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## **Mexican Americans' Struggles For Education in Jimenez's *The Circuit: Stories From The Life of Migrant Child and Breaking Through***

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### **Abstract**

*This article focuses on Mexican Americans which constitute the highest number among other immigrants in the United States in Francisco Jimenez's autobiographical novels *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of Migrant Child and Breaking Through*. This study wants to find out how the struggle of Mexican Americans struggle for education is represented in the Francisco Jimenez's autobiographical novels and to elucidate how Francisco Jimenez's autobiographical novels represent Mexican American's struggle for education in the United States from 1940s–1960s. This is a qualitative descriptive research and thus presents the data interpretation through descriptive analysis. The object material of the research is the two novels namely *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of Migrant Child and Breaking Through*. This study applies heuristic and hermeneutic theories. In its process, however, it uses biographical, sociological and historical approaches to reveal the history of Mexican American immigrants in the United States, particularly their education. The findings of the study show (1) Francisco's struggle in the novel represents Francisco Jimenez's struggle for better life by means of education in the United States. This struggle is symbolized in the circuit and butterfly metaphors; (2) Mexican Americans survive their struggle for education by conquering the barriers in the forms of school adaptation, language discontinuity, minority stresses and economic hardship. Finally, Jimenez's autobiographical novels give significant influences on Mexican Americans in the United States especially in the issue of education.*

**Keywords:** *butterfly, education, Francisco Jimenez Mexican American*

### **Introduction**

American immigration refers to the movement of non-residents to the United States. It has long been a major source of population growth and cultural changes throughout much of American history. In some cases, the process of immigration brings about problems for immigrants such as poverty, joblessness, and social conflicts. For the immigrants, having to move outside their place of origin is not an easy thing even though the reasons include the most difficult circumstances that force them out of their country. This requires well-managed preparations, expense, family's support, and willingness to learn new language and culture.

Mexican Americans, also called Chicano, is one among the many groups of immigrants entering the United States. In fact, they constitute the highest number among other immigrants. This results serious problems for Mexican immigrants and for the United States especially education for immigrants' children which brings significant impacts or changes on American social life. Mexicans became part of the United States involuntarily through conquest. This signaled the beginning of prejudice and discrimination against Mexican origin people residing in the United States (Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995:170). For Mexican Americans, the discrimination against them creates some barriers when they have to mingle with American society. These barriers come from the distress on minority status, discrimination, economic hardship, difficulty in understanding English language, or parents who are unfamiliar with the educational system in the United States (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995:45).

Becoming part of the United States, however, does not guarantee Mexican American to have the same position as other Anglos. Racial segregation continues to be a part of Mexican American students' social fact, even up to the present time. Wortham simply remarks "American schools have not succeeded in the education of Mexican American students" (1997:19). Although there are many individual successes, Mexican Americans as a group are still disproportionately remain below grade level, drop out of school, and fail to finish college (Losey, 1995:35).

Many facets of the history of Mexican American immigration to the United States are well known, captured in endless stories in family narratives, legends, poems, folk songs, novels, memoirs, films, history and civic textbooks, academic monographs, and research reports. One of them is captured by Francisco Jimenez by writing some autobiographical novels concerning Mexican American immigrants such as *The Circuit: The Life of a Migrant Child* and *Breaking Through*.

There are many possible topics that can be explored and discussed in Francisco Jimenez's masterpieces. The study, however, is intended to be one of researches in dealing with Mexican American children and young adult's education. By using Jimenez's autobiographical novels as a representative picture of the life of Mexican American society in the periods of 1940s up to 1960s, the objectives of the study are to deeply analyze and give answers to the problems mentioned in the previous section. Therefore, the analysis exploits and explores many sources on both the primary subjects and other supporting materials to find out how the struggle of Mexican Americans for education is represented in the novels and to elucidate how Francisco Jimenez's novels - *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* and *Breaking Through* represent Mexican Americans' struggle for education in the United States from 1940s-1960s

### Methodology

The method used in this study is a library research. The data gathered are classified as the primary and the secondary data. Francisco Jimenez's autobiographical novels *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* and *Breaking Through* serve as the primary data sources. These sources are used to gain data, comprising sociological and historical facts on Mexican immigrants in the United States, on the education of Mexican immigrants, and on various sociological and literary theories.

