Looking Back: Tracing the Trajectory of Four Dominican Women Who Learned "To Do' School

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LOOKING BACK: TRACING THE TRAJECTORY OF FOUR DOMINICAN WOMEN WHO LEARNED 'TO DO' SCHOOL

by

Maria Montalvo-Balbed

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ABSTRACT

LOOKING BACK: TRACING THE TRAJECTORY OF FOUR DOMINICAN WOMEN WHO LEARNED ‘TO DO’ SCHOOL

by

Maria Montalvo-Balbed

This study examines the educational trajectories, critical life events, variations and commonalities of four Dominican educators in the U.S. South who, despite being non-English speakers and immigrants, were successful in attending college and obtaining degrees in education beyond a Master’s degree. This study explores their life journeys in order to understand and account for various factors which allowed and propelled them to be successful in school and rise to leadership positions in education. The themes which emerge are directly related to the various types of capital and social assets that are embodied within the Community Cultural Wealth framework, e.g. aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Patterns found among the participants’ paths include: success stories, academic resilience, exposure, mentors, and the historical context of their immigration. The findings suggest that the women’s own strong academic expectations, coupled with high levels of academic and emotional support were key factors in their educational and career success. This study extends the existing body of research literature on the persistent underachievement of immigrant and English Learners through an expanded understanding and application of the concepts of cultural capital and cultural responsiveness in education.
Acknowledgements

Taking the journey to explore the trajectories of the Dominican women in this study was a seed planted by my chair, Dr. Bernadette Musetti, in a literacy class during the last semester of my doctoral program. Up to that point, my interest in research had been in professional development. Through one of the many conversations we had about literacy and how second language learners become literate in a second language, I began the ‘I wonder’ stage of how some are able ‘to do’ school and others are not. The rest of the journey has taken many roads and trajectories of its own; but the one constant has been the unwavering support of Dr. Musetti who believed in me and my quest to understand why some do and others don’t. Thank you Dr. Musetti con ‘toda mi alma’ for your dedication to help me see this project until the end.

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To my sons, Marcus and Dominic, who inspire me every day to keep trying. I look forward to witnessing your journey and your contributions to making the world a better place.
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And last but not least, I am most grateful to the four women in this study who shared their innermost personal stories with me. Your life stories will serve to EDUCATE others on how it is done!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Measures or indicators of school success are more transparent today in the research literature than ever before. The No child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 required accountability measures for schools to provide evidence of how well students perform in schools (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). NCLB allowed for more transparency as to who the students are and how they perform in schools. However, there continues to be great concern as to why English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly Latinos, continue to lag behind in most measures of school success (Batalova et al. 2007; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). While progress has been made in identifying instructional frameworks (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) which when utilized have beneficial outcomes for English Language Learners, particularly those who enter the school system with Spanish as their first language, the statistics are staggering for the many Latinos who continue to struggle with finding success through education (Swanson, 2008). In other words, there is a plethora of evidence as to who is doing well and who isn’t and even more documentation of how to fix the educational structures which would be supportive for ELLs whose first language is Spanish, but the truth is that Latinos, who represent the fastest growing group in US schools, are not finding success through educational channels (Swanson, 2008; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Thus, understanding
the life stories of those Latinos who have found success through education is of great interest to me both as a researcher and as an educator.

**Statement of the Problem**

The dropout rate in Georgia is among the highest (Balfanz et al., 2009). Examining the factors that could turn this negative trend around would highly benefit the state of Georgia. While there is vast data signaling limited English and poverty as major factors undergirding the underachievement of the Latino population, there is a gap in the research as to why some are able to succeed in spite of economic, language and cultural hurdles. Consequently, this study focuses on tracing the factors that influenced a group of women from the Dominican Republic to become successful by learning ‘to do’ school.

**Research Questions**

It is against the backdrop of academic underachievement for immigrant students from the Dominican Republic that this study focuses on lived experiences and educational trajectories of four Dominican women who have transitioned into leadership positions in education in the South. Today these women hold leadership positions in education, but they shared the same characteristics as the many faces behind the negative statistics of underachievement and school failure that characterize this Dominican demographic group and Latinos in general.

This study investigates the lives of four Dominican women who have successfully navigated the American educational system. Their stories offer perspectives and deep insights on the factors that influenced that successful transition. Yosso (2005), whose conceptual framework of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) guides this study,
proposed that understanding the sources of knowledge that students bring to school might yield a better understanding of the relationship of school achievement and culture. Yosso theorized that deficit thinking “takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: a) students enter school without the requisite normative cultural knowledge and skills; and b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education (p. 75). Thus, Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) provides a lens for examining the lives of these four Dominican women. By exploring the context in which these women’s lives developed, the researcher seeks to understand which factors impacted the outcome of their current lives.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What factors, including various types of capital, do academically successful Dominican women indicate as significant in helping them bridge to the “school world”?

2. What are the critical events in the lives of four Dominican women that contributed to their academic resilience?

3. What are the commonalities and variations in the life stories of educationally successful Dominican women across particular cultural, linguistic, ethnic, class, personality and other categories?

Schools and classrooms have undergone tremendous change since I first went into a middle school, speaking no English, three decades ago. From my own experience, great and positive changes have occurred at all levels, the classroom level, school leadership, the state and nation. For example, in 2010, The Center on Education Policy (CEP) reported that 22% of school age children are either immigrants or the children of
Looking Back: Tracing the Trajectory

immigrants in comparison to 9% of such children in 1979. The CEP stated that
approximately 80% of these children speak Spanish at home. The education of English
Language Learners, particularly of those whose first language is Spanish, is of
importance to me as an educator, and particularly as one who has been empowered by
education. Understanding the factors which have influenced some to journey through the
educational system successfully can demystify this trajectory of failure and shed some
light on how some are able to defy the odds in spite of the enormous hurdles of language
and poverty.

Research (Planty et al., 2009) indicated that public school enrollment will
increase to a high of 53.9 million students in the year 2018 and that the majority of the
growth (40%) of these students, who will also be of Latino origin, will reside in the
Southern region of the United States. The majority of these students (2.1 million), who
speak a language other than English at home, also identify Spanish as their home
language. In the last twenty years, the number of school-aged children who spoke a
language other than English at home increased to 20% of the school population; however,
college enrollment indicators also show a decline for Latinos every year since 1985.
Overall, the statistical landscape for the Latino population is not promising.

Latinos in the United States

There is no doubt that Latinos are changing the face of America. The most recent
census shows that Latinos account for 56% of the population growth, with 50.5 million
counted (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). Of this number 17.1 million are 17 or younger, up
39% from 2000. This group represents forty-three Spanish-speaking countries, as well as
a diverse and complex group of people. Thus, Latinos are not a monolithic group. Latinos vary in many ways, not just country of birth and Spanish language nuances. For example, there are variations in their political stance, immigration status, skin color and socioeconomic status. Thus, studying this group by national origin is best. However, it is of great importance to understand the complexity of this population. Approximately 60% of Latinos today are born in the United States, making the majority of Latinos second generation immigrants. Latinos also make up 80% of the ELL population in the United States, and contrary to common belief, 95% of Latinos believe that it is important for their children to attend college. (Zambrana, R. E., & Logie, L. A., 2009). This researcher has focused this investigation on Dominican women in the South, particularly Georgia.

**Latinos in Georgia**

Georgia’s Latino population has tripled in size since the 1990s, with Latinos accounting for more than half a million new residents in a ten-year span. The demand for this demographic shift was primarily for farm workers and for the poultry and the carpet industries. This booming economy also created jobs in the construction and landscaping business sectors, which drew many immigrants primarily of Mexican descent to Georgia. The expanding economy of the 1990s was a critical factor in the increased need for low-wage and low-skilled workers. Unlike in other states, the Latino population was predominantly foreign born or immigrants in the 1990s in Georgia (Bohon, Stamps, & Atiles, 2008). Today the Latino population accounts for 8.1% of the total population in Georgia. Even more importantly, 15.3% of the total Latino population is in Georgia is of school age (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). With this influx of Latinos in Georgia, the
school systems immediately experienced a population growth of students whose first language was Spanish and for whom English was an additional language. The most recent census data indicates that 18% of the total population of Gwinnett was Latino in 2010. This county also has the state’s largest increase of Dominican students today (J. Valentine, 2010), the subject of this research.

Population trends indicate that Latinos have tripled in size in the South. Within the Southern states, Georgia ranked within the 17 states with the highest drop-out rates in the nation in 2010 (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Horning Fox, 2009). Immigrants from the Dominican Republic comprise the fourth largest Latino group in the United States. Within other Latino groups, Dominicans have the highest indicators of poverty among non-English speaking homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Because Spanish speaking children who are also English Language Learners will represent 40% of all school-aged children by the year 2030, it is imperative that educators understand the contributing factors that can lead to more successful outcomes for this group of students. There are many factors which influence success or lack of it for students; thus, educators need to understand how to build bridges that provide access into how ‘to do’ school in a new culture and in a new language.

**Dominicans**

The share of Dominicans who live in poverty is nearly double that of the general US population and higher than the rate among all Latinos. Dominicans are less likely than other Latino groups to be married (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The majority of Dominicans live in the Northeast; however, a rapid growth pattern of Dominicans migrating South is evident in the statistical profile of Hispanics of Dominican origin in
the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). While progress has been made for Latinos in general, Gándara and Contreras (2009) posited that Latinos remain the most undereducated major population group in the country.

Similarly, the presence of immigrants who indicate that they are from the Dominican Republic is evidenced not only by statistical growth patterns, but is also clear when the community signage indicates that this particular community is present. That is the case for Dominican immigrants in the South and particularly to Georgia. A drive in the Buford Corridor in Gwinnett County, outside Atlanta, which is home to the largest school system in the state of Georgia, depicts signs of the Dominican community as evidenced by the numbers of Dominican hair salons and Dominican restaurants that have popped up in the last few years. Eighteen percent of Gwinnett County’s population identifies as Latinos. The Atlanta Journal Constitution reports that immigrants continue to regard metro Atlanta as a place where they can fulfill their dreams (Garner & Schneider, 2010). Thus, examining the factors that led to the successful trajectory of other Dominicans is of interest to educators in Georgia. Batalova et al (2008) asserted that the English Language Learners’ population growth nationwide is outpacing the general student population. The ELL population enrollment in public schools nationwide grew by 56%; while the entire population grew by only 2.6% (Batalova et al., 2007). Georgia is no exception to this growth pattern. English Language Learners in grades 6-12 speak primarily Spanish nationwide. Consequently, research that explores the literacy trajectories of former ELLs and how well former ELLs are doing compared to monolingual English students and what accounts for their comparatively strong outcomes is an area that deserves further research (Batalova et al. 2007).
The existentialist, Soreen Kierkegaard (n.d.) once said that “life must be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward,” thus providing a metaphor for understanding the trajectory of those who have experienced success through education. Qualitative methodology lends itself to understanding “stories lived and told” as a way to learn from those who have experienced success in school even though they had many factors working against them in the educational system. Similarly, Clandinin and Connelly, (2000) testify to the influence in their work of John Dewey, who “believed that examining experience is the key to education” (p. xiii). The lessons we can learn from these “lived lives” can enlighten educators and policy-makers as to what mattered to those who have successfully navigated K-12 schools and colleges and have entered the professional work world of education. If 80% of the ELLs in the education system are immigrants of Latino descent, understanding what propelled some Spanish-speaking English Language Learners, specifically these four women from the Dominican Republic, to excel in a K-12 environment and beyond is of great personal interest to me and hopefully to educators and policy makers.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

In his recently published book about Dominicans in Providence Rhode Island, Itzigshon (2009) expressed his fear that students who identify themselves as Dominicans are headed for a downward assimilation pattern, meaning that they will not be the ones that rise to hold professional jobs and fully transition into middle class America, a dream held by immigrants coming to this country. Consequently, understanding why and how some were able to be successful in school, attend college, obtain advanced degrees, and high ranking jobs in the American education system is the subject of this research.
By tracing the lived journey of Dominican women who have merged into leadership jobs in education, this study is able to identify those factors that contributed to their academic achievement and how they gained access to these leadership jobs in education. While this researcher recognizes that the results will not be generalizable due to the nature of the low number of participants and the fact that it is localized in one geographic area of the United States, the results add to the understanding of the role that Community Cultural Wealth played in helping them become successful.

This research contributes to the existing body of literature a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of why some are able to mainstream successfully in spite of the adversity. This dissertation provides the voices of Dominican women themselves to speak about the barriers that were overcome to ensure success, as well as some of the interventions that likely helped them graduate and succeed. The investigation shines a light on challenges faced by Latino students that often get overlooked or ignored and how these four Dominican women were able to overcome these challenges.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to understand if Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) played a role in the success of these Dominican women, who are English Language Learners and first generation immigrants, and who had limited experience with higher education and particular types of capital and family experience with how to go to and pay for college. A more in-depth discussion of the conceptual framework of CCW appears in chapter two.
Local Context

One out of five children in a classroom today is either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. Many of these children are English Language Learners even though the majority was born in the United States. The bulk of these students also come from homes where Spanish is spoken at home. The dropout rate among Hispanic students is also the highest in the nation, as well as in Georgia (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007). The disconnect between the educational system and these students is of great concern not only to educators, but also to economists and sociologists. Itzigosohn (2009) asserted that for the first time in history the United States will see a downward assimilation trend with second generation of Dominicans because the majority of them have found work in the service industry and not in professional jobs expected of those who join the ranks of the middle class. There is great pressure today- not only from education, but also from all sectors of society to figure out how to turn around this predicted downward trend (Itzigshon, 2009).

The metro Latino student population in Georgia equals 14% of the total student enrollment out of the twelve systems which comprise what is called the metro school systems. Out of these twelve systems, three systems account for more than 20% of the total Latino population enrolled in K-12 schools [Metro RESA], 2010. Three out of the four participants in this study are represented in the counties with the highest percentage of Latino enrollment.

The Dominican population is expected to reach 1.6 million in 2010 in the United States. The Migration Policy Institute reported (Grieco, 2004) that the Dominican population has grown by 181.8% in the last decade. This percentage still only represents less than one percent of the total population in the Metro systems and mirrors the
Dominican student enrollment in the Georgia school systems, which is also reported to be less than one percent of the total Latino population (J. Valentine, personal communication, July 1, 2010). However small the percentage, the actual numbers indicate a significant upward growth pattern. Data on Dominican students in Georgia indicated that more than half of the total Dominican students are considered English Language Learners (J. Valentine).

While Georgia’s Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) Report indicated that the graduation rate has risen to a 78.9% for the school year 2009-2010 (Cardoza, 2010), *Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate Schools* (Balfanz, et al, 2009) reported that Georgia is one of seventeen states with the lowest graduation rates in America. In Georgia, the graduation rate for Latinos was 69% (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Horning Fox, 2009). In the highest populated school system represented in this study where the majority of Latinos attend high school, the graduation rate was reported to be a 42.6%. Even where improvements are shown in Georgia, the Latino population graduation rate is much lowered than the dominant group whose graduation rate is at 82.1% (Balfanz et al., 2009).

**Deficit Theories**

Ladson-Billings (2007) posited that school achievement and, most importantly, minority achievement in the United States remains a social and political dilemma today in all facets of life. Ladson-Billings believed the structures of this “achievement gap,” i.e. the difference between those students whose school performance meets the identified target goal of achievement and those who do not, should be examined. Before articulating the concept of CCW, it is important first to explain the concept of cultural capital and its
impact into what we know today, as the deficit practices in educating students whose backgrounds are not those of the dominant group. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, first introduced the notion of cultural capital in the early 1960s in order to try to explain why some students do well and others do not (Weininger, 2005). According to Weininger, Bourdieu’s theory emphasized that economic status or poverty was not sufficient to explain the disparities between social classes in schools. Instead, Bourdieu’s premise was that “cultural habits and dispositions,” meaning behaviors and skills, which are said to be inherited from the family, are better indicators of school success than economic status (Weininger, 2005). Valenzuela (1999) posited that schools that work from this understanding of cultural capital do not value the knowledge and skills that Latino students bring to school. On the other hand, Yosso (2005) rejected the notion that Latino students come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. Instead, Yosso theorized that the CCW framework served as an alternative concept for understanding the cultural capital that Latinos bring with them to school. Anzaldúa (2002) inferred that if other “conocimientos” (knowledges) are recognized, such as the skills and behaviors of Latinos, as being valuable in the school world, then instead of marginalizing students who have a different language and culture, they can be empowered by recognizing other “conocimiento” or the ways of others, not just the “conocimiento” of the dominant group.

Consequently, Yosso (2005) offers CCW as a framework to view the cultural capital Latino students bring to school. She identifies six categories of cultural capital. They are as follows:

*Aspirational capital*, which refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real, perceived barriers.
**Linguistic capital** which includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.

**Familial capital**, which refers to the form of cultural wealth that promotes a sense of community, history, and cultural institutions.

**Social capital**, which refers to the network of people and community resources which provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions.

**Navigational capital**, which refers to the skills of maneuvering through social institutions.

**Resistant capital**, which refers to the form of capital wealth which exhibits behavior that challenges inequality.

**Review of the Relevant Terms**

*Hispanic or Latino*: a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race (Planty et al., 2009, p. xiv).

*Dominicans*: anyone who was born in the Dominican Republic and/or self-reported Dominican as their origin or ancestry. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004)

*Limited English Proficiency (LEP)*: the term used by the US Federal government to identify those students who speak a language other than English and are identified through testing.

*English language learners (ELL)*: the term used most commonly today to refer to those students whose first language is not English and are identified by testing as such.
Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): a measure of achievement based on yearly state assessments that states must comply with under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Conocimiento: Knowledge that is based on life experiences and not on book knowledge only.

Organization of the Study

In chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature describing the deficit theories of underachievement as they refer to Latinos who are English Language Learners. This chapter explains deficit theories of education of English Language Learners and particularly of Dominicans. I give an overview of the role the types of capital acknowledged by the literature, referencing how Community Cultural Wealth provides a context for understanding those who achieve despite the odds. This chapter also provides an understanding of what the literature says about ELLs who are Spanish speakers and why and how this study will augment the current body of literature on this topic.

In chapter 3, I explain why a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate for this study. The value of case study and narrative analysis will be explained as it relates to this study of Dominican women in the South. I explain how I gained access to the subjects and why the role of insider helped me in obtaining rich, in-depth interview data.

In chapter 4, I discuss the findings of the research and give an explanation of how I analyzed these findings using the CCW framework.

In chapter 5, I summarize the findings, provide conclusions, and submit my own personal narrative in order to explain the commonalities or differences between the participants and my story. I suggest some possible areas for future research. In conclusion, I write an overview of the lessons learned from looking backwards to be able
to understand how the subjects gained access to leadership jobs in education despite not speaking English, attending poor schools, and having parents with an elementary level education.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Examining the existing literature on first generation immigrants who immigrate to the United States from the Dominican Republic and are able to successfully navigate school, despite the many barriers, and who go on to enter leadership positions in education, is the focus of this literature review. The following areas of research illuminate the discussion: theories of underachievement among Latinas and Dominicans, challenges to the cultural capital paradigm by the conceptual framework of Community Cultural Capital, the implications of deficit theories of education, theories of second language learning, LatCrit theory, and Dominicans as learners in U.S. schools. Finally, a summary of the implications of the literature review is presented.

Hernandez (2010) asserted that much has changed since her first publication of *The Dominican Americans* in 1990. This group has experienced a 41% growth between 2000 and 2008 in the United States. According to Hernandez, this group of individuals is surpassing the expected educational attainment of similar immigrant groups. At the same time, little has changed, even while there are some positive signs that change is happening. Second generation Dominicans have higher college graduation rates than many of their other Latino counterparts, despite the fact that the majority of them come from families with the lowest income levels and are primarily headed by single women, and have parents with less than a secondary education. Notwithstanding the progress of a significant number of second generation Dominicans, the landscape is not green for a
great majority of the same population. Among the ills affecting this population are the
high levels of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and increasing birth rates.

For example, a recent study on Latinas conducted by the National Women’s Law
Center (NWLC) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
(MALDEF) (2009), similarly found that even though the educational attainment of
Latinos in general has improved, there is still a great gap in the educational attainment of
most of the Latino population, which is also supported by Gándara and Contreras (2009)
and Itzigshon’s (2009) research. The NCWLC qualitative study of three hundred and
thirty five Latinas found that Latinas are dropping out of school in alarming numbers,
which poses a threat to their future and economic security of this country. One of the
important findings of this study was that Latinas do express a desire to reach high
educational goals, but at the same time they do not believe that they will be able to attain
those goals. This study highlighted some of the factors which cause interference and
account for the discrepancy between Latina’s high aspirations and the actual
accomplishment of their goal. Among the many challenges Latinas face are high levels of
poverty, lack of parental involvement, limited English proficiency, immigration status,
discrimination based on ethnicity and gender, pregnancy and parenting responsibilities,
other caretaking responsibilities at home for younger siblings, and lower involvement in
after school activities. Because Latinas are the fastest growing school-aged population, it
is imperative that researchers learn from those who have traveled similar journeys and
learn from their experience of success.
Underachievement Theories

Theories abound which explain the reasons why the majority of Latinas and Dominican women are not reaching comparative levels of educational attainment and integration into the middle class as other immigrant groups have in the past. Cultural capital is often cited as a reason why some make it and others don’t. However, the notion that some have capital and some don’t is rejected by many of the scholars writing about why Latinas fail or succeed in school (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Yosso, 2005; Anzaldúa, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). These researchers asserted that this negative view of capital is what promotes a deficit approach to educating immigrant Latinas. Instead, Nieto (2000) proposes a multicultural approach which “takes into account the cultures, languages, and experiences of all students. This approach can go beyond the simple transfer of skills to include those attitudes and skills that have the potential to empower students for productive and meaningful lives” (p. 319). Other researchers also (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002,) indicate that there is a strong link between one’s culture and language development. Villegas and Lucas’s research (2002) asserted the notion that educators must value the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students if they are to make learning a successful experience for the many language minority students currently in American schools. Years prior to Villegas and Lucas’ research, Banks and Banks’ research (1995) also affirmed that the intersection of culture and language needed to be acknowledged in order for students to obtain higher levels of proficiency in learning.

Similarly, Moll’s (2005) work indicates that understanding the “funds of knowledge” or experiences that these students bring with them to school and learning
how to infuse these cultural and language experiences into the curriculum honors the linguistic and cultural diversity of Spanish-speaking ELLs in the school setting.

Understanding students’ background and how they communicate at home entails more than just knowing the country of birth and the standard language of that particular country. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) further describe funds of knowledge as “approaches (that) focus on the processes of everyday life in the form of daily activities as a frame of reference” (p.170). These authors contend that in order for teachers to be able to tap into the cultural capital of the communities they work with, and before they are able to use these cultural capitals to mediate literacy- they must understand their own socially constructed identity. In other words, teachers must understand how their own identity has been shaped by their own cultural experiences and how their beliefs and actions impact the way they interact with their students. Teachers must be willing to explore their own identity in order to understand and value the impact it will have on their students.

