racial microaggression as opposed to a Hispanic with more years in the country, note how Carlos, a focus group participant and American-born Latino, fully fluent in English, interpreted an almost identical situation:

We were in math class, and the teacher is like asking for the answer to a problem, and nobody is answering and he says, “Christina [an ESL student], you don’t have to answer. I’m sure any second now somebody will.” Then he’s like, “Ha, ha.” Or something like that. Christina didn’t understand what the hell he said. How can you make a joke with somebody, and they aren’t in on it? I’m sorry, that’s racist. I think even he realized it cause like nobody laughed, and he turned bright red.

Mateo recalled another situation he experienced earlier in the year when a Latina woman, the mother of a recent graduate, died after a long illness. The woman had been well known in the Hispanic community and among some Whites. In fact, for years, she had been one of the few taxi drivers in town. In the mornings, her job was to drive to
various schools dropping off Latino students whose parents did not have other transportation. In the evenings, she drove White businessmen getting off the train after work. Mateo explained the offense in this way:

So the day she died, I told Mr. Penny. Normally when a parent dies, even if it’s somebody who just graduated, there is an announcement over the loudspeaker, and we have like a moment of silence. Teachers go to the funeral, the principal goes to the funeral. When Alicia’s mom died? Nothing. So at the end of the day, I go and say to Mr. Penny, like, “Why no announcement? Are you going to the funeral?” He’s like, “I’m not sure, culturally, if that is a good thing. If that’s appropriate.” I was like, “You should ask. I will tell you. You should go.” So he went for five minutes. No teachers were there. I don’t think he would have gone if I had not said something.

In the student profiles, I recounted several experiences of participants being paired to work with a White student or students. This turned out to be a common experience for many. Each seemed to have a version of the same story, and each situation elicited a different response. The connector between many was that the recipient noted a difference—an imbalance—between working with other Latinos versus working with a White classmate or classmates. In his version of the scenario, Delio was happy to be excluded because it allowed him to avoid work he anticipated would be a challenge for which he was not prepared. Mateo, on the other hand, advocated to be part of an integrated team. Dagoberto, a participant in the focus group, disengaged when assigned to work with a White student:

In my ethics class, I was paired up with a White boy. My teacher was going around telling people individually who their partners were, and she told me. Then I’m looking as she tells him. She tells him and was like, he looks up and around. Totally ignores me. Then I see he says to another White kid, “Da-go-ber-to,” I don’t even know you. I ended that quick. I did my own project. He could have turned around and said hello. That was just rude.
In addition to specific incidents where verbal or nonverbal actions were communicated, several participants noted the absence of race in what they considered important discussions. This was described as White silence (DiAngelo, 2012), which is a kind of microinvalidation. Among several examples that surfaced, three stand out: two were identified during individual interviews, and one was a school-wide instance that many participants interpreted as a microinvalidation.

The first individual instance was reported by Johnny, reflecting on his sociology class, which omitted any discussion of groups and subgroups at the school:

It’s a little crazy. I feel like sociology just kind of like takes you through like the basics of like subculture. But we really never get into subculture within the school, but like definitely like we talk about like subcultures like the Amish or like the Hasidic Jews or, uh, you know just different things like that, and then, you know, you just pretty much get like a broad spectrum and then you just kind of like . . . You just understand school better, and then you’re just like, “Oh, we’re . . . we are the subculture.” And I’m like, I’m gay and Latino, and nobody is talking about that or every other group we have in school.

Johnny said that at the time he did not see this omission but explained that the conversation highlighted his own status for him.

In the second instance, Mario in the focus group interview explained he was aware of a “wrong thing” when an African-American student in a history class brought up racial unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and it was not discussed:

You know the case that happened with Ferguson. In my history class, we have this one Black kid in my class. He was talking about it, and he felt very strong about it. He was pushing at the teacher saying that he was kind of racist, but the teacher really wasn’t. He was just, “Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion,” you know what I mean? And the kid was like pushing. Nobody said anything, and the teacher was there silent. He was hanging out there. Then we moved on.
Mario recalled the discomfort he felt in that moment, which he attributed to two things: the statements from the African-American student were very personal, and no one acknowledged how strong these were for him.

Earlier in the year, the entire school faced an event that was both a communal experience and an individual one. In September, at the start of the school year, the Peakstown High School football team played against a neighboring community’s entirely Black and Latino team. In that game, Peakstown’s team, largely White except for three African-Americans and two Latinos out of 60 players, was accused of racial insensitivity when it placed a banana through a doorknob hole that separated the lockers for the home team and visiting team. Taking offense, the visiting team filed a complaint with the state’s interscholastic athletics association, which prompted an investigation.

In the weeks that followed, the incident roiled the town and the students. Participants in the focus group, however, reported that the situation was mentioned only once in an announcement over the loudspeaker. In the course of the investigation, the district at one point claimed the banana was a joke and in another stated that it was a good-luck charm. Ultimately, the state association exonerated the district and the team. Nevertheless, the decision was a controversial one, and among dissenters was a statewide newspaper that published an editorial criticizing the district and the decision.

In the focus group and in individual interviews, disagreements about the intent of the players and the subsequent actions by school officials were clearly expressed. However, they agreed that the net effect was highly negative. The group interview included this exchange:
Mario: I feel like with the incident with the bananas, Peakstown dropped it completely. Yes, they [the opposing team] was stepped on and said they [Peakstown] were the most racist school ever. I don’t agree. But to me, personally, I had a full-out conversation with my family. We went off, and we were, “no!” We completely supported the Peakstown school, but are they that stupid? They should have thought, “Oh, they’re Black. Let’s not put a banana in there.” Yes, it was stupid. So, if we wanted to make fun of that, for them being Black, we could have said something else? If the whole team was Spanish, then them putting a taco, then maybe it might have been racist? The whole team is Black, and they’re not doing it in the intention? “Let’s put a banana.” That’s stupid.

