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Tracking Identity: Academic Performance and Ethnic
Identity among Ecuadorian Immigrant Teenagers
in Madrid

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This article examines Ecuadorian students' attempts to contest immigrant stereotypes and redefine their social identities in Madrid, Spain. I argue that academic tracking plays a pivotal role

in the trajectory of students' emergent ethnic identity. To illustrate this process, I focus on students who abandon their academic and professional ambitions as they are tracked into low-achieving class-rooms, and in the process participate in social and cultural practices that reify dominant stereotypes of Latino immigrants. [academic tracking, identity, immigration, ethnicity, Spain]

Several decades of scholarship have documented the adverse impact of academic tracking in schools for students placed in low-ability classes. The policy of separating students by achievement or perceived ability, while distinctly advantageous for students in advanced tracks, systematically dovetails with inferior pedagogy, restricted educational opportunities, and low self-esteem for others (Braddock and Slavin 1995; Gamoran and Berends 1987; Gamoran et al. 1995; Oakes 2005). Furthermore, there is frequently a troubling correlation of students' academic track and their racial or ethnic background, which has prompted investigations of the ways in which race and ethnicity play into teachers' expectations for educational performance and thereby affect students' educational outcomes over the long term (Braddock 1989; Lucas and Berends 2002; Oakes 1994; Oakes and Guiton 1995). A growing body of ethnographic research has sharpened our understanding of this process considerably by illuminating how underrepresented minority students negotiate ethnic and racial stereotypes as they construct historically and geographically specific identities in schools (Akom 2003; Lei 2003; Mehan et al. 1994; Nasir et al. 2009; Stritikus and Nguyen 2007; Wortham et al. 2009).

In this article, I explore the relationship of academic tracking and ethnic identity in my ethnographic work with working-class Ecuadorian students in Madrid, Spain. My argument is that Ecuadorian students are "tracked" in the Spanish educational system both academically and socially. That is, despite the fact that academic tracking is against official educational policy in Spain, many Ecuadorian immigrant students are placed in low-ability classes that restrict their educational and socioeconomic horizons over the long term. At the same time, these classrooms have become sites at which students participate in social and cultural practices that reify existing immigrant stereotypes. What stands out in this ethnographic example is that educational policies and practices played a pivotal role in the emergent ethnic identity of students' attempting to redefine their social identity in Madrid but being "tracked" in the Spanish educational system.

To illustrate the close interconnection of academic tracking and the formation of Latino identity in Spain, I provide two case examples of students who exemplify a common process occurring among Ecuadorian immigrant teenagers making concerted efforts to succeed in the Spanish educational system with the goal of later pursuing professional careers. I found that academically ambitious Ecuadorian students are particularly sensitive to the (often derogatory) distinctions between Latino and Spanish students frequently made by their teachers and peers and very aware of the potential of those stereotypes to have a detrimental effect on their educational and professional opportunities over the long term. Indeed, many Ecuadorian teenagers make impressive efforts to contest not only whether stereotypes of Latinos in Spain apply to them but also whether the stereotypes have any legitimacy at all. Despite these efforts, students who are tracked into low-ability classes typically undergo a dramatic transformation in their attempts to redefine their social identity in Madrid. For most Ecuadorian teenagers, their placement in low-ability classes deflates their ambitions for future academic and professional success, which effectively undermines their ability to contest dominant education and class-based Latino stereotypes. Compounding this, their friendships and acquaintances with their peers become limited to other students in these classes, which are now predominantly made up of other Latin American immigrants at the schools they attend. Faced with the prospect of social isolation if they refuse, most are compelled to participate in practices that not only identify them as Latino immigrants in Madrid but also perpetuate the very stereotypes they once challenged.

My study draws from frameworks that theorize social identities as emergent through social and cultural practices situated in existing power relations (Bourdieu 1977; Butler 1999; Hall 1996; Holland and Lave 2001). From this perspective, a stable and coherent ethnic identity is not an inherent characteristic of a student, but formed in historically and geographically specific contexts through recognizable, repeatable behaviors. Thus, even though it may appear that ethnic and racial categories are natural distinctions that exist in schools, students must continually embody these identities through practice. Ethnic and racial identities are therefore always in a process of formation, never wholly complete, and continually redefined through the repetition of bodily acts. At the same time, however, existing power-laden stereotypes and normative ideals regulate the practices that constitute social identities by defining the limits of anticipated and acceptable behaviors.

Ethnographic research in the field of education has documented students' efforts to redefine their ethnic and racial identities in the face of dominant stereotypes that can undermine their ability to succeed in school. Moreover, recent work exploring the formation of immigrant identities suggests that areas of new migration lack long-standing immigrant stereotypes and "allow more flexible and sometimes more hopeful immigrant identities" (Wortham et al. 2009:389). To a certain degree, this is the case in Madrid, where Ecuadorian students are members of a relatively new immigrant group and enjoy a certain degree of latitude to challenge existing Latino stereotypes—particularly in comparison to most immigrant students from Latin America in the United States. In effect, it is precisely because many Ecuadorian immigrant students are actively contesting hegemonic categories of ethnic difference in contemporary Spanish society that the role of educational policies and practices in the emergent ethnic identity of the students is particularly salient. Yet in the case examples presented below, the extent to

which Ecuadorian immigrant students were able to redefine their social identities hinged on their ability to succeed in the Spanish educational system. That is, regardless of the possibilities for constructing new social identities, Ecuadorian students were nevertheless forced to negotiate educational policies and practices that constrained their ability to act as they took up positions in social networks and participated in corresponding social and cultural practices that constituted their ethnic identity. For this reason, I argue that academic tracking not only had profound effects on students' future educational and professional possibilities but also that Spanish educational policies and practices tracked the trajectory of students' emergent ethnic identity.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of the educational context of my study by explaining how Spanish educational policies and practices lead to separate and unequal educational possibilities for students, discussing the emergent academic achievement gap between Spanish students and immigrant students in Spain, and outlining the underlying reasons for the low academic achievement of many Ecuadorian immigrant students. Second, I explain how my fieldwork site and research methods provide the lens through which I trace the trajectory of an emergent ethnic identity among immigrant teenagers. Third, I present common stereotypes of Latinos that Ecuadorian immigrant students encounter when they first arrive in Madrid and describe how many Ecuadorian students attempted to contest these stereotypes and redefine their social identity in Madrid. Finally, I examine the pivotal role of academic tracking in the process of ethnic identity formation among academically ambitious Ecuadorian teenagers.

