CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The study of Latinos can only begin by charting unsuspected encounters, with full awareness that the task is bound to find unsuspected mirrors bound to reflect the researcher’s unguarded gaze.

— Roman de la Campa, Latinos and the Crossover Aesthetic

Among the wide-ranging challenges facing American educators and the divergent theories and methods we employ to redress inadequacies in our educational system, perhaps no other issue is more pressing than the disparity in educational achievement among racial/ethnic groups. However it is measured, whether by school grades, standardized test scores, course selection, or high school and college completion rates, the fact that there is a persistent history of group-level achievement differences in American education is not debatable. Nevertheless, the reasons we give for this problem—as well as the theoretical presuppositions and research techniques on which many past explanations have been premised—can be strongly contested. This was dramatically illustrated by the explosive reaction to publication of Herrnstein and Murray’s The Bell Curve (1994), which by linking genetic characteristics to group achievement differences marked the troubling re-emergence of a line of research most scholars in the field thought was obsolete. Herrnstein and Murray’s thesis has been largely discredited by other works (Jencks, et al., 1972; Bowles & Gintis, 1972; Thompson, Detterman, & Plomin, 1991; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997; Jencks & Phillips, 1998) and debunked by “anti-essentialist” arguments (Loury, 2002), all of which leave little doubt that so-called innate differences between “races” are actually the shameful product of a long history of discriminatory political and cultural practices, as well as continued ethnocentric biases in the contemporary political and economic structures of American society (Du Bois, 1903; Wilson, 1987; Massey & Eggers, 1990; Kozol, 1992; Menchaca, 1995; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996; Trueba, 1999; Valencia, 2002; Villenas & Foley, 2002; National Research Council, 2004). It is precisely because some student groups have consistently performed at higher levels than other groups of students, and because the causes of this phenomenon tend to
be naturalized (instead of being more reasonably understood as the culmination of problematic historical, economic, cultural, and sociopolitical factors), that social scientists must continue steadfastly in their efforts to illuminate a problem that is now commonly designated as the “achievement gap.”

Sociologist James Coleman’s controversial 1966 report to the U.S. Congress, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, was the first national study to describe racial/ethnic differences in academic achievement among children of various ages (Phillips, 2000). For years prior to the *Coleman Report*, investigations of this nature had been largely focused on educational inputs; school quality had been measured by the resources that went into schools, not the quality of the students who came out of them (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982). Since the publication of Coleman’s report, empirical research on the achievement gap has emerged in fits and starts. Indeed, nearly two decades passed before U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell’s 1983 report to Congress, *A Nation at Risk*, inspired a renewed focus on the persistent educational underachievement of minority students in the United States (Miller, 1995).

Eleven years later, *The Bell Curve* sparked a firestorm of debate that catalyzed more research discrediting insidious claims about the genetic inevitability of group-level achievement differences. Most pointedly, the authors of *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Jencks & Phillips, 1998) boldly asserted that eliminating the gap was not only within reach, but would do more to promote racial equality than any other strategy now under serious political consideration. In response to changing demographics and a new economy in which employment prospects and wages are more highly correlated with educational attainment than ever before, many policymakers have redoubled efforts to achieve group-level equality of educational outcomes. At the federal level, the Clinton administration’s final budget plan called for a symbolic gesture with real consequences, allotting $50 million to reward states that make significant gains in closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students (Robelen, 2000). A new law in North Carolina now requires the state board of education to include “closing the achievement gap” in its statewide accountability scheme. That state’s *Advisory Commission on Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps* also orchestrates an annual conference that has raised national awareness of the issue (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2004). In a similar spirit, the preamble to the 2001 version of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed into law (PL 107-110) by President G.W. Bush, explicitly states that the purpose of
the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is to bring an end to
group-level differences in student achievement (Thernstrom &
Thernstrom, 2003). And in May 2004, the National Education
Association Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the NEA, announced
a substantial grant program—the Foundation boasts a $41 million
endowment—aimed at closing the achievement gap between minority
and low-income students and their more affluent peers (Education
Week, 2004).