Rodrigo: That’s what I was going to say. I know the kid that did it, and I talked to him, and I had a full-out conversation with him. He was, “Dude, most of my friends are Black. I would never be racist. Kids in the Peakstown High School football team are Black. You know?” I don’t think that it was . . . but it was dumb, and Black kids at school, they took it real bad.

Mario: But isn’t it them to try to sweep this stuff under the rug?

Carlos: That’s what I was going to say. I think that . . . you ask anyone, if someone from out of Peakstown asked anyone from Peakstown, I think they would say Peakstown is so supportive on race. They make everyone feel part of the family. They would never say Peakstown is a racist town at all. Everyone tries to get everybody included. But I can believe that they would try to make this go away because it’s not something I like or want to talk about.

Mario: But is it really getting everybody involved? Yes, I feel included with you all. I don’t care about the school so much. I’m sorry. At least some of the people of the school.

Interviewer: Whites?

Mario: Not all Whites, but yes. They be the ones sweeping it under the rug. Necessary? I don’t think so. The school cares for me. I feel that, but at the same time, damn. Stuff like that should not happen. Peakstown has been so helpful for someone like me and other people that I do know. I give you examples, you will see that Peakstown is not all racist, but thing like this is crazy.

Interviewer: Did you guys have conversations in school with teachers or with
administrators or . . . ?

Carlos: Uh-uh [negative].

Rodrigo: No. Never at that level. The loudspeaker.

Carlos: It took like four days after, not even. Maybe more, a week after, where there was an announcement saying there was an incident even happened.

Despite some positive sentiments expressed by the students, such as Mario, who said, “We completely supported the Peakstown school,” the most significant sentiment was a sense of having experienced an offense. Participants alternatively expressed a sense of disbelief and disappointment, along with an acceptance of behavior that was too familiar:

Carlos: The whole team is Black. . . . “Let’s put a banana.” That’s stupid.

Rodrigo: It was dumb, and Black kids at school, they took it real bad.

Mario: But isn’t it them to try to sweep this stuff under the rug?

**Finding 2b: Microaggressions are replicated among Latinos.** An unexpected finding was microaggressive behaviors reported or enacted by participants against other Latino students as a result of stereotypes of those peers. Specifically, some American-born or raised participants routinely excluded or disparaged recent immigrants. The discrimination was based on language, social class, and sometimes race.

Few studies on the manifestations of such behaviors exist among Latinos in the United States (Benner & Graham, 2011; Córdova & Cervantez, 2010), but the relationship is analogous to the intergroup strife and internalized racism expressed among African-Americans (Clark, 2004). Popular culture has long documented the social stratification of African-Americans based on color, in which those with lighter skin tones rise to the top (Clark, 2004). Several studies have demonstrated that African-Americans
have used color to guide membership in fraternities, clubs, and other social organizations, with a balance being sought to ensure lighter-skinned Blacks are represented (Hall, 1992; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986). Using a free-response format, Maddox and Gray (2002) also found that African-Americans used significantly more negative traits to describe darker-skinned Blacks and more positive traits to describe lighter-skinned Blacks. These studies echo the doll technique used to argue for school desegregation in the 1950s, where researchers showed that Black children consistently used terms such as “bad” to describe a brown doll and “nice” to describe a White one (Clark & Clark, 1950).

Recent social histories have explored discrimination based on color among Latin American populations in the United States (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Although the product of a unique historical process and development, the manifestations of this prejudice have often mimicked what has been documented among African-Americans. Applied to this study, the analysis offered by these researchers in part helped frame students’ position in the social spectrum of Peakstown.

This point was illustrated by Delio, who touched on several factors as he considered other Hispanics. As quoted earlier in his student profile, Delio said:

We Hispanics are from a lot of different groups. You have those that are born here and speak English and then you have those like me that came [to the United States] at an older age. I don’t talk to [the Hispanics who speak English]. They are mostly Ticos [Costa Ricans]. . . . They are wholly different thing.

When asked to expand on this idea of how they are different, all Delio could say was that “they are different.” He could not articulate all the differences but understood enough to say “they are wholly different thing” that he would not approach. When asked to give
examples of things other Hispanics might do to inform his assessment, as is the case with subtle microaggressions, Delio could not name them other than to say, “they are like the Americans: they have their own things.”

On the other side of this equation were participants who were American-born or raised. When those on the panel were asked to explain how they thought Whites might describe Latinos in general, they touched on an answer that they immediately applied to their classification of ESL students such as Delio. But the exchange is also notable for how decisively they derogate the recent arrivals, much the same way as the other groups denigrated the FOBs (fresh off the boat). The exchange was as follows:

Interviewer: How might the average White student describe Hispanics?

Rodrigo: Ratchet!

Mario: Yep. Ratchet!

Carlos: It’s a slang term they use for . . .

Esteban: Not really us. It’s not that bad. It just, [to Carlos] it doesn’t fit you.

Rodrigo: The ghetto kids get ratchet a lot. Let’s say that. In a way. OK? Wearing a baggy shirt and baggy pants.

Dagoberto: Or maybe let’s say, an outfit like this [pointing to his shirt and neat jeans] with running sneakers. They’ll be like, “That’s ratchet,” because that doesn’t match. It doesn’t go well together. And, and . . . no brands.”

Mario: OK. Not brand, no . . . OK, overall they [Whites] would say that about Hispanics just in general. They go, “OK, these guys are ratchet.” I say the ESL kids are really ratchet. And it is.

When asked if this was a discriminatory or racist attitude toward ESL students, Esteban’s response captured the group’s consensus, which justified the exclusion or avoidance of students such as Delio in the language of aversive racism. He said:

No. Not really. I’m not like racist. How can I be racist, or anybody, anybody here? That, I, it’s not that we racist, but different. If the boy is ratchet, it’s like ratchet. So why don’t we talk to them? I mean, that’s not necessarily true. We, I mean I talk to ESL students sometimes, but they are not in my classes. We’re in like different classes and have different things going on. The [ESL] guys have all kinds of attitude, the girls . . . that’s a whole other kinda thing. Don’t get me started on the girls. They are straight up Bs. Ask Melina or Patria. But, you know, I see these guys in my neighborhood, and I’ll say hello.