Academic Tracking in the Spanish Educational System

The Spanish Education Act of 1990 (Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo, or LOGSE) emphasized the right to free, public education for all children, first, by increasing compulsory schooling from age 14 to 16—divided into *educación primaria* (primary education) for children 6 to 12 years old, and *educación secundaria obligatoria* (obligatory secondary education, or ESO) for children 12 to 16 years old—and second, by recognizing the cultural plurality within Spanish schools and the need to adapt curriculum according to individual student differences (Santos 1999). Yet while a primary objective of LOGSE was to increase educational equity and excellence for all students, Spanish teachers were generally not prepared to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and some even resented the change in the student body to include less academically prepared students and immigrants (Gibson and Carrasco 2009). Moreover, a particularly drastic transformation in the student population occurred after the passage of LOGSE in conjunction with a sudden shift in immigration patterns to Spain in the late 1990s. In Madrid, the number of *estudiantes extranjeros* (foreign students) enrolled in schools—where foreign students include both those who immigrated and children of immigrants who do not have Spanish nationality—jumped from less than 31,000 students in 1999 to almost 150,000 students in 2009, or 14 percent of the student population in Madrid (Consejería de Educación de la Comunidad de Madrid 2010).

The sudden change in the student population in the 1990s contributed to an increased separation of children according to level of academic performance and perceived ability—both through educational policies that segregate children within schools and by a division in the Spanish educational system between public schools and publicly funded private schools

(concertados) that crosscuts these policies (Carrasco et al. 2009). After the Franco dictatorship, private Catholic schools first began to receive *conciertos* (contracts) from the state to eliminate the high tuition at these schools and quickly expand the languishing public school system. Many now argue, however, that *concertados* and public schools are separate and unequal educational systems with *concertados* (30 percent of schools at the compulsory level) serving primarily middle and upper-class students while public schools (67 percent) serve students from working-class and immigrant families (approx. 3 percent of schools are funded entirely through private tuition; see Jacott and Rico 2006; Pérez Iriarte 2005; Poveda 2003). Among *estudiantes extranjeros* more than 80 percent attend public schools, and this number would be much higher if only *estudiantes extranjeros* from working-class families were considered since immigrant students from the European Union and other OECD countries primarily attend *concertados* or private schools (Jacott and Rico 2006). Moreover, in some districts of Madrid *estudiantes extranjeros* are concentrated in specific public schools where they constitute a majority (Lucas 2005).

There are several reasons why the student populations at public schools and *concertados* are segregated along class and ethnic lines. First, even though *concertados* cannot, by law, charge mandatory tuition, almost 100 percent of *concertados* demand some form of payment from parents—usually between 100–200 euros a month—for extracurricular activities that are mandatory and included during the school day (Lucas 2006). Second, among the general public there is a perception that *concertados* provide a superior education to students and demand for placement in a *concertado* is sometimes more than double the number of available places. *Concertados* can therefore establish criteria for the selection of students and, although regulated by the state, these criteria provide some families with a significant advantage for acceptance (Jacott and Rico 2006). Furthermore, because *concertados* are allowed to reject students because of low levels of academic achievement or a history of disciplinary problems, many students are excluded from the *concertado* system. Finally, there is evidence that middle-class Spanish families will pull their children out of the local public school if it perceived to be an institution serving a high population of immigrant students and enroll them in a *concertado* (Carrasco et al. 2009; García Castaño et al. 2008; Jacott and Rico 2006; Pàmies 2006).

In addition to the two-tiered Spanish educational system that has contributed to a concentration of *estudiantes extranjeros* in certain public schools, many *estudiantes extranjeros* are segregated from their Spanish peers within their schools because of educational policies and practices that separate students according to academic achievement and perceived ability—either by placing students into official *compensatoria* (compensatory) and *diversificación* (diversification) programs that offer remedial instruction outside of the mainstream classroom or by creating *grupos homogéneos* (homogeneous groups) in different classrooms to facilitate instruction. Compensatory classes are temporary placements that provide intensive instruction for students working at least two years below grade level in language and mathematics, while diversification classes utilize personalized and practical methods to support students at risk of dropping out of ESO during their final two years of compulsory schooling. In contrast, the process of creating “homogeneous” groups of students according to level of academic achievement for instruction in separate classrooms takes shape through various educational

policies and practices at different schools. Carrasco et al. (2009), for example, explain that at one high school in Barcelona homogeneous grouping was uncommon for required courses in the first and second year of ESO but could already be observed in elective classes. By the third and fourth year of ESO, however, the school sorted students into perceived homogenous ability groups and separated the groups into classes labeled “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D,” with one class, comprised almost exclusively of Spanish students, identified as being *destinados* (destined) to pursue further study in the *Bachillerato*—equivalent to 11th and 12th grades in the U.S. system and essentially required for entrance to the university.