While culture and language are seen as hurdles that often impede Latinos from experiencing school success, other theories take a different stance in explaining school failure or success for non-dominant groups. John Ogbu (1991) explored explanations for why some minority groups consistently fail in large numbers, while other groups are generally more successful. Through his study of black and Mexican-American communities in Stockton, California he developed a theory to explain these differential educational outcomes in the United States. He rejected the notion that language and culture were the only determining factors in explaining success or lack of success for non-dominant groups. He theorized that non-dominant groups in the United States are
either voluntary or involuntary minorities. According to Ogbu, voluntary immigrants are those who choose to move to a different country in order to pursue economic opportunities or political freedoms. Ogbu posited that voluntary immigrants view education as a vehicle to succeed; therefore, they tend to see barriers as temporary hurdles that can be overcome with hard work. On the other hand, involuntary immigrants are those whose status is that of an oppressed group with fewer choices and opportunities. He found that involuntary immigrants’ performance in school worsens the longer they remain within the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1991). Ogbu’s theory highlights the sociohistorical relationship between immigrants and the country in which they are living or to which they have emigrated. For example Native Americans and other indigenous North American groups, while not immigrants per se, have a relationship of being a colonized people vis-a-vis the dominant culture and country in which they are living. A prime example of the contextual nature of this relationship of voluntary vs. involuntary immigrants’ and the dominant culture is that of Korean immigrants to the U.S., where they are a historically and relatively successful group (voluntary immigrants), as opposed to Koreans in Japan, where their history is one characterized within Ogbu’s terms as an involuntary minority group, where indeed they are generally marginalized and unsuccessful.

In the current study, the context of immigration is expanded to include the sociopolitical context of the receiving nation vis-à-vis a particular group at the time of their immigration, making it a more dynamic model than Ogbu’s. For example, the U.S. was experimenting with the policies and practices of affirmative action to address past inequities in education and hiring when the participants immigrated to the U.S. This is in
sharp contrast to the sociopolitical context of thirty years later, during the time of this study, which is an era of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino backlash as evidenced through numerous pieces of such legislation passed in Georgia and nationwide.

Given these reasons, I have elected to use the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) conceptual framework to guide this study, as it is broad, multifaceted and inclusive and can best help frame this study in which multiple factors are examined in order to explain how Dominican women in the study were able to successfully navigate the educational system as students and enter those same worlds as professionals. Yosso (2005) theorizes the concept of Community Cultural Capital as a way of focusing on other types of capital which are often unacknowledged as cultural wealth that students bring with them into the classrooms. CCW is a framework which expands the lens of cultural capital to include other sources of cultural wealth that culturally linguistically diverse students bring into the classroom as assets beyond the accepted notions of education, social networks, and economic capital. Yosso (2005) proposes other sources of cultural capital which need to be valued in education in order to both empower students and transform the process of schooling rather than using deficit theories of education. Yosso (2005) states that deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education (p. 75).
Conceptual Framework

Yosso’s CCW conceptual framework offers a different lens by which to view cultural capital as communities of strength, rather than as disadvantages brought about by poverty. CCW acknowledges and values other forms of capital.

Aspirational capital embodies a culture of possibilities. This type of capital seems to propel a culture of possibilities for students. In other words, without the possibility of being able to dream or visualize a different pathway, students find themselves without hope. Many other researchers have studied this concept of aspirational capital which confirms extensively the value of having dreams as a type of cultural wealth that nurtures a culture of possibilities or what is more commonly call a ‘Sí se puede attitude’ (Gándara, 2010, Yosso, 2005, NWLC, 2009). This attitude connotes that education can be done with hard work.

Linguistic capital is another asset which is often overlooked as a strength that students bring into the classroom. Students’ ability to translate for their parents and to negotiate meaning as they go from one language to the other in helping their parents conduct daily business in their lives is not taken into consideration as a valuable tool students bring to school, among many other uses of language within a bilingual community. Students with linguistic capital make use of their primary language in order to understand the nuances of the second language.

Familial capital goes beyond the immediate family unit to include extended family and community well-being. This type of asset is also affirmed by the work of Moll et al, (2005). The importance of learning from one’s community to care for others helps
in the development of coping mechanisms. Familial capital provides a secure extended family structure which nurtures healthy connections among and with others.

Social capital refers to a support system where people share information with others and support each other’s efforts to gain access to community and educational resources. These social networks have been found to help immigrant communities in transcending the adversity in their lives.

Navigational capital refers to one’s ability to navigate through social institutions such as schools and colleges. Navigational capital recognizes an individual’s agency or will to connect to social networks that facilitate the navigation through institutions of higher learning, work, health care, and judicial systems.

Resistant capital refers to the idea of refusal to accept what others determine should be their fate. This may include refusing to accept the status quo and promoting a social justice scholarship through education. Yosso posits that Latina students are empowered by a resistance that is based on self-awareness and an inner motivation for social justice. In order to understand this resistance capital, Yosso relies on the voices of those who have been motivated by a need to struggle for social justice. Oral histories are used as data to understand the motivation behind students’ transformational resistance in schools which seems to stem from their roots and their own family histories (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Thus, these elements of Yosso’s CCW conceptual framework offer a different lens through which to view cultural capital, not only as what may be seen as communities of strength, but as multiple and varied types of capital that intersect and which can promote various skills, while providing resiliency, and support. This framework is in
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direct contradiction to the deficit theories often found in schools that adhere to these theories where the first language of the student is not seen as an asset but as a liability, for example. When schools function under this premise of deficit theories, the results are devastating for students of the non-dominant group. For example, Herman (2009), in a study of multiracial high school students, found that the grades of multiracial students are more related to the context of their schooling than any other factor. She suggested that a student’s academic track, differential encouragement by teachers, and different evaluation styles were higher predictors of success after controlling for background and environmental characteristics of the students than race and socioeconomic status. Thus, CCW offers a variety of capitals to understand the success of Latino/a students.

LaTCrit Theory

In the Listening to Latinas Report (2010), Latinas expressed high aspirations for emancipating themselves by aspiring to higher levels of education in order to be self-sufficient and have a better life. However, they also have the highest birth rate of any other minority group. This fact could impact the outcome of those aspirations if and when they are forced to give up those aspirations of furthering their education (at least temporarily) and become mothers, which also affects their income possibilities. While Latinas and their parents expressed high aspirations for education, the number of Latinas with college degrees continues to diminish. Ultimately, much of what we do in our daily lives is related to gender and the way in which society differentiates our actions.

Educational theorists have pointed out how gender particularly affects women:

Gender development is a fundamental issue because some of the most important aspects of people’s lives, such as the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they
hold of themselves and others, the sociostructural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing. It is the primary basis on which people get differentiated with pervasive effects on their daily lives. (Bandura & Bussey, 1999, p. 677)

It is precisely this type of notion that women have no control of their lives that has led scholars to theorize about using one’s knowledge, culture, histories, experiences and language as valuable capital from which women draw in order to make sense of their lives and gain strength to move forward (Bernal, 2002). A Critical Race Theory approach grew out of the dissatisfaction with current lens used to describe Latinas’ experiences and outcomes in life. This new theory called LatCrit was conceived in 1995. ‘La’ stands for Latinas/os and ‘Crit’ stands for critical, and when the two are combined, it stands for Latina/o Critical Theory, a scholarly movement which rose as a response to the long historical presence and invisibility of Latinas/os in the United States (Valdes, 2005).

Thus, the theory which gives credence to people’s histories is better known as LatCrit theory which is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is based on five concepts which Dolores Bernal and Tara Yosso describe as the theory which challenges scholarship that seeks to dehumanize and depersonalize Latinas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). LatCrit theory, then, is based on the scholarship of CRT which seeks to empower the histories of Latinas by giving voice to their experiences, language, culture, and their lived lives as assets in the educational system as opposed to the deficit lens by which their lives are often viewed in schools (Bernal, 2002). “In fact CRT and LatCrit educational studies view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived
experiences of the students of color by including such methods as story-telling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, testimonies, cuentos, consejos, chronicles, and narratives” (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 314).

In a qualitative study with Chicana college students, Bernal (2002) documented how the students view their bilingualism, biculturalism and commitment to communities as critical tools that have helped them navigate through educational obstacles. LaTCrit epistemology provides an alternative framework from that of a deficit and instead allows educators to understand the different “conocimientos” or knowledge students bring from their homes and communities. Critics of this approach argue that the use of personal histories and narratives is too subjective to be valid, but proponents of the CRT and LatCrit theories hold to the views expressed by Bernal when she stated that through these lenses, “students of color can be seen as holders and creators of knowledge who have the potential to transform schools into places where the experiences of all individuals are acknowledged, taught, and cherished” (p. 121).

**English Language Learners**

The research is quite voluminous in the area of the English language; however, there is still much debate as to the optimal conditions for one to develop native-like proficiency in English as a second language in the United States. Frank Smith eloquently stated that

children know how to learn. And it is the responsibility of teachers to make learning possible by ensuring that what is to be learned is comprehensible. The teacher’s role is to help a child make sense of school and of the world (Smith, 1975, p. 247).
Smith’s premise is said to be key to learning a second language; it has to be comprehensible in order to make sense. Yet the achievement gap still persists today for the vast majority of English Language Learners from Latino backgrounds, as the data presented previously demonstrated. Before ensuing on the discussion of how language and culture interact in the second language proficiency paradigm, it is important to describe the linguistic complexity involved in acquiring second language acquisition and proficiency.

Jim Cummins is noted for having made the distinction between two different types of language proficiencies. He called the “surface” skills of listening and speaking which are typically acquired early in the second language acquisition process the Basic Interpersonal Communication skills (BICS). The second type of proficiency is what he has coined as the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and he suggested that while many children develop native-like speaker fluency (i.e., BICS) within two years of immersion in the target language, it takes between five to seven years for a student to be working on level with native speakers using all skills, including reading and writing (Cummins, 1979). Hakuta, (2000) also concluded in his study that it takes three to five years for oral proficiency (BICS) to develop and three to five years for academic proficiency (CALP) to develop among second language learners.

This theory of language learning has dominated much of the research on second language learning for the last thirty years. Garcia, (2005) concurs with Cummins’ research findings on literacy development and the impact that one’s first language has on the literacy development of the second language. These researchers found that a student’s first language level of development is a good indicator of the student’s ability to develop
comparable literacy levels in the second language. Cummins further theorized that there is a particular threshold at which proficiency in one language will transfer to another. Weak skills will not transfer, whereas intermediate to strong skills will. Musetti (2009) found that elementary students in a bilingual program using leveled readers (1-36) were able to transfer their Spanish reading skills to English reading at the upper intermediate levels (level 20).

However, Calderón (2007) posited that it takes less than five to seven years to gain native-like literacy in a second language. The author contends that it takes five to seven years for children who are learning in their primary language (native) and the introduction of the second language (English in this case) is delayed until the fourth or fifth grade. Calderón also asserted that it can take up to seven years or more for children with interrupted schooling to acquire native-like proficiency in English. She established (2007) that for children entering in elementary grades in a rigorous monolingual program, it takes significantly less than five to seven years to gain comparable literacy levels in the second language or target language.

Furthermore, two of the largest longitudinal studies carried out on instructional delivery programs for English Language Learners by George Washington University researchers (Collier & Thomas, 2002) support the significance of dual language instruction as a model that can close the achievement gap for this group of students. Higher levels of bilingual proficiency were associated with higher levels of reading achievement in all of the studies cited. However, there were other key findings which identified program factors and instructional characteristics that promoted academic success for ELLs. These factors include a positive school environment, a meaningful and
academically challenging curriculum, a program model that is grounded in sound theory and best practices, teachers in bilingual programs who understand theories of bilingualism and second language development, and the use of cooperative learning and high-quality exchanges between teachers and pupils (Genesee, Lindhom-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005).

Other researchers’ findings which support the link between ones’ culture and language development are Garcia (2005) and Banks (1995), who affirmed the intersection of language and culture in their work. Both authors asserted that students learn best when their culture as well as their language is respected, affirmed, and used in instruction in the process of learning a second language. And as cited earlier, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, (2005) found in their study that understanding the “funds of knowledge” or experiences that students bring with them and learning how to infuse these cultural and language experiences into the curriculum honors the linguistic and cultural diversity of English Language Learners, which in turn makes learning culturally responsive for them. Villegas and Lucas (2002) also found that affirming the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students is a powerful indicator of success for these students.

Fillmore and Snow (2001) found that teachers play a critical role in language development. They asserted that teachers need to be agents of socialization and they need to be able to ease the assimilation process for English language learners by respecting the students’ background and their families. Of major importance is the knowledge teachers must have of how the English language works in order to be able to teach others how to read and write it.
In one of the most comprehensive studies of the research to date on what constitutes effective pedagogy for students whose first language is not English, Goldenberg (2008) asserted that a strong scaffold for supporting English Language Learners in English-only settings is to provide opportunities for extended interactions or instructional conversation with teachers and peers. The Instructional Conversation (IC) is one of the standards that came out of the research for effective pedagogy for culturally and linguistically diverse students which were documented by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) in *Rousing Minds to Life*. Moreover, in a comprehensive review of the literature conducted by Tellez and Waxman, (2006), the authors established that the practice of the IC addresses the need for cognitively challenging curriculum which moves teachers and students away from the typical patterns of teacher-directed instruction that currently exist in schools today.

According to Cummins (2009) one of the outcomes of the National Literacy Panel stated that it is not enough to teach reading skills but that “extensive oral” English development must be incorporated as part of the literacy practices to be used with ELLs. However, there are multiple objections to this and other findings by the National Literacy Panel. While Cummins (2009) agrees with some of the findings, he disagrees wholeheartedly with the others because the panel only used quantitative research dating back to 1980. No qualitative research documenting the sociocultural influences on students’ English academic development, among other important non-peer reviewed seminal studies, were not taken into consideration. For example, Cummins noted that there is ample research documenting the length of time required for second language students to reach comparable levels of academic language proficiency, yet the panel rejected the
evidence to support this finding. Along the same line, the panel asserted that there was not enough evidence to support the instructional factors which promote English reading comprehension among ELLs. Taking exception to this finding, Cummins referenced seminal studies which document that the level of student engagement in reading is a better predictor of literacy performance than a student’s economic background.

In conclusion, the literature on second language learning is vast and some areas of research are very clearly supported, such as the length of time it takes to acquire academic literacy and the critical role of dual language learning as well as the importance of engaging the students in meaningful instructional conversation. However, the sociocultural factors influencing language learning are better documented through qualitative studies than through quantitative studies which use depersonalized only data to draw conclusions.

**Research on Dominicans**

An examination of the factors which allowed four first generation Dominican women to travel through numerous educational systems and join the ranks of the middle class, despite numerous barriers, is a topic which until now has not been specifically researched. A library search for successful trajectories of Dominicans yielded 200 research projects about Dominicans which related to areas in art, music, politics, economics, business, health issues, tourism, sociolinguistic, and transnational identity. Retrospective research spanning the course of thirty to forty years, such as the research proposed through this investigation, was not evident in any of the research engines used. The research conducted on the education of Dominican students has been done primarily with populations of Dominican students in New York and Rhode Island, where the
largest numbers of Dominicans currently reside. This research focused mainly on the role
of the family and motivation to persevere, racialized identities, and some on schooling
experiences of Dominican students. Investigation for this literature review did not yield
any studies of Dominican women who were successful in moving from first generation
English Language Learner to successful entry into leadership positions in education in the
South. Therefore, this review of the literature on Dominicans specifically focuses on what
other scholars have found to be the factors that propelled or allowed some to succeed
academically.

**Transnationalism**

Transnationalism is about duality. Much has been written about immigrants from
the Dominican Republic who negotiate their lives in two worlds. Duany (1994) affirmed
that transnational communities are those that are “characterized by a constant flow of
people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachment to two nations
and a far-flung network of kinship and friendship ties across state frontiers” (p. 2). For
example, in order to stay connected to their families, Dominicans continue to speak
Spanish, of which they are proud. Dominicans stay connected not only through language
but through music, art, technology, economics, cultural, and social affairs. It is this
transnational nature that has helped many scholars argue for dual language instruction,
instruction in both English and Spanish, in New York City in areas where the majority of
Dominicans reside. Pita and Utakis (2002) argued that this transnational identity calls for
policy changes in the educational system so that dual language instruction and cultural
studies becomes part of the education of these students. These authors contend that
Dominicans place a strong value on “familismo,” or keeping connected to their extended
relatives, not just their immediate family living in the United States. Therefore, maintaining the native language is of primary importance to families in order to be able to communicate with immediate and extended family both in the U.S. and their native country.

In the same way, Rodriguez (2009) documented in her ethnographic study of five adolescent Dominican girls and their families living in Washington Heights in New York City that maintenance of the native language, Spanish, plays a very important role in keeping family connections both in the U.S. and the home country. She posited that maintenance of the Spanish language is tied to a healthy identity of being able to switch back and forth between two worlds and two languages. The teens see themselves empowered by having access to both worlds because of their ability to communicate in both English and Spanish. Furthermore, Rodriguez suggested that cultivating the Spanish language at school through dual-language programs could ease the divide between the school world and the Dominican transnational community. Rodriguez concluded that using both Spanish and English for instruction could bridge the home school connection, allowing these students higher levels of achievement.

In a study of gender and transnational practices, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo (2005) found that women and men experience their migration differently, but that the reason seems to be more based on socioeconomic status than gender. They established that women tend to adapt to the norms and values of the receiving country more readily than men do. It appears that at least initially men tend to feel a loss of status, which is seen as a threat to their masculine identity. Because of this perceived loss in the new society, men yearn to return home and regain their status, preventing them from
establishing stronger ties to the home country. Women, on the other hand, gain advantages and privileges which they didn’t have in their home country, and as a result, are more prone to want to stay in the receiving country and invest their time and energy into making it in their new society. Ultimately, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo (2005) established that transnational participation or living in between two lands or borders does not lessen or weaken the desire to be part of the American society. Furthering the complexity of the immigrant experience, they asserted that the lower the socioeconomic status of the immigrant the more likely they are to experience radicalized behaviors and the more distance they see between themselves and white America. However, they also pointed out that the more exposure to American society that immigrants encounter, the less social distance between immigrants and white American there seems to be. They conclude that there are some important differences in the way the genders experience their assimilation into American society and that women seem to have some more gains in gender status than men.

Similarly, Dicker (2006) studied the complexity of this transnational community by conducting a qualitative study of five Dominican women who represent first and second generation immigrants and reside in Washington Heights, the neighborhood with the largest Dominican population in the United States. This author was concerned as well with the assimilation question of whether these immigrants will incorporate or assimilate into the American society as other immigrants in the nineteenth century did. Dicker found that the transnational nature of this group with ties to their homeland and to their new land complicates or challenges the assimilation process for this group of more recent immigrants. Because their ties require linguistic maintenance of the Spanish language,
Dicker found that Dominicans may have linguistic and cultural needs that educational institutions are failing to acknowledge. Dicker concluded that in spite of living in a Spanish dominant community, these Dominican women acquired an additive bilingualism, rather than a subtractive form of bilingualism and considered themselves bicultural. Dicker’s findings are concurrent with other studies of immigrant communities who live in between two borders and adapt to the new culture and new language without taking away their own native language, norms and behaviors.

**Assimilation Patterns**

Contrary to the studies mentioned above about the complexity of transnational immigrant communities and the perceived threat that they will not assimilate into the American society because they have many ties, such as language, culture and family, bounding them to their native countries, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, and Holdaway, (2008) recently published their findings of a ten year study involving more than three thousand men and women in their twenties who are the so called generation 1.5 as they are the children of first generation immigrants or children who immigrated to this country before the age of twelve. These authors contend that contrary to beliefs, the ‘second generation’ of Dominicans, Russians, South Americans, Chinese, and West Indians are assimilating into American society. However, some seem to be assimilating much better than others. Chinese and Russian Jewish immigrants seem to be doing as well or better than their white counterparts. Whereas, Dominicans and West Indians are doing about the same as their counterpart minorities, African Americans and Puerto Ricans. In other words, Dominicans’ are not faring as well in many levels such as education and economics. This interpretation of the Dominican immigrant assimilation process mirrors
the findings by Itzigsohn, who fears that while Dominicans have made progress in integrating into the American fabric of life, they are still marginalized by poverty and racialized societal issues.

**Capital**

Reynoso (2003) conducted a study on the concept of social capital and Dominicans in New York City, Washington Heights. Her premise was that social capital did not suffice in assisting this immigrant group to assimilate into a foreign society even though she considered it a very important element to the assimilation process. While she considered other factors as crucial to the integration process, she rejected the notion that factors such as motivation and individual abilities were the determining attributes to the successful integration or assimilation of this group of immigrants. She studied the contextual conditions upon entering this country as determining elements or factors into the integration or assimilation process. She found a strong sense of ethnic identity for the majority of participants in her study and strong communities in New York formed by their ties to popular culture such as music, language, food, and religion. She stated that the problem was not whether Dominicans are void of social capital networks or not, but the lack of economic resources and opportunities in the communities to which they immigrate, such as the poor (ghetto) neighborhoods in New York City where the majority of Dominicans still reside that seem to impact or impede the assimilation processes of this group of immigrants.

Toribio’s (2001) work focuses on the elements of language status in the Dominican community. She found that race, more than any other factor, had an impact on Dominicans’ ability to keep their Spanish as a separatist instrument or not to relinquish
their Spanish to the new language. She further found the Dominican Blacks distinguish themselves from African Americans by their linguistic dominance of Spanish while the white Dominican is more prone to relinquish his linguistic dominance to become more a part of the mainstream culture of white America. He concluded that the Spanish language serves to unite Dominicans to their past, but at the same time it separates them from the African American neighbors. Toribio pointed out that Dominicans suffer double jeopardy if they are forced to give up their first language and cultural ties to their families, but still suffer discrimination because of their race. Not surprisingly, Toribio found that those who relinquished to English as part of their incorporation into American society seemed to experience a reduction in competence of the Spanish language.

Identity

In another more recent study of Dominicans in Reading, Pennsylvania, Jensen, Cohen, Toribio, De Jong, and Rodriguez (2006) studied the role that skin color, language ability, and ethnic identity have on the assimilation process. They found that there is a strong relationship between the way Dominicans identify themselves and the color of their skin, their language abilities, and the length of time in the United States. For example, their study indicated that Dominicans who identified as panethnic, or as Latino/Hispanic, also had self-assessed as having lighter skin tones and more years in the United States, indicating that their identity with the bigger Latino/Hispanic community was socially constructed. Interestingly, they noted that the same group who identified as panethnic also had more economic advantages. The authors noted that those Dominicans who identified as panethnics had better education, more employment, higher levels of incomes, and more home-ownership than those who identified as Dominicans. The
authors noted that none of the interviewees (65 total) identified themselves as African Americans or black. However, the respondents pointed out that while they do recognize they have dark skin, others in the community regard them as blacks even though they don’t identify themselves as black or African American. According to these authors, panethnicity is associated with more years in the United States, which was also consistent with the Dominicans who self-identified as panethnic. The authors concluded that panethnicity is an adopted self-identifier as the members of a community see themselves as part of a larger group than just their country of birth. The adoption of this self-identifier seems to also indicate more attributes of those who assimilate into the American fabric of life.

**Resiliency**

Lastly, Reynoso (2008) recently conducted a study of Dominican English language learners and the resiliency factors which helped them become academically successful in the Bronx Community College in New York, despite their personal, academic, and environmental hurdles. He found seven categories which fostered academic resiliency among the participants at Bronx Community College. The categories were faculty, family, counseling, peer support, self-motivation, and bicultural identity development.

