

## **“Picture the Middle of Nowhere”: A Critical Ethnographic Study of Latina High School Students’ Educational Experiences in Rural Wyoming**

### **Purpose**

When I asked one of the study’s participants to describe Snowy Range City, Wyoming, she stated, “Picture the middle of nowhere, then picture the middle of that, that’s Snowy Range City.” Her comment rings true as the state of Wyoming is the least populated state in the U.S. And while Wyoming is predominantly White, the Latino/a population continues to make its presence felt.

The Pew Research Hispanic Center<sup>1</sup> reports a 74.5% increase in the Latino/a population within the state of Wyoming between 2000 and 2011. According to 2010 federal census data, the Latino/a population in Wyoming is 9.1% statewide. And, while this number may seem relatively low in comparison to other states, it is significant for two reasons. The first is that given Wyoming’s small raw population of 567,356 people, almost 10% are Latino/as. Given the relatively small and spread-out nature of the Wyoming landscape, this percentage is felt in more meaningful ways than the numbers alone represent. Additionally, prominent Wyoming cities such as Prominent City #1 and Prominent City #2 have Latino/a populations at 14.5% and 9.2% respectively. Wyoming cities such as Town A (12.3%), Town B (13.4%), Town C (24.3%), Town D (16.4%), Town E (11.3%) and Town F (16.6%) each report over 10%, or above the state percentage, of Latinos/as residing in their communities (as indicated in parentheses next to their names). In Snowy Range City, WY, specifically, the Latino/a population is a significant 27.2%, housing the largest Latino/a population in the state. Additionally, 17.4% of the Snowy Range City population claims a language other than English spoken at home, compared to 8.5% and 11.2% in Prominent Town #1 and Prominent Town #2, for example. Snowy Range City, WY continues to experience growth and change in their demographic landscape and, given its demographic evolution, is a ripe site for investigation and study, given its large Latino/a population. I contend that it is critical to account for the educational experiences of Latinos/as in geographically isolated areas of Wyoming and specifically in Snowy Range City, WY, as they comprise almost one third of their population. Additionally Latinos/as in these areas represent the future marketplace, citizenry and leadership both locally and statewide.

While existing research overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences of “urban” high school Latinos/as (Gándara, 2010), little is known about the educational experiences of geographically isolated Latinos/as. As U.S. demographics continue to trend upward in the numbers of Latino/a youth, new migration patterns continue to appear in less visible, isolated towns across the country (Alvarez & Rios, 2012). The Latino/a students within these areas are increasingly isolated – culturally, socially, economically and academically. Despite the fact that Latino/a youth are the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S., they still remain among the poorest, least educated, most discriminated and politically disenfranchised group in this country (Gándara, 2010).

The purpose of this research is to conduct an in-depth qualitative study, combining critical ethnography and action research, to explore and analyze the educational experiences of geographically isolated<sup>2</sup> high school Latina high school students in Wyoming. Specifically, this study is based in Snowy Range City, the Wyoming city with the largest Latino/a population examining the particularly unique and consequential experiences of Latina high school students there. The research questions proposed by the study are: (a) What are the educational life histories of geographically isolated Latina high school students in Wyoming? (b) How do geographically isolated Latina high school students in Wyoming

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/02/15/statistical-portrait-of-hispanics-in-the-united-states-2011/#15>

<sup>2</sup> I define geographically isolated as “frontier” locations, areas with approximately fewer than 4 people per square mile.

navigate their academic, cultural, linguistic and social needs in the context of a predominantly White state with a growing Latino/a population, (c) What are the educational implications for geographically isolated Wyoming Latina students, particularly those who wish to pursue higher education and (d) What can educators do to help support geographically isolated Latino/a high school students in Wyoming and beyond?

### **Perspective(s) or Theoretical Framework**

This study utilizes a combination of counter-storytelling and Chicana feminist epistemology as a conceptual framework. Counter-stories are defined as a method of telling the stories of historically marginalized groups, specifically within education. Counter-stories are constructed through research data, existing literature (both traditional and non-traditional texts) and the researcher's professional and personal experiences. The value of counter-storytelling lies in the power of "naming one's own reality" (Delgado, 1995), rather than having it designated and told from the perspective of another, a likely dominant other. Using the methodological tools of story construction and telling to relay geographically isolated Latino/a students' narratives, this study will aim to name the realities of these Latino/a students as they navigate their educational experiences in a scarcely populated and predominantly White region of the U.S. This study also employs a Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) which is grounded in the life experiences of Chicanas.

### **Methods**

This is a qualitative study that is both critically ethnographic (Madison, 2011) and action research. It aims to understand how ten geographically isolated Wyoming Latina students navigate their academic, cultural, linguistic and social needs in the context of a predominantly White state with a growing Latino/a population. This critical ethnographic study (Madison, 2011) consists of interviews, observations, and data (writing assignments completed by participants) from an action-research project gathered from a group of ten geographically isolated Wyoming Latina high school (9 freshmen and 1 sophomore) within Snowy Range City (pseudonym) over a one-year period and specifically focused on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2013.

