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Mexican Immigrant Families Crossing the Education Border: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examines Mexican immigrant parents' experiences of helping their children navigate and succeed in school and their perceptions regarding differences between the U.S. and Mexican educational systems. Findings highlight parents' challenges in helping their children succeed in a new and unfamiliar school system and the often serious implications for the success of their children. Challenges identified include language barriers, difficulties in understanding and dealing with unfamiliar rules, requirements and expectations for children, and feelings of ineptness in unfamiliar territory. Findings also highlight the importance of cultural resources in response to challenges. Educational and programming implications are discussed.

Keywords: Latinos, education, parental perceptions, school

The rapidly changing ethnic composition of the United States, particularly with regard to the Latino population, has numerous implications for educators working with youth. Latinos now make up the biggest ethnic minority group in the United States, and it is projected that by 2050, 1 of every 3 teens and children in the country will be Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Unfortunately, Latino youth lag behind their peers on many educational outcomes. High school dropout rates are higher and college enrollment rates are lower among Latinos compared to all other major ethnic groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Latino children and youth generally score lower on the SAT and other standardized tests (College Entrance Examination Board, 2005). Consequently, Latinos are less likely to complete college and graduate schooling and are disproportionately underrepresented in professional fields such as science and engineering (Center for Latino Educational Excellence, 2003).

The consequences of these lagging educational outcomes of Latino youth are serious, particularly given the projected increases in the Latino population. In order for educators to address the educational needs of all children, the factors underlying these gaps in outcomes must be better understood. The current study is an attempt to shed light on these issues by examining the perceptions and experiences of Mexican immigrant parents as they

help their children navigate the U.S. educational system. By utilizing a phenomenological approach, the study intends to provide in-depth information regarding the experiences of parents who are key actors in the academic lives and overall well-being of children.

The Role Of Parents In Children's Academic Outcomes

The role of parents in the academic success and well-being of their children has been acknowledged by numerous researchers (e.g., Paulson, 1994; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Supportive parenting, parental monitoring, and positive relations between children and their parents are all linked to positive academic outcomes (Fuligni, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1995; White & Glick, 2000). Although few studies have examined these relations among Latinos, Latino parents' school involvement (Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010), support (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006), and positive parenting practices (Dumka, Gonzales, Bonds, & Millsap, 2009) have all been linked to the academic success and performance of Latino children.

Currently there is a dearth of information on the experiences of Latino immigrant children in U.S. schools and the role of parents in helping children navigate the U.S. educational system. Nonetheless, studies have shown that Latino parents are generally supportive and highly involved in their children's education (Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004); that they care deeply about the educational success of their children; and that they understand the importance of a good education for attaining personal goals, such as getting a good job and ensuring future financial security (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Valencia & Black, 2002). Unfortunately, many Latino parents, particularly immigrants, lack basic information about the U.S. educational system (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Often this gap in information stems from the marked differences between the school systems they are familiar with in their home countries and the U.S. schools their children are attending (e.g., Valdés, 1996; see also Auerback, 2002; McLaughlin, 2002; Villaverde, 2003). Such differences can have substantial implications on parents' abilities to support their children and assist them in their schooling. Although research such as that cited previously has begun to shed light on the experiences of Latino immigrant parents and children in the U.S. educational system, in-depth information from their perspective is lacking.

Theoretical Framework

The current study draws from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), which depicts human functioning as being embedded in a series of nested and reciprocal contextual systems. This model is useful in framing the many factors that influence optimal development and functioning that can be found in the various contexts surrounding immigrant or ethnic minority children and families (Carlo, Carranza, & Zamboanga, 2002). The most immediate setting, or the *microsystem*, includes contexts in which the child is directly participating, such as the school, neighborhood, and home. The second layer of this framework, called the *mesosystem*, is composed of linkages between two or more immediate settings (e.g., the degree to which parents are aware and supportive of the child's peer group and friends). Optimal development is

supported by strong links among the various immediate contexts of the child, for instance when parents are supportive of the school or when a child's close friends value family (Carlo et al., 2002).