**Summary and Implications of Literature Review**

Based on this review of the literature, it is likely that English Language Learners will be more successful when they value the maintenance of the native language and maintain connections to their families. The majority of the studies focus on how
participants negotiate living in two languages between home and school. This duality was both conflicting and a source of strength, which explains how some ELLs are able to succeed in spite of the deficit theories. The idea that Latinas, and more specifically Dominicans, live in dual spaces both psychologically, physically, linguistically and culturally was well documented in the research. The research on learning a second language has some definitive findings on the length of time it takes to become academically proficient in a second language and what type of programs and conditions or practices are imperative to help students, particularly Latino students, who are second language learners thrive linguistically and academically.

However, there are no studies covering a 30- to 40- year span, looking at the complexity of how individual Dominicans are able to go beyond a high school education. In addition, no studies examine the lives of those individuals who attain advanced degrees and become part of the middle class culture using education as a vehicle. The literature does not reveal enough about the success factors of those Dominicans who are able ‘to do’ school successfully despite the many factors working against them. Thus, this study is necessary to add to the body of literature on how and why some Dominicans have been successful in learning ‘to do’ school and entering leadership positions in education despite the odds working against them. This study will look for the ways that Community Cultural Wealth has contributed to this extended educational journey.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the success of these four Dominican women who are first generation immigrants and English Language Learners and the ways in which their realities can be understood and explained using, in part, the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) model. The research pointing to the achievement gap of Latino students prevails in the literature. In addition, much has been written addressing how to remedy the problem of Latino underachievement in education; however, there is not enough research that speaks to how some are able to make it through the educational pipeline and transition into K-12 jobs in the educational field despite the many factors against them. This study focuses on participants who identify themselves as first generation Dominicans who defied the odds.

Their life stories yield a deep understanding of the factors that explained, influenced, and, indeed allowed for their eventual entrance into leadership roles in K-12 education. According to Creswell (2009), researchers use theoretical perspectives in qualitative research which provide an overall framework for the study of questions of gender, class, race, or other issues of marginalized groups. The researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense of the meanings others have of the world. In this study, the qualitative research methodology is used in order to obtain a deeper understanding, through in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, one-on-one and focus interviews. As Denzin and Lincoln explain, such qualitative instruments are uniquely situated to explore these factors of success:
The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (2005, p. 10).

Consequently, this study focuses on how these participants, who represent a purposive sampling of women who met the criteria as former English Language Learners, first generation immigrants, female, same ethnicity (Dominican), college graduates, and successful educators in the South, successfully navigated various educational systems and entered into leadership roles in education.

**Research Questions**

There is much known about those who fail ‘to do’ well in school, but not enough about those who “do school” well and transition into well-established leadership jobs in education. Dominican women were the subject of this research. The literature for this group of women indicated that while some have made great strides in getting through college, for the most part they hold jobs in the service industry. Itzigshon (2009) who conducted a five-year study in Rhode Island with Dominican participants of both genders fears that the second generation of Dominicans may not join the ranks of the middle class. In fact, he fears that neither the second nor the third generation will be able to join the middle class like so many other immigrants of the second and third generation have. It was the intent of this study to learn from the lives of those who have climbed the ladder
to the middle class as to how they were able to do it, having started with the same
disadvantages as so many Dominican students in schools today. Yin (2008) defined a
research design as a “logical plan for getting from here to there, where here may be
defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions
(answers) about these questions” (p.27). Consequently, this study investigated the
following questions:

1. What factors, including various types of capital, do academically
successful Dominican women indicate as significant in helping them
navigate the school world?

2. What are the critical events in the lives of four Dominican women that
contributed to their academic resilience?

3. What are the commonalities and variations in the life stories of these
educationally successful Dominican women across particular cultural,
linguistic, and ethnic, class, personality and other categories?

Research Design

This study is framed within a qualitative paradigm by conducting in-depth,
retrospective, individual, and focus interviews in order to learn what characterizes the
educational experiences of the participants and what they mark as the factors and critical
events in their successes. Creswell (2009) stated that “constructivist researchers focus on
the specific contexts in which people live and work, in order to understand the historical
and cultural settings of the participants” (p. 8). It was the intent of this study to make
sense of the events in their “lived lives” that led to their success today. A qualitative
paradigm helped me understand what occurred in the lives of these women that propelled
and allowed them to integrate into the fabric of American life, including higher education.

There are five major approaches that could be employed in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). This study utilized a narrative case study approach. Clandinin and Connelly explain the advantages of this approach:

With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in researcher’ texts. In this view, experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities. (2000, p. xxvi)

Additionally, the cross case study approach will yield a descriptive knowledge which must be understood in context (Stake, 1988). Furthermore, a cross case analysis as part of the research design, enhances the generalizability and deepens the understanding and explanations of the themes that emerge. Thus, a stronger analysis is obtained because “multiple cases not only pin down the specific conditions under which a finding will occur but also help us form the more general categories of how those conditions may be related” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 173).

The individual interviews were conducted using a narrative inquiry process where the participants told their stories in a recursive manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman (1995) stated that the narrative process “seeks to collect data to describe lives” (p.86). The authors further stated that narrative analysis
“can be applied to an in-depth interview” (p. 86). In analyzing the narratives, the researcher works to actively find the voice of the participants in a particular time, place, or setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). This research study attempts to provide a description of the learner’s literacy stories and experiences based upon their recollection and statements about their own feelings and perspectives. The narrative process enabled these learners to restory and reconstruct their lives in the educational setting. This research describes the relationship that these Dominican women reported through individual and focus interviews in order to shed light in the issue of why these particular women were able to succeed in school and the world of academia, whereas most Latinas who share the same background characteristics likely would not succeed academically. Indeed, it is the factors that have influenced these particular women’s educational successes and subsequently their professional journeys which are the focus of this study.

Qualitative Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology because the nuances of gender, race, class and unique personalities are difficult to examine within statistical studies (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). These are precisely the nuances that comprise Community Cultural Wealth which may account for the success of the study participants. Thus, a qualitative approach fits the purpose of this study better. A narrative approach, as noted above, contextualized this study because it allows the participants to use stories to reaffirm their life journeys. These stories can, in fact, guide others in their understanding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxv).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) pointed out the both pros and cons of using narratives and life histories. The positive aspects of using narratives and life histories
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Sometimes leads researchers to fix on details, misinterpret information, or depend on the cooperation of key individuals. In addition, a narrative is difficult to replicate. While the researcher depends on the honesty of the participants, she has to be skilled in interpersonal skills to get participants to open up and tell their stories. On the other hand, the positive aspects of narratives that these authors posed were the ease of the face-to-face interaction, the collection of data in a natural setting, and its utility for documenting events or conflicts. Narrative also provides context and facilitates analysis and validity checks.

The value of a qualitative methodology is that the participants have stories about their successes and educators and others like them can learn from their journey. Marshall and Rossman (2006) asserted that qualitative research is crucial for understanding voices and experiences which are not apparent through the statistical analysis of quantitative research. As an immigrant woman with similar identities as the participants, my positionality as a researcher was strengthened, not weakened, by my ethnicity and gender and second language experience as I heard and interpreted the lived stories of those who have traveled similar journeys. As a researcher, I was able to gain access to and understanding of participants’ experiences as a result of my insider positionality, and the qualitative methods I employed within the study enhanced my positionality. Conversely, I was aware that my particular background and experiences, precisely because they are so similar to those of my participants, could potentially predispose and bias me to particular understandings, interpretations and conclusions.

Within the five approaches outlined by Creswell (2007), case study provided the best inquiry strategy for this study because this researcher had “clearly identifiable cases
with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases” (p. 74). The cases were accessible; the cases were bounded by its commonalities of the participants’ ethnicity and immigrant status as Latinas and Dominicans, language learning and success in attaining current middle class status in the South through advanced education.

As Marshall and Rossman (2006) pointed out, the pros and cons of any method must be considered and are not “chosen in a vacuum” but the researcher must test these methods as part of designing the study (p. 136). Additionally, researchers must consider their own abilities in carrying out any particular overall approach or method, and this methodology suited this researcher.

**Setting**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explained that if a study is of a specific program, organization, place, or region, some detail regarding the setting is critically important. The authors also suggested that a rationale be provided that outlines why this specific setting was more appropriate than others for the conduct of the study. What is unique? What characteristics of this setting are compelling and unusual? In this study, the setting was dictated by its location within the South. Also factored into the decision was the fact that first generation Dominican women have risen to academic success in the school districts in the South. The specific setting is school systems within the Metropolitan Regional System Agency (MRESA) in Georgia. Participants work within the jurisdiction of the researcher although not in the same school system. The participants work in large urban school systems in different administrative and teaching positions within the MRESA region which is composed of twelve large school systems in Atlanta, Georgia. The researcher has familiarity with the setting and the participants. While there were
potential struggles with closeness of the participants and the researcher, this possibility was balanced by the ease of arranging interviews and building relationships, as well as being drawn to the study of my ethnic group. In addition, Marshall and Rossman (2006) posited that “closeness to the people and the phenomenon through intense interactions provides understandings that can greatly increase the quality of qualitative data” (p. 62).

The school systems in the study are labeled, A, B, and C. School system A is one of the largest systems in Georgia and continues to grow. The school district anticipates it will serve nearly 161,000 students in the 2010-2011 school year. The district has a large Latino population.

School system B is also a large metropolitan district. The school district is located in one of the most culturally diverse counties in the nation. The student enrollment totals more than 102,000 students in 143 schools and centers, and the system has 13,285 full-time employees.

School system C is a smaller district in the metropolitan Atlanta area. The district has 21 schools that serve 12,168 students in grade PK through 12.

**Purposeful Sample**

Researchers cannot study all relevant circumstances, events, or people intensively and in depth. Instead, they select samples. Purposeful sampling is generally used in case study research (Creswell, 2007, 2009). This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Decisions need to be made about who or what should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled. Creswell (2007)
proposed that in case study research, no more than four or five case studies should be chosen for a single study. His position was that “this number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis” (p.128).

Miles and Huberman (1994) warned that the type of sampling chosen for research is crucial to the ultimate analysis of the data. They note that “the choices—whom to look at or talk with, where, when, about what, and why—all place limits on the conclusions you can draw, and on how confident you and others feel about them” (p. 27). They further added that purposive sampling matches qualitative research best because it is not random. Thus, the participants were chosen from a purposive and convenient sample of women who are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, hold jobs in educational institutions in school systems in the South, and were English language learners when they first arrived in this country. By tracing their journey, this researcher identified the support mechanisms that helped these women cross the academic bridge that allowed them to learn to successfully ‘do school’ in the United States.

Four Dominican women who met the criteria established were invited to participate in the study. The criteria included being first generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic who graduated from universities, earning a Masters and other advanced degrees in education, and currently work in the educational arena within the Metro school systems in Georgia, and have joined the ranks of the American middle class.

Carmen (pseudonym) holds a post-masters advanced degree in education and has held multiple leadership jobs as principal and central office cabinet level administrator in
large school districts in the Metro area. Carmen immigrated to the United States with her family while she was in elementary school. She has five siblings, and two obtained college degrees from a four-year institution.

Ana (pseudonym) is an elementary classroom teacher in a large school district within the Metropolitan Atlanta area. Ana has five siblings, and two have also obtained degrees from a four-year institution. She holds a masters degree in Reading and was named teacher of the year for her school.

Rosario (pseudonym) has held numerous leadership positions including that of principal in a large school district in the Metropolitan Atlanta area as well. Rosario has a brother and a sister. Both siblings have obtained degrees from four-year institutions. Rosario moved to a larger city most recently to hold a cabinet leadership position in instruction where the majority of the students are English Language Learners and of Latino descent.

Deyanira (pseudonym) holds a Masters degree and has served in numerous positions in a large Metropolitan Atlanta district. She has one brother who also lives in the South who holds a technical degree. Deyanira holds a central office administrative position in the area of teaching and learning with a focus on English Language Learners. All potential participants have joined the ranks of the middle class and are bilingual.

**Access to Site**

As stated in Creswell (2009), identifying the purposefully selected sites or individuals for the proposed study include identifying where the research will take place (setting), who will be interviewed (actors), what the actors will be interviewed doing
(events) and the evolving nature of the events (process). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) a realistic site is one a) where entry is possible; b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured (p.61-62).

**Instrumentation**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explained that in qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument. Her presence in the lives of the participants invited to be part of the study is fundamental to the methodology. Whether the presence in the setting is sustained and intensive, as long-term ethnographies, or relatively brief but personal, as in-depth interview studies, the researcher enters the lives of the participants (p.72). I had the opportunity to share pieces of my own story when interviewing as they asked me questions about my life, thus making me part of the instrumentation.

Patton (2002) develops a series of continua for thinking about one’s role in planning the conduct of qualitative research. First, the researcher may plan to have a role that entails varying degrees or participantness—that is, the degree of actual participation in daily life. Next, the researcher’s role may vary as to its revealedness or the extent to which the participants know that there is a study going on. Full disclosure lies at one end of the continuum; complete secrecy at the other. Patton, however, advises full and complete disclosure. Third, the dimensions of a researcher’s role may vary in intensiveness and extensiveness—that is, the amount of time spent daily in the setting and the duration of the study. Finally, the researcher’s role may vary depending on whether
the focus of the study is specific or diffuse. When the research questions are well
developed before hand and data appropriate to address those questions have been
identified, the researcher’s role can be managed efficiently and carefully to ensure good
use of the available time, both the researcher’s and the participants (p.73-74).

Data Collection

Data can be drawn either from one primary source (e.g., oral interviews, journals,
or essays) or from multiple sources, which are preferred. As in ethnography, bringing
together (triangulating) multiple perspectives, methods, and sources of information (e.g.,
interviews, observations, field notes, self-reports or think-aloud protocols, tests,
transcripts, and other documents), add texture, depth, and multiple insights to an analysis
and can enhance the validity or credibility of the results. Observations and data collection
settings may range from natural to artificial, with relatively unstructured to highly
structured elicitation tasks and category systems, depending on the purpose of the study
and the disciplinary traditions associated with it (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

Establishing a trusting relationship with research participants, using multiple elicitation
tasks (data collection procedures), obtaining adequate relevant background information
about case participants and sites, and having access to or contact with the case over a
period of time are, in general, all highly desirable.

Like ethnography, case study data collection involves a wide array of procedures
as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case. Yin (2003) refers to six forms:
documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participants’ observation, and
physical artifacts (p. 132). Focus interview will likely yield the best information, when
interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect
information is limited and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information. With this approach, however, care must be taken to encourage all participants to talk to and to monitor individuals who may dominate the conversation. For one-on-one interviewing, the researcher needs individuals who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas, and needs to determine a setting in which this is possible (p.133). In this study I use and even combine several of these formats. For example, a series of one-on-one interviews and a focus interview included a physical artifact where each participant described a series of photographs each has brought to share as both descriptive and emblematic of their journey.

Quality researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing. Kahn and Cannell (1957) described interviewing as a “conversation with a purpose” (p.149). Patton (2002) puts interviews into three general categories; the informal, conversational interview; the general interview guide approach; and the standardized, open-ended interview.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) added to the literature on interviewing by stating that qualitative, in-depth interviews typically are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few topics to help uncover the participants’ views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the response. The most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach is conveying the attitude that the participants’ views are valuable and useful (p.101).
Marshall and Rossman (2006) further added that interviews can yield large amounts of data in a short period, which indeed happened in this study.

Creswell (2007) recommended involving participants in determining the place for conducting the interviews. A quiet location free from distraction is preferably. It is up to the researcher to determine if the physical setting lends itself to audio taping or videotaping, which is necessary to ensure accuracy. Creswell also advised researchers to stick to the questions during the interview process and to also “complete the interview within the time specified (if possible), be respectful and courteous, and to offer few questions and advise” (p.134-135).

In this study, prior to submitting a request to conduct research, an e-mail was sent to the participants who met the criteria of the samples to inquire if they would be willing to participate in this study. Upon being granted permission to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) established at the degree-granting university, the researcher sent a formal invitation letter to the participants who met the criteria of the purposive sample explaining the purpose of the study (Appendix A). The participants and the researcher met at a location that was the participant’s choice. The researcher had a specific set of questions and an approximate time frame that was explained to the participants.

Three individual interviews were conducted for each participant relating to the three facets being explored: 1) early schooling, K-12 years, 2) the undergraduate and graduate college experience and 3) post college professional life. Each interview lasted anywhere between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. The interview protocol consisted of structured and semi-structured open-ended questions to allow the
participants to elaborate on the details of each part of their life events. The researcher conducted two focus interviews with the four participants. The focus interviews consisted of open-ended questions formulated as a result of the areas needing more depth from the individual interviews. Krueger (2009) posed the question, “why do focus groups work? Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged” (p.4). Krueger added that open-ended questions were best and pointed out that “the focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by other-just as they do in life” (p.7). This influence is particularly noted when the participants are similar in the characteristics being studied, as noted in this study. The researcher in this study is also a Dominican female who also works in education. With this background, she believed there would be little chance of cultural misinterpretation and that she has the interpersonal skills to conduct the interview and had research questions that are sound. Interview protocols were included in Appendix C, D, E, and F.

Several researchers posited that focus groups must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide multiplicity of perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2009, Creswell, 2007, Yin 2003). This study with only four purposefully chosen participants meets that criteria as well.

The participants were advised that one of the focus interviews would be videotaped and that they were required to bring three photographs to the interview that portrayed each of the facets of the interviews: background information, college/university and professional experience. Creswell (2007) advised that the focus interview be
conducted until the researcher has reached a point of saturation, where there is no more new information being added to the story.

On storing data, Creswell noted that he was surprised at how little attention is given in books and articles to storing qualitative data. He added that the approach to storage will reflect the type of information collected, which varies by approach to inquiry. He insists that in writing a narrative life history, the researcher needs to develop a filing system for the “wad of hand written notes or a tape” (p. 142). I explained that the interviews would be audio-taped and transcribed and kept in locked files on my home computer for one year. Participants were assured that the records would not be shared with anyone and security protocol would be followed as approved by the IRB.

**Data Analysis**

Analyzing the data is the process of making sense out of the data sources (Creswell, 2007). I transcribed the interviews from the audio-tape and video-tape to a word file format. I analyzed the data by major themes and then further reduced the data by the different types of capital which correlated to the Community Cultural Wealth framework which served as the lens for the analysis. The data was categorized according to each type of capital within the Community Cultural Wealth framework. Pseudonyms were used in coding the data from the interviews in order to protect the identities of the participants. After coding the themes, a cross-case analysis was created to tell the stories of the lives lived. Creswell (2009) highlights that meaning making is always a social activity and that this happens through the interaction with a human community and that is the purpose of this focus group activity to gain an understating of their historical and social perspective of their journey.
Case study data analysis generally involves an iterative, spiraling, or cyclical process that proceeds from more general to more specific observations (Creswell, 2007). Data analysis may begin informally during interviews or observations and continue during transcription, when recurring themes, patterns, and categories become evident. Once written records are available, analysis involves the coding of data and the identification of salient or key points. I coded the data by research questions and by individual, so each question was answered for each participant to understand the role that CCW played in their journey. Because it was clear that the various types of capital did not account for all of their success, I looked for the critical events to help me extend the interpretation of their life stories. Then, I looked at the commonalities and variations and did a cross case analysis of their stories.

**Validity of Interpretation**

Creswell (2009) advocates member checking as one strategy that can be used to validate the interpretations of qualitative analysis. After the data analysis has been completed, the participants were asked to check my interpretation of the transcribed data set from the interview to verify that the interpretation coincided with what they intended to tell me. In addition, participants signed a consent letter (Appendix B) giving permission to both audio-tape and video-tape. The letter states the purpose of the study and ensures that their participation will be kept totally confidential.

Validity and reliability in qualitative research is very different than in quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have written extensively on this topic and noted that, within the rationalistic, quantitative paradigm, the criteria to reach the goal of rigor are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. On the other hand, they
proposed that the criteria in the qualitative paradigm to ensure “trustworthiness” are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. These are the criteria to be used to establish trustworthiness in this qualitative research study.

Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) argued that the concepts of reliability and validity are overarching constructs that can be appropriately used in all scientific paradigms. Their arguments were based on Kvale (1989), whom these authors cited as stating that to validate is to investigate, to check, to question, and to theorize. All of these activities are thought to be integral components of qualitative inquiry that insure rigor or trustworthiness. Whether quantitative or qualitative methods are used, rigor or trustworthiness is a desired goal that is met through specific verification strategies. While different strategies are used for each paradigm, the term validity is the most pertinent term for these processes. Verification takes into account that varying philosophical perspectives inherent in qualitative inquiry; thus, the strategies used will be specific to, and inherent in, each methodological approach. The authors also noted that refocusing the qualitative research process to verification strategies will enhance the researcher’s responsiveness to data and constantly remind researchers to be proactive and take responsibility for rigor or trustworthiness.

Verification in Qualitative Research

Verification is the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain. In qualitative research, verification refers to the mechanism used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study. These mechanisms are woven into every step of the inquiry to
construct a solid product by identifying and correcting errors before they are built into the developing model and before they subvert the analysis (Creswell, 2007). If the principles of qualitative inquiry are followed, the analysis is self-correcting. In other words, qualitative research is iterative rather than linear, so that a good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between designs and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis. Data are systematically checked, focus is maintained, and the fit of data and the conceptual work of analysis and interpretation are monitored and confirmed constantly. Consequently, verification strategies are designed to ensure both reliability and validity of data (Morse et al., 2002). These same authors believed that reliability and validity can be achieved through activities such as ensuring methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, and developing a dynamic relationship between sampling and data.

**Limitations**

All qualitative research is imperfect at best (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). A discussion of these limitations reminds the reader that this study is bounded and situated in a specific context, that of Dominican females who have achieved success in the education field. Furthermore, while the low number of participants may prevent the researcher from making findings generalizable, it is also considered a strength of case study because the small number allows for potentially rich data stemming from the sustained, in-depth interviews and focus interviews. Miles & Huberman (1994) stated that “multiple cases, adequately sampled… and analyzed carefully… can help us answer
the reasonable question, do these findings make sense beyond this specific case?” (p. 173).

While the ‘insider’ positionality of the researcher is considered a strength in qualitative research, it also creates a certain tension between the interviewees and the researcher. Ganga & Scott (2006) defined ‘insider’ research as “social interviews between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage” (p. 2). Because I have lived similar experiences, I brought to the process the positionality of a trusted researcher who knows the culture and language of the participants. However, my position could have inhibited others from sharing their true life stories for fear of being judged. Creswell (2009) speaks about the fact that people in airplanes often share very personal information with strangers because of the anonymity of those listeners. In this case, the participants may feel that sharing personal details of their lives may cause harm in some way. Debriefing or member checking took place for participants to have an opportunity to confirm, disconfirm or add perspective to the analysis of the interview data. Schwandt (2007) adds that member checking actually allows for a more ‘participative and dialogical’ interaction between researcher and participant; honoring the participants’ right to know what the researcher has written about them. This researcher shared the findings with the participants in order to do just that.

**Ethical Considerations**

Participants had an opportunity to sign an informed consent form before they engaged in the research project (Appendix B). This consent form informed the participants of the purpose of the study, the reason for being chosen to participate,
benefits of participating, guarantee of confidentiality, assurance that they could withdraw at any time and person to contact if questions arose (Creswell, 2009).

A researcher develops case studies of individuals that represent a composite picture rather than an individual picture. Furthermore, “to gain support from the participants, a qualitative researcher conveys to participants that they are participating in a study, explains the purpose of the study, and does not engage in deception about the nature of the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 142). The letter of invitation for this study complied with the protocol of the research process and was approved by the IRB at Kennesaw State University.

