

**Flourishing in a New Country: Resiliency among
Dominican English Language Learners at Bronx Community College**

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This study examined how two Dominican English language learners attending Bronx Community College tapped into internal and environmental strengths to overcoming language, immigration, academic, and personal adversities. Using an oral history methodology, the life stories of two English language learners from the Dominican Republic were recorded and analyzed. The results indicated that the participants experienced the following set of barriers: separation from family members, difficulties with the English language, and financial difficulties. Despite the overwhelming challenges these participants experience, they were able to graduate from Bronx Community College and overcome setbacks by employing the following resiliency strategies: reliance on psychological strength to cope effectively with their challenges, connecting with supportive family and friends, establishing supportive relationships with faculty and staff and developing a bi-cultural ethnic identity.

Introduction

The major challenge faced by community colleges is how to increase student success, whether success is defined in terms of graduating with a degree or certificate, transferring, or retaining a job. Most community college students are first-generation college students and are

not familiarize with navigating the campus environment. Further, many community college students are academically underprepared and need to complete a series of developmental courses prior to taking college-level courses. These students often come from impoverished communities with a high crime rate and limited educational opportunities. For these types of students, community colleges are seen as their last resort to a better life. The deficit model has been used extensively to understand the factors associated with poor academic performance among minority college students. In contrast, this study examined Dominican students who achieved academic success. Using a strength-based perspective is more beneficial in understanding and finding ways to help Latino community college students become successful. In order to increase the success rate of minority college students, institutions of higher education need to focus on creating an environment in their campuses which fosters resiliency among their students. Two English language learners from the Dominican Republic who were interviewed to better understand how they achieved academic success despite cultural and sociocultural obstacles. The results yielded the following resiliency factors which influenced their success in college and in life: utilization of psychological strength to cope effectively with challenges, connecting with supportive family and friends, establishing supportive relationships with family and friends, and developing a bi-cultural ethnic identity.

According to the Census, Hispanics are the largest ethnic or racial minority group in the United States. They currently represent 17 percent of the total U.S. population. As of 2000, over a million Dominicans lived in the United States, with more than half a million in New York City alone. Dominicans in the United States play a crucial role in sustaining the Dominican Republic by sending remittances to family members, investing in the Dominican Republic, and traveling

back and forth on a regular basis. Like other immigrant groups, Dominicans have a variety of reasons for leaving their homeland. Dominican immigration has been transformed by political and economic changes both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. Most Dominican immigration began after the assassination of Trujillo in 1961. The Trujillo dictatorship, which lasted from 1930 to 1961, was followed by a period of political and economic instability. Those who were not politically connected had difficulty finding jobs, which meant that elections could lead to economic upheaval for many families. The 1980's were particularly difficult. By 1989, more than half of all families were living below the poverty level. The economy in the Dominican Republic continues to falter, while Dominicans arriving in the United States now may also experience difficult financial circumstances here.

Dominican English language learners face socio-economic and cultural barriers and they also confront a series of other challenges that native students do not face. For many Dominicans entering community colleges, learning proficiently the English language seems to be their biggest obstacle. Because the Dominican community is a transient community where individuals go back and forth between the native country and the United States, many Dominican children experience great difficulties learning the English language. Often, Dominican children grown up attending schools both in the Dominican Republic and in the United states. This instability often results in academic difficulties for Dominican students.

Adjusting to a foreign country is also a great burden for Dominican students. Specifically, for Dominican students who have lived most of their lives in the Dominican Republic, it is extremely difficult to adjust to the American culture. These students often report experiencing acculturation stressors due to their immigration to the U.S. Dominican families are temporarily separated by the immigration process. The family separation is a great challenge for

many Dominican families. The father is usually the first one who migrates and the mother stays back in the homeland with the children. Then, the mother reunites with her husband and the children are often left in the native country in the care of a relative, usually the grandparents, or with aunts and uncles. The children reunite with their parents in the United States several years later. Little research exists on the long term psychological effects of such separation on Dominican children.

Dominican children often report having experienced great anxiety as a result of separating from loved ones during the immigration process. Younger children specifically, have a harder time when their parents immigrate to the U.S. and are left behind in the Dominican Republic. It often takes several years before their visas are granted and their parents are settled economically in the U.S before they reunite with them in the U.S. While some children may adjust smoothly to their new environment, others may experience great difficulties in adjustment. Even though they are reuniting with their parents, these children often feel sad because they leave behind their friends, extended family and familiar surroundings.