Collecting, selecting, and analyzing data are three steps carried out in this study. First, the primary data are collected from the novels *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* and *Breaking Through* and the secondary data are from various sources. Secondly, as all data are collected, they are selected and classified according to the topics outlined above. Finally, the collected data are analyzed, and the result of this analysis is presented in a descriptive manner. The technique is performed after conducting data analysis. Data analysis is an important factor in determining the quality of research results. This study uses a qualitative approach, meaning that all data are analyzed qualitatively. Qualitative analysis can be classified as descriptive method by describing, providing, analyzing, and interpreting information found in both the primary and the secondary data.

### Discussion

The period from 1930 to 1960 was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students. This era was characterized as a major change in the character of public education for Mexican American students because of the evolving nature of deficit thinking, the rise of school segregation and inferior schooling, and the efforts by the Mexican American community for educational equity (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998:28). The segregation directly causes some problems for Mexican Americans in gaining educational equity in the United States.

During the segregation period, Americanization was the prime objective of the education of Mexican children. Schools and instructional practices were reorganized when Mexican children appeared in increasing numbers on school registers. Special programs that included Americanization classes were set up for both children and adults. The objective was the political socialization of the Mexican community to preserve the political and economic subordination of the Mexican people. The educational plan for the "Mexican educational problem" called not only for Americanization, but also testing, tracking, and emphasis on vocational education (Bernal, 1999:43). The Americanization then becomes more central issues for educators in the school than giving good knowledge for the children.

The main segregation case is ethnicity or race. Macias adds the connection between race/ethnicity and school context is especially strong among the Mexican immigrant population. Mexican immigrants are more segregated within the educational system than almost any other population, including African American youth (2010:272). Moreover, ample evidence indicates that the schools in which Mexican immigrant youth are concentrated typically involve more problematic contexts than other schools, especially White-dominated ones. It is clear that the form of segregation has been started through the history of America.

In the early history of the United States, the school system constructed a cultural demarcation between a superior and inferior culture. Assimilation involved not only the elimination of linguistic and cultural differences,

but the eradication of a culture deemed undesirable. The Anglo seems claiming as the superior one in education; therefore, the school system based on the superior system. This was similar to the common school movement of the 1830's and 1840's when self-proclaimed protectors of the Protestant Anglo culture attempted to halt the drift towards a multi-cultural society. The dominant culture enjoyed greater wealth and prosperity by claiming cultural superiority while Mexican children, whether born in the United States or Mexico, were treated as foreigners, aliens, or intruders. To Americanize them was to transform the Mexican community into an English speaking and American thinking community (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998:101). During this time, school leaders throughout the Southwest set up activities to conform these students to the new environment. Americanization programs based on academic and popular literature portrayed Mexicans as dirty, lazy, and irresponsible. This perception of the Mexican people was more insensitive than malicious. School leaders' diagnosis and prescription for the cultural illumination of the Mexican community called for more classroom time spent teaching the children clean habits and positive attitudes. This Anglo image of the Mexican community instilled in educators a sense of guardianship of the American way of life (Valencia, 1991:89).

Throughout the U.S. history, Mexican Americans have and continue to endure various types of negative stereotypes, which have long circulated in media and popular culture. Mexican Americans have also faced discrimination based on ethnicity, race, culture, poverty, and use of the Spanish language.

The plight and struggle continues for Mexican American students in South Texas. Mexican Americans are the least educated population in the United States and are the least likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college and receive a college degree (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). The status of Mexican Americans' education has not changed significantly. Even today, Mexican Americans still face the same barriers of segregation and discrimination, language and culture, and low socio-economic status in their attempt to graduate from high school and continue on to college.

The language becomes the main problem for Mexican immigrant in which they have to adapt from Spanish speaking area to English speaking area. Because of this pattern of language loss, the public schools have an obligation to help maintain minority languages and cultures. Immigrant parents are especially likely to question language-maintenance efforts in schools if they believe there is any chance this will limit their children's acquisition of the majority language that they themselves cannot teach their children well. As a matter of fact, Portes & Rumbaut underlines that learning English is a basic step to enable immigrants to participate in the life of the larger community in, getting an education, finding a job, obtaining a driver's license, accessing to health care or social services, and applying for citizenship (207)

Mexican immigrants encounter problems such as labor, education, language, social life and many others. Suárez-Orozco says that immigration, a major life decision, has important psychological and social implications for the individual and the family group. On the eve of departure, immigrants face an uncertain future with potential for both gains and losses (20). The problems the immigrants encountered for life also have an effect for the life of education for the children. Children of immigrant family have to adapt with new environment in the new school. Macias adds that the important educational phenomena are patterns of school adaptation, language discontinuity, occupational training, and psychological factors. The value of these studies derives from the wider socio cultural perspective they bring to bear on specific educational problems (292). Those educational phenomena affect the whole life of Mexican American experience especially in education. As segregated ones, Mexican Americans position themselves as minority group which do not have all free access for education. Even the United States Law imposed the same position for education right. Even today, Mexican Americans still face the same barriers of segregation and discrimination, language and culture, and low socio-economic status in their attempt to graduate from high school and continue on to college.