The *exosystem* is composed of contexts with which the child has no direct contact but that are still influential in his or her development, for instance the parents' workplace. Carlo and colleagues (2002) suggested that aspects of the exosystem such as the size of the Latino population in the community can have important implications on Latino children's outcomes. Furthermore, although a growing body of work has started to examine the experiences of Latino immigrants, relatively little attention has been placed on Latinos in the Midwest and Great Plains region (Carranza, Carlo, & de Guzman, 2000). Aspects of the ecological context within Aspects of the ecological context within both the Midwest and Great Plains can have important implications for the experiences of Latino families. Finally, the outermost layer is called the *macrosystem* and is composed of broad cultural belief systems, norms, and laws that surround a particular culture or community. The ecological systems approach is utilized here to provide an organizing theoretical framework from which to examine the myriad aspects of families' experiences.

The current study used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Through qualitative inquiry participants are afforded the opportunity to present their stories, have their voices heard, and give meaning to the phenomenon that is shared (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The phenomenological approach was utilized in order to understand these experiences through the lens of the persons experiencing the events (Becker, 1992) as well as to uncover the shared aspects of those experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Methods

Participants

A criterion and purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for this study (Creswell, 2005). Families were identified through a university-based mentoring program that paired college students (mentors) with middle school Latino students. Respondents were six individual mothers and one mother-father pair (M age = 38.90 years, SD = 3.50). Six respondents were married, one reported being a single parent, and another reported being separated. The average number of years the participants had lived in the United States was 11.70 (SD = 5.7), and their educational attainment ranged from first to eighth grade. All participants had received their education in Mexico. The total number of children living with the families interviewed was 29, ranging from one family with 7 children to another family with 2 children. Five of the children were enrolled at the elementary level, 10 at the middle school level, and 8 at the high school level, with the rest being too young to be enrolled in school.

Procedures

All interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and lasted approximately 45 min. Interview questions were broad, open ended, and designed to generate interactive discussion with foci that evolved as the participants shared their stories (Moustakas, 1994). The opening question for the interview was as follows: "Tell me about some of the

differences and similarities you see between education in the U.S. and Mexico." Follow-up questions were asked to probe deeper into respondents' perceptions about and experiences with the U.S. educational system. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Data collection was conducted by the first author, who is fluent in both English and Spanish.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed guidelines outlined by Creswell (2007) and modified by Moustakas (1994) to generate themes from qualitative data. The following steps were utilized: (a) *horizontalization*: transcriptions were read again and meaningful statements, sentences, and/or quotes that demonstrated the participant's experience of the phenomenon were highlighted; (b) *clusters of meaning*: the meaningful statements, sentences, and/or quotes were grouped into themes (repetitive and overlapping statements were removed); (c) *textural and structural description*: a description was written about what (textural) and how (structural) the participants experienced the phenomenon; and (d) *essence*: a composite description of the participants' shared experience was constructed. Validation checks were conducted by peer review and debriefing at the university's research methodology center. This entailed reviewing the process for the phenomenological study, applying the process to the data collected, and verifying that the process was properly applied.

Results

A total of 77 significant statements were extracted from the interviews. From these, six themes were derived, as described here.

Theme 1: Differences in the "Cost" of Education

The cost of education, in both tangible and intangible terms, was one of the most striking differences between the U.S. and Mexican educational systems, according to respondents. Parents talked about the availability of educational opportunities for children in the United States – public schooling is completely free and available to all. In contrast, families need to cover some costs for elementary and secondary levels of education in Mexico. The families spoke about the obligation of "quota payments" to the schools their children attend in Mexico. In Mexico, the government pays for many educational costs (e.g., salaries, textbooks, the cost of the building), but quota costs are fees that parents pay to assist the school. One mother explained that these are not charges to the family; instead, parents are paying to assist the school. Although quotas are not formal fees, if the families do not pay, the school cannot operate. According to another mother, the result would be "there will be no schooling, there won't be any of this, there won't be any of the other things, and I mean until you bring the money, you cannot go to school."

Parents acknowledged that the free education at the secondary level in the United States gives children many advantages. Respondents noted that in the United States they "help you with everything" and that it is "easier to study here because you receive a lot of help." Children receive help in the form of transportation to and from school, free meals, supplies that are provided (e.g., paper, books), and even the option to learn a second language.