Below, in Francisco’s commentary on ESL students, he added yet another dimension, directly naming race in describing how some Latinos associated. As reported in his profile, he said of a White Latina:

Eliana is beautiful and White. All her friends are White too. Not Americans but like Latinos who are White. You see her, and she just, like she hangs with that crowd all the time. You don’t see her with no Indios.

In trying to explain some of these attitudes, in the quote that follows, Johnny achieved several things: He acknowledged the differential treatment toward ESL students and, in the manner of aversive racism, distanced himself from the behavior; he singled out those who have emigrated from Central American countries with higher percentages of indigenous populations; and he provided a rationale for the behavior. He said:

There are cliques, and you can’t go around it. I actually like sort of noticed and don’t really appreciate it. It’s, um, it’s kind of messed up to think that the Hispanic students don’t really help out the ESL students. Like, you can just sort of see like the ESL students hanging out with themselves or walking the hallway. There’s not a lot of interaction with them. I think parents have a lot to do with it. Like that it’s like with Black kids. “I don’t want you hanging out with Black kids,” or “Olvidate de la Salvatrucha.”9 That’s my, that’s my perception. I could

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9 A pejorative term for Salvadorians that calls attention to a notorious Salvadorian street gang, reputedly one of the most dangerous in the world
be wrong, but, uh, my mom has definitely been very like strict and . . . I mean like I don’t really blame her because a lot of our parents are very . . . conservative, and they’re very . . . I don’t want to say primitive, but they’re not like . . . they’re from a different time.

Mateo also recognized the behavior while distancing himself from it:

I can’t say that I’ve taken them under my wing necessarily, but I can say that I don’t like . . . I don’t think of them as they’re completely different people. Like I’ll . . . I have my friends, obviously, but, you know, I talk to them. They say hi to me and I’m, “Hi, how are you?” Like I don’t think it’s, “Uhh, ESL kids.” Because you know some kids are like that. They think that just because that they’re ESL, they’re gonna drag you down or something.

These finding were important in helping me understand the dynamic within the school’s Latino subgroups. They also served as a powerful lens through which microaggressions could be observed from both sides of the equation: the individual who perceived and received the insult or assault and those who were the source.

Finding 3: Latino students find elements of school they appreciate. Despite the conditions participants described as negative, each participant was able to identify aspects they appreciated or found positive. Several noted the safety and organization of the school, and others focused on the school’s reputation and resources. All were able to identify a person they either could relate to, felt “cared” for them, or thought made a difference in their schooling.

The safety of the school and community made an impression on Delio, for example, who remarked that some of the violence he had witnessed in Honduras would be unthinkable here. He said this allowed him to focus on his friends and family:

Well, how can I put this? Here, there is more respect. I saw people killed steps from my home, and that would never happen here. I can walk the street with my father at any hour and not worry. In the school, people are cool. Easy. That’s the best.
Although Delio came from a very violent environment, students who had been raised in the United States also commented on the relative safety of the school in relation to nearby urban schools.

The school’s record of safety and academic achievement was a point of pride for the students. Several participants reported that the favorable record and resulting reputation played a part in why their parents opted to live in this community, even though housing costs were higher than in other nearby areas. In the focus group interview, Rodrigo said it this way:

We could have been in the New Springs or Maple Grove, but hey, like my family stayed here because of the schools. No doubt. My dad once had saved up something like $20,000 for a down payment on a house and went looking. He found a place out in New Lebanon. In the middle of the sticks, man. I was like, “No way.” But still was going. Then my mom looked up the school [test] scores, and that was it. Boom! No move. You know, Peaskstown is a high-testing place. We, we didn’t want to let go of that, so we stayed.

Each participant noted at least one person in their experience at the school who had connected with them in what they perceived to be significant ways. For Danilo, this was a math teacher who worked with him at the town’s recreation center during the summer he arrived from Ecuador. That teacher is the person who matched Danilo with the school’s soccer team. Danilo explained:

Mr. Jack saw me playing because I would go [to the recreation center] every afternoon during the summer. He asked me if I was going to high school, and as soon as I said yes, he asked me to visit him when classes started for me. Before I could visit, he saw me, and he immediately brought me over to the soccer coach for a trial. I was on the team two weeks after that. Mr. Jack still checks in on me.

Several participants explained how particular teachers extended themselves in an attempt to help when they thought the participants did not understand or were failing a class. Some received free tutoring. Although students could not always take advantage of
these opportunities, for some, those exchanges made a very positive impression. The same was true of teachers who attempted to include students socially or otherwise.

For example, although the participants in the focus group agreed that many had been the victims of social microaggressions, they just as strongly believed there were many at the school who made a real effort to include them as Hispanics in various aspects of school life. Brayam expanded on this point:

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying it’s all good, but I don’t think the school is racist. There are a lot of good people here. When I went to apply for colleges and I could not figure out Naviance [college and career readiness software] and whatnot, Mr. Peterson [guidance counselor] put me in contact with Mrs. Roy. She’s a volunteer. She’s been helping. I could not have done the applications without her. It’s not all good, but it’s not racist.

Finding 4: Institutional practices create and support bias. The final finding superimposes the holistic experiences of the six principal participants on the school as an institutional body. Institutional bias describes “discriminatory practices that occur at the institutional level of analysis, operating on mechanisms that go beyond individual-level prejudice and discrimination” (Henry, 2010, p. 426). The participants discussed aspects of their lives that, taken in isolation, may seem like obstacles that any one individual could address. However, taken as a whole, these form identifiable patterns of behavior supported by institutional practices that themselves may create obstacles. The following examples demonstrate how systemic conditions at the school form obstacles for the participants. This finding is separated into two subcategories: limited access to information and material resources, and uneven or insufficient differentiation of instruction.