**Summary**

This chapter presented the methodology and research design that was employed in the study. A thorough description of the steps of the process ensured a quality study and bias was also discussed. The sample consisted of four Dominican women who reside in the South and have enjoyed educational success despite having little family support to navigate through the educational system in the United States. Their stories are told using a narrative approach. This study focused on this subset, participants who identify themselves as first generation Dominicans, who defied the odds.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The goal of this research was to identify the factors and critical events that helped four Dominican women find success in academia, as well as professional success in the South. The purpose was to understand the factors that helped the participants navigate the school world successfully. In a review of the literature conducted on academic resiliency, students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions are said to be resilient (Waxman, et al; 2003); thus, I investigated whether there were commonalities and variations in their life stories across particular categories such as linguistic, ethnic, class, personality, or others that allowed and propelled them to becoming successful educators in the South.

First, I explain the ways in which my data collection methodology both allows for and supports my findings. I begin this analysis by creating a narrative portrait of each participant to give the reader an understanding of each person’s story. Secondly, I explain my findings through the Community Cultural Wealth framework and explain each type of capital as it is revealed in each story. Thirdly, I expand upon the CCW framework by contextualizing the critical events in the four women’s life stories which aided them in “doing school” successfully. And lastly, I provide the reader with an analysis of the commonalities and variations in their life stories in order to make suggestions for future practices in educating English Language Learners.

The data collected through one-on-one interviews and focus interviews served to form a life portrait of each participant. A main goal throughout the interviewing process was to gain a better understanding of the critical events that helped them “do school”
Despite the language barriers and other obstacles related to being an immigrant. The interviews also helped me to gain an in-depth understanding of how being an educator in the South has helped them to take on leadership roles in education and become part of the middle class structure in Georgia.

**Participant Portraits**

**Portrait # 1 (Ana)**

Ana recalls her place of birth as a two-bedroom house with dirt floors that she shared with five siblings. Her parents occupied one bedroom, and all of the children occupied the other. Ana still has vivid memories of that house in a remote and rural area of the Dominican Republic. The nearest school was quite a trek for her, and she never had a chance to attend it. In those days children didn’t start public school until the age of seven, and Ana migrated to the United States at the age of six. While in the Dominican Republic, her father was often away from home tending to his jobs in the construction business. To make things easier, he lived where the jobs were for long periods of time. In order to make ends meet for a family of seven, her mother made ‘dulce’ (a Dominican favorite dessert) and other tasty Dominican treats. Her older brother would often go to the nearest town and sell their “sweets.” Ana now recognizes how her mother was able to combine her cooking ability with her entrepreneurial skills to help the family survive. It was that resourcefulness that would help her develop other survival skills as the family made its way to the Big Apple, New York. Ana has no recollection of books or formal learning prior to coming to the United States. Her first taste of that came when she began attending public school in Upper Manhattan in an area better known today as Washington
Looking Back: Tracing the Trajectory

Heights. In those days Washington Heights was a drop-off point and a first port of entry for many Dominicans as they made their way to the United States. Ana began attending an elementary school on Amsterdam Avenue where she describes the neighborhood as poor and mostly populated by Latinos and African Americans. She still remembers how she loved the books with pictures that she had never seen before. However, she remained puzzled for some time as to why she never saw children like the ones in the books anywhere in her school. For the most part she remembers her first experience as surreal, coming from a remote rural area into a big city like New York. She does recall her first teacher simplifying things for her on an individual basis in class, and she fondly recalls her hugs and smiles. Her home life in New York changed drastically as both her parents were out of the house for twelve to fifteen hours a day while they worked. Her mom worked in a restaurant and eventually left dishwashing to become a salad girl. Her mother realized that she needed some additional skills and enrolled in night beauty school. This led to the opening of a “Dominican Salon” which helped them financially. However, her mother delegated all of her responsibilities as a parent to the older siblings. The family spoke Spanish at home and were encouraged to read the newspaper in Spanish so they wouldn’t forget their language. She remembers watching a lot of cartoons, and she says that watching television was instrumental in her learning English. Neither of her parents had more than an eighth grade education. Like so many other families at the time, they fled the Dominican Republic for political reasons, to get away from the Trujillo regime. Her father was able to find employment in construction, an area in which he was quite skilled, and he quickly learned enough spoken English to get by. She chuckles at the
memory that her parents never attended a parent conference in school, but always expected the children to bring home good grades.

The ugly school experiences began in middle school where Ana began to experience bullying by her peers. She remembers being picked on by the Black girls and getting into fights. She recalls the gangs in middle school, and her sister having to come to school to fight another girl who had beaten her up. She remembers the racial tensions of the time between the Italians, the Blacks, and the Dominicans. It was a scary time. Most importantly she recalls the way classes were organized by numbers which indicated who was in the smart class. The lower the numbers, the smarter you were supposed to be. She was a curious young lady and asked her teacher why all the White kids were in the lower numbers. Her teacher told her that when she learned English well enough, she could be in one of those classes too, but that never happened. By the time she entered high school, she was placed in a remedial reading class.

High school was a terrible experience for Ana as she recalls having to get into a gang-like group in order to survive the violence. She remembers the school having to install metal detectors because an overwhelming number of weapons were found on students. She emphasized that today it would be called a gang, but back then they were just trying to survive. Back then they dressed alike (all in black) and gave out the message that if anyone messed with any one of them, they were messing with all of them. Ana insisted that truth be told: she never got involved in any legal or serious problems like many youth in today’s gangs do. As far as her high school education was concerned, she recalls her economics teacher as the only person who made the content relevant and meaningful. He made it real by teaching her how to use a checkbook and from that she
was able to apply it in real life. After high school Ana, along with some friends, enrolled in a community college, but she soon dropped out because she was just not interested. She recalls having a hard time concentrating in school and was also getting into trouble at home. She realized that she just didn’t like living in New York and with the help of her parents moved back to the Dominican Republic where she enrolled in a four-year college. She spent two years there but became frustrated with her lack of academic Spanish, which also made college work in Spanish quite difficult.

Ana returned to New York and worked in several clothing stores before finding success as a store manager at a Pottery Barn. During this time she also enrolled at New York University and began taking some continuing education classes. While on vacation in the Dominican Republic, she met a Caucasian young man who taught at Carroll Morgan, an American school in the capital, Santo Domingo. They eventually got married and with his help Ana was able to get a job organizing the after-school program at the school. Those experiences made her aware of her ability to interact with children, and as she had children of her own, she realized that if she worked hard enough, she too could be a teacher. Years later, they moved back to Georgia where her husband’s family lives. She started volunteering at the elementary school where her children attended. The principal of the school saw her potential and encouraged her to go back to school and get her degree in education. While at Carroll Morgan, Ana had gained self-confidence and began to aspire to be like the teachers she worked with. That same principal offered her the chance to work as a bilingual paraprofessional, and she jumped at it. Soon she was back in school.
Ana is now a classroom teacher in the South. She has worked hard in her role as a kindergarten teacher and has obtained a Master’s degree in reading. While she acknowledges the struggles of becoming a professional in Georgia have left a mark, she says that she has used the sting of other people’s ignorance to make her students’ lives better every day by being the best teacher she knows how to be. She was recently named the teacher of the year at her school.

**Portrait # 2 (Carmen)**

Carmen was ten years old in 1969 when her family migrated to the United States via New York from the Dominican Republic. She remembers being scared of the buildings, the trains and the huge number of people who lived in a building. She attended Catholic school in the Dominican Republic where the focus at the time seemed to be on preparing girls to be good housewives, as the memories etched in her brain are of learning to cook, sew, knit and perform household chores. Carmen assumes that her family was not poor because they lived in a house, and she went to Catholic school. She distinctly remembers that they moved to the United States in search of a better life because they were very scared for their lives during the civil war in the Dominican Republic. Her memory is still haunted by the turmoil and the bullets coming through the walls and hiding under the bed when the shooting sprees started. Her father was involved in the protests and feared for his family’s safety. They left their home without even a suitcase and ran to the airport. She has vivid memories of the violence during the war. Once in New York, her family settled in the Bronx area of the city. After a while they moved to another neighborhood in the Bronx. The neighborhood was primarily Jewish.
with a few Hispanic and Black families. Over the course of about eight years, the neighborhood became predominantly Black and Latino.

As far as her first schooling experience, she remembers sitting in the back of the room where she became invisible to the teacher and other children in the classroom. She remembers the isolation she felt sitting there and not interacting with the other children. Carmen and her two older sisters received special tutoring after school from a Spanish-speaking person who was a paraprofessional at the school. This person was not assigned to help them do their homework, but she took an interest in Carmen and her sisters and volunteered to help them with their homework. She does credit this woman for making her feel better about school. She has few recollections of her learning experience during her first year in the United States, but she vividly remembers the many times she was beaten up after school by the Black girls who would pick a fight with her and her sisters any chance they got. She recalls it was really a strange situation since they all had the same skin color; she couldn’t understand why they were picking on her. Over time, she became scared of the “Black American girls.” She believes that the reason she was picked on was because they didn’t speak the language and didn’t fit in. She remembers those episodes as strange because later on in middle school her best friends were African American girls. To this day, the only explanation she has for being picked on was because they were new to the school and didn’t speak English. During her elementary and middle school years, her mom was in the United States with the children by herself, and her father had stayed behind in the Dominican Republic. Her mother worked in a factory for long hours, and as a result, the children had to learn to take care of each other
and they had to take on adult responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, and most of all, they had to be responsible for their own school.

By middle school, Carmen was able to make friends and felt less isolated and different than when in elementary school. To this day, she recalls speaking Spanish at home and English at school. Her father lived with them for a short period of time, but left them because he was not able to adjust to life in another country. She remembers detaching from her father after he left because she felt abandoned and not having much to do with the Dominican Republic after that. Her mother set expectations that they needed to go to school and stressed the importance of an education. Because she worked long hours, she was not able to attend parent-teacher conferences or school events. Although Carmen’s mother did not have a high school education, she always read the Spanish newspaper and kept up with current events. In the Dominican Republic, her dad was the strong disciplinarian and authoritarian figure; in the United States her mother became the person who held them together as a family.

Carmen can still recall how she used to struggle with the English language and how people would laugh at her for mispronouncing words. By eighth grade, she was recognized as having potential to go to college and was selected to attend a college-bound program as a ninth grade student. While in the college-bound high school, she felt that the students at that school were treated very differently from the ones at the regular high school where her sisters attended. She recalls that the rigor of the courses was very different from those that her sisters experienced. As part of the college-bound program, they were assigned a counselor who made frequent visits to her home to explain to her mother what was going on at school. These visits built a trusting relationship between
Carmen’s mother and the counselor who spoke to her about financial aid and college expectations. The counselor took a group of students, including Carmen, on regular field trips to visit colleges. She also helped them fill out their financial aid and college application forms. This counselor held her hand throughout the four years of high school. Meanwhile, there was a lot of emphasis at home on graduating from high school and finding jobs where the children could support themselves and not work in a factory like their mother did. Her mother made it very clear that she wanted better for all her children.

With the help of her counselor, Carmen was accepted in a Quaker College in Ohio where she decided to attend. She would be the first person in her family to attend college. Her older sister graduated from high school and got married several months later. Carmen recalls that she seemed to learn English faster than her sisters so she naturally started to be the one who navigated the system for the family. As the second oldest, she took the lead on running the household and ran the family errands and translated for the family whenever they needed help with an official American institution. Once at the Quaker College, life was quite difficult in many ways. Carmen’s academic English was still not developed enough to be able to do well in her college courses. She met a Spanish professor from Cuba who took her aside and helped her understand why she was still struggling with the English language. He recommended she take some grammar courses to help her improve her academic English. He also recommended that she stop thinking in Spanish and translating into English. She remembers that as the pivotal point where she made a conscious effort to start thinking in English and forget her Spanish. She even went so far as to Americanize her name. She felt so frustrated by the mispronunciation of her name that she thought it would be better to just change it so she could just fit in. She
feels that her linguistic ability in Spanish has diminished over the years as she has incorporated into an English-speaking environment. Carmen married her college sweetheart who is African American.

In college, she recalls Dr. Wilson, an education professor who took an interest in her, offering advice and supporting her with words of encouragement. In a sense he adopted her, kept in touch with Carmen’s whereabouts and wrote her letters of support for every ladder she climbed when she became a professional, until he passed away a few years ago. While in college Carmen worked in a hospital cafeteria to help with her personal expenses, although she went to the Quaker College with a full scholarship. She felt that her time at Quaker College was challenging, because she felt alone and far away from her family. She reports that, most of the other minority students who went to Quaker College were from the same high school or area and went back home after the first year, never to return. She remembers also wanting to quit, but her mother would not let her come home and told her she had to stick it out because this was a great opportunity she had been given and she needed to take advantage of it. She eventually became close friends with her roommate who lived in a nearby town and took her home with her on long weekends and vacations when she could not afford to return home. After her first year, she adjusted to her new environment and began to flourish. She started getting As and Bs and participating in leadership community service opportunities. She graduated on time and with honors.

After graduating from college, she returned to New York and worked in a Catholic elementary school for three years. After that, she became a teacher in the New York City Public Schools. She was assigned to the Gateway program, which was part of
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a public school initiative for fourth and fifth graders who had been retained. The teaching experience was very difficult but very rewarding, she says. After three years, she became frustrated because she felt the unions controlled the school, its climate, and promoted mediocrity. Many teachers were not there to make a difference, but to collect a pay check. However, she believes that experience made her a better teacher. She and her husband left New York and headed South. She became an elementary school teacher in a prominent school system in Virginia, well-known for its progressiveness in education. She was encouraged to enroll in an administrative program, which she did. She became an assistant principal, a principal, and eventually an assistant superintendent in a school system in Georgia. Carmen has had tremendous success in every position she has held and believes she has made a difference.

Portrait # 3 (Rosario)

Rosario’s family is from a rural area in the northern mountains of the Dominican Republic. Both of her parents were teachers in the public school system of the Dominican Republic, even though they had not completed more than a high school education. However, Rosario always knew that she would go to college because her parents emphasized the importance of education early on to her and her older brother. Her family migrated to the United States in 1966 due to political persecution. Both her parents had lost their jobs during the Trujillo era because they were not supporters of the regime. Rosario was only five years old when she first arrived to New York and settled into an area in the South Bronx of New York City where drugs and poverty were the norm, rather than the exception. She recalls having to step over discarded syringes as she walked down the stairs of the building where she lived. She recalls her first experience in
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Kindergarten as being when the teacher had to tap her on the shoulder because she didn’t respond to her own birth name, since she had always been called by her nickname, Julie. She didn’t recognize that when the teacher called her name in a strange pronunciation that she was being addressed. She remembers that the only other Spanish at the school were several cafeteria workers, so there was no one with whom she could speak Spanish or communicate with while in school.

Academically, she recalls the classroom was organized by abilities. As she remembers 1-6 meant the student was in the slow group and 1-1 meant he or she was in the fast group. Rosario rose to be in 3-1 and 4-1. By the time she took the state test, she scored in the advanced level and was offered an opportunity to attend another school with a gifted program where she was labeled “proficient” in English and placed in the “smart” classroom. She fondly recalls a fourth grade teacher whom she remembers dearly because she was so “kind.” Rosario was responsible for dropping off her little brother in his classroom and was often late to class as she arrived huffing and puffing out of breath to the classroom. The teacher understood that she was a child with adult responsibilities so she didn’t take recess away from her, even though she was late to class almost every day. This simple act of understanding may likely have changed Rosario’s educational trajectory, since the teacher could have invoked disciplinary action for the tardiness, that when compounded, could have had very negative consequences for her.

By the time Rosario finished sixth grade, her parents decided that they didn’t want them growing up in that environment of drug and gang infestation, so they decided to send them back to the Dominican Republic to live with relatives. After a year, they decided to send them to a boarding school in another town where children from their
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Rosario describes the boarding school experience as one where she felt “special.” Mostly, she remembers that the academic work was very rigorous but, more than anything else, she was allowed to be a child there: she was not responsible for taking care of her little brother. She credits her religious background as a strong element in her life that has always kept her family values intact. She finished high school at the boarding school and felt that she was encouraged to bloom at that school and set up to be successful in anything she wanted to do in life.

After finishing high school in the Dominican Republic, she got a scholarship to attend an Adventist college in South Lancaster, a suburb of Massachusetts. However, the isolation she felt there after having grown up in a school where she knew everyone and everyone knew her was unbearable, and she went back to the Dominican Republic. A group of friends was going to the Adventist College in Costa Rica, and she went along. She didn’t finish college there; she went to another Adventist College in Puerto Rico. After graduating from college, she returned to the Dominican Republic and worked at two different American schools where the curriculum was in English. She married a Dominican young man in the Dominican Republic.

After two years, she and her husband moved back to New York, and she worked in an elementary school in the South Bronx where the students were primarily African Americans, Latinos and others from the Caribbean Islands. She recalls that experience
being very difficult for many reasons. For one, she taught sixth graders, and that was not within her experience, as she had taught kindergarten for two years up to that point in her career. She felt like she was learning English along with the students, as her only exposure to English had been in elementary school and after that her education was in Spanish. The school in the South Bronx was in turmoil, and the administration at the time had very low expectations for the students. Because of her extraordinary job as a middle school teacher for two years, she was asked if she wanted to become the principal of the school. She accepted the challenge, which came at the same time she was pregnant with her first child and trying to figure out many things in her own life. As she recalls that time, she wishes she had not been so ambitious: taking on two major challenges simultaneously, a newborn and an underperforming school. She had no background in how to turn around a school or even administrative experience in general. However, she used her common sense, knowledge recently acquired through her masters in Administration and Supervision, and her deep passion for providing quality education to all children, coupled with what she knew about the environment she grew up in at the boarding school. She immediately changed the environment to set up high expectations and structures for the parents and students. She felt supported by the School Board and worked hard to turn a vision for the school into a reality for the students. She was able to bring the school out of financial ruins and academic demise. Within a few years, the school had a waiting list for students wanting to enroll.

From New York, she was offered a headmaster position in Miami, in a K-12 Adventist Academy where she worked for several years making similar changes. Opportunity knocked at her door once again, when she was offered a Title I regional
supervisor job in Puerto Rico to work with the non-public schools. Later, she returned to Massachusetts to enroll in a Masters program at Harvard. After completing her Masters, she had an opportunity in Boston to start two new schools, which received a number of recognitions for their academic programs and student performance. As a result of her reputation, she was offered a job in a county in Georgia where the lowest performing school had a large Latino population. Once again, she took an elementary school with very low academic achievement, and in five years the school’s parental involvement and student performance changed so much that the school won many accolades for their high performance, becoming a 90-90-90 school (which means that 90% or more of the students are minority, 90% are receiving free or reduced lunch, and 90% are performing on grade level).

However, it was in this Georgia school system where Rosario saw the ugly face of racial politics come to play out when her school’s scores were questioned because the performance scores had been so high. The school went from being number 63 to being the number one ranking school even though most of the children were African American and Latinos, and the school’s poverty level was at 99%.

She considers the politics of underachievement of Latinos to be the most contentious professional endeavor she has encountered in the South. Rosario now works in a predominantly Latino community in San Francisco, California, where she is thriving while setting up structures where Latino children can be successful.

In thinking about her successful experiences in education, she credits her parents for their strong support, but mostly she credits her religious upbringing where she learned what success feels like and looks like for children and parents of scarce means.
**Portrait # 4 (Deyanira)**

Deyanira describes her upbringing in the Dominican Republic as a privileged childhood, but typical of middle class families, where she attended very good private schools and developed strong academic skills. She enjoyed a healthy balance of after school activities and lots of cousins to play with when at home, coming from a close-knit extended family with a shared family courtyard. She describes those years as a “worry-free childhood.” Her father had his own private practice as an engineer and was a popular calculus teacher at the university when she was growing up. However, he passed away when she was eleven years old. Still, her circumstances didn’t change dramatically because her father had an extensive family and her paternal family helped her mom to raise Deyanira and her two brothers. As Deyanira recalls, her mother’s family lived in New York City, and they had family friends who lived in Boston and Miami whom they kept in touch with on a regular basis. Deyanira’s mother was the only one of her siblings who after high school went back to the Dominican Republic to marry Deyanira’s father. Her mother worked as the General Secretary of the Red Cross in the Dominican Republic for twenty years. Although her mother worked outside of the home, up to the time when Deyanira’s father passed away, they didn’t see their mother as the strong component to their tightly knit paternal family that she really was. Instead, the center of their world was their father who was charismatic, successful, and well-liked by society. After her father’s death, she continued living among her paternal family unit and didn’t notice significant changes in her stable lifestyle. By the time Deyanira was a senior in high school, she was an outstanding student and had applied for and was awarded an exchange student opportunity in the U.S.
When she arrived in Nevada, Missouri, to meet her new parents for one year, she was exhausted from listening to English the entire trip and not being able to respond. She remembers needing lots of naps to rest her brain from the exhaustion of being immersed in a different language all day long, despite the fact that she had studied English back home prior to her exchange program. She had reached a conversational level at the university program she attended in the Dominican Republic. However, it seemed like now she could hardly understand anything anyone was saying to her. Nonetheless, she describes her experience in Nevada as one full of both linguistic and cultural challenges, but at the same time one filled with wonderful memories as a foreign exchange student. She lived with a well-educated Anglo family that treated her like their own child. She was treated like an ambassador of her country at school, and as a result, she was automatically part of the student council and quickly engaged in many after school activities. She even became president of the Spanish club, which she reports gave her a sense of pride and self-respect. Her American sister, Laura, acted much like her “cultural broker” when negotiating language and cultural exchanges with her peers and teachers. Life as an exchange student went as predicted, and Deyanira went back to the Dominican Republic after her one year of study abroad. Deyanira eventually married to a Dominican young man and had three children.

It wasn’t until years later that Deyanira had the opportunity to experience life in the United States as a graduate student. She applied for and was granted a Master’s scholarship at a university in New Jersey. Her family moved to the U.S. with her. She encountered more problems this time than when she was an exchange student in high school. This time she didn’t have anyone to help her navigate and negotiate the system,
so she found herself having to learn what was expected here at the university. Luckily for her, she was in a scholarship program which required her to teach some Spanish courses as part of her graduate scholarship. There she met a Cuban professor who took her under her wing and mentored her through the graduate experience. Having family in New Jersey and looking at the opportunities for her children, she and her husband decided to stay in the United States. She divorced after a couple of years and relocated as a single mother with her three children to Georgia, because she had been told that there were many job opportunities there, and her brother had relocated there as well. She had some very unpleasant experiences teaching in the public school system in New Jersey and decided that she wanted nothing to do with teaching. However, when enrolling her children in school in one of the Atlanta metropolitan area school systems, she was encouraged to apply because she was bilingual, and they needed bilingual personnel in the school system. Not having a job, she applied and soon began to work as an ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) teacher in that school system. Today Deyanira is responsible for making system decisions for how English Language Learners will be serviced in the district. She finds, despite the many challenges of working in a system where Latinos (particularly from Mexico) are thought to be uneducated, she is able to build bridges for these students by setting up programs and structures where “cultural and linguistic brokering” are part of the many support systems she has set up for the many families from many different countries that relocate to this system looking for a better quality of life.
Emergent Themes

Various recurring themes emerged from the life stories of the participants which help explain their ability to “do school” and to eventually become successful educators themselves. These include, but are not limited to, the strength of the family unit where each woman was supported by her immediate and extended family to reach both her own and her family’s goals for her. A part of this experience was the constant reminder and expectation that they needed to do better than their parents in order to have a better life and indeed be a better version of their parents. For three of the women, their mothers were the drivers of their aspirations and the person in their lives who helped them reach for something different and something bigger than they might have otherwise. Their mothers were the constants, the stability, even when they were away from the home working long days. Although at times this ambition was framed around a lack of independence or fear of being controlled by someone else (a man), the message was one of “be strong, be skilled, be educated and be independent, not a victim.”