To keep pace with these new initiatives and to reach a point where
the programs they inspire might have the desired consequences,
researchers must continually account for the ever-shifting
demographics in student populations. Until recently, scholars have
focused primarily on the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites
e.g., Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Hallinan, 2001) simply because more
research had been conducted about testing performance among African
American students than among other groups, and also because, until
fairly recently, Blacks were far more numerous in the United States
than other minority groups (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). But rapid
Hispanic/Latino population growth has altered the racial and ethnic
landscape in America. At the same time the growth of the standards
movement since the late 1980s, with its link to state assessments and
K-12 test scores (Carnoy, Elmore & Siskin, 2003; McDonnell, 2004),
has illuminated glaring achievement differences between groups,
making educators specifically aware of the low average educational
achievement and attainment patterns in the U.S. Latino population. As
a result, the public’s concerns about the gap have broadened and also
newly concentrated on U.S. Latinos.

Changing Demographics in the United States

With more than one-third of the U.S. Latino population still under
eighteen, Latinos are projected to be the largest minority group in the
United States by 2005. The number of U.S. Latinos is growing eight
times more rapidly than the population as a whole (Vernez & Mizell,
2002), and after 2020, the Latino population is projected to add more
people to the United States every year than all other racial/ethnic
groups combined (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the
Census, 2000a). At this pace, there will be 16 million more U.S.
Latinos (59 million) than Blacks (43 million) by the year 2025 (Davis,
2001). In short, no other group will do more to change the nation’s
schools in the next quarter century than the new ethnic mosaic of
Latinos, whose student population is expected to increase more than 50
percent between 1985 and 2025 when nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population (and its K-12 students) will be Latino (White House Initiative, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a; Tienda, 2001).

While the highest concentration of Latino school-age children will continue to be in the southwest, many other regions of the country will share in the large percentage increase in Latino students. Illinois and Missouri are among the midwestern states that can expect a 30 to 40 percent increase in their Hispanic school-age population between 2000 and 2015. Hispanics constitute nearly 30 percent of the population in Chicago and hold the balance of power in most city elections. Even higher increases are projected for various eastern states including Massachusetts and Virginia (see Figure 1.1): Arlington is now more than 20 percent Hispanic (Davis, 2001).

Figure 1.1—Projected Percent Increase in Hispanic School-Age Population (ages 5-17), 2000 to 2015

Nature and Extent of the Achievement Gap

Although some gaps in the academic performance of Latino and non-Latino White students have narrowed over the past two decades, various studies point to the persistence of large achievement differences distinguishing the two groups at all educational levels. Perhaps the best evidence comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), widely known as “the nation’s report card.” For at least the past thirty years, Latino test scores in NAEP reading and mathematics have lagged behind those of non-Latino Whites (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,
In fact, by the time children are nine, performance differences have emerged in all academic subjects, and thirteen-year-old Latinos are approximately two years behind White students of the same age in both reading and math. These trends continue at the secondary education level. At age seventeen, Latino twelfth-graders are reading at levels similar to thirteen-year-old White eighth-graders (NCES, 1998b). Figures 1.2a and 1.2b illustrate the nature and persistence of the Latino-White test score gap among seventeen-year-old adolescents as measured by standardized reading and mathematics test scores from the mid 1970s to 1999.\textsuperscript{vi}

\textbf{Figure 1.2a—Trends in Average Reading Scores by Race/Ethnicity}

![Graph of Average Reading Score](image)

