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# Communicative Practices That Lead To Timely High School Graduation Against All Odds: A Positive Deviance Inquiry In A Predominantly Hispanic School

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COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES THAT LEAD TO TIMELY HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADUATION AGAINST ALL ODDS: A POSITIVE DEVIANCE INQUIRY IN  
A PREDOMINANTLY HISPANIC SCHOOL

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2011

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GRADUATION AGAINST ALL ODDS: A POSITIVE DEVIANCE INQUIRY IN

A PREDOMINANTLY HISPANIC SCHOOL

By

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## **Abstract**

The school dropout rate among Hispanics is a major financial, educational, and public concern in the United States. However, some school districts that primarily enroll Hispanic students are succeeding in retaining and graduating their students against all odds, utilizing resources already present within their community. These institutions are “positive deviants” – they are “deviants” because they are not the norm and “positive” because they embody desirable outcomes. In such high schools are enrolled students, who against all odds, work their way to timely graduation. They are positive deviants within their institution. The present study conducted in a U.S.-Mexico border city focused on the communicative behaviors of primarily Mexican high school students, the largest U.S. immigrant Hispanic subgroup with the lowest (50.6%) high school completion rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The 20 Positive Deviant students interviewed were screened with six criteria: the student is a senior, is graduating on time, student is of Hispanic origin, is economically disadvantaged, has a GPA of 3.0 or above, and the student is the first generation in their family to graduate from a U.S. high school. Key communicative practices identified to be useful in retaining and timely graduation of students include: regular, consistent, and positive messages from educators and parents to “stay in school” from early grades; constant verbal affirmation from parents, educators, and mentors praising students for academic and other achievements; and clear and repeated parental expectations to “do things right.” In addition, involvement in extracurricular activities help students stay engaged in school, while teaching life skills, teamwork, and leadership; peer support groups among students help them stay out of trouble and in prioritizing schoolwork over social activities; and parental messages such as “Don’t make the same mistakes I did” help students understand and grasp the consequences of dropping out of school.

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## **Preface**

Education has been a life-long passion of mine. When I was a child, I began a love affair with books. As a monolingual Spanish-speaker in a family where no one spoke English, I faced what many first U.S. generation children face: a daunting school experience not understanding the language. As Midouche (1998) recalls, minority students were immersed in a “sink or swim” English environment. Luckily, through my love of reading I emerged as a swimmer. I was always motivated to continue my studies and throughout my academic career, there were memorable teachers who recognized me, praised me, and mentored me. I remember the sense of accomplishment receiving my bachelor’s degree and pursuing my career in communications.

Fast forward twenty years: I find myself shocked at the large number of Hispanic students dropping out of high school. I had always imagined a future where all students regardless of their nationality or ethnicity would be college graduates. Working in a recognized school district, I am deeply curious why the national public school system is failing our children. After taking a few classes with my advisor, Dr. Arvind Singhal, and learning about his work on the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to change inspired me to conduct the present study. Interviewing the PD students brought back memories of my own childhood struggles. One of the striking changes that I observed was the students’ pride in being bilingual and their hands-on mentoring by educators. Students are no longer embarrassed to speak Spanish or treated like second-hand citizens for doing so. The communicative practices uncovered in the present study are timeless human interactions, which may have been overlooked and taken for granted in today’s fast-paced technology driven world.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

“The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

The school dropout rate among Hispanics<sup>1</sup> is a major economic, cultural, and societal concern in the United States. However, some school districts that predominantly enroll Hispanic students are succeeding in retaining and graduating their students against all odds, utilizing resources already present within their community. These institutions are “positive deviants” – they are “deviants” because they are not the norm and “positive” because they embody desirable outcomes. Even among schools with relatively lower graduation rates, there may be individuals who overcome multiple barriers i.e. the “positive deviants”, and find a way to graduate on time. The present study explores the Positive Deviance approach to retaining and graduating students in a large urban high school with the district’s highest (2.6%) dropout rate and a Hispanic student population of 74% (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09). The school district is located in the southwestern United States on the U.S. - Mexico Border. It will investigate how some students

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<sup>1</sup> As ethnic labels carry their own baggage, participants in this study were asked to select a term that they self-identified with from the following categories: Chicano/a, Mexican-American, Mexican, Latino/a, or Hispanic. The majority of respondents selected Mexican-American or Hispanic. In this study, I use the word “Hispanic” since it is the term most commonly used by official and government entities, which are cited throughout this study. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term “Hispanic” to describe persons who self-identify, regardless of race, as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central, or South American.

against social, economic, and cultural obstacles, are able to graduate on time utilizing communicative practices that lead to better outcomes.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau, during 2000-2006 Hispanics accounted for one-half of the nation's growth and the Hispanic growth rate (24.3%) was more than three times (6.1%) the growth rate of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2006). As the fastest growing minority in the country, Hispanics reflect the future face of the nation. When 35% of non-U.S. born Hispanics drop out of high school and 11% of native-born Hispanics drop out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) the societal consequences are grim. As a Hispanic subgroup, Mexicans make up the largest immigrant population (Lutz, 2007) and have the lowest high school completion rate (50.6%). Politicians, educators, parents, and taxpayers troubled by the high dropout numbers often propose overhauling the national public school system, allocating more money per student, creating monetary incentives for educator performance, administering knowledge-based tests for teachers, or implementing new curriculum and instructional strategies to solve the dropout issue. A new way to view the dropout problem is using the Positive Deviance approach to social change (Singhal, 2009) that is derived from the belief that the answers to a community's problems exist in the local wisdom of the people. Instead of spending a lot of time analyzing the problem, the facilitator and the community focus on identifying what is working in a community, and working with the most ordinary people (Pascale & Sternin, 2010)

### **Consequences of Hispanic dropout rates**

The U.S. economy is strongly tied to education and skills that influence social prestige, socio-economic status, and occupation. High school dropouts are stigmatized socially and traditionally have a life-long disadvantaged economic position. This social and economic stigma

is magnified when the dropout is a minority (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Aud, 2010; Davalos, 1999; EPE Research Center, 2007; Rumberger, 1987; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Stearns, Mueller, et., 2007). Hispanics, as the fastest growing minority population in the U.S., need higher education to end the cycle of poverty and maximize their ability to compete in the global workforce. As high school dropouts, Hispanics are less likely to be part of the adult work force and they often stay in low-wage jobs with minimum promotion prospects (Rumberger, 1987). In the U.S. 44% of dropouts under the age of 24 are unemployed (EPE Research Center, 2007) and the number is higher for Hispanics.

Dropouts have an increased likelihood of being imprisoned for breaking the law, being dependent on government aid, and have inferior mental and physical health than people with more education (Grossman & Kaestner, 1997; Rumberger, 1987; Witte, 1997). These consequences translate into a high monetary and social outlay for the country including incarceration and government assistance costs, non-existent tax income, as well as having a low-skill workforce that cannot compete in an educated world market. In addition, those who drop out of school early are less likely to complete a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Murnane, Willet, & Tyler, 1999), so the societal costs for younger dropouts is higher than for older dropouts.

### **The Positive Deviance approach**

Although the conventional intervention strategy is to focus on the problem, identify it, isolate it, and then fix it, the Positive Deviance (PD) approach begins at a very different place. Instead of focusing on intervening with individuals who carry “deficits”, PD focuses on those individuals or groups that have the same resources as the rest of the community, yet manage to overcome obstacles and succeed. As noted previously, these social and behavioral innovators are

referred to as “positive deviants” (Pascale & Sternin, 2010; Dura & Singhal, 2009). The dropout problem is a complex social and behavioral issue that is affecting a U.S. generation. What this research project seeks to explore is not “Why do so many Hispanic students drop out of school?” but instead “What makes some individuals in the Hispanic communities graduate from high school in a timely manner against all odds?”

In 2010, the school district was selected by the Broad Foundation as one of five national urban school districts that demonstrated the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among poor and minority students (The Broad Foundation, 2010). The school district is located on the U.S.-Mexican border and is the second largest school district in El Paso. It has a student population of over 44,000 students in 61 PreK-12 schools, with Hispanics making up 90% of the population (The Broad Foundation, 2010). The district has over 81% of its students eligible for free or reduced lunch, a national indicator of an economically disadvantaged population. Yet in 2007 (the most recent year for which graduation data were available), the district’s average graduation rate for its Hispanic students was 70 percent, the fifth-highest graduation rate for Hispanic students among the 100 largest urban school districts in America (The Broad Foundation, 2010). This study will explore positive deviance practices within the district’s largest high school, which has the highest dropout rate. The inquiry focuses on the communicative practices of students who have overcome numerous obstacles to graduate on time.

In the last 20 years, the Positive Deviance (PD) approach has yielded effective outcomes in over 40 countries with a wide variety of complex social problems. The PD process is successful when it is utilized in dealing with issues that encompass three factors: (1) The issues are enmeshed in a complex social system, (2) The problems require social and behavioral

change, and (3) they entail solutions that have unlikely consequences. By observing exceptions that thrive against numerous barriers, the focus of the issue is redirected to “what works” instead of “what’s wrong”. (Pascale & Sternin, 2010, p.10). The Positive Deviance approach has worked in solving multifaceted social issues such as malnutrition, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS prevention, hospital-acquired infections, and various health topics. It has also been used in corporate settings to increase sales, boost team performance, and the like.

### **The origins of Positive Deviance**

In 1990, Save the Children, a U.S. non-governmental organization (NGO) was invited by the Vietnamese government to implement a program that would save children from malnutrition. At the time about 65% of the children in Vietnam were categorized as malnourished. Save the Children asked Jerry and Monique Sternin, long time development practitioners, to go to Vietnam to head the project. The Positive Deviance approach had been proposed as a research and interventional framework at Tufts University but no one had put it into practice (Pascale & Sternin, 2010).

The Sternins faced the monumental task of ending child hunger in a poverty-laden country, and they were given only a six month visa to complete the task. The Vietnamese government was unfriendly at best, they had suffered greatly in the American war, there was the U.S. trade embargo in place, and they were leery of foreigners. The Sternins knew that expert-based best practices, such as supplemental food programs, were not applicable since these type of programs would not be sustainable due to the poverty in the country. Instead, they decided to implement the new Positive Deviance based approach. The deciding factors to use PD was that the solution needed to be able to be maintained after they left and based on practices that were

already working with existing resources (Pascale & Sternin, 2010). When the Sternins met with national and local leaders and explained that they wanted to observe the behaviors of the villagers and have the answers come from within the community, the Vietnamese officials were skeptical at first but later warmed to the idea. The pilot site chosen was the Quang Xuong District, four hours from Hanoi. It was an extremely poor village with exceptionally high malnutrition rates (Pascale & Sternin, 2010). In collaboration with community leaders, the Sternins collected baseline measurements and socio-economic information of the families living in the village. They found that the population was “poor”, “very poor” or “very, very poor”. When asked if it was possible for any child from a “very, very poor” family to be well-fed in the village the answer was “Có,Có!” or “It is!”. The “Có,Có!” answer became the “aha” moment in later PD designs (Pascale & Sternin, 2010).

Through onsite team observation, it was noted that mothers who had well-fed children added small shrimps, crabs, and greens readily found in the rice paddies to their family’s meals. In addition, the children were fed small portions four to five times per day. Also, they observed that these families engaged in strict handwashing throughout the day. This sanitizing habit helped to keep the family healthy. These small actions led to healthy children, but the positive deviant mothers had not shared these actions with their neighbors since they were not socially accepted practices. The adding of shrimps, crabs, and greens was the equivalent of adding earth worms, snails, and dandelion weeds to the meals of children in the U.S. (Peters, 2010).

The observation team’s next step was how to get the villagers to “act” on these new behaviors. The challenge was succinctly summarized by one of the wise elders, "A thousand hearings aren't worth one seeing, and a thousand seeings aren't worth one doing" (Pascale &

Sternin, 2010, p.34). As non-threatening facilitators, the Sternins asked community leaders how they could share this information with others in the village. The group decided that if they developed community cooking and feeding classes this would empower each family to find what recipes worked best for them. The village leaders asked Save the Children to provide an egg or tofu per child for two weeks. This extra food provided the incentive for the families to come to the classes. There were no additional resources given to the population yet within five and a half months, the pilot project was deemed successful. Malnourished village children showed a steady increase in weight that was monitored, documented, and posted by the health volunteers until the children reached a healthy “graduation” weight (Pascale & Sternin, 2010).

Instead of telling other villages to follow the same plan, the Sternins were adamant about each village discovering what worked for them. Self-discovering and community ownership are chief components of the PD approach. After two years, the PD community model became widely accepted and spread to other villages, saving the lives of hundreds of Vietnamese children. The Sternins ended up staying six years instead of six months and continued refining their PD approach in Vietnam. From Vietnam, the PD approach would spread to other countries and tackle other complex problems.