Parents also noted a distinction with regard to what one has to give up in order to attend school. One parent stated, "Here, it is an obligation to go to school," whereas sometimes in Mexico a child cannot continue his education because he has to "help [his] father by working." Many respondents talked about the difficult decision that families face as to whether a child should go to school or work to help the family. At times, the older siblings have to stay home to care for the younger siblings while the parents go out to work. Parents noted that it was not uncommon for them to see fourth- or fifth-grade children in Mexico stay home to care for a toddler while both parents went to work. In some families the children also go out to find work in order to help the family financially. "When he sees that the money is scarce he goes to work," one parent said. Because the parents in the study were gainfully employed in the United States, their children's only responsibility was to go to school. One parent said, "So then, the child, their only job is, like I tell mine, to go to school, get up every day, go to school, get up every day, go to school. That is their job and responsibility."

Another educational expense in Mexico that is not practiced in the United States is the tangible investments that families make. Because government provisions to the schools are limited, the schools depend on the families to provide services that in the United States are purchased by the schools. If classrooms need painting, if an additional room needs to be built, or if the grounds need cleaning, the parents are contacted to come and provide these services. If parents can paint or are good with carpentry, they give their services. If not, then they supply the paint or the wood. One mother expressed it this way:

There's a difference in the participation of parents in the schools over there. They need many, many things and the parents have to ... help. Then the parent needs to go and paint it or ... provide the paint ... so many parents are going to give the paint, so many parents will come to paint. They also clean ... like around, sweep. You can take turns, one week you, the next week someone else, like that. Also, the children ... clean the classrooms.

These are not practices that one would see at a local public school in the United States. Parents may be asked to volunteer to go on a field trip with their child's classroom, but they would not be asked to help paint or provide the paint for a classroom that needs painting. Parents were unanimous in their views that they were partaking of many positive educational experiences in the United States. Their children were able to attend school at low to no cost.

Theme 2: Differences in Academic and Behavioral Expectations

Respondents expressed that they had the impression that in Mexico, academic expectations for children are higher and rules regarding behavior are far stricter. One parent gave the example that in the United States her children are allowed to use calculators in math class, whereas this is not done in schools in Mexico. Another parent pointed out, "When they arrived here they found out that they had already studied (in Mexico) what they were beginning to study in the U.S." Many opined that in Mexico, there are stricter rules about learning content material such that students are tested rigorously throughout the year and a failing grade means that they are not moved up to the next grade. Some found it perplexing to learn that in the United States students will be promoted even if they do not know the coursework simply because of their age.

Parents also noted that behavioral expectations, particularly for respecting people in positions of authority, are higher in Mexico. As an example, in Mexico when a school administrator or visitor enters a classroom, all of the students stand up as a sign of respect. One parent felt that in the United States students show a “lack of respect” toward teachers.

Parents’ perceptions regarding the higher demand placed on students in Mexico were paralleled by their belief that there are also higher demands placed on the parents. They mentioned that in Mexico, parent/teacher conferences are mandatory. If a parent does not attend, the student will not be permitted back in the classroom until the parent comes to the school to meet with the teacher. As one parent put it,

Sometimes, like, well you are obligated, if you don’t go, the next day the student will not be admitted to the school. If they have a parent/teacher conference and the student’s parent does not attend, the next day the student is not permitted in school. So then you feel obligated ... until the parent comes and then, you beg their pardon and they inform you of what is going on and sometimes they want help from the parents. And the parent should ask with what, how they might be of help.

In contrast, parents in the United States are encouraged but not required to come to the conferences. Schools see this time as an opportunity for the parent to meet the child’s teacher, find out what the child is learning in school, and look about the classroom and see what the students have been doing. If the parent does not attend there are no formal repercussions. Given these differences in expectations, parents expressed a concern over the lower level of rigor; for instance, if they go back to Mexico, their children would lag behind their peers.

Theme 3: Complexities of the Language Barriers

The primary language of the respondents in this study was Spanish, and they expressed concern and frustration over challenges in communication between themselves and the school and between the school and their children. For example, they were often unable to read the information sent home by the schools, as translations were not always available, and they were unable to express themselves to voice concerns or ask questions of school authorities.

