

PREPARING EDUCATORS TO INVOLVE FAMILIES

From Theory to Practice

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Case 7: Staying on the Path Toward College

One Boy at the Crossroads

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Characters:

Paulo, sixth grader
Rachel, community college outreach program director
Alberto, Paulo's father
Sarta, Paulo's mother
Alicia, family friend
Miguel, Alicia's son
Nancy, Paulo's math teacher

INTRODUCING PAULO

Paulo Dominguez sat around a table with a number of his fellow sixth graders eating potato chips and cookies. He and his classmates listened as a woman named Rachel Marquez talked about a program that would help prepare them for college. All sixth graders in the community were being recruited to submit applications to the program, which was designed to support them through middle and high school in learning the study habits and decision-making skills needed for college preparation and careers. The program, named Más Allá (connoting the meaning "beyond" in English), represented a long-term partnership between the town's community college and the larger nearby university. Its mission is to engage girls and boys into a program that builds long-term networks for academic success and support for pathways to college.

"Your lives consist of many worlds," she began, "and each world contains all the different people or groups in your life, like a family member or a friend, or sports teams, classmates, and church groups." Rachel began passing out colored pencils and paper to the students and invited each sixth grader to think about the different worlds in their lives. As Paulo began to draw pictures of his family, school, and church he thought about his present life in California and his future dreams of working with computers and maybe even designing video games.

Rachel then urged the youths to think about the positive and negative influences in each of these worlds. Paulo looked over at his two best friends making faces and amusing gestures behind Rachel's back. Paulo began to feel self-conscious about following Rachel's instructions, turned his paper over, and started drawing video game characters instead.

As you read this case, consider applying the following theoretical lenses to your analysis:

- **Executive Functioning:** Who are the significant individuals scaffolding Paulo's thought processes? What factors make this a critical period in the development of his ability to self-regulate?
- **Community Support:** How can community programs engage parents to support the learning and development of youth? What community bridging strategies are available to the parents in this case?
- **Ethnic and Racial Minority Parenting:** How are Paulo's parents' parenting practices affected by their past experiences? How do their beliefs influence their goals for Paulo?

When school let out, Paulo walked home. He lives in a small trailer in an RV lot with his parents, older brother, and two younger siblings. His parents came to California as Mexican immigrants.

"If I tell my friends I want to join the college outreach program, they'll think I'm a schoolboy. But Mama always says that if I don't go to college I won't have a good future. My mom loved to go to school, but had to quit school to start working when she was 12. Her mom didn't let her do her homework, even though she really liked to do homework. Instead, she had to do chores. Mama tells me that I need to go to college if I want to get a good job and buy a house. Going to college helps you get a job instead of being a drug dealer or other things that cause you to get in trouble with the cops."

However, Paulo, who was always a good student, had been slipping. His math teacher had recently recommended him for the remedial track, and more and more frequently, he was not turning in homework assignments. When Paulo reached home, his mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner while his father was reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. He had been in the fields picking strawberries since five in the morning. "Hola mi jito (hello my son)," his father said as Paulo poured himself a glass of water, "Como te fue en la escuela? (how was school?)"

PAULO'S FAMILY

Alberto Dominguez, Paulo's father, spent his childhood in Mexico and completed an elementary education at a *primaria* (elementary school) in a rural village

where there was no middle or high school. When he moved to a nearby town in an adjacent state to find better work, he met his future wife, Sarita.

After Sarita and Alberto were married, they decided to make the trip to California to find work and give their children a better start in life. Sarita started working in a factory on an assembly line while Alberto worked in the fields picking strawberries. Sarita took English classes at night until she became pregnant with their first child, Raul. She attended other classes in Spanish, including birthing and child care. Since then she has had three other children and continues to work part time in the factory.

SARITA, PAULO'S MOTHER

"I'm quite concerned about Paulo. His father and I want him to be safe, both physically and emotionally, and we want him to have an equal chance to learn and succeed. But lately, I see him being less with the family and more with his friends. I know this is a time for him that's difficult. He's getting older, and relationships and friendships get harder, but I want to help him make the right decisions so we can guide him to college and to stay on the good path. I don't want him to get into drugs or a gang, or get a girl pregnant.