Often bilingual students operate as cultural and linguistic brokers for their families, as was the case with these four women, but also, they had those who were brokers for them as well. They also had mentors and other adults who guided them at critical, often vulnerable junctures in their lives, and who saw potential in them. This mentorship is something the women describe as an important part of their own professional lives—helping others to be successful in the way they were helped by high expectations, support structures, rigorous and demanding curriculum, and the development of strong skills of many kinds.
Importantly, these women had exposure to other ways of life beyond their own communities and could see for themselves multiple cultures and ways of operating in the world. They were able to observe how others negotiated meaning across various contexts, and they credit this knowledge with helping them navigate multiple worlds, languages, cultures and communities. Certainly, the women were smart, capable and full of potential. They resisted when told they could not achieve or have something and sought instead to achieve and succeed. Part of what we learn from these women’s stories is the importance of exposure to the dominant cultures in society in a way that mitigates against assimilationist pressures that often result in subtractive experiences, including language, and schooling more generally. Participants in this study learned about values, discourse patterns, educational expectations and ways of being through various means, including living with a family, having relatives abroad, and having mentors and cultural brokers.

Finally, religion played a pivotal role in the lives of the women. In some cases it opened doors for them both figuratively and literally. In other cases, it was a source of strength and inspiration along their often arduous educational and life paths, and it bonded them with their families and communities, as did language in many ways. Church was even a place for academic support and to acquire and practice leadership skills.

These themes are woven throughout and across the life stories of the participants whose stories exemplify various types of capital, as described in detail in the following section. Here I am drawing on Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework and “unpacking” various types of cultural wealth or capital as described by the participants in order to understand the role these assets played in their lives, in particular in helping them to “do school.”
Types of Capital

Aspiration Capital

Ana didn’t display high aspirations early on in her education. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t until much later in life that she became interested in teaching as a result of the empowerment she felt in working with children in an after-school program. She felt good working with children and felt successful in that environment after having tried other different endeavors in her life. She was a married adult when she realized that she really had a great desire to become a teacher. While in high school, Ana didn’t see the need for further education beyond a high school diploma. She explains, “I really didn’t have an idea so I took liberal arts classes because I thought...you know...I thought having the diploma was the most important thing not necessarily having a career at the time...so I just took liberal arts classes, which was a waste of time.”

Ana wasn’t interested in school, as she says, because she often felt disconnected and confused about what was going on in her life. She felt that the teacher’s lack of interest in her academic success was a determining factor in her lack of interest.

I just wasn’t interested. The teachers weren’t interested in me. I wasn’t interested in school, and I tried to go back to the Dominican Republic because that’s what I thought I wanted because I didn’t like New York and so…my confusion at that age and my lack of—I actually think that all throughout my life—I was kind of ADHD, but I really wasn’t—I couldn’t sit still, I couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t focus and maybe I could have, but I just couldn’t focus. And I didn’t know at the
time but I can look back and say that I was very unsteady. I was always getting into trouble with my parents and stuff and I was just like, I gotta get out of here.

Ana’s disposition towards the importance of schooling came later on in life after her positive experience with working with young children in an after-school program in the Dominican Republic. It was while working with children that she realized what she wanted to do with her life.

I got a job at one of the American schools in the Dominican Republic when I met David (pseudonym for husband) and I loved...the interaction with the kids and passing on the knowledge that I had of the English language, and it made me realized that I worked really hard, that even though I never had formal education, experience in terms of college or whatever, that if I worked hard enough I could do a good job teaching and I was very grateful for that. And so that’s when I got the bug that I wanted to go back to school. And I put it off and I think it was in God’s plan that I would be a teacher and so when I got married and had kids I said, I have to give my kids more.

Later on when Ana relocated to Georgia with her husband, David and her children, she volunteered at her children’s elementary school where again she felt the pride in working in helping children who, like her at one time, did not speak English. The principal of that elementary school, where Ana now works as a kindergarten teacher, approached her and asked her if she wanted to work at the school as a paraprofessional. The principal had noted her bilingual abilities as an asset to help bridge the communication gap between teachers and parents. Ana describes the process:
…well, when my boys went to school, I had to be involved in their education because I believed that...I wanted to be more involved than my parents were… I remember when the boys started school I wanted to be involved somehow so I said, “I speak perfect English and Spanish” and so she passed that on to the principal who one day called in the hallway and said, “oh, come by, and we can talk about you being involved” and that started the whole ball rolling and… she always said to me; “whenever you finish you have a job with me.” And I got some awards for helping her school, and she was always singing my praises, and so she really encouraged me...

Thus, this principle became a cultural broker for Ana, helping her acquire aspirational capital.

On the other hand, Rosarios’ parents were teachers, albeit in a rural area in the Dominican Republic, so they had great expectations for their daughter to use education as vehicle to advance in life beyond where they were. Rosario explains how there was never a question in her mind that she would go to college: “So even though you were in a rural area you knew early on that you were expected to go to college even though most kids in your area didn’t know anything about college.” Later on in life Rosario encountered a motivational speaker who spoke to her inner core:

…at my sister’s high school graduation, the guest speaker was Samuel Betances. He shared his stories and how he had been a high school dropout and how he found a mentor and he ended up graduating with his doctorate degree from Harvard. And that was the seed of inspiration for me, I said, “well if he was able to do that, you know... one day…” that was the seed that was planted in my heart,
that one day I wanted to go (Harvard) and so the time came ten years later and I
applied and I got into the program.

Rosario also recalls her mother’s constant reminder as to why getting an education was
critical.

My mother wanted us to get an education so that we did not have to tolerate any
kind of abuse from a man. So she was like, “you need to become educated so you
don’t have to tolerate any kind of abuse from a man. You need to become
educated so you can support your family. If you have an abusive man you don’t
have to stand for it, you don’t have to put up with it!” And you know that was
very big on her list.

Rosario’s mother wanted to prevent her daughter from being trapped in an abusive
marriage or a relationship by using education as the vehicle for emancipation.

My mother had that clear vision that…my father wanted us to study, yes he did
but my mother was the driver. She would say, “no they’re not staying here! They
need to go to the boarding school!” then when we were in that school, my father
was the one who made the change into the Adventist school but my mother, she
would be the one to make the final decision.

Thus, Rosario’s mother set high expectations for her children’s education.

In somewhat the same way, Carmen’s mother seemed to use her struggle to make
it in the United States as a call for her daughters to do better for themselves. Carmen
refers to her mother’s recurring conversation about the need to become independent
financially in order not to have to depend on a man.
I didn’t hear conversations about college, I heard conversations about graduating and going to work and you know getting a job where you could depend on yourself and you didn’t have to depend on a man, which I found interesting…so that was the conversation, you see me work in a factory (speaking about her mom), you see the long hours I work, you don’t want this kind of life, you don’t want to struggle like I do, so that was the conversation but it was not, you need to go to college cause you need to do better, and at the time if you think about it back in the time if you think about it back in ’77 that was huge, I mean if you got a high school diploma, there were very few people I would say, Hispanics that were even aspiring to go to college in the United States, so graduating from high school so you can get a job and you can take care of yourself and provide for yourself and not have to struggle was the conversation.

Carmen’s mother clearly saw the parallel between education and opportunities to be self-sufficient. Carmen also remembers her mother singling her out in some subtle ways among her siblings.

I think just where she saw, when the conversation about colleges and going to visit and all of that, I think she saw that I was sort of driven and motivated and that I was aspiring to do things differently, I was very self-sufficient and I wasn’t the oldest but I sort of took the lead with running the households and running errands and taking care of things.

Carmen talks about the role her counselor had in opening up her eyes to other possibilities. Her high school counselor exposed her to new places, ideas and how others
lived; she showed them a different way from how they lived by taking them on field trip to the city and to college visits outside of New York.

…I don’t know (speaking about her counselor) how she treated other kids but she had a group that I think she just made it her mission that these group of kids, for whatever reason “I’m going to make sure that they go to college” because I’m pretty sure that everybody in the college bound program didn’t have the same needs and maybe whether she knew the support wasn’t at home, I’m not sure, but it was just a group of us I would say…I don’t know if it was part of her job, to be honest, I just think she did a lot of that on her own for whatever reason…I remember Mrs. Wearing (counselor’s name) took us on field trip to visit colleges and…filling out application, helping us identify scholarships, financial aid, so it’s a lot of support…

It was evident that Carmen had a solid support system at school, which aided in her ability to aspire to do better through education as she saw a world of possibilities outside of her neighborhood and family.

Deyanira, unlike the other participants, knew that education was important from her first memories of her household as her father was a prominent engineer and architect and professor at the University of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. She remembers wanting to be like her dad as he was jovial and very well-liked. She considers herself a “pretty resilient” person and very “inquisitive” and interested in achievement. She has always liked school and the competitive nature of studying and doing well; thus, she had no doubts that she would go to college and become a professional in her life.
Deyanira and Rosario both had parents who were educators. It was expected they would go to college; however, in the case of Rosario, it was her mother’s promise that an education would mean she would never have to put up with abuse from a man that was an additional aspiration factor. She also had a critical incident in which she was inspired by the commencement speaker at her sister’s graduation, where the idea of one day attending Harvard first entered her consciousness. In the case of Carmen, it was also her mother’s voice telling her to do better, and like Rosario, reminding her that an education would mean never having to depend on a man. However, unlike Deyanira and Rosario, Carmen did not have parents who were educators, but benefitted greatly from the help of a school counselor whose support was critical to navigating the world of college and helped with applications, scholarships, and college visits. Ana, on the other hand, had no aspirations in high school as she felt disoriented and confused about what to do after high school. Ana didn’t have the emotional or the academic support in high school like Carmen, Rosario and Deyanira did. However, Ana did develop aspirations to become an educator later on in life as she experienced success working with small children in an after school program.

In the lives of the four participants, education was the door that led to opportunities to become independent. Both Rosario and Carmen had their mother’s constant reminder that education was the entrance into a world where they could be liberated from having to depend on a man financially to have a better life and at the same time not work so hard in order to make a living. While Ana had aspirations and reminders that education was important, she didn’t have the same type of academic support that the others seem to benefit form so her journey into post high school educations seemed to
take longer or at least a different pathway. The NWLC & MALDEF (2009) report found that while 98% of Latinas surveyed reported high aspirations to obtain an education and become a professional although very few see it as an achievable goal. In fact, one-third of the girls surveyed do not expect to achieve their educational goals. The report cites a number of reasons as to why they do not see their aspirations, hopes and dreams becoming a reality. Some of these reasons include limited English, high rate of pregnancy among Latina teenagers, lack of parental involvement, immigration status, and poverty. At least two of the participants’ lived experiences seem to resonate with similar characteristics as those outlined by this report and their hopes and dreams did become a reality despite all the hurdles mentioned above. One of the greatest hurdles young high school Latinas report for their inability to make their hopes and dreams come true is a lack of financial resources. Carmen’s journey seems to shed some light as to what helped her achieve her goals and that was not only the human support of her counselor at school, and rigorous academic expectations, but more importantly the financial aid she received to be able to go outside of the immediate neighborhood and obtain an education.

**Linguistic Capital**

Ana definitely harnessed her ability to speak Spanish throughout her life and continues to find that capability a strength that has opened doors for her both here in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. She recalls her parents encouraging her to read the Spanish newspaper even though she had no formal education in Spanish until she went to college in the Dominican Republic. There she found that she had a good ability to speak Spanish and read, but when it came to reading complex texts at a college level, it
was just as difficult and frustrating as learning English had been for her in the United States, even though the first language she learned to read in was English.

I watched a lot of TV and I learned a lot about that (current events). However, they (parents) did have newspapers and they always insisted that we needed to speak Spanish. They didn’t want us to not learn Spanish. They wanted us to learn English but also to learn Spanish; to keep our Spanish culture and roots and so they always insisted that we read Spanish and so I always remember reading the newspaper, just reading it to myself.

Ana shares her thoughts on becoming bilingual. Becoming bilingual was definitely an asset to her development academically, but it was also a source of struggle in both languages as at times she felt frustrated by not being academically proficient in either language. Ana’s language frustration is part of the process a second language learner experiences. Cummins (1979) refers to this stage of language acquisition as the BICS stage which refers to the conversational surface skills of first learning a second language.

Ana recognized that her CALP or academic literacy development was not developed because when she interacted with academic text in either language, it was a hardship in both English and Spanish until she gained a solid understanding of her own native language.

I’ve been bilingual in terms of the spoken language, but after I went to the D.R. and really learned Spanish and really learned how to write Spanish…that’s when I became really bilingual because I could write perfectly well both ways…I could read Spanish too…I used to read the newspaper because I remember being very interested in what was going on in D.R. which was very unusual for kids my age.
to be interested in politics and all this stuff that was going on so I used to read
that, but I went to school, the text was very different in Spanish so I had to re-read
and re-read and try to—you know—I had to get a lot of tutoring help too in order
to pass the classes.

Although her struggle was difficult, Ana has attained linguistic capital by improving her
use of both Spanish and her English.

Carmen also recalls living in two worlds: at home in Spanish and at school in
English. The duality of language and culture is documented in her recollection, but it
appears that it is exactly that duality which gave her stronger skills in being able to
navigate social institutions for her household.

I constantly read. Well first of all up to fifth grade when I came to the United
States , it was totally Spanish, wasn’t English and Spanish…up until middle
school it was primarily Spanish, then it became both because I spoke English at
school, when I went home it was only Spanish and then all the way through my
high school years it was the same thing English at school and Spanish when I
went home… I took Spanish classes, I even took Spanish class in
college… (speaking about college) they had a Hispanic student association (in
Ohio) that I was involved in…

Similarly, Rosario had plenty of opportunity to appreciate and nurture her
knowledge of both her native language at the same time she learned the language of
school in the United States. She remembers her father teaching her how to read in
Spanish through the Bible stories. She says, “Exactly, Bible stories. So that’s how I
learned to read Spanish at a very young age. So when I was in second grade I was already reading Spanish as well.”

Rosario was educated in both languages. She studied in English while living in the U.S. up to sixth grade and then during middle school and high school she studied in Spanish in the DR. She recounts that he father was an avid reader and he usually spent time talking to the children about what he read and discussing these ideas. She states, “A lot of times my father, he liked to read a lot, and even now he reads two or three newspapers a day and goes online, and he would read the papers and say ‘oh! You know’ this and this and bring up topics of conversation.” Rosario noticed that as she became more proficient or literate in Spanish, her English improved.

Well, I think when I left after you know…being in school for five years here; kindergarten through fifth grade, I had gotten the language, I had become...well I wouldn’t say proficient, but I had enough language that I maintained it through the years. And then, you know, coming in the summer and coming in December and so forth I had enough of that I didn’t forget it. And what I did was, as my Spanish vocabulary expanded, I increased…you know, I brought those words into my English.

Thus, Rosario acquired linguistic capital simultaneously in both languages.

On the other hand, Deyanira’s linguistic capital was and continues to be very strong. She attended private schools in the Dominican Republic where she notes that the curriculum was “academically very challenging” and the “best” teachers were hired. She recalls that the first time she came to the United States as an exchange student, she was delighted to be asked to give presentations in Spanish about her country.
As a foreign exchange student, I was treated like an ambassador. I was elected president of the Spanish club; I was also invited to participate in many other school and community activities. Being the elected president of the Spanish club gave me a sense of pride and self-respect. I had many opportunities to speak in my language and speak about my native country and my culture. The Spanish club sponsor and student members were sincerely interested in what I had to say. They asked me a lot of questions and wanted me to speak Spanish to them.

She also recalls how well she performed in her English class even though she was placed in a sophomore English class because of her lack of English. She was a senior but attended English class with sophomores. She had a strong background of the Spanish language, and her knowledge of grammar helped her shine in that class where she felt quite successful.

The curriculum was mainly focused on grammar in that subject. I couldn’t speak, but I could understand the concepts, and I could do my written class work and homework assignments with very little difficulty… He (teacher) followed the lines of the book one by one going over each chapter and grammar exercise – direct object, indirect object, prepositional phrases, verb tenses – all these terms were not so unfamiliar to me. After all, Spanish grammar is not all that different, and I knew grammar in Spanish.

Deyanira’s love of language learning is evident throughout the interviews. She studied French as a third language and majored in Applied Linguistics and translation in her college program in the Dominican Republic after having completed her senior year as an exchange student in Nevada.
Linguistic competence in two or more languages, as has been documented by many researchers (Cummins, 2009; Goldenberg, 2008; Calderón, 2007; García, 2005; & Hakuta, 2000) as a complex process, and honoring one’s native language is of critical importance to being able to acquire higher levels of second language proficiency or what Cummins refers to as the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level. The women in this study found that knowledge of their native language helped them gain a better understanding of how the English language works and helped them accelerate their English language learning, which is consistent with the research on second language acquisition.

**Familial Capital**

Ana credits her parents for setting expectations at home even though they were working and not available to supervise for long periods of time.

They (parents) were never there to watch, but we were told that we had to do our homework, and my sister had to make sure that we got our homework done, and although she never did really follow through with it, she (older sister) was in charge. My mother was a strong disciplinarian, and we had to be honest. The Ten Commandments were big time in our living room. She (mother) had them everywhere. We were scared to death that we shouldn’t do something but anyway…so I was scared of my parents. We never had a friend relationship. I could never go to her and talk about my problems…she was the mom, and he was the dad, and they were good parents, but I couldn’t talk to them about my problems…but they really valued honesty and integrity…in the neighborhood we were respected.
Ana talks about the role of religion in their upbringing:

Well, just because they were gone most of the time, working. We knew the religion, we had limits. But they had to go to work. We had keys to the apartment, and when we came home we were alone for a lot of time…everybody had a chore, and we had to complete the chore, and they wanted us to have spending money, so we had to work a lot to have that money.

Ana speaks about her parental influence:

She (mother) had spunk, a flame, and she always knew that she wanted to make it better for us. So she went back to school and became a beautician and she owned a beauty shop. She became one of the best in the neighborhood in Washington Heights. She made the most money, so she had the most to say on where the money was spent…they (parents) wanted a better life for their kids and didn’t conform to the status quo and a lot of people in the neighborhood were on welfare and they said never. We will never have to depend on somebody else for our well being. They were, I guess, more self-motivated to give us a better life and to give us a good example in terms of…nothing in life is free…you have to work hard for it. And we don’t want you to do that…my father paid everything in cash, and he was incredible because he was never late with payment so in that sense he taught us responsibility…a large majority of Dominicans have family at the center of their existence. We value ourselves and the family. We would do anything for our family. If my family had to come here and stay with me for a whole two years I would not have a problem with that.
Carmen’s mother also instilled in her a sense of responsibility for helping others in need. Her family had been helped when they came to United States and stayed with a friend until they could get their own apartment even though there were seven people in a two-bedroom apartment. Carman described how this experience influenced her:

I think I’ve always been positive. One of the things that I think has been instilled when you talk about values that I saw my mother do was this willingness to help others that are in need, and that’s something that I’ve carried with me and is what I still do in situations, I think that has helped me be sympathetic and empathetic, the determination, I think I have internal motivation to always do better and I set really high standards for myself, I think that has helped me.

In a similar way, Rosarios’ mother was very clear on her goals for her children. It seemed as if she sacrificed in working long hours in a factory so she could make sure her children would focus on their schooling.

…my mother’s mind set was that she didn’t want to see us working in McDonalds’ or Burger King…It was almost like selling drugs on the corner, and she says “no you need to go to college! You need to get an education because I couldn’t stand to see you working at McDonald’s,” and she also worked to help support me.

Therefore, this familial capital also played a part in Rosario’s aspirational support.

In addition, Deyanira had a strong family unit consisting of not only her immediate brothers and parents, but she lived in very close proximity to aunts, uncles and many cousins in the Dominican Republic who supported her endeavors to travel. She also counted on family members who lived in the United States so her attempt to travel as an
exchange student in high school, and later when she earned a scholarship to complete a Master’s program was within the norms of her circle of family members and friends. When a potentially life-changing crisis occurred, she recalls how her strong family ties made it seem like nothing had changed in her life: “My father passed away when I was eleven, and my mother, with the moral support of a very extensive paternal family, raised my two bothers and me.” The familial capital that Deyanira experienced allowed her to continue on her successful trajectory.

Parental involvement has been documented (Gonzalez et al., 2005) extensively to be a determining factor in helping students be successful in schools. However, parental involvement, as in the case of these participants, was not the traditional incorporation of parents in school events or going to the school to advocate for their children. As a matter of fact, none of these participants remembers seeing either parent participate in a parent-teacher conference or any school-related affair. Nonetheless, the importance of setting up structures for these students to take responsibility for their schooling was evident. Thus, it would appear that understanding the student’s circumstances and their background would help educators create bridges of support for the students (Nieto, 2000).

Social Capital

For Ana, the church played a big role in building a sense of place in the community. The church activities provided opportunities for developing leadership skills. Yosso’s (2005) framework of social capital supports the notion of a church as a community resource that can provide members with opportunities to develop leadership skills, as was the case with Ana and Rosario. The church also provided both Ana and
Rosario with various layers of emotional and academic support. Ana described her church experience in the following way:

My parents were church-going people in the D.R. We used to go to church every Sunday, Catholic Church. I was an “hija de Maria,” which was a girls’ program at the church where you had lots of activities. We had Sunday School, we had to dress up in white every Sunday and go and read the Bible, and we used to do a lot of community service projects around the area and it was more like mentoring program for girls and my brothers were “monaguillos,” who were ushers and helpers at the church, and we used to clean the community and do a lot of tutoring for kids, reading to kids so we used to go every Sunday to church and we were die-hard Catholics…we were very afraid of God because he was like a just…he wasn’t my friend…he (God) was something to be feared.

Ana explains how the church activities helped her with her character development. She developed a sense of self by being involved in helping others.

…I was shy in my youth, but then I got into the church, and it really did build my confidence, and I was kind and caring to people, and I was always interested in people and talking to people and helping people. So I was very popular. I was never loose with the boys, and so I was kind of like a goody two shoes. And the gang thing, wasn’t really, we were just a group of girls that dressed alike.

Likewise, Rosarios’ family had strong ties to their religious family, which has been a source of support throughout their lives.

Well, religion has really been the essence of our family. It’s been very key and central to everything we do; where we live, where we go to school, our
careers...everything has been influenced by our religion and so that's how I ended up going to this school in Bonao (boarding school in the Dominican Republic)...well once you belong to a church and you’ve been there...these are the people you see on a weekly basis. You see them twice a week and you’re sick they’re the ones that come and visit you and if are happy or celebrating, they’re the ones you want to celebrate with because a lot of times your physical families fall away from you. And so they’re there for you emotionally, spiritually.

Thus, the church served as a conduit for social capital for both of these participants.

On the other hand, Carmen and Deyanira received similar support from school personnel, which provided them with opportunities to navigate through the educational system, a finding echoed in the work of Yosso, (2005). Carmen recalls her counselor’s ability to build relationships with her students and credits her counselor for introducing her to other possibilities. She remembers,” …I think that it’s about relationships, and this counselor knew how to develop relationships with her students no matter who they were.”