The language barrier was a complex issue, and attempts at solutions often brought about new sets of challenges. For instance, translators in school, although invaluable, sometimes made parents feel a lack of confidentiality when speaking to school personnel about sensitive issues regarding their children. In addition, parents noted that during parent/teacher conferences, many things were lost in translation, and the amount of available time allotted to talking with teachers was reduced by half because the time had to be shared with the interpreter.

Similarly, challenges were introduced when the participants’ children reached some level of English proficiency. Parents reported that when their children reached a level of proficiency that allowed them to move out of the bilingual program, school personnel had the expectation that they were completely able to communicate in English even if their level of comprehension was still much lower than that of their majority peers. One parent shared the following experience of a child who had moved to an English-only program:

It becomes more difficult for some [students] to learn, and they are taught superficially. And when the questions come [from the students], they [teachers] don’t have the time to

teach [again]. I mean, this has happened to my children. They tell me, I did not understand well. The teacher told me, I will teach it later. But they don't have the time to do it later.

This parent conjectured that perhaps the teacher did not realize that even though the students could now speak English, it probably still took them longer than native speakers to fully grasp everything the teacher was saying.

Another mother noted similar experiences for parents, such that when they showed a bit of proficiency in English, the schools would stop sending translations for materials or provide translators during meetings. As one parent explained, "There are things in what they are saying that I understand, but I don't know how to answer. This is where the barrier comes in."

Theme 4: Distinctions in Procedures Lead to Difficulties

Because of differences in the procedures and structure of the U.S. and Mexican educational systems, parents often misunderstood policies and procedures, sometimes resulting in missed opportunities for their children. For example, students in Mexico typically take the same classes and thus parents do not need to guide their children in deciding which classes to take. In the United States, parents found that they had to monitor their children to make sure that they were on track to graduate. Parents found this challenging and noted that for many of them, they were not even aware of such a difference. One parent pointed out that her child missed the opportunity to go straight to college because he did not complete all of the necessary classes; she stated, "We failed with this child and he could not go directly to the university."

Parents also gave the example of the parent/teacher conference. Parents found that when they came to the conference, the experience was very different from what they had been used to in Mexico. Instead of a straightforward opportunity to sit with the teacher and talk at length about their child, there were boards that listed all of the teachers and 7-min time slots for each parent. Parents had to navigate a complicated schedule to talk with each of their child's teachers, who were spread out around the school. In one high school there were 110 teachers and 75 available slots per teacher. Although parents of other children might have been used to this system, those in the study found it confusing, overwhelming, and frustrating:

Put everything in lines [the stickers representing the slots] and then look for the teacher, and seven minutes to talk, to speak. You don't understand anything in seven minutes. Blah, blah, blah, you leave the same way you arrived. And then when I get home and I see that they don't have problems with gangs, or problems like this, that they don't complain at the school about problems with their behavior. I feel that, I feel that everything is fine.

Such differences in procedures between the United States and Mexico, in addition to language barriers and other challenges, caused these parents to sometimes feel discouraged and unable to support their children in their education.

Theme 5: Perceptions of Ineptness

The challenges that immigrant parents face in helping their children navigate a new educational system can be profound. Given the language barriers and a system that sometimes

felt alien, respondents expressed feelings of ineptness in facing the U.S. educational system. Although they were quite familiar with procedures and policies in Mexico, it was often difficult to understand the U.S. system, much less support their children in successfully completing their education. One parent described her experience as being “unable to understand what they are expecting ... not being able to help.”

Parents noted that certainly there is assistance provided for students and parents; nonetheless, this is often not sufficient given the vast differences in their experiences and knowledge regarding the new system. Moreover, this assistance diminishes the longer they are in the school, likely on the assumption that the children and parents have already adjusted and that once they reach a certain level of familiarity, they are left “on [their] own,” as one parent put it.

Theme 6: Consejos

Consejos is defined as a type of advice that is composed of “spontaneous homilies designed to influence behaviors and attitudes” (Valdés, 1996, p. 125). The families in this study spoke of their responsibility to provide guidance to their children so that they would be successful in school. Because they did not speak, read, or write in English they were limited in the type of assistance they were able to give their children. As one mother explained, “Honestly, you don’t speak English, you cannot read English ... you cannot help much.” Not having this ability, all they could do was to give *consejos*.