Finding 4a: Access to information and material resources is limited. A common element in the participants’ daily experiences was the lack of information to inform
decisions that guided their development, or practical resources to make that development possible. In those situations, participants made accommodations that kept them from optimal participation in the school. Two examples illustrate this finding: the guidance department and transportation.

In several instances, school departments did not give participants timely information. Several participants cited the guidance department. Ricardo, for example, described arriving to the high school on the first day to register and having little idea about what was expected of him or what to do. When he came to register, he had been given a basic schedule that included required courses and was then asked to choose electives. This was done with the aid of a translator, but neither understood what impact one choice might have over another. Ricardo described the experience as disorienting, which is not a unique experience for a student in a new school, but in his case, the disorientation reinforced an instructional gap. Ricardo explains:

Well, I didn’t know what classes to choose, so I just chose whatever they put in front of me. I didn’t know, for example, that maybe I should have left chemistry for another semester. I didn’t know enough then. I didn’t even know how to use the translator [on his phone]. That class I had to take twice because I didn’t understand it.

Another example emerged from the college counseling provided to Ricardo, Danilo, and Johnny. Ricardo reported that college counseling had been non-existent for him. As a legal resident, with his profile, Ricardo could have access to postsecondary studies that include low-level entry options such as community college. However, unaware of this option, he had neither sought nor been provided information. The same was true of Danilo. White students who had Danilo’s academic and athletic profile
routinely traced pathways to college that included sports scholarships as early as the tenth grade. As reported by Danilo, who was in the 11th grade, there had been no conversations with the guidance department about postsecondary possibilities.

Transportation is another issue. All of the participants walked to and from school on a daily basis. Although Peakstown only has an area of six square miles, like similar suburban communities, it has a limited system of public transportation. But unlike neighboring districts, the school does not provide busing. This means that on a regular basis, each participant, walking to and from school, walked at least three and up to seven miles a day. Danilo, the individual who lived farthest away, routinely had to start walking to school by 6:45 a.m. to arrive for classes at 7:45 a.m.

During soccer season, Danilo was sometimes at practices late enough to be picked up by his father. However, most days, he walked home or tried to either find a ride with a classmate or find a walking partner. Although he joked that walking was his exercise, not having transportation made Danilo tired in the morning and prevented him from attending tutorials offered by teachers after school, along with other extracurricular activities. He said:

Mr. Wolter is a good [math] teacher, and he’s told me, “Come to tutoring afterschool.” But at 3:00 p.m., if I don’t spend much time here, I’ll get home before 4:00 p.m. At 3:00 p.m., I’m tired.

For Francisco and Johnny, who each live about one and a half miles from the school, transportation is less of a concern. However, when factoring in walking to their part-time jobs, the need to budget one and a half to two hours a day or more for walking
becomes part of their routine—a routine that for more fortunate students might otherwise include time for tutoring, homework, or extracurricular activities.

**Finding 4b: School resources are not distributed effectively.** Among the participants, there were multiple instances where the school system provided inadequate classroom resources or distributed them ineffectively. In each case, the school closed the participants off from full access to education. Two examples illustrate this finding: the lack of instructional supports for Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo, and the experiences of Francisco and Johnny with special education.

Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo were the only participants whose dominant language was Spanish. Without the benefit of content-area courses\(^\text{10}\) conducted in Spanish, each spent most of their instructional time in classes conducted in English, a language they did not fully understand. They have compensated by, among other things, locating friends or relatives who can provide tutoring, translating materials independently, or simply not doing portions of the coursework. Delio explained his after-school routine:

> Well, I pick up my sister [who attends fourth grade]. She waits for me like five minutes, at most. We head home. First, she does her homework. I help her with her math. Then, while she is doing other subjects, I start on my work. I ask her questions, so she may translate, or when she is done with her work, she’ll start doing history or science with me. She speaks English perfectly, and she can read the material. Between her translating, what I translate and see in class, plus the work in ESL class, I can do assignments.

Ricardo also used his ESL period to complete assignments. Outside of this support, he explained his regular routine as follows:

\(^{10}\)“A now-preferred synonym for subject or subject area among educators, content area refers to a defined domain of knowledge and skill in an academic program. The most common content areas in public schools are English (or English language arts), mathematics, science, and social studies (or history and civics).”

[http://edglossary.org/content-area/](http://edglossary.org/content-area/)
If the teacher has given me a handout, then I take out the phone and start translating there. Just Google Translate. If not, in class, I listen or copy from the board or start reading the textbook and translate that. Depending on the class, there are some times where there are other [ESL] students in the class who understand more English than me and will translate. If not, I miss some of what is being said, of course I do, but I understand enough to pass.

Danilo illustrated the last strategy, saying “If I try to do the work, the teacher will give me some credit. Enough to pass.”

All three students cited examples of assignments routinely modified or simplified to allow them to pass a course.

None of these three participants expressed confidence that outside of Spanish and ESL, they had left a class fully understanding all the information they were meant to learn or possessing the skills they were expected to master. They found effective arrangements, such as courses that incorporated aspects of sheltered instruction\textsuperscript{11} and access to a content-area tutor during ESL class, as Delio experienced. However, neither sheltered-instruction English tutors nor content-area tutors were a standard practice in the school.

The school offered aspects of sheltered instruction only in history because that academic department had several teachers trained in the practice. In other subject areas, the participants are “sheltered” together with other English-language learners in the same class by virtue of the fact that they are scheduled together for ESL classes. The limited

\textsuperscript{11} “Sheltered instruction refers to programs in which English-language learners are “sheltered” together to learn English and academic content simultaneously, either within a regular school or in a separate academy or building. Teachers are specially trained in sheltered instructional techniques that may require a distinct licensure, and there are many different sheltered models and instructional variations.”

http://edglossary.org/english-language-learner/
availability of ESL resulted in Delio, Ricardo, and Danilo being placed in classes with at least two or three students that shared similar English-language skills.

