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Life in Latino Families

As is true in all cultures, there is no single Latino family type. Latinos are as varied as any other ethnic group. Mexican immigrant, Mexican American, Chicano, Central American, Latin American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban: All these are identities within the Latino population in the United States. Like the cultural heterogeneity of Latino groups, the social class and socioeconomic standing also vary (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994a, 1994b). Some Latinos are U.S. born and English speaking, with heritage and history in the United States for many generations. Others are immigrants and are primarily Spanish speaking. Geographically, Latinos reside in almost every state of the union, from Florida to Alaska to Hawaii. But large concentrations of Latinos live in California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Colorado. About two-thirds of Latinos reside in the southwestern United States, but other states, including Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan, report a sizeable Latino population, while many other states have seen a growing Latino group. In some states, the Latino population is largely migratory, working in agriculture and living in temporary, substandard housing camps.

While many highly visible professionals of Latino heritage work and reside across the United States, innumerable Latinos remain relegated to working-class status as agricultural workers, factory workers, and paraprofessional service providers. Recent immigrants are most likely found in these entry-level jobs. They immigrate with

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high hopes of expanding educational opportunities for their children, which can lead to economic betterment. It is imperative to note that Latino workers in the United States are not just “the help” and “the leaf blowers.” They are judges, architects, professors, university presidents, journalists, doctors, business owners, governors, athletes, and scientists. Latinos are Rhodes scholars and Nobel Prize winners, including Adolfo Perez, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz, Rigoberta Menchu, Sergio Robles, Mario Molina, and many others. They speak not only Spanish but also English, and many speak numerous other languages as well. Officially, Latinos are the largest minority population in the United States at 37 million and 13% of the population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

Latinos also differ with regard to the places that they call their original homeland. Although Latinos share a common heritage of language, history, and culture, differences exist within each ethnic group, ranging from the time of arrival in the United States to their socioeconomic standing. For example, both Chicanos and Mexican immigrants may be U.S. citizens, but Chicanos consider their identity a form of political consciousness and trace their ancestry to those who lived on the land that is now the Southwest, which was ceded to the United States after the Mexican-American War in 1848. The ancestors of Mexican Americans originally emigrated from Mexico during the Mexican revolution in the early 1900s. Still others with roots in Mexico are more recent immigrants.

Puerto Ricans, of course, are citizens because Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory. Three major currents of migration to the United States from Puerto Rico categorize the Puerto Rican experience. The need for workers in the United States attracted a major migration during the 1940s. An even larger migration occurred in the 1950s. Most migrated with their young families. These Puerto Ricans were skilled workers and literate in Spanish and entered the manufacturing and service industries. The third migration has been a steadier, more fluid flow of Puerto Ricans who continue to travel back and forth to Puerto Rico to work and to visit family.

Many immigrants from Central America arrived as refugees from war-torn countries including Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Costa Ricans have also immigrated to the United States. Other immigrants from Latin American countries may have fled economic and social distress. Cubans arrived in two main waves from Cuba. The earlier immigrants were wealthier people fleeing the Cuban revolution, while those who came in the 1980s were people from lower socioeconomic groups in Cuba (Fuller & Olsen, 1998).

Educational attainment also differs across the Latino groups. Latino educational experience in the United States spans the continuum from low literacy to postgraduate professional education. Many complete college and graduate school; however, a large percentage of Latino students have difficulty completing high school and getting into college, especially Spanish-speaking Latinos from lower socioeconomic ranks. In some communities, Latino students drop out of school at the rate of more than 40% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Latinos have encountered prejudice and lack of access to educational resources because of their low-income status and linguistic differences.

Regardless of the Latino families' social, educational, or economic standing, they all have strengths. As in other ethnic groups, the family is the primary social unit among Latinos. Latino families also exist in many different forms, including two-parent families; extended families with grandparents, uncles, or cousins; and single-parent families. The family as a social unit holds a valued place as a resource for coping with the pressures life brings. Its preservation is critical to the continuity of social, political, religious, and cultural order. The extended family plays a very strong role. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and family friends are frequent visitors in a Latino family household. Whether extended families live in the same home, around the corner in the same community, or in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, or Central American countries, where extended travel is required to visit, families stay close. Traditional values and practices are transmitted in families that maintain strong ties. Schools can tap these values.