*The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* captures the struggle of a young boy Francisco (called Panchito). The story line in the first sequel of the novel is divided into 12 sections which each tell a different story from the experience of Francisco in starting a new life as an immigrant in the United States. Francisco and his family are the central character in this autobiography novel as he is the writer of the novel.

The title of the novel is *The Circuit*. "The Circuit" means "arena" or "track". "Track" or "arena" means place for fighting or struggling. This could be interpreted that in this novel the life of Francisco Jimenez's living as new immigrant in America means 'track' or 'arena' for him in which he has to fight and struggle in facing life. The circuit symbolizes Francisco's life through the journey, from picking cotton and strawberries to topping carrots and back again over a number of years. As it moves from one labor camp to the next, the little family of four grows into ten. Impermanence and poverty define their lives. Like track, the struggle for life with faith, hope, and back-breaking work is what the family endures. The circuit also symbolizes a repeating cycle of life by moving one place to another in order to find a farm field for Francisco's family.

The story also captures the butterfly symbol as seen from the cover of the novel. Butterfly then has certain meaning for Francisco Jimenez as an individual and as a Mexican American. A butterfly symbolizes freedom, the human spirit or soul, transformation, interconnectedness. Ancient cultures associated butterflies with children and a number of stories in ancient mythologies of different lands and people revealed that butterflies symbolized birth, death and after life. The most significant about a butterfly is its relationship to children. The story of a butterfly is well known. A creepy, fuzzy, pale caterpillar goes into a cocoon and comes out a beautiful, colorful butterfly. The struggle to get out of the cocoon makes the butterfly strong. It can be translated that one can look at the difficult times in his life as his chrysalis time. Sometimes one wants to reform a little, sometimes a lot, but it emerges transformed. The emerging butterfly must struggle to get out of its 'tomb', then a butterfly struggle and struggle to break through its cocoon and finally, to help it, he cut the top of the cocoon. By making the hole bigger, the butterfly could have an easier journey. The butterfly is soon out but deformed badly. Its body is huge and its wings are small and floppy. The struggle is critical for pushing fluid out of the body of the butterfly into its wings giving them strength and shape. Cultural myth and tradition honor the butterfly as a symbol of transformation because of its impressive process of metamorphosis. From egg, to larvae (caterpillar), to pupa (the chrysalis or cocoon) and from the cocoon the butterfly emerges in her unfurling glory. This presents a massive number of transitions this tiny creature undergoes. The butterfly unquestioningly embraces the chances of its environment and its body. This solid acceptance of its metamorphosis is also symbolic of faith.

*Breaking Through* is the sequel of *The Circuit*. Jiménez continues the story as Mexican American immigrants, which concludes with an immigrant visa and his return to the United States. This novel that consists of 146 pages is a collection of twelve short stories presented from the perspective of a young boy, in which the author narrates his childhood experiences growing up in a family of Mexican migrant farm workers.

This novel starts with a poem by Thomas Mann taken from *Dr. Faustus*. There is slightly meaning for Jimenez when putting this poem to his autobiographical novel.

"There is at bottom only one problem in the world...

How does one break through?

How does one get into the open?

How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?"

The title of the novel is "Breaking Through". "Break" means "crack" or "shatter". The complete explanation is that "breaking through" means an act of overcoming or penetrating an obstacle or restriction. "Break on through" has always been about breaking free from societies restraints and doing things that come naturally. The complete explanation is that breaking through means breaking down the barriers or obstacle. Mann's statement in his poem embraces the relationship between how cocoon works hard to emerge as butterfly and how someone breaks through some problem in his life.

