

**Contextual Considerations in the Educational Trajectories of Immigrants: a study of**

**Nicaraguans in different places and among different compatriots**

**by**

**Lisa Konczal, PhD**

Barry University

June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011

**for:**

**IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITIES: ACADEMIC CULTURES IN TRANSITION**

July 27-31, 2011

Annual Meeting of the Society for Values in Higher Education

Elmhurst College, Elmhurst, Ill.

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## Introduction

Regardless of the discipline, there is a tendency among researchers to lump immigrant data into pan-ethnic categories. The label "Hispanic," for example, combines multiple national origin groups and multiple generations, concealing the considerable differences among them. A similar weak spot in immigrant discourse is discounting the particular geographic and social context in which immigrant children settle. An immigrant attending school in Miami, Florida does not have the same experiences as an immigrant attending school in Los Angeles, even if both share the same national origin. Among other things, the reception immigrants receive by people in their neighborhoods and schools plays a decisive role in their educational trajectory. This paper analyzes the education outcomes of people of Nicaraguan origin in the US by looking at the contextual differences between people of various Hispanic origins. Context, in this case refers to influence of those other immigrant compatriots that populate the metropolitan area which they settle.

Miami-Dade County has the highest proportion of foreign-born people in the nation. The majority of those immigrants are Cubans, a group that has achieved considerable power and status (an anomaly that has been reported as the "Cuban Success story"). Under this context, what are the educational implications for other Spanish speaking immigrant groups (like Nicaraguans) who settle in the same area? Do they assimilate toward similar successful educational and economic outcomes? Or do they end up being marginalized like many new immigrants? This paper will answer these questions. One of the ways it does this is by comparing Nicaraguans in Miami (where the majority immigrant group is Cuban) to Nicaraguans in Los Angeles (where the majority immigrant group is Mexican).

The data for this paper is obtained primarily from the most recent IPUMs (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) data. Variables include educational attainment and school attendance; as well as other relevant acculturation variables (parental education, language knowledge and usage, citizenship status, and socioeconomic status). The data in this study is supplemented by ethnographic interviews obtained under the CILS (Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study), which tracked hundreds of immigrant youth from about 1990 when they were in middle school, to about 2008 when they were in their late 20s to early 30s. The CILS study included face-to-face interviews with immigrants in Miami. I conducted many of these interviews myself during the final phases of the project.

The first part of the paper revisits the concept of assimilation, perhaps the most enduring theme of immigrant studies, including those that aspire to understand the education of young US immigrants. At the heart of the discussion is *segmented assimilation* a theory conceived by Portes and Zhou (1993) to denote the varying ways in which immigrants navigate their way into into distinct sectors of American society. At the heart of this discussion are the educational advantages and disadvantages that lead immigrants toward the particular sector, or segment, that are articulated in segmented assimilation theory. The subsequent parts of this paper discuss: 1) the data utilized; 2) a detailed demographic overview of Nicaraguans in the US: where they settle, as well as educational and socioeconomic data; 3) the contextual differences between Nicaraguans in the greater Miami and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. This section does not focus exclusively on Nicaraguans. Since the focus is context, it details the circumstances of the other Hispanic groups that dominate the two metropolitan areas (Cubans in Miami and Mexicans in LA).

The concluding section summarizes findings and reconsiders the central questions in the light of those findings.

### Theory and Literature

Meanings of assimilation in scholarly discourse have unfolded over the course of immigrant history in the US. Observations of the first great waves of immigrants to the US during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century provoked the idea that foreigners will shed their native cultures while embracing the ways of the dominate US society(Park and Burgess 1921). To the classical theorists the dominate society unarguably meant white, middleclass, protestant culture. Furthermore, most early-to-mid twentieth century immigration theorists believed that assimilation was a prerequisite to upward mobility. Straight-line assimilation is a useful description for this way of thinking: the more “American” one became, the greater the success.

A more optimistic approach to the immigrant adaptation process was denoted in “the melting pot.” During the 1960’s scholars also recognized the persistence of ethnic identity even after generations have passed (Glazer and Moynihan 1970). In their influential book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Moynihan (1970) argued, “the core has taken on the characteristics of an ethnic group” meaning that whites rediscovered their “ethnic” identity so they did not feel left out as non-whites claimed their heritage (Glazer and Moynihan 1970: 5). The U.S., they argued, had become a nation of various ethnic groups in which no one unified core existed. Glazer and Moynihan concluded that assimilation theory set forth by Park and Gordon could not account for anomalies whereby ethnicity was an important aspect in local politics. During the 1960’s it was clear that immigrants’ cultural diversity did not completely fade away in favor of assimilation

into a homogenous middle class white culture. However, new models attempting to explain this persistence did not arrive for some years.