When Dominicans arrive in the United States, they have to learn a new language, meet new friends and adjust to a new way of life. In addition, as newly arrived immigrants, they have to work many hours for low wages to pay their living expenses. Despite these barriers, Ingris and Junior, both Dominican English language learners at Bronx Community College, were able to flourish and achieve academic success. What factors made these Dominican students resilient? Understanding resilient Dominican students can be beneficial in teaching other students resiliency skills that will optimize their potential in college. A positive psychology theoretical framework was used in this study. Positive psychology is concerned with the scientific study of

human flourishing. It consists in the following areas of study: character strength, positive emotions, engagement, meaning and purpose, and positive relationships (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011).

In order to have a better understanding of the construct of educational resiliency, it is important to understand the origin and development of the construct of general resilience. The term resilience is considered a broad term which encompasses physical and mental health. Researchers have defined resiliency differently. Resiliency is “the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles” (Gordon, 1996, p.63); or alternately “Resilience in an individual refers to successful adaptation despite risk factors and adversity” (Masten, 1994, p.3). Being able to successfully overcome obstacles is a general theme of most definitions of resiliency.

Protective mechanisms modify the individual’s response to a risk situation (Winfield, 1991). Resilient individuals are able to overcome adversities because there are protective factors in their lives, which mitigate the effects of risk factors. For non-resilient individuals, there is often an absence of protective factors. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) write:

Resilience concerns behavioral adaptation usually defined as internal states of well-being or effective functioning in the environment, or both. Protective factors moderate the effects of individual vulnerability or environmental hazards so the adaptation trajectory is more positive than would be the case if the protective factors were not operational (p.426).

It is still not clear how protective factors interact with risk factors and how they help students to achieve despite overwhelming odds. Protective factors are categorized as support systems, family ties, and disposition attributes (Werner, 1989).

Providing adequate college resources can also promote academic resiliency among at-risk students. The term resource includes a wide range of things that are thought to enhance students' learning: physical facilities (laboratories, classrooms, libraries, audiovisuals aids), human resources (well-trained faculty members, teaching assistants, counselors, and support personnel), and monetary resources (financial aid, endowments, extramural research funds). In effect proponents say, if adequate resources are brought together in one place, student learning and development will occur (Astin, 1987). Resilient students utilized college resources to the fullest extent. Essential college support services include tutoring, counseling services, computer laboratories, and extra-curricular activities.

Maintaining strong family relationships can have a positive influence on fostering educational resiliency among at-risk students. Parental influence plays a significant role in determining a child's academic success or failure (Bronfenbrenner, 1978). Family members often provide support and motivation, which promote academic resiliency among at-risk students (Arellando, 1996).

A child's parents are the first protective agents in the child's environment (Masten, 1994). Parents provide the nurturing which is essential for healthy development. At-risk children who are raised in a nurturing environment are more likely to perform better academically than children who lack a supportive environment. The family provides stimulation

and high expectations, which also have an influence on the development of academic resiliency among at-risk students (Williams, 1976). First-generation college students are usually ambivalent about attending college. When they do attend college, it is a family member who usually provided the motivation and encouragement to do so.

For Hispanic community college students, the extended family plays a vital role. Due to the fact that many community college students have young children, an extended family member, like the grandmother, often takes care of the children while the student attends classes. Most immigrant families that come to the United States for the first time have to perform unskilled jobs. Yet, many of these immigrant families place a high value on education and encourage their children to do well in school. In short, the literature indicates that the family serves as a protective mechanism, which has a positive influence in the lives of resilient at-risk students.

Disposition factors are considered protective factors, which resilient individuals utilize to buffer against psychosocial stressors. Resilient students exhibit personality characteristics which are associated with achievement. For example, high self-esteem and self-efficacy are prevalent characteristics of resilient individuals. Rutter asserts, “The available evidence suggests that it is protective to have a well-established feeling of one’s own worth as a person together with conviction that one can cope successfully with life’s challenges” (Rutter, 1987, p.36).

Throughout the literature, researchers argue that resilient individuals are able to turn life’s difficulties into growth and opportunities (Salvatore, 2013). The two participants in this study were able to overcome adversities in college and in their lives outside of college and enhanced their performance and sense of fulfillment. Resilient individuals possess the following

personality characteristics: strong locus of control, exceptional ability to plan, ability to alter life experiences, strong interpersonal skills, and good problem solving skills. (Salvatore, 2013).

Methodology

An oral history interview methodology was used to examine the reasons for immigration among by Dominican immigrants to New York City. Many social scientists today still believe that quantitative methods are the only way to acquire evidence. However, Yow (2015) claims that qualitative research methods such as oral history, can also provide reliable and valid evidence. As a research method, oral history has critical and evaluation procedures that can help us understand how we understand and interpret research.

