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Dreams Beyond Labels: Case Studies of Four English Language Learners Who Are Beating the Odds

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What is surprising is not that children fail, but that some do succeed against all odds.

-Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, as cited in Trueba (1988)

Why is it that some students perform better than others? Why are some students surviving and excelling in our current education system while others are being left on the side of the road, or even worse, abandoning the system altogether? Minority and low socio-economic students have been identified as consistently performing at lower levels on standardized tests, more likely to dropout, and are less represented in higher education (Colorado Department of Education, 2005).

The existence of an achievement gap between English speakers and English language learners continues to be a concern in our educational system. Schools across the nation are looking more closely at this issue and investigating ways to close the gap. The research has attributed several factors, such as low socio-economic status, low levels of parent education, exposure to and pressure from gangs, and teen pregnancy, as influential in this

achievement gap (Catterall, 1998; England, Egeland, and Collins, 2008). Schools continue to try to provide support systems to help decrease alarming drop out rates. However, perhaps it would be just as beneficial for these schools, and for researchers, to step away from solely focusing on the students who are failing, and research the students who, despite fitting all the at-risk characteristics, are achieving at high levels. There are students who are poor, whose parents have little education, who are exposed to gangs, and who fit other at risk categories, that are experiencing great success in school and moving on to higher education. So, what are the factors that guide and help these students to, and through, their academic victories? Some of the noted components include parental support and involvement, positive student-teacher relationships, involvement in school activities and clubs, peer support, and their own intrinsic motivation (Catterall, 1998; De La Cruz, 2008; Englund, Egeland, and Collins, 2008; Fulgini, 1997; Harklau, 1994).

Role of Parents

Although there are ELLs whose parents did not go very far in school,

parent encouragement and expectation of success for their child in school is of the utmost importance. Studies conducted by De La Cruz (2008) and Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008), found family to be the most crucial element in student success. Although these parents did not have many educational experiences, they emphasized the importance of education to their children. De La Cruz (2008) states, "Even though these families were unable to provide active support, the emotional support they did provide was effective enough to become a driving force to get the participants to the next level in their education." (p.36) Englund et al. (2008) also point out that students who have negative relationships with their parents are more likely to drop out of school. Lastly, many immigrant families come to the United States to enroll their kids in an educational system that is perceived to be better than the one in their home country. Therefore, they are strongly supportive of high achievement in school because they see education as the avenue to success (Fuligni, 1997).

Role of Teachers

Teachers are also a significant part of the equation for success in school. Teacher-student relationships can help ELLs feel confident and able to succeed in a challenging environment. In Catterall's (1998) study on students' own perceptions of their likelihood of dropping out, he notes that teacher-student relationships play a major role in changing students' minds to stay in school. Students were more likely to stay in school if they felt their teachers cared about them and were interested

in their lives. Teachers need to make it a priority to build these kinds of supportive relationships where students can be heard and take ownership in their learning. Students need to know that their teachers are their advocates and will stand by them to help them achieve their goals. In the De La Cruz (2008) study mentioned above, each participant had an *Advisor Mentor* that was one of his/her teachers, counselors, or an older, more informed person that helped guide them through their educational decisions. The *Advisor Mentor* was listed as the second most important mentor for Hispanic students and for two of the participants it was one of their teachers. Englund et al. (2008) agree with the findings of Catterall (1998) and De La Cruz (2008). They state that students who know their teachers truly care about them are more likely to persevere and stay inspired to work hard.

Embedded in good teaching, and other school-wide initiatives for all staff, at any level, is the expectation that all students can achieve at high levels. Teachers must make sure their students know that they believe in them and will support them to be the best that they can be. The Colorado Department of Education reported in their *Colorado Closing the Achievement Gap Commission's Final Report* (2005) that, "Schools that have closed achievement gaps have clearly established the importance of high expectations for all students, which is inherent to all of the approaches that they take. Central to this notion is that closing achievement gaps requires academic improvements among under-

performing groups of students, but not at the expense of higher performing ones.” (p. 17)

Teachers who hold high expectations build confidence in their students.

Role of Peers

Birds of a feather flock together.

When a group of students are motivated to do well in school, then this can be a great asset for academic ambition. In addition to parents and teachers, peers are another prominent provider of support and mentoring. Peers can provide support that parents often cannot. They have a deeper understanding of day-to-day experiences, and have the opportunity to provide almost instant, onsite support when it is needed (Fuligni, 1997). It is important for students to find peers that have the same academic goals and motivation in order to stay driven.