\textbf{Figure 1.2b—Trends in Average Math Scores by Race/Ethnicity}

![Graph of Average Math Score](image)
While standardized achievement data reveal students’ relative mastery of specific knowledge and skills, other data, such as high school and college completion rates, demonstrate differences in group-level educational attainment. Although the gap in high school completion rates between Blacks and Whites has narrowed significantly in the past twenty-five years (NCES, 1998a), double-digit disparities in the graduation rates of Latino and non-Latino White high school students have persisted (NCES, 1998c). As a corollary to this phenomenon, numerous studies demonstrate that Latino students are much more likely to drop out of school than non-Latino Whites (Fernández, Paulsen & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Trueba, Spindler & Spindler 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Rodríguez, 2002). The alarmingly high Latino high school dropout rate—1.4 million Latinos between the ages of 16 and 24 were dropouts in 2001 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b)—is, in fact, twice that of Blacks and more than three times that of non-Latino Whites (see Figure 1.3).

Not surprisingly, these numbers prefigure similar trends in educational attainment at the college level, where Latinos are about half as likely as their non-Latino White peers to complete four years of college—a gap that has not shown signs of diminishing over time (NCES, 1995b; Vernez & Mizell, 2002). Whereas 25 percent of non-Latino Whites and almost 15 percent of African Americans have completed a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree, only 11 percent of Hispanics have done so (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1998). Significantly, Latinos who do finish college also take longer than their non-Latino peers and are more likely than either African American or

White students to require upward of six years to secure a bachelor’s degree (NCES, 1996). Such findings, coupled with dramatic Latino demographic shifts, suggest that the gap in educational achievement will persist and grow in significance if its causes are left unresolved.

**Figure 1.3—Status Dropout Rates of 16- to 24-Year-Olds by Race/Ethnicity, 1981-2001**

![Dropout Rates Chart](chart.png)


While achievement differences between Latinos and non-Latinos are pronounced, they may not be as disparate as within-group differences in student performance among Latino sub-populations (Miller, 1995; Valencia, 2002). Students of Mexican descent are dropping out of school at nearly three times the rate of their Cuban American counterparts (NCES, 1995b), while also scoring significantly lower on Stanford achievement tests than Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Colombian Americans (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Indeed, Latino underachievement is particularly pronounced for Mexican Americans, who as illustrated in Figure 1.4 constitute approximately 67 percent of U.S. Latinos, compared to the 14 percent from Central and South America and the Caribbean, the 9 percent from Puerto Rico, and the 4 percent of Cuban descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002a).
In terms of college preparedness, SAT verbal scores among Mexican American college-bound students actually fell by nine points from 1989-1999, while scores for U.S. Puerto Ricans increased eighteen points on the SAT’s 800-point scale (College Entrance Examination Board, 1999). Once admitted to college, students of Mexican origin demonstrate the lowest college completion rate among Latino sub-groups (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). From such information, it is not hard to conclude that Mexican American students face the greatest immediate educational challenge among all Latino subgroups in the United States (De la Rosa & Maw, 1990; Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Vigil, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Grogger & Trejo, 2002; Valencia, 2002; Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004).

**Explaining Mexican American Underachievement**

Most studies designed to explain low average levels of Mexican American student achievement and educational attainment appeal to theoretical notions involving three interrelated kinds of capital—specifically, human capital, cultural capital and physical/economic capital. Neo-classical economists originally introduced human capital theory (Schultz 1961; Becker, 1964) to explain how altering people’s knowledge and skill levels will set in motion a more efficient use of economic capital (Coleman, 1990). What French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1979) has been
employed in a variety of ways (Lareau, 1987; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Spillane et al., 2003), from explaining educational and consumptive tastes across social classes (DiMaggio, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984), to investigating the cultural underpinnings of the achievement gap (Gándara, 1994). Framed at the intersection of human and cultural capital, language barriers are most frequently cited in association with Mexican American underachievement, with the result that most of the federal and state activity aimed at increasing the achievement of Latino youth throughout the 1970s and 1980s focused on English language acquisition and development for students with limited English proficiency (Gándara, 1994; Valdés, 1998; Gibson et al., 2004).\textsuperscript{a} Other studies have focused more broadly on the explanatory power of culture, noting for example that youth of Mexican descent often attend schools where teachers have little knowledge of the students’ cultural backgrounds, which can lead to students’ alienation and disengagement from school (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Trueba, 1988; Menchaca, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999; Gibson et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, socioeconomic disadvantage is also a well-researched contributor (Lareau, 1989; Velez, 1989; Miller, 1995; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Trejo, 1997; Valencia, 2002) to a problem only exacerbated by inequitable schooling and substandard educational facilities (Shields et al., 1999; Rumberger & Gándara, 2000; Pearl, 2002).