The material in this research study was part of the Dominican Oral History Project at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. Life histories in English and Spanish from more than twenty-five Dominican immigrants in the New York City area were collected. In the present study two life stories of Dominican migrants were analyzed. While many immigrants leave the Dominican Republic to rejoin family, this study examined what prompted the initial immigration that started the chain of migration. The most common reasons are economic, often an economic crisis at the individual and family level. The author conducted the interviews of the two participants in this study.

Setting and Participant Selection

This study was conducted at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. Bronx Community College is located on 44.6 green acres in New York City. BCC enrollment grew 10% from 10,740 in Fall 2010 to 11,783 in Fall 2015. The BCC study body is

as richly diverse as the community it serves. The ethnic background of students enrolled in the Fall 2016 semester consisted of: 65.3% Latino/Hispanics, 28.9% Black, 3% White and 1.4% Asian/Pacific Islander 3.7 and American Indian 07 %. (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment).

Participants were English language learners from the Dominican Republic who enrolled at the college to earn an Associate's degree. The two participants in this study arrived in this country without any English proficiency. This qualitative research project attempted to capture their educational and life story. The challenges that they encountered were explored as well as their resiliency skills. Their story is one of success and achievement despite cultural, language and financial adversities. Junior and Ingres provide a model for helping other community college students achieve academic success despite overwhelming odds. In the following section, I provide a brief background of each participant. Then in the next section, I explore the key strategies used by participants to mitigate obstacle and achieve academic and personal success.

One objective of qualitative research such as this is to obtain a clearer understanding of human experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The meaning people give to their experiences and the process by which they make interpretations are important elements of constructing reality. Qualitative research provides a tool to better understand Dominican immigrants and to obtain a historical account of their experience. Exploring their perspectives of immigration and their educational and vocational experience provide insight into how Dominican immigrants make connections to their new environment in the United States while maintaining close ties to their homeland.

Interviews are effective techniques to obtain descriptive data which can help the researcher to understand how participants interpret the world. Scholars have written about Dominican history from their theoretical lenses. The purpose of the qualitative interviews is to capture the stories of Dominican immigrants from their own perspectives and provide an account of their reality. In this way, qualitative research is better suited for examining their perceptions of immigration, their education, and their vocational experience than quantitative research.

Educational attainment and resiliency was the focus of this study because according to the latest census, Latinos have one of the lowest rates of educational attainment of any group in the country. In 2000, only 51% of Dominicans in the United States over the age of 25 had completed high school and only 10.6% had completed college, as compared to the overall population, where more than 80% completed high school and 24.4% finished college.

This study addressed the problems of Dominican immigrants by helping us to better understand their achievement and successes in their own words. Gaining a better understanding of successful Dominican immigrants can provide community colleges and other educational and vocational training institutions with important information which can be utilized in the development of effective and innovative retention and recruitment programs.

Data Collection

The two-hour audio taped interviews were completed with each participant. The interviews were conducted in Spanish. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions in order to let the participants tell their stories in their own way. Questions covered the following topics: family background, education, labor history in the Dominican Republic, immigration

experience, and labor history in the United States, current identity, and transnational migrant experience. (See Appendix A-Sample interview topic questions).

Ingris

The first individual whose story I would like to tell is Ingris. Ingris was born in the town called Las Ezperanza, in the Dominican Republic. At the time of the interview, she was 25 years old and in her last semester at Bronx Community College. She migrated from the Dominican Republic with her father when she was 17 years old. Her father's sister, who lived in New York City, helped her brother come to the U.S. Since Ingris was a minor, her father could also include her in his immigration petition. Both made little money and had to work many hours to support the family in the Dominican Republic. Ingris attended elementary and secondary school in the Dominican Republic. She was a good student. She attended a technical high school which prepared her well academically. She learned practical computer skills which helped her when she arrived to the U.S. Ingris's two older siblings were not included in the petition request because they were already adults. Her mother also stayed behind.

Prior to coming to New York, Ingris lived with her parents and with her older sister and older brother. Her family is very religious. Ingris attributes her success to her hard work and strong religious values. For Ingris, family values are the most important elements of her identity. She asserts:

Mi familia es importante. Esos valores familiares son lo que me hacen ser Ingris.¹

¹ *My family is very important. These family values are what make me be Ingris.*

Ingris's father was the first to migrate to the United States. When Ingris finished high school, he filled the immigration papers to bring her and her younger brother to reunite with him in New York City. Upon arriving in the United States, she enrolled at the English language Immersion Program at Bronx Community College. The Language Immersion Program is designed for newly arrived immigrants with limited English proficiency. She stayed at the Language Immersion Program for one year and then enrolled in the criminal justice liberal arts program at Bronx Community College.