In this study, I focus on the practice of separating children into different ability classes to facilitate instruction. I found that, in effect, this practice leads to differentiated academic trajectories for different students at the same school. While the exact number of Spanish secondary schools that practice homogeneous grouping is unknown, one study revealed that one in three high schools in Catalonia separate students according to academic achievement or perceived ability, and this practice occurs even more frequently in schools with high populations of *estudiantes extranjeros* (Ferrer et al. 2008, cited in Carrasco et al. 2009). Moreover, a growing body of educational research in Spain indicates that when this form of *de facto* tracking occurs, *estudiantes extranjeros* are more likely to be identified as low-achieving students (Carrasco et al. 2009; Gibson and Carrasco 2009; Pàmies 2006).

The overrepresentation of minority students in many low-ability classes has developed within the context of an emerging and serious academic achievement gap between working-class *estudiantes extranjeros* and Spanish students (Colectivo Ioé 2006; Defensor del Pueblo 2003; Gibson and Carrasco 2009). Since the Spanish Ministry of Education’s comprehensive annual report on academic performance does not take into account the ethnic background of students or differentiate between Spanish students, immigrant students, and the children of immigrants, most studies investigating the academic performance of *estudiantes extranjeros* have combined qualitative and quantitative methods and focused on specific geographic regions of Spain, working-class immigrant populations, and selected schools within a region. The data I collected in Spanish secondary schools during my fieldwork aligns with findings from studies indicating a discrepancy between the performance of working-class *estudiantes extranjeros* and their Spanish classmates. Poveda et al. (2009), for example, conducted two years of ethnographic research (2007–09) in one high school in Madrid where close to 25 percent of the student population was comprised of *estudiantes extranjeros* from Latin America—the majority from Ecuador. The researchers provide the exam results for students in the second year of ESO to illustrate the disparity in students’ levels of educational performance at the school: of the 48 students from Latin America in the second year of ESO (out of a total of 126 students) only 35 percent were promoted to the third year of ESO in mainstream classes (vs. 77 percent of Spanish students) while 52 percent were recommended to alternative educational programs and 12.5 percent were required to repeat the second year of ESO.

The multifaceted explanations in the Spanish academic literature for this emerging academic achievement gap parallel several findings from my fieldwork. First, late incorporation into the Spanish educational system had direct consequences for Ecuadorian students’ academic

performance. Several researchers have pointed out that the level of academic content can vary dramatically across different educational systems, leaving immigrant students unprepared to meet grade level expectations in Spanish schools (Delpino Goicoechea 2007; García Castaño et al. 2008). Spanish educational research has also shown that cultural differences between the Spanish educational system and the educational system in the student's country of origin—including the organization of school schedules and coursework, requirements for independent learning and group work, homework expectations, teaching methods, disciplinary measures, student attitudes toward schooling, and forms of relationships between students, teachers and parents—may compound academic difficulties (Delpino Goicoechea 2007; Pàmies 2006).

Second, Ecuadorian students' current socioeconomic position in Spain and the common perception that their families' socioeconomic status had declined after immigration to Spain were implicated in students' beliefs about the Spanish educational system and behaviors in school. Indeed, recent research conducted in Spain reveals that the late incorporation of immigrant students in the Spanish educational system is not a satisfactory explanation for students' academic difficulties. In a noteworthy ethnographic study conducted among 49 Moroccan students at one high school in a Barcelona neighborhood (1996–2002), Pàmies (2006) found that the children of Moroccan families who had successfully entered the middle class in Spain were typically successful in Spanish schools, while children from Moroccan families who had endured persistent economic difficulties and lived in working-class neighborhoods segregated from the majority Spanish population often struggled in Spanish schools—regardless of the number of years of schooling the student had completed in the Spanish school system or level of Spanish language fluency at the moment of incorporation in the school system (see also Gibson and Carrasco 2009, who point out that Latin American students from middle- and upper-class families typically excel in Spanish schools). Moreover, the segregated living conditions of the working-class Moroccan families represented a visible form of low social status to the children in these families. These students frequently concluded that their families had not succeeded in increasing their socioeconomic position in society through immigration and settlement in Spain, which compounded their pessimism about education and contributed to oppositional behaviors toward schooling—even when children were born in Catalonia. Finally, Pàmies found that students without past experiences of academic success in their families usually did not view the school as a way to facilitate social mobility, but rather believed Spanish schools only served the majority Spanish population and offered them limited opportunities.

Third, the results of my research are supported by several studies highlighting underlying reasons within the school itself that compound the educational struggles of *estudiantes extranjeros*. Gibson and Carrasco (2009), for example, point out that traditional, teacher-centric methodologies prevail in Spanish schools at the expense of active and participatory learning activities that could facilitate immigrant students' access to the curriculum. Several researchers have documented the detrimental effects of teachers' negative stereotypes and low expectations for immigrant students' academic performance (Delpino Goicoechea 2007; García Castaño et al. 2008; Pàmies 2006). Others have considered how peer pressure to conform to an antischool culture can also influence students' beliefs and behaviors toward their education

(Carrasco et al. 2009; Pàmies 2006). Finally, a growing body of research has explored how the organizational structure of the Spanish educational system contributes to the academic difficulties of *estudiantes extranjeros* by creating ethnically segregated groups of students—with different academic standards, teaching methods, and expectations for success—both between schools in the same neighborhood and within schools serving diverse student populations (Carrasco et al. 2009; Gibson and Carrasco 2009; Pàmies 2006; Ponferrada and Carrasco 2010).