Again in college, Carmen remembers a professor who took an interest in her success. Carmen did her student teaching in the school where his wife was an elementary principal.

…in college I remember Dr. Wilson. He was in the college of education, so Dr. Wilson was one who was a great mentor who encouraged me and supported me...he was just a great person and stayed in touch with me until he died, so he would write me letters and find out how I was doing and wanted to know what I
was doing, so he was really great and a great writer...he would write me these letters that were just very inspiring.

In addition, Deyanira had access to social capital not only in the circle in which she grew up as a middle class child in the Dominican Republic, but when she first came as an exchange student, her sponsoring family provided her with an extensive connection to how things were done here in the United States. She recalls fondly how her “American sister” always came to her rescue in difficult school situations. She remembers, “Laura (her American sister) was always around to rescue me from embarrassing situations. She was my cultural broker.”

Again when Deyanira returned to the United States, many years later, for a second opportunity with a scholarship to earn a Master’s degree, she recalls how a professor rescued her.

When I came to New Jersey, I was a graduate assistant. And I was in the Spanish-speaking program, and I had to put some hours there because it came with the scholarship. There I had a great mentor, and her name is Angela Lopez, and she’s from Cuba, and she helped me a lot to understand the system because she came from Cuba when she was nine years of age as part of a group of children in something called the Peter Pan Project. She was my mentor, and she helped me make it through. In addition to her, the other people in the department had a very special interest in helping those graduate students [who were] scholarship recipients.

Social capital establishes that it is exactly this type of human support system described by Deyanira and Carmen which has been found to help immigrants jump over the hurdles of
limited English and poverty and the many other factors associated with being an immigrant (Yosso, 2005).

**Navigational Capital**

While Ana doesn’t have too many pleasant memories of her earlier schooling experiences in the United States, she does recall looking up to the girls who were successful in school while she was in high school. She states, “…and there were some girls in high school that I looked up to because they were so successful. They were at the top of the class. They did really good work; they studied and never got in trouble.” However, she didn’t have the navigational skills or the support mechanism to find out why those girls were doing well and how she could learn from their experience. Ana didn’t have a counselor, like Carmen did, who guided her trajectory while in high school to ensure her success. Ana found success in the retail business in New York after high school where she was able to use her people skills successfully. However, throughout her K-12 schooling experience, the interview data reveal no interaction with social institutions beyond the school world and the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, Rosario remembers the excitement of planning to go to college outside of the Dominican Republic at her boarding school. Rosario attended a religious school which set high expectations and offered a support system for the students to be able to gain access to educational institutions after high school. She states:

> Well, in that environment it was just like the next thing that everybody—it was almost a given, you know—everybody would just start talking, and even when you started high school, you were always having conversations…”oh, where do you want to go to college? Do you want to go to Puerto Rico? You know to
which of the Adventist school? And usually most of us stayed—many of us stayed within the Adventist systems. I remember immediately when I was a junior, we were already sending out for our applications and looking for things and all the professors would be talking to us—so where are you going? So what are you going to do?

Rosario compares her educational experience in the Adventist school system to her public education experience in the United States

Well, I think that the boarding school compared to a public school was like apples and oranges because you know—when we lived in the Bronx, we lived in a very deprived area, and our school was reflective of that environment, and the children that—and the families that lived around there. But when we went back to the Dominican Republic and we went to Santiago, we went to a very good school, and the children who came and boarded in that school were middle class—came from upper middle class families, so it was a very different environment. And so... the education, the children and the families that we were relating to were totally different and the environment was different and the expectation—you know, academic expectations—and then we were in—we were also surrounded by a family; my grandparents lived in the city. So like every other weekend we were able to go and...

Rosario makes a connection to the high expectations in the private Adventist school to the expectation of the more impoverished public school she attended in elementary school in the Bronx in New York.
Similarly, Deyanira had access to many educational institutions both here in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. She attended private schools in the Dominican Republic where she says that the students who graduate from the private schools in the Dominican Republic demonstrate high levels of academic competence in the United States schools in spite of language barriers.

Deyanira recalls her second time coming to study in the United States. Again she came to the University in New Jersey as a result of a scholarship program she applied to while in a Master's program in the Dominican Republic.

I came to the U.S. to what used to be called Caine College, and I came with a scholarship that I got through the university that I was attending in the D.R. so I came with a Master's scholarship and to do a Master's in Instruction and Curriculum for ESOL. I completed that Masters in 1992. Then when in Georgia, I attended the University of Georgia, and I added classes to complete a leadership certification program from the University of Georgia.

Thus, Deyanira’s navigational capital allowed her to acquire an advanced academic degree.

The trajectory for Carmen, Rosario and Deyanira was similar in that they were able to attend educational institutions, whether here in the United States or in the Dominican Republic, which facilitated access to institutions of education beyond high school and set the expectation that this was a possibility for each individual. Clearly, this was not the case for Ana who attended a high school in Washington Heights in New York, where the expectations were low and academic rigor and support were not evident. Yosso’s (2005) framework supports the notion that students who have access to
navigational structures and support are able to navigate higher learning institutions even though their parents were unable to help them find their way to universities or other institutions of learning after high school.

**Resistant Capital**

All of the participants had to resist negative stereotypes and other barriers and to display a high degree of motivation in order to be successful in learning to “do school.” Ana theorizes about the roots of her motivation to be successful in the United States.

I think we have spunk (meaning Dominicans). I think we have an innate motivation. We struggled a lot as a nation to prove ourselves, and I think a lot of it has to do with that same tenacity that my mom showed that motivates me and a lot of Dominicans because we had to work so hard to prove ourselves. And I understand a lot of minorities had to go through the same thing, but I see so much more desire—the struggle is so recent that it’s in our minds, where as some other cultures had had—it’s so much in the past.

Ana further explains her beliefs about being able to make it in America. She doesn’t believe that success requires one to be of any race or class.

The person that wants to make it in life has to do certain things to get there—and the road to getting there involves sacrificing something. So if you were to tell me that it’s a white value, and I’m adopting a white behavior to get there—no, it has nothing to do with being white—if you came to America and you wanted to go to college and make yourself professional, I wouldn’t see that as following the whites and doing what they do. It’s just part of the struggle.
It seems as if Ana’s words contradict her experience. Ana’s experience in school was not one where she received support to help her focus on college or a career after high school. However, Ana’s refusal to accept mediocrity for her life, led her to find a different pathway to get a college degree and become an educator.

Carmen, on the other hand, had very similar family circumstances as Ana except that her school experience was quite rigorous and supportive. Carmen speaks about an individual’s ability to make choices for her life:

I think it’s an inner choice. I think you look at life, and you look at how you are living, and you then make a choice in whether you want to live in that manner or you don’t. I also had the opportunity to visit friends’ homes, and so I knew where they lived in these townhouses, which is you know the brownstones, so I knew there was a difference with that kind of living—exposure, I think going to visit colleges, and there was a whole different world outside of your neighborhood and your school I think was a big difference. I don’t think my mom made a difference; I think my sisters made a choice with life. I think that they were limited in their thinking about life, and sometimes I wonder if it was about what was pushed in the Dominican Republic—you got married early and it was about being a housewife and taking care of your husband; I think that’s the cultural piece probably.

However, Rosario does think her mother influenced her motivation to do well in school. She explains:

Well, I think it’s internal. It’s that internal motivation and I—I think it’s not necessarily being satisfied with—or that quest of searching for more, doing better
in whatever career you take, that you become proficient—that you are in the top of whatever you decide to do. So that has been my internal drive, and it has been since childhood—“you are not going to get pregnant! You are not like them!” So it wasn’t like you have the potential, it was you’re not going to do that, you’re not going to be an embarrassment to the family by getting pregnant and having kids. And in that sense she would go through that motion. If there was a young man whom we heard got arrested or sent to jail she’d say to my brother, “you, that’s not going to be you! You need to be a righteous man; you need to be—you’re not going to be one those criminals selling drugs!” And she would take it on like that. But it was not the positive side; proactive like “I’m proud of you” — never, never, ever, EVER—but she never really took into account our effort—so there was, if you could say, if you could say negative encouragement, if that makes sense.

Nevertheless, this “negative encouragement” seemed to have fueled Rosario’s resistant capital.

Even though Deyanira experienced many difficulties in her educational experiences in the United States, she had a tremendous amount of support from the structures set up to accommodate her needs as a foreign exchange student and the second time around as a scholarship student. However, she has always been very assertive about her skills and capabilities, never questioning her ability to be able to obtain her educational goals. She remembers, “My Language Arts class (while in high school in the United States) was pretty boring, but my survival depended on learning English.” She
understood that her goal to learn English surpassed a teacher’s personality and she acted on it.

When Deyanira remembers her Economics teachers in high school, she is able to articulate the reasons for her ability to “do” school even though her English proficiency was not comparable to a native speaker at the time.

I consider myself pretty resilient; but I have to admit that I was a little scared of this teacher. I didn’t understand most of what was going on in the class. The readings were difficult, and my English vocabulary was very limited. As much as I tried to perform well, I was just sitting in the back of the class, going with the flow. But since learning takes place when students are exposed to some kind of teaching, I did learn a little about the U.S. economy and to pronounce and spell words like ‘government’…many times these comparative analyses helped me with my learning of English.

Deyanira’s strong understanding of the Spanish language and of the school world provided her with tools to be able to make sense of the subject matter even though the language of the classroom was incomprehensible. Resistance theory highlights an individual’s agency or will to challenge themselves to do whatever they need to overcome the hurdles impeding them from obtaining their goals (Yosso, 2005), and Deyanira’s story certainly gave proof of her determination to do well in school despite not being able to understand the English language.

These Dominican women all shared a wealth of aspiration, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital which helped them “do school” despite the fact that Spanish was the language of home and English was the language of school. All four
participants had access to all six types of capital outlined in the Community Cultural Wealth framework, albeit at different times in their trajectories and via different pathways.

**Critical Events That Contributed to Success**

**Community Cultural Wealth**

In examining the life trajectories of these four Dominican women, the common characteristics that emerge from the various individual interviews and focus interviews appear to fit within the Community Cultural Wealth framework across all six areas identified by Yosso (2005). While their life experiences have been quite different, within their own individual stories, they all exhibit evidence of possessing all six types of capital. They show evidence of linguistic capital and strong familial capital. With the exception of one of the participants (Ana), they all talked extensively about the social capital existing in the schools they attended. Ana, on the other hand, had very poor school experiences; this seems to have affected the choices she made after high school and how long it took her to obtain a college education and become a teacher. They all demonstrate evidence of the navigational capital early in their lives with the exception of Ana who didn’t become a teacher until later on in her life when she became a parent volunteer and the principal of the school encouraged her to get her teaching degree and offered to hire her if she did. This principal kept her promise by hiring Ana after she graduated from a college in Georgia.

These Dominican women appear to have a strong link in their ability to resist the status quo. They took advantage of every opportunity offered to them in order to improve their lives through education. Ana’s high school experience was less successful, and she
could not point to anyone who might have taken an interest in her educational journey. Her high school was plagued by gang activities and poor teachers and little guidance to do anything differently.

Rosario, on the other hand, had a very strong religious nucleus which her parents fully took advantage to support Rosario in her education trajectory. Carmen, while in the eighth grade, was chosen to attend a college bound high school program which provided a very rich academic, high expectations program. She received lots of support from her counselor and was exposed to colleges outside of New York and many experiences outside of their neighborhood where she noticed that there was a different way of living. Deyanira had the opportunity to attend a foreign exchange program and attended a high school where the expectations were very high and the support of living with an “American family” gave her an “in” into the American culture by having a sister who acted as her “cultural broker” in her role as sponsoring sister.

Three of the participants had strong high school experiences and all three went on to college right after high school. Ana, who did not have a strong high school experience, took other pathways before becoming an educator. She went to a community college in New York right after high school, but soon left to go back to the Dominican Republic where she felt she might be able to go to school and find more direction in her life. Two of the participants’ schooling was primarily in Spanish from high school to college and that didn’t seem to prevent them from becoming effective educators in English. It appears that the language in which one receives education is not as important as the type of education or academic support system provided. This is a key finding from this study and addresses the question asked within the educational community over the past many
decades related to the central issue surrounding bilingual education. Ana’s high school experience seems to have affected her trajectory to becoming an educator: the lack of academic structure in high school made that journey longer. Thus, it appears that the school environment did impact their outcomes in life. One major theme that seems to have affected all four participants is that they moved away from the big city of New York and left their neighborhoods and gained entrance into more middle class education opportunities where they were able find success. Even Ana, who took a different pathway to becoming a teacher, was only able to find success in a higher education institution when she moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where her bilingual skills were in demand due to the relatively recent influx of Latinos to the state at that time. All participants had a very strong family nucleus. Three of the participants found scholarships to support the cost of their education. Three of the participants had great exposure to outside institutions and other ways of living outside of their immediate neighborhoods while in high school. They experienced positive academically challenging high schools experiences where they felt supported to be successful. Ana, on the other hand, didn’t find this until she had an opportunity to experience great self satisfaction in working with children in a positive school environment.

All four participants expressed affirmation for the role their mothers played in making sure that they were successful. All four participants were also above average students. They enjoyed school and doing school life. All four participants have a very competitive edge to their personalities where they do not seem to conform to what everyone else is doing. In fact, they all have strong personalities with a need to do well.
They all seemed to take charge of their surroundings at home and in school from early on and took responsibility for themselves and even sometimes for their siblings.

**Commonalities and Variations in Their Life Stories**

**Bilingualism**

There are more commonalities to these women’s life stories than variations. All four participants developed strong bilingual skills and used their Spanish and English to help navigate the system often for their parents and their families. It was also evident that they relied on the knowledge of Spanish to make sense of the content areas that they did not fully comprehend, such as in the case of Deyanira when attending high school as an exchange student. Research (Cummins, 1979, Garcia, 2005; Genesee et al., 2005; Goldenberg, 2008) shows that there is a strong positive correlation between L1 (native language) and L2 (second language) proficiency, which means that development of the native language allows for easier access to the second language learning experience and higher levels of academic success for students. In some cases the participants were aware of this and leveraged their knowledge of the language of Spanish to learn academic English.

**Parental Support**

All four participants had strong parental figures who often expressed how important it was to get an education to better oneself. In the case of Deyanira, she had modeled for her by her parents what life was like for professionals. Even though her father passed away when she was only eleven, the memory of her father’s legacy seemed to inspire her to be like him. For the other three participants, the mother played a critical
role in helping them conceptualize a life of possibilities and independence by obtaining an education. Their mothers emphasized how education would emancipate them from having to endure an “abusive” man in their lives. They learned early on that taking care of themselves was the alternative to being in a subjugated place with a man ruling their lives. Itzigshon (2009) also found in his research with Dominican families in Rhode Island that these mothers found a sense of liberation in the United States and facilitated the assimilation process for their children more aptly than fathers. For many of the mothers, it was the first time they had worked outside the home. Often fathers return to the Dominican Republic due to their unwillingness or inability to adjust to a new culture where they do not feel that they are in control of their lives. The women stay and make a living and encourage their children to get an education as a vehicle to a better life. In a study conducted by Patricia Gándara (1995) with fifty Mexican men and women from varying professions, she found, among other factors, that mothers more than fathers, in particular, had a profound influence in the education of their sons and daughters. While these Mexican mothers, for the most part, had limited education, they instilled in their children a passion to do better for themselves by getting a good education, in the same way that Ana, Rosario and Carmen’s mothers did.

**Exposure**

All four participants, albeit through different pathways and time frames, had ample opportunities to experience other ways of living which inspired them to want more for their lives than what their current status was. Also, as a result of parents working long hours or experiences outside of their home, they developed coping mechanism skills and developed leadership skills in order to survive in a different environment than what they
were accustomed to. Thus, they took ownership and responsibility for their own lives. It appears that for three of the participants, financial support for college, either through financial aid or scholarship opportunities, facilitated the process of attending college.

Exposure to middle class environments played a role in their schooling experience. All four participants had opportunities to see and experience the rigor and high expectations of schooling institutions which served a majority of students from middle class families whether here in the United States or in the Dominican Republic. In these “other” schools, they noticed that expectations were high for all students to be able to engage in rich academic, rigorous learning. Rosario and Deyanira both speak of their schooling experiences in the Dominican Republic where they were expected to do well and academic engagement was an expectation for all students. Carmen was able to experience high levels of academic engagement with much support in the college-bound high school program that she participated in. Ana, on the other hand, didn’t really get to experience what high levels of academic engagement was like until she coordinated an after-school program in a private American school in the Dominican Republic. The importance of exposure is documented in the research conducted by the NWLC & MALDEF (2009) where research establishes that exposing students to the outside world by bringing in speakers and taking students to post-secondary institutions and connecting mentors to students is vital to helping Latinas achieve their educational goals.

**Historical Context of Immigration**

The other aspect of their commonalities is their families’ reason for migrating to the United States. For three of the families, the political upheaval of the country at the time was a motivating factor for immigrating to the United States. US immigration laws
were not so rigid in that era, so their entrance was also made easier as a result.

Educational policies, by the time they got to college, were in favor of encouraging Latino students and other minorities to enter college, and the colleges facilitated these practices because there was money available to improve the graduation rates of minority groups in the United States and there were policies in place to ensure educational opportunities. Researchers (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Gándara & Contreras, 2009) attribute the increase in college opportunities for minorities during the sixties and seventies (time in which three of the participants migrated to the United States) to the Civil Rights Movement. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, many doors were opened to minorities through programs in education, such as affirmative action which provided financial support for many minorities to be able to attend institutions of higher education. It was a time in U.S. history where policies to eliminate social inequality became real. It would seem that these Dominican women’s family arrived in the United States at a prime time in history, giving them certain advantage to receive financial support to attend college. This was at least the case for Carmen who received a full scholarship to attend college in Ohio. In addition, educational institutions were under extreme pressure to reverse their practices of inequality; this pressure may have made it possible for Carmen to also attend a college-bound program at her high school. Nonetheless, this does not appear to be the case for the other three participants.

Schooling Experiences

It was evident that while their life trajectories were different, some of their schooling experiences which proved to be successful were similar, such as the high expectations and well-structured school environment where Rosario, Carmen and
Deyanira attended. It is without a doubt that all four participants had a tremendous amount of self-motivation to navigate their own trajectory. Villegas and Lucas (2002) proposed a culturally responsive framework for schools to set an academically rigorous curriculum, professional development program for teachers, and a setting with high expectations but with ample support for students who are linguistically and culturally diverse. This kind of environment would likely have made a tremendous difference for Ana early on in her life, had it been part of her elementary and secondary experience.

Critical Factors for Success as Educators

In the following section I discuss findings regarding the similarities which appeared to contribute to the participants’ ability to become successful during their K-12 education and later as educators themselves.

Motivation for Achievement

The participants unanimously agreed that they do not accept mediocrity or the status quo and that they work very hard to make sure that whatever they do is to the best of their ability. They strongly concurred that they set very high expectations for themselves and for those with whom they work. Most importantly, the participants are in agreement that their parents’ hard work as immigrants has always been in the back of their mind, pushing them to strive to be better in order to honor their struggle in coming to this country and working so hard for them to have a better quality of life. Ana summarizes the source of her motivation to stay in school.

I guess because my parents valued education, even though they didn’t have that background in their lives, they knew that it was the only way we could get out…
my mom and dad worked really, really hard and it was really hard for them to get involved—I mean I don’t think that they ever went to a parent conference, but we knew that we had to work hard at school.

Ana was the one who went to school in Washington Heights where at one time she even became involved in a group that dressed alike and she thinks today it would be called a “gang.” She thinks back about why she stayed in school and finished high school:

…In Washington Heights you saw kids that didn’t make it through school, and they ended up working in a factory like their mom and dad, or they ended up selling drugs on the corner. And the girls got pregnant. A lot of the negative experience motivated the older folks to say “I don’t want that for you” and “don’t hang around those kinds of people”…I remember one day I had a friend named Rosa who always got into trouble, and I wanted to be the difference in her life, but my parents didn’t see it that way. They saw me trying to imitate her and trying to be like her…and I got in trouble (shoplifting) with her one day and my mom said “never, never again.”

Rosario also noted that her parents always told her she was different from those pregnant teens on the streets. This same feeling of not shaming their parents was a recurring theme throughout.

**Mentorship**

Secondly, they all have had another person who has pointed them in the direction of becoming a leader in their career. Someone, usually a principal, has seen in them qualities of leadership and encouraged them to get into leadership roles in schools where they have worked. Carmen says that they all found people along their life span that
encouraged them. Carmen further explains her reasoning for being singled out by other adults.

…I never thought that I was selected because of the fact that I was Latina. I’ve never felt that. I felt that I was selected because I had proven myself and the position that I am in now is the same thing, a proven track record. I think your work has to speak for itself of who you are and what you’re doing. And maybe it is but I’ve never felt that way. And I have had to suppress where I am because my ethnicity is not welcomed or embraced where I currently work. So even in the district that I am in, it’s not welcomed so I have to be very careful. And it’s very difficult to do that because it’s not acceptable.

Throughout their school career they found “other” adults who also encouraged them to become a better version of themselves by providing them with guidance or feedback on their performance and how they could do even better for themselves. This pattern of having “other” people highlight their strengths has worked for them in viewing themselves as capable individuals.

**Context**

Another aspect of their success in Georgia is the time in which they moved to the South. A decade prior to this study, Georgia saw the largest influx of Latinos in its school systems. Schools sought out employees with expertise in working with students whose first language was not English and who were themselves immigrants. The participants in this study had much needed cultural and linguistic expertise and were in demand professionally. Indeed, empathy for students like they once were seems to be a recurring theme in their discourse. They felt great empathy for those students who are in schools
for the first time and do not speak English. So, as educational leaders they established structures to support these students. They constantly struggle to make sure that teachers understand the difference between not speaking English well enough and a student’s ability to learn. Ana has a recent vivid memory of the value of teachers having high expectations for all students. Ana affirms that seeing students as capable learners regardless of their circumstances or race or class is part of her job today where she teaches.

I had a teacher in my grade level this year who told me she would never send her child to this school and my heart broke—because I felt for those twenty kids she has in her class—because it is not good enough for her child, but it’s good enough for those other kids. So imagine the work that needs to be done—and I think I had twenty kids this year and I know each and every one of their talents. But I feel for the kids that don’t have that person.