These families saw that their responsibility as parents was to give their children *consejos* regarding success in school and ethical behavior. These parents also saw giving *consejos* as supporting their children’s goals for a better education. For example, one mother stated that she told her children, “Look, my child, study, it’s for your own good, so you won’t end up like us.” The parents were cognizant of their limitations because they were not fluent in English. For this reason they resorted to the tool that they had on hand and knew how to use. By giving *consejos* they provided an ongoing conversation about the importance of school and, in this way, were meeting their responsibility to help their child.

During parent/teacher conferences in the United States, one of the first questions the Mexican immigrant parents would ask was “Does my child behave in class?” or “Is my child obedient?” because the answer to these questions was an indicator to the parents of whether the child could be successful in school. Teachers were usually taken aback by these questions; they were more used to questions of a different nature, such as how well the student is doing in school or what he or she can do to get further ahead. As the parents spoke of their experiences, the obstacles they have had to face, and their goals for their children, they were always optimistic about tomorrow. A vital part of the picture of success for these families included moral education, and one way to achieve it was through *consejos*. The parents expressed that as long as they continued to give their children *consejos* about their future and to use the failures along the way as lessons to build upon, they would find the success to which they aspired. Not having or being aware of the tools available to parents in the United States for working with their children (i.e., networking with school personnel and other parents) and helping them to succeed academically, these families saw their *consejo* as a tool for positively encouraging their children about school. They felt good about it and believed that their words would serve as guidance.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to better understand the experiences of immigrant Latino families as they navigate the U.S. educational system. Through the use of a qualitative phenomenological approach, parents' own voices were highlighted and their shared experiences were expressed and better understood (Creswell, 2007). The experiences of navigating the U.S. educational system among the families in this study were complex. On the one hand, respondents recognized that their children are afforded many educational opportunities in the United States—children have access to free schooling and other resources (e.g., free meals), and children can focus on schooling rather than having to work in order to help with family finances. Furthermore, there are fewer demands on parents with regard to covering both the tangible (e.g., fees) and intangible (e.g., services) costs of schooling. On the other hand, the school system is new and alien—differing so widely from that which they knew well in Mexico. The daunting task of navigating such a system posed many difficulties and resulted in missed opportunities, feelings of ineptness, and an inability to fully support their children in the process. Parents recognized their own limitations in guiding their children through this new territory but continued to provide what assistance they could in the form of emotional support, advice, and encouragement.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; see also Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002) suggests multiple layers of influence on development. As immigrant families transition to a new community and country, acculturation and adjustment, as well as potential incongruence between one's own culture and that to which one is adapting, can emerge at each of these levels (Carlo et al., 2002). Indeed, transitional adjustments and challenges at multiple layers of the ecological system could be gleaned from parents' accounts of their experiences. In the immediate settings (i.e., the microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the basic structure of the school system (e.g., how classrooms are designed) differed between what children and parents knew in Mexico and what they encountered in the United States. As seemingly superficial as this was, such differences had substantial implications on how classes were conducted and the implicit expectations for children. Similarly, the structure of parent/teacher conferences differed quite drastically from what parents knew. Instead of a straightforward set of meetings, parents found complex schedules with various teachers that children had in school. Such differences had implications for the degree to which parents felt connected to and comfortable with the school, reflecting what Bronfenbrenner's (1979) called the mesosystem, or the interconnections between microsystems.

At the broadest and most distal contexts represented by belief systems (exosystem), parents talked about the differences in terms of behavioral and academic expectations for their children as well as for themselves. For example, there were differences in the very meaning of education and the need for children to complete schooling rather than fulfill other family obligations. There were differences in the degree to which parents were expected to direct their children—with parents finding a higher need to help their children in the United States (i.e., because there is no homogenous curriculum). Given the multiple layers of incongruence, parents' tasks of adjusting to a new system and assisting their children in succeeding academically were full of challenges.

The findings also reiterate what other researchers have found regarding the importance of addressing the language barrier to effectively help children and parents navigate the educational system (Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, & Jayasena, 2000; Ramirez & Smith, 2007).