### **PD actions lead to elementary school retention in Argentina**

In rural Argentina, children have a 50% chance of dropping out of school by the seventh grade. The majority of the dropout rate is due to poverty. Children often have to work the fields harvesting cassava, tobacco leaves, or weeding to help support the family. In October 2002, the World Bank asked Jerry Sternin to travel to Misiones, Argentina to start exploring a Positive Deviance approach to retain children in school (Sternin, 2009). At first, Sternin was met with



teacher defiance and skepticism that an outsider would solve their student attrition rates. After an extensive daylong dialogue where there was no blame assigned, the teachers were united in their efforts to find a solution. They suggested forming teacher-parent groups that could research which area elementary schools had high retention rates and similar resources. The invited parents readily accepted the challenge and identified themselves as Positive Deviant parents and farmers. The teacher-parent teams attended a ten-day PD workshop and identified eight schools that had retention rates of 78% to 100% (Singhal & Dura, 2009). The teams visited the schools and came back with a primary finding: the difference was that the teachers had a great deal of respect for their students. Through perceptive facilitation from Jerry Sternin, this premise was discussed and the group agreed that most teachers had respect for their students but this did not make them a high retention school.

The parent-teacher teams went back to the field to dig deeper and observed four important deviant factors: 1). They found that unlike traditional schools, the high performers had engaged parents. The parents helped maintain the campus through carpentry, sewing, or cooking. They felt comfortable talking to the teachers about their children and felt ownership of the school. The teachers greeted the parents warmly, invited them to visit the school, and visited the student's home before the beginning of the school year. The teachers entered into a "*compromiso*" or a contract with the parents that outlined the respective responsibilities of the teacher, parents, and student (Sternin, 2009). 2). Schools with high retention rates also followed different teaching methodologies. Instead of teaching all students the same, the classes were broken up into groups and assignments were tailored to the student's abilities. 3). The high performing schools engaged community leaders to talk to parents thinking of pulling their children from school. Many schools considered the priests their religious and community leaders and recruited them to

support their cause. 4). Lastly, the high performing schools understood that hungry children could not learn, so they fed them breakfast instead of lunch. This journey of self-discovery provided a bond between the teacher-parent PD groups and the parents decided to act on these actions and make “commitment” posters for every child stating that they would keep their children in school, which in turn would help them end the cycle of poverty (Singhal & Dura, 2009).

### **Thesis Plan**

What implications do the Vietnam and Argentina experiences with positive deviance have for school retention rates in the Southwestern U.S. among Hispanic populations? The present study seeks to shed some light on this question.

In the next chapter, an extensive literature review presents studies on high school retention and dropouts among the Hispanic population, and the Positive Deviance approach is further explained. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in the present study, including in-depth interviews, and participatory sketching. Chapter 4 reveals the results and findings, and Chapter 5 presents the conclusions and implications of this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The present chapter reviews the literature on factors that influence high school retention and dropout rates among Hispanics, including communicative behaviors (e.g. parent, teacher, or peer support), and also review the positive deviance approach in more detail. The research questions that guide the present study are posed.

#### **Studies on high school dropouts**

A challenge encountered in researching graduation rates is that they vary due to unclear high school graduation rate calculations. Independent researchers suggest that many more of the country's youth are dropping out than reported by governmental organizations. There is a wide difference between federal, state, and independent reported rates. For example, the Texas reported graduation rate for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is 80%, for the U.S. Department of Education it is 73% and Education Week reports the Texas graduation rate at 65%. Recent federal regulations are requiring states to implement a common formula by the current school year 2010-2011 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

The United States was ranked as a leader in education with 100% high school graduation rates after World War II. Today, the U.S. lags behind as number 21 among industrialized nations worldwide in graduation rates (EPE Research Center, 2007). More than 1.2 million students drop out of school every year in the United States. This translates into more than 6,000 students every school day or one student every 26 seconds. In addition, 70% of eighth graders cannot read at their grade level (EPE Research Center, 2007). Due to these alarming statistics, extensive research studies have explored the multiple reasons why and when teens leave schools.

Researchers found that most leave due to academic failure, discipline problems, and for employment opportunities. Across all grade levels, ages, and ethnic groups ninth graders had the highest dropout rate (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Students aged 16 and younger are more likely than older students to leave school for disciplinary reasons. A school's zero-tolerance disciplinary policy may also contribute to students dropping out. In addition, students who repeat a grade before reaching high school have a higher risk of dropping out of school than students who are promoted in a timely manner (Stearns, Moller, et al, 2007). Other contributing factors include conflicts with teachers or other students, school disciplinary actions such as suspension, isolating students with discipline issues, or transferring them to an alternate campus (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Dropping out of high school has numerous detrimental results for the individual and society in general. Negative economic impact is the most noticeable difference. Individuals ages 18 through 65 who were high school dropouts earned an income of about \$24,000 a year in 2007 (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). In contrast, individuals in the same age category who had completed their high school degree or obtained a GED certificate earned a salary of about \$40,000. Also, there are a higher number of dropouts that are unemployed compared to adults who earned a high school degree (U. S. Department of Education, 2009).

In addition, adults who dropped out of school are disproportionately represented in U.S. prisons (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). Approximately 65% of convicts are dropouts and the lack of education is one of the strongest indicators of criminal behavior. A dropout is more than eight times more likely to be in prison than a high school graduate, and almost 20 times more likely than a college graduate (Harlow, 2003). The cost for incarceration is high as well.

The U.S. spends about \$22,600 per prison inmate per year compared to \$9,644 per student per year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

Furthermore, regardless of income, people who did not complete their high school education ages 25 or older report being in worse overall health than those adults with a high school degree (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). In Texas, a statewide study of high school dropouts showed that since 1986 Texas schools have lost almost 2 million students with a net loss of \$488 billion to the state. This figure represents lost taxes and income; increased welfare subsidies, unemployment, training, and incarceration expenditures. The study's findings suggest that an average of 140,000 Texas students drop out every year or six students every hour (Intercultural Development Research Asociation (IDRA) 2001). Texas high school dropouts for the class of 2008 will cost the state almost \$30.7 billion in lost earnings over their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

### **Dropout rate within the Hispanic community**

Most investigations of Hispanic students have focused on their poor academic performance. The reasons for this have been attributed to the obstacles students face such as the English language barrier, immigrant parents who are not familiar with the American education system, cultural disparity, and institutional practices such as state and federal testing (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). These obstacles often contribute to teens dropping out of school. In addition, minority youth are more likely to have disciplinary issues. Schools with a high percentage of poor or minority students are more likely to have strict disciplinary policies in place that may influence minority youth to drop out (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). More disturbing is the fact that Hispanic students drop out of school at a higher rate than

their classmates do even when their grades are average and they are not considered at-risk (Fernandez & Chu, 1988). When the school's regulations and curriculum is directed to reach only mainstream students, these minority students may become unmotivated and leave school (Zalaquett, 2006).

Other issues that affect high school completion among Hispanics in the U.S. are ethnicity, language proficiency, generational status, family background, and socioeconomic status. Family socioeconomic status has the largest impact on high school completion. The cycle of poverty continues for Hispanics forced to drop out of school to help support their families because the poverty rate for families headed by dropouts is more than twice that of families headed by high school graduates (Baum & Payea, 2004).

Latinas in every grade are most likely to leave school due to family reasons, either due to teenage pregnancy, taking care of younger siblings, or to fulfill domestic obligations for other family members. Older Hispanic males and White males most frequently leave school for employment reasons (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Poverty is a relentless obstacle in staying in school and a primary contributor to dropping out. This factor becomes especially important to Mexicans, which are the largest immigrant group and whose dropout rates are the highest among minority groups (Lutz, 2007). Research also demonstrates that maintaining their native Spanish along with English provides a greater likelihood to complete high school, when controlling for socioeconomic status and other variables (Lutz, 2007).

## **Impact of bilingual communication**

One of the reasons Hispanic students drop out of school is lack of English-language proficiency. There are about 5.5 million students attending American public schools who are not native English speakers and 80% of these students are Spanish native speakers (García, McCardle, & Nixon, 2007). Minority students who are limited English proficient (LEP) are the fastest growing student population in the United States. K-12 students classified as LEP grew from 5.3 million to 10 million between the years of 1991-1999 (Smith-Davis, 2004). Presently, one in three children in the United States comes from a racial or ethnic minority group, one in seven converses in a language other than English at home, and one in fifteen was born outside of the country (Wiese & García, 1998). Many of these students perform poorly in school due to their low proficiency in English (Cabrera, 2004).

The pervasiveness of Spanish language is evident at the high school in El Paso, Texas, where the present research investigation is based. Visiting the campus and walking down its hallways one often hears students speaking Spanish or “Spanglish”, a combination of English and Spanish. This second language acceptance is an important part of the students’ cultural identity, and one that in many parts of the country is not tolerated. Yet, at this high school, as in other schools located on the U.S. - Mexico border, Spanish is an essential component of how students communicate with their peers, family, and community members. Observing the students, one notices how effortlessly they switch from Spanish in the hallways to English in the classroom. Part of this acceptance and organizational climate may be attributed to the district vision statement: *“All students who enroll in our schools will graduate from high school, fluent in two or more languages, prepared and inspired to continue their education in a four year college,*

*university or institution of higher education so that they become successful citizens in their community.*” This vision statement is instilled in students since they start school and many students can recite the vision statement in English and Spanish. Students at the district are encouraged to speak, read, and write in Spanish as a second language.

Bilingual education is also a way to provide children with self-esteem through an understanding of their cultural history, knowledge of their ethnic traditions, and pride in their native tongue. Language in general and bilingual education in particular, gets to the center of heritage, assimilation, culture and quality of life (Moses, 2000). The recent English-only initiative primarily serves as an anti-Spanish immigrant reform policy that devalues the Spanish language, its usefulness, and the Spanish-speaking community. In addition, an underlying current to the opposition of bilingual education is the fear of students’ criticism and contempt for the English dominant culture, which opponents believe can lead to non-assimilation into American society (Moses, 2000). Historically, the value of keeping the native tongue has been a conflicting one, even among immigrant parents. Parents’ intentions to maintain their native language becomes difficult when they receive little encouragement to do so from schools or from the society at large. Some have feelings of insecurity and guilt about their children’s academic performance that leads them to abandon the use of Spanish with their family (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Bernhard, 2001).

For parents who were monolingual Spanish-speakers and experienced discrimination, humiliation and physical abuse as first-generation American students, the lesson they learned was not to speak Spanish at all. They learned early on that students who spoke English had a better chance of assimilation and were not mistreated by teachers or made fun of by peers.



Therefore, many of these parents purposively chose not to emphasize the learning of Spanish so they would not have to endure the repression they had experienced growing up (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000).

A 20-year Title VII expert and educator, Midobuche (1998) recounts her personal experience growing up as a LEP student on the Texas border and the humiliation she suffered for speaking Spanish in school. Midobuche (1998) states that when she told her mother about the punishments she endured at school, her mother told her that since she had been born in the United States she “should respect and not question the teacher’s authority” (Midobuche, p.50). In Texas, it was a crime to teach in any language other than English from 1919 to 1969 (Midobuche, 1998). Like many Mexican American students prior to and after the Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, Midouche was made to feel ashamed of her language, heritage, food, culture, and non-English speaking parents. This insensitivity to students’ cultural identities in the American education system left questions of self-identity and doubts of self-worth for generations of children.

The value of the Spanish language also creates ambivalence about bilingual education in the minds of many parents. This ambivalence may explain why Orellana, Ek, and Hernández’ (2000) research with immigrant parents found confusion about continuing their students’ education in Spanish. After Proposition 227 in California dictated that bilingual education would no longer be an option, immigrant parents from Mexico and Central America said they felt that their children would succeed faster academically and professionally if they were fluent in English (Orellana, Ek, & Hernández, 2000).

## **Student retention within the Hispanic community**

Even between different ethnic groups, researchers have noted major differences across generations. Among immigrants, the length of residence in the United States is related with greater school achievement (Hirschman, 1996). The assimilation theory foresees that every generation will have more opportunity to educational attainment than the last as they adapt to American society cultural and societal norms (Gordon, 1964). Immigrant resilience to better themselves and their families has resulted in many Hispanics overcoming obstacles to obtain their high school degree and continue their studies at institutions of higher learning.

### **Communicative behaviors to encourage Hispanic high school retention**

Positive Deviance approach principles will be applied in this study to discover the wisdom that already exists among Hispanic students who, against all odds, stay in school and graduate from high school. The PD exploration will help identify the communicative behaviors utilized by the students within their community that help them stay in school. The focus is not only on the intrapersonal communicative behaviors of the students themselves, but also on the relationships they have with their family, teachers and school personnel, friends and peers. This study explores the different factors that can affect a teen's decision to stay in school and graduate on time.

### **Intrapersonal communication**

Most Hispanic students live in a cultural divide between English in school and Spanish at home. Brunn (1999) states that self-identity and self-worth are intricately tied to social acceptance through language. One's native language is central to how people perceive

themselves and are perceived by others. These elements form an important part of the acculturation and socialization process.

Cultural identity has three main parts: one's racial and ethnic heritage, the connection to one's cultural community and the sense that one's race and culture deserve respect and are valued. Moses (2000) argues that with a strong sense of self and an encouraging context in which to make positive life choices, students have the best chance of achieving self-determination. In a study by Zalaquett (2006) of 12 successful Hispanic college students, 100% of the students interviewed said they were proud of their academic accomplishments and understood the value of education as the path to future success. The students commented that they viewed themselves as role models for their siblings since they were the first in their family to attend college and although they received limited academic guidance from their parents, they were inspired to stay in school out of respect for their parents.