Butterfly can be interpreted in denotative meaning as a weak animal, which tries to escape from a cocoon. Related to this study, the struggle of Mexican American immigrants in the United States can also be described by the presentation of Francisco Jimenez's novels, which describe his struggle to emerge his life as butterfly. The butterfly presents a symbol of transformation because of its impressive process of metamorphosis. From egg, to larvae (caterpillar), to pupa (the chrysalis or cocoon) and from the cocoon the butterfly emerges in its unfurling glory. This presents that a massive amount of transition this tiny creature undergoes. The butterfly unquestioningly embraces the chances of its environment and its body. This solid acceptance of its metamorphosis is also symbolic of faith. The hope to transform the life to have better place can also be seen from Mexican American life to achieve education in the United States. Those fundamental ideas come up after retroactive reading finishes.

Francisco Jimenez performs butterfly in his autobiographical novels as the representation of his transformation from a poor immigrant to one of students who gets scholarship in Santa Clara University. Like a butterfly, which breaks through the cocoon with hard effort, Francisco breaks through the barriers he faces during his life in the United States. The transformation to become a butterfly actually has not completed yet because Francisco can only show his achievement until he can get scholarship to Santa Clara University. This achievement is not easy since Francisco has to face barriers in his school life, friends and society. Like caterpillar, which seems weak, Francisco firstly does not have power to against the discrimination for Mexican American.

In this study, the analysis of hermeneutic process is derived from the understanding of heuristic reading after obtaining data in Jimenez's novels. In hermeneutic reading, there are some contextual ideas for the Mexican American struggle for education presented by Francisco Jimenez's autobiographical novels. Some contextual frameworks appear as explanation of the major barriers that characterize the plight and struggle of the education

of Mexican Americans. These include patterns of school adaptation, language discontinuity (Macias 292) or difficulty understanding the English language, and economic hardship (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 121).

Francisco Jimenez's novels have the settings from the mid of 1940s to the mid of 1960s. This was one of the advancement of segregated schools and the expansion of inferior public schooling for Mexican American students. Francisco Jimenez's with his autobiography provides environment of school and all problems relating to his education. Because of the history of discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans in the United States, being part of Mexican Americans may pose unique problems to individuals with a mixed heritage like Francisco Jimenez. His experience as a mixed heritage society is summarized in all short stories from his two autobiographical novels.

Francisco Jimenez's novels present the condition of schooling before bilingual education is applied. The clear circumstance of education for Mexican Americans appears in the novels under the segregated system applied by the government. Francisco in the novels, can become the representation of Mexican American child when struggling for education in the nation of immigrant.

The novels have a setting from 1940s to 1960s. During these school years Mexican Americans followed the unfolding of the school adaptation of the children, families, and teachers in the process. Francisco Jimenez's works present comprehensive perspectives of school adaptation that considers child, school, and family and centers on various behavior and relationship between teacher and student, student and peer, and student and environment.

Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco underline that relational engagement is the extent to which students feel connected to their teachers, peers, and others in their schools (43). The immigrant students who are most likely to adapt successfully to school seem to forge meaningful, positive relationships at school. Indeed, such relationships are important for the academic adaptation of all students. Social relations provide a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback. The relationships in school play a particularly crucial role in promoting socially competent behavior in the classroom and in fostering academic engagement and achievement.

For immigrants, the role of peers is important one in helping them to create a relationship. As it is stated by Gandara and Koayama that adolescent including Mexican origin, spend more time with their peers than they do with anyone else and peers then play an important role in influencing adolescent behavior (3-4). The school adaptation directly changes the different behavior to the Mexican students when facing a new environment. In this study, the psychological factor coming from the society which considers him as different race forms the child life in the novels. The child finds it difficult to form a relationship, have to overcome challenges, and find inner strength.

The child, Panchito, in the short stories *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez is at a disadvantage because of his race when it comes to forming friendships, overcoming obstacles, and preserving their childhood. While this story focuses on one character, the difficulties that the child endures plague entire communities and groups of people. The young boy in *The Circuit* is a member of a migrant family and is forced to change schools and move often. This causes him to feel like outsider, making it difficult for Pancho to form concrete relationships. Gibson, Gandara and Koyama states that Mexican origin students, even more than other students, tend to select their closest friends from own ethnic group (6)

In the novels, Francisco does not have any peers from Anglos; therefore, he tries to build relationship by having and making some efforts. The fact is that Francisco only has friends from Spanish speaking children, Arthur, Miquelito and Gabriel. "I preferred to hang around Arthur, one of the boys who knew a little Spanish" (*The Circuit* 19). This is clear when in public education, Anglos seem to denigrate Mexican children as "bad thing"; therefore; they avoid Mexican children. Francisco step by step learns many thing from Anglos culture.