Her parents had very little education; her mother worked as a housekeeper and her father was an electrician. According to Ingris, her parents have always supported her in everything. They are an inspiration to her and have motivated her to achieve academically and to overcome difficulties. Her older sister served as her role model. Her older sister graduated from college in the Dominican Republic and currently works as an auditor in the Dominican Republic. According to Ingris, her sister pushed her to excel in college. At the time of this interview, Ingris had graduated from Bronx Community College with a 3.0 GPA and had completed one year at John Jay College with a 3.3 GPA, majoring in criminal justice. She recently completed her bachelor's degree and was pursuing her master's degree. She married and has two children.

Junior

Junior's story is a testament to the human spirit of perseverance. Only in a country like the United States can someone move up the ladder of success like Junior. Junior Corniel was born out of wedlock in 1975 in Amapola, Tenares, in the Dominican Republic. He grew up picking coffee beans since he was small, attended school but dropped out after the 8th grade, at age of

seventeen. Even though his father was not married to Junior's mother, he made sure that Junior was well taken care of. Junior worked in his father's farm from a very young age. In 1990 his father began the process of petitioning for Junior to come to the United States. Junior arrived to New York City in 1995.

Shortly after he arrived, he began working as a dishwasher at Carmine's restaurant in Manhattan. He worked long hours and worked his way up as chief dishwasher and busboy. Yet, Junior felt that something was missing in his life. His wife encouraged him to take the high school equivalency exam (GED) so that he could apply to college to learn English and become a radiological technician.

While he continued working, he earned a GED, attended Bronx Community College (BCC) Language Immersion Program. To learn the new language, he enrolled in the English language Immersion Program, an intensive twenty-five hours per week program at Bronx Community College. He continued working at the restaurant part-time while he pursued his education. After one year in the Language Immersion Program, Junior enrolled in developmental courses and two years later then entered the Radiology program at Bronx Community College. He graduated with his degree in radiology in 2007 and was hired as a radiological technician in a major hospital in New York City. He and his wife purchased a home in New Jersey and live with their two children and his mother.

Data Analysis

The analysis process began with the development of a single coding scheme based on the transcription of the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interviews were analyzed and categories were developed from the data. As additional interviews were transcribed and

analyzed, the coding schemes continued to evolve. Patterns, categories, and themes further emerged from this analytical process.

Results

Immigration and Separation

Immigrating to another country is frequently a stressful event. For Ingris it was especially difficult. As the youngest of three children, Ingris was always treated as the baby of her family, but when she came to the United States with only her father, she had to grow up quickly. Her mother would do everything for Ingris. She would prepare for her meals, do her laundry and clean. In the United States, however, Ingris had to learn to do things on her own.

Being the youngest, it was very hard to separate from my mother and family. I was spoiled. My mother did everything for me. I had to mature very fast when I arrived to the United States. I had to change. I was sick one day with the flu. In the Dominican Republic my mother would take care of me. I had to wake up and I realize that I had to take care of myself. It was a radical change. I was 18 years old when I arrived.

Junior's first weeks in the United States was difficult. For Junior, not being able to speak English and being unable to find work right away were extremely difficult for Junior. He had to stay in his cousin's home until he found a full-time job. Even though it was not easy, he was determined to prosper in America. During that time, he met his present wife who was according to Junior, "The one who helped me to achieve my goals."

Junior left behind his mother, sisters and brothers. He called them on a regular basis, but missed them dearly. For many Dominican immigrants, separating from loved one can present challenges that often they are not prepared to deal with. As a result, many Dominicans become vulnerable to experience acculturative stress and report other difficulties. However, Junior was fortunate to surround himself with nurturing family members who had migrated to the United States prior to him.

Fear of Speaking English and other academic adversities

For Ingris and for many other English language learners, speaking in English is a major stressful challenge. Many English language learners do not excel in college because they have fears of speaking in English. Those students who are able to successfully manage their fear of speaking English can succeed in college. In Ingris' case, her cousin was able to assist her to overcome her fear of speaking English by gently assisting and teaching her how to pronounce the words in English and encouraging her to practice.

Ingris's case provides insights for developing an intervention program to help other English language learners overcome their fear of speaking English. Colleges can develop a peer English speaking program designed to provide English language learners with opportunities to converse with English proficient students in a relaxed environment. What this study suggests is that English language learners can overcome the fear of speaking English by having a supportive individual who can assist and teach them how to pronounce words in English. Often, English language learners feel isolated and do not establish connections with students who speak English proficiently. As a result, they do not have an opportunity to practice speaking English outside of their English classes.

Junior confronted a series of obstacles both on campus and off campus. The findings suggest that he was able to successfully overcome academic challenges. For junior learning how to write English proficiently was a major academic challenge. While Junior was a student at Bronx Community College, it was a college requirement that all students had to pass the CUNY Writing Proficiency exam in order to graduate. The first time he took the writing exam, he failed. He enrolled in a writing workshop to improve his writing skills and retook the exam a second time. Unfortunately, he failed it again. According to Junior, he was very frustrated because he was close to graduating and needed to pass the writing proficiency exam.