Where Traditional Explanations Fall Short

Although contemporary research offers various reasons for low average levels of student achievement among Mexican origin youth, some of the explanatory pieces are still missing from the puzzle. For example, socioeconomic disadvantage does not prove to be as consistent a predictor of educational underachievement as one might expect. Studies based on human and economic capital do not explain why some middle-class minority student groups consistently perform below non-Latino Whites with similar family and school backgrounds (Miller, 1995; Phillips et al., 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Nor has research yet explained why racial disparities in educational achievement prove to be greater among students whose parents are college educated than among students whose parents lack even a high school degree (College Entrance Examination Board, 1999).\textsuperscript{x} And while primary cultural differences, such as language, do distinguish many minorities from the mainstream, considerable debate has continued among researchers as to the significance of such factors (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Darder, Torres & Gutierrez, 1997). Thus, some studies have begun to question...
“secondary cultural difference” theories (Ogbu 1978; 1992) by showing that many minority students, regardless of the terms of their incorporation into the U.S. mainstream, share perceptions about their educational experiences that are similar to—if not more optimistic than—those of their non-minority peers (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998).

Society’s Interest in Eliminating the Achievement Gap

Why should we care about group inequality? As the 1983 congressional report *A Nation at Risk* re-emphasized, a fundamental determinant of a nation’s productivity is the educational level of its population. The relation of literacy to the efficiency of workers has been highlighted by a recent employment study in the United States, which found that as many as one-half of all job seekers are seriously limited in the kinds of work for which they are eligible as a direct consequence of their own extremely low levels of literacy. These problems are even more acute for Latinos and Blacks who obtained a high school education or less (Loury, 1987; Kirsch, Jungeblut, & Campbell, 1992). While social policy has made workplace discrimination less of a career barrier than it was thirty years ago, the question of educational attainment nevertheless continues to severely limit minority advancement in the marketplace. As affirmative action programs have been drawn increasingly into question, especially with regard to admission standards for state universities, we should also admit that active educational policies addressing gaps in educational achievement need to remain a priority, since eliminating racial/ethnic differences in test-score performance not only offers to improve employment and earnings prospects for minorities, but also promises to help us end divisive debates over racial preferences in the workplace and in education. If colleges and universities could achieve student population diversity without making race an explicit factor in their admissions decisions, much of the fury around the politics of affirmative action would likely be diffused (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Given the obvious national economic and social benefits that would follow if group-level educational achievement were more evenly distributed—including increased tax revenues and contributions to Medicare and Social Security, as well as revenues saved in public welfare, health and law enforcement programs (Vernez & Mizell, 2002)—it is perhaps surprising that the research and policy communities have not been even more focused on efforts to put an end to the achievement gap. Certainly the sensitive nature of the subject
plays a part in explaining the apparent reluctance of the scholarly community to research the gap or grapple with it in the policy arena (Phillips, 2000). Even so, and according to only the most pragmatic calculus of political decision-makers, the likelihood the population base of U.S. workers will increasingly come to be made up of persons drawn from groups whose amount of education and whose actual educational performance is significantly below the achievement levels of the remainder of the nation’s populace prefigures a future in which work force conditions will prove increasingly to be an impediment to U.S. economic productivity (Baumol et al., 1989). It may be that those of us who are presently affected by the educational handicaps of Latinos only in an indirect way will end up deeply regretting our lack of foresight if we are not able to provide the vision, planning and resources required to deal effectively with Latino and, more specifically, Mexican American underachievement (Miller, 1995; Baumol et al., 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Vernez & Mizell, 2002).