Like the preceding participants’ common experience of being English-language learners, Johnny and Francisco both touched on another aspect of the services provided in the school. Before arriving at the high school, both were referred to their respective school’s Child Study Team (CST) by school personnel. For Johnny, this happened early in his elementary school experience. At that time, he was identified as having an auditory processing disorder that impaired his understanding of the spoken language.

In reviewing his educational background, Johnny believed he was misclassified as a student who needed special education services. He believed this because he was tested in English at a time when he was not yet fluent. Moreover, he succeeded academically at every grade. Johnny’s testing, which a review of his records confirmed, was completed in English, and if challenged would have been deemed invalid because English was not Johnny’s home language or, at that time, his dominant language. Although he could not go back to determine if he would have had as much success without special education services, he regrets that the services kept him from more rigorous courses in certain subject areas, especially math. As was recounted in his profile, Johnny explained:

I probably could have been in higher math classes if I weren’t in special ed. They kept me in low classes because special ed teachers only taught low classes, even though I was getting As. I probably wouldn’t have struggled as much in the math section of the SATs had I been in a higher math class, had I like had a, a longer time to understand like Algebra 2 and all this and that. So I feel like the whole like special education thing kind of puts me back.

In the eighth grade, Francisco, like Johnny, was referred to the CST for an evaluation by his teachers. Twice the team made appointments with his mother to
officially begin an evaluation process. She missed both appointments, and the case was closed. The case was passed on when Francisco went to the high school, but it was never reopened. Francisco continued to struggle through his classes and has had to repeat courses every summer to graduate on time. He says of his experience: “Do I wish, like was I special ed? I don’t know, but it, maybe the evaluation would have been a good thing, I think.”

Findings Summary

The findings section of this chapter presents four major findings identified in this study. The findings are organized according to a thematic approach, subcategorizing each finding into more specific points. The perceptions and experiences of the student participants emerged from the data collected over the series of interviews of the participants, observations, and review of records. The words of the participants were used extensively, whenever possible, in keeping with one of the main purposes of this study: to capture an authentic representation of their own lived experiences.

The participants’ perception of themselves as a distinct, isolated group within the larger school was further reduced to four parts. Participants’ sense of isolation in the school was addressed first, with examples from isolation in the community. Isolation as a function of limited-relatedness domain disengagement was explored, as was the perception of negative stereotypes and internalized devaluation.

The second major finding concerned participants perceived microaggressions and how these were replicated among Hispanics. First, how perceptions of microaggressions
differed between two groups among the participants—immigrants recently arrived and American-born or raised Latinos—was explained. Second, an unexpected finding of microaggressions between these two groups was explored. American-born or raised Latinos replicated microaggressive behaviors toward recent arrivals and rationalized it in the language of aversive racism. Despite these experiences, all students were able to identify some positive aspect of their schooling, usually centered on a personal relationship.

Another finding was that participants consistently expressed an appreciation for the school. They noted its academic reputation, general order, and resources. Several also cited individual staff they believed cared about their learning or well-being.

The final finding was the identification of elements that speak to an institutional bias. This allowed for the analysis to superimpose the holistic experiences of the 6 principal participants on the school as an institutional body. Limited access to information and material resources, as well as insufficient or uneven differentiation of instruction, were identified as patterns of behavior that are supported by institutional practices that may create obstacles.

Through interviews, observations, reviews, analysis, and reflections, these three major findings emerged and provided a framework for sharing the stories of these six students. Their lived experience provided a view into how they see themselves as part of the school community and how they describe their time there.

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Findings in Relationship to the Research Questions

**How do Latino students identify themselves within the larger school community?** The Latino students that participated in this study consistently saw themselves as an isolated minority, distinct from majority White students, teachers, and administrators at the school. In their daily experiences, participants interacted almost exclusively with other Latino students. Although the study focused on school experiences, participants also described a similar isolation in the community outside the school.

In describing Latinos as a group, most participants repeated negative characteristics they believed Whites would ascribe to the group. Participants also readily ascribed those same characteristics to some Hispanics in a way that was consistent with what the literature describes as internalized devaluation. All participants described consciously taking various degrees of actions and exercising behaviors to outwardly counter negative Hispanic stereotypes.

The participants also referred to group boundaries that for some Latinos were more porous. They referenced Latinos who were more integrated with Whites and a smaller number associated with African-Americans. In various ways, they saw these individuals as Latinos “in name only” and censured their assimilation as a rejection of their group identity as Latinos.

**How do Latino students describe their experiences at Peakstown High School?** The second finding in this study concerns participants’ reports of experiences consistent with the definition of racial microaggression. These interpretations differed...
between participants who were recently arrived to the United States and their more established counterparts who were fluent in English. These subtle insults were described as interactions either experienced firsthand or observed between other Hispanic students with school personnel or White students. Yet, participants reported that Hispanics replicated the same behavior in their own group, describing actions toward other Hispanics that reflected similar racist acts. Some American-born or raised participants routinely excluded or disparaged recent immigrants. The discrimination was based on language, social class, and sometimes race.

Participants discussed aspects of their school lives that, when taken as a whole, formed identifiable patterns of behavior in the school as an institution that created and supported obstacles. They did not have enough information to inform decisions to guide their development or lacked practical resources to make their development possible, and the school system did not provide adequate classroom resources or distribute these resources effectively. For example, services for English-language learners in the classroom and the provision of special education services were inconsistent.

Another finding is important for how consistently it surfaced. Despite the conditions they described as negative, each participant was able to identify positive aspects. Several participants noted the school’s safety and organization, and others focused on its reputation and resources. All were able to identify a person they could relate to, someone who they felt “cared” for them, or someone who made a difference in their schooling.
Chapter Three

In this final chapter, I review the purpose of the study, present a summary of the findings, discuss implications for practice, present limitations of the study, offer suggestions for future studies, and close with final reflections. This study has not only led me to various findings that could have institutional implications but has also challenged me to reflect on my own practices as an educational leader when considering this group of students.