The participants remembered teachers who made content relevant to them even though they could not understand the English language well-enough to participate fully in class. Most importantly, they feel it is really important for teachers to see that these students are intelligent and capable of learning even though their English is not comparable to the native speakers. They see themselves as instrumental in helping others in their schools understand that parental engagement or support does not mean parents volunteering at the school. They see each parent and each student as an individual, and they advocate for understanding the student and their family as individuals first and then as second language learners.
Fitting In

One of the women believes that race has worked to her benefit in the South. The color of her skin has made it easier to fit into the Black category, and she has gained acceptance in that culture. Being married to an African American has also provided entrance into the African American culture without her identity being questioned. For those whose skin color is neither Black nor white, it has been much harder to be accepted by either side. As a matter of fact, one of the participants feels that Black women have had the most difficulty in accepting her in supervisory positions. She believes they see her as a competitor to positions that they have worked hard to obtain. Another one feels that she is often mistaken for a person from another Latin American country, and therefore, people act very surprised when she tells them that she is from the Dominican Republic. She feels that other Latinos tend to view her with suspicion at first and that she feels that she has to prove herself more to other Latinos than to Blacks or Whites. And last but not least, the one who doesn’t fit into any “fixed” category of color and who has a more discernable accent has had the hardest time being accepted by her peers. After working arduously to raise the bar in a school where the majority of students were Latinos or African American, the achievement of those students was questioned because the system didn’t think that “those kids” could reach such high levels of achievement in a five-year span. This experience was deeply disillusioning, and it motivated her to move to California, where her skill to turn low performing schools into high performing schools isn’t questioned as suspicious, but as the right thing to do. Thus, “fitting in” has been more difficult for some and easier for others.
Leadership Styles

Interestingly, they all agreed that they seek collaboration in their work and that they know how to work through collaborative structures very well with all types of personalities and that this process has always worked for them. They do not isolate themselves, nor do they claim to know it all. They view themselves as life-long learners. They agreed that because they have had the experiences as immigrants and second language learners, they have learned the value of acknowledging or leveraging different points of view and perspectives. Additionally, they understand the importance of setting high expectations for all students, not just those whose first language is not English. However, they all highlight how critical it is that schools are set up with varying layers of support for students to be able to realize their hopes and dreams.

In summarizing their leadership styles, they would concur that they practice what they preach and they believe that all children deserve to learn in an environment that challenges them but supports them where they are. What that support looks like is probably what has earned them and their programs accolades such as “teacher of the year,” “principal of a blue ribbon school,” and “charter school of the year.” Additionally, their practice has propelled them into leadership positions such as that of a person who directs the initiatives for Curriculum & Instruction for a large district, or being given the privilege to head one of the most diverse and linguistically and culturally challenging group of second language learners in Georgia where over one hundred different countries are represented in the school system. These women seem to understand the practice of leadership. Spillane and Diamond (2007) state that “leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge, and potentially shaping the practice of
followers. These influences are connected to the core work of the organization – teaching and learning in classrooms – through teachers” (p.9). It is evident that these Dominican educators know the value of the distributed leadership practice. Recently, Carmen shared a letter from her superintendent (not referenced here in order to maintain anonymity) where she is congratulated for her arduous work with principals, central office curriculum, and instruction personnel and other teacher leaders in establishing a culture of success where these leaders now understand how to establish a “distributed practice” that supports teacher leaders in schools and administrators in acting on the belief that “all students can learn.” In Carmen’s school system, the majority of students failing to this point had been African Americans and Latinos. Today that is not the case.

Another example is Ana, who was given the honor by her peers this year to be the “Teacher of the Year” in her school. Ana is proud of her accomplishments with children from all backgrounds. In addition, Rosario made extraordinary changes in the elementary school in Georgia where she was principal and now continuous to use her expertise in establishing cultures of success in another school system in California where the majority of students are English Language Learners. Deyanira continues to be instrumental in Georgia where she is held in high esteem among professionals for her expertise and efficacy in working with English Learners.

These findings give further evidence of the complexity of education. These women’s stories embody descriptions of how the six types of capital were key factors in their educational and professional successes. These assets, together with critical events in their lives, played significant roles in the type of educators they are today. Their clear vision and commitment to their work is articulated through the many accolades which
they have received for improving the lives of many children through education regardless of race, ethnicity, or language background.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, and IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Questions and Findings

In chapter four, I presented an analysis of the findings of my investigation of the life journeys of four Dominican women who have successfully joined the middle class through professional jobs in education, despite the barriers posed by being immigrants, and by not speaking English when they first arrived to the United States approximately thirty years prior. Through this research, I sought to understand the factors which facilitated the journey into learning ‘to do’ school in a language that was foreign to the participants and their parents, and which ultimately allowed them to become highly successful educators in the South. In chapter 1, I introduced a study conducted by Itzigshon (2009) wherein he concluded that Dominicans would not be joining the ranks of the middle class in the United States in as large numbers as those of other immigrant group have in the past. This he poses as a challenge to the economic well-being of the United States. My own story is similar to those of the participants in this investigation, where I too am an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, a native Spanish speaker, from a working class home, and have become a successful educator in the U.S. South. For these reasons, I became intrigued with understanding the factors and types of capital that helped these Dominican women in this study to succeed along their educational paths and that led ultimately to them becoming firmly part of the middle class, in leadership position jobs in education, in the U.S. South.
Impact of Types of Capital

Community Cultural Wealth

The rich cultural array of capital present in their life stories aligns well with Yosso’s CCW conceptual framework, which allows us to “unpack” the more general concept of cultural capital and offers a richer context in which to view the role that different types of capital play in Latinas’ lives. The Community Cultural Wealth framework identifies different types of capital, which I was able to use to examine the lives of the participants in this study. The life stories of the participants demonstrate particularly well the value of linguistic capital in their lives. All four participants benefitted greatly from linguistic competency in their native language, in order to make sense of their new language, English. To this day, at least three of the participants use their native language, Spanish, simultaneously with English. They feel strongly that their ability to understand and value having two languages active in their lives has privileged them in terms of being effective in the multi-lingual communities of their schools. Numerous types of capital were evident in the narratives they told of their lives. For example, their mothers’ constant reminders that they needed to do better than they (mothers) had and that education was the vehicle by which they would do so. Three of the participants benefitted greatly from a rigorous academic environment, while this was not the case for Ana. Ana, who did not have access to a rigorous academic environment, struggled with school. The life stories also provide evidence of their resiliency as students. In a study conducted with tenth grade Mexican-American students who were from a lower socioeconomic background, Alva (1991, p. 19) reported that resilient students were more likely to
feel encouraged and prepared to attend college, enjoy coming to school and being involved in high school activities, experience fewer conflicts and difficulties in their intergroup relations with other students, and experience fewer family conflicts and difficulties (p. 31).

We noted that Ana had the least amount of school support in high school, thus making her journey into higher education more difficult. However, the level of resistant capital evident in each one of their life stories is significant. These Dominican women were motivated to rise above the crowd by challenging the commonly held perception that they could not achieve because they were immigrants or didn’t speak English as native speakers. Indeed, they had a “sí se puede” mentality, even before such a term was common or in vogue in terms of educational aspirations among Latinos. Perhaps Ana summarizes their determination best when she says

…I come from a family of non-conformist (referring back to the reason her family left the country as a rejection to Trujillo’s regime). That has prompted in my heart this feeling I have of fighting to do better…and you are right—I do not take ‘no’ for an answer…that makes me find a way. (interview with author).

It is this spirit of facing their challenges head-on that seems to recur throughout their stories. Within this framework of CCW, familial capital was perhaps the common bond between all participants. They had very strong emotional support from their parents, especially their mothers. This finding is concurrent with Gándara’s (1995) research with fifty Mexican-American individuals who also achieved high levels of success through education, despite their socioeconomic status and non-English speaking homes. Thus, the wealth of aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, resistant and familial capital that
are evident in these women’s life stories allows us to conclude that these types of capital were critical factors in assisting these women ‘do school’ successfully.

Impact of Critical Events

Academic

The critical events in their stories which contributed to their academic resiliency are tied to their intellectual capacity, but more importantly, to the rigorous academic environment that facilitated their schooling experience. I argue that mentors, high academic expectations and exposure to the power culture are factors which contributed to these participants’ academic resiliency. Research on academic resiliency indicates that resiliency is not something we either have or do not have. It is not a “fixed attribute,” but viewed more as a “construct” that is influenced by several “alterable factors” such as personal attributes of motivation and orientation. Also included as attributes related to resilience are family life, school and classroom learning environment, autonomy, and sense of purpose, to name a few (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). This interpretation of the factors which influence or alter academic resilience for students are consistent with the constructs that influence the life stories of these Dominican women. For example, Carmen, Rosario and Deyanira all experienced high levels of engagement with challenging academic curriculum in their high school experience. While the high school experience for Deyanira in the United States was only for one year as an exchange student, she was able to thrive as a non-English speaker due to the support structures in place for her to be successful as part of that program. What if every student had similar supportive structures in place, such as the student peer who acted as the “cultural and language broker” for Deyanira? What if all students had an adult, like the counselor in
Carmen’s case, who followed her trajectory in high school for four years and made sure that Carmen was exposed to the college experience? What if every student who was at risk was treated like Carmen and placed in a college-bound program where the level of support was very high? What if at-risk students went to school and had teachers like Rosario’s who engaged her in talking about her future and making plans for taking next steps? In other words, these Dominican women had various types of capital pushing them upward, but they also emphasized how important it was to have a school that had high expectations for them. Rosario recalls with sadness an incident her daughter had with her math teacher when they first moved to the South. Her daughter was failing math, and as a parent she requested a conference. When the high school principal asked her daughter why she thought she was failing, her response was that her math teacher had told her she was failing. Her mother concluded that her daughter had stopped trying and was displaying a kind of learned helplessness. To this day, Rosario says her daughter sees math as a monster that is strangling her. At the same time, Ana recalls how high school was such a bad experience for her academically because all she remembers is teachers asking her to open the book and complete a certain page and then submit the work from that page for a grade. I personally recall that same scenario of very low expectations on the part of the teacher for my academic performance. An obvious, yet critically important conclusion is that a rigorous academic curriculum and an ability-centered learning environment with high expectations matter a great deal. These women’s stories provide a mosaic of experiences and yield multiple factors which contributed to their success. While the role of capital was definitely instrumental in shaping their trajectory, it was not the only component that impacted their success. This exemplifies the complexity inherent
in education, where success and failure are largely social constructions that result from the complex interactions of numerous variables, which entire bodies of research literature have attempted to explain over the decades.

**Commonalities and Variations in Life Stories**

The life stories of the four Dominican women participants were similar in some ways and different in others, but the constructs that remain constant across the four participants were the strength of their bilingualism and their parental support. It is well established that an individual’s literacy in the first language provides a strong link to the development of higher levels of proficiency in the second language (Cummins, 1979, 2009; Garcia, 2005). These same researchers concluded that a student’s first language level of development is a good indicator of the student’s ability to develop comparable literacy levels in the second language. The participants in this study reported that the more they learned about their own (native) language, the higher the complexity level of English proficiency they were able to obtain. Being bilingual was a strong component in each participant’s story. The participants emphasized how important it was that they spoke Spanish at home and English at school. They were often able to negotiate meaning from Spanish to English and English to Spanish for their parents by interpreting, while at the same time learning English at school, where their Spanish was a resource and a springboard for learning academic English (Musetti & Tolbert, 2010). Indeed, their bilingualism was a strong asset, rather than a liability in their schooling.

**Exposure**
The type of exposure these participants had to rigorous academic programs where students are expected to achieve was evident throughout my investigation. Rosario and Deyanira had experiences with schooling in their native country where they speak about the rigor and excitement of learning in schools where the teachers were highly engaged and invested in the success of their students. Both of these participants noted that they had an opportunity to attend private schools in the Dominican Republic where learning was a major focus for all students. They spoke highly about how much they enjoyed learning in an intellectually challenging environment.

Carmen didn’t attend private schools but was singled out to attend a preparatory, college-bound two-year program before returning to her main high school campus, and she has great vivid memories of the caliber of academic work expected of her. While Ana did not have this same type of academic support as part of her schooling experience, she was able to reflect on her experience in a private school in the Dominican Republic where she headed an after-school program for elementary children who attended a bilingual school. It was this experience which solidified for her that she wanted to be a teacher, one who nurtured learning both academically and emotionally as she had seen done in the school where she worked. It appears that being part of a high-functioning academic environment is a key component in each participant’s success story and is something they reproduce in all of the educational settings in which they work.

Mentors

The role of “other adults” is well-documented in the literature as a factor which influences the lives of students, particularly the lives of children who are at risk of failing in school (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999).
While none of the participants can recall one teacher who made a profound difference in her life, they do remember one person at different stages who has provided guidance and emotional support while in school. Ana was an exception to this, but she identifies a mentor who came later in her life and was the first principal she met in the South who inspired her to get her teaching degree and who supported her through that process and later hired her where she is now “teacher of the year.” Based on the recollections of these women regarding the importance of having a mentor, it would be wise for schools to establish programs where an adult is matched to an at-risk student in order to help him or her navigate the school world. And since mothers were the primary drivers of motivation to do well academically, a further recommendation might also be the replication of programs where Latina mothers and daughters are in conversations together in after-school settings discussing their goals and dreams, such as a middle school mother-daughter program *Pláticas del Alma*, or Conversations of the Soul program (Musetti, 2007; Musetti, Perez-Knapp, Rodriguez & Garcia, 2006).

**Historical Context of Immigration**

It is without a doubt that the time in which three of these participants immigrated to the United States (thirty to forty years ago) was a different and critical time of political and educational reform in the United States. As part of broader civil rights movement, educational institutions were scrutinized in terms of diversity and access, and there were several initiatives to increase the enrollment of minorities in colleges. As a result, many universities had programs that facilitated the entrance into college for minority students, such as the one that Carmen attended in Ohio and the one I attended at one of the CUNY colleges in New York. It is prudent to note that while affirmative action programs no
longer exist in admissions decisions in public institutions in 2011, ten years prior, Georgia started a series of initiatives to create a Latino pipeline to increase opportunities for Latinos to attend colleges in Georgia, at a time when the Latino population had increased by 474%. Today the Latino Initiative at UGA, funded largely by a grant from The Goizueta Foundation (2011) seeks to provide a multi-faceted approach that uses teaching, research, and outreach to address the needs of the increasing Latino population in Georgia. Other similar initiatives exist across the University System of Georgia institutions. UGA, for example, has multiple programs to address the needs of the Latino K-12 population through a “Steps to College” program where high school and even middle school students are engaged in college preparatory activities on a college campus in order to provide them with the same type of exposure that Carmen had access to in New York City. Musetti and Tolbert (2010) document a “Steps to College” program in Georgia where high school Latino students who are also English Learners participate in a school-university partnership summer enrichment science program as part of this UGA Latino Initiative to open up the college pipeline for Latinos. Students expressed higher levels of motivation toward attending a four-year college after completing the program and came to see themselves as self-described “future leaders of the world.” Contrary to Ogbu’s theory of the involuntary immigrant, these immigrants from the Dominican Republic seemed to be aided more by the sociopolitical context of their immigration to the United States than whether they chose to come voluntarily to this country or not. None of the participants had a choice in deciding to come to this country; yet they seemed to be influenced more by the policies generated through affirmative action.
As discussed, there were numerous commonalities and surprisingly few variations in the life stories of these four Dominican women. The main difference in their life stories stem from the type of schooling experiences they had. It appears that the types of school they attended had much more influence on their success than the time spent in schools learning in English.

Limitations

Marshall and Rossman (2006) noted that, “all research projects have limitations; none is perfectly designed” (p.42-43). Neither is this investigation. While the “insider” positionality of the researcher is considered a strength in qualitative research, it also creates a certain tension between the interviewees and the researcher. Ganga and Scott (2006) defined “insider” research as “social interviews between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage” (p. 2). Because I have lived similar experiences, I thought the participants might not want to share all the details of their lives with me. However, I discovered that I was more anxious about their potential reluctance to share for fear that I might be judgmental. My fears were not justified. The participants were honored that I chose them to share their life stories. They stated at different times that if their life story was of help to anyone, they were happy to share it. The participants have had the opportunity to confirm, disconfirm, or add perspective to the analysis of the interview data at various times through member checking, which I feel added validity to this study.

Furthermore, Schwandt (2007) considers member checking to be a “participative and dialogical” interaction between researcher and participant, honoring the participants’ right to know what the researcher has written about them. Thus, I shared with my
participants the results of the interview data at each juncture of the interviewing and analysis process. I conducted three one-on-one interviews with each participant for a total of nine interviews. At the beginning of each interview I provided the participants with a copy of the transcript of the last interview to make sure they approved what they had shared with me. At the first focus interview, I shared with the participants what I had surmised as the common threads of their life stories. They all agreed that their mothers were instrumental and that Spanish was the key to keeping their strong ties with their home and learning to draw on their knowledge of Spanish when making sense of English. Three of the participants knew each other professionally, and one didn’t know any of the others. They met at the focus interview. The first focus interview provided a forum for them to get to know each other on a more personal level. One of the participants offered her home for the focus interview. At first, they seemed reluctant to share much of their life stories, so they focused on looking at each other’s pictures and making jokes about the clothes and hair styles of the time. After they laughed and joked around, I was able to bring them back into focus by reiterating the thread or commonalities I had found in their life stories. They were surprised to learn that they had similar experiences in the New York public school system when they first arrived in the United States. They then shared stories about their mothers whom they revered, but at the same time feared, when they were children. I believe that my similar background gave them ease in sharing their stories. Ana became visibly saddened when she looked at her elementary school picture and recalled her feelings. She said, “I hated the way my school felt,” and Carmen added, “it was horrible…my teacher put me in the back of the room…she isolated me in the back of the room and by the way she treated me, she empowered other students to treat me that
way too… I was invisible to the teacher, and no one played with me during recess except my sisters.” It was evident as the conversation took its own course and the participants expressed different views as to why they were able to make it through education, that they had forgotten that the camera was on and that they were genuinely sharing their experiences. I have shared each of the portraits and analysis with them through e-mail in order to ensure member checking and confirm my analysis of the interview data. They have corrected some of the facts on their portraits to make sure I got the information correct. However, it is important to note that while at one time they expressed an interest in using their real names, after reading the analysis, they thought it would be best to stay with pseudonyms.

**Personal Reflections**

**My Own Story**

The examination of these women’s stories has been cathartic for me in terms of understanding my own journey of success through education. I have often wondered why I made it into college, when, after a battery of tests, my own counselor called me into the office and said words that still make me cry: “You’re not college material.” When I think of where I am and how much those words propelled me to do better to prove her and everyone else wrong, it is obvious to me that I had an abundance of resistant capital. At the time, I had no idea what she meant by me not being college material. All I knew was that she was reinforcing the message that I could not “do school,” which reinforced the messages that I often heard in other subtle ways from my own mother. My mother, unlike the participants’ mothers, would tell me that I was weak and that studying was hard for me. As a result, she recommended that I should focus on something easy like secretarial
work and suggested I should find a man who could take care of me, because school made me suffer. Thus, when the counselor said “I wasn’t college material,” I internalized it, and it served to reinforce the negative self-concept that I already had. My mother was sincerely concerned about my debilitating migraine headaches. However, the way this was interpreted by me and the message I heard from my mother was that I was weak and that school was too stressful for me. She wanted for me to alleviate that stress, and so she constantly reminded me that a career with a short preparation program would suit me best. My school counselor also offered to get me a job as a bank teller because I had a nice disposition with people. Again, this reinforced this notion that I was weak and not suited to a demanding profession. My high school experience was more like Ana’s experience in that the support mechanism were not in place for either of us. I even thought that music class and field trips were only for the Jewish students because I never saw anyone I knew being involved in plays, music, or field trips. I was extremely shy and would have never dared ask why I couldn’t participate in those areas of school. I was also placed in the vocational track, which I never questioned, nor did my mother. In fact, my mother didn’t even know where the school was because she worked very long hours in a factory and never came to school. I eventually received help to get into a four-year college by one of my brothers who had taken advantage of a program that recruited minorities who otherwise would not have gotten into college. In the end, I did very well in college, but I was in a program which provided counseling, academic support, and a gradual release into regular college courses, to which I attribute a great deal of my early and even my eventual success.
While I was in this college, I met a professor of education who hired me to do research in the library for him. I had a certain number of articles I had to read and synthesize per week. I remember reading these articles over and over again until I could understand them. Once a week I had to meet with him in person to go over what I had determined were the top three articles he should focus on and tell him why I chose them. What an experience that was! I thought it was a job, but really he was teaching me to think deeply and critically through reading, analyzing and writing. In retrospect, that was a pivotal experience for me in terms of overall educational trajectory.

After working in a teaching job overseas for a few years, I had gained a great deal of experience in navigating educational systems and decided to attend a summer institute at Teachers College Columbia, for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). It was an amazing experience. I decided to apply to their Masters in TESOL program. After applying, I never heard back from the college, which I attributed to the fact that I lived overseas. I showed up on registration day to the college not knowing I had not been accepted! I made my way to speak to the coordinator for the program. After much challenging conversation and a short lecture on how things are supposed to be done in order to get accepted into the institution, he agreed to accept me on a conditional basis. He told me if I could get a 4.0 grade point average the first semester, I would be officially accepted. I worked very hard and earned a 4.0 and stayed at Teachers College. Throughout my life I have found many educators who have taken me under their wing to mentor me. I know for a fact that if I had not encountered mentors who took an interest in me and exposed me to another world, I would have never made it through the educational pipeline of higher education. Even today, as I sit and write my story, I know that I would
not have even thought it possible to make it through a doctoral program, had someone (in this case a woman who was a professional colleague) not encouraged me to apply.

When I think of what propelled me into a leadership job in education, I know that mentors in college and after college were critical in my development. I can also see that the value of various types of capital embodied by CCW have been present in my life. However, I often wonder what my outcome would have been, had my brother not guided me through that first college experience. I went to high school with another forty-seven Dominican students and other than my brother and myself, only two of those ever got a college education. I always attributed the success of the other two to the fact that they attended a Catholic school in grades K-8 and therefore gained the academic capital and resiliency required to be successful in high school. What about those other forty-three students who were not given the support to move forward with a post-secondary education? It seems obvious to me that education matters, the type of education we receive matters, mentors matter, and exposure to how others succeed matters profoundly.

**Methodology Reflection**

This study used a qualitative methodology and a narrative approach which allowed me to capture interactions among participants and between each participant and myself. Creswell (2005) and others believe that qualitative methodologies are best suited to capturing people’s nuances about their life stories. I utilized a narrative approach in order to contextualize the life stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that a narrative approach is the right approach for this type of data analysis because people live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including
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the young and those such as the researchers who are new to their communities. (p. xxv)

Furthermore, the value of a qualitative methodology is that the participants have stories about how they got to where they are and educators and others like them can learn from their journeys. Marshall and Rossman (2006) assert that qualitative research is crucial for understanding the voices or experiences of those whose voice is not transparent through the statistical analysis of quantitative research. As a Dominican immigrant woman with similar identities as the participants, my positionality was strengthened, not weakened as a researcher by my ethnicity, my gender and my second language experience, as I heard and interpreted the lived stories of those who have traveled similar journeys.

**Relationship of Findings to Previous Literature**

A review of the literature of first generation immigrants who migrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic and who were able to successfully navigate school, despite having many barriers, and eventually even enter middle class ranks, was the focus of this literature review. I found that the Dominican women in the current study were able to realize their aspirations, unlike the findings from the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) which reported that Latinas feared that they would not be able to realize their aspirations to go college, which was indeed the case on a large scale. However, many of the recommendations proposed from the NWLC report align well with what these Dominican women report as the factors that helped them realize their aspiration to become professionals. This study highlighted some of the factors which cause interference and account for the discrepancy between Latinas’ high aspirations and
the actual accomplishment of their goals. Several of the challenges Latinas face are high levels of poverty, lack of parental involvement, and limited English proficiency, among others. From this study of four Dominican women, we can conclude that the types of school environments encountered by these women matter very much when bridging from aspiration to reality.

Support of and for the first language is another area that this study found to be important. My investigation into the lives of these women seems to indicate that acknowledging the different types of capital Latinas bring with them to school and capitalizing on these assets matters greatly also. Ladson-Billings, (2007), Valenzuela, (1999), Yosso, (2005), and Nieto, (2000) posited that ignoring the capital Latinas bring with them to school is what promotes a deficit approach to educating immigrant Latinas.