The theoretical framework of this paper is *segmented assimilation*—primarily because this theory recognizes higher education as a necessity of contemporary US immigrants, required for negotiating a path toward success, even survival. In sum, segmented assimilation asserts that immigrants differ in their direction of mobility (upward, downward, or stagnant) and in the degree to which they acclimate into the culture in which they settle. Some immigrants embrace their homeland culture and speak their homeland language, while others deliberately (sometimes unwillingly) discard them. The mobility they experience often depends more on modes of acceptance by the larger US society and the local environment in which they settle.

This idea is contrary to the classical discourse of assimilation. Under the segmented assimilation model there are three possible outcomes of adaptation: 1) the classic expected trajectory of upward mobility into the normative structures of middle-class white America; 2) the downward-mobility pattern, acculturation and integration of immigrants into the underclass; and 3) economic integration into middle-class America, with lagged acculturation and deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and solidarity (Portes 1993).

#### *Positive Academic Outlooks*

The third path of assimilation (above) is of most interest here, because it offers opportunity for the required to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. While traditional assimilation theorists argued for giving up homeland cultural traits as a prerequisite to succeed in the U.S. (including in schools), current observations conclude that some immigrants succeed by deliberately maintaining certain ethnic norms and values such as the belief in the payoff of schooling (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). For example, children of early anti-Castro Cuban exiles

attending private schools in Miami experienced an environment that was characterized by a culture that supported parental or homeland ethnic traits such as language and beliefs (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Stepick 1993). Cubans in Miami had the resources and capital to create private bilingual schools in Miami. In these schools children were taught English, but they did so while preserving Spanish and a strong attachment to the Cubans' national history. Because of this preservation, rather than despite of it, educational attitudes and achievement were positive (ibid).

What factors provoke immigrant children into this most optimistic outcome? According to Portes and Zhou (1993) it is the degree of acceptance on three levels: 1) Government policy; 2) societal reception (degree of prejudice in US society, e.g., as illustrated by media) and Co-ethnic community. Again the example of Miami Cubans: The US government policy toward granting Cubans legal status is what some refer to a "open door" (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996: 4); societal reception is relatively positive<sup>1</sup> due to the first waves of Cubans to the US who were perceived as phenotypically "white" (light-skinned and European; and finally, the co-ethnic community as illustrated above is comparatively influential, middle class, and self-sustaining. The former

### *Negative Academic Outlooks*

What makes some immigrants have a negative or adversarial outlook toward education? While addressing this question, researchers attribute degree of discrimination and the particular settlement patterns as relevant to academic attitudes. A relatively large number of immigrant children have settled in underprivileged neighborhoods where immigrants and their children come into direct daily contact with the native poor (Zhou 1997). Such is the case of some

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<sup>1</sup> The Mariel Boat lift to Miami in 1980 that brought thousands of Cubans, many of whom were darker-skinned than their refugee predecessors, began a well documented campaign of racism and prejudice toward this particular group of Cubans. This negative societal reception is exemplified in films like *Scarface* and popular TV shows like *Miami Vice* that portrayed Cubans that came during that time as criminals, drug dealers and thugs (see Konczal 2006: 526; Sawyer 2006: 160; Totman and Scudder 2009: 78)

Mexican immigrants in the California and Haitians assimilating into inner-city African American urban culture (Stepick 1992; Ogbu 1991). They reject mainstream norms and values; that is they do not assimilate into this sector, because they actively reject it.

According to Ogbu (1991), the peer culture of today's inner-city schools often places immigrant children in a dilemma: if they choose to meet their parents' expectations for academic achievement, they are likely to be ostracized as "uncool," by their American peers in schools. However, if they submit to peer pressure and to "American" attitudes they likely will adopt negative attitudes toward school leading to poor academic performance that will limit their opportunities for advancement later (Portes 1995; Portes 1996; Zhou 1997a). The end result of this latter adaptation path is summarized by Suarez-Orozco as "learning not to learn" (Suarez-Orozco 1991).

This describes another 'segment' of segmented assimilation. That is the event of assimilating (adopting the culture of the new society), but rather than the acclimation as beneficial, it is detrimental. Furthermore, this path is a result of negative reception that is reflected in the extraordinary prejudice and discrimination they have confronted (Stepick, 1999; Stepick, C. D. Stepick, Eugene, Teed and Labissiere 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). For some immigrants, negative reception is apparent in government policy, societal prejudice, and a weak co-ethnic community. The lack of acceptance of some immigrants has *produced cultural dissonance*, which is manifest in youth covering up or hiding their home culture, including language. For example, studies of Haitians in Miami showed that compared to other immigrants, these students claimed less knowledge of a foreign language (for them this would be Haitian Creole), even though the reported English language ability of Haitian young people was statistically equal to that of the other youth (Stepick et.al 2001). Researchers like Stepick (2001)

interpret the students' claimed ignorance of Creole as a reflection of cultural dissonance, an effort to distance themselves from their roots. A similar experience is apparent with Mexicans in Los Angeles, as this paper will discuss later.

