



Research Brief

The Strengths of Latina Mothers in Supporting Their Children's Education: A Cultural Perspective

OVERVIEW

By Manica
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A growing body of research indicates that when parents are engaged in their children's learning and development, their children do better in school.¹ Indeed, increased parental engagement has been found to increase children's accomplishments inside and outside of the classroom.² One strategy that educators can use to increase parents' engagement in their children's learning is leveraging the ways parents are already engaged to encourage more frequent and different forms of involvement. This approach is especially important for parents who may appear to be less involved despite holding a high regard for education. For example, Latino immigrant parents consistently place a high value on education,³ yet appear to be less involved compared with other parents.⁴

This brief reports on what was learned through recent interviews with Latina immigrant mothers about the techniques they used to support their children's education at the most malleable stage of development, the preschool years. The interviews explored the various ways mothers supported their children's learning and development, how culture shaped their involvement, and how their involvement might enhance their children's learning and development. Implications of the findings are discussed as they relate to parent empowerment and developing supportive parent-teacher partnerships.

KEY FINDINGS

- Latina mothers support their children's education in ways that are readily apparent to teachers and that teachers typically encourage, such as reading books to or with children and attending parent-teacher meetings.
- At the same time, Latina mothers support their children's education in ways that reflect Latino cultural values and beliefs or *cultural forms of parental engagement*, such as *sacrificios* (sacrifices), *consejos* (advice), and *apoyo* (moral support), and these ways may be less apparent to teachers.

- Latina mothers who promote and practice cultural forms of engagement do so in the hope that this approach may increase their children’s motivation to do well in school. Thus, mothers’ *sacrificios*, *consejos*, and *apoyo* are all directed toward their children’s educational success.
- Schools may overlook cultural forms of engagement because they lack familiarity with and understanding of Latino parents’ cultural values and beliefs, including the goals that Latino parents have for their children.
- Teachers and schools may increase parental engagement among Latinos by recognizing, encouraging, and incorporating cultural forms of engagement. This step, in turn, could foster an environment that encourages a true partnership between schools and Latino families and a space in which Latino parents feel empowered to support their children’s education. Teachers may also use cultural forms of parental engagement as discussion points to introduce Latino parents to novel approaches to enhancing their children’s educational development.

About the Study

The interviews on which this brief is based were conducted as part of the author’s doctoral dissertation study for the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Interviews took place between February and March 2013 in the Washington, D.C. area. Using a mix of survey and open-ended questions, Latina immigrant mothers were asked how they supported their preschool children’s education, as well as the factors that make it easier or more difficult for them to be engaged in their children’s education. After each interview, the author drafted a summary and transcribed the audio recordings, translating from Spanish to English as necessary. The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for all research procedures.

In total, 43 interviews were conducted with Latina mothers who had a child enrolled in a public preschool serving three- to five-year-olds. The sample for this study was restricted to foreign-born parents, because 91 percent of Latino children in the United States have at least one foreign-born parent.⁵ The interviews were almost exclusively conducted in Spanish. Almost all mothers interviewed reported a family income of \$35,000 or less. The majority of mothers were employed (34 of 43); and most of those who were employed worked 35 hours a week or more. Half of mothers in this study did not have a high school diploma. At the end of each interview, mothers received a \$15 stipend as a thank you for their time.

BACKGROUND

It’s often said that parents are children’s first teachers, an expression that captures the important role parents play in helping their children learn. Children often learn best when parents and teachers are partners in the educational enterprise.⁶ True partnerships are built on the strengths of the respective partners. For example, teachers should acknowledge and draw on parents’ strengths to identify ways to facilitate children’s optimal development. For this to happen, though, teachers need to understand parents’ capabilities, values, and goals;⁷ when it comes to Latino parents, this understanding is sometimes lacking. At times, the strengths of Latino parents are misconstrued or overlooked,⁸ leading to devaluation of their contributions as advocates for their children and as assets that could be leveraged in parent-teacher partnerships.

Through everyday interactions, parents socialize their children in ways that align with the parents’ childrearing values and goals. These subtle, daily interactions are saturated with cultural relicts and are a means of transmitting values across generations. To date, studies that examine the ways parents support or engage in children’s education have mainly focused on the perspective of middle-income, European-American parents.⁹ This limited perspective based on one cultural group presumes a certain level of cultural sameness and potentially conceals cultural assumptions about how parents can be engaged in their children’s education and about parenting itself.

Given these potential assumptions, there is a need to examine whether what is learned about parental involvement from the vantage point of European-American and middle-income parents applies to culturally and linguistically diverse parents. Additionally, it is vital to explore assumptions people may hold when there appears to be discrepancies between non-mainstream parents' values and their behaviors. For example, Latino immigrant parents believe strongly that education is the ticket to a more prosperous, fulfilling life¹⁰ and often immigrate to the United States to gain access to a better education for their children.¹¹ Yet Latino parents appear to have low levels of engagement in their children's schools.¹² However, if we expand our thinking about what ways parents can be engaged in their children's education, a different picture emerges. Indeed, Latinos tend to be engaged in ways that are not typically considered in our understanding of parental engagement in school.¹³

Applying a strengths-based approach, this study examined the ways Latina mothers were engaged in their children's education and the assets that they bring to their children's schooling. The focus of this brief is parental engagement from the perspective of Latino cultural values and beliefs, herein referred to as *cultural forms* of parental engagement.