"But I do worry. At the same time that we want Paulo to succeed in school, I'm afraid we're not able to help him. I don't like to go to the school much. Raul, my oldest son, dropped out of school a few months ago, but when he first started having trouble, I got a call from one of his teachers. They called me to go there. I was very scared because I was unfamiliar with the system and the language. No one spoke my language except for the principal and one other teacher who translated for Raul's teacher. I asked them both about the problem involving my son, and the principal and the teacher weren't very helpful. I just felt like they wanted me to leave. Raul dropped out a few months later.

"We aren't here in the United States because we like working here or love living here. We live better in Mexico. But I make this sacrifice because I want my children to study, to learn English, and have a better life than me and their father. It's not that I don't think we have a good life; it's just I want Paulo to have a better life. We provide encouragement and use our own lives as examples of how limited your options are with a poor education.

"And now I see Paulo, just like Raul was a few years ago, at this crossing in the road. He's on *el buen camino de la vida* (the good path of life) now, but some of his friends, I think, are making it hard for him to stay on it. I know that his father and I can't always help with his school learning. I still don't feel comfortable going to the school like I probably should. Already, he has more education than me and his father. I'm worried about him."

ALBERTO, PAULO'S FATHER

"Any type of job is acceptable for my son, as long as it isn't in the fields. When I was very young, I started to pick vegetables on the rancho, and I wouldn't want him to do that. Right now Paulo is a very serious and good boy. I would like for

Paulo to get to college, but the way things are now, who knows? We don't have much money to send him to school. I know that college is not the only definition of success in life, but I look at our lives in the factories, fields, hotel kitchens—and we want our son to be a doctor, teacher, lawyer. I'd like him to live well. Really, that is the dream that one always has, that one's children succeed, that they are better off. That they do the things one was not able to do.

"His mother and I, we are very poor, but we don't give our children bad examples about anything. We behave well, hoping that they will learn to behave. If they see that we behave and are good parents, hopefully they will do the same. This will keep him away from *malas amistades* (negative friendships).

COMADRE³ ALICIA (MADRINA) AND HER SON MIGUEL

There was a knock on the door, and Paulo put down his pencil and homework assignment and went to answer it. His madrina Alicia Robles and her oldest son Miguel had arrived for dinner. Alicia greeted Sarita with a kiss on the cheek and began to help her fix dinner. Meanwhile, Miguel went over to Paulo and asked if he needed any help with his homework. Alicia and Sarita met at a Sunday church soccer game in which their husbands were playing and quickly became close friends. Alicia's oldest son Miguel was only a few years older than Raul. Because her family had been in the United States longer than Sarita's, Alicia felt like it was her job to take Sarita under her wing.

Lately, Alicia had been sending Miguel over to help Paulo with homework. Miguel was one of the first students involved in the community college outreach program and currently attends the local community college, with the scholarship from the outreach program.

As the two boys worked together, Paulo put down his pencil and rested his chin against his fist.

"This work is getting really hard—especially these word problems! I never get them right. If you're not here, I don't even have a chance. I know my mom wants to help, but she just doesn't know this kind of math. I should just quit. What did you do when you were my age?"

"I know where you're coming from, Paulo. This math work is hard, but it's important that you stick with it, stay in school, and go to college."

"I know. You're always telling me that. That lady Rachel came to school today to tell us about that program you're in."

"Hey, that's great, Paulo! Do you have the application? We can get to work on it right now. You know, it was the program that really opened up a lot of doors for me. They helped me get a job tutoring other kids when I was in high school and have kept me employed since then. And that scholarship sure helped me pay for college. Now I work at the program's partnership with the university as a researcher to help make the program better and as a college mentor. So take that application out. Let's look at it!"

When Paulo explained that he was too embarrassed to get the application form, Miguel talked to him about all the reasons he really should get involved. Miguel added that besides all the benefits for the future, there were also cute girls who often attended.