Similarly, Moll’s (2005) work indicates that understanding the “funds of knowledge” or experiences that these students bring with them to school and learning how to infuse these cultural and language experiences into the curriculum honors the linguistic and cultural diversity of Spanish-speaking ELLs in the school setting. For the Dominican women I studied it was evident that linguistic, aspirational, and resistance capital existed in their lives, but it is not clear whether the schools intentionally used these connections to enhance the students’ school experiences. It seems more likely that the participants used the capital to mediate their own learning, as opposed to the schools making a conscious effort to make these connections and leveraging what these students brought with them (i.e, various types of capital). An important conclusion and message to educators is to seek out areas of strength and capital that do not fit mainstream patterns and may involve nontraditional mechanism of discovery and application.
As Yosso (2005) theorizes, the concept of Community Cultural Capital can provide a framework for considering other types of capital which are often unacknowledged, such as the cultural wealth that students bring with them into the classrooms. In examining the lives of these women, it is apparent that this theory, when applied to language minority women as in this case, is indeed a powerful theoretical framework for understanding an expanded notion of cultural capital, particularly as that concept relates to educational and professional trajectories.

Schools can be powerful institutions for children to be able to succeed if the appropriate support is in place. We saw, for example, how Ana’s school experience did not include any support, but Carmen’s schooling experience was very supportive, and Carmen was able to go to college outside of her family’s home, whereas Ana lacked the preparation necessary, even if she had been granted the same opportunity. Likewise, Herman (2009), in a study of multiracial high school students, found that the grades of multiracial students are more related to the context of their schooling than any other factor examined, which also resonates with this study’s findings. Similarly, Lucas, Henze and Donato (1990) concluded that teacher expectations of students were the single most important factor in student success across high school English Learners in the six schools in their study.

A student’s first language level of development is a good indicator of the student’s ability to develop comparable literacy levels in the second language (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Cummins, 1979; Garcia, 2005). In my own research with the four Dominican women, their knowledge of their native language was strong a predictor of their school success. They were able to use their knowledge of how language
works to make sense of English. They made use of cognates (words that have the same root and almost the same spelling in the second language) to understand complex concepts. Deyanira talks about how she used her knowledge of words that are similar in both languages to try to make sense of history. Similarly, the work of Collier and Thomas (2002) supports the efficacy of two-way or dual language instruction as a program model. In their seminal longitudinal study, they found that levels of reading achievement were directly related to support of the native language. This duality was also evident in my study. The participant’s bilingualism was a factor for success. However, there were other key research findings that identify program factors and instructional characteristics that promote academic success for ELLs. These factors included a positive school environment, a meaningful and academically challenging curriculum, a program model that is grounded in sound theory and best practices, teachers in bilingual programs who understood theories of bilingualism and second language development, and the use of cooperative learning and high-quality exchanges between teachers and pupils (Genesee, Lindhom-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). While it is not clear to what extent each of these factors was evident in the schooling experiences of the participants in this study, the first two factors are indeed documented in this study, at least for Carmen, Deyanira and Rosario; these three experienced a positive school environment and an academically challenging curriculum. In a comprehensive study of the research to date on what constitutes effective pedagogy for students whose first language is not English, Goldenberg (2008) asserted that a strong scaffold for supporting English language learners in English-only settings is to provide opportunities for extended interactions or instructional conversation with teachers and peers. Unfortunately, I was not able to gather
enough data to determine the instructional practices used in their schooling experiences K-12. None of my participants remembered exactly what types of strategies were used when they were in the classroom with the exception of Ana who recalls the recurring high school scenario of “open the book and complete part…”

Duany (1994) affirmed that transnational communities are those that are “characterized by a constant flow of people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachment to two nations and a far-flung network of kinship and friendship ties across state frontiers” (p. 2). For example, in order to stay connected to their families, Dominicans continue to speak Spanish, of which they are proud. Dominicans stay connected not only through language but through music, art, technology, economics, cultural and social affairs. These connections were also evident in these participants’ narratives.

Similarly, Pita & Utakis (2002) argued that Dominicans place a strong value on “familismo” or keeping connected to their extended relatives, not just their immediate family living in the United States. Therefore, maintaining the native language is of primary importance to families in order to be able to communicate with immediate and extended family both in the U.S. and their native country. In the same way, Rodriguez (2009) documented in her ethnographic study of five adolescent Dominican girls and their families living in Washington Heights in New York City that maintenance of the native language, Spanish, plays a very important role in keeping family connections both in the U.S. and the home country. She posited that maintenance of the Spanish language is tied to a healthy identity of being able to switch back and forth between two worlds and two languages.
In a study of gender and transnational practices, Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo (2005) found that Dominican women and men experience their migration differently, but that the reason seems to be more based on socioeconomic status than gender. They established that women tend to adapt to the norms and values of the receiving country more readily than men do. It appears that at least initially men tend to feel a loss of status, which is seen as a threat to their masculine identity; because of this, men yearn to return home and regain their status, which they feel has been lost in the new society. This desire prevents them from establishing stronger ties to the new country. This was the case with Carmen’s father. He was unable to adapt to life in the United States and returned home. Dominican women, on the other hand, gain advantages and privileges which they didn’t have in their home country, and as a result, are more prone to want to stay in the receiving country and invest their time and energy into making it in their new society. This was the case for Carmen, Ana, and Rosarios’ mothers. The authors conclude that there are some important differences in the way the genders experience their assimilation into American society and that women seem to have some more gains in gender status than men. Because all four participants were women, I would have to agree with this premise since all mothers were able to integrate into the American society in an easier fashion than the fathers.

In the same way, Dicker (2006) studied the complexity of this transnational community by conducting a qualitative study of five Dominican women who represent first and second generation immigrants and reside in Washington Heights, the neighborhood with the largest Dominican population in the United States. This author is concerned as well with the assimilation question of whether these immigrants will
incorporate or assimilate into the American society as other immigrants in the nineteenth century did. Dicker found that the transnational nature of this group with ties to their homeland and to their new land complicates or challenges the assimilation process for this group of more recent immigrants. Because their ties require linguistic maintenance of the Spanish language, Dicker found that Dominicans may have linguistic and cultural needs that educational institutions are failing to acknowledge. Dicker concluded that in spite of living in a Spanish dominant community, these Dominican women acquired an additive bilingualism, rather than a subtractive form of bilingualism and considered themselves bicultural. Dicker’s findings are concurrent with other studies of immigrant communities who live in between two borders and adapt to the new culture and new language without taking away their own native language, norms and behaviors. The current study gives support to this finding as well.

Reynoso (2003) conducted a study on the concept of social capital and Dominicans in New York City, Washington Heights. Her premise was that social capital did not suffice in assisting this immigrant group to assimilate into a foreign society even though she considered it a very important element to the assimilation or integration process. She stated that the problem was not whether Dominicans are void of social capital networks or not, but the lack of economic resources and opportunities in the communities to which they immigrate. Such poor (ghetto) neighborhoods in New York City, where the majority of Dominicans still reside, seem to impact or impede the assimilation processes of this group of immigrants. I found that Carmen was given opportunities to go beyond her neighborhood and that exposure was extremely important
to her success, whereas Ana was not given the opportunities to experience any other type of environment.

In research regarding the role of language, Toribio (2001) found that the deficit would be much greater for the Dominican immigrant who relinquishes linguistic and cultural ties and still remains the object of racial discrimination. Not surprisingly, Toribio found that those who gave up their Spanish in place of English as part of their integration into American society, quickly lost their ability to speak Spanish and thus could not communicate with their family.

Lastly, Reynoso (2008) recently conducted a study of Dominican English language learners and the resiliency factors which helped them become academically successful in the Bronx Community College in New York, despite their personal, academic and environmental hurdles. He found several categories which fostered academic resiliency among the participants at Bronx Community College. The categories are faculty, family, counseling, peer support, self-motivation, and bicultural identity development. Family, self-motivation, and counseling were factors which aided the journey of the four Dominican women in this study as well.

In conclusion, the review of the literature reveals that knowledge of the native language and type of schooling experience does matter. The four Dominican women’s life stories reveal that Community Cultural Capital, which encompasses linguistic, aspiration, social, navigational and resistant capital, definitely played a part in improving their outcomes and in their learning “to do” school.
Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The implications for practice that I formulated as a result of this study’s findings are the need for professional development that addresses the intersection of culture and language, a rigorous academic experience, heritage language instruction, and formalization of the role of other adults in providing support for education, including as “cultural and language brokers.”

Recommendations for Practice: Professional Development

Nieto (2000) defined multicultural education as “comprehensive school reform…that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination…and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students and their communities, and teachers reflect” (p. 305). Most importantly, Nieto emphasized that a multicultural perspective to education is not an additional programs or the perfect silver lining to education, but rather it is meaningful and authentic education where the curriculum challenges students to think critically and to take ownership of their learning. In proposing a professional development approach which is comprehensive and promotes social justice, I propose a socially and culturally responsive approach such as the one delineated by Villegas and Lucas (2002).

Villegas and Lucas (2002) proposed a model of professional development which affirms the cultural and linguistic diversity of students in order to make learning a successful experience for the many language minority students currently in American schools. They proposed a coherent framework for professional development that promotes principles of social justice and articulates a vision of what a culturally responsive curriculum looks like. In their model, a culturally responsive curriculum
promotes a) an understanding of how language is learned and how to help students make connections to the target (new) language, b) an examination of students’ lives in order to make instructional connections that make sense for them, c) an understanding of how learners make meaning or construct knowledge in order to build bridges to new knowledge, d) an understanding of culture and specifically an understanding of the impact on learning of a collectivist versus individualist view of learning, e) an understanding of how affirming views about diversity promote or convey confidence in the student’s ability to learn, and f) an understanding of how to use appropriate strategies that engage all students in critical thinking. A culturally responsive environment as delineated by the tenets proposed by Villegas and Lucas (2002) supports and affirms learning in a setting that supports high expectations for all students and builds supporting frames for the students to learn.

There is a large body of research supporting learning two languages. There are cognitive, economic, socio-cultural, and educational benefits to learning in two languages. However, for purposes of this recommendation, I will only focus on the benefits of supporting the learning of the students’ primary language. Research shows that students who enter school in the United States with little proficiency in the target (English) language, benefit greatly if they receive instruction in their primary language. Researchers (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000, p. 3) assert that “providing English language learners instruction in their primary languages, especially in literacy, establishes a solid foundation on which they can acquire English.” All four participants confirmed that learning Spanish was crucial to being able to make connections to learning in English and acquiring higher levels of proficiency in English. Therefore, establishing a “heritage”
language program which refers to the primary language of the students in question is a valuable tool to helping students become proficient in their second language.

An additional recommendation that has come out of this investigation is that of promoting “language and cultural brokering.” When Deyanira spoke about Laura, her sponsor sister, she told us that Laura was her cultural broker. Laura helped Deyanira understand the context and the language whenever she didn’t quite understand the nuances of the English words. The idea of “language brokering” became official in 1995 (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004) when the practice of negotiating language and culture for family members was recognized as a source of strength for bilingual students. Leveraging students’ bilingual and bicultural literacy allows for a great way for students to work in a collaborative fashion among and between language proficiency levels. Since then we have seen numerous exciting applications of this concept in diverse educational settings (Allen, 2007; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009).

Finally, each one of the participants had access at one time or another to an adult who provided guidance, direction, and support and who was instrumental in helping them obtain access to outside resources, such as colleges, as was the case for Carmen, or curriculum guidance such was the case with Deyanira with the Cuban professor who took her under her wing and taught her how to navigate the college world, or the principal who provided inspiration and commitment for Ana to go back to school to get her degree in education. In my case, I cannot even imagine how I would have navigated the first college experience had I not had more than one person who provided guidance, support, and encouragement for me to finish college. The National Women’s Law Center &
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2009) research also documented the value of mentors as invaluable assets to Latinas.

The stories of these four Dominican women shed light on their individual educational trajectories as immigrants and provide a pathway to explore their entrance into the leadership positions they currently hold in educational settings. I would like to see this study adapted in two ways. One, it would add to our understanding to hear the voices of others with similar backgrounds, but different nationalities in order to discover the similarities and variations in their life stories and the types of capital they employed to be able to “do school” (2009). Even more interesting would be to examine the lives of current Dominican high school students (both first and subsequent generations) in schools in the South in order to understand the extent to which they are successful and the factors they describe to explain their success (or lack thereof).

Another area of research that might illuminate the problem of differential school success is to find out how schools are implementing and sustaining a professional development approach that is linguistically and culturally responsive and how this approach to learning and teaching influences the outcomes of students who are English Language Learners. Ultimately, I would like to see this study extended to explore and examine mechanisms for leveraging the Community Cultural Wealth students either have access to or already possess.
Final Reflections

I set out to understand the factors which influenced four Dominican women to learn “to do” school, despite adversity. I chose to use one-on-one interviews, and focus interviews through a narrative inquiry approach in order to be able to retell their life story and then analyze the factors that impacted their journey through a thematic approach. As I reflect on what I have learned through the process of recreating their life stories and analyzing the interview recordings, I realized there were some common threads among all four which predicated my analysis. I originally set out to understand if CCW was a viable and valuable tool to help me understand the types of capital that influenced their lives. I found out that not only were they in possession of capital that helped them overcome some of the barriers to learning in a new language, but more importantly, that there were certain types of capital that dominated their narratives, such as the knowledge of their primary language and the role that their mother played in each of their lives when it came to education. Their life stories resonated in some ways with mine and in others less so. I was not as self-aware as they were about how “to do” school. I never questioned the “status quo” like they did. My mother just took for granted that schools knew what they were doing with me. The one area which was extremely helpful to me was that I did take Spanish throughout high school, and Spanish was one class where I was able to excel and learn to comprehend what I read and to analyze difficult texts from a literary point of view. The other classes in high school were very similar to those Ana spoke of in her narrative. I remember being told to open a book and complete the answers in the back. Thus, it became very clear for me why both Ana and I struggled with school and why my counselor told me that I was not college material. We were never given the
courses or skills to be able to prepare to go to college. No wonder we struggled with college; we were not given the tools to learn “to do” school.

This study provides evidence to further dispel the myths that Latinos fail academically due to the lack of parental involvement or that immigrant parents don’t care or value education. Additionally, a common “concern” voiced by educators is that children do not come to school prepared with experiences that will help them connect new information to prior learning. We can see from this study that students do come with experiences and background knowledge. This study is also important in demonstrating (once again) that despite poverty and a lack of English language skills, given the right supports and “wealth,” at-risk students can be successful in educational contexts (Bernal, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Garcia, 2005; Ladson-Billlings 2007; Nieto, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Much of the research of the past several decades has focused on documenting the persistent underachievement of immigrant and other minority students. My focus in this study mirrors the trend nationally where schools and districts are constructing success among these students and the focus has become not on whether this can be done, but how best it can be done. A myriad of national, state and local efforts from various quarters are focused on this work and range from local K-20 pipeline programs, to charter schools, to Teach for America type of programs. Those responsible for educating all students must take this as the sacred trust it is and realize that the stakes are too high to allow continued failure of Latina/o students in large numbers. The stakes are too high for individuals, like those in this study, for communities, states, the nation, and all globally interconnected peoples. It is my hope that this study has personalized the statistics and given a snapshot
of what a “sí se puede” approach to schooling might provide. This approach must include promoting strong skills in every type of literacy to students (including language skills which may best be promoted, for example, in a bilingual dual immersion program). James Cummins reminded us that language minority students fail in large numbers not from a lack of English, but from interactions in schooling that cause them to withdraw from academic effort. Our schools need to be staffed by educators who understand the critical role of caring, like Dr. Profriedt at Queens College in New York, who taught me to read, write and think critically for an authentic purpose. Latinos are growing at a rate eight times that of all other groups in the U.S. and will constitute a majority in the coming decades. It is not only a moral imperative that we educate Latino students to the highest levels, but it is an economic and national imperative. In conclusion, the voices affirming culturally responsive education advocate an education where students have agency, are respected, are engaged in rigorous academic work with authentic purposes, are working with teachers who understand how language and culture intersect and impact students’ learning outcomes, access to opportunities, and ultimately their quality of life.
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APPENDICES

Letter of Invitation (Appendix A)

October 2010

Dear Educator,

You are being invited to participate in a qualitative research study to be conducted during the Fall Semester, 2010. I am a doctoral student in the INED program at Kennesaw State University, Maria Montalvo-Balbed. I am working under the direction of Dr. Bernadette Musetti, Associate Professor of TESOL in the Department of Inclusive Education at Kennesaw State University.

I will be conducting a qualitative narrative case study investigating the lives of Dominican women who have successfully navigated the American education system and have successfully integrated into a professional life in education in the South.

I am interested in researching the commonalities and variations in the life stories of educationally successful Dominican women across particular cultural, linguistic, class, personality, ethnic and other categories that may arise through the research.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you elect to participate, please understand that I will audio-tape the individual interviews and video tape the focus interview. I will transcribe all interviews. Your remarks will be kept strictly confidential. In order to protect your anonymity, your name and any features that could identify you will be removed from all written materials and oral work before these data will be used.

Please understand that you may withdraw from the study at any point during the time the research is being conducted. You will be encouraged to ask questions before, during and after participation in this study. There will be no financial consequences to you or your organization by participating in this study.

Your comments and questions are welcomed anytime during the research. I may be contacted at Metro RESA 9770-431-226) or at home (770-998-6747) at anytime. A summary of the results will be provided once work is completed.

Research at Kennesaw University that involves participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities
should be addressed to Dr. Ginny Zhan, Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, Kennesaw Ga.

Respectfully,

Maria Montalvo-Balbed

Participant Consent Form

I,__________________________, give my consent to participate in the research entitled “Looking back: tracing the journey of four Dominican Women who learned ‘to do’ school which is being conducted by Maria Montalvo-Balbed, graduate student at Kennesaw State University. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw consent at any time and have the results of the participation returned to me, removed from the experimental records, or destroyed.
## Looking Back: Tracing the Trajectory

### Tracing the Journey analysis: Case Study of four Dominican women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions #1</th>
<th>Aspirational Capital</th>
<th>Linguistic Capital</th>
<th>Familial Capital</th>
<th>Navigational Capital</th>
<th>Resistant Capital</th>
<th>Social Capital</th>
<th>Major themes/patterns</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Assertions, lessons learned, questions raised</th>
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<td>What factors do academically successful Dominican women indicate as significant in helping them navigate the school world?</td>
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<td>What are the critical events in the lives of four Dominican women that contributed to their academic resilience?</td>
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<th>Research Question #3</th>
<th>Commonalities Variations</th>
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<th>Major themes/patterns</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<td>Are there commonalities and variations in the life stories of the educationally successful Dominican women across particular cultural, linguistic, and ethnic, class, personality and other categories?</td>
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<th>Types of Capital that emerge outside of the Types of Capital embodying the Community Cultural Wealth Framework:</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<td>Types of capital</td>
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Interview Protocol for research entitled: “Looking back: tracing the journey of four Dominican women who learned to ‘to do’ school”.

Appendix C

Note: The following questions represent the protocol for the interviews to be conducted in the first set of individual interviews. Some of these questions have been adapted from the interview protocols used by Patricia Gándara (1995) in her research of Mexican Americans in the 1990’s in a similar study.

Background Information:

Where were you born in the Dominican Republic?

How old were you when you first came to the United States?

What was your schooling experience like prior to your arrival in the US?

When did you come (approximate year) to the United States for the first time?

Why did you and your family immigrate to the United States?

Did you have relatives in the US when you first arrived?

What was your immigration status upon arrival?

In which state did you settle?

What was your area or neighborhood like when you first arrived in the United States?

What was your first schooling experience like in the United States?

How would you describe the physical environment of your home when growing up, both in the DR as well as the US?

Do you remember how your family supported your schooling experience in the US?

Do you remember your first classroom experience in the US? What was it like?

What feelings come to mind when you think of that first experience?

Do you recall how and when you learned English?

Are you bilingual? Have you always been bilingual?
Do you consider yourself bilingual/bicultural?

Can you define being bilingual and bicultural at different stages of your life?

Do you consider yourself literate in Spanish and English? How did you acquire this biliteracy status?

Do you recall if you had any responsibilities outside of school? If so, how would you characterize those responsibilities?

Did you travel to the Dominican Republic on a regular basis after immigrating to the US? If so, how often? Why?

What can you tell me about your middle school and high school experience in the US?

Do you remember if your family made any type of sacrifice on behalf of your education?

Appendix D

College/University

What can you tell me about the colleges/universities you have attended? Degrees obtained?

How did you get entrance into a higher education institution?

What type of colleges or universities have you attended?

Do you recall any special people or mentors in college? Tell me about those!

Did either of your parents attend college?

Have any of your siblings attended college? Are they older or younger?

Can you tell me about your siblings’ college experience?

How did the colleges and/or universities you attended shape you?

How did your peers influence your college experience?

Did you have anyone who inspired you to attend college?
Appendix E

Professional Experience:

Is your biliteracy status an asset for you or a liability in your current life?

When you became a teacher, what type of school did you teach at?

What type of experiences do you remember about your first teaching experience?

Did you have any help (financial or emotional) from anyone through your college experience?

How long did you teach before becoming a school administrator?

What type of degrees did you obtain before becoming an administrator?

Do you consider your professional life in the South successful? Explain!

Is being a Latina (Dominican) professional in the South easier or more difficult than in other states? If so, how?

siblings

Do you have siblings? Younger or older?

What type of family do you have? Has it always been the same as it is today?

Do you recall your sibling’s first school experience?

Do you remember what type of student you were in your childhood all the way to high school?

What about your siblings, what type of students were they?

Religion

Do you practice any religion?

Have you always practiced a religion?

What role does religion play in your life?

Role models

Do you recall ever having any role models? If so, can you tell me about them?
Have you ever had a mentor? What was that experience like?

*Parental influence*

What type of attitude did your mother (father) place on education?

How did your mother (father) influence you?

Did your parents encourage independence in you? If so, how?

Did your parents engage you in or expose you to any cultural activities when you were growing up?

Which parent had the greatest influence in the family decisions?

Which parent had the dominant personality?

Did your parents see themselves as ‘different’ from people in the neighborhood when you were growing up? If so, how? Explain!

Did your parents ever indicate that you were ‘different’ from your peers or siblings?

*Identity*

How did or would you have identified yourself in 2010 census?

How are you identified by your ‘Anglo’ friends?

How do your Latino (a) friends view you in terms of race/ethnicity?*

Have you ever experienced any discrimination?

Do you think you look like a ‘typical’ Dominican?

How would you be considered (in terms of race/ethnicity) in Dominican Republic?

Have you ever been mistaken by anyone else other than Dominican?

Have you ever ‘adapted” white values in order to make it in school or the work place?

Have you ever wished you were not Latina? Please explain!

Do you consider your family values as ‘typical’ or ‘atypical’ of Dominican families?

*Gender*

What role does being a woman play in your schooling and professional life?
Personal Characteristics

1. Do you have any personal characteristics that were instrumental in helping you be successful both in your school life as well as in your professional life?
2. To what do you attribute your academic and professional success?

Appendix F

Additional, more in-depth open-ended questions were added to the interview protocol after the first round of interviews were conducted and transcribed. The new questions generated through these interview protocols were used in the final focus interview with all participants present.

1. Do you think that there is discrimination in schools in the South?
2. What is your maiden name?
3. Do you think it would have made a difference if when you applied for this job you had said you were Ms. Rodriguez?