Role of Personal Motivation

Another important aspect is a student’s own personal motivation to succeed. This intrinsic motivation is surely influenced by the extrinsic factors mentioned above; knowing that their parents care about education, having teachers that support them, and having peers that are like-minded in their endeavors (Fuligni, 1997). All of these factors contribute to a resilient student, but there also is a spark inside some students that pushes them through and beyond any obstacle. De La Cruz’s (2008) study mentions *Self Mentor* as a prominent factor that leads to student success. As she explains, a *Self Mentor* recognizes that their situation or environment was not ideal, but could

still push forward and overcome obstacles. These students focus on the positive and recognize that things will be difficult for them, but they can still succeed. They have an awareness of what their parents went through to come to the United States and understand the value of an education. Students with intrinsic motivation not only use teachers and parents as advocates, but they self-advocate, which shows determination, confidence, and ambition (Harklau, 1994).

Other Support Programs

There are other programs within schools that target minority and ELL students to help them continue their education past high school. One of them is called AVID, Advancement Via Individual Determination, which targets first-generation college students (Swanson, 1992). The implementation of these programs demonstrates that schools are recognizing that there are many minority students, including ELLs, who have the drive and skills to attend college, but who also need some guidance and information on how to access higher education.

External and internal motivation, school methods and support, and familial, teacher, and peer support are only some of the factors that are helping our high achieving ELLs succeed against all odds. These students can be used as role models to demonstrate why educators, schools, and communities need to support and encourage minority students to stay in school. It is with these types of student in mind that the present research study has been designed. This study was guided by the success of four college-

bound ELL students as a way to identify the factors that influence their academic achievement.

Methodology

To answer these questions, in-depth case studies were conducted with four ninth graders who were enrolled in an advanced International Baccalaureate program. The case studies included two boys and two girls; all Hispanic former ELLs. Each of these students moved from Mexico to the United States in their early elementary years, were fourteen years old and lived in a medium-sized city in the Rocky Mountain region.

The four students, their families, and their teachers were contacted and given consent forms to participate. A list of interview questions was developed and refined for the students, parents and teachers. The parents received Spanish questionnaires by mail with a stamped envelope in which to return the questionnaires to the researchers. The results of these questionnaires were translated from Spanish into English. Core subject teachers also received a questionnaire asking them about the students' motivation and family life. The students received a copy of the interview questions to preview before the one-on-one interviews. For the purpose for the case study, each student selected a pseudonym.

After collecting the necessary information and conducting the four interviews with the students, the information was categorized and analyzed. Each student interview is depicted below and is separated into five sections: Background, The Present, Support Systems, Self-Comparison, and The Future. Their individual answers

are followed by comments from their parents and teachers. The study's design and interpretation of the information gathered from students, parents and teachers was guided by the work of Merriam (1998).

Case Studies

Case Study #1: Quetzal

Background

Quetzal was born in Tierra Colorado, Mexico. At seven, he moved to Tijuana, and then lived for a brief time in California before moving to Colorado when he was 8 years old and in the third grade. He described himself as a student who got into trouble a lot by getting in fights while he was in school in Mexico. While at the same time, he cared about school and was described by his Mexican teachers as one of the best students in his class. Upon arriving at school in the United States, Quetzal said he immediately did not like it and really wanted to go back to Mexico. He described himself as a kid who rebelled against his mother by frequently leaving home and not telling her where he was going. He often hung out by himself because he did not want to make friends at first. Quetzal's teacher spoke a little Spanish, which was helpful at times, but Quetzal realized that this forced him to learn English and viewed his teacher's Spanish limitations as a positive influence on his English education. There were only a couple of other students that spoke Spanish. Quetzal said other students offered to teach him English. He soon felt comfortable in class and started communicating with others.

The Present

Quetzal had many positive things to say about his education in the United States, such as being able to study different languages, as he was studying French, the different ethnicities of his classmates, and the safety that American schools provided. American schools were much safer and he felt reassured by having a closed campus with a school resource officer. In contrast, he expressed that he always felt scared walking home from school in Mexico because he might get hurt or get into more trouble. He was, therefore, grateful for a sense of security in American schools. He also said that he really liked how every year he found more friends, more teachers, and more opportunities to learn. Quetzal really liked band and music class and was very appreciative of having electives. He did not have anything negative to say about schools in the United States.

Quetzal described himself as a hard working, but occasionally forgetful, student. He was no longer a rebel and wanted to make his mother proud. He was the second youngest in a large family and was the only one who was successful; his sisters and brothers were not as motivated to do well in school. He was enrolled in all IB core classes and was also taking French, band, and AVID. He had earned As and Bs in all but two of his classes. While he was in elementary school he used to get Ds because of the language barrier, but now he felt fairly confident in English.