In addition to formal education, a student's ability to communicate through technology provides a sense of self-pride and achievement. The rise of global technology pushes students to engage in communication and learning that is constantly changing such as social networking, interactive internet games, computer software, cell phone applications, instant messaging, podcasts, and videos. Students, specifically teenagers of all ethnicities, are always looking for new ways of connecting socially with bigger groups across physical, social, political, and cultural boundaries. This requires that they learn how to use technology across national boundaries (Ajayi, 2006). Self-identity is associated with the students' ability to navigate across cultural, economic and language boundaries and they may find out that dropping out of high school is not a viable option for life-long success.

## **Parental communication and involvement**

Recent research has shown that relationships at home and at school with key individuals such as parents, teachers, and friends are associated with student behavior at school and ultimately academic achievement (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009; Diaz, 2010). Parental engagement is one of the strongest influences in deciding whether a child stays in school or drops out (Martinez, 2004). Parental communication such as talking to their child about education expectations, discussing their school day, reviewing their homework, going to visit their teachers, or being involved in school activities has proven to be helpful in keeping youth motivated to stay in school (Anguiano, 2004; Woolley, Kol & Bowen 2009; Zalaquett, 2005; Diaz, 2010; Singhal & Dura, 2009; The Positive Deviance Initiative, 2009). Researchers have found that parental support provides Hispanic youth with the encouragement to do better in school, thus students achieve a higher grade point average and graduate on time.

In addition, communicating in the parent's native tongue is critical in preserving a strong cultural self-identity for Hispanic youth. Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo (2006) conducted a study of 16 Hispanic parents regarding their views on language usage. The interviewed parents believed that being bilingual is an advantage and an important component to economic and societal success in the United States. They also believed that their children's ability to speak Spanish is paramount in maintaining family and cultural roots.

Although keeping their native tongue is important to immigrant parents, most do not realize how easy it is to lose fluency in Spanish in an English-dominated world (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). Most immigrant parents are focused on providing for their families and have little time to learn English themselves. They speak Spanish to their children in an effort to keep

their culture alive and are successful with younger children. Though elementary school immigrant children often speak Spanish at home and keep cultural traditions, the media and social pressures to become “Americanized” often influences the students to lose their native tongue, especially when they become adolescents (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001).

Researchers have stated the importance of examining Hispanic family values and their influence on student education (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Values such as “*respeto*”, “*educación*” and “*familismo*” are highly desirable cultural characteristics. *Respeto*, respect for self and others, especially elders is a value that Hispanic children are taught by their parents early in life and includes adult authority figures in school and in their family. In a study about pregnancy avoidance by Alejandra Diaz (2010) female college students were asked how they managed to stay pregnancy free during their teen years. Several replied, “Respect for my parents”. In the same study, respondents said that the close relationship with their family, seeing how hard their parents worked to provide for them, and not wanting to disappoint their parents motivated them to not get pregnant (Diaz, 2010).

The translation of *educación*, means much more than what “education” means in English (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). The Spanish word encompasses both the academic and the cultural values instilled in Hispanics since childhood. For many Hispanic parents a person does not need to be highly educated to have a strong moral compass, although both are highly desirable. *Familismo* is the “desire to maintain strong family values...and commitment to the family over individual needs and desires” (Halgunseth, 2006). *Familismo* combined with strong parent-teacher partnerships has been positively attributed to the success of Hispanic youth in school completion (Singhal & Dura, 2009; The Positive Deviance Initiative, 2009). In a study about Latina pregnancy avoidance (Diaz, 2010) college females ages 18-28 said that although

their parents rarely spoke to them about sex or pregnancy, their parents consistently communicated the message that their children should “finish school”. Most respondents said that their parents spoke to them often about the importance of education and were very clear in communicating that to achieve economic independence and success they must continue their studies, and one respondent stated that there was always a parental expectation that she go to college, since her siblings had already attended.

### **Engagement in peer-centered extracurricular activities**

Research studies have shown that students who are active in extracurricular activities have a more vested interest in school, have a higher grade point average than peers who are not involved, and are less likely to have behavioral problems or drop out of school (Brown, 2002; Diaz, 2010). Extracurricular activities offer a formalized way for students to be involved with school and their peers. The social interaction provides students with a communicative outlet that contributes to their social self-esteem and self-worth. Involved students feel part of a team that bonds them with their coaches or school sponsors and teammates. This bond contributes to a student’s sense of well-being and avoids social and academic alienation that often contributes to dropping out of school. In addition, school sponsors and coaches often serve as role models and mentors to minority students who may not have parents that share dominance of the English language, or knowledge of the student’s chosen activity or sport. A study by Brown & Evans (2002) found that Hispanic students have a greater sense of connection to school when they are involved in extracurricular activities. The study also found that Hispanic students participated significantly less in extracurricular activities than their European American counterparts, except for sports. Athletic participation seems to have a sizable appeal and retention for minorities and cuts across ethnic boundaries.

In addition, extracurricular activities are usually held after school hours, a critical time for engaging in risky behavior for many students (Snyder, 1997). Thus, participating in these programs reinforces socially acceptable behavior. As several female respondents stated in Diaz's (2010) study, extracurricular activities helped them "stay out of trouble". Besides keeping them busy, the programs helped them connect with other students who had comparable interests and motivated them to keep their grades up, while providing them with increased self-confidence.

### **Teacher-student interactions**

Research has found that relationships with teachers are also one of the most important factors in determining students' academic success (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). Racial and ethnic minority students show positive academic outcomes when they have supportive teacher relationships (Anthrop-Gonzalez, 2006). In a study of middle and high school students that included Hispanics, key factors of family, school and neighborhood were analyzed, and teacher support was found as the most important factor in students having a positive attitude toward school, exhibiting better behavior, and obtaining higher grades (Woolley & Gogan-Kaylor, 2006).

Teachers and school personnel serve as adult role models to students during the day when parents are not around. They can provide minority students with career insights that their parents may not have, especially if the parents have limited schooling. In a 2001 study, Choy found that the probability of enrolling in an institution of higher learning is strongly linked to the parents' education level even when other factors are taken into account. Among 1992 first generation high school graduates, 27% were from families in which neither parent had attended college.

These high school graduates were more likely to be Hispanic or Black and be economically disadvantaged compared with their cohorts whose parents held college degrees (Choy, 2001).

Through daily interactions, educators communicate with students on their academic and extracurricular strengths, tutor and/or mentor them, and encourage students to strive for high school completion and higher educational attainment. In a study of predominately Hispanic students in seventh through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, student perceptions of school including the teacher-student relationship foretold which students remained in school (Davalos, 1999).

Katz (1999) examined the role that teacher interactions play in Hispanic students staying in school and found that students were very sensitive to educator messages they heard about succeeding or failing in school. Sharon Draper (2000), a teacher, writer and poet, writes about the power of the teacher-student connection. Draper recounts stories about how she reached students by always praising them, and by never giving up on them regardless of the student's disengagement. She tells the story of Tony, a problem student who was suspended from school for "cussing out the teacher" (Draper, p.64) and ended up dropping out of school. Two years later, Tony asked Draper for a recommendation letter to attend college. Draper recalls that she wrote the best letter she had ever composed. Ten years later, Tony showed up in her classroom with a rose, a grown man and a soldier. He apologized for his behavior and thanked her for believing in him. The angry, surly young man was now an English teacher like his mentor (Draper, 2000).

Furthermore, the study found that teachers often withdrew from a student based on the perceived negative individuals or peer group the student chose as friends. When a teacher does not invest in a student based on their chosen friends, the student-teacher relationship suffers and negatively affects the student even if the student is receiving support from other social groups.



This finding underlines the power and importance of teacher-student relationships in achieving educational success (Katz, 1999; Draper, 2000).

Teachers can build a more equitable learning environment for minority students by moving away from the conventional deficit-thinking model that blames students and their parents (Garcia and Guerra, 2004). Teachers who realize that many issues contributing to school detachment are rooted within broad social problems, such as poverty, dysfunctional families, and low social expectations for Hispanic youth—may become change agents in their students' lives. Through positive communication, students will feel motivated and encouraged to succeed and less liable to get in trouble at school. Students who receive support from caring adults are more likely to get good grades and to engage in positive practices that promote opportunities for future success (Garcia and Guerra, 2004).

### **Communication with peers**

Research studies indicate mixed findings with respect to the influence of friends and peer relationships for Hispanic students in determining academic outcomes (Gonzalez, 1997, Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2009, Katz, 1999, DeGarmo, 2006). As noted above, being friends with perceived troublemakers can influence a teacher to withdraw attention from a student resulting in a strained teacher-student relationship (Katz, 1999). DeGarmo & Martinez (2006) found that supportive friends did not influence academic outcomes with sixth to 12<sup>th</sup> grade Hispanic students. Similarly in a study of Hispanic 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students peer academic support was not found to be linked to student motivation (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2009). On the other hand, resilient Hispanic students that have friendships with peers who value education (in

addition to family support) can motivate them to perform better academically (Gonzalez, 1997; Zalaquett, 2006).

In overall terms, intrapersonal behavior as well as communicative behaviors with teachers, parents and peers play a large part in influencing students to drop out of high school or to continue their education and become successful adults. In the next section, we examine the fundamentals of the PD approach and link the behaviors to the Hispanic positive deviant students who are succeeding in beating the odds to graduate on time.

### **Conceptual tenets of Positive Deviance**

Positive Deviance is an oxymoronic term (Pascale & Sternin, 2010) used for people who thrive against multiple difficulties. The premise is that for a seemingly unsolvable problem, someone has found a solution. Oftentimes the individual or community does not realize that their behaviors are not normal, yet once the behaviors are studied and uncovered they can be replicated across communities. *Individual differences* (Pascale & Sternin, 2010) are the most valuable commodity and become the goldmine of the community. This section analyses the Positive Deviance methodology and how it can effectively be utilized to discover PD behaviors of successful Hispanic high school students.

1. *The Positive Deviance approach is premised on the principle that solutions that come from within the community are more readily accepted and more likely to have community ownership.* In this sense, the PD approach turns the conventional diffusion of innovations interventional model that believes in expertise coming from the outside and being communicated throughout on its head (Singhal, 2010). Three fundamental conceptual premises of PD are that it

is an asset-based method to social change; its strength is rooted in self-discovery; and the answer lies within ordinary people, not experts (Dura & Singhal, 2009).

The Positive Deviance approach brings to light individuals that utilize uncommon behaviors to succeed beyond all obstacles, while sharing the same resources as others in the community. However, it is not as simple as it sounds. What is most difficult to understand about the Positive Deviance approach is not what is similar about the ideas found in the solution, but what is different. One must learn through contrast. (Pascale & Sternin, 2010) This study will look to uncover the communicative behaviors of successful Positive Deviant Hispanic students who are graduating on time, while some of their peers are dropping out of school. The study will look at the intrapersonal communicative behaviors of the students, as well as their relationship with their parents and family, campus educators/mentors, and friends. The study will explore what intrapersonal assets and behaviors the teens possess that motivate them to complete high school. In the section that follows, key Positive Deviance tenets are further explored.

*Positive Deviance is based on asset-based social change.* Instead of the traditional knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) methodology, PD is a communication driven, action-oriented social change process (Dura & Singhal, 2009). It stresses practice instead of knowledge, the “how” instead of the “why” or “what” (Pascale & Sternin, 2010, p. 197). PD relies on a community of individuals discovering existing unusual, successful behaviors by peer innovators to solve an “intractable” problem. The problem is important, compelling, concrete, and specific (Pascale & Sternin, 2010), as illustrated by the teen pregnancy avoidance study conducted by Diaz (2010).

In Diaz’s study (2010) of Latina women in El Paso, Texas aged 18-28 who had stayed pregnancy free during their teen years, several factors were discovered. Important associations

that the young women remember making as teens were that sex equaled pregnancy, pregnancy equaled failure, and that finishing school meant not becoming pregnant and being successful. The parents' message about sex and pregnancy to the young women was subtle to non-existent in most cases. However, the message about finishing school was often communicated and reinforced by the parents through verbal, written, and interactive activities. Many mothers who had become pregnant when they were teenagers shared their stories about the harsh realities of being a teen mother and warned their daughters of the consequences, usually equating it to dropping out of high school. Most families stressed that if the girl did not become pregnant she was more likely to finish school, attend college, and have a successful career and life. In addition to parents, most of the girls had teachers or adult mentors that communicated the same "stay out of trouble" and "finish school" message which respondents say motivated them to graduate high school and continue their studies at an institution of higher learning.

2. *The Positive Deviance approach suggests that self-discovery through interactive engagement will lead the community to successful outcomes* (The Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010). PD subscribes that all individuals or groups who are part of the problem are also part of the solution. Since the solution lies within the community, there needs to be deep respect for the wisdom found among community members and their culture. The community discovers these solutions and decides how to practice these uncommon behaviors. The community also decides how to adapt them locally and how to expand them to the larger community. Positive Deviance practices require that the solution must be accessible to all, be simple to execute, and can be implemented immediately without additional resources (Singhal & Dura, 2009, Pascale & Sternin, 2010). The following case documented by Singhal and Dura (2009) in northern Uganda

with returned abductees who overcame tremendous odds to reintegrate themselves in society is illustrative.

Singhal and Dura (2009) report that for over two decades the Lord's Resistance Army has abducted, killed, raped, and enslaved young children, many of whom are enlisted as child soldiers. In 2007, Save the Children initiated a pilot program to assist in the reintegration of victimized girls in northern Uganda's Pader district using the Positive Deviance approach (Singhal & Dura, 2009). A team of Save the Children staff, health educators, and community representatives selected 500 girls to observe and help. Most of these girls were formerly abducted child soldiers or vulnerable girls who had experienced pregnancy at a young age. Thus, they were viewed as damaged goods and unmarriageable. Many turned to prostitution to make ends meet (Pascale & Sternin, 2010).