Parental authority and respect are highly valued and considered a form of love. Children are expected to take instruction from parents without questioning. Questioning parental authority is sometimes considered disrespectful, yet in some homes with high verbal deftness,

Elementary and Secondary

POINT

Latino Family Values

- *Respeto*. Respect for education and educators
- *Respetar a otros*. Strong sense of mutual respect in relationships
- *Ser buen educado*. An emphasis on discipline and proper behavior
- *Compadrazgo*. The relationship between parents and godparents, translating into co-parenting

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it is a common practice. Latino families also expect children of all ages to learn how to maneuver successfully within the social system involving extended family members in settings where they live, study, and work.

CONNECTING

Connecting across the home-school border requires educators and Latino parents each to know the culture of the other. This happens through clear and deliberate communication. It also involves a willingness to understand and learn others' culture. The word *educación* (education) in traditional Latino families is more comprehensive than the generally accepted American usage. Although success in school becomes a valued expectation for Latino parents, the word *educación* means more than mere schooling. As used in Latino families, the term considers that the educational process is more than getting good grades in schools. It is used to describe how people comport themselves politely, how they are willing to act collectively with others, how they support and respect everyone, and how they are deferential to authority.

One Latino parent expressed it in these words: "Ignorance makes one believe that strength is in the body, not in the mind. When they think that way, they do not stop and think and negotiate with others" (translated from Spanish). In essence, the emphasis is on relationships with others in the process of achieving in school. Education is viewed as a vehicle to move children out of poverty. The desire for children to have a better life than that of the parents accounts for the sacrifices that parents make on behalf of their children.

Although their parents may be living, some Latino children have other family members as guardians, including grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, or older siblings, who are not the biological parents. *Educación* is part of Latino culture, and children are held to this expectation by various family members. When reaching out to Latino parents, educators need to include the students' guardian or members of the extended family who may also take charge of the children's schooling.

In Mexico and other Latin American countries, the school curriculum is very centralized. There is little choice of books, uniforms are typically required, and the school rules are firmly and uniformly set. Parents are involved in maintaining the schools and pay close attention to how well-behaved their children are. A great deal of respect is accorded to the teachers, who have a strong presence as professionals in Latino societies.

Secundaria (secondary) school is not mandatory. But for those students who can continue school after the seventh grade and

don't have to drop out to work and help support their families, the first part of secondary school lasts 3 years. Following the initial *secundaria* years begins the last 3-year segment of secondary school, called *Media Superior*. It is the last 3 years of public education. Students attend for 7 hours a day and are 18 years old when they receive their diploma. Only about half of the students who complete *secundaria* continue a professional career at a university or "normal school" for teacher preparation.

Often, parents' vision of schools and education is based on their experience in their former country if they are immigrants. Part of what parents believe is necessary to support their children is to be available when the school calls.

However, for some, connecting with the schools becomes nothing less than a frustrating situation because they either do not have experience in the school system or, even if they do, they feel isolated. The school needs to hold parents in high regard. A parent, Mr. Ortiz, from a large urban school district shared this vignette with others at a parent meeting.

Elementary

POINT

Latino Parents Expect to Be Involved in Elementary Schools

- In wanting to help their children in their homework
- In staying informed about their children's academic progress
- In setting school behavior rules
- In having input in the children's discipline program
- In making decisions about their children being retained or placed in a special program

Secondary

PERSONAL VIGNETTE

Most of us work all day, and we're docked pay if we leave work to go to talk to the teachers. That's why we do it only in emergencies. But what happens too often is that the school calls me to tell me that my son has been in a fight or he has misbehaved and that I need to come and pick him up. I go to the school, and I'm forced to

(Continued)

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(Continued)

sit in the office and wait for longer than an hour before a secretary comes to tell me that they made a mistake. It wasn't my son after all. This has happened more than once, and I'm still trying to get to see the principal or someone to tell me why it's happening. Meanwhile, I keep losing pay when I leave my job to deal with my son's problems that aren't his.

(Translated from Spanish)

NOTE: This Personal Vignette and others in this chapter are based on interviews, observations, and case files assembled by the author over the course of a 25-year career. In some cases, names have been changed to protect privacy, but any quotations are substantially the words of the original speaker, and the incidents occurred as described.