Despite not always feeling supported by his siblings and his friends, Quetzal had always felt supported by his mother and credited her with being the primary reason he kept up his

motivation. He recognized that she wanted a better life for him and he wanted to make her proud. It had not always been an easy path, though, and Quetzal said there were a few obstacles that he had to overcome in the beginning. First, he was embarrassed that his family could not afford school supplies. Riding the bus was a problem because he had some confrontations with other students about his family heritage. He did not elaborate on the details of these situations, but it eventually led to finding alternate transportation. His family was split between Mexico and the United States for many years, but now everyone was here, which made him happy. He said they lived in a small trailer, which could be difficult at times. All in all, though, he said their problems were much worse in Mexico. When times were difficult, Quetzal said he turned to sports; he liked to box with his nephew (who was the same age), lift weights, and play soccer. He also found enjoyment in writing poetry, songs, and playing guitar.

Support Systems

Quetzal's biggest influence was his mother. She constantly encouraged him to do well and often expressed her appreciation of him. His teachers had been the second biggest influence. His sixth grade teacher was especially influential because she helped him and his mother with problems at home. His AVID teachers had really helped him with organization and with keeping college in the forefront of his goals. His friends were helpful by cheering him up when he was feeling down and helping with his homework.

Self-Comparison

When asked what made him different from other students his age, he offered several answers: he had a very large family and most of the other students in the IB program had small families. Also, if he knew that a friend spoke Spanish, he would only talk to them in Spanish. Lastly, he said he was different from others because of his fierce pride in his heritage and when called derogatory names for being Mexican, he always responded that he was proud to be a Mexican. He compared himself to Odysseus and Achilles in the Odyssey, saying that he related to them because of their pride in their heritage.

In Quetzal's opinion, students who wanted to do well in school kept their dreams in focus and knew that if they worked hard, they could accomplish their dreams. He said that students who did not do well in school succumbed to peer pressure, gangs and drugs. The advice he would give to struggling students was *"try hard for what you want and you will get it; find someone who can help you; have fun with whatever you are doing; and help yourself first and you will never give up."*

The Future

In five years, Quetzal envisioned himself in college studying for a career. His mother wanted him to go to college and he would be the first in his family to even finish high school. He was not sure if his friends wanted to go to college. He didn't believe his neighbors had attended college; he thought they were mostly involved in gangs, so college was never even in the picture.

Parents

Quetzal's mom never attended school. Because of this, she was incredibly grateful for her son's educational opportunities in the United States. She said that one of the greatest benefits of school in the U.S. was that school allowed her son to study. To get involved, she attended the monthly parent meetings for Spanish-speaking parents. She stated she was extremely satisfied with Quetzal's education and that could not think of any disappointments. She reported not having had any obstacles in her family since coming to the United States. She wanted her son to attend university and said that she would do everything she could to make that possible. She also added that she would like more information on how her son could get into college.

Teachers

Quetzal's teachers described him as a quiet, respectful, attentive student who had a positive attitude about school. He was mature beyond his years, had a strong heart, and always came prepared to learn. He differentiated himself from other students by building personal relationships with his teachers, being very self-motivated, and by not getting involved in typical junior high drama. He was not afraid to be smart in front of his peers and had strong self-control. His teachers did not feel that language created a barrier in his learning. He had an intrinsic desire to learn and advance in life. Only one teacher knew about his family life and described a chaotic household with many siblings involved in gangs, teen pregnancies, abusive relationships, and too many people

living in a small space. Despite the current reality of his home life, all of the teachers were confident that Quetzal would go to college. His passion for personal success, eagerness to learn, and a desire to help others are the characteristics that would get him there.

Case Study # 2: Rodriguez

Background

Rodriguez was born in Durango, Mexico and moved to the United States when he was eleven. He remembered school in Mexico well and said that they went to school for less hours overall and had an hour off for lunch at which time they went home. He only remembered studying Spanish, Math and History in school in Mexico. Rodriguez recalled that school in Mexico was very strict and he recalled getting hit for discipline in first grade. Rodriguez was not the best student during these times and said he ditched a lot back then. He did not like the way his school in Mexico lacked security and in his opinion, teachers did not care about individual students. He liked the schedule of the school day better, though, because it gave him a nice break in the middle of the day. He also pleasantly remembered having a lot of friends and feeling like he could talk to everyone each day.