The Current Study

What I have set out to do in this study is to link an emergent literature on social capital with research on residential and student mobility in order to show that Mexican American underachievement is at least in part the result of the social network instability accompanying high rates of transience among this particular group of students. Broadly defined, social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources embedded in social networks that may be converted, via social exchange, into other manifestations of capital, including physical/economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), human capital (Coleman, 1988) and healthy civic participation and community cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Since it has recently been acknowledged that we know quite little about the relative importance of social capital across different spatial and cultural domains (Rothstein, 2000; Fuller & Hannum, 2002; Ream, 2003), in this study I focus specifically on social capital inhering in family, peer, community, and school social networks.

Like the frequent repotting of plants, mobility tends to disrupt social root systems, limiting the capacity of students and their interlocutors to develop and maintain social capital by (a) disrupting family cohesion, (b) inhibiting students’ efforts to make new friends and adjust socially to a new school situation, and (c) impinging on the development of reciprocal relations between students and institutional agents within the broader community (Jason et al., 1992; Pribesh &
In turn, this process is often detrimental to adolescents’ self-confidence and their overall well-being (Munton 1990; Wood et al., 1993; Rumberger et al., 1999). It follows that, insofar as mobility impacts the resources that inhere in social networks, holding sway over group stability and academic achievement, the mobility/social capital dynamic merits our close attention (Mehan et al., 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996; Olsen 1997).

If mobility were not so commonplace, such concern about its potential association with declining stocks of social capital (Putnam 2000) and educational underperformance among mobile student groups (Wood et al., 1993; Pribesh & Downey, 1999, Rumberger et al., 1999) might seem unwarranted. There is no getting around the fact, however, that mobility is widespread (GAO 1994; Hudis & Rathnam 1994; Rumberger, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), and it is probably not realistically solved by telling parents, in an increasingly mobile and fragile marketplace, that for the sake of their children, they aught not to move. The majority of U.S. school children make at least one non-promotional school change by the twelfth grade, and many transfer schools much more frequently (Rumberger et al., 1999; Swanson & Schneider 1999; Rumberger, 2003; Offenberg, forthcoming). A survey of more than fifty local education agencies throughout the United States revealed that in many districts the proportion of students enrolled in a school for less than the entire academic year exceeded 30 to 40 percent (Ligon & Paredes 1992). Another study of immigrant children reported that turnover rates in a majority of schools in three California school districts exceeded 50 percent per year (McDonnell & Hill 1993). Choosing up sides in a kickball game when students have yet to even learn the names of roughly half their classmates is only the most trivial of playground problems. It is not surprising then that mobility is particularly pronounced among U.S. Latinos (Rumberger 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) who constitute by far the most significant of recently immigrated communities and thus the very population most susceptible to various kinds of economic and social instability (Rumberger 2003). Nevertheless, student and residential mobility among Mexican origin youth has remained a largely unexplored area of study (Ream & Castillo, 2001).

James Coleman (1988, 1990) was perhaps the first to address the mobility/social capital dynamic, and others have followed suit (Tienda, 1991; Hagan et al., 1996; Pribesh & Downey 1999; Pettit & McLanahan, 2003; Ream, 2003). In this book I build upon Coleman’s research and take it a step further by suggesting the impact of mobility
on social capital development may be particularly detrimental to Mexican origin youth, per the following hypothesis: Mexican Americans learn less in school than non-Latino Whites, in part because they have less access to social capital due to the fact that they are more mobile during their school careers. It is a rather axiomatic notion that some groups of people have more ample resources embedded in their social networks than others; but it has rarely been investigated whether different forms of social capital, like different kinds of currency, give evidence of differential exchange value. So just as newly minted Euros are good for paella in Valencia but won’t buy a hotdog at Wrigley Field no matter how international the Chicago Cubs’ fan base may now be, the convertibility of certain forms of social capital may also be conditioned by the people who possess it and the places where they attempt its exchange. Are, for example, some forms of social capital more convertible into test score performance than others? To answer that question and others like it, I apply the notion that the convertibility of resources embedded in social networks may differ between racial/ethnic groups to the broader context of the mobility/social capital dynamic in order to test a second hypothesis: Different forms of social capital, like different forms of currency, have differential exchange value – hence the process of academic achievement differs for the two groups in a manner that disadvantages Mexican origin youth.

