

Cultural Brokers: Helping Latino Children on Pathways Toward Success

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Abstract

Latino children in elementary and middle school not only experience developmental changes and confront the risks and adventures held by neighborhoods, they must also juggle the values and expectations of two cultures as they navigate their own pathways toward success. Integrating the results of a series of studies focused on the children of Mexican-American immigrants in California, this article discusses ways that teachers, parents, siblings, and program staff can help young Latino students succeed in U.S. schools and live according to their parents' values.

Elementary school represents a critical time in the lives of Latino students. It is during these school years that they begin to follow either *el buen camino* (the good path toward responsible adulthood) or a path leading to high-risk behaviors. Recent studies show that by the third grade, large gaps emerge between Latino children and national norms in reading, written language, and math. These early gaps widen in subsequent years.¹ In 1995, 30% of Hispanic young people were school dropouts, compared with only 9% of non-Hispanic white youths and 12% of non-Hispanic black youths.² Thus Latino youths come to be underrepresented in college prep classes and overrepresented in the juvenile justice system.³

A college education is not the only definition of success in life, but conversations; with children of Mexican immigrants reveal that they begin school with high hopes, dreaming of becoming doctors, lawyers, sports heroes, teachers, and firefighters.⁴ Parents who work in strawberry fields, hotel kitchens, and factories dream their children will be doctors, teachers, and lawyers.⁵ A key period of vulnerability occurs, however, as students move from elementary to junior high or middle school. This is a time when students must coordinate their family relationships and responsibilities with increasingly salient relationships with peers. Yet many Latino parents, Most of whom have less than a high school education, lack the knowledge of U.S. schools to guide their children to college and careers.⁵

This article discusses ways in which teachers, family members, and young adult staff in community programs can serve as culture brokers for Latino students, by helping them to feel safe in home, school, and community, to find educational experiences beyond the classroom, and to remain on pathways that lead to personal and academic success. Families, schools, peers, and communities represent both resources and challenges for children. They can help Latino children stay in school and can act as intermediaries as children bridge their worlds. This article draws on new research to

("friends who will pressure me to take drugs"). The children saw their greatest resources in their families, including parents, siblings, and cousins; their schoolteachers, counselors, and coaches; their friends; and themselves ("never giving up, looking for help by asking people, and studying a lot"). Children also named the program staff and scholarships as resources in their essays.

During the transition from elementary to middle school, children begin to look ahead in their own lives and look up to older siblings, peers, and adults. Some children's pathways lead them toward college and adult responsibilities, while others lead toward school dropout and the risks of

"underground" occupations. Consequently, these years are a critical time to ensure that children find help moving toward the goals that they and their families hold.

Bridges and Barriers, Resources and Challenges

Schools and Mexican immigrant parents share the ideal that all children will be safe-both physically and emotionally - and have an equal chance to learn and succeed. Even so, factors in schools, families, and communities help some children to move along academic pathways, while others slip away.⁷

Schools as Gatekeepers and Brokers

Teachers act as institutional gatekeepers when they assess students against standardized benchmarks of achievement which determine eligibility for college-prep classes or placement in vocational or remedial classes.^{8,9} When elementary schoolteachers disproportionately place Latino students in special education classes and in low reading and math ability groups, they send these students toward remedial tracks in middle and high school.¹⁰

Teachers-from any ethnic background - can also act as cultural brokers who help Latino children to succeed in school and to achieve their dreams. Some review the assessments of Spanish-speaking students to ensure that they are not wrongly placed in special education due to language differences.¹¹ Teachers can also encourage the dreams and goals of Latino children. For instance, in a rural elementary school in California, fourth graders wrote a children's book in English and Spanish that discussed the links between career dreams and going to college, defined grade point averages and scholarships, and explained practical college issues like dormitories that would be meaningful to school-age children.¹² In Arizona, university researchers collaborate with teachers to bring Latino parents into the school as sources of valued expertise.^{13,14} When school staff members find ways like these of working with Latino children and parents, they link children's home and school in ways that nourish children's aspirations for the future.

Parents Promoting "The Good Moral Path"

The transition from childhood to adolescence triggers both hopes and fears for parents who want to promote their children's school achievement, but also want to protect them from drugs, violence, and early pregnancy. In one study, Latino parents in Los Angeles, who were primarily Mexican immigrants, described their children as nearing the crossroads between the good moral path (el buen camino) and the bad path (el mal camino).¹⁵ The parents considered moral guidance of their children as their primary method sought to protect their children negative peer influences (malas amistades). To these parents, a strong moral upbringing includes and supports academic achievement.