When he first arrived in the United States, he felt like he would never make it in school. He said his grades were really bad and he used to always try to sit in the back of the room. On the positive side, though, he felt like it was not until he came to the United States that he felt pushed to do well in school. A big distinction between his school in Mexico and his experience in the United States was the teacher relationships.

He felt that here his teachers cared about him as an individual and he was surprised that all the teachers expressed concern and tried to keep track of whether or not he was attending class. Rodriguez also felt security with his bilingual teachers, principal, and friends.

The Present

Overall, Rodriguez really liked school. He said his uncle, who was a teacher in Mexico, was a role model to him because he was the first in his family to graduate from college in Mexico. His uncle always told him to “do the right thing.” Rodriguez described himself as a good student who liked to participate, who was willing to ask questions, and who did not want to be known as someone who disrupted class. When interviewed, he was taking a full schedule of honors classes and had good relationships with all of his teachers. He had straight As and said that, with the exception of a period of time when he first arrived in the United States, he earned straight As.

Rodriguez viewed his bilingual skills as mostly helpful. He liked being bilingual because he could speak to people that speak either Spanish or English. He was also teaching his uncle how to speak English. Rodriguez said his ability in both languages was strong. He preferred to write in English because he knew more sophisticated words, but he felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish.

To stay motivated in school, Rodriguez had his entire family in Mexico cheering him on and he wanted to make them proud. He said the only reason he was in the United States was for a good education. He mentioned that, “*My heart is in Mexico, I just go to*

school in the United States.” Being motivated was not always easy, though, and Rodriguez and his family had some struggles while in the United States, such as trying to get citizenship for his mother. His stepfather worked long hours and Rodriguez noted that his mother wished he were home more often. This sometimes caused stress at home. When he was having a difficult time, either at home or school, Rodriguez felt best when he turned to his friends for good company and his teachers for problem solving and help.

Support Systems

Rodriguez recognized his family and his teachers as being his biggest academic supporters. His family supported him by knowing his grades and being involved in his schoolwork. His mother expected him to achieve Cs or better and checked his grades every week. Rodriguez said of anyone in his family, his grandparents likely cared the *most* about his grades and frequently checked-in with the family to make sure he was doing well in school. He also credited his stepfather for being able to help him with his homework because he was a native English speaker. Rodriguez had consequences for poor grades. However, as a reward for good grades, he got a new cell phone.

Rodriguez said his teachers really advocated for him. At least four of his teachers were checking his grades on a weekly basis. One teacher made him stay after school to work on homework and projects. Rather than seeing this as a burden, he said it showed his teachers cared and wanted him to do well.

Self-Comparison

Rodriguez said he was different from other students in the United States

because they did not appreciate the education system available to them. When asked why some students did well in school and others did not, he narrowed his answer down to three main reasons: parents, teachers, and friends. If parents do not push their children to do well, and get involved in school, their children are more likely to fail. Rodriguez said that teachers needed to show students that they wanted to help them; otherwise students develop negative relationships with their teachers. Lastly, he said that it is easy for a student to get peer-pressured into being a bad student. If he had to give advice to these struggling students, he would tell them to make some new, positive friends in addition to the old ones. He would encourage all students to have good relationships with their parents and their teachers to do better in school.

The Future

In five years, Rodriguez saw himself in college. He wanted to be enrolled in one of the top universities in the United States. Rodriguez said that one of the first things his family told him when they arrived in the U.S. was that he was going to go to college, no matter what. He wanted to attend college to make more money, to be able to support a family some day, and to have extra money to go visit his family in Mexico. He would be the first in his immediate family to be a full-time college student in the United States. His stepfather was currently enrolled as a part-time college student. He and his cousin, who were the same age, made a bet that they would finish school and attend college at the same time. He had a very positive outlook on his life and future.

Parents

Rodriguez's parents were not able to return the questionnaire.

Teachers

Teachers described Rodriguez as a quiet student who initially struggled with deadlines, but who used a variety of support systems to get organized. He helped translate for other Spanish speakers and was respected by his classmates and friends. What differentiated him, teachers said, was that he was respectful towards adults, was truly motivated to do well in school, and his parents conveyed an expectation of success to the teachers as well as Rodriguez. In addition, all of his teachers expressed high confidence in his ability in English. They believed he was motivated due to high parent expectations and involvement, and high teacher expectations. Most of his teachers believed that he would attend college because of parent and self-expectations and because Rodriguez recognized that education was key to his success in life.