The team identified Positive Deviant girls and their distinctive behaviors and practices that helped them enjoy a higher quality of their life, and made them respected and integrated in their community. Some of these self-empowering actions were that the PD girls all worked harder, smarter, and pulled together to help each other through teamwork. The girls created a social outlet and an economic network for themselves. They respected themselves and other community members. Also, many of the girls had older women who served as their mentors. PD girls all did more with the resources they had. They saved money and invested it wisely to provide income for themselves and their family. For example, the girls bought seeds, grew crops and sold them; purchased animals for farming or for food; or became vendors in the village market. The PD girls continuously learned from their mentors and from one another. Over the course of the project the former victims seem to have integrated successfully into village life. The girls showed a remarked improvement in self-esteem and hygiene (Pascale & Sternin, 2010)

and through participatory sketching and interviews they show they are on their way to a new life free from violence and fear (Singhal & Dura, 2009).

3. *The PD approach believes that the answer lies within ordinary people, not experts, and once the answers are self-discovered by the community they should “act their way into a new way of thinking rather than think their way into a new way of acting” (Pascale & Sternin, 2010).* Positive Deviance change agents surrender their expertise, put away their ego, and instead listen and observe (Singhal, 2010). There needs to be a humble, open approach as the community’s journey of self-discovery begins to unfold. Community members must observe that “someone like me” is obtaining successful results with the same resources as their neighbor (Pascale & Sternin, 2010). The difficult part of this process is that often the solutions are so common sense that the innovators are unaware of their uncommon behavior and need change agents to observe and document the practice.

Based on the examination of the literature review and the conceptual tenets of Positive Deviance, the following research questions will frame and guide this study.

### **Research questions**

To frame my research inquiry, I decided to informally “act my way”. During a visit at a high school in the district, I paid careful attention to a conversation between a teacher and a parent, which helped me conceptualize some aspects of my research statement.

The teacher and I were talking about school policies and procedures in the English-language, when a parent timidly knocked on the door. The teacher greeted the parent warmly in Spanish and invited her into the room. The parent smiled shyly and seemed intimidated by us. She asked if she should return later. The teacher answered no, it was fine, and continued to be

friendly and talkative while the mother inquired in Spanish about her daughter's extended absence due to pregnancy and her progress in the class. I silently observed as the teacher had a 20-minute dialogue with the parent. During their conversation, the teacher advised the parent what the student needed to do to catch up on her work, provided worksheets with future assignments, and asked that her daughter come in to see her or call in two days. The teacher's tone throughout the conversation was matter of fact and not judgmental. When the parent left, I asked the teacher if she realized what she had just done. The teacher replied she was "just doing my job". I told her that I had observed some "positive deviant" traits in her interaction with the parent. First, by warmly greeting and welcoming the parent the teacher had put the self-conscious mother at ease. Second, by speaking Spanish, the language barrier was eradicated and the parent felt empowered to communicate in her native tongue. Third, by not being judgmental about her daughter's pregnancy the parent felt less ashamed and more at ease speaking to the teacher. Finally, by giving the parent the homework assignments the student would know that the teacher cared about her progress and by interacting with her mother the teacher had gained the parent's full support. The teacher said that she always spoke in Spanish to parents who were monolingual Spanish speakers and internally realized some parents felt intimidated by government institutions so she always tried to be friendly but she never realized she was doing anything different from the norm. She added that she was very religious and never tried to judge other people. I congratulated her on her positive communicative behavior and she smiled and said that I had "made her week" and that from now on she was going to be more aware of how she interacted with students' parents. The teacher's interaction with the parent is an illustration of ordinary people doing uncommon things that may positively influence a student's educational outcome.

Based on the above embodied experience, a review of literature on the Hispanic dropout rate and its implications, and the tenets of the positive deviance approach, this study will explore student retention and communicative behaviors with a Positive Deviance approach. Diaz's research study (2010) of Positive Deviant Latina college students helped develop a similar frame for a youth-oriented research investigation, albeit for a different issue (teenage pregnancy).

The following research questions guide this inquiry:

RQ1: What are the specific intrapersonal communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

RQ2: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their teachers and mentors that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

RQ3: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their parents and family members that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

RQ4: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their friends that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

In the next chapter, we discuss the methodology and data-collection procedures to address the above research questions.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods and procedures**

The purpose of the present chapter is to discuss the methods and data collection procedures that were utilized to conduct this research study.

#### **Site of research**

This study was conducted in a high school located in a middle class neighborhood of a Texas border city. The location of the school belies the fact that the student body has one of the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged students (over 64 percent) in the district (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The high school is the largest high school in the district with 2,503 students, and has the highest dropout rate (2.6 percent or 66 students in 2008-09) among the district's seven high schools (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09). The high school has fought in recent years to maintain its academic performance standards. Although the school district keeps increasing its numbers of Texas Education Agency (TEA) recognized and exemplary campuses, the high school struggled to meet the federal Adequate Yearly Performance (AYP) ratings. In 2007, 2008, and 2009 the school missed the AYP in mathematics and became an academically acceptable campus (Texas Education Agency, 2010). This designation brought new scrutiny to the campus by state and district officials as well as from the media and parents.

The federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act evaluates all public campuses, school districts, and states under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) program rating for performance accountability. The state, districts, and schools are required to meet AYP criteria on three measures: Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, and graduation rates for high schools and districts. If a district or school that receives Title I, Part A funds fails to meet AYP for two

consecutive years, that district or campus needs to offer additional education services, a different school choice, and/or implements a corrective action plan (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The school took all three actions in the 2009-10 school year. Currently, the high school faces institutional academic pressure, a high dropout rate, and an economically disadvantaged student population.

### **Selection of participants**

Although all high school students face challenges, when applying the Positive Deviance approach one looks for those students who have the odds stacked against them, face tremendous difficulties but are not only meeting academic standards but thriving in their environment. Why are some students flourishing while others dropout? When the principal granted permission for the project, he encouraged me to work in partnership with the school counselors. I developed an initial PD screening form including eight key criteria to identify potential Positive Deviant students. Working in collaboration with the high school counselors, the screening criteria for selecting PD students was refined to six criteria (Appendix B): (1) The student is a senior, (2) he/she is graduating on time, (3) he/she is Hispanic, (4) he/she is economically disadvantaged, (5) he/she has a high GPA with a 3.0 or above, and (6) he/she is a first generation U.S. high school graduate.

Due to the large graduating class size, the school counselors suggested enlisting the assistance of the district technology information systems (TIS) department to run initial student data reports. The data already exists in the PEIMS (Public Education Information Management System) database. The TIS specialist was able to retrieve PEIMS data for the first five criterions.

The counselors, who have daily interaction with students, helped to identify seniors who are the first generation in their family to graduate from a U.S. high school.

### **Observations and Conversations**

Visits to the campus, observations, and in-depth interviews are necessary to contextualize the Positive Deviance approach. Numerous conversations were held with the school principal, district personnel, and school counselors seeking their advice and guidance on how to frame the study. The graduating class of 2011 is comprised of 448 seniors. All seniors were entered in an initial query to meet the following screening criteria: the student is graduating on time, student is of Hispanic origin, is economically disadvantaged, and has a GPA of 2.0 or above. There were 235 students, almost half of the graduating class, who met these criteria. When the GPA was increased to 3.0 and above, 103 students met the criterion. When the final PD criterion was added: the student is the first generation in their family to graduate from a U.S. high school there were 24 eligible students. Once the 24 students who met the six criteria were identified, a meeting was set up. I met informally with the eligible students at the high school during their advisory period. Sitting in a circle with the students, I described the proposed PD study and engaged them in an informal question and answer session. I asked the students to consider participating in the study and explained that it was voluntary. I informed them that we would provide them with bilingual consent and assent forms available in the Counseling Center and through their counselors. I asked the interested students to read and review the forms carefully with their parents and return the signed forms to their counselors prior to them being interviewed. From these 24 students, 19 were interviewed, three declined to participate and two were nonresponsive. One student meeting the five criteria, but with a GPA of 2.75 was

interviewed. The student had a friend who took part in the study and voiced a desire to participate in the project. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted.

It may be useful to talk about my role as a researcher and sense-maker, especially in the context of the school district. As the public relations director for the district, I am charged with communicating district news to internal and external audiences. As a participant observer in this study I understand how vital communicative behaviors are in helping our students succeed academically. Communication is key in informing constituents of district policies, board decisions, employee and student successes through the media and /or district communication conduits. I work closely with principals and other administrators to insure that news about their school is accurate and timely. As a communication specialist in the education field, I have the ability to observe and act without a predisposed “educator lens”. My communication background helps me avoid education jargon, which is vital when communicating with parents and the community at large. My position allows me to gather district information and statistics, talk to key stakeholders, and my working relationship with school administrators facilitated conducting and completing the research for this study.

As an active observer of public school districts, I have seen firsthand that teaching is a profession historically associated with low pay, and usually attracts individuals that enjoy molding young minds and making a difference in their community. To make up for a lack of monetary incentives, school culture is often associated with the condition of communion (Barnard, 2005) associated with employee motivation, solidarity, satisfaction, and a sense of belonging. Altruistic values versus monetary incentives often are stronger motivators than money alone. As a participant observer, I see teachers unite when it comes to a child’s welfare and most rate it as their first priority in their daily work routine. When one asks any school administrator

what they miss most about leaving a campus, they all have the same response, “the children”. A sense of family is also part of the organizational culture in the district. This condition of communion is that the needs of children must be placed above the wants of adults. This unifying goal provides meaning, direction, and mobilization to district employees. We communicate this message internally and externally in the board of directors’ core beliefs, the district strategic plan, the superintendent’s goals, and the mission statement. This sense of family facilitated the present Positive Deviance study at the high school since administrators, educators, and parents alike want to find out what the high school student “positive deviants” are doing to graduate on time and with a high grade point average. In this project, I try to present the facts without bias, and instead of acting as an expert on high schools, I made a conscious decision to listen, observe and expose the wisdom that lies within the high school.

### **In-depth interviews**

Once the students who met the PD screening criteria agreed to participate in the study, the school counselors helped coordinate interview times with the selected students. Student consent forms in English and Spanish were completed and turned in before the interview process began. The Positive Deviance approach was utilized as a guide to formulate interactions within the school community. Participants were individually interviewed and audio taped (with permission). The 20 student interviews took place during a three-week time frame and each interview ranged between 30 to 60 minutes. Semi-structured interview questions were formulated to identify what practices and communicative behaviors the students engage in interpersonally as well as with their teachers, mentors, counselors, parents, and friends to help them stay and excel in school. In addition, the selected PD students who volunteered for the study took part in a participatory sketching exercise after their interview. The interviews were

administered in a quiet conference room in the school's counseling center. All the students were cooperative and engaged during the interview process. Their personal stories, recollections, and experiences drove the dialogue.

### **Participatory sketching**

The idea for participatory sketching and photography comes from the work of renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. In 1973, while administering a literacy project in a barrio of Lima, Peru, a team led by Freire asked people questions in Spanish, but requested the answers via photographs. (Singhal, Hulbert & Vij, 2007). This communication exercise proved to be monumental in changing the discourse of the vulnerable people living in the barrio and caused community mobilization of the poorest of the poor.

According to a study done in the Sudan by Singhal (2006), participatory sketching and photography has emerged as a new, inexpensive, and audience-centered methodology used to gain input on what audiences understand and interpret from Education Entertainment programming. These types of participatory methodologies provide a different point of view on audience engagement than through traditional survey data (Singhal, 2006; Singhal & Dura, 2009). People of all ages, of differing socio-economic backgrounds, and education levels can contribute fully in participatory sketching and photography without fear of grammar and language mistakes. This is especially important if the students who are interviewed are limited English learners and feel more comfortable communicating in Spanish or through sketching. This sketching "invitation" may expose student insights that they have problems articulating such as what motivated them to stay in school or how their life may change with a college degree. Participatory sketching provides students the opportunity to crystallize their thoughts or

future goals through a drawing that reflects their ambitions or captures a beloved person that has motivated them to succeed despite many difficulties. This type of non-rushed expression, used jointly with in-depth interviews, can yield far deeper emotions and thoughts than verbal data collection alone.

Sketching prompts were provided to the students for this study. The participants were encouraged to revisit their educational journey and provided with drawing paper, sketching pencils, and colored pencils. Students were asked to select one of two sketching prompts or to draw a combination of the two. The prompts were: (1) Think of some key events with key individuals who have motivated you to complete high school and excel. Visualize them, one by one. And, now sketch what you see; (2). Think of objects, artifacts, mementos, awards, encouragements that you have received – from family, friends, teachers, and others – that represent your journey of gaining a higher education. Visualize them. Now draw them.

The results of the in-depth interviews and participatory sketching methodology are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

In the present chapter, I present the results of the in-depth interviews with the Positive Deviant students and other data collected through the participatory sketching exercise to answer the proposed research questions. In applying the Positive Deviance approach, the wisdom and know-how to thrive in school against all odds resides with the students. However, in the PD approach, the students' communicative behaviors that explain their success are considered heroic, not the individuals. The focus is on identifying the micro-behaviors that result in demonstrably better outcomes, against all odds.