## Data and Research

Most of the data for this paper is extracted from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series IPUMS database, which contains samples of the US Census' American Community Survey (ACS) 2009. Since these are samples, they are not exact counts (as no data set is), but they are perhaps the closest to the real number that is currently available. From the ACS 2009 IPUMS data I pulled the sample group of "Hispanics," then further narrowed that group to specific Hispanic origin (Nicaraguan, Cuban, etc.). The 'Hispanic' group in this data set, simply refers to any person who answered "yes" to the question, "Are you Hispanic?" From there the survey asks that they specify the specific Hispanic national origin they identify with. It is therefore based on identity more than actual country of origin. Rather than pulling samples from "birthplace" (which includes diverse nationalities, born in a specific nation) or pulling from "first and second" ancestry (which attempts to objectively identify parents and grandparents place of birth), the Hispanic origin is most appropriate for this study. Furthermore, it is consistent with the sampling method used by the PEW Hispanic Center data, much of which is utilized in this paper. The ethnic categories discussed here are based strictly on subjective self identification of the respondents--as is appropriate for the analysis of a socially constructed categories of people. Later in the paper I do separate and compare "US" and "Foreign-born."

Besides numbers, I also include ethnography from years of interviewing immigrant young adults from various ethnic backgrounds in Miami. The first set of interviews were from

dissertation over 10 years ago. I also collaborated on the Children of Immigrant Longitudinal Study. The original survey was conducted with large samples of second-generation immigrant children attending the 8th and 9th grades in public and private schools in the metropolitan areas of Miami/Ft. Lauderdale in Florida and San Diego, California.

#### Demographics: An overview of US Nicaraguans

In 2008 the U.S. Census' American Community Survey counted an estimated 242,666 people in the United States that were born in Nicaragua and 351,704 who identified as Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin (which includes both U.S. and foreign born Nicaraguans). Nicaraguans are the eleventh-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the United States, accounting for less than one percent (.75 percent) of the Hispanic population and an estimated .12 percent of the total American population. Mexicans constituted 30.7 million (65.7 percent of Hispanic population), and the highest number of Hispanics with a Central American ancestry were Salvadorians (1,560,416 or 3.3 percent of Hispanic population) and Guatemalans (985,601 or 2.1 percent of Hispanic population).

The waves of Nicaraguans who came to the U.S. during the last 30 years came initially in reaction to the political upheavals in Nicaragua that started with the Sandinista Revolution in the late 1970's and continued with a civil war during the 1980's, known as the Contra/Sandinista war. The first wave of Nicaraguans to the U.S. was characterized by those fleeing political and economic upheaval in the wake of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 (Portes & Stepick, 1993).

The numbers of Nicaraguans pale in contrast to other Hispanics, especially Mexicans, but in the 1980s the Contra-Sandinista War drove Nicaraguans to the United States in numbers high enough to make an impact on the largest metropolitan areas. Their geographic patterns of

settlement reflect the general immigration settlement trends into America's largest cities. During the 1960s most settled in the San Diego, New York, and booming Midwest industrial areas: Cincinnati, Chicago, Cleveland. By the 1980s deindustrialization and its concurrent decrease in labor-intensive job demand shifted the pattern away from the Midwest toward cities with service-intensive economies (e.g., Los Angeles, San Diego, Miami).

By the 1990s South Florida ruled supreme as the number one destination for Nicaraguans and has remained at the top ever since. Besides employment opportunities, Miami attracted Nicaraguans because it became a hub for other Spanish speaking immigrants, especially Cubans, who quickly gained considerable power and status compared to other immigrants in America.

#### *Educational Attainment*

According to the 2008 ACS estimates, Hispanics of Nicaraguan Origin had only slightly higher levels of education than the Hispanic population overall. Some 18.8 percent of these Nicaraguans ages 25 and older—compared with 12.9 percent of all U.S. Hispanics—had obtained at least a bachelor's degree (see Table 1 for this and subsequent data variables). These figures were lower than the percentage of American population that had obtained at least a bachelor's degree (27.7 percent). Among Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin 73.5 percent had at least a high school diploma or GED equivalent. This is low compared to the American population (85 percent have at least a high school diploma or GED equivalent).