Case Study #3: Selena**Background**

Selena was born in Campeche, Mexico and lived there until she was seven years old. She described her three years of school in Mexico as being strict but comfortable because she knew everyone is her class and they all spoke the same language. In addition, she liked that all the parents knew each other well. The things she did not like about school in Mexico was that the teachers were not as helpful as they were in the United States. At her school in Mexico, teachers would often leave

early so there was no opportunity for help after school.

Upon arriving in the United States, Selena remembered feeling very strange because she did not understand anything that was going on around her. She felt singled out at times and frequently thought that people were talking about her. She was also surprised that students did not have to wear uniforms.

The Present

Selena was still learning new words every day, but she no longer had the same fears as she did when she first arrived in the United States. When asked to describe her education in the United States, she said the biggest change was the larger class sizes and having desks that were in good shape. She really liked that her teachers were there to help her if she was confused. She said that although her teachers were really helpful, sometimes the large class sizes prevented the teachers from being able to help every student so she wished classes were smaller. Overall, Selena really enjoyed school because she was interested in many subjects and liked her teachers. She admitted that sometimes she did not want to do all the work, but she did it anyway because she knew it was the "right thing to do." She viewed school as her opportunity to get into college, and viewed college as her opportunity to be successful.

Selena was enrolled in many rigorous classes, including IB Math, History, Science, and English. She was also taking French II and had an off period to work on her homework. Her grades included As, Bs, and one C. As a student, Selena was very active, loud, and funny. She liked sports and this

helped her stay busy. In her family, she was the only daughter and had one older brother and two younger brothers. Her family was very protective of her since she was the only girl, and they were also very supportive.

To stay motivated, Selena received a lot of help from her parents and teachers. She also knew she could ask her brothers for help when needed. She said that learning how to be prepared and organized helped her be successful, which in turn, helped her stay motivated. Her parents really wanted her to go to college and she also wanted it for herself. In addition, she recognized that her family had come a long way since they arrived. When they first arrived from Mexico, they felt very isolated because of the language barrier. Neither she nor her family understood how school worked and it was difficult to get answers to their questions. Things had greatly improved since then.

Support Systems

Selena's parents were full of encouragement. They were always willing to try to help her and they sometimes provided rewards for good grades. Her friends were also helpful because they called each other for help or worked on projects together. Selena said her teachers were incredibly helpful because they always encouraged her to keep going and try the best she could. Her AVID classes in junior high really taught her to be organized and how to take notes, which helped her in high school.

Self-Comparison

Selena said that the most notable difference between her and other students was that she was Hispanic.

Although there were other Hispanic students in her IB classes in junior high, there were not many of them at the high school level. Among her current classmates, she said that she was louder than most and got distracted easily. In her opinion, students who did not succeed in school were being influenced by friends who were not good students and who made bad choices. Also, unsuccessful students did not have great influences from home, or their parents might not have cared about education.

Selena had three recommendations for struggling students: do your homework, seek help, and ask questions. She believed that these three tasks had helped her do well.

The Future

In five years, Selena hoped to be attending Stanford. She envisioned having a car and living an independent life. She wanted to be able to visit family in Mexico, travel, and to be able to help her family if they ever needed anything. She felt like if she went to college in Mexico it might be easier to understand, but that college in the United States would provide her with a better education. When asked if many of her neighbors attended college, she responded that she did not believe so because most of them were Mexican and she did not see many Mexicans continuing school after high school. She was proud to add that her brother was enrolled in a community college and that her aunt attended college in Mexico. She was excited to be the first one in her family to attend college.

Parents

Selena's parents were very proud of their daughter and they felt she would

go on to higher education because she put forth a lot of effort and they had faith in her. They were satisfied with schools in the United States because there were schools with Spanish-speaking teachers, schools offered a lot of help, and her daughter had the opportunity to be in IB classes. However, her parents were unhappy with the U.S. schooling system because their daughter could not continue on to college with the current regulations regarding tuition, however, they did not elaborate on this comment. Even though they felt their daughter would not be admitted into university, they still wanted her to try and study whichever career Selena wanted to choose. Selena's parents had positive educational experiences of their own, but expressed regrets about not attending university after high school. Therefore, it was important to them that their children attended higher education.

Initially they were challenged with not being able to afford some of the costs that schools required and not understanding all the systems of the schools. They overcame these obstacles by getting to know other parents and teachers. The obstacles that Selena might face in the future included paying for education beyond high school.

Teachers

Selena's teachers described her as a positive, energetic, intelligent, friendly, and sometimes overly social student. They also said she was competitive by nature and admired people who are successful. Selena was different from other ELLs because she was very outgoing and willing to talk to anyone.

She had friends from many different backgrounds.