Educational researchers have not only documented how many of the consequences commonly associated with academic tracking contribute to the emerging academic achievement gap in Spain (e.g., lowered academic achievement, higher drop-out rates, reduced educational aspirations) but also examined how academic tracking structures peer group relationships that can ultimately have profound effects on students' academic success or failure. Carrasco et al. (2009), for example, found that when stigmatized, low-achieving Moroccan students at one secondary school in Catalonia formed a negative view of themselves as students, they often developed hostility toward their peers in high-ability groups (see also Ponferrada and Carrasco 2010). In addition, the internal segregation of students at the school and the stigma of being identified as a low-achieving student—in combination with the overrepresentation of Moroccan students in remedial classes—limited the possibilities for intercultural relationships at the school since few students could expand their social network beyond the lower-academic tracks. Furthermore, low-achieving students' alienation and exclusion from school contributed to increased conflicts with teachers and the development of an antischool culture. Equally important, Spanish researchers have shown that the academic performance of minority students who are meeting grade level expectations can also be destabilized as marginalization and isolation in mainstream classes drives some students to lower their educational and professional aspirations (Gibson and Carrasco 2009; Ponferrada and Carrasco 2010) or yield to peer pressure to participate in an oppositional, antischool culture (Pàmies 2006).

A recent investigation of academic tracking in Catalonia also considers how the overrepresentation of *estudiantes extranjeros* in lower academic tracks becomes implicated in students' social identities by reinforcing existing hierarchical positions occupied by minority students in Spanish society. In this study, the researchers argue that Moroccan children were not simply recognized as students in need of remedial instruction, but rather, identified as being low-achieving students: “En el IES una cosa era ir a refuerzo y otra ser un chico o chica de refuerzo” [In the secondary school it was one thing to go to a remedial class and another to be a remedial student] (Carrasco et al. 2009:16). Yet in my fieldwork, a social identity as a low-achieving student was not an identity that students necessarily brought with them from Ecuador. How, then, does a student placed in a low-achieving class come to be a low-achieving student? And how do students' conceptualizations of ethnic identity and difference become intertwined with their perceptions of academic performance? In the ethnographic evidence presented below, I explore these questions through a close examination of the role of academic tracking in the emergent Latino identity of working-class Ecuadorian students in Madrid.

Research Site and Methods

I conducted 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the working class and immigrant neighborhoods of Ciudad Lineal district in Madrid between July 2004 and June 2006. Ecuadorian women first began to move to the southern neighborhoods of Ciudad Lineal in the late 1990s to work in the wealthy northern homes of the district, cooking, cleaning, or caring for children and the elderly. In 2005, Latin American immigrants constituted 12 percent of the total population of Ciudad Lineal (60 percent of immigrants living in the district) with Ecuadorians (14,360) greatly outnumbering Colombians (3,932), Peruvians (1,863), Bolivians (1,248), and Dominicans (1,107; see El Ayuntamiento de Madrid 2005).

The extended period of time necessary for ethnographic research allowed me to trace the trajectory of identity formation among immigrant teenagers and develop close relationships important for discussing intimate topics such as a person's sense of belonging or feelings of isolation. During three separate visits to Madrid, I conducted participant-observation and interviews with Ecuadorian teenagers, their friends, families, teachers, and neighbors in homes, schools, churches, neighborhood parks, plazas, nightclubs, restaurants, after-school programs, and community centers. I befriended individual families through my attendance at an immigrant support group, participation in schools, volunteer work at an after-school center, or through snowball sampling as my network of relationships expanded. Open-ended conversations about my research led to invitations to homes and social events, and in return for assistance with my research I offered to tutor students with their studies.

My fieldwork in schools was facilitated by my affiliation with the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (Spanish Council for Scientific Research) and introductions from Spanish researchers at the Council. I first completed three months of preliminary research (February 2005–April 2005) at three high schools in different districts of Madrid (Vallecas, Latina, and Chamberí). During this time I visited each high school once a week for approximately four hours; observed classes; conducted informal interviews with teachers before and after class, during coffee breaks, and while eating lunch with the teachers; and chatted with students during classroom activities, on the recreational yard, and during lunch. When I returned to Spain for eleven months of fieldwork during the 2005–06 academic year in Ciudad Lineal, I centered my fieldwork within one elementary school (October 2005–April 2006) and one secondary school (January 2006–June 2006) in the district. During this time I visited each school once or twice a week and, while my involvement in the schools initially followed the same format as during my preliminary research, I was able to develop closer relationships with teachers and students as well as engage in ongoing topics of discussion that deepened my understandings of the complex educational issues facing Ecuadorian immigrant students.

Throughout my research, my relationships with teachers, Ecuadorian teenagers and their family members were mediated by my status as a white, female student who had returned to graduate school after working as an elementary school teacher in California public schools (when I had initially begun to study the Spanish language). Teachers were interested in my work with immigrant students in the United States and we often discussed our experiences as teachers. When I visited families in their homes, I was almost always included in female activities—

working in the kitchen with mothers, gossiping with teenage girls at home, completing errands outside of the home—but only rarely invited to participate in male social groups. For this reason, my analysis is rooted in my relationships with female teachers who considered me a colleague, immigrant women who treated me as a friend, and teenage girls who positioned me as a member of their peer group and identified me as *una joven* (a young person).

My findings are drawn from detailed field notes compiled at the end of each day and a series of recorded and transcribed interviews that I conducted with my nine primary participants (PPs) from six different families (F1 through F6). On completion of my fieldwork, I coded my field notes and interview transcripts using a grounded theory approach. The chart below indicates each of my primary participants' ages on arrival in Madrid (AOA), length of residence when we met (LOR), grade level when we met, attendance at a public school or *concertado*, and mother's and father's employment in Madrid (all names are pseudonyms).