In short, this investigation pursues two hypotheses. The first posits that Mexican Americans learn less in school than non-Latino Whites because they have less access to social capital, a condition which is at least partly contingent upon the fact that they are more mobile during their school careers. The second draws a distinction between the availability of social capital and its convertibility by considering whether different forms of social capital give evidence of differential exchange value that works to the disadvantage of Mexican origin youth. These hypotheses are examined via the following research questions:

- To what extent do mobility rates and the availability of various forms of social capital differ between Mexican Americans and non-Latino Whites of varying socioeconomic and/or nativity status?
- What is the relationship between mobility, social capital, and twelfth grade academic achievement among Mexican American and non-Latino White adolescents?
- Do group-level differences in the relationships between these factors contribute to Mexican American underachievement?

Beyond its contributions to understanding the achievement gap and low average test score performance among Mexican Americans in particular, this study makes two additional contributions to the current state of research on this subject—one theoretical and the other methodological. First, by employing social capital theory, I investigate whether social capital and mobility interact to influence adolescents’ academic achievement and their experiences in specific social institutions. Second, by employing a mixed-methods research design rather than the more common single-method research technique, I attempt to combine the strengths of survey and field research, demonstrating that methodological cross-pollination can be used to triangulate findings and increase confidence in research conclusions.

The findings from this investigation suggest that the mobility/social capital dynamic is particularly detrimental to Mexican origin youth. When we ask what it is about the dynamic that causes differential educational outcomes between Mexican Americans and non-Latino Whites, the survey analyses show that Mexican Americans are more mobile than their non-Latino White counterparts and are over-represented among the highly mobile. If we juxtapose the reactive and the strategic reasons behind student transience, the interview analyses also suggest that the reasons students change school may have bearing on the educational impacts of mobility. Moreover, in spite of the potential utility of various forms of social capital, Mexican Americans may face a comparable disadvantage in terms of its availability as well as its convertibility into valued educational outcomes.

Reduced stocks of social capital may be partly explained by the economic, social, and political challenges faced by the growing percentage of Mexican American youth who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants. Language barriers and employment-related demands appear to be particularly challenging for the immigrant and second-generation populations who constitute the majority of Mexican Americans in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Even though building and fortifying social networks across domains has the potential to improve the quality of life for individuals and their broader community, findings in this study illustrate that social capital does not always work to the benefit of those who tap it (Portes & Landolt, 1996). In fact, students of Mexican origin in possession of what
appears on the surface to be a valued form of social currency in schools may actually be the unwitting recipients of a form of counterfeit social capital that impinges on their school success (Ream, 2003). So alongside the many beneficial manifestations of social capital noted throughout this book, this study shows that relationships are also fraught with subtractive elements. Under the best circumstances, social capital is exchanged in the production of socially desirable outcomes. In the wrong proportion or in less than desirable circumstances, however, its negative manifestations can hamper productivity. It is in part the enigmatic relation between the social capital postulate and some of these more perplexing results that makes a careful examination of the theory and its relevant research worthwhile—not only for its potential to influence student performance, but also for the light it may shed on suspected group-level differences in the way it does so.