Teachers believed that her motivation came from high parental expectations and a self-awareness of being capable of succeeding in school. Her parents were involved in parent-teacher conferences, and her mom was one of two parents who helped chaperone a field trip to a local university for a "Women in Science" workshop. She had a lot of like-minded friends and they harmlessly competed against each other.

Most of Selena's teachers believed that she would attend college. They also knew that her parents supported her and were pushing her to attend higher education. If asked, most of her teachers said they would be willing to write her a letter of recommendation because she had the skills and was motivated to be successful. Highlights would include her ability to be a team player, her hard-working nature, and her strong leadership skills.

Case Study #4: Osumi

Background

Osumi was born in Durango, Mexico and moved to the United States in first grade. Osumi and her family moved to the United States when she was six years old and in the first grade. She remembered being scared and confused because she could not understand the language. However, her strongest memory was of her first day at school in the United States. Osumi recalled being the only person in her class wearing a dress, and a big, puffy one at that. She almost cried that day. Osumi pointed out that there were many physical environment differences between her

school in Mexico and her school in the United States. The most notable were heating, air conditioning, desks instead of benches, and lockers.

The Present

Osumi really liked school and appreciated how her classes incorporated different cultures, ideas, and beliefs in order to more fully understand the lessons. The only thing she did not like about school was the large class sizes. She described herself as active, cheerful, serious, smart, polite, and respectful. She was enrolled in IB Math, English, History, Biology, and Art. She was also taking French. She had straight As, and had always earned similar grades. She translated for her parents when necessary and made a lot of decisions about what the family would buy since she understood English.

Osumi's parents contributed a great deal to her motivation to do well in school. They constantly encouraged her to do well and she did not want to let them down. Osumi wanted to attend college and this helped keep her motivated. When she struggled, she used her resources, such as the internet or a dictionary, and asked for help. When life was difficult, Osumi kept her head up and worked on making things better little by little.

Support Systems

Osumi's teachers provided her with a great amount of support. Her AVID teacher taught her how to be organized with her binder, how to study for tests, and how to take notes. Her teachers were always willing to help her one-on-one. Her friends also encouraged her to do well and they supported each other by studying together. Her parents supported her by encouraging her to do

well and stay positive, and they provided emotional support. They also rewarded her when she did well in school.

Self-Comparison

Osumi described herself as a quiet, hard-working student who did not mess around, and this was what differentiated her from other students. In her opinion, the notion that some students want to do well while others do not was because of the support and expectations set at home. She felt that parents were the most influential example of how students should act in school. Advice she would give struggling students would be to seek help from other adults and try to put forth some effort even if it is difficult at first.

The Future

In five years, Osumi saw herself studying law or medicine at Harvard or Yale. Although she had her eyes on Harvard or Yale, she was open to going to college outside of the United States, or at least studying abroad. She saw college as an opportunity that her parents did not have and she felt fortunate to have the opportunity to go. She had several cousins who were currently in college in Mexico, but no other relatives had attended college. Lastly, Osumi shared that she eventually wanted to open a foundation that encouraged and helped children, especially Hispanic children, be successful in school, and possibly provide scholarships for college.

Parents

Osumi's mother described her own educational experience as enjoyable. She said that they did not have many resources in school, but through much

sacrifice, her parents provided them with as much as they could, and she and her siblings were successful. She said she had several siblings who completed university in Mexico and were now engineers, teachers, and secretaries. Before coming to the United States, Osumi's mother was an accountant.

Osumi's mother recalled that language was the biggest challenge they encountered when they moved to the United States, but they had moved past that obstacle. She said that God had helped them through all of their difficulties and that He would get them through any difficult times in the future.

Osumi's mother was mostly satisfied with the education her children had received in the United States. She said that schools placed students in the correct level and gave extra attention to students who needed it. She was disappointed that schools in the United States did not have a stricter dress code. She wanted her children to attend college because education was the greatest legacy she could leave them. She expected her children to be good students and good examples in society. She was confident her children would get into college because they were good students and had good values, but most of all she felt that God would help them through anything.

Teachers

The teachers' comments about Osumi were almost too overwhelming to compile. They had endless amounts of positive things to say about this student. They said she was incredibly organized and thorough, a risk-taker, a great listener, prompt, prepared, willing to participate and help those around her, and she fit in with every group. She

was respectful, liked to be challenged, detail oriented, and produced exemplary work, to name a few. According to her teachers, she was different than other students because she had a higher interest in school, was internally motivated to succeed, she was serious about her education, she was non-judgmental towards others, she was observant, and mostly because she was incredibly intelligent in her academic and social life. Her teachers attributed a strong grasp of English, prior experiences with success, parental support and expectations, and enjoyment of the learning process to her great success in school. Her teachers had never met her parents, but knew that they had high expectations for school and that when they arrived in the United States they came with nothing and had to start from scratch. All of the teachers felt confident that Osumi would attend college because of her skills, ambition, and positive ambition.