FINDINGS

In general, mothers who participated in this study reported supporting their children's learning and development in various ways. Latina mothers reported supporting their children's education through typical forms of engagement. Like other parents, Latina mothers reported engaging in "home-based" activities (e.g., reading books with their children), "school-based" activities (e.g., volunteering in the classroom), and "home-school partnership" activities (e.g., attending parent-teacher meetings). Latina mothers reported engaging in home-based activities more so than school-based activities and home-school partnership activities.

Latina mothers in this study also reported engaging in cultural forms of parental engagement, which extend beyond typical forms of engagement. These cultural forms of engagement were generally done at the home, out of the sight of educators. Cultural forms of engagement are discussed in more detail below.

Cultural Forms of Engagement

Latina mothers' cultural forms of parental engagement in education are explained through the prism of Latino cultural values and beliefs. In reviewing the responses of the study participants, three themes regarding culturally embedded parental engagement emerge: *sacrificios*, *consejos*, and *apoyo*. These themes are explained below using the voices of Latina mothers to highlight how each theme relates to parental engagement.

***Sacrificios* refers to a mental state of struggle and sacrifice in the interest of enhancing or supporting children's education and learning.**

This theme was voiced by the majority of mothers. During discussions about *sacrificios*, mothers referred to a wide range of children's educational and developmental needs that they placed above their own. *Sacrificios* appeared to be organized, in part, around Latina mothers' cultural beliefs about gender roles, specifically *marianismo*. *Marianismo* refers to women making sacrifices and emphasizing the needs of their children (and husband) above their own.¹⁴ Despite the apparent hardships associated with *sacrificios*, mothers generally discussed *sacrificios* with a sense of pride and conveyed a sense of hope for their children's future. Mothers delighted in the thought of their *sacrificios* motivating their children to finish school and to be "somebody" in the future. Juanita,* a mother of a five-year-old daughter, illustrated this idea:

Like be a professional, you want to study and be somebody, it's different to be a professional...my son ...is studying and when he is bigger he will make a lot of money ...because he will be a professional. That's why you have to make sacrifices now for the pay off in the future. Because in the future they [children] will have a good education.

*To protect the privacy of mothers interviewed, alias are used in places of participants' names.

Indeed, there seemed to be an understanding between the parent and child that parents' *sacrificios* were made with the expectation that the child will do well in school to show the child's appreciation for his or her parents' sacrifices. Lola, another mother in the study, retold a conversation she had with her five-year-old son:

Sometimes he tells me that when he grows up he wants to be like me. I ask him why and he says because you work and give me everything. He says when I am older he will take care of me. This makes me want to work harder for him. I tell him that this is why he has to keep doing good [in school]. I tell him that I will continue to work hard so he can go to a good school.

Consejos refers to advice parents give their young children about school that reinforces values, such as resiliency and perseverance.

Providing *consejos* to their children was virtually universal among the mothers interviewed. The structure of *consejos* was organized, in part, around Latina mothers' cultural beliefs about *educación*. *Educación* typically encompasses more than the English "education," as it refers to acquiring educational knowledge as well as training in manners, morality, and interpersonal relationships.¹⁵ In the present study, the *consejos* mothers provided focused on both aspects of *educación*.

Despite their limited formal education, mothers in this study emphasized to their preschool-aged children the importance of education, repeatedly telling their children that they need an education to "be somebody" and have a professional job or career. Parents' *consejos* about the value of education resembled an appeal to their children to have a better life. The mothers in this study knew what it was like to be relegated to working physically taxing, low-status, and low-paying jobs; and they used their own experience as an example of something for their children to avoid. A common theme that ran through the interviews was mothers' plea that children should not "be like me, but be better" and that education was a means to accomplish this.

There was unanimous agreement among the mothers interviewed that education was the key to a better life and being "better" or "great." As Maria, a mother with a five-year-old daughter, explained:

I tell her that it's important that a child is educated because whatever person or teacher or whatever, who has an education is going to do well... They are going to grow up and rise up and do something great because they are educated.

Although most women's *consejos* for their children to do well in school were given without explicit and concrete guidance, Valentina recounted *consejos* she gave her five-year-old daughter about what she can do now so that she can have a more satisfying job than herself:

When we talk she [daughter] says she wants to work. I tell her that I want her to work and study, and I want her to be better. She says she wants to be like me and I tell her that I work cleaning and I don't want the same for her. She has to do better. I want more for her. She has to listen, go to school, not leave class, and listen to her teacher.

Jessica, a mother of a five-year-old daughter, offered *consejos*, providing guidance on morality and interpersonal relationships to show her daughter how she should act in school and the consequences of her behaviors at school:

She comes home from school and will say that a student didn't listen to the teacher. I remind her how important it is to listen and learn so that she can be someone and not leave her studies half way. I sometimes tell her, you see the kids in the street who drink and I ask her if she wants to be like them. I tell her to accomplish things she has to learn to listen and learn.