### Overview

In the opening chapters of this study, Chapters 2 and 3, I elaborate the theoretical model in some detail and assess the data and methods I employ to investigate the mobility/social capital dynamic. Chapter 2 summarizes the theoretical and empirical work that weaves this study together, focusing primarily on (a) social capital as the theoretical basis for this investigation, and (b) mobility as a primary independent factor under study. I open the chapter by addressing various theoretical approaches that have been employed to investigate the achievement gap, along with the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical research borne of those theories. Considering social capital theory, including its origins and applications, I offer a more thorough explication of the theory as a logical next-step in the process of deductive research, with my own research designed to address the gap, especially as it pertains to Mexican American underachievement. This chapter concludes with a summary of existing research on the incidence, consequences and causes of student and residential mobility. In Chapter 3, I turn to more pragmatic concerns relevant to the methods I use in this study, offering a thorough review of the research design employed herein, and introducing my approach to mixed-methods data collection and analysis.

Over the course of Chapters 4 through 7, I present the survey and field research results I have obtained. Chapter 4 offers a closer look at the nature of the achievement gap between Mexican Americans and non-Latino Whites, further exploring the degree to which the gap
remains intact even when the comparison groups are considered according to socioeconomic and nativity status. I then study the incidence and consequences of student mobility among the two groups, again taking into account the demographic characteristics of their members. As Chapter 5 delves at greater depth into social capital—discussing, for example, the ways in which, as an enigmatic resource, social capital remains difficult to measure by empirical techniques—I consider this postulate in a domain-specific fashion, which is to say, among families, between peers, and within communities and schools. The question of the availability of social capital among Mexican Americans and non-Latino Whites within each of these arenas is also considered, setting the stage for further exploration of its impact on student achievement in the two subsequent chapters. In Chapters 6 and 7, I attempt to interweave the survey and interview data in a manner designed to illuminate the mobility/social capital dynamic with regard to its contributions to Mexican American underachievement.

Throughout my study, the mixed-methods approach links the emergent social capital literature with research on student mobility so as to investigate student performance among Mexican American and non-Latino White adolescents. Most immediately, the research results suggest that low average test scores among Mexican American adolescents are at least in part dependent upon high rates of student mobility, since mobility may impinge on students’ social networks. Moreover, disadvantages in the availability of certain forms of social capital, as well as measurable differences in its convertibility, may additionally contribute to low achievement among Mexican origin youth. What such results should encourage in researchers is an increased focus on the reasons students change schools and a greater sensitivity to inter- and intra-ethnic aspects of the socialization process that may well contribute to group-level differences in the availability and utility of various social capital resources. The concluding discussion in Chapter 8 addresses the broader implications of these findings, encouraging policymakers to consider mobility and social capital as related factors conducive to policy manipulation when designing programs intended to mitigate low average educational achievement and attainment among youth of Mexican descent, and when designing accountability schemes used to measure school and student performance.
I use the term “racial/ethnic” to refer to the major racial and ethnic groups in the United States – namely Hispanics/Latinos, non-Latino Whites, African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans. It should be acknowledged, however, that “race” is a particularly problematic categorization, fraught with ethical and philosophical problems that have been eloquently set forth in deliberations in philosophy and cultural studies about the ontological status of “race” (Du Bois, 1903; Appiah, 1992; Gilroy, 2000; Loury, 2002; National Research Council, 2004).

See, for example, One-Third of a Nation (Commission on Minority Participation and American Life, 1988).

On the west coast the meta-categorical term Latino is generally preferred to Hispanic—the latter adopted in the 1970s and first employed in the 1980 U.S. Census (Bean & Tienda, 1987). I tend to employ the term Latino, although both labels are used synonymously throughout this book. Likewise, within the diverse Latino/Hispanic population, the terms Mexican American, Mexican origin, Mexican descent and Chicano are interchanged to reference individuals of Mexican ancestry who were either born in the United States or Mexico (Valencia, 2002). As mere labels, however, none of these terms adequately acknowledge the diverse ethnic and cultural heritage in the populations they describe (Macías, 1993; Miller, 1995).