The majority of the participants self-identified as Mexican-American (9) and/or Hispanic (6). Three identified themselves as Mexican as one student explained, "As a child I lived in Mexico and I still consider myself a Mexican; my family is Mexican and so is my culture" (Participant 860842). The remaining students self-identified as South American, Latina, and Chicana.

Recounting their personal stories, all of the students spoke of the obstacles they had faced during their high school years. A major difficulty shared by several recent immigrant students was the language barrier. They did not understand English and were unable to communicate in the school setting, thus had to work especially hard to maintain their grades. Other participants recounted living in a dysfunctional non-supportive household; the struggle of living in poverty; staying in school even though their friends dropped out; overcoming abusive relationships, and being homeless. Thirteen of the 20 students interviewed said they are recent Mexican immigrants or first generation Americans. Half of the students interviewed stated that



their parents were divorced and eight said they live with their mother, the female head of household. Six live with both parents, five live with family members other than their parents, and one is homeless and lives with different friends. Universally, the students related stories of wanting to better their lives through higher education. All students interviewed said they planned to attend college and several had received scholarships and acceptance letters to a university.

### **Intrapersonal communication behaviors**

RQ1 asked: What are the specific intrapersonal communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

The Positive Deviant students were generally confident and proud that they had achieved the high school graduation milestone. “I feel really proud of myself. I’m the first to graduate in my family” (Participant 806001). The students related how their parents and grandparents had not had the opportunity to pursue their studies due to financial obligations or had dropped out of school and were working at minimum wage jobs.

The words “jobs” versus “careers” surfaced many times throughout the interviews. The students voiced a need to have well paying careers and end the cycle of poverty. “I want to stay in school to be a better person. I want to be on top, have a career, and have a better life. What drove me was I didn't want to see myself like my parents struggling for money. You have to go to school for a good future” (Participant 846805). Another respondent put it more simply, “I want to be someone in life. I want to have a career and not live from paycheck to paycheck” (Participant 806001).

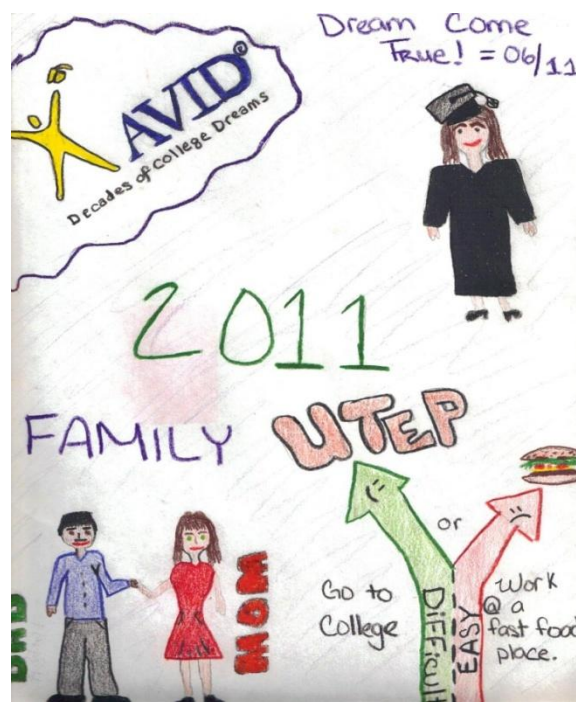
Students’ answers varied from being inspired from within to succeed, to making their parents proud, to learning from the mistakes of their family. “I’m pretty much self- motivated,

and I want to make something of myself. I feel pretty good about myself, and I'm confident. I know that I'll be able to do whatever I want to do" (Participant 825950). Another participant echoed being self-motivated: "There wasn't anyone that actually told me to stay in school I just knew instinctively that I needed to do it. Since I was young, I always heard that you need an education so you won't have to be flipping burgers. In my mind, I always knew there's a better life for there's a lot to do out there in the world. And you can achieve that somehow through education and you can be happy" (Participant 849774).

Several of the respondents said that they wanted to do well in school because of the sacrifices and obstacles their parents had endured. Participant 816512 said, "I'll be the first one to graduate college in my family. My mom didn't graduate from high school but has been there for us and helped us. She gave us a roof to live under and never gave up in supporting us".

Many participants equated their achievement in school to parental pride. "When I heard about this [study], I wanted to do it because I want my parents to be proud of me. I work, I study, and I have my social life. When I think of everything I have to deal with, I feel so proud of myself. I didn't want to be that kid that was going to be a loser. I always try to do better. I want to be someone that people will look up to. I want my parents to be proud" (Participant 883340). Another student noted: "I want to have an education for my family. I want my parents to be proud because they did not have a chance to go to college, so I want to make them happy" (Participant 841943). Several students said that they wanted to stay in school and succeed as a way to pay their parents back for all the hard work and sacrifices the parents had endured to ensure their children stayed in school.

Avoidance of teenage pregnancy as referenced in Diaz's research study (2010) of Positive Deviant Latina college students also influenced some students to stay and succeed in school. "I feel very proud that I am graduating. My grandmother and my mother were pregnant when they were 17. I'm 18 and I'm graduating. And I have been accepted to college and have received scholarships. I feel very good about that" (Participant 855189). Several other female participants reiterated that they felt proud of staying pregnancy free since their mothers, sisters, and friends had gotten pregnant as teens. The Positive Deviant students observed the results of these pregnancies, which often meant dropping out of school and working at a minimum wage job or trying to raise a child while continuing their studies.



SKETCH 1: "The photo shows my family and their support for me, and the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program which has helped keep me stay focused on getting good grades and going to college. It shows my dream will come true and I will graduate in June 2011. It also shows two roads to life: one is the easy one but you will end up working in a fast food place. The difficult one is one that will take you to college" (Participant 841943).

Additionally, learning from parent and family mistakes plays an important role in motivating some students to stay in school and excel. A respondent who related that her mother and sister had dropped out of school and her brother is incarcerated explained: “There are several differences between me and my family. They were never involved in school and they never wanted to be here. I want to be in school, I hate being at home and doing nothing. Also, they got involved with the wrong people and they went down the wrong path. I don’t think it is other people that motivate you. It has to come from within. It has a lot to do with your background, but I think if you have the perseverance to succeed you will” (Participant 89540). The table below summarizes some important observations gleaned from positive deviants about their intrapersonal behaviors and the outcomes that they generate.

Table 1. Intrapersonal Communication Behaviors Exhibited by Positive Deviants

Intrapersonal behaviors	Outcomes
Studies longer and harder than others	High GPA
Prioritizes school work before leisure activities	Self-pride and sense of accomplishment
Respectful listening to parents’ stories of struggle	Determination to succeed
Pays attention to education messages	Values importance of continuing education
Persists in school and stays pregnancy free	Graduates on time

In conclusion, the self-motivation to be successful and to achieve a better life than the one they presently have are important components that influence students to stay in school. Determined to succeed, PD students study longer and harder than their peers to achieve a high GPA. Through active listening of their parents' stories of struggle and survival, the students incorporate positive behavior that results in their graduating on time. Students often want to complete school to make their parents proud or to provide their parents with financial assistance or gifts as a way to "pay back" their parents contributions. Positive Deviant students learned early on to pay attention to education messages from their parents, educators, and adult mentors that encouraged school completion. Through observation and dialogue with family and friends, the PD students also learned about what mistakes to avoid. Parents often shared warning tales of the consequences that would occur if the student dropped out of school or became pregnant.

### **Teacher-student communication**

RQ2 asked: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their teachers and mentors that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

As referenced in the literature review, research has found that ethnic minority students show positive academic outcomes when they have supportive teacher relationships (Anthrop-Gonzalez, 2006). School is an important factor in shaping young people's lives especially when the child lacks parental support or familial role modeling. This became evident in the present study where 10 out of the 20 participants come from homes with divorced parents, and many were raised by a female head of household focused on providing for the family. Students often view teachers and other school personnel as second parents. Participant 81898

stated, “Mr. B, my broadcasting teacher, has been a great father figure and has always helped me out”. Another respondent echoes similar thoughts, “My AVID teacher is like my second mom. She pushes me and motivates me in many ways. She is the teacher I can go to if I have any problems and she listens to me and gives me advice. She helps me so much and even helps me with my AP classes. We’re really, really close” (Participant 809212).

Teachers and school mentors become even more important to minority children who seek to continue their education. Children and parents who are recent U.S. immigrants are often unfamiliar with U.S. bureaucracies and the higher education application process, thus the children cannot rely on parental guidance for assistance. A student who had spoken about her mother having dropped out of school and being the first in her family to go to college related, “I’m really close with Mr. C, my theater director. He’s always been there for me and he helped me with my college application until 4 a.m. one night. Thanks to him I’m going to the University [of my choice], which is the school I wanted to go to” (Participant 825950).

Garcia and Guerra (2004) found that through positive communication, students feel motivated and encouraged to succeed and less liable to get in trouble at school. Students who receive support from caring adults are more likely to get good grades and to engage in positive practices that promote opportunities for future success. Students look forward to and appreciate teachers who are engaged and make learning interesting. “My French teacher was really strict, but every day she was really inspiring. She made learning fun because she was really different. When students asked her if we had to work, she would say, “the sun came up so of course we have work” (Participant 830860). A fellow respondent said, “My AVID teacher, he set me straight. I had an attitude when I was a freshman. The teacher made me open my eyes about the future. If it wasn’t for the program or him I would have not cared about my grades, I would have

just gotten by. I would not have the GPA I have” (Participant 830860). The student relates that the teacher talked to her constantly about the realities of life without a good education. She said he was friendly and approachable, but unbending about maintaining a high GPA and attending college. The student recalls that the teacher, through his constant talks with her, convinced her to study, attain good grades, and plan to graduate college.

Many immigrant students who live on the U.S.-Mexico border experience a language barrier when they enter the school system. Students who did not speak English upon their arrival said they often felt insecure about communicating in the classroom setting or with other students that were primarily English speakers. The students revealed they developed close relationships with teachers they could converse with easily. Participant 895298 who conducted the interview mostly in Spanish said, “My ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher has communicated the importance of staying in school even if it is hard sometimes. He has been a good counselor for me and has guided me”. Another participant who is a recent immigrant recalled, “When I first moved to El Paso, I didn’t like it and wanted to go back to Chihuahua because I was scared and nervous. I learned English during my sophomore year and had difficulty with my English, writing, and math classes. I’m close to my English teacher, Mr. C. He’s motivated me to continue and work hard. He could see that I was a good student so he tutored me and helped me a lot” (Participant 895260). The student narrates that the teacher understood that she was struggling with English and through continuous positive verbal affirmations, such as “I’m proud of you” he let her know she was improving. He also provided individual tutoring and let her know what she needed to work on to increase her knowledge of the language. Bilingual students said that their ability to speak two languages has created an increased sense of cultural pride.

As noted in the literature review, involvement in extracurricular activities play a significant role in students staying engaged in school, maintaining a higher grade point average, and being less likely to drop out of school or engage in risky behavior (Brown, 2002; Diaz, 2010). Participants who were engaged in one or more extracurricular activity related how being involved helped them become better students and added to their personal growth. Participant 855189 relates, “My wrestling coach is the number one person that impacted me. He told me to always act like a champion and people would respect me. He also taught me not to give up on myself and to keep going when times were tough. And to triumph when there were bumps on the road. Coach was very demanding and he expects a lot out of you. The need to practice was important and keeping my grades up in order to compete. This is important because I love to compete. It has been unbelievable. I attribute everything to wrestling”. Another participant said, “I’ve been in a lot of stuff [extracurricular activities]. We have to pass in order to be able to compete. We help each other. We also learn to respect everyone, because everyone is different. I’ve learned how to be a leader” (Participant 860842).

In addition to keeping students interested in staying in school, excelling in sports provides much needed financial assistance for students who are from a low socio-economic background. “I’m part of track and field. It has taught me that I need to have balance in my life. There is time for academics, athletics, and everything if you balance. I feel good about my organizational skills; it will help me in college. I have also received scholarships for this [track] so now I have to decide what college to attend. (Participant 821245).