Ericka gave her daughter *consejos* about character traits related to traditional Latino beliefs about the value of *respeto* towards the teacher and the value of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships with her peers:

I always tell her to listen to her teachers, it's important that she pays attention to what the teacher is saying, pay attention to what the teachers are explaining and behave well with her classmates, to have a good relationship with them.

Apoyo refers to the emotional and moral support parents offer their children to boost their self-esteem and encourage their perseverance so that they do well in school.

This theme emerged in the majority of interviews. For the Latina mothers in the study, *apoyo* seemed to derive from *familismo*, a Latino cultural value that emphasizes strong family bonds, the expectation that family provides instrumental and emotional support, and commitment to family needs even above individual ones.¹³

Lana, a mother of a five-year-old daughter, reported showing *apoyo* both with her words and physical affection. She hoped her *apoyo* would encourage her daughter to pursue her goals. Lana believes that through her *apoyo*, she will keep her daughter's desire to learn strong:

Oh, I give her praise, hugs and kisses. And I tell her that she is smart. And this makes her feel very happy. I think this is very important because when I motivate her it will show her that she can be whatever she wants to be. You can always inspire... That's the ambition of education. If I show my daughter things of education, she will want them.

Some mothers also used *apoyo* to build children's self-confidence around learning and future careers. Pilar explained how she hoped that her *apoyo* would help her 4-year-old son rid himself of feelings of insecurity and how she used both *apoyo* and *consejos* to encourage her son to set high career standards:

[I want him to be] whatever he wants to be, whatever career he wants, because I try to help him, and I try to tell him he is intelligent and the things he does are excellent, and there is no excuse to prevent him from doing what he wants in life. Like being a professional, I say you can and you can do everything, if you try. He [son] says 'I can't do it' and I say 'No, you can do it.' He has to try because sometimes he says 'no,' but I push him and I have to help him get rid of this fear or whatever incapacity he is feeling.

Esperanza illustrated the important role mothers play in providing *apoyo* and reported that one of her duties, as an advocate for her daughter's education, is to ensure that she is receiving emotional support at home. As she put it:

As a mother we want the best. We love them but everything has limits. For me, love and support is unconditional. Fathers are different, not that they don't love a lot, but they are different. Emotional support comes from home. What they see at home they transmit to school, emotionally. If there is nothing at home, then this can harm them in school. For me, that is what they will transmit. There must be communication in the home. As parents, we should converse with children. My support for my daughter is that everything is good at home. Not perfect, but good and that is what she will project in school. That is what is important to me. So she doesn't worry about what is going on. There are parents that argue in front of kids in the street and to me that is wrong. It brings them down morally and they think this is normal and it's not. I don't like my kids to see this. If I need to call their attention I do it properly. If they have a low emotional value this affects their education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Preschool programs can create environments that are empowering for parents and help teachers and parents develop strengths-based partnerships, which in turn support children's learning and development. The findings presented in this brief have implications for teachers' professional development and training and their approaches to activities that promote learning. To ensure that early care and education programs acknowledge the strengths of Latino parents and are sensitive to their cultural values, beliefs, and approaches to supporting their children, educators might consider the following recommendations as starting points.

Teacher training and professional development:

- As part of teacher training, exercises can be conducted to demonstrate how narrow views of what constitutes parental engagement can lead to underestimation, misinterpretation, and devaluation of the efforts of parents.

- As part of ongoing training on cultural sensitivity, teachers can participate in workshops or other interactive activities that use real-life examples to demonstrate how cultural values, beliefs, and standards shape how parents decide to support their children's education.
- As part of continuing professional development, teachers can receive training on best practices for parent-teacher partnerships and can learn more about what strengths-based partnerships are and the manner in which to develop them.

Understanding and leveraging parents' strengths:

- As an initial step in building relationships with parents, teachers can ask parents how they support their children's education.
- Teachers can learn about parents' values and beliefs, as they relate to their goals for their children and family.
- Teachers can have regular meetings with parents—preferably via home-visits so parents are in a familiar and comfortable environment—to build and strengthen quality relationships with parents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research on which this brief is based yields important insights into the ways Latina immigrant mothers support their preschoolers' education. However, this study does have some limitations. The most obvious is that the parents who participated in the study constituted a self-selected group and may not be representative of the larger Latino population. For example, this study was restricted to foreign-born mothers with children attending preschool in a single metropolitan area. Thus, the behaviors, opinions, and beliefs of native-born Latina mothers, Latino fathers, and parents with children who are not attending preschool are not represented in this brief. Additionally, because the majority of those in the study had low incomes, the extent to which values presented in this brief reflect cultural versus socioeconomic values are hard to disentangle.

However, these limitations should not undermine the value of this investigation, which provides fresh information that merits further study. And it has provided a means for Latina women themselves to speak about a topic that is obviously dear to their hearts: helping their children climb the educational ladder to a successful future.

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