Even though he had successfully completed all the courses for his major in radiologic technology, he would not be able to take the state license exam until he passed the writing proficiency exam. Many students often drop out of college when confronted with academic problems such as the one that Junior experienced. However, Junior was determined not to give up and he kept taking the exam. He finally, passed the CUNY writing exam in his third attempt. He was very excited. Her stated:

I have not stopped fighting and I have received assistance. We need to continue moving forward and take advantage of the many opportunities that this country offers us. If I want to achieve something, I do it with love. I do it slowly, but I know that I will achieve it.

Junior's strong sense of determination helped him pass the CUNY writing proficiency exam. He was determined not to let anything stand in his way of achieving his overall goal at Bronx Community College. Similarly, Ingris also exhibited a strong sense of determination to overcome

her own obstacles to and achieve her academic goals. Student who have a strong desire and commitment to achieve their goal are able to persevere despite encountering barriers. Persistence and the ability to persevere despite difficult circumstance are key factors of resiliency.

Tapping into their Personal Strengths

Ingris and Junior both relied on personal strengths to overcome academic and social cultural obstacles. Among the many strengths that they identified as significant in overcoming obstacles and achieving academic success were: a high level of persistence, an ability to adapt to change, utilization of effective problem-solving strategies, utilization of superior people skills, a high level of self-confidence and commitment to achieve academic and career goals, and a high level of hope, engagement and well-being.

Junior started working in his father's farm when he was only five years old. He was expected to help around the farm after school. Junior attributes his success in college to the work value that his father instilled in him at a very young age. He asserts:

When you come from a family that has a farm, you are expected to work from a young age. He started working at the age of five. As I got older, my responsibilities in the farm increased. I learned the value of hard work by working in the farm. It was very difficult work but It taught me the meaning of hard work. My father had cows and other animals. I also milked the cows.

Junior was able to rely on his strong work ethics successfully navigate the demands of college. While a student at Bronx Community College, he found enough time to study for his classes and he also worked on a part-time basis.

Ingris's story also reveals that she was able to use personal strengths to overcome *difficult life's challenges*. She states:

Perseverance is very important. If you get tired, keep going. You have to use all the survival tools in your toolkit to overcome obstacles in life. It is not easy but if you want to really achieve something, you have to believe that you can do it. There is nothing that can stand in your way. You are the only person that can prevent you from not achieving your goals. You have to move forward despite the problems and difficulties.

Ingris's ability to persist despite facing overwhelming barriers propelled her to use personal strengths to motivate and inspire herself not to give up on her career and life goals. She also relied on her strong spiritual beliefs to help her keep moving forward. She adds:

While in college I experienced a very personal and challenging issue. I had to withdraw from college for one semester. It was very hard for me but I returned to college the following semester. God gave me the spiritual strength to keep moving to achieve my goals.

Religious beliefs can also contribute to the well-being of college students and buffer the stressful circumstances that they face. In Ingris's case, having a close relationship with God helped her to overcome difficult life challenges.

Overcoming Financial Adversities

In general, Latino/a college students confront many financial adversities that often affect their retention in college. A significant number of Hispanic students drop out from college, not

because of poor academic performance, but due to financial issues. Resilient student like Ingris and Junior were able to overcome financial obstacles.

Ingris gained strength and was motivated to excel academically by her parents' financial difficulties. She adds:

One thing that motivates me to learn is my parents. They did not get an education. Education is the key to move ahead. They went through financial problems. This motivated me.

Ingris's story, like that of Junior exemplifies the financial difficulties that many immigrants experience, but most importantly demonstrates a strong determination to move forward by obtaining an education. Education becomes the major source for climbing the ladder of success. These participants also derived a source of strength that propelled them to achieve their goals in spite of multiple academic and personal challenges. Their high motivation and having family support sustained them through difficult challenges that they faced as they pursued their dreams.

Part of achieving a goal involves hard work and commitment. Ingris exemplifies this by her hard work and strong desire to achieve her goal and overcome any obstacles that stand in her way:

Learning the English language is the major barrier. I could not communicate. It would take me one hour to read several paragraphs. I was always asking myself, "What does this mean." Perseverance is very important. Use all your tools to overcome your obstacles. If it's in your mind nothing can get in the way. The only obstacle you have is

you. You have to be optimistic. Tú pasa por vientos y mareas.² Put your trust in God.

Persevere. Don't stay down, but try to overcome those obstacles. Say, Yes I can; I can do it. I had to drop out one semester due to a personal problem. I felt down. I kept going. It was hard. I am still standing. Give the best of yourself. This is about you.