This is one area where some Latino parents feel disconnected from the school. But nevertheless, they very much want to comply with the school's expectations and do their best to the extent of losing pay to show up at the school. The problem in this case was that the school had not made this parent's rights known to him. When parents know that they can assert their right to have the teacher, counselor, or the principal deal with them when they show up at school, their good-faith effort to work with the school is encouraged. So how can Latino parents and teachers connect?

A critical part of establishing the home-school connection is for the school to engage Latino parents in dialogue and to identify ways they can reach out to each other. Mrs. Garcia, a fourth grader's single parent, epitomizes a common sentiment on school connection. She works very late hours and sometimes cannot be at the school or talk regularly with the teacher.

Elementary

PERSONAL VIGNETTE

When I can't get to the school, I try calling the teacher from my work to check on my daughter Monica's progress in reading. But I can't always call during my break. It's important that we have personal

contact with teachers because often the child is not the problem. And as long as we do not investigate the situation, our children are the ones who lose out. For me, it's important that I continue to talk to my daughter's teacher personally as often as possible about her work in the classroom, especially when I see that she's frustrated about doing homework. When I stay away, it's too easy to believe the teacher when she blames Monica for her learning problems. Then it's harder for me to help Monica at home because I don't know what's true. It would be nice for the teacher to be able to talk with me at night or even on weekends.

Like this parent, many know the value of making face-to-face contact with teachers. There is no simple formula for connecting Latino parents and teachers. Schools design their own ways of reaching out to parents, some more effective than others, but certain conditions are desirable. Latino parents already value school, and that is a critical advantage for educators to acknowledge and use as a springboard.

What educators know about Latino parents does not always include the family life: how children learn the language and culture that they bring to school. This gap in information is the source of misperceptions and generalizations about Latino families being illiterate. If students are not performing well in school, educators fault the families because they have low socioeconomic standing. Assumptions are made about the low literacy levels in the family or the low parental involvement in children's schoolwork at home. Learning how literacy exists in households is important for

Elementary and Secondary

POINT

Conditions Conducive to Latino Parents and Educators Connecting

- Latino parents value education
- Latino parents hold high expectations for their children's academic success
- Parents respect teachers' authority
- Connecting with the school is a two-way street—both parents and educators need to reach out
- Educators need to communicate parental rights in the schools to parents

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educators, particularly teachers. With knowledge of the children's home life, teachers can incorporate the children's culture in the curriculum and build a stronger foundation for their academic success.

SHARING INFORMATION

Whether reading a child a bedtime story, holding family conversations in the living room, or reading correspondence from an insurance company, Latinos use language in complex ways. The heterogeneity within Latinos is reflected in the language used at home. The parents may speak Spanish while the children speak English. The matter becomes compounded when parents speak Spanish but are not literate in that language. In another language scenario, adults speak and are literate in both languages and strongly encourage their children to become fully bilingual.

Parents who are recent immigrants typically include their children in all family functions. Children's play is typically something that children do independent of adults. In the case of more educated parents, verbal engagement with children is more prominent (Heller, 1966). Talking with children is important for these families. Parents talk and sing to children from birth, or before in some cases. Siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, other extended family members, and friends constantly interact with children in Latino families. In some families, verbal interaction is not a high priority. When these parents become involved in parent education activities with others, they learn the importance of communicating verbally with their children. Learning to ask appropriate questions in the home is clearly a critical component of realizing parental academic expectations for their children (Heller, 1966).

Regardless of whether Spanish, English, or both languages are spoken in the home, language is a fundamental strength of Latino families. Home interactions and communication within the family are rich and full. Some families have two parents who set consistent rules for disciplining children, with strict schedules for completing their schoolwork under the careful watch of the parents or older sibling. Parents take classes in local colleges to improve their English skills and their employment opportunities. Oral and written literacy has a strong cultural and historic tradition, even in Latino families where the parents have little formal schooling. Reading materials of interest to the parents, whether these are *fotonovelas* (mininovels done with many pictures) or writing on politics and current events, are readily found around the house.

Besides their daily correspondence, families read the Bible, popular magazines, history books, poetry, personal development books, and *fotonovelas* (Laosa, 1983). Parents' workplaces influence their involvement with written literacy. Jobs require varying amounts of reading and writing. Although some jobs may not require much written literacy, they actually provide families with literacy opportunities. Some Latino immigrant women take jobs in housekeeping. They work for employers who give them not only books but mentorship about dealing with schools. In families where parents may have less written literacy skills, children still receive encouragement to do their schoolwork and to achieve. In these homes, parents rely on oral tradition to teach their children values and ways to think and perceive the world. This is a form of support for children and young adults that schools can tap and build on when engaging parents in the school's culture.