According to Census 2000 figures, the U.S. Latino population may already exceed the U.S. Black population (12.5 percent compared to 12.3 percent, respectively). But these figures are subject to interpretation, since more than three-quarters of a million Americans identify themselves as both Latino and Black (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000b).

For example, in 1975 average reading proficiency among 17-year-old Latinos was far below that of 17-year-old Whites, and even below that of 13-year-old Whites. By 1992, however, the achievement gap had fallen by one-third, such that 17-year-old Latinos were reading at about the same level as 13-year-old Whites (NCES, 1995b).

For a thorough review of group-level achievement differences as measured by standardized test scores for elementary and secondary school populations, college-bound high school students, and for those planning to pursue education beyond the bachelor’s degree, see An American Imperative (Miller, 1995) and also No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).
Standardized test data should be interpreted with caution, particularly since they are limited in what they can assess (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; McDonnell, 2004). For example, most standardized tests employ multiple choice questions rather than open-ended essay questions that might more thoroughly explore students’ range of skills and creativity. And standardized tests can be particularly problematic when making between-group achievement comparisons. That lack of English proficiency can inhibit student performance on standardized mathematics tests (Durán, 1987, pp., 119-121) underscores this point.

Disproportionately high dropout rates are partly attributable, however, to significantly greater dropout rates among Latino immigrants. For example, the dropout rate for Latino 16-24-year-olds born outside the United States (44 percent) was double the rate for those born in the U.S. (21 percent) (NCES, 1998a). In fact, foreign-born Latinos are the only immigrants in the United States who have a lower level of education than their native-born counterparts (Vernez & Mizell, 2002).

It should be noted, however, that Latinos are also making real educational gains over generations—improvements that are obscured by the continuing influx of new immigrants. A recent longitudinal study employing U.S. Census and Current Population Survey data demonstrates impressive Latino advances in educational attainment across generations. Illustratively, Mexican immigrants born during 1905-1909 averaged but 4.3 years of schooling. Their American-born sons, averaging 9.3 years, doubled the years of schooling. And their grandsons were high school graduates, averaging 12.2 years of schooling (Smith, 2003).

In 1974, The Supreme Court ruled in a major legal case, Lau v. Nichols, that public schools must provide an education that is comprehensible to students who do not speak English. When Chinese-Americans in San Francisco filed the case, English was the only language of instruction in American public schools. Thus, English language learners (ELLs) were precluded from a meaningful educational experience (Valencia et al., 2002). After the Lau decision, policymakers and educators began to search for better ways to instruct ELLs. In 1976, for example, California passed a law (Assembly Bill 1329) that required schools with specific numbers of ELLs to be offered bilingual education. Other states followed suit (Crawford, 1989). By the late 1980s, however, bilingual education had become contentious and politicized. And by the late 1990s, anti-bilingual education sentiment reached a tipping point with the 1998 passage of a California initiative, Proposition 227,
designed to severely limit public schools from using native language instruction to teach (García & Wiese, 2002; Guerrero 2002).

xi This finding is particularly troubling since the gaps in achievement appear to be greatest at the top of the achievement spectrum – the pool from which our nation’s leaders are drawn.


xiii In the wake of the Supreme Court’s unanimous 1954 desegregation ruling in Brown v. Board of Education and the subsequent Civil Rights movement, the decades of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed targeted initiatives to improve schooling for disadvantaged children, including minority groups that were disproportionally poor. Although these efforts led to a reduction in the achievement gap, particularly between African-Americans and non-Latino Whites, the gap remains a stubbornly persistent educational problem.

xiv These concerns were echoed by former President Clinton’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, which went so far as to warn that educational opportunity for Latinos has become “a matter of economic and national security” (Gewertz, 2000).

xv Forms of social capital conjure notions of the density of social networks including relationship depth and levels of commitment, their range across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic and generational borders, and the personal or public domains in which relationships are made manifest (McNeal 1999; Meier, 1999). Different forms of relationships may lead to different benefits, including information, influence, and social solidarity (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998).