The interaction is made from those who live in the same condition. The Mexican child seen from Francisco often speaks about the importance of his peers as he acclimates to a new country, a new neighborhood, and a new school. Peers are described as providing a sense of belonging and acceptance, as well as tangible help with homework assignments, language translations, and orientation to school. To Francisco as a newly arrived immigrant student, the companionship of friends from his country of origin seems especially important; these peers are important sources of information on school culture. It is clear when Francisco builds a relationship with his classmate in the first grade, Arthur. Arthur, his Spanish speaking child, can help Francisco with language translation in the class. Arthur is described as saviour for Francisco since he does not have friends in the class.

The segregation comes to Mexican children when they are thought as the bad person. Anglos sometimes avoid Mexican children to have relationship and even Anglos parents forbid their children to have contact with Mexican children. Francisco in novels gives his effort to build relationship with his Anglo's friends, "To make

friends, I began to pay close attention to what my classmates did and talked about" (Jimenez, *Breaking Through* 30)

By analyzing the child's experiences, all aspects in the stories are related to race and education. In *The Circuit*, the boy has to overcome the conflict between his family's lifestyle and his desire for an education. In the end, there is hope for change because the child makes friends, rises above adversity, and discovers maturity and independence. Throughout "The Circuit", the young boy proves his independent nature by working, going to school by himself, and depending on himself. By dealing with the trials involved in forming relationships and receiving an education, the child is forced to become more adult-like. The child is forced to rise above difficulties when trying to receive his education. He is Hispanic and new at the school. It would then be a challenge for him to make friends with the other students because his family is constantly packing "everything into cardboard boxes" (Jimenez, *The Circuit* 257).

The barrier from language is also more complex when the teacher in the class applies this policy to Mexican student. Teacher makes certain rules that there is no Spanish conversation in the class. During the segregation period, Americanization was the prime objective of the education of Mexican children. School and instructional practices were reorganized when children appeared in increasing number on school registers. Special program included Americanization classes were set up for both children and adult. To Americanize them was to transform the Mexican community into an English speaking and American thinking community. This language conflict presented an educational barrier for Francisco.

Francisco Jimenez's works have setting in 1940s–1960s and the school then still applied English only instruction in school. For decades, most Mexican American students whose mother tongue was Spanish and who were proficient in English have faced the sink-or-swim pedagogical practice of English-only instruction. It is clear that between 1940's – 1960's the segregation in education was still applied for Mexican American. It takes long for Francisco in the novels when he does not have friends from Anglos for learning and practicing English language. His only environment with the family at home does not totally support him. His family does not master English.

The difficult economic condition which drives the family members in Mexican family to work also forces children to help their family. In the novels, Francisco and Roberto have to work hard to support their family need. They even spend their weekend to work. Poverty in Mexican American's family force children to work; on the other hand, it separate them from the childhood and of course their education is also suffered. As seen from Jimenez's biography, Jimenez mentions that he has to work from sun up to sun down, the entire family earned just \$15 a day. Jiménez called this nomadic existence "the circuit" in a short story by that title that has been reproduced many times in textbooks and anthologies of American literature. "It's a symbolic circuit," he says. "If you are a migrant worker, you are constantly living in poverty. It's very difficult to get out of it." Francisco soon finds relief from the hard life in the fields and a way to escape the circuit: school. "I came to realize that learning and knowledge were the only stable things in my life. Whatever I learned in school, that knowledge would stay with me no matter how many times we moved." (Carlile, 2004:50)

### Conclusion

Francisco Jimenez as portrayed in the novel clearly enlightens the reader about the meaning of struggle for education for Mexican Americans in the United States. The meaning of struggle is represented in the novel in the form of butterfly and the circuit as the symbols. The presentation of the transformation from caterpillar to cocoon and then butterfly symbolizes Francisco's struggle in facing economic hardship, language discontinuity, and school adaptation in the novel. This presentation is also seen in the circuit. Like a racer in a circuit track, Francisco has to struggle very hard for its life with all of its confidence, hope, faith and back-breaking works. His struggle proves the stage of butterfly metamorphoses when Francisco Jimenez finally gets his scholarship to Santa Clara University. This achievement clearly explains that cocoon can be butterfly someday with human faith. Francisco in the autobiographical novels has proved his life for the struggle of his education.

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