Purpose of the Study

The city of Peakstown is a prosperous suburban community outside a major northeastern metropolitan center, where I am a school administrator. Over the past 20 years, Peakstown has become home to many Latino families. This population is also reflected in the public schools, where Latinos are now approximately 13% of the population (Center, 2013). Since the first Latino students reached classrooms, district and community leaders have perceived an achievement gap in academic performance between them and their White peers, who constitute a majority in the school and in the community. Despite introducing programs, initiatives, and policies to correct these differences, school administrators and community leaders report that an achievement gap persists between Latinos and their White counterparts. The discrepancy is particularly acute in the case of Latino males. We know little of how Latino male students see themselves as part of the school community, and that, combined with the discrepancy in performance between Latino and White students, served as the impetus for this study.
In this study, I sought to explore Latino male high school students’ social identity, in the context of my district, through a qualitative research design that privileged student voice. The research design used a phenomenological approach within the framework of practitioner research to explore students’ constructions of identity in school. I framed the subject through the lens of literature that considers the history of Latinos in the United States, social identity, and school achievement. These were undergirded by critical race theory and concepts of social identity. From this conceptual framework I listened as participants shared their stories and experiences. The study was guided by two questions: (a) How do Latino students identify themselves within the larger school community? and (b) How do Latino students describe their experiences at Peakstown High School (or within the Peakstown School District)? I sought to answer these questions through interviews with students, a focus group, observations, and reviews of school documents.

Summary of Findings

In our conversations, participants spoke about their families, their schooling experiences, and how they defined themselves within the school context. They expressed how they perceived themselves and how they thought others saw them. During the observations I saw their stories come to life, and I took on part of their daily reality. From this experience, I developed the following four findings.

1. *Latino students feel isolated and stigmatized.* Participants perceived themselves as a distinct, stigmatized, and isolated group at the school and in the larger community. This isolation resulted from how the participants related to Whites in the majority, and how they perceived Whites would relate
to them. The isolation also served as a way to avoid or cope with potentially negative interactions with Whites. Latinos outside group boundaries, who have assimilated the majority White culture, face rejection from other Hispanics.

2. *Latino students perceive and replicate racial microaggressions.* Participants perceived racist microaggressions. American-born or raised Latinos were particularly attuned and sensitive to signs of subtle slights and discrimination from their White peers. They perceived negative stereotypes, which they internalized. Surprisingly, some of the participants replicated behaviors and imposed the prejudices toward other Hispanics, specifically recent arrivals. The participants rationalized this behavior in the language of aversive racism.

3. *Latino students find elements of school they appreciate.* Participants consistently expressed an appreciation for the school, noting its academic reputation, general order, and resources. Several also cited individual staff they believed cared about their learning or well-being. These notions, as reported by the students, help provide a more complete picture of the experiences for Hispanic students in the district.

4. *Institutional practices create and support bias.* School and district practices, such as limited access to information and material resources, as well as insufficient or uneven differentiation of instruction, were identified as patterns of institutional practice that may themselves create obstacles.
Through interviews, observations, reviews, analysis, and reflections, these four major findings emerged and provided a framework for sharing the stories of six students. Their lived experiences provided a view into how they see themselves as part of the school community and how they describe their time there.

Implications for Practice

This section discusses six implications this study has for my practice as an educator and specifically an educational leader within this district. As practitioner research, the work presented here is primarily intended to guide my practice. However, I also believe that these implications may be of importance to other educators looking to develop an understanding of students who constitute a stigmatized group.

Students’ voices, Latino voices, minority voices, need to be heard. Latino students, like all students, have an “insider perspective” that can reveal which, and in what ways, school practices support or inhibit their success (Bland, 2011). They are authorities in what it means to be a Latino student in a majority White school and community. This can be a particularly rich source of data in an institution where the staff is not representative of the students’ culture and backgrounds, and as such may have no direct comparable experiences in the school setting.

If we recognize that Latino students are not achieving at the same rate as their White counterparts, as experts in the daily experience of their schooling, these students should be part of the conversation when programs and policies are created or discussed by school leaders. Their direct knowledge should be incorporated into decision-making processes to best meet their needs and support their learning. With genuine opportunities
for Latino students to reflect on their experiences and engage in a dialogue with school leaders, we may achieve practices that are more responsive, appropriate, and effective.

**Address institutional bias.** It is difficult to discuss racism in an organization where nobody in the group will recognize themselves as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). However, as we continue to function within a system that imposes conditions disproportionately limiting the education of Latino students, we are in effect endorsing biased behaviors. To know this is a problem and to fail to take action makes us complicit in the practice.

Most of the inhibiting conditions are not attributable to any one person, which dilutes a sense of personal responsibility. For example, the high school allows some Latino students to sit in a class conducted in English, a language they do not understand. As representatives of the high school as an institution, administrators will say they do not have content-area classes taught in Spanish because without the requisite number of English-language learners concentrated at any one time, in any one subject or grade level, regulations do not require them to do so. In the context of their school, such regulations contribute to the failure of some Latino students. However, stemming as they do from Federal statutes, the regulations are not attributable to any of their own school administrators, and thereby have the effect of absolving them from a degree of criticism when they allow Latino students to remain in classes that are unintelligible to them.

Observed more broadly, the problem in this example is not just the regulations, but those individuals who implement them. They do not see themselves, nor are they perceived as, racist; from personal experience, I know them to be caring individuals.
They are “well-meaning people who believe in equal rights yet make decisions that inadvertently transmit [racism]” (Kristoff, 2015, p. SR11). Once we are aware of such problems with our practices, as professionals we have a responsibility to advocate for a change or accept we are part of the problem.

**Address issues of race and racism.** An implication for my practice is to explore how, as an individual in a school system, I can positively address issues of race and help develop tools to effectively engage in this discussion. When issues of race, racism, or racialized behavior are identified, we have often pulled away. Even in the context of this study, on topics of race, power, and inequality, colleagues have excused themselves by saying, “We don’t have a language for that.” It is at moments such as these, when we may be most uncomfortable, that it is important to engage, even if the conversation begins at a most fundamental level; if all we can articulate is that we do not have “a language” to speak about race, even acknowledging this may itself begin to surface feelings and ideas that begin to build, if not a vocabulary, a common understanding of where we stand.