A more dismal outcome is apparent while looking at foreign born Nicaraguans (that is people who said they were born in Nicaragua). According to the ASC 2008 estimates only 70 percent of people who identified Nicaragua as their birthplace had graduated from high school (or had a GED equivalent, ages 25 and older). However, there is evidence that this has changed over time. According to this same data set, in 2000 only 60 percent of people born in Nicaragua

had a high school diploma or equivalent (compared to 70 percent of all foreign born immigrants in 2000). Even more optimistic are the numbers showing Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin who were born in the U.S. Ninety-three percent of Nicaraguans under this classification (U.S. born) completed high school or GED equivalent according to the ASC.

*Socioeconomic status and work*

In 2008 the median personal income of Nicaraguans age 16 and older was \$20,000. The median income for all Hispanics was about \$21,488. The share of Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin who lived in poverty (13.6 percent) was only slightly higher than the U.S. total (12.7 percent) estimated in 2008, but much lower than the percent share among all Hispanics (20 percent). These figures show that Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin fair better than those who trace their origin to other Central American nations, such as El Salvador (15.4 percent in poverty), Honduras (21.5 percent), and Guatemala (20.6 percent). Almost 1 in 5 children who are Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin (under age 18) live in poverty. In addition (as shown in Table 1), one third of Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin (33 percent) do not have health insurance compared with 31.7 percent of all Hispanics and 15.4 percent of the general U.S. population. Even more specifically, 20.5 percent of Nicaraguans under the age of 18 do not have any health insurance.

Nicaraguans' occupations predominately fall under categories of technical, sales, and administration (over 30 percent). However, occupations of only foreign-born Nicaraguans fall predominately under low wage service and office jobs. Some, but not most, work in informal sectors in South Florida factories for low wages, for example construction, hairdressing and tailoring.

These figures stand out in comparison to most other immigrant groups, notably the Hondurans and Guatemalans. People born in Nicaragua were almost twice as likely in 2000 to be

employed in managerial professional, technical or sales positions (43.3 percent versus 19 to 27 percent for the other two) according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The advantage is attributed to characteristics brought from the homeland. The first few waves of Nicaraguan immigrants to America tended to be disproportionately of working age, more likely to have a secondary or university-level education, and more likely to have been employed in a white-collar occupation before leaving Managua (compared to Hondurans and Guatemalans). In addition, Nicaraguan emigrants in the first two major waves tended to come from higher income households. In sum, not all Nicaraguans are struggling financially, and native-born Nicaraguan children have higher level positions than their foreign-born counter parts.

#### Education and assimilation in context: Nicaraguans among Cubans in Miami

This section dissects the education of Nicaraguan from a more micro level perspective, by understanding them within the context of two metropolitan areas with the greatest numbers of Hispanic immigrants: Miami and Los Angeles.

Miami, in South Florida, has lived up to its assortment of titles such as the Gateway to the Americas, International Hub, Capital of Latin America and City of Immigrants. Miami has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any major metropolitan area in the United States, proportionally 50 percent more than either Los Angeles or New York (Stepick, Grenier, Castro & Dunn, 2003). According to the latest U.S. Census figures 50 percent of Miami-Dade County's 2.4 million residents are foreign-born. Looking at both foreign-born and second generation together, that percentage comes to over 70 (Miami-Dade County Department of Planning and Zoning [MDCDPZ], 2003; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Of that foreign-born

population, about 87 percent are from the Americas (South and Central America, including Mexico and the Caribbean) (MDCDPZ, 2003).

There are approximately 81,585 foreign-born Nicaraguans living in the Miami-Hialeah Metropolitan area in Florida (ACS 2008; Ruggles, Alexander, Genadek, Goeken, Schroeder, and Sobek 2010). This figure is even higher when counting those who identify as Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin. According to the 2008 ACS that is 122,501 (about 5 percent of the total Miami-Hialeah population), which makes them the second largest Hispanic group in South Florida, behind Cubans (783,979 or about 33% of the Miami-Hialeah population). Leaders in the Nicaraguan community and others dispute this figure taking into account the large concentration of undocumented Nicaraguans in Miami, at least 65,000 in the mid-1990s according to immigration attorneys (Marin, 1996).

The assortment of diasporic communities can be observed in the pluralistic treasures of Greater Miami-Dade County. Little Haiti is just south of the downtown, Little Havana is in central Miami, and Little Managua is west near the everglades. Some residents make claim to a Little Lima, Little Rio and Little Buenos Aires.