Common Themes

What were the main factors that influenced these ELLs to be educationally successful and college-bound? There were several common threads among the students. They all mentioned consistent parental support, additional help from their teachers, having like-minded friends, and a burning self-determination and desire to succeed in life.

Parents' high expectations and support appeared to be the strongest influences for all four students as they all expressed that their parents had high expectations for good grades in school. A few mentioned that they recognized

their parents came to the United States to offer their children a better education and hoped this would lead to more prosperous lives in the future. Some students also mentioned that many of their peers were not successful in school because they did not have high parent expectations at home. The students in these case studies valued the fact that their parents were pushing them to achieve.

Teachers were also a significant factor in these students' lives. Each student mentioned that teachers had positively influenced him or her, both academically and personally. A few of them mentioned that their teachers taught them useful organization tools and study skills that helped them become better students. They also pointed out that their teachers knew them as individuals, and not just as another face in a crowd. All of the students emphasized the importance of having positive relationships with their teachers, not only for the extra help but also because it made school more enjoyable when they were excited to see their teachers.

The information the students provided aligned with what was gathered in the teacher surveys. Teachers commented that these students were incredibly hard workers and had goals to be successful. They also commented on having positive relationships with these students and knowing their interests in and out of school. The teachers verified that much extra help or guidance was given after school, and they credited the students for advocating for themselves to get that extra help. All of the teachers were

also aware of the high expectations coming from the students' homes.

When looking at the lives of teenagers, it would be negligent not to address the powerful influences that peers can have in each other's lives. Each of the case study students brought up the importance of having like-minded friends, but some of them put more of an emphasis on it than others. Both Selena and Osumi said they had several friends who helped them with their homework and projects, and who also wanted to attend college. Rodriguez and Quetzal, on the other hand, said that their friends could be supportive, but that they did not necessarily have the same goals in mind and did not find a lot of academic support from their friends. Overall, for each of the case studies, the support and influence from their friends did not compare to the support from their parents and teachers.

Through the interviews with these students, their parents, and their teachers, one factor was glaringly apparent; these students were incredibly self-motivated and had an inner desire to be successful in school and go to college. This might be the most impressive factor considering that life had not always worked in their favor. Each one of these students credited parents and teachers as being their biggest support system, but it was obvious through their words that they actually *wanted* to do well themselves. Each of them recognized that some of their peers who came from similar backgrounds were not making it in school. Each of them described overcoming these factors by working really hard and never giving up.

Although they had been exposed to drugs and gangs, and some were surrounded by people who had dropped out of school, they were willing to look beyond their immediate environments and envision a better future for themselves.

Conclusions And Recommendations

The students in this project declared that their parents were the most influential factors in their educational motivation and success. This directly aligned with what was found in the literature review. Both De La Cruz (2008) and Englund et al. (2008) declared that parent expectations and relationships shape their student's perseverance and achievement in school. Fulgini (1997) stressed that parents who may have made many sacrifices, including moving to the United States to offer a solid education for their children, were determined to instill similar values in their children.

According to Catterall (1998), De La Cruz (2008) and Englund et al. (2008), students were more likely to stay in school if they felt they had a connection with their teachers. Each of these students noted that there had been many teachers along the way that had given them extra attention and support. These students seemed to understand the importance of getting to know their teachers and felt the satisfaction of their teachers knowing them as individuals.

The findings in the literature review suggest that having like-minded friends played a major role in a student's success. Although these students placed more emphasis on other influential

factors, peers did play a role. Peers provided a type of support that parents and teachers often could not; they had a similar perspective of what it was like to be a teenager at school. Peers could encourage each other and helped create a community within the school (Fulgini, 1997).

Each of these students followed De La Cruz's (2008) model of a *Self Mentor*. Each of these students also mentioned that a piece of advice they would give struggling students was to seek help and ask questions when necessary; in other words, they suggested self-advocating. Harklau (1994) said that self-advocating was a characteristic of students who were intrinsically motivated to do well. These students definitely showed these characteristics and demonstrated an awareness of their intrinsic motivation.