BACK AT SCHOOL

The next morning Paulo got up and went to school. He was still thinking about the community outreach program. The night before, Miguel had reawakened his desire to approach Rachel and ask for an application. As he entered the school, Paulo glanced at the quilt hanging in the lobby. His math teacher, Nancy, and another teacher had asked their students to create a picture of their hopes and dreams, then asked families in the community to sew on the different parts. Paulo's patch showed a computer video game.

"Hey Paulo!" Robert yelled as Paulo approached his math class. "Come over here!"

Paulo walked over.

"Yo. A few of us after school today—we're gonna meet up with some guys up the street. You in?" asked Robert.

Paulo hesitated. "Um . . . well, I might need to stay after school and work on some math homework. I'm failing."

"Paulo, man. Don't worry so much about your homework and school. It's not worth studying so hard. There are easier ways to get a job and money," answered Robert.

"Maybe man, yeah, I'll see," answered Paulo just as the bell rang.

Paulo breathed a sigh of relief and continued to walk to math class. Robert was starting to remind Paulo more and more of his brother Raul who had dropped out of school to hang out all day with his friends and was now on probation for stealing bikes to sell. He knew his parents suspected Raul was in a gang and saw how much they worried about his future.

NANCY BROWN, PAULO'S MATH TEACHER

Nancy Brown had been teaching math for nine years. During her first years teaching at the high school level, she had witnessed several students, especially low-income, ethnic minority, and immigrant boys leave school and its career opportunities too early. So she switched to a sixth-grade math classroom at Bay Vista Middle School a few years ago, hoping to help get youth in the community on the right track to math earlier in their school careers while they were still on "the good path." Bay Vista is a primarily Latino, low-income school with high numbers of English Language Learners who speak Spanish (see Table 4.3). Families mostly come from Mexico to work in the fields picking strawberries and lettuce, and in the packing plants.

"I see it as my job not only to teach mathematics but to also try to encourage the dreams and goals of Latino children and their families. Lately, I am concerned about Paulo. I see him spending time with some really questionable kids, and I'm worried about his math and his goals. I had to recommend him for the low-level sixth-grade math class. This upsets me because I see all the assets he brings with him. I told him that he's got a lot of potential, but that he's not working hard enough. Then he surprised me and started talking about his frustration with word problems.

Table 4.3 Bay Vista Middle School

Location	Mid-sized West Coast city, population 45,000
Grades served	6–8
Enrollment	871, 95% Hispanic
Students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch	80%
Percent of children who do not graduate from high school	56%
Mobility rate	13%
English Language Learners	59%
Percent of sixth graders scoring at the proficient level or above on math standards-based tests	6%
Percent of sixth graders scoring at the proficient level or above on English language arts standards-based tests	9%

"It seems he has an older friend at home who helps him, but when he's on his own, he just can't figure it out. So now I know he's trying, but there's only so much I can do. There are standardized benchmarks of achievement that determine eligibility for college-prep classes in high school like Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2, and if you're in low-level math in sixth grade, it's really hard to place into a higher level afterwards and pass Algebra by ninth grade. I just can't put him in these classes without him being prepared.

"I see so many times a disproportionate number of our Latino students placed in low-level math ability groups early on that sends these students towards these remedial tracks. I want to work to untrack these youths, but they need support—as well as the skills—to know they can succeed. In Paulo's case, he hasn't been doing his work and has made some new friends who seem to value school less than he does. It's really affected his grades."

RACHEL MARQUEZ, COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTREACH PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Rachel Marquez walked into the cafeteria at lunch with her friend Nancy Brown. Rachel wanted to invite more thoughts and questions from students about applying to the program. She had directed the outreach program, Más Allá, since its start six years earlier. The program currently enrolls 500 low-income youth and offers tutoring by college students, Saturday academics and

summer institutes, family involvement activities, and academic guidance from sixth grade through high school to help students stay on track to college. Upon graduation from high school, students are awarded \$1,000 scholarships to attend the community college.