Language is one of the most important routes through which culture is transmitted, and it is an integral tool in learning about a new culture – permeating every level of the ecological system (Carlo et al., 2002; De La Vega, 2007). Parents in this study identified language as one of the biggest hurdles to understanding the educational system. And although the parents recognized that the schools made substantial efforts to help overcome this issue (e.g., by providing translators), those solutions were often insufficient and sometimes introduced new sets of challenges.

Finally, the findings suggest that barriers to understanding and thus navigating the educational system went beyond language. The multiple differences parents found between the U.S. and Mexican educational systems were broad and deep. Parents recognized their limitations in understanding the system but also believed that school administrators and personnel did not fully comprehend the issues and challenges they and their children were facing. For instance, parents reported that if they showed even a minimal level of English proficiency, school personnel would assume that they had a full understanding of the language and no longer provided translation services. Children who exhibited even minimal English language skills were prematurely removed from bilingual programs, and teachers assumed they had high proficiency. Thus, it appears that there was a need for more information on both sides.

Implications and Limitations

Although Latino immigrant parents report having a high regard for their children's education (De La Vega, 2007; Kao, 2002), immigrant children have higher risks of dropping out of school (Driscoll, 1999) and in general lag behind their majority peers on other measures of academic well-being (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). For scholars, educators, and policymakers to effectively address this issue, the complex needs, challenges, and unique circumstances of Latino immigrant children and families need to be better understood (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2008). The present findings highlight the need for those in the field of education to have a better understanding of the unique circumstances of Latino immigrant families and the need to help families better understand the U.S. educational system (see also Gonzales, Dumka, Mauricio, & German, 2007). Addressing these gaps in knowledge, from both the parents' and school's perspectives, is of paramount importance for the success of Latino immigrant children.

Although many of the themes in this study reflect the challenges and needs of the families, the findings also reflect the unique strengths and cultural strategies used by parents. Respondents talked about the importance of education and their attempts to assist their children in succeeding. Despite the difficulties they faced, the parents were motivated to understand the U.S. system. They attended parent/teacher conferences, tried to understand the requirements and rules in order for their children to graduate and transition into college, and tried to gather whatever information they could in order to support their children. Parents particularly discussed using culturally structured strategies, particularly *consejos*, to advise their children and provide guidance regarding schooling and other matters of life. Although there is a dearth of research on such culturally structured strategies, some researchers have documented *consejos* as a unique and culturally specific tool that Mexican parents use to guide their children (Blea, 1985), particularly in light of the ethnic minority experience that includes powerlessness (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Furthermore, scholars are beginning to acknowledge (a) the importance of utilizing such tools in order

to facilitate home-school communications that will best help immigrant Latino children succeed in school (Sánchez, Plata, Grosso, & Leird, 2010) as well as (b) the need to build upon other cultural strengths that immigrant families bring (Carlo, Koller, Raffaelli, & de Guzman, 2007). Understanding these unique strategies and other strengths of Latino immigrant families will be invaluable in more effectively addressing the challenge of developing culturally appropriate and responsive educational practices.

Several limitations should be noted in interpreting the findings from this study. The aim of qualitative inquiry, particularly detailed and in-depth small-scale endeavors such as this, is not to draw conclusions that can be generalized to the broader population (Patton, 2002). Instead, the goal here is to provide a more in-depth understanding of and exploratory information on the experiences of a group of individuals with a shared experience. In an attempt to draw participants with overlapping experiences, we recruited participants for this study who were all living in the same midwestern city and whose children were enrolled in the same school district and participated in the same mentoring program. Larger scale studies with more representative populations are needed to draw more generalizable findings. Moreover, although the themes reflected responses that were expressed by either all or most parents in this study, certainly there were differences in specific aspects within each category. The themes were meant to reflect broader patterns of responses.

Notwithstanding those limitations, this study provides important information regarding the experiences of Latino immigrant families as they face the U.S. educational system. Gaining such information and putting it into practice can facilitate school-home communications (Bollin, 2003); guide educators and practitioners in better responding to the steadily growing population of Latino youth; and help expand current research on the needs, challenges, and strengths of this population.

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