To scholars observing Miami immigration and ethnicity, it is not just the numbers that are of key interest. Rather, it is the unique and exceptional manner in which Hispanics, notably Cubans, were able to achieve a rapid process of incorporation, exhibiting relatively high levels of occupational and political achievement (Perez, 2001; Portes & Stepick, 1993; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Stepick & Grenier, 1993). In sum, Latinos in Miami have done exceptionally well, economically and politically, compared to immigrants in other parts of the nation. While Miami has only five percent of the total U.S. Latino population, it has close to half of the forty largest Latino-owned industrial and commercial firms in the country (Stepick et al. 2003). Besides

economic, Latinos in Miami have substantial political influence. In 1985 the Miami City Commission were majority Cuban American and has had a Cuban American mayor almost continually since then. The 2004-2011 county mayor, Carlos Alvarez (who was recently fired), is also Cuban American, as was the mayor before him (Alex Penelas, 1996 – 2004). Four Miami Cubans are in the U.S. House of Representatives, the junior US Senator from Florida (Marco Antonio Rubio is Cuban and the Miami-Dade County state legislative delegation along with the Miami-Dade County School Board are dominated by foreign-born Latinos, especially Cubans. Indeed, never before has a minority immigrant group held so much power in a major U.S. City.

The discussion about segmented assimilation earlier in this paper aids in the understanding of their success. As mentioned, government policy is a key factor that determines the sector in which immigrants land. The Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS<sup>2</sup>) bestowed onto Cubans one of the most generous welcoming packages ever bestowed upon immigrants to the U.S (Masud-Piloto, 1996). They were fleeing a socialist nation during the pinnacle of the Cold War and therefore were welcomed to the U.S. with open arms (ibid). The “open door” policy granted to Cubans gave them opportunity that subsequent generations could take advantage of (ibid).

Nicaraguans came to the United States under circumstances similar to that of Cubans—the overthrow of a strong-man government coinciding with a socialist revolution, loss of private ownership for the upper and middle class followed by severe economic hardship for all. Yet, Washington did not welcome the Nicaraguans as they did the Cubans. A different ideology was employed toward Nicaraguans and the situation in Nicaragua. Washington virtually demanded

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<sup>2</sup> As a result of tightened security after the September 11, the INS ceased to exist. In 2003 the newly created US Department of Homeland Security was charged with the administration of US immigrants. Under this department, the offices of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have replaced INS.

that Nicaraguans, rather than escape to the U.S., accept the opportunity to fight against the Sandinistas on their own terrain (Portes & Stepick, 1993, pp. 156,157). US policy made a temporary exception with NACARA<sup>3</sup> (Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act) that allowed for some Nicaraguans to seek refugee status. Nicaraguan immigrants therefore were welcomed amiably compared to other groups like Haitians and Mexicans.

In terms of the societal reception, Nicaraguans in Miami are subjected to some degree of prejudice and racism. At a local High School with a large Hispanic student body (mostly Nicaraguan and Cuban), Nicaraguans are sometimes ostracized with the epithet *terra flecha* which literally means *arrow thrower*, but colloquially it denotes the indigenous heritage many Nicas share. It is not meant to be nice and it reflects the interethnic racial conflicts between peoples who trace their ancestry to Central and South America and the Caribbean.

In spite of these derogatory labels, Miami Nicaraguans have a substantial advantage over other Hispanics in the U.S. That is, they settled into an area that inhabits a larger group of Hispanics with power and status. While the Nicaraguan group is less populous and subject to racial discrimination, they find it easy to blend into a larger, more influential group and thus derive ample benefits from doing so (Fernandez-Kelly & Schaufli, 1994; Suarez-Orozco, 1997).

This anomaly (a minority assimilating into another minority) is illustrated in language and self identification. Like Haitians, Miami Nicaraguans discarded or hide some of their ethnic traits, such as their particular Nicaraguan Spanish dialect (for example, Nicaraguans use *vos* (you), a word other Latin American's rarely use). But rather than discard their Spanish altogether, Nicaraguans modified it to fit the mainstream of Miami. Some young Nicaraguans

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<sup>3</sup> Best described by Ana Margarita Cervantes-Rodriguez (2006, pg.7) NACARA, enacted in November 1997, "was intended to grant relief from deportation to Nicaraguans and other Central Americans, Cubans and nationals of the former Soviet bloc countries that met certain criteria."

have told me they have adopted the Cuban-Spanish dialect or in Miami what has come to be known as *Cubonics* (Balmaseda 1997; Konczal, 2006).

The way Nicaraguans self-identify is also telling of their necessity to blend into a larger, homogenous pan-ethnic (i.e., Latin or Hispanic) solidarity. A study of Nicaraguan and Cuban high school students in South Florida showed that second generation Nicaraguans self identify with pan-ethnic labels more so than Cubans, who identify with their national label (Cuban or Cuban American) (Fernandez-Kelly & Shauffler, 1995, p. 685; Portes & Macleod, 1996). The ethnic label “Hispanic” assigned by the U.S. Census to peoples with origins in Spanish speaking countries has been criticized for stripping people of their historical identity and reduces them to imputed common traits (Oboler 1998). But for some Nicaraguans, it may very well represent self-assertion and a more inclusive solidarity, which the Cubans in the Miami experience. More and more though, Nicaraguans are gaining a stronger nationality. Recent studies have found that, over time, Nicaraguans in Miami have successfully secured certain degrees of influence, and as a result, embrace their national identity (Fernandez-Kelly & Curran, 2001; Konczal 2002).