The need for and potential benefits of addressing race and racism affects White and Latino communities alike, the dynamic of racism exacting a cost on both parties. For the participants in this study, part of that cost comes in the form of their school experience and sense of self, which was revealed in the course of the research. Although the study did not extend in the same way to Whites, the actual economic cost of efforts to support programs for Hispanic students that do not produce intended results, which is also a cost for Whites and the community as a whole, in part motivated this study.
Evaluate curriculum. A complete education explores with the student a broader world he may not know or understand, and reflects his place in it. In this way, wrote Style (1996),

education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected. Knowledge of both types of framing is basic to a balanced education which is committed to affirming the essential dialectic between the self and the world. (p. 7)

To this end, the school should have culturally relevant curriculum that honors students’ experiences, and their histories. Given the changes to the school population, which is representative of the shift in the nation as a whole, the school should evaluate if the curriculum reflects this change. A basic question should be: To what degree is the curriculum ethnocentric or representative of the student body?

Develop self-advocacy and networks of support for Latino students. Within the school and outside it, it is important for Latino students to understand their strengths and needs, the conditions they deserve, and their responsibilities, so that they may incorporate these into their daily lives and communicate them to others as needed. Closely related to the previous implication of developing a “language” to discuss race, self-advocacy also implies being able to assess racial situations, identify resources, explore desired solutions, and express the same. Mateoson (2014) called this “racial literacy,” the “ability to read, recast, and resolve racially sensitive interactions” (p. 4).

As a leadership practice, practitioner research can empower. Practitioner research informed the subjects, and me as a leader, more completely. The process provided for a systematic investigation that identified and balanced relevant data. The
awareness and understanding that resulted was empowering for the subjects and me. Going forward, it offers a template for future work.

Part of what motivated me to pursue this research was that I myself had been what was considered an underprivileged minority Latino student in a majority White setting. As such, I saw myself in many of the Hispanic students that filled our high school. This solidarity moved me to act, and part of me wanted to “save” the students, to be their advocate. However, the levels of understanding this research facilitated highlighted that that in many past instances, in several ways, because of my personal position and history I instinctively assumed I understood the Hispanic students and what they needed.

This was reinforced by a network of administrative colleagues who sometimes turned to me as the one Hispanic in the room for a minority perspective they thought we lacked, and my own need to make decisions. I thought at times that relying on my position as a minority may have been the most efficient manner to find resolution to issues presented to my district and me. What resulted, even though intellectually I understood that without the full benefit of students I did not have complete answers to our needs, were decisions that lacked a broader student voice.

This research project helped me experience in a direct manner how much more nuanced and rich the understanding can be with a student perspective, and provided a framework to include those student voices now and in the future. The process of this research starkly illustrated for me that although I may have been attuned to some of the issues Hispanic students encountered in our schools, the students themselves understand these issues better than I alone could. I learned that although my personal history had
many things in common with the students’, by virtue of who they are, as well as the time and place in which they exist, they are very different from me; although I am Hispanic, I am not my students. The sense that I needed to “save” them, or that I could “save” my students, was at least misguided, if not mistaken. Given the opportunity, students can speak for themselves, be their own advocates, and help create the space in which they can be who they are, and in that way “save” themselves.

Practitioner research was able to bring me to this realization because it shifted the emphasis from me as administrator to the larger group and, as I quoted Ravitch (2014) earlier, “the stories, in the data, and in the evidence that emerges from a more relational, contextualized, collaborative and practice-centered kind of research” (p. 6). As such, my own work as a leader in the district is changed.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Study

This is a small study looking primarily at just six students in a much larger population of Hispanics at the school. It is an exploratory study and can only provide general indications of how theoretical understandings may inform what is experienced in this setting. It can be a foundation for future study that could provide empirical evidence for broader and more generalizable conclusions.

More conversations with Latino students at the site are needed to develop a more complete picture of their lives as students and members of the extended community. This research would further our understanding of how race, ethnicity, and language manifest themselves in American classrooms for new immigrants from Latin American.
Additional studies can test the generalizability of findings presented in this study and allow researchers to more completely theorize on the experiences of Latinos in this majority White suburban school. It would be beneficial to look at immigrants that fit the profile of students presented here—males, but also immigrant females. Likewise, immigrants with different socioeconomic backgrounds may inform our understanding more completely.

For my practice, the most immediate suggestion is to incorporate two comparative groups: White staff and students. How would White staff and students respond to the same questions? How do White staff and students perceive Latino students? How would they describe Latinos’ experience in the school and district? How do their responses compare to the responses of participants in this study or a similar study? In recognition of the fact that I am the only Latino male administrator, I may not be the person in the best position to interview Whites about their beliefs and practices related to race. However, my race and ethnicity, along with my position in the district, may also provide a platform to identify such a concern as worthy of consideration.

My position itself, however, is the final limitation to the research here discussed. My position as a leader in the district poses limitations on this study. Although I spent many hours in classrooms, interviewing participants, some of whom were acquaintances, I remained an adult authority with a badge that read, “Principal.” Additionally, I knew or got to know the parents of several participants as well. I was aware of this throughout my research and believe the limitations were balanced by the potential to develop understandings that would improve my practice. However, research by an outsider to the
school and district may yield more complete data, and future investigations should include such options.

**Final Reflections**

Maintaining the line between research and practice was difficult. At several points in this project, I had to keep myself from immediately acting on a piece of information I had collected, or from drawing conclusions early on. The driving impulse is to act when I perceive a wrong. However, through this process I learned the value of a methodical, informed approach to collecting data. It has allowed me to develop a more complete understanding of Latino students in my setting and allowed their voices to speak for themselves. The lives and experiences of these students made a deep impression on me. Often in the morning, as I drive to work, I think of Danilo, who of the participants lives farthest away, walking his three miles to school. When I see landscapers, I scan the faces to see if there are workers who, like Ricardo, should be in high school. The participants’ perseverance and resilience, in addition to the trust they placed in me, was humbling.