The home language and culture open children's eyes to the world, transmitting a worldview. Language and culture help define the children's identity and shape their ability to make life choices. They bring to life a family's history and world beyond the mainstream society in which they live. Language also conveys ethnic identity and pride as well as understanding of the family's position in the community.

Storytelling is still considered a popular oral tradition in Latino families. Where extended family members, including grandparents and other elders, reside with a younger family, the use of story connects the generations. Adults tell their children stories. In turn, children learn the stories and share them with peers under the carport of their apartment building or on the playground during recess. An 8-year-old boy tells the following story. It is his favorite because he learned it from his grandfather. He entitled it "Looking for a New Home."

Elementary

PERSONAL VIGNETTE

Once there was a little kitten whose name was Cloud. His owner, whose name was Anita, got sick and died. Cloud was left alone and wanted to find someone to take care of him, to feed him, bathe, and comb him. One day, Cloud left the house and got lost. Then, he was found by an older man who told him that he wanted to help him cross the street. Then they became friends and the kitten, Cloud, was happy.

(Translated from Spanish)

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Not all stories are original. Parents may be more familiar with popular stories. Some parents tell their children adaptations of classics such as the “Three Little Pigs” and “Little Red Riding Hood,” weaving contemporary plots into the traditional story line. Without question, this language-learning activity teaches storytelling techniques while providing an opportunity to listen and pose questions. Regardless of the story, children and parents revel in their time together. When reaching out to Latino parents, it is critical for educators to recognize the parents’ willingness to know about their children’s academic progress. What deters their active participation can be addressed structurally through well-designed programs.

What Latino children bring to school is who they are, what they believe, how they feel, and how they behave in a culture that is rich in history, language, values, customs, and practices. Of importance is the information that educators and parents share about the less visible cultural practices that underlie interactions in the family and in the school. Family unity is a strong value in the way that families serve as resource for each other. Sometimes, Latino families are thought to be overly dependent on each other. In Latino families, the practice of interdependence is highly valued. As Latino families remain in the United States for longer periods of time and as they advance into higher education, gain facility in English, and move into the professions, students lose their primary language. However, this fact does not necessarily distance them from their culture. They remain close to other aspects of their culture through networks established with other members of the cultural group. Family networks reveal the value of interdependence across the multiple generations of Latinos in the United States.

The word *cooperative* is often used to describe Latino conduct, especially for children in the schools. Sometimes, their behavior is misinterpreted, and children are stereotyped as passive. But the word *collective* is more appropriate when addressing preferred behavior of Latino children because it describes their ability to join with others in a group activity.

There is also a collective character to the concept of interdependence that allows individuals to give and receive support. Interdependence as a practice and value in Latino families has much to do with the person’s role as an active, sharing family member. It does not necessarily mean that people are dependent on others in a way that renders them irresponsible. In fact, interdependence in older children and adults is characterized by an expectation of performing household duties and supporting others.

ACROSS GENERATIONS OF LATINOS

The issue of parent involvement of Latino families in the schools is not limited to recent immigrants or to parents who have limited English and whose children are at risk academically. The majority of Latinos are U.S. citizens who have resided in this country for generations and whose primary language is English. In fact, some no longer speak Spanish, yet their experience with the schooling system has been one of estrangement and conflict. Although some have traversed the home-school divide and have gone on to succeed academically through public elementary and secondary schools and colleges, all too many have a schooling experience characterized by prejudice and inequity. The important point here is that Latino participation in the schools cannot be won by simply translating everything from English to Spanish. The issue is more than what language is spoken. It has to do with attitude on the part of the school toward the under-represented Latino community. Schools must be willing to reach out in culturally appropriate ways, to make an effort to include Latino students in special academic enhancement programs supporting their achievement, and to integrate Latino cultural contributions in the school curriculum.