In terms of assimilation and education, the power of their co-ethnic community has persuaded Nicaraguans to assimilate into another Hispanic group. The phenomenon recalls Mary Waters’ now classic work *Ethnic Options* (1990), which eloquently describes the choices later generations of 20<sup>th</sup> century European immigrants had as a result of their advantageous similarities (especially skin color) to the dominate Anglo-Saxon, Protestant status. To avoid discrimination, the offspring of Irish and Polish during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century could opt to claim a more privileged ethnicity. Nicaraguans in Miami who face discrimination do the same in more subtle ways (language and panethnic identity).

In another context: Los Angeles

What about Nicaraguans who settle in Los Angeles where there co-ethnics, Mexicans are group that historically has had perhaps the worst reception of any immigrant group in the US? Los Angeles is the second most common destination of Nicaraguan immigrants. There are currently about 46,780 Hispanics of Nicaraguan origin in the Los Angeles-Long Beach Metropolitan area. This is a mere 0.05 percent of the massive 9.8 million people residing in that area. Mexicans on the other hand represent 37 percent of that population with over 3.6 million people identifying as Hispanics of Mexican origin<sup>4</sup>.

In terms of government policy, Mexican immigrants in the US and in LA have not experienced a gracious reception. As Min Zhou asserted in 2008 study of second generation immigrants in LA, “Legal status upon migration is perhaps the single most powerful structural difference that separated their mobility paths from the outset” and “undocumented status exacerbates low parental human capital and seriously handicaps immigrant children’s ability to pursue even simple educational goals” (Zhou 2008: 57). Because of their visibility, Mexican immigrants have continually been targets of hostility by anti-immigration groups. Nothing is more evident of this than recent backlashes against “illegals”, something not new to California. In contrast to Cubans in Miami, Mexicans in LA have an unwelcoming government policy, experience far more societal prejudice and discrimination, and are not supported by a strong community of co-ethnics.

The rejection they face on macro and micro levels has no doubt contributed to their educational outcomes. Children of Mexican immigrants are more likely to fail out of school (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 2000; Perlman and Waldinger, 1997; Rong and Preissle, 1998); have

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<sup>4</sup> This does not include other pan ethnic categories that may identify Mexicans, such as “Chicano”. This was left out to comparative purposes: each group discussed in this paper is identified via their home country origin.

lower levels of education brought from their homeland (Portes and Rumbaut, 1990; Zhou, 1997a); score relatively low on standardized test scores (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 2000; Trueba, 1991); and have higher high school dropout rates compared to other groups in the US (Romo and Falbo, 1996; Rong and Preissle, 1998; Valencia, 1991).

Matute-Bianchi's study of "Field High" in San Diego has found that school success is more likely among what she termed "Mexican-oriented" students: those who maintained strong, positive identities as "Mexicanos" in addition to valuing educational credentials as a means of achieving adult success (Matute-Bianchi 1991). However, many Mexican youth she studied did not embrace their ethnicity as an asset to their educational success. Instead, they actively rejected their heritage and, along with it, schooling. They are described by Matute-Bianchi as "cutting classes by faking a call slip so you can be with your friends at the 7-11 . . . sitting in the back of a class of 'gabachos' and not participating . . . not taking the difficult classes . . . doing the minimum to get by." According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001) Mexican immigrants "represent the textbook example for theoretically anticipated effects of low immigrant human capital combined with negative context of reception".

While few studies have documented Nicaraguans in this context, there is invaluable ethnography describing how Nicaraguan immigrants experience downward mobility as generations. Observations of foreign born Nicaraguans in large California metropolitan areas do well academically because they have a "dual frame of reference" (Fernandez-Kelly and Schaufli 1994; Gibson 1991b; Ogbu 1991b; Suarez-Orozco 1997). That is, they compare their new situation and education in the United States to their prior, usually less favorable, situation in their homeland. Young Nicaraguan immigrants in the US remember life in Nicaragua with its caste like system where your name opens more doors than educations (and education is difficult

to come by in a poor nation). That is the yardstick in which they measure their educational opportunities in the US. The first generation appreciates their newfound opportunities for advancement through education, and therefore do well academically. On the other hand, the second generation who has no ‘dual frame of reference’ is keenly aware of the prejudice toward Hispanics (or their Mexican compatriots) and the disenchantment of their peers, which is visible in Los Angeles. In sum, second generation Nicaraguans in Los Angeles experience *cultural dissonance*: the most negative path of segmented assimilation leading them toward poverty.