Chart 1

PP	AOA	LOR	Grade/School	Mother's Work	Father's Work
F1 Isabel	15	1	2nd ESO/Public	Domestic Labor	Unemployed
F2 Ana	12	2	2nd ESO/Concertada	Domestic Labor	—
F3 Blanca	10	5	1st ESO/Public	Restaurant Work	Street Vending
F3 Carmen	12	5	Dropped out	Restaurant Work	Street Vending
F4 Diego	9	3	5th primaria/Public	Hotel Work	Construction
F5 Camila	6	5	5th primaria/Public	Domestic Labor	Construction
F5 Paloma	11	5	3rd ESO/Concertado	Domestic Labor	Construction
F6 Maria	8	4	5th primaria/Public	Domestic Labor	Construction

It is important to note that all of the parents of my primary participants held working-class jobs in Ciudad Lineal. My conclusions regarding the educational experiences of immigrant students in this working-class neighborhood, therefore, should not be extended to immigrant students from Latin America whose families have successfully entered the Spanish middle class. Moreover, none of the family members had status as permanent legal residents and the legal status of various members of the families was continually in flux. Ana's mother, for

example, did not have legal status when I met her; later secured part-time employment, obtained working papers, and began the process of applying for legal residency for her daughter; but eventually lost her job, her legal status, and the ability to secure legal residency for her daughter.

While the families I came to know best during my fieldwork were all members of the working class in Spain whose legal status made obtaining secure work precarious, at the same time, they considered themselves to be from the middle class in Ecuador (e.g., one family had operated a restaurant, another owned a grocery store with extended relatives, one father had driven a taxi) and maintained goals of securing middle-class status in Spain with time and hard work. Family members also assumed that students would become middle-class professionals by taking advantage of the opportunities available to them in Spain and children possessed clear ambitions for a middle-class lifestyle equal to their Spanish peers. An additional similarity is that all of the students were struggling to meet academic expectations for their grade level: six students repeated a grade level before or during my fieldwork, one secondary student had quit school, and three secondary students talked about the possibility of dropping out of school.

In the discussion below I focus on two teenager girls—Isabel and Ana—whose stories stand out in my field notes. I regularly visited Isabel and her family over the course of two years during the entire 16 months of my fieldwork; I visited Ana and her family during the 2005–06 academic year and conducted participant-observation at her secondary school that year while she was enrolled in the second year of ESO. The experiences of the two teenage girls are illustrative examples of how academic tracking played a pivotal role in their understanding of ethnic identity and difference in Spain, first, because I was able to document a marked change during my fieldwork in the girls' identification as Latinas—from actively contesting negative stereotypes of Latinos in Madrid and fostering friendships with their Spanish peers to rejecting Spanish social relationships and claiming a Latina identity—and, second, because the girls' academic struggles and subsequent marginalization in school were clearly implicated in this change.

While I focus on the stories of these two girls below, at the same time, all of my primary participants followed a similar trajectory of academic struggle, marginalization as a low-performing student, and increasing identification as an ethnic minority in Spain. Not only were the elementary students already grouped apart from their Spanish peers for remedial instruction and identified by their teachers and peers as low-achieving students but also, their current academic struggles were indicative of future segregation from the mainstream, predominantly Spanish student population as they continued on to secondary school. I also found that several secondary students' academic struggles had already contributed to feelings of alienation and isolation from their Spanish peers and a strong identification as Latinos in Madrid. Finally, although my closest relationships with students during my fieldwork were with teenage girls, I documented similar intertwined processes of social identification and academic performance among academically struggling Ecuadorian boys.

Professional Dreams and Latino Stereotypes: Redefining Latino Identity in Ciudad Lineal

The vast majority of Ecuadorians in the working-class neighborhood of Ciudad Lineal had immigrated to Spain to better their economic situation, and many children in these families possessed clear ambitions for establishing professional careers in Spain (see also Carrasco et al. 2009 and Defensor del Pueblo 2003, who document the high educational and professional ambitions of immigrant students from Latin America). Isabel, for example, wanted to study law and Ana dreamed of becoming an architect. Moreover, I found that many Ecuadorian immigrant students understood that they shared a common language and culture with their Spanish peers and argued that they were unlike other large minority groups in the city—specifically Moroccan, sub-Saharan African, and the native Romani communities—because they could easily make friends with their Spanish peers. As Isabel once explained when I asked her what kinds of problems Ecuadorian students experienced communicating with Spanish people: “Yo creo que ninguno porque casi el idioma es igual, y nos entendemos muy bien, ellos me entienden y yo los entiendo” [I don’t think any because the language is almost the same, and we understand each other very well, they understand me and I understand them]. Thus, despite their immigrant status and current economic difficulties in Spain, many Ecuadorian students saw themselves as upwardly mobile, hard-working students with the cultural and linguistic competencies necessary to pursue professional careers and did not consider their future life in Spain to be necessarily different from their Spanish classmates.

Students’ own self-image, however, often contrasted sharply with portrayals of immigrants from Latin America that positioned Latinos as categorically different from Spanish citizens because they were living in the country illegally, uneducated, and largely employed in low-wage/low-status service jobs. In school, while stereotypes of immigrant children from Latin America varied considerably, most Spanish teachers in Ciudad Lineal did not expect Ecuadorian students to excel in their education based on the perception that Latin American immigrants in the neighborhood were poor and uneducated. At best, Latino students were thought to be quiet, polite, and cooperative in the classroom; on several different occasions Spanish teachers told me that they even preferred teaching Latino students over Spanish students because of the level of respect Latinos gave to their teachers in the classroom. Yet while teachers frequently described Latino children as compliant and appreciative students, at the same time, Latinos were often construed as slow-learners or lazy students. It was common to hear statements about the lower academic abilities of Ecuadorian students, such as this elementary school teacher who characterized her students by explaining, “los latinos son muy majos, pero a la hora de trabajar, son lentos” [Latinos are very personable, but when it is time to work, they’re slow]. I also repeatedly heard teachers complain that Latino students habitually failed to complete homework, did not bring required supplies to school, or did not focus on their schoolwork during class time.