My need to develop answers to the questions I posed was driven by my own memories of being a Latino student in a White school and by my own sense of being an outsider. I moved to address this subject out of a sense of duty to these students because they were, I thought, like me. I felt a sense of duty to my colleagues as well, most of them White, who often expressed a sense of frustration at their inability to understand or make progress with Hispanic students. Some of what the participants said was painful, embarrassing, and upsetting to hear. Much of what students shared confirmed that although we have done a lot to improve the education of Hispanics in our community,
there is still more to do. In this study I chose to privilege the voices of Latino students who are rarely listened to, and I found them honest, interested, engaged, and engaging. Their stories were illuminating. Our school community is a place that appreciates diversity. The district has invested in efforts to improve Hispanics’ educational outcomes, yet this study suggests there are areas where we need to revisit what we feel, what we say, and most importantly, what we do.

Our school district is in the midst of a larger American reality that illustrates how immigration is manifesting itself in many parts of our country. The story of Latinos in our town is an American story, versions of which are bound to be repeated many times over as the Latino population grows and continues to makes its presence felt in traditionally White communities. What I learned is that while these first- and second-generation Americans integrate into our society, they are developing an identity that places them outside the mainstream as something less than full members of our larger society. This is sometimes reinforced by our own action or inaction as school leaders and educators. As uncomfortable as some of these findings have been, they have helped name a problem. The work has fueled some ongoing conversations and sparked others. As school leaders, we are now obliged to lead by creating a space for that dialogue in search of better solutions for all students.
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Felix Gil
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917-689-0944

Invitation to Participate in Research

LATINO STUDENTS IN [BLANK]

My name is Felix Gil and I am the principal at [BLANK]. I am conducting a study as part of a graduate school program. I am inviting you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about the experience of Latino students in our schools.

If you agree to be part of this study you’ll participate in interviews with me about your experiences as a Latino student in [BLANK] High School. I will also observe you in classes. Interviews are expected to last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted at a time that will not interfere with your class schedule.

By participating, you may help us to better understand what it’s like for you to be a student in our school.

If you decide you want to participate, I will contact your parent or guardian to get permission from them as well. Being in this study is up to you and there are no consequences if you don’t want to participate or even if you change your mind later. All information collected will be strictly confidential.

You can ask any questions that you have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn’t think of now, you can call me at [BLANK].

Signing your name below means that you want to be part of this study. With that, I will contact your parents for permission and schedule a time to meet with you at school.

________________________________________  __________________
Participant Name (Please Print)  __________________

Best Phone Number to Reach You

When you complete this form, please return it to your teacher, Ms. [BLANK].
Appendix B: Parental Consent Form

PERMISSION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

LATINOS IN OUR SCHOOL

My name is Felix Gil. I am conducting a study as part of my graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

We are inviting your son to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about the experience of Latino students in our schools.

If you agree to your son being part of this study on one day I will observe him/her in classes and during other times in the school day. He/she will also participate in a two individual interviews with me about his experiences as a Latino student in [blank] High School. Interviews are expected to last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted on school grounds at a time that will not interfere with his class schedule. Other short interviews may follow. All parts of the study will be completed over the next 4 months.

We do not anticipate any risks with participation. However, if your son becomes distressed or changes his mind, he may withdraw participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he is entitled. His current standing with the school will in no way be affected at any time by his decision to refuse to participate.

By participating, your son may help us to better understand what its like for you to be a student in our school.

Please talk this over with your son before you decide whether or not to allow him to participate. We will also ask directly if he agrees to take part in this study. Even if you say “yes,” your son can still decide not to be in this study.

If you don’t want your son to be of this study, he does not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and there are no consequences if you don’t want your son to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.
All information collected will be strictly confidential, stored in password protected databases, and accessible only to the investigators; No participants will not be identified by name or any data that is unique to them.

You can ask any questions that you have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn’t think of now, you can call me 917-689-0944 or ask me the next time you see me.

Signing your name below means that you give permission for your son to be in this study. You will be given a copy of this form after you sign it.

________________________________________  ____________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

________________________________________  ______________
Participant Signature  Date

________________________________________  ______________
Parent Signature  Date

________________________________________  ______________
Investigator  Date

If you cannot reach me or you want to talk to someone other than me, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 573-2540.
Appendix C: Individual Interview Protocol

Introductory Questions:

Where is your family from?
How did your family or you first come to [ ]? 
How long have you attended [ ] High School?
When did you begin attending the [ ] Public Schools?
What do you think about being in [ ] High School?

Mapping/Social Identity Questions:

Looking at the map, I see you filled in _____, _____, _____, and _____ as groups you belong to. Why are those important to you?

How are you like other Latino students who go to school here?

How are you like the other _____ students who go to school here?

How would you describe the students (who live in the town) here to a visitor?

What do you think the students who go to this school and live in this town think of you?
Specific examples?

What do _____ students say about Latino students?
How are Latinos treated in this school?

Talk about any clubs or activities that you belong to or have belonged to.
If none, why haven’t you joined any clubs or activities?
Which club or activity might you join if you had an opportunity?
What clubs or activities are not available at [ ] High School that you might join?

You mentioned _____, _____, and _____ as groups you don’t belong to. What clubs or activities do you think they belong to?
What clubs do members of those other groups belong to?

What are some of the differences between you and other Latinos who go to school here?
What are some of the biggest differences between you and other _____ resident students?

How do the students who go to [ ] High School influence you— positively or negatively?
Mapping/Social Identity Questions Redux:

Looking at the map, think of a time at Summit High School when you were particularly happy to be part of one of these groups. Explain.

Looking at the map, think of a time at Summit High School when you were not happy to be part of one of these groups. Explain.
Bibliography


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