Latino students represent 24% of the American student population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002; 2013). Dropout rates for Latino students living in severe poverty are twice the dropout rate of other Americans at the same income level (National Center Educational Statistics, 2002; 2013). The strongest factor, which influenced those who choose to dropout, seems to be related to a family’s socioeconomic status (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Fry & Taylor, 2013; Swanson, 2005).

This study seeks to elicit the voices of Latino students who successfully completed high school in a school district with significantly lower graduation rates for Latinos, as compared to their district non-Latino counterparts. Through these voices, and the narratives of their high school experience, this study delves deeper into where and how these students experienced both inhibiting (or negative) and contributing factors to high school completion, and how they actually overcame these inhibiting factors to the point that it enabled them to persist in school until graduation.

A transcendental phenomenological approach gives a voice to this marginalized population by utilizing a lens from the non-dominant worldview. Critical race theory
guides this study by focusing on the experiences of ten Latino students who completed high school with their corresponding cohort. The critical race theory permits a focus on an oppressed population by utilizing race as a venue for framing and shaping the world around this particular population (Goldberg, 2002). This study, however, is unique in that it investigates the phenomenon of persistence to high school completion from the lens of Latino students themselves.

Utilizing a Critical Race Theory Lens in combination with a qualitative study, underscores not only the importance of race, but also investigates this phenomenon through a social justice framework. These methodologies aid in interpreting the meaning of experiences from the perspective of ten Latino high school graduates. In this study, graduates of a marginalized population were given a voice. These graduates managed to beat the odds, despite having risk factors associated with school dropout. Eighty percent of the participants had thoughts of giving up and dropping out at some point in their high school career. Several of the participants experienced a significant event, which influenced their high school career, including parent’s deportation, homelessness, teen pregnancy, suspensions, expulsions, and repeated failures. These events were exacerbated by repetitive marginalizing behaviors and demoralizing comments they had to deal with on a daily basis that lead to a feeling of disconnectedness and a lack of belonging to the school community. Finally, this study concludes by making recommendations school personnel may wish to consider as they seek solutions to serve marginalized students attending America’s public schools.