Another stereotype circulating in schools portrayed Latino immigrants as culturally inferior and socially backward. I often hear teachers express their frustrations with the culture and social norms of immigrants from Latin America in the lunchroom. One day, for example, a teacher explained to me that the Latino culture is not as *evolucionad* (evolved) as Spanish culture. When asked to elaborate, she pointed out that Latinos are very religious, have lots of children,

and the men are sexist. On another occasion, a teacher, frustrated with her domestic worker, exclaimed: “Es como si fueran de otro mundo” [It’s like they’re from another world]. It was also common to hear teachers complaining about the difficulty of communicating with Latinos, such as the teacher who explained to me that misunderstandings between Spanish people and Latinos often occurred because the Latino culture was a cultura baja (low culture).

Ecuadorian students also encountered stereotypes at school that positioned Latino immigrants as illegal, dangerous, and a threat to social cohesion in the country. I frequently heard Ecuadorian students recount experiences in which their classmates had challenged their legal status in the country, questioned the legality of their parents’ employment, or disputed their right to take advantage of social services and health care in Spain. In addition, teenagers often had to confront stereotypes of Latino students as gang members. Ana, for example, confided one afternoon that her classmate had been taunting her with “lo típico . . . que latinos son peligrosos, que no se puede salir por la calle porque hay bandas latinas” [the typical . . . that Latinos are dangerous, that you can’t walk in the street because of the Latino gangs].

Ecuadorian teenagers in Ciudad Lineal were often taken aback when they first encountered portrayals of Latino immigrants in school that did not correspond to their own perceptions of their social identities. Moreover, academically ambitious, upwardly mobile Ecuadorian teenagers typically rejected the negative stereotypes of Latinos that they encountered in schools, objected to the idea that they were categorically different from their Spanish classmates, and made concerted efforts to redefine their social identity in Madrid. These students not only fostered Spanish friendships and participated in social and cultural practices common among their Spanish peers but also tended to avoid practices that might identify them with stereotypes of Latinos as poor and uneducated and, if singled out as a Latino, asserted that they were no different from Spanish students.

Isabel and Ana both emphasized their friendships with Spanish students when I first inquired about their social relationships in Spain. When I first met Isabel, for example, she was adamant that she did not differentiate between Spanish and immigrant students when interacting with students at school, but based her friendships on her classmates’ interests and individual personalities. Like most Ecuadorian students who participated in the social and cultural practices of Spanish social groups and fostered Spanish friendships, Isabel and Ana were also careful to avoid certain activities that would identify them with the uneducated, working-class population of Ecuadorian immigrants. One example of this practice became apparent when a teenage girl responded to my invitation to visit a well-known public park where Ecuadorians gathered together to share a meal, relax, and socialize on Sunday afternoons with the exclamation, “¡Que vergüenza! ¡Que vergüenza!” [How shameful]. In fact, Ana, the one teenager who finally did accompany me to the park, was compelled by her mother to join me and her family that day. After lunch as we walked along the path of Ecuadorian vendors and musicians, I asked Ana why she hadn’t wanted to visit the park. She answered: “Te da un poco de miedo, el ver tanta gente del mismo color, de tu mismo país, en un mismo lugar” [It makes you a little afraid, seeing so many people the same color as you, from your country, in one place]. Ana went on to explain that she would have much rather spent the day strolling around

the mall, going to the movies, or meeting her friends at a teenage disco. Yet it was clear that afternoon Ana was not afraid—she was uncomfortable being identified with the group of working-class immigrants in Madrid.

Even when Ecuadorian students were careful to avoid practices that would cause them to be recognized as poor and uneducated Latinos, most students could recount experiences in which their teachers or classmates had positioned them as working-class immigrants in Madrid. In these situations, some Ecuadorian students continued to challenge the idea that they were different from their Spanish peers. On one occasion, for example, Ana described how she had questioned the reasoning of her classmates who were complaining about immigrants in Madrid by pointing out that the majority of people living in the city could be considered immigrants—some had migrated to the capital from other parts of the country while others had arrived from different countries. After school that day she recounted her experience to me:

Hablábamos de inmigración y los chicos empezaron quejarse de los inmigrantes. Dijeron que los inmigrantes andan en bandas, que son peligrosos, y que vienen a quitar el trabajo de los españoles . . . Les dije que los inmigrantes no vienen a quitar trabajo de los españoles; hacen el trabajo que los otros no quieren. Y hay gente de todos partes de España aquí en Madrid y son inmigrantes también. Vienen por las mismas razones. [We were talking about immigration and the kids started complaining about immigrants. They said that immigrants are in gangs, they're dangerous, and they come to take jobs from Spanish people . . . I said that immigrants don't come to take jobs from the Spanish, they take the work that others don't want. There are people in Madrid from all parts of Spain and they're immigrants too. They come for the same reasons.]

On another occasion, I recorded a semistructured interview with Isabel, hoping to capture her ideas about the differences between children from Latin America and Spanish children. Isabel, however, challenged the entire premise of my interview by adamantly rejecting the idea that Latino students are categorically different from Spanish students. She explained:

La gente, cuando viene de diferentes países yo no creo que . . . yo creo que ellos se adaptan aquí. Yo no creo que hayan diferencias porque, como es gente nueva, tiene que adaptarse a lo que hay. Entonces, se adaptan y muy enseguida . . . a un español no le cuesta, pero hombre, a mi sí que me ha costado, pero ya me he enseñado a ser como la gente es, a hacer lo que la gente hace y claro, yo creo que aquí, la gente . . . no hay diferencias, se adaptan a lo que hay aquí, a lo que es aquí y ya está. [People, when they come from different countries...I believe that they adapt here. I don't think that there are differences because, since they are new, they have to adapt to what is here. Then they adapt and very soon . . . a Spanish person doesn't bother you, but hey, to me yes it's been difficult, but already I have taught myself to be like people are, to do what they

do, and of course, I believe that here, the people... there are no differences, you adapt to what there is here, to what it is here and that's it.]