Approaching a problem from a positive perspective can reduce anxiety and strengthen individuals to cope better to adversities in life. Positive psychology principles state that human can flourish despite experiencing difficult life-changing situations. By focusing on their personal strengths rather than weaknesses, human beings are able to flourish and thrive in stressful life situations (Seligman, 2003).

Overcoming Academic Barriers

Many English language community college students drop of college due to their inability to overcome academic challenges. Learning how to read and write English proficiently is particularly difficult for most English language learners. Junior's difficulties passing the ACT writing exam and the CUNY English Proficiency Examinations illustrate the challenges that English language learners confront in higher education. He had to repeat the CUNY English

² You go through wind and waves, depicting the difficult hardship that she experienced.

proficiency exam three times before passing it. Junior was extremely concerned because passing the CUNY writing proficiency exam was a requirement for graduation. He would have not earned his degree in radiology if he had not passed the CUNY proficiency exam on his fourth attempt.

A major obstacle that I experienced at Bronx Community College was obtaining a passing score on the ACT Writing Examination. The first time that I took the exam I failed; then I took it a second time and failed by one point. You need a score of 7 in order to pass and I got a 6. I took it a third time and finally passed it with an 8. Now I have to pass the CUNY Proficiency Writing Exam. This exam has also been a problem for me. Grammar has always been hard for me. There is a lot of pressure on students with this exam. You are only given one hour to complete the test. The test itself is not student friendly. There has to be a better way to demonstrate your writing abilities than this test format. You also feel scare because you have three or four observers watching you while you are taking the exam. They treat you as if you were a criminal. They think you are going to cheat. It is impossible to cheat because every student has a different essay to do. I should not be required to take additional writing assessments. I should not have to proof to the college that I am a proficient writer. I passed my freshman writing composition course and I completed the Language Immersion Program. I just took the CUNY Writing Proficiency exam. I hope I passed it.

All these writing assessment exams can prevent students from graduating. I am supposed to graduate in June but if I don't pass the CUNY Writing exam, I will not be graduating because my academic standard is not adequate. ¿Do you think that a person that

successfully passes six classes and seven radiology courses where you are writing regularly, working with patients, does not have the basic academic standards? This test is biased and affects particularly the Hispanic students.

English language learners experience similar academic challenges that can derail their aspirations. In Junior's case he was able to persevere and did not give up even though he encountered difficulties with passing the required standardized writing exams. In many instances students drop out of college before completing their degree because of their inability to pass these standardized exams. Junior's expressed frustration with the writing standardized examination typifies the multiple academic challenges experienced by English language learners. Educators and administrators need to take into account the biases in the standardized exams currently being used to assess students' reading and writing abilities and develop better measures to assess the writing abilities of English language learners.

Maintaining Strong Family Ties Facilitates Resiliency

The findings revealed that Junior and Ingres both relied on their family as a source of motivation and inspiration to achieve success, despite the challenges that they experienced in college. In the Dominican culture, the family plays a vital role and members support each other. The extended family also is involved in looking out for the well-being of family members. The Dominican family is very close and supports each other. Throughout the interview, Junior

frequently returned to the themes of family unity and hard work. These appear to be at the core of Junior's identity.

Junior specifically, relied on his family when he first came to the United States. As a new arrival in this country, he did not find a job right away. He stayed with a relative temporarily. Junior was able to find a job as a dishwasher at Carmine's restaurant in New York City. For Junior his family taught him the importance of hard work and sacrifice. These two character strengths helped him to do well in his job and in college. He asserts:

I am a person that when I start working in a new job, I like to focus on my work and do things right. At the restaurant, they noticed that I was doing my job well, and they promoted me. In college I also try my best to do well.

The participants in this study reported that they had one or more significant others who motivated and inspired them to attend college and to do well in college. They also reported that they could not have finished college without the support of a family member. For Ingres, having her cousin work at Bronx Community College helped her to overcome barriers and achieve academic success. She says:

When I arrived in the U.S., I met my oldest cousin Shirley. She is my role model. She overcame obstacles and became successful. She motivates me. I first thank God and then her for what I have achieved.

Ingris's cousin worked at the college and offered her a part-time job when she started as a freshman. According to Ingres, her cousin helped her overcome the language barrier that she experienced when she arrived in this country. Prior to enrolling at Bronx Community College, Ingres attended the Language Immersion Program, an intensive English language program

designed to prepare English language learners for college level work. Ingres reported that she made great progress in improving her English skills at the Language Immersion Program.