#### Education of Nicaraguans in Two areas compared

Tables 2 and 3 show differences in educational attainment between Miami Nicaraguans and Los Angeles Nicaraguans. Table 2 shows the education attained by Nicaraguans in Miami and in Los Angeles. It also shows their “Majority Hispanic” counterpart (in Miami that would be Cubans, in Los Angeles, Mexicans). The following assumptions can be derived from this table:

- Nicaraguans and Cubans in Miami, despite having different experiences in migration and treatment are strikingly similar in education levels. Both groups have close to 29 percent who have not finished high school (or GED equivalent). This is higher than the entire US population, but lower when compared to other Hispanics nations wide.
- Miami Nicaraguans have higher rates of those not finishing high school than do Nicaraguans in Los Angeles (29.1 percent versus 21.4 percent). Miami Nicaraguans who do finish high school go on to obtain a Bachelors degree or higher (20.4 percent at slightly greater rate than Nicaraguans in Los Angeles (17 percent of Nicaraguans in Los Angeles have at least a Bachelors degree).

- Mexicans in Los Angeles parallels what the literature says about the education of Mexicans in the US as a whole: relatively high rates of high school non-completion (46.4 percent) and relatively low rates of higher degree attainment (8.1 percent).

Table 3 shows the differences between US- and foreign-born Nicaraguans' educational attainments in Miami and Los Angeles. The highlights are below:

- In both Miami and in Los Angeles the US born Nicaraguans fair better than their foreign-born Nicaraguan counterparts. 15.8 percent of US-born Nicaraguans in Miami fail to complete high school and in LA that figure is 7.2 percent. The disparity is most explicit in Los Angeles where only 7.2 percent of US born Nicaraguans fail to complete high school versus 23.4 percent of Foreign-born Los Angeles Nicaraguans who do not complete high school.
- In terms of Bachelor's degrees obtained the difference between Miami US born and Los Angeles US born is significantly different: thirty four percent of US born Nicaraguans in Miami have at least a Bachelor's degree compared to 20.1 percent of the similar group in Los Angeles.

## Conclusion

In terms of the main questions explored in this paper the data only tells us the following: There are differences between Nicaraguans in Miami and Los Angeles in terms of educational attainment. Nicaraguans (both US- and Foreign-born) complete high school at lower rates than their LA counterparts. However Nicaraguans in Miami have higher rates of Bachelor's degrees. Neither of these conclusions describe the effects of the compatriots (Mexicans and Cubans in their respective metropolitan areas), but the educational similarities between Cubans and

Nicaraguans in Miami merely hints that there may be a relationship. To find statistical influence future analysis should include the effects of amount of time lived in the particular metropolitan area as well as controls for poverty and citizenship.

The data along with the literature and observations does however support ideas asserted by segmented assimilation theory; especially that different immigrant experiences yield diverse paths of educational outcomes. Cubans have benefited from advantages bestowed upon them via a favorable governmental policy. This along with low societal prejudice toward the first waves of Cubans enabled them to create a self-sustaining community that also supported their compatriots who arrived in subsequent years. It may have also paved a path for other Spanish speaking groups, like Nicaraguans that live, work, and attend school along side them. This is apparent in the observed language (“Cubonics”) and identification choices (panethnic) of Nicaraguans. It seems that becoming Hispanic/Latino in Miami offers an opportunity for, not the foreclosure of, advancement.

Across the nation in Los Angeles the largest Hispanic group, Mexicans, have had a more difficult experience in regards to government policy and society prejudice. The result has been relatively less favorable educational outcomes. Also still too premature to presume, this may have ramifications for other Hispanics who settle in the same area. They are likely to be subjected to similar prejudices. In terms of assimilation, one must become more thoroughly mainstream American to succeed in a local context dominated by “Anglos,” or non-Hispanic Whites as the US Census refers to the dominant US ethnic population.

However, Miami may not be utterly unique. In parts of California, Asians have come to dominate in a way that parallels Hispanic/Latinos in Miami. In Monterey Park, California in particular, Asians control or at least are a powerful influence in both its politics and economics

(Horton, 1995; Fong, 1994). The new immigration thus has a couple of consequences for the constitution of American society and the assimilation of immigrants into it. First, in a few cases, those immigrants can establish sufficient power locally to dominate and thus change the course of assimilation, prodding new immigrants to assimilate into a particular ethnic segment of American society, rather than mainstream, ethnically white American society. Finally and most importantly, the consequences of segmentary assimilation vary dramatically according to the amount of power the ethnic segment has in the broader society. Assimilating into a poor, ethnic minority, inner-city segment is more likely to increase the probability of downward mobility (see Portes and Zhou; Stepick 1998). On the other hand, assimilating into an economically and politically powerful segment can be as or even more rewarding than assimilating into mainstream American society.