Several participants said they had not been involved in extracurricular activities and they regretted it. Some female participants cited family obligations as the reason why they had not been involved. Participant 806001 explains she was not involved “because I need to be home to

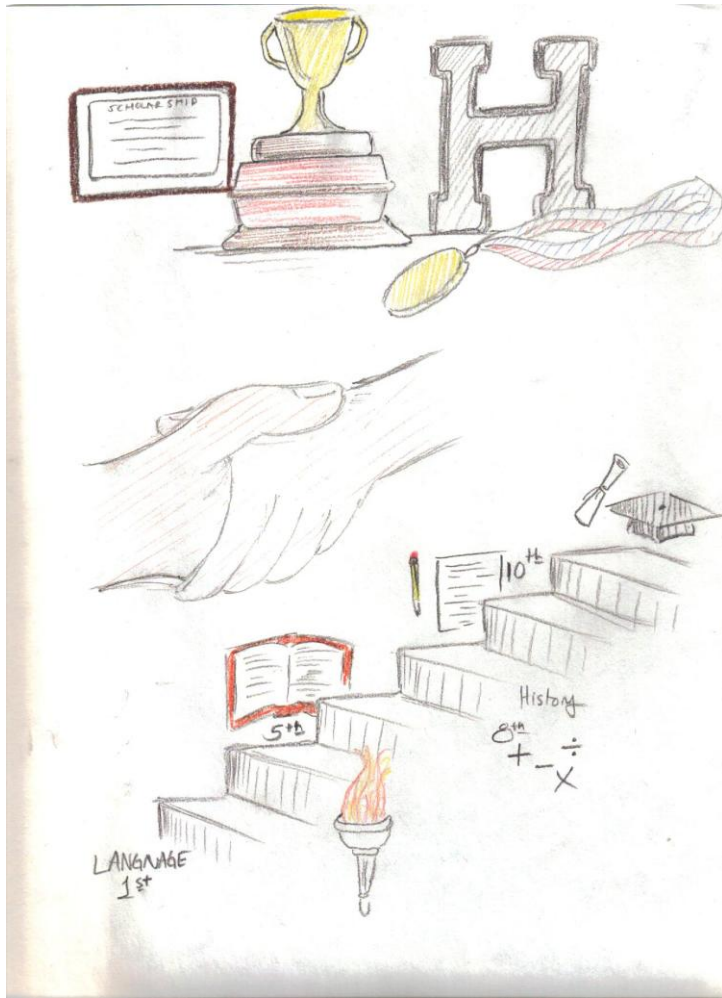


take care of my brothers. I'm in dance but not after school. I would like to turn back and try cheerleading or volleyball. I don't complain about it but I would have loved to be more involved". Other reasons for non-involvement include feeling self-conscious of not speaking English fluently, and being shy and uncomfortable in group or team settings.

A true Positive Deviant, participant 841943, narrated that she had overcome many obstacles growing up. Her parents are divorced and she has little interaction with her father and stepfather. Her mother and her twin sister became pregnant as teens and dropped out of school and her brother is in prison. The participant said she was often sad after attending her brother's court hearings and school personnel helped cheer her up and motivated her to stay strong. During the interview, the Positive Deviant student related her life story matter of factly and as her sketch shows, she stays focused and optimistic on the positive aspects of life.



SKETCH 2: The drawing shows a road surrounded by various images and words. It represents the participant's journey through high school. The road starts with cross-country, since she was in the varsity team and made it to regionals every year since her freshman year. The A+ report card and money shows incentives she receives from her grandfather for making good grades. Student Council, Interact, SAC, Jr. Leadership El Paso, RYLA and the drawing of the cheerleader represent the extracurricular activities the student participated in during high school. The image of Hanksgiving is significant because she relates that the event showed her how the less fortunate lived and made her grateful for what she has in life. A drawing of her and her boyfriend holding hands represents how he encourages her to stay in school and get good grades. The road ends with the participant in a graduation gown since she finished her high school journey and is ready to start a new one. (Participant 841943).



SKETCH 3: “This shows different medals and trophies that I have received along with a letter for track and field, which is very special and hard to get. It also has the college scholarship I have received. In the middle are hands that represent handshakes of congratulations from teachers, parents and other students. On the right is a stairway representing my educational journey. It starts in 1st grade with learning the (English) language; I only spoke Spanish when I started school. Then we go to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, where I learned to read well and enjoy it. This changed my life. There is also a torch for determination. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I had an excellent math teacher who made it all make sense. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I perfected my writing skills and now feel very confident in writing whatever is required. And, finally it shows my graduation, the end of my high school career” (Participant 821245).

The table below summarizes the key teacher-student communicative behaviors reported by the positive deviant students.

Table 2: Teacher-Student Communicative Behaviors Reported by Positive Deviants

Teacher-Student Communicative Behaviors	Outcomes
Verbally affirming students	Creates self-esteem and drive to do better
Individualized attention to students and voluntary information sharing	Builds teacher-student bond
Hands-on mentoring	Becomes “second parent”
Native language sensitivity	Student pride in cultural heritage
Real life coaching and encouragement	Fosters leadership, confidence and skill building

In sum, positive educator messages and engagement in extracurricular activities are essential components for keeping students motivated and involved in their studies and in their school. Daily or weekly verbal affirmations with simple statements such as, “You can do it, you are smart” “I’m proud of you” and “Great job!” play an important role in generating student enthusiasm to study and stay in school. Many PD students said that individual educators/mentors knew their “family situation”. When this occurs, the educator becomes the confidant. By

understanding where the student comes from and their family dynamic the educator, in essence, becomes the second parent. Students cited that they felt free to tell their mentor everything, including information they might not feel comfortable sharing with their parents and/or peers. The student-teacher bond can become even stronger as students prepare to attend college, which is unfamiliar territory for many immigrant parents. Students experienced hands-on mentoring when their teacher/mentor helped them with the scholarship process. One student said her teacher helped her until 4 a.m. to insure that the student met the scholarship deadline.

Teachers also reflect the social acceptability of students. As more Hispanic students enter the U.S. school system, cultural sensitivity and encouragement works to keep immigrant students in school. Teachers who display that sensitivity and provide positive verbal reinforcement to do better, are rewarded with students who do not lose their sense of cultural pride in their native language. In many instances students see extracurricular activities as something they want to do because of their personal interests and abilities. The state requirement that students need to pass their classes in order to play or compete in school activities provides an incentive to maintain a high GPA. More importantly, extracurricular activities provide students with life lessons such as having to call the coach when they are going to be late to practice. This small action is part of real life, if you cannot be somewhere you need to let people know. This action is something most adults take for granted, but many youth are not in the habit of doing. Extracurricular competition also develops character and the message “act like a champion and people will respect you” is an important one. This lesson will provide big dividends as the students enter the workforce or face personal difficulties. In addition to providing balance to a student’s life, these activities teach leadership, responsibility, and self-respect.

## Parental communication and involvement

RQ3 asked: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their parents and family members that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

Parental encouragement to stay in school influenced many participants to graduate on time and value the importance of education. Participant 821245 related, “My parents were the most influential in telling me to stay in school. They were born in Mexico and told me about the hardships in life they went through. My parents told me stories about how they couldn’t stay in school and how they struggled with the (English) language. They migrated here so I could be born here in U.S. I appreciate the sacrifices they made and I would not give that up to drop out of school”.

Participants displayed a strong understanding of their culture and *familismo*, which is the “desire to maintain strong family values...and commitment to the family over individual needs and desires” (Halgunseth, 2006). The Spanish word *educación* encompasses the academic and cultural values instilled in the Hispanic family culture (Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). The core values of *familismo* and *educación* were exemplified through a student’s story. “My mom is a single mother and my dad was deported to Mexico, so my mom is on her own. I have two younger brothers and we’re a pretty close family. We try to visit my dad in Mexico on the weekends. Overall, my mom is a really hard worker. She brought us up to have good manners. It was really hard when my dad got deported, because he’s not here with us to help us out financially. I’ve learned how to cope and just go with it. But it’s hard because I don’t get to see him a lot. We’re trying to get him back over here and that’s why my mom works so hard to

support us. She's done a great job. I'm the oldest, so I kind of feel like my mom's right hand" (Participant 806001).

Spanish seemed to be the dominant language spoken in the respondent's homes. Many respondents speak Spanish to keep their culture alive and as a means to communicate with their parents and extended family. Most immigrant parents are focused on providing for their families and have little time to learn English themselves (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). "My parents are Mexican. I was born here, but we always speak Spanish at home" (Participant 847345). Participant 849774 related that her mother who has a minimum wage job "had a rough life growing up. She went to school in Mexico but I don't believe she graduated from high school. She started learning English, but she really doesn't speak it".

Respondents spoke of how their parents influenced them to stay in school and study to insure financial success. Participant 860842 said, "My dad and my mom always told me about school and careers. They always told me to do things right. I want to be like my parents. They are my role models. They know what to expect from me. They always tell me to have a high career. My grandma is the reason I want to be an oncologist because when she was sick I couldn't help her". Participant 830860 relates, "My mom always told me that with a higher education, I would get more money and that that I could have a good future life. I study a lot to get what I want. My brother also influences me. He tells me not to make the same mistakes he did."





SKETCH 4: “This shows me in the center graduating with my HS diploma. Around me are my younger brothers who I want to be a role model for, the Silver (designation) diploma that I am going to receive, my mom and dad who love me and who I want to make proud. My Abu, my grandmother, who was sick and who is my motivation to become a doctor, so I can help kids with cancer” (Participant 860842).

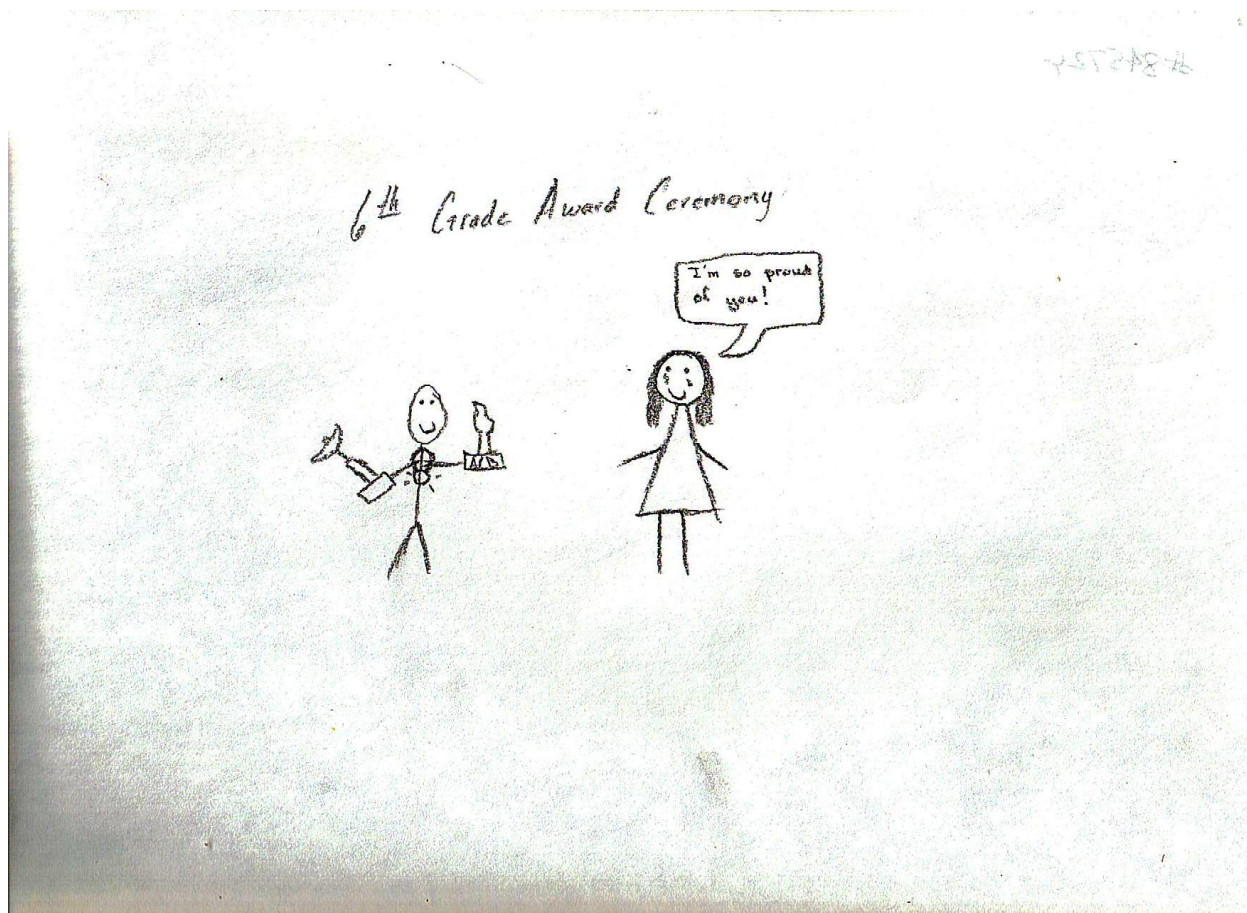
Some participants spoke about the fact that although their parents never conveyed the importance of getting high grades or attending college, the students understood they needed an education to have a successful life. Participant 841943 relates, “My parents didn’t even finish middle school. My parents are from Mexico. My father told me the importance of getting a good



job. They talked to me once in a while about staying in school. They know they don't have to tell me, I will still do it". Another respondent echoes this inner knowledge, "They figured it was implied that I knew how important it was since I've always had good grades. I didn't need to be told, it was never an option to not graduate. I knew since I was little. I didn't even know dropping out was an option" (Participant 825950).

Students also learned to stay in school by observing the mistakes of their parents and siblings. Participant 89540 relates, "I have a twin sister who dropped out junior year and has a baby. I want a better life. I've watched my mom struggle and seen my sister with her baby and that's not what I want. I want to be able to give everything to my children". Students learned from their parents or family's mistakes through storytelling, narration, or observation. Students related that their parents were open and honest in discussing the mistakes they had made in regards to not completing their education. The parents often told their children not to repeat their mistakes, but instead to continue their schooling.

The parent-teacher partnership is equally important in student success. Although only two respondents spoke specifically about their parent's involvement in school, many participants said that their favorite teachers and school personnel knew about their "family situation". Participant 895260 shared, "My mom always told me how important it [school] was. She was involved [in my school] and my first year she came to talk to my teachers and counselors to make sure I was doing well. My cousins are my mentors since they help me with homework, especially with English". Another respondent put it succinctly, "They [my family] were really involved. They let me find things out for myself but they supplied the tools. They helped me realize my path and that's to stay in school" (Participant 84009).