The proposed study is part of ongoing research funded by the University of Wyoming Social Justice Research Center and in collaboration with several Snowy Range City community entities. As such, this study constitutes a multi-pronged and largely supported endeavor with the understanding that such research will result in improved educational outcomes for its participants. At this point in time, I continue to collect and analyze data. As completed interviews have provided preliminary analysis, additional follow-up interviews will continue through the summer of 2013 and beyond. All data will be included in the final analysis of this study. Once all interviews have been transcribed and preliminarily analyzed, all participants will be contacted for a 30-minute follow-up interview as a means of clarifying and expanding responses from the first interview. The follow-up interview will also be utilized as a means of "member-checking" (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Follow-up interviews will also be audio recorded for further analysis.

### **Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials**

The impetus for this research project emerged from my close relationships with two Snowy Range City community activists who founded a program entitled Latina Emerging Scholars (pseudonym). Latina Emerging Scholars, a group of self-selected Latina teens at varying academic levels who live in Snowy Range City, Wyoming is a program founded by two community activists in Snowy Range City, with the goal of academically, personally and financially supporting them through high school and at least through their first year of college. In fall 2012, I hosted their group of "Latina Emerging Scholars" (LES) from Snowy Range City. Since this visit, we have continued to nurture our relationship, discuss potential collaborations and are eager to move this project forward. I began my research project in summer of 2013, where I conducted ten 40 minute to 1 hour interviews with the participants. In addition to the interviews, I led a five-day effort entitled the "Emerging Latina Scholars Intensive Writing Institute" where the ten

LES girls engaged in a series of pre-writing and writing activities which culminated in 10-12 page individual autobiographies. For the remaining summer, I continue to meet with the LES girls remotely each week (in conjunction with the LES founders) where we are focusing on improving their academic skills.

### **Findings**

The following themes have emerged from the data collected. By the time of the AERA conference, I will have conducted a more thorough data analysis. Here, I briefly describe them.

#### ***“As long as you do it, you’ll get an A”:* Longing for high expectations from teachers and within school**

Participants shared their perceptions of teachers’ expectations of them. One participant summed up her experience with turning in homework by saying, “As long as you do it, you’ll get an A.” This statement represents participants’ frustration, disappointment and consistent encounters with teachers who expected very little of them. In fact, participants agreed that, for the most part, teachers would frequently praise them for the quality of their submitted assignments although the participants had spent very little time or exerted minimal effort in completing them.

#### ***“I do remember”:* Vivid early memories of reading and writing**

All but one of the participants recounted their earliest memory of reading and writing with great clarity and detail. Almost surprising themselves with the facility with which these memories arose, participants relayed the locations, people and interactions they had with reading and writing text at very early ages in their development. “I do remember,” one participant responded in awe, after I asked her if she could tell me about her early memories of reading and writing. The ways in which the participants connected these memories to their current relationship with reading and writing proved striking – some made direct links; others displayed a lack of awareness between the two.

#### ***“I wouldn’t describe myself as smart”:* Cognitive Dissonance, Defining and Identifying Smartness in Others but not in Self**

The theme of “smartness” emerged as one which participants wrestled with. While they had relatively coherent and solid definitions of the definition of smartness, all, without exception, agreed that they would not use “smart” as a word to describe themselves. “I wouldn’t describe myself as smart,” one participant stated. It became increasingly clear that there was a cognitive or perhaps cultural dissonance among the participants between their theoretical understanding of “smartness” and their “real-life” self-perceptions of smartness.

#### ***“There’s lots of white kids and there’s lots of rich people here”:* Contrasting Snowy Range City to Hometown in Mexico**

The stark contrast between Snowy Range City and the participants’ hometowns in Mexico was a theme that arose consistently and often. Demographically, Snowy Range City was blindingly white while their hometowns were oases of brown family members, friends and community folk. Additionally, Snowy Range City is extremely wealthy and although rural, much different than most of the participants’ rural experiences which consisted primarily of *rancho* living. “There’s lots of white kids and there’s lots of rich people there,” one participant commented in reference to describing Snowy Range City. The immersion into a white space presented significant challenges to the participants’ ability to successfully acclimate to the new culture of Snowy Range City.

### **Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

First, this research begins to fill the wide scholarship gap around potentially college-bound Latino/a students in geographically isolated areas and, in the process, uncovers their potential needs who, as of now, are seriously ignored. Secondly, identifying the needs of these Latino/a students in Wyoming allows educators and educational institutions, both local and statewide, to better understand and address

these needs as well as develop rigorous curricula and programs that will lead to increased college-going rates. Third, such findings can inform pedagogical practices and enrich culturally responsive teaching methods that can be applied on a national level. Finally, research findings may ignite a larger conversation about the significance of geographically isolated Latino/a students in Wyoming that could, in turn, lead to broader policies and further research related to their education. Finally, in connection to the annual meeting theme, I illustrate the ways in which the power of this type of education research can innovatively impact practice and policy specifically for an under-served and under-research student population of color. I conclude with recommendations for changes in policy and practices to academically support and ensure the success of geographically isolated Wyoming Latina students and beyond.

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