The ability of Ecuadorian students to construct a new model of identity that countered dominant stereotypes of Latinos as categorically different from Spanish students—belonging solely to the working-class, lacking academic skills and abilities, participating in backward customs, and even engaging in criminal behaviors—hinged on their success in the Spanish educational system. Yet it was precisely their struggles in the classroom that eventually led many students to not only abandon their attempts to redefine their social identity but also reify existing stereotypes of Latino immigrants in Madrid.

Tracking Identity

For most Ecuadorian immigrant teenagers, their first experiences in Spanish schools are a jarring experience. Many of the students I met during my fieldwork described themselves as good students in Ecuador and were dismayed when they were not able to perform at the same level in Spanish schools. To their shock and consternation, when academically ambitious, upwardly mobile Ecuadorian teenagers struggled to meet the educational demands of Spanish schools many found themselves assigned to lower-ability classes.

This was the case for Isabel, who reported that she had always performed well in school in Ecuador and initially planned to attend college when she first arrived in Spain. Yet after failing the majority of her classes during her first academic year in Madrid, Isabel explained that she had been assigned to *segundo facil* [easy second year] the following year. I was unable to obtain permission to conduct participant-observation at Isabel's school, but from Isabel's descriptions of her experiences in school it was clear that students' were separated at the school according to levels of academic achievement and perceived ability. Isabel referred to the lower-track classes as the *facil* [easy] classes at each grade level.

Once placed in this class with other students experiencing academic difficulties—the majority of them from Latin America—Isabel was restricted in her ability to participate in the social and cultural practices of her Spanish peers. As Isabel's second year in a Spanish secondary school progressed, she began to develop friendships with a group of students in the class who identified as Latinos, and who, in her words: “*Odian los españoles*” [They (her Latino friends) hate Spanish people]. Although Isabel initially disagreed with her friends' feelings toward Spanish people, nevertheless, whenever Isabel spent time with this group of students she engaged in practices that identified her as a Latina. Isabel explained, for example, that she discovered which neighborhood plazas and areas of the park were considered Latino and which areas should be avoided because they were places where Spanish teenagers gathered. Isabel learned from her new friends that it was important to be with other Latino teenagers in the neighborhood because there had been instances of fighting between Latino and Spanish groups of students. Isabel also began to spend time on weekends socializing at Latino bars and discos.

Isabel was keenly aware that her new friends not only influenced her social activities, they also were having a negative influence on her academic performance. In fact, at one point during my fieldwork she consciously distanced herself from this group of students for a period to concentrate on her studies. During her social hiatus she explained to me:

Me junté con gente que no debía y bueno...y cambié un poquito y en clase, pues, era muy revoltosa, era muy habladora . . . me gustaba siempre llamar la atención y si me aburría empezaba a tira bolas de papel a la gente para que ellas me las devolvieron, así, a molestar . . . una de mis profesoras se hartaba, me echaban de clase, me mandaban a jefatura porque decían que conmigo no podían dar clase, y con mis amigas igual. [I got together with some people that I shouldn't have and well...I changed a bit and in class, well, I was very rebellious, I was very talkative . . . I always liked to call attention to myself and if I was bored I would start to throw wads of paper at people so that they would throw them back at me, like this, to bother people . . . one of my teachers got fed up, they threw me out of class, they sent me to the principal's office because they said that with me they couldn't teach class, and with my girlfriends the same.]

Ultimately, Isabel's placement in a lower-ability class had significant consequences for her ability to redefine her identity in Madrid. Early in my fieldwork Isabel had adamantly rejected the idea that Latino and Spanish students are different from one another—she once told me that, “I believe that here, the people... there are no differences, you adapt to what there is here, to what it is here and that's it.” I was surprised, therefore, when Isabel explained to me one day while we were chatting about the group of Latino students she had been attempting to avoid that she now realized that it was *casi imposible* (nearly impossible) to make friends with Spanish students at school. Isabel went on to explain that it was pointless to avoid the group of Latino students because it was so difficult to make friends with Spanish students. Furthermore, Isabel's participation in the social and cultural practices of this peer group now identified her as a stereotypical Latina student who was not serious about her schoolwork.

Like Isabel, Ana had also been determined to succeed in the Spanish educational system when she arrived in Madrid. Ana attended ESO at a *concertado* where I was able to obtain permission to conduct participant-observation for six months. The principal explained that at this school, students from the same elementary school were placed together in one classroom to ease the transition to secondary school. However, beginning with the second year of ESO students were placed into different classes according to their academic performance and their teachers' evaluations of their academic potential: high-achieving students were assigned to classes “A” and “B,” while low-achieving students, students with disciplinary problems, and students who had failed the previous year were assigned to classes “C” and “D.” By the second year of ESO, the difference between the academic level of an “A” class and a “D” class at the school was striking. During my observations, students in the “A” and “B” classes not only covered more academic material but also critically engaged with the subject matter in greater depth in comparison to students in the lower classes. In contrast, “D” classes were notorious among the

teachers for the disruptive behavior of the students, high absenteeism, and low student motivation.

When I met Ana she was already struggling in Spanish secondary school and had been forced to repeat the first year of ESO. Unlike Isabel, however, Ana was one of only two immigrant students in the “B” class in the second year of ESO—one of the higher ability classes. Her teacher explained that she had been placed in the class because her previous teachers felt that she had high academic potential and was willing to work hard at her studies even though she had repeated the first year of ESO. Ana’s teachers also hoped that by placing her with other high-achieving students Ana would not be negatively influenced by her peers in the lower-ability classes who were not serious about their schoolwork. Yet even though Ana’s teachers had deliberately placed her in the “B” class Ana continued to struggle with her assignments.