These students mainly focused on the support and help of their parents, teachers, and friends, and their own self-determination. These four factors seemed to be the most common, reoccurring themes between the four students. Other factors may have been equally influential, yet the questionnaires used in this study may not have appropriately focused on them, and therefore may have created limitations within student answers.

By understanding the factors that positively influenced ELLs, we can help target students who may need extra attention to get them on the right path. Although some of these factors are out of teachers' and schools' control, many factors are within their control and can be used as strategies to help more ELLs beat the odds.

It was rewarding to see these students express a sense of pride and

accomplishment through the process of these interviews. They were able to reflect on all of their endeavors and felt appreciative to have their stories told. More often than not, schools and other public organizations let celebrations slip by the wayside due to chaotic schedules and unending demands. It is essential to make sure we celebrate students, like the ones in this study, for their incredible accomplishments and well-deserved achievements.

This study provided insight into the minds of hard-working students. It would be beneficial to share their story with other students who may have a similar background. Their stories are incredibly inspiring and heart-warming. Their goals and aspirations are admirable to many, and their stories demonstrate that they have worked very hard to get to where they are today. They had many obstacles working against them, such as poverty, gangs, language barriers, isolation, and low levels of education among their parents. According to the statistics, these students were much more likely to fail than to succeed in the current school environment. However, these four students, and certainly many more, refused to be part of those statistics. Quetzal, Rodriguez, Selena, and Osumi have accomplished remarkable and noteworthy accomplishments and are living proof that students are capable of moving beyond their labels to achieve their greatest dreams.

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Appendix A –Interview Questions

Your Background

Where were you born?

1. How old were you when you came to the United States?
2. Describe your feelings, emotions, and experiences when you first entered school in the US. Does anything stand out to you?
3. What kind of education did you receive in your country of origin?
Describe the classroom environment and teaching style.
What did you like/benefit from?
What was not helpful?

About You Now

4. What kind of education have you received since coming here? Describe the classroom environments and teaching styles.
What do you like/benefit from now? What is not helpful?
5. Do you like school? Why? Why not?
What **exactly** do you like about school?
6. How would you describe yourself, both in and out of school?
What role do you play in your family?
7. What kinds of classes are you taking?
What are your grades?
Have you always had grades like these?
8. How well are you able to communicate in English? In Spanish?
Which one is easier for you?
9. Do you feel your bilingual skills have helped you or slowed you down in school?
Why?
10. Tell me how you've created and kept up your motivation to do well in school.
11. What obstacles/road blocks have you or your family faced in school in the U.S.?
How have you overcome them?
12. How do you pick yourself up when things get tough?

Your Support Systems

13. In what ways have teachers helped you on your educational path?
14. In what ways have your friends helped you?
15. In what ways has your family helped you?
16. Do your parents expect you to do well in school?
What do they do to show you that expectation?

You And Other Students

17. What makes you different from other students in your classes?
18. In your opinion, why do some students want to do well in school and others don't?
19. What advice would you give struggling students?

Your Future

20. Where do you picture yourself in five years?
21. Do you want to go to college? Why? Why not? In the U.S.? Elsewhere?

22. Do your parents want you to go to college?
23. Do your friends want to go to college?
24. In the community where you live, have people attended college, or are they in college right now?
25. Has anyone in your family attended college?

Wrap-Up

26. Are there any other factors that have helped you succeed in school that I haven't mentioned above?
27. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your educational success and/or future?

Interview Questions for the Parents of the Case Study Students

1. In what ways are you involved in your child's school?
2. Are you satisfied with the education your child has received in the U.S.?
3. What are some aspects of school in the U.S. that you think are beneficial?
4. What aspects of school in the U.S. do you find frustrating or disappointing?
5. Do you want your child to attend college? If not, what do you hope your child does after graduating high school?
6. Describe your own personal experiences in education. What was school like for you? How long were you in school?
7. Do you feel like you have a good understanding of the qualifications to attend college in the U.S.? If not, do you feel like you have access to this information?
8. Do you think your child will meet the requirements to get into college? Why?
9. What challenges do you think your child has faced in school in the U.S.?
10. What challenges do you think they will face in college?
11. What obstacles has your family faced since moving to the U.S.?
12. How did you overcome these obstacles?

Interview Questions for Teachers of the Case Study Students

Student Name: _____

1. How long have you known this student?
2. Describe what types of behaviors and habits this student demonstrated in class.
3. How is this student different from other ELL or minority students that you have taught/are teaching?
4. Why do you think this student is motivated?
5. What do you know about this student's family?
6. Do you think this student will go to college? Why or why not?
7. If asked, would you write a letter of recommendation for this student to get into college? What would you highlight about this student?