However, when she registered as a freshman at Bronx Community College she was placed in an English as a second language course. Although she had made significant progress while at the Language Immersion Program, she was not proficient in English. Ingres encountered language barriers when she enrolled at Bronx Community College. She did not know enough English. She adds:

When I started, I did not know enough English. When I started working with my cousin as an assistant at registration, she encouraged me to talk to people in English. I was very afraid. She would pronounce all the words in the sentence that I had to say and I would repeat them with her. I lost the fear of speaking English.

For Ingris, the emotional support she received from her cousin at Bronx Community College motivated her to improve her English proficiency. It is important to provide a supportive and enriching experience for English language learners. The emotional support provided by Ingris's cousin was a crucial component which facilitated the transition to college life for Ingres and contributed to her academic success at Bronx Community college.

Forming Connections with Faculty and Staff

The two participants in this qualitative study reported the important contribution of faculty and staff in their success at Bronx community college. The college experience for many English language learners can be very stressful. Many students are not able to adjust to college

life and are often marginalized. Helping English language learners to establish connections with faculty and staff can provide a sense of emotional security and facilitate the adjustment process.

Junior established a supportive relationship with his counselor at Bronx Community College. His counselor assisted him in enrolling in the Language Immersion Program and motivated and inspired him to persevere despite facing financial and psychosocial challenges. Junior also enrolled in a freshman success seminar, taught by his counselor. In this class he learned how to manage his time in college, how to study effectively, and how to manage life's stresses. The course provided a foundation that helped Junior acclimate to college life. His counselor also advised Junior every semester to ensure that he registered for the right courses in his major.

Junior asserts:

I am very grateful for all the help my faculty advisor gave me. He was always there when I needed him. He motivated me when I was feeling down. I could have not achieved my academic goal without him. He was extremely helpful. He also helped me get into the radiologic Program. I will forever be grateful to him.

Having supportive faculty is extremely important for retaining minority students. To facilitate the student-faculty relationship it is best to have faculty members who are also from the same culture as the students. The percentage on minority faculty is relatively low nationwide when compared to the Anglo faculty population. Institutions of higher education need to do a better job at recruiting and retaining faculty of color.

Developing a Bicultural Identity

Ingris and Junior both reported the importance of maintaining a bi-cultural ethnic identity to their success in college. Even though, they had become proficient in English, and had graduated from college, they derived guidance and strength from their ethnic identity by remaining closely connected to ethnic and cultural traditions. Both reported that they had acquired aspects of the American culture, but had maintained their Dominican identity.

For Junior, for example, adjusting to the American culture was hard at the beginning when he first arrived, but as he learned the English language, he began to acquire some of the American customs and traditions. He had a deep commitment to fit in and learn about American culture. He was also not afraid to take risks. While working at the restaurant, he never turned down opportunities to move up. He would watch American television to learn about the American culture and its traditions. He was also interested in becoming a better person and learning as much as possible about America.

He felt so connected and appreciative of the American culture, that he became a U.S. citizen. He considers himself to be a Dominican-American citizen. Because dual citizenship is recognized by the Dominican Republic, Dominicans who become U.S. citizens do not have to give up their Dominican citizenship.

*Junior: I consider myself Dominican but also American since I am living here. I am thankful to this country because I have been able to obtain an education, a profession, and been able to purchase a house. Soy Americano y Dominicano.*³

Junior's drive to achieve and to graduate from college was also motivated by his strong ethnic identification with both the Dominican and American cultures. As he became more successful in the host country, his affinity to the American culture increased. According to Junior, he owes a lot to this country. In the U.S. he was able to make his dreams a reality.

For both participants, living between two worlds provided the opportunity to gain insight and motivation that allowed them to experience a transformation leading to their success as English language learners from the Dominican Republic.

Conclusion

Matti (2013) claims that in times of life setbacks, resilient individuals are able to turn life difficult moments into growth and opportunities. Ingris and Junior clearly embraced life's setbacks and were able to flourish as human beings. Resilient students like Ingris and Junior were able to achieve academic success at Bronx Community College because they were able to dig into their toolkit of resiliency strategies to deal successfully with adversities. For instance, Ingres used all the tools at her disposal to overcome language and personal obstacles. She utilized tutoring for example, to help her overcome her language problems. She found the

³ *I am American and Dominican.*

tutoring services at Bronx Community College very helpful. For both participants, supportive relationships inspired and motivated them to achieve academic success and overcome barriers. This has implications for college staff member involved with developing retention programs for English language learners. In order to foster resiliency, community colleges need to provide opportunities for English language learners to establish supportive connections on campus. Too often, college representatives expect students to establish supportive relationships on campus automatically. In this study, we can see the value that having a supportive connection can do to promote resiliency and academic achievement.