SKETCH 5: This simple sketch records the student's most memorable moment of his academic career. It shows him at his 6<sup>th</sup> grade awards ceremony with a big smile holding three awards. Next to him is his mother crying and saying "I'm so proud of you!" He explained that he was named to the A and B Honor Roll, received the Perfect Attendance and Excellence in Reading awards. The student recalls that he had never received three awards before this event. He remembers his mother was so happy and proud of him that she started to cry. His mother told him to continue to get good grades. He said that he will remember that moment forever. The student narrated that he had been doing badly in school before, but this awards ceremony changed his life. From that time on, he was motivated to do well in school. (Participant 845726)

Table 3 summarizes some key parent-child communicative behaviors reported by the PD students.

Table 3: Parent-Child Communicative Behaviors Reported by Positive Deviants

Parent-Child Communicative Behaviors	Outcomes
Continuous verbal affirmation	Strong sense of self
Positive academic reinforcement	Studies more to please parents
Setting of clear behavior expectations; asking about grades	Understands and appreciates boundaries
Role-modeling to “do things right”	Student behavior reflects parental values
Storytelling and self-disclosing narration	Learns from parents mistakes

In sum, parental communication about the importance of staying in school provides young adults with the impetus to graduate on time and maintain a high grade point average. Parents who provide affirming statements such as, “You are smart” “I am proud of you” and “You have everything” creates an impetus for students to perform better in school. Parents who ask their children specific questions such as, “Have you done your homework?” “How are your grades?” “Have you finished your [college] application?” reinforce the importance of continuing their education. It also lets the student know that their parents care about their education and establishes a clear understanding of parental expectations. Parental involvement

is crucial. When parents are involved in their children's schools, educators are more prone to contact them if their student is not doing well in class or when their student is being recognized for academic achievement. Parental involvement can take various forms. Simple actions such as role modeling continuing education by reading books, viewing current events and discussing them with the student keeps the family engaged in learning. Attending parent-teacher meetings at the school or volunteering with extracurricular activities that the student is involved in increases family unity. Hands-on mentoring by siblings and extended family members can help the student obtain much needed help in problem subject areas. Parental support is one of the strongest motivators for PD students to do better in school. Immigrant students honor their parents' wishes through cultural "*respeto*" or respect by graduating high school.

### **Communication with friends**

RQ4 asked: What are the specific communication behaviors and practices that the PD students engage in with their friends that help them stay in school and make timely progress?

There were mixed findings with respect to the influence of friends and classmates in influencing academic performance and achievement. Peer pressure can persuade teens either to act out negatively or result in a positive outcome. Several participants noted that they had friends that had made the wrong choices or "taken the wrong path". Participant 841943 shared that she was the only one of her group of friends to graduate high school. "I don't want to be like them. My friends are dropouts and the girls have kids. I look at them and I don't want to be like them. I am with them because I support them, and I help them out, but I don't want to be like the way they are now. They set an example of how I don't want to be. Just because I hang around them, doesn't mean I want to be like them. Beginning my sophomore year and my junior year, they

were out of school, all 15 of them. They are having a hard time out there. Some are trying to get a GED, but they are lazy. I have had these friends since 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I try to help them out but the knuckleheads won't listen".

Participant 830860 said, "I've had friends that have dropped out and they always say it's because they didn't have time or that it was too hard. I'm not sure what motivates others but for me, it's mainly my family. For teens, maybe it's because they're in something they want to do. It depends on different people. Some don't have any motivation, but most of my friends' parents didn't graduate, so they want to graduate so they're not seen as losers. My mom doesn't have the best job, so she motivates me to be better".

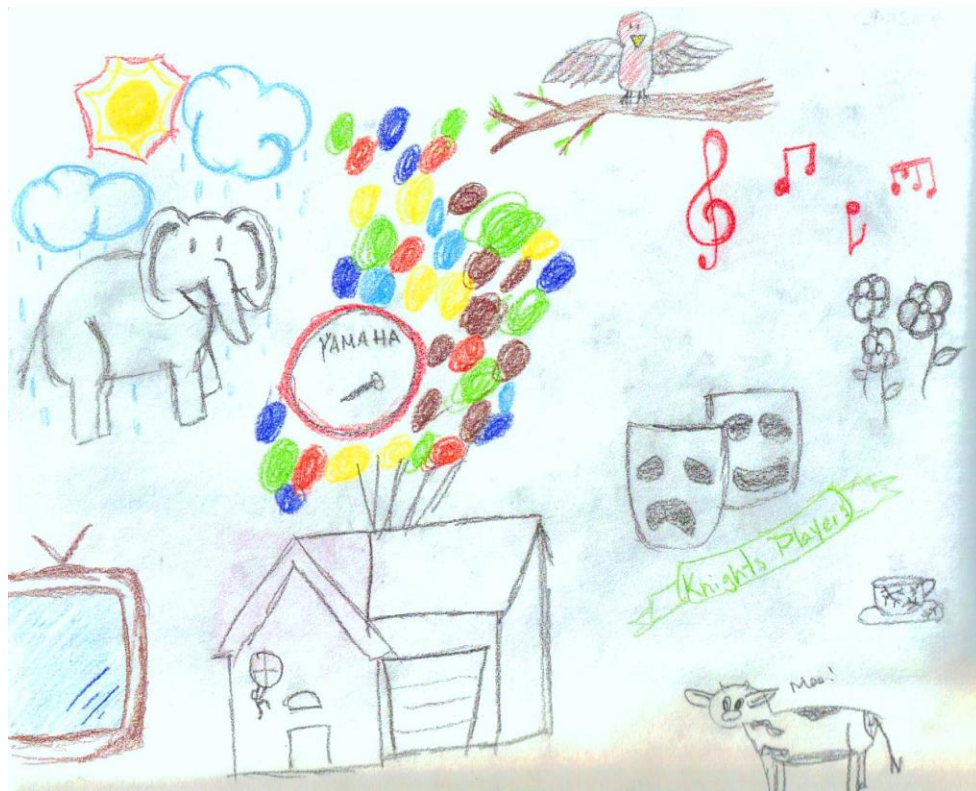
A couple of students spoke about negative relationships they had experienced. These relationships often derailed their academic achievement and self-worth. Participant 849774 recalled, "I did not have good self-esteem until this year. I learned what makes me happy. I had a boyfriend my freshman year but I was never happy... I didn't have self-esteem so I thought I would never find someone else. But then I thought I don't really need this. I realized I have to be here for myself. And so that's when I started noticing what I felt. I realized I did not have to be with someone to be happy".

As noted in the literature review, resilient Hispanic students that have friendships with peers who value education (in addition to family support) can motivate them to perform better academically (Gonzalez, 1997; Zalaquett, 2006). Several students said that their core group or best friend helped them stay engaged in school. "We're a really close and tight group and are always there for each other. We're all in dual credit classes so we influence each other academically as well as socially" (Participant 84009). Participant 89540 said, "I've been with the same group of girls since middle school. But me and my best friend are separate from the group

because we really care about school, while the other girls just want to go out and party. Me and my best friend help keep each other on track”.

Almost half of the students interviewed said that although they had many friends in high school, the friends did not influence them academically. Participant 883340 summarizes, “Mostly I have hi, bye friends. I am close to them but see them mostly as my high school friends. I don’t think I will be friends with them during college. I focus more on my school and work. I don’t let them influence me”.

Others like Participant 825950 whose sketch is below, speaks highly of the positive force her friends and classmates have had on her self-esteem and personal growth.



SKETCH 6: The drawing shows different symbols representing the people that helped the student through high school, and how she feels about herself. The television, music notes, and masks represent the programs she is involved in. The elephant in the rain represents her

friends who are in the drum line. Her friends help her realize that she can do whatever she wants to do and accomplish things that she never thought she could. The sun represents her best friends, who have been with her since kindergarten. The house symbolizes her family and the balloons lift the family like the house in the movie “Up”. It shows her little brother escaping through the window, getting in trouble, even though she tries to be a good role model for him. The flowers represent friends that seem tough on the outside, but are sensitive on the inside; “Things aren’t always as they seem”. The teacup reminds her of her mother and the cow represents her grandfather, who owns a farm and is a big influence in her life. Finally, she is the bird taking flight and going off to college. (Participant 825950).

Table 4 summarizes some key peer-to-peer communicative behaviors as reported by the Positive Deviant students.

Table 4: Peer-Peer Communicative Behaviors Reported by Positive Deviants

Peer-to-Peer Behaviors	Outcomes
Unwavering emotional support	Builds trust and confidence
Discuss academic goals	Study together =Higher GPA
Communicate hardship stories	Learns about consequences of undesirable behaviors
Shared social interactions only	Understands that friendship is not sustainable

In sum, there were mixed results with respect to the influence of friends and classmates in determining academic attainment. About half of the students said their friends were more social than academic influencers. Many said they realized they would not have any connection to their high school friends once they started attending college. For those that did have friends that affected them academically, peer support was key. Students related that they leaned on their

friends for support when school was hard. They recounted small actions such as the decision to study together for a test instead of going out to a party. Others said they had made a pact with their best friend(s) to go to college together. Students said they confided in each other about peer pressure and agreed to stay out of trouble together. Students said their friends used reassuring words like “I understand” and “Everything will be okay” and words of encouragement such as “You can do it” when they felt sad, depressed, stressed, or insecure. Students reiterated that learning “what not to do” through observation and conversations with friends who made mistakes such as getting pregnant and/or dropping out of school are as important as hearing the message to stay in school. Small actions such as sharing these stories with friends and peers can help other teens avoid making these mistakes and help them stay in school.

### **In summary**

The protagonists in the present study faced high odds: they were Hispanic students, from a low socio-economic background, the first in their generation to graduate from a U.S. high school, yet they were able to maintain a high 3.0 GPA. Many of the students also came from a single head of household and were recent immigrants or first generation Americans. Respondents gave many reasons for staying in school, among them were self-motivation and determination, wanting to make their parents proud, and aspiring for a better life by means of a career. The students recounted that they had received verbal affirmation from parents, teachers, mentors, and friends. They were the successful results of hands-on mentoring by educators and by extended family or friends. Many students said they were encouraged to “do things right” by their parents. Equally as important, students related that they learned “what not to do” through their parents stories of the consequences of dropping out of school.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Summary and conclusions**

The present study focused on the communicative behaviors of primarily Mexican –American high school students, the largest U.S. immigrant Hispanic subgroup with the lowest (50.6%) high school completion rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The 20 participants interviewed were Positive Deviant students, who as seniors, had achieved this education objective even though they each faced numerous barriers throughout their high school journey. The respondents answered the four research questions through indepth interviews and a participatory sketching exercise.

Intrapersonal behaviors exhibited by the Positive Deviants included self-motivation, a strong sense of self, and a compelling belief that dropping out of school “was not an option”. Students spoke of a feeling of accomplishment in their academic achievements and also of an undeniable sense of duty to make their parents proud. Many respondents said that they had experienced what life was like without a high school diploma and they wanted to exceed that lifestyle. The PD students related how they studied longer and harder than their classmates, especially those who were learning the English language. They stated that they were proud of their high GPA because school had not come easily to them. Participants said they had to prioritize their school work before social events in order to maintain their grades and sense of accomplishment. Students had a desire to graduate from school to make their parents happy and as a way to “pay back” their parents for their unwavering support.

Communication with teachers and adult mentors proved to be significant for the Positive Deviant students. Respondents said that educators often served as a second family and many

students had special teachers or mentors they confided in or who provided academic guidance. Many of these students experienced hands-on mentoring from educators who tutored them in a specific subject or helped them with their college applications. Students cited many instances of positive feedback from educators and encouragement to stay in school and continue their education at a institution of higher learning. Verbal affirmations with simple statements such as, “You can do it, you are smart” “I’m proud of you” and “Great job!” play an important role in generating student enthusiasm to study and stay in school. Students also said that extracurricular activities helped them stay on track with their grades, while keeping them out of trouble, and engaged in school. Several students also stated that they had learned life lessons, such as calling their coach to say they would be late to practice or to always “act like a champion” to earn people’s respect.

Parental support and confidence in their children’s abilities were strong motivators for the PD students to continue their studies. Many participants recalled being advised to stay in school by their parents from an early age or being told to learn from their parents or siblings mistakes by not dropping out. Even when direct verbal communication from the parents did not take place, the respondents said they knew what was expected of them and they stayed in school and maintained a high GPA. Parents who provide affirming statements such as, “You are smart” “I am proud of you” and “You have everything” create motivation for students to perform better in school. Parents who ask their children specific questions such as, “Have you done your homework?” “How are your grades?” “Have you finished your [college] application?” reinforce the importance of education. Parental involvement is fundamental. When parents are involved in their children’s schools, educators are more prone to contact them if their student is not doing well in class or when their student is being recognized for academic achievement. Parental

engagement can be as simple as reading books and newspapers, viewing current events, and discussing them with the student. Attending parent-teacher school meetings or volunteering with extracurricular activities that the student is involved in increases family support. Hands-on mentoring by siblings and extended family members can help the student obtain much needed help in problem subject areas. Parental support is one of the strongest motivators for PD students to do better in school. Immigrant students honor their parents' wishes through cultural "*respeto*" or respect by graduating high school.