By the spring quarter, Ana had become discouraged with her schoolwork and resigned to continued academic failure. As the academic year progressed, Ana began to noticeably distance herself from the other students in the class. That spring, rather than spending time with her classmates, Ana began to socialize with a group of teenage girls from Latin America in one of the low-ability classes during breaks between classes and at lunchtime. With her new group of Latina girlfriends—who constituted a small minority at the concertado—Ana began to participate in social practices that identified her as Latina. For example, Ana went for the first time with her new friends to an afternoon “matinee” disco for teenagers that played exclusively Latin American music (e.g., salsa, Reggaeton). On another occasion she coordinated her clothing with several girlfriends so that they all wore Latino gang colors to school. Ana explained that this was just for fun because her friends knew that boys at the school would approach the group of girls to ask about their clothing. Ana also began to cut class with her friends and spend time with them in the neighborhood parks and plazas rather than studying after school. By the end of the academic year, Ana had established herself within a peer group that did not possess the same goals for university study that she had once aspired to achieve.

Although Ana had not been placed in a lower-ability class, Spanish educational policies and practices that segregated students according to ability level still affected her ability to redefine her social identity in Madrid. It was clear that Ana began to avoid her Spanish classmates because she was acutely embarrassed of her continued academic difficulties and the failing grades she consistently received on her assignments and exams. Moreover, Ana could not participate in many classroom discussions and activities because she did not understand much of the academic material. Ultimately, her social isolation and marginalization in the “B” classroom motivated her to seek out new friendships with the Latino students in the lower-ability classes and participate in the social and cultural practices of this group.

As the school year was drawing to a close, I visited Ana and her mother after school one day. During my visit, Ana and her mother began to discuss Ana’s desire to leave the concertado she was currently attending and enroll in a public school. When her mother challenged the wisdom of moving to the public school, Ana became frustrated and insisted: “Quiero estar con mi gente” [I want to be with my people]. Ana had once argued with her classmates about her status in

Madrid, pointing out that, “There are people in Madrid from all parts of Spain and they’re immigrants, too.” Yet now Ana had decided that, as a Latina, she should attend the neighborhood public school where she could be part of a larger immigrant student population.

An Emergent Latino Identity

In 2007, a Spanish teacher was quoted in the newspaper *El País* explaining the misbehavior of immigrant students from Latin America: “Buscan su sitio haciéndose malos malísimos, bajan a la plaza y buscan su Identidad a guantazos” [They search for their place by being extremely bad, they go to the plaza and search for their identity by fighting] (Ordaz 2007:33). Rather than consider how students’ social identities constantly evolve or analyze the ways in which schooling might be implicated in the formation of an ethnic identity, this teacher concluded that the students’ disengagement with schooling and violent interactions were simply natural behaviors for students establishing their ethnic identity. This explanation for the academic difficulties of Latino students, however, was based on an assumption that students from Latin America had an inherent identity necessarily rooted in their ethnic background—thereby locating the underlying cause of students’ academic struggles within the students, their families, and their communities rather than in larger structural forces and social inequalities.

One of my motivations for highlighting the relationship between academic tracking and the formation of ethnic identity is to critique common sense understandings of how students’ ethnic and racial identities influence school success and failure. In Ciudad Lineal, Ecuadorian immigrant students do not bring a preformed Latino identity with them from Ecuador that determines their level of academic performance. Instead, their identification as Latinos takes shape during the first years after they immigrate to Spain. During these years, the ethnic identities that these students encounter are not simply appropriated but may also be manipulated, challenged, and rejected. Yet as the above case examples illustrate, students’ ability to redefine their social identity was structured by the educational policies and practices that they encountered in school. For these students, their isolation and marginalization as low-achieving students’ not only contributed to the many negative consequences commonly identified in the academic literature on tracking (e.g., low academic performance, reduced educational aspirations, poor self-esteem) but also played an instrumental role in the process by which they came to conceptualize ethnic identity and difference in Spanish society.

Elsewhere, I have discussed how poverty, political alienation, religious practices, and racism influence Ecuadorians’ ideas about identity and difference (Lucko 2007). Yet I maintain that the educational policies and practices that constitute academic tracking in Spanish schools played a pivotal role in the trajectory of students’ emergent ethnic identity. The close interconnection of academic tracking and the construction of Latino identity is perhaps most clearly illustrated by students like Isabel and Ana—students who aspire to succeed in the Spanish education system and continue on to professional careers. Even though some might assume that Isabel and Ana had always differentiated themselves from Spanish students, Isabel’s realization that it was “almost impossible” to make friends with Spanish students and Ana’s desire to “be with her people” were radical departures from their previous beliefs that they were no different from their

Spanish classmates. Despite their attempts to contest immigrant stereotypes and re-define their social identity in Madrid, through their experiences in school they came to realize that it was impossible to claim that they were no different from their Spanish peers.

The process of ethnic identity formation occurring in Spanish secondary schools is particularly significant because the educational policies and practices shaping Ecuadorian students' understandings of ethnic identity and difference today are instrumental in defining what it means to be a Latino living in Spain. Ecuadorian students who were unsuccessful in their attempts to redefine their social identity as they were tracked into lower-ability classes typically decided that their educational ambitions were futile. As students came to the understanding that their academic difficulties made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to continue to advance in the educational system and attend college, there was a strong tendency for them to conclude that their working-class, immigrant status in Spanish society was not a temporary position. Instead, Ecuadorian students came to realize that, as Latinos, they would continue to follow different academic, professional, and life trajectories from their Spanish peers. Efforts to create educational policies and practices that would reduce the marginalization and segregation of academically struggling immigrant students—supported by further research exploring how tracking is taking shape in the context of recent immigration movements to Spain—could open possibilities for immigrant students attempting to redefine their identities in Spanish society.

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