Más Allá also uses a research-based partnership with a local university to better understand student and family perspectives about resources and challenges to getting into and succeeding in college. In an ongoing cycle of action research, the program hosts regular meetings between program and research staff, as well as youth leaders, to identify ongoing questions and integrate data collection and analysis into program activities. Findings from the research suggested that both males and females see their peers as the greatest source of difficulty in attaining their academic and career goals. At the same time, mothers were the greatest resources. And students who continued in the program drew increasing positive support from both peers and mothers over time, a pattern that makes Rachel think that one key way her program works is by building networks of college-bound peers.

Rachel explained to Nancy the latest problematic trends developing from their research. “Younger students are more interested in program activities than older students. It’s the older students who are under more pressure from peers to join gangs, ditch school, spend their time going to parties, and not attend program activities. At the same time, many of them need to work and make money. We also see more girls than boys attending activities. A lot of boys are not applying to the program in sixth grade because even then they think it looks ‘uncool.’ Some older boys have just stopped coming altogether. These gender patterns worry me, and I struggle with how I can enroll more boys. But one thing that is working is Daniel, who is a student teacher from the university who teaches math at the high school. He’s great teaching the math enrichment class at our Saturday Academies. The attendance of the older boys has gone way up. A few bring their ‘homeboys’ and sit in the back of the class, and Danny just pulls them right on into the math.”

Just then, Rachel caught the fleeting and embarrassed eye of a boy sitting amidst his other friends in the cafeteria.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Major Issues

The purpose of this case is to consider how schools and communities can work with Latino families to increase youth opportunities to go to college. The case is designed to help educators understand the home, school, peer group, and community factors that influence Latino youth to take *el buen camino de la vida* (the good path of life) or *el mal camino* (the bad path) and how to get back on the good path. Specifically, the case focuses on the following:

- The influence of family relationships and personal networks on youth identity
- Academic socialization, including building pathways to college

- The different ecological contexts shaping the development of youth or children in the upper range of middle childhood
- Ways that schools might link with low-income immigrant families and communities

Describing the Situation

- What crucial decision(s) must Paulo make?
- How would the different characters who have a relationship with Paulo identify the problem he faces? How are they similar and different in their assessment?
- Identify references to “pathways” and “paths” in this case. What might be some of Paulo’s different possible pathways or life trajectories to high school, college, and a career?

Exploring Contributing Factors

- What do Sarita and Alberto want for Paulo’s future? How do these expectations influence his social-emotional and academic identity?
- How does Raul (Paulo’s brother) influence Paulo?
- Describe Paulo’s relationship with his peers. What resources and challenges do they provide?
- What are some of the natural parent networks that exist for families in this community? How have they served as a resource to Paulo?
- How would you describe Paulo’s relationship with his teacher, Nancy?
- What are some of the barriers Rachel faces in her work as the program director?

Articulating Possible Next Steps

- What should Nancy do next to support the potential she sees in Paulo?
- What can the school do to develop relationships with Latino parents whose children are at risk of dropping out?
- How might Rachel and Más Allá take a bigger responsibility in helping to engage families in their children’s education?
- How might Rachel redesign the efforts to sell the program to Latino boys like Paulo?

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- What are children like during the upper range of middle childhood? How does developmental level influence home-school-community relationships and vice versa?
- How does the social and cultural position of first-generation immigrant Latino families put them at risk for unfavorable youth educational

- outcomes? What school and community supports should be available to Latino families? To what extent are the supports offered in this case sufficient to keep Latino youth on the right track?
- In what ways can teachers come to better understand the cultural contexts of the students they teach and how these contexts influence the students' school experiences?
 - What other institutions/community organizations can support the school in helping Paulo, and in what ways can they do this?
 - Who are the "Paulos" in your school and community? What is being done to reach the needs of these families and children? Identify programs like Más Allá that are available in your community.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this case was originally published on the Family Involvement Network of Educators. Harvard Family Research Project. Web site: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/progress.html>
2. An earlier version of this case was originally published on the Family Involvement Network of Educators. Harvard Family Research Project. Web site: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/bilingual.html>
3. A *comadre* or *compadre* is a godparent (godmother or godfather) who helps parents guide their child through life and school. This person is called a *madrina* or *padrina*, for women or men, respectively, in their relation to the child.

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