As this study revealed, English language learners can experience difficulties learning a new language and sometimes experience fear of speaking in English. Colleges need to pay close attention to English language learners and develop appropriate programs to assist them in adjusting to college and coping with the challenges involved in learning a new language. English language learners need to have opportunities to practice their English skills in a safe environment. Colleges can offer selected workshops on coping with the stress of learning a new language. Most importantly, Colleges need to foster resiliency by helping English language learners to acquire strategies to cope effectively with adjusting to a new culture and learning English. English language learners should not have to suffer alone. Colleges need to step up to the plate and create programs to serve this growing population in the nation's community colleges.

Maintaining close family ties also promoted resiliency among both of the students in this study. Often, English language learners feel isolated in community colleges. They feel that they don't belong. Colleges can assist student to feel that they are part of the campus community.

Services need to be in place that assist student in strengthening family ties. Especially for Dominican English language learners, the family can assist student when they encounter difficulties. Social workers can provide supportive family services to ensure that families stay connected, even under period of transition caused by the immigration process.

As both Ingris and Junior demonstrated, maintaining a bi-cultural identity was also a factor that contributed to their resiliency and academic achievement. Traditionally, immigrants were encouraged to acculturate to the main culture and to give up their traditional heritage. This may not be the right path to take. Colleges need to encourage their English language learners to maintain their heritage and their native language. Students should not have to feel pressure that they need to give up their culture to become successful. In fact, as the participants have demonstrated, it is possible to become successful by maintaining their ethnic identity while acquiring to dual identity. America becomes a richer country when citizens express and share their heritage while also acquiring American traditions.

Maddi (2015) asserts, “The mental work of hardy coping, he or she is lead to using what has been learned to formulate an Action Plan which could help in resolving the stressful circumstances. Actions Plans are comprised of an overall goal, and the instrumental steps that need to be taken to reach the goal” (Maddi, p.35). The evidence in this study suggests that Ingris and Junior were able to cope with the academic and cultural adversities by also having an Action Plan. Ingris’s and Junior’s stories shed light into how resiliency can help individuals achieve their dreams, despite overwhelming odds. They both endured difficulties for long period of time. Yet, they persevered and never gave up. They derived resiliency from their inner and spiritual self. During tough times, they never lost the sense of hope, but moved forward and took control of their lives. They learned and derived positive outcomes from their difficulties and became

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better people as a result of their difficulties. By all accounts both Junior and Ingris have achieved the American Dream.

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Appendix A

Sample Questions/Topics for Open-Ended Interview

Family Background

- Demographics: where and when they were born, description of family, marriage, etc.
- Family labor history (parents' jobs, unpaid work, etc.)
- Childhood chores and activities of daily life
- What they did for fun
- What was the town/area like
- Memories that stand out: negative and positive life experiences
- What were important issues: difficult life events

Education

- Educational history: where and when they went to school, how successful they were, differences between schools in the U.S. and the D.R.
- Attitudes towards school: What did they think of school? What areas of study did they like or dislike? What was the family attitude towards school?
- Were classmates of the same background? (ethnic, socio-economic, religious) What about teachers?
- Language history: how old were they when they started to study English, bilingual classes or not, etc.

Labor History in the Dominican Republic

- First job: How did they get it? What did it involve? What did they do with the money?
What did they think of the boss? What was the best thing about the job? What was the worst thing about the job?
- Work experience, paid and unpaid
- Vocational training
- Relation between educational training and job

Immigration Experience

- What was happening in the D.R. when they decided to emigrate; what event in the D.R. influenced their decision to leave
- Where and when did they first come to the U.S.?
- Immigration experience: What was it like to leave the Dominican Republic, who they left behind, etc.?
- Challenges experienced as an immigrant from the Dominican Republic
- Experiences with prejudice or hostility as a new immigrant
- Most difficult part of fitting in to the American culture

Labor History in the United States

- First job in the U.S.: How did they get it? What did it involve? What did they do with the money? What did they think of the boss? What was the best thing about the job?
What was the worst thing about the job?
- Work experience, paid and unpaid

- Work experience, legal and illegal
- Vocational training
- Relation between educational training and job

Current Identity

- Current feelings about country of origin and native language now
- Customs from the country of origin that are still observed
- Language attitudes: where do they speak English or Spanish? How do they feel when speaking English? How do they feel when speaking Spanish?
- If they have children, what language do they speak with their children? What language do their children speak when they talk with them? How do they feel about that?
- Identity: Which of the following terms would they use to describe themselves: Dominican, Dominican-American, American, Dominican-York, immigrant? Which terms have others used to describe them? Are there any other terms they identify with? Which do they prefer? Why?

Transnational migrants

- How did going back and forth between the D.R. and this country affect them? How did it affect their schoolwork? How did it affect their ability to read and write in Spanish? How did it affect their English?
- Challenges as a transmigrant
- Which country would they prefer to live in
- Which country do they see themselves living in later in life