The influence of peer-peer communicative behaviors, on the other hand, was mixed. Some respondents said that they had close friendships that helped them academically through peer tutoring and social support. PD students related that they leaned on their friends for support when school was hard. They recounted small actions such as the decision to study together for a test instead of going out to party. Others said they had made a agreement with their best friend(s) to go to college together. Students said they confided in each other about peer pressure and decided to stay out of trouble together. Students said their friends used reassuring words like "I understand" and "Everything will be okay" and encouraging words such as "You can do it" when they felt sad, depressed, stressed, or insecure. Others said that their friends were mostly for companionship and social interaction but did not influence the respondents academically. Several respondents said that their friends had dropped out of school and although they supported their friends, the PD students did not want to be like them.

## **Conclusion**

The high school dropout rate among Hispanics is a complex societal problem in the United States with educational, vocational, economic, and civic implications. However, some school

districts like the one where the present study was conducted are succeeding in retaining and graduating their predominantly Hispanic students against all odds, utilizing resources already present within their community. This study identified several communicative practices that led to successful high school completion among a selected pool of high school students, all positive deviants, in a large urban high school located in the Southwestern United States. The criteria for their selection included: the student is a senior, he/she is graduating on time, he/she is Hispanic, he/she is economically disadvantaged, he/she has a high GPA with a 3.0 or above, and he/she is a first generation U.S. high school graduate.

The high school's graduating class of 2011 is comprised of 448 seniors. All seniors were entered in a computer query to meet the screening criteria and 103 students met the first five criteria. When the final PD criterion was added: the student is the first generation in their family to graduate from a U.S. high school there were 24 eligible students. Of these, after informed consent, 20 students were interviewed for this study. Participants were engaged in a conversation about their educational experiences and their key motivators and sense-makers. The conversation included questions about themselves, their family, their teachers, mentors, and their friends. They were asked about involvement in extracurricular activities and where they find education information. Respondents were also invited to participate in a sketching exercise and provided with two prompts. Upon completion of the sketch, the students were asked to narrate what their drawing represented.

Respondents in the present study demonstrated resilience and persistence in graduating high school and continuing their education. Although the PD students faced numerous obstacles including not understanding the English language, family members and friends who had dropped out of school, and financial constraints, all the students displayed maturity and self-

confidence in their future. This optimistic outlook was the tipping point that made them successful high school graduates.

In summary, teachers, parents, family members and other adult mentors played a significant role in positively influencing the PD students to continue their studies. Through repeated messages to stay in school and to live up to their academic potential, the students felt they could succeed and be the first in their generation not only to graduate from high school but to graduate from college and pursue a career. These affirming messages were internalized, providing the participants with a strong sense of self-assurance and a belief in a better future. Friends and peers in some cases added to this conviction of success, but nearly half of the participants interviewed said that their friends did not influence them from an academic standpoint.

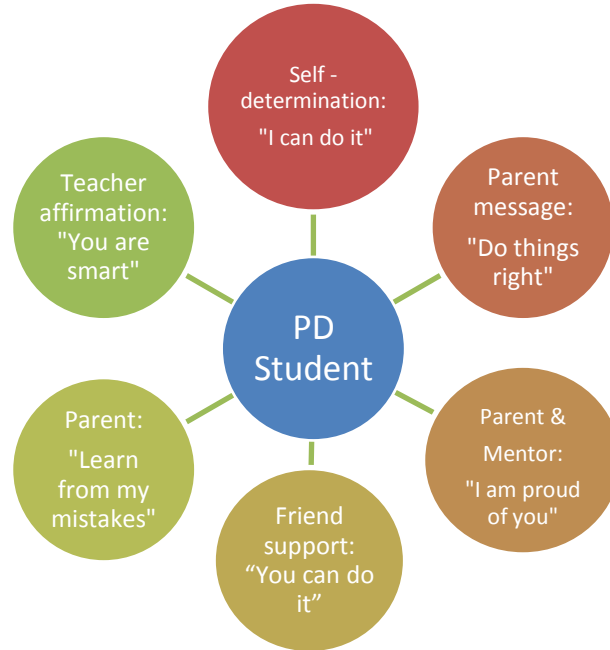
### **Implications**

The present study uncovered Positive Deviance communicative behaviors that promote timely high school graduation and are easily accessible to educators and schools without the need for additional resources. Key attributes and lessons learned from this study are as follows:

1. Consistent, positive messages from educators and parents to value education should commence in early childhood. Direct simple messages such as “Stay in school”, “A higher education equals a better life”, and “You can do it” are important motivators for students.
2. Parents, educators, and adult role models should encourage and praise students for academic achievements throughout the student’s school career. Repeated verbal affirmation such as “I am so proud of you”, “You have everything”, and “You are smart” provide emotional dividends that create self-esteem and drive students to do better in school.

3. Parental expectations for school attainment should be clear and repeated often. Parents who role model hard work and send the message to “do things right” may influence students to mirror positive behavior. Negating messages such as “Don’t make the same mistakes I did” are crucial to understanding the consequences of dropping out of school.
4. Educators need to be sensitive to immigrant student language and cultural needs. Students should be embraced and helped to learn the English language to retain them in school and to avoid failure in other subject areas. Teachers need to provide individualized attention and tutoring to students who need extra help. Messages such as “You are smart, you can do it” motivate students to continue studying.
5. Extracurricular activities help students gain self-confidence, while teaching life skills, teamwork, and leadership. When a mentor tells a student to “act like a champion”, they usually try to exceed expectations.
6. Peer support is key to staying out of trouble. Students said their friends used reassuring words like “I understand” and “Everything will be okay” and encouraging words such as “You can do it” when they felt sad, depressed, stressed, or insecure.

Key PD messages used for educational success:



Results of the present study will be shared with high school administrators and students and possibly the school district to study the Positive Deviance approach and review student responses to see what behaviors can be amplified, replicated, and adopted. Also, I plan on submitting results of my thesis for publication.

### **Limitations and next steps**

This thesis is not free of limitations. First, only one high school was analyzed and it is part of an urban school district that has a lower than average national high school dropout rate for Hispanics. Second, there is no progress report to analyze and track how the PD students, now in high school, will assimilate or achieve academically at the university level. Lastly, the study can be enhanced with future research that focuses on analyzing and tracking additional successful PD

students in other parts of the United States that have graduated from high school and are currently enrolled or have graduated from an institution of higher education.

I hope this study helps in more deeply exploring the application of the Positive Deviance approach in educational institutions, especially where students face multiple barriers in achieving high school completion. There is a special need for educators, parents, and policy makers to look at the high dropout rate among Hispanic children and explore all options in assuring that these students do not become another statistic. Through small acts of verbal affirmation, cultural sensitivity, hands-on mentoring, real life coaching and encouragement Hispanic students will flourish and achieve timely high school graduation.



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This report is influenced by a study conducted in the U.S. Southwest looking at Positive Deviance and teenage pregnancy. While the issue under consideration is different, there are some overlaps in method and structure that is acknowledged. Reference: Alejandra Diaz, 2010, *A Positive Deviance inquiry of communicative behaviors that influence the prevention of Hispanic teenage pregnancy*



## **Appendix A**

### **Informed consent**

#### **Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects**

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**Protocol Title:** Communicative practices that lead to timely high school graduation against all odds: A Positive Deviance inquiry in a predominantly Hispanic school

**Principal Investigator:** Patricia T. Ayala

#### **UTEP Department of Communication**

### **1. Introduction**

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You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. Please take your time making a decision and feel free to discuss it with your friends and family. Before agreeing to take part in this research study, it is important that you read the consent form that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

### **2. Why is this study being done?**

---

You have been asked to take part in a research study of communicative behaviors that lead to timely high school graduation. Approximately, 15-25 seniors will take part in this study at XX High School. We are interested in students like yourself who are excelling in school, despite facing multiple obstacles. Specifically you were selected because you are Hispanic, a senior, graduating on time, have a GPA of 3.0 or greater, come from an economically challenged household, and are the first generation in your family to graduate from a U.S. high school. Because there are a large number of students at Hanks, the district IT department and the school counselors helped us to identify you and other students like yourself.

If you decide to participate in this study, your involvement will last about one to two hours.

### **3. What is involved in the study?**

---

The research team will interview you about school and your relationships with your family, teachers, and friends. The interviews will be audio taped and coded so your identity is protected. The interview is designed to last between one to two hours, but please feel free to say more on the topic. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please tell us and we will stop the interview or go on to the next question, whatever you prefer.

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**4. What are the risks and discomforts of the study?**

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There are no known risks associated with this research.

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**5. What will happen if I am injured in this study?**

---

The University of Texas at El Paso and its affiliates do not offer to pay for or cover the cost of medical treatment for research related illness or injury. No funds have been set aside to pay or reimburse you in the event of such injury or illness. You will not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form. You should report any such injury to Patricia Ayala at (915-274-5399) and to the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu).

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**6. Are there benefits to taking part in this study?**

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There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. This research may help us to understand how positive communicative behaviors can motivate Hispanic students to graduate from high school on time.

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**7. What other options are there?**

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You have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study.

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**8. What are my costs?**

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There are no direct costs. You will be responsible for travel to and from the research site and any other incidental expenses.

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**9. Will I be paid to participate in this study?**

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You will not be paid for taking part in this research study.

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**10. What if I want to withdraw or am asked to withdraw from this study?**

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Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to a member of the research group so that they know why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them. The researcher may decide to stop your participation without your permission, if he or she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

### **11. Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

---

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Patricia Ayala at (915-274-5399) or payala2004@aol.com.

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

### **12. What about confidentiality?**

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Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. All records will stored in a secure location and heard only for research purposes by the researcher and her associates. Audio tapes of the interviews will be coded so you will not be personally identified.

Audio tapes will be retained for possible future analysis. We may wish to present some of the tapes from this study at conferences or as demonstrations in classrooms.

Please sign below if you are willing to allow us to do so with the tape of your interview.

I hereby give permission for the audio tape made for this research study to be also used for educational purposes.

---

Signature

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Date

### **13. Authorization Statement**

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I have read each page of this paper about the study (or it was read to me). I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I will get a copy of this consent form now and can get information on results of the study later if I wish.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature:

Time:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Consent form explained/witnessed by: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Printed name: Patricia T. Ayala

Date:

Time:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Screening criteria**

**Protocol Title:** Communicative practices that lead to timely high school graduation against all odds: A Positive Deviance inquiry in a predominantly Hispanic school

**Principal Investigator:** Patricia T. Ayala

For questions, please call 434-0693 or email at [payala2004@aol.com](mailto:payala2004@aol.com)

School personnel will obtain the following screening data. Secondary data retrieval for criteria 1-5 will be obtained from PEIMS student database by district TIS department. Last criteria, 6, will be obtained from the high school counselors after initial screening criteria is gathered, and a list of students meeting criteria 1-5 is provided to them.

#### **I. Screening criteria for identifying high school Positive Deviant students:**

1. Student is a senior.
2. Student is graduating on time.
3. Student is Hispanic.
4. Student is economically disadvantaged.
5. Student has a GPA of at least 3.0 or above.
6. Student is a first generation United States high school graduate.

## Appendix C

### Interview questions

Today is \_\_\_\_\_. My name is Patricia Ayala. I am here with participant number \_\_\_\_\_ to conduct an interview for the project Communicative practices that lead to timely high school graduation against all odds: A Positive Deviance inquiry in a predominantly Hispanic school.

1. Talk about label and self-identification. Do you consider yourself Chicano/a, Mexican American, Mexican, Latino/a, or Hispanic?
2. Talk about high school experience.
3. Talk about family, siblings, and parents.
4. Talk about involvement in extracurricular activities.
5. Talk about relationships with teachers/coach/counselors.
6. Talk about relationships with friends/peers.
7. How do you feel about yourself?
8. Why did you decide to stay in school? Did anyone influence you?
9. Were your parents involved in communicating importance of graduating from high school?
10. Talk about mentors and important people in your life.
11. Where do you find education information?
12. As a teen, what do you think motivates teenagers to stay in school?

## Curriculum Vita

Patricia T. Ayala is a native of El Paso, Texas where she is a public relations and communications expert. She currently serves as the public relations director for a school district in El Paso, where she has been employed for the last six years. In addition, Ayala has extensive experience as a tobacco control advocate, facilitator, and as a technical advisor specializing in coalition building and clean indoor air policy. Ayala has worked in tobacco control at the state, national and international levels with a focus on Latin American countries. In 2000, Ayala worked on a four-year initiative as Program Manager for A Smoke-Free Paso del Norte. Ayala recruited and led the work group for grassroots mobilization that resulted in passage of the 100% smoke-free ordinance in El Paso, the strongest ordinance passed at the time in the state of Texas. Ayala co-authored a study for the Centers for Disease Control journal: *Clean Indoor Air in El Paso, TX: A Case Study*, Nov. 2005, Vol. 2, No.1.

Ayala is a graduate of the University of Texas in El Paso with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism. She was a Fellow of the Advocacy Institute and of the National Latino Council on Alcohol and Tobacco Prevention. Ayala has served in various international, national, state and local boards of directors and was a Chairman of the Board for the American Heart Association Texas Affiliate in 2002. She is an alumna of Leadership Texas and Leadership El Paso. Previously, she was the Administrator of a home health agency and Executive Director of the American Heart Association, West Texas Division.

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