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**Table 1: Population Characteristics, 2008**

(thousands, unless otherwise noted)

	Hispanics of Nicaraguan Origin		All Hispanics (1)		US Population	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Total</b>						
	351		46,822		304,060	
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	166	47.3	24,214	52	149,863	49
Female	185	52.7	22,608	48	154,196	51
<b>Nativity</b>						
Native Born	129	36.7	28,985	62	266,044	87
Foreign Born	223	63.3	17,837	38	38,016	13
<b>Age</b>						
< 5	21	5.8	5,216	11	20,879	7
5 to 17	63	18	10,787	23	53,012	17
18 to 29	67	19.1	9,344	20	51,086	17
30 to 39	55	15.7	7,769	17	40,407	13
40 to 49	62	17.7	6,087	13	44,673	15
50 to 64	58	16.5	4,989	11	55,207	18
65 and older	25	7.1	2,631	6	38,797	13
<b>Marital Status (ages 15 and older)</b>						
Married	130	47	15,422	47	120,805	50
Never married	111	39	12,713	38	75,960	31
Divorced/separated/widowed	43	15	5,030	15	46,228	19
<b>Education attainment (ages 25 and older)</b>						
Less than high school diploma	61	26.6	10,011	39	30,050	15
High school diploma or equivalent	61	26.6	6,637	26	57,016	29
Some college	64	28	5,601	22	57,595	29
Bachelor's degree or more	43	19	3,302	13	55,356	28
<b>Median Annual Personal Earning (US\$)</b>						
All (ages 16 and older with earnings)	\$20,800	X	\$21,488	X	\$29,533	X
<b>Persons in Poverty</b>						
Younger than 18	16		4,390		13,131	
18-64	29		4,792		21,919	
65 and older	25		491		3,648	
<b>Health Insurance</b>						
Uninsured, all ages	117	33.3	14,852	32	46,729	15
<b>Language (ages 5 and older)</b>						
Speaks only English at home	41	12	9,855	24	227,375	80
Does not speak only English at home	290	88	31,752	76	55,806	20
<i>Speaks English very well</i>	145	43.7	16,223	39	31,376	11
<i>Speaks less than very well</i>	146	44	15,529	37.3	24,430	8.6

1. Numbers representing Hispanics and US are derived from Country of Origin Profiles, PEW Hispanic Center <http://pewhispanic.org/data/origins/>

**Table 2:****Educational Comparison of Miami and LA, Nicaraguans and Majority Hispanic Group, 2009**

	Miami-Hialeah				Los Angeles-Long Beach			
	Cubans		Nicaraguans		Nicaraguans		Mexicans	
<b>Educational Attainment (1)</b>	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
No Highschool Diploma (2)	174,415	<b>29.8</b>	24,155	<b>29.1</b>	6,832	<b>21.4</b>	904,953	<b>46.4</b>
HS Graduate or Higher (no BA) (3)	289,069	<b>49.5</b>	41,986	<b>50.5</b>	19,702	<b>61.6</b>	886,445	<b>45.5</b>
BA Degree or Higher(3)	120,849	<b>20.7</b>	16,980	<b>20.4</b>	5,443	<b>17</b>	157,293	<b>8.1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>584,333</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>83,121</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>31,977</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,948,691</b>	<b>100</b>

1. Educational Attainment for ages 25 and older.

2. Includes those who did not get a HS diploma nor a GED equivalent.

3. Includes those who either got a HS diploma or a GED equivalent. Also includes those who achieve years of education beyond high school, but did not receive a bachelors degree.

Data obtained from IPUMS, ACS 2008

**Table 3:****Educational Comparison of Miami and LA, US- vs. Foreign-born Nicaraguans**

	Miami-Hialeah				Los Angeles-Long Beach			
	US Born		Foreign-Born		US Born		Foreign-Born	
<b>Educational Attainment(1)</b>	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
No Highschool Diploma(2)	499	<b>15.8</b>	23,656	<b>29.6</b>	282	<b>7.2</b>	6,550	<b>23.4</b>
HS Graduate or Higher (no BA)(3)	1,579	<b>50.1</b>	40,407	<b>50.5</b>	2,854	<b>72.7</b>	16,848	<b>60.1</b>
BA Degree or Higher	1,072	<b>34</b>	15,908	<b>19.9</b>	791	<b>20.1</b>	4,652	<b>16.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,150</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>79,971</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,927</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>28,050</b>	<b>100</b>

1. Educational Attainment for ages 25 and older.

2. Includes those who did not get a HS diploma nor a GED equivalent.

3. Includes those who either got a HS diploma or a GED equivalent. Also includes those who achieve years of education beyond high school, but did not receive a bachelors degree.

Data obtained from IPUMS, ACS 2008