Generations of historical, social, and cultural distance between the schools and the Latino community must be bridged. This is possible only through systematic outreach to Latino community leaders, to Latino religious and social organizations, and to every Latino family to make them an integral part of the decision-making voice

of the school on a regular basis. This must extend beyond a one-time token invitation to attend a music assembly on Cinco de Mayo. The effort must be a part of the school's daily activity plan. The activities in this book are not limited to engaging Spanish-speaking Latino parents. The points made, the case examples illustrated, and the suggestions offered include but extend beyond the type of English/Spanish language differences between the home and the school.

Elementary and Secondary

POINT

The School Culture That Latino Parents Need to Know

- *Individualism.* Students are expected to think for themselves
- *Independence.* Students are expected to work on their own
- *Promptness.* Students are expected to arrive at class or meetings on time

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School Culture

Schools, like families, have a way of conducting business day in and day out. There's a language that organizes the classroom, and it is something that parents need to learn.

The school culture is reflected in the classroom. Working independently is highly valued by most teachers, as is the focus on the individual. Promptness and efficiency are also expected in all activities.

The school culture can create and communicate an open, positive, and welcoming environment, or it can convey a

Elementary and Secondary

POINT

Family Values That Latino Parents Bring to School

- *Language.* Spanish and English
- *Collectivity.* Strength in joining with others
- *Interdependence.* Strongly support others

closed, defensive, and unwelcoming place for parents to contact and visit. What parents and teachers know about the culture of the home and the culture of the school, respectively, is the foundation on which to build a continuing relationship for the benefit of the children's academic achievement.

STAYING INVOLVED

Adversity

At some time or another, all families face turmoil and difficulty, and certainly Latino families are no exception. They experience travail with greater frequency because of the conditions in which they live. The pain of unemployment, underemployment, health crisis, divorce, substance abuse, and teenage school dropouts can overwhelm families. Maintaining a healthy family becomes increasingly difficult. In crowded apartments with large families, households fill with despair, especially if alcoholism overloads the situation. Members of these families often live with a gag over their mouths because of the shame and isolation they feel. For many Latino children who live in these families, going to school is their only

release from a fear-filled environment. Many children who come from homes lacking money, security, and encouragement fail to adjust to a new culture in the school. Concentration and energy to learn are almost impossible for these children.

Unresponsive schools may compound the situation of poverty until they work with parents to interrupt the cycle (Fuller & Olsen, 1998). Parents find support for dealing with their social problems through community agencies. Where social isolation pertaining to their children's schooling is concerned, it becomes even more critical for educators to provide avenues for parents to share their frustrations and strengths while getting involved in the schools (Lareau, 2000). Taking advantage of access to resources often means having community support groups that assist others to make necessary social changes. For children coming from stress-filled homes, positive school experiences play an even stronger role in their lives. Educators need to design programs that will systematically advocate for children as they attempt to learn under the pressures of their daily lives.

Typically, parents of higher socioeconomic background participate more regularly in the schools even if the schools do not encourage parent involvement (Epstein, 1994). Their familiarity with the school system makes it easier for them to know how to involve themselves. However, some educational institutions believe that parents who have not been educated in the United States, or who speak only Spanish, are deficient in their ability to support their children in education. Schools need to acknowledge the families' cultural strengths. Educators do this by incorporating family strengths into the school curriculum. By recognizing and developing pride in their identity, schools let parents know they can provide valuable contributions. When schools recognize that families bring the strength of resilience, students are advantaged as their parents' resourcefulness is taken into account.

As is the case with living in a culturally different home, speaking Spanish need not be a disability to parent participation. Latino families may draw a boundary between the school and the home because they respect the teachers' authority and hand over full authority for their children's education to the school. Trusting the teacher to know what is best for their children is important, but it sometimes interferes with parents becoming advocates for their children on a regular basis. Within the home, parents provide for physical and emotional needs.

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SUMMARY

- There is no single prototype of a Latino family. Latino families are as varied as families in every other cultural group.
- In spite of different neighborhoods where they reside, their varying educational attainment, and the amount of Spanish and English spoken at home, the level of literacy used in the home, and the way that they involve themselves in their children's schooling, all families have strengths.
- The linguistic and cultural differences of Latinos are not deficits; rather, they are valuable strengths and knowledge that benefit the students' academic performance.
- Latino families' strengths manifest in the history, language, cultural values, and expectations for their children's success.
- Their day-to-day interactions in the family make it possible for Latino families to continuously grow, adjust, and change.