Mexican immigrant parents, however, often face the dilemma of holding high aspirations for their children's school success while they lack the knowledge of educational institutions needed to guide their children. For example, one study interviewed parents in 36 Mexican immigrant families with children in third, fifth, and seventh grades.^{5,16} Most of the parents worked as farm laborers or in canneries and had left school in their Mexican villages at age eight. By fifth grade, the children from these families exceeded their parents' schooling, making it difficult for parents to help with homework- The parents hoped their children would become doctors, lawyers, or teachers, but some

Box 1

A Latina "Comadre" Promotes Student Success

One program director described a comadre's brokering between her family and school: "My parents immigrated from Mexico to Los Angeles in search of a better life for their children. They made sure we did our homework and maintained frequent contact with school, and nine of their thirteen children completed college. Most of my peers dropped out before they reached high school. Their parents also came to the United States to give their children a better life, with dreams for their children to obtain a college degree. But like many noneducated immigrant parents, they did not feel comfortable helping their children with school because they did not understand the system. My parents had a comadre (godmother) who took them under her wing, explained how U.S. schools function, and reassured them their participation was demanded for us to be successful,"

Source Dominguez, E.E. *Proyecto Mom 6 Mono: A model for parental involvement. Unpublished M.& thesis in Education. University of California of Santa Cruz, 1995, p. 3.*

were challenged by their fears of drugs, neighborhood violence, and negative friends. Some families moved to other neighborhoods or sent their children back to Mexico.¹⁶ Their dreams of college and professional work dimmed to hopes that children would finish high school and find steady jobs.

Siblings as Mentors

In many Latino families, older siblings are more able than parents to orient students to school, help with homework, and model positive school behavior. One study of sibling pairs in California families of Mexican descent revealed that older siblings taught reading, math, and school expectations to younger brothers and sisters.¹⁷ These contributions are crucial when their immigrant parents have low levels of schooling and are unfamiliar with U.S. schools. Because Latino families often value close family ties, older siblings' companionship and emotional support at school can enhance students' motivation and achievement.

The study also found, however, that as children reached junior high school, a number of older siblings slipped out of the mentor role, because they were not doing as well in school as their younger siblings or they had left school altogether. Therefore, resources beyond schools and families are needed to support Mexican heritage youths in early adolescence.

Program Staff as Culture Brokers

The young adults encountered by Latino children in community programs can play key roles in helping them feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods; learn alternatives to violence; gain educational experiences; and acquire the bicultural skills needed for success in school. Young adult staff can also give children a chance to talk and write about their dreams for careers, education, families, and their communities.¹⁸ In Latino communities, young adults from a range of ethnic backgrounds work in programs for school-age children and often act as culture brokers. They value children's home communities, and many share a common language and sometimes a family history with the children. Yet many have learned to be bicultural and can help children become so as well, by passing on their understanding of how to retain community traditions while entering and succeeding in schools, colleges, or local government. These staff members build on Latino traditions of comadres and compadres (godmothers and godfathers) who help parents in guiding their children in school and life (See Box 1).¹⁹

An interview study found that, like Latino parents, young adult staff members working with Latino children in after-school programs defined success in life in moral and academic terms.⁴ In guiding youths, the staff drew on positive and negative aspects of their past experiences. When reflecting the sources of their own success, three young men credited mentors they had and programs they had attended, but they lamented the scarcity of positive role models in the communities of the

Families, schools, and communities can join together to create bridges for Latino children, working together to support their safety, school achievement, and emotional and social well-being. (Their efforts echo the community-bridging strategies adopted by the African-American families described in the article by Jarrett in this journal issue; and the relationships between young adult staff and youths resemble those created in the Bridges to Success program described in the article by Dryfoos in this journal issue.) In times of rapid cultural change, parents do not know all their children need to learn to survive and flourish, so sources of guidance must be found beyond the family,²⁴ yet strong ties with family elders sustain access to wisdom and cultural traditions, including moral values. This article has emphasized the role that older siblings or young staff in community programs can play in helping Latino children to find pathways to success in the eyes of their families, their communities, and mainstream American schools.

In schools, community-based programs, and neighborhoods, links across generations can be forged across senior staff, young adults, and the parents and children they serve. These loosely knit networks can also foster new generations of leadership with the cultural skills that today's children need to succeed in an increasingly diverse world. Although programs like Head Start focus on the transition into school and Upward Bound helps high school youths find their way to college, new research suggests that close years, when few adults may take children's attention should be paid to the middle dreams seriously.

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