From Barrios to Yale: The Role of Parenting Strategies in Latino Families

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This study relies on qualitative methods to investigate the role of parents and home characteristics in the academic success of Latino/a students from impoverished, immigrant families. The primary goal is to identify parenting practices that contribute to the academic achievement of poor Latino students. Ten first-generation, U.S.-born, Latino students attending Yale University were interviewed for this study. All of the students were the first in their families to receive a college degree. The findings identified four family background characteristics that contributed to their scholarly achievement. The four themes were (a) a strong parental commitment to the importance of education, (b) parental facilitation of their child’s autonomy, (c) an array of nonverbal, parental expressions of support for educational goals and tasks, and (d) the presence of supportive faculty mentors and role models in the students’ lives.

Keywords: academic achievement; education; parenting; poverty; Latinos

Numerous studies have documented the deleterious impact of poverty on all aspects of child development. Compared with their more financially advantaged counterparts, children from poor families tend to display lower levels of cognitive functioning, social development, psychological well-
being, and self-esteem (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd, Ceballo, & Mangelsdorf, 1997). Moreover, the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged and racial minority adolescents has long lagged behind that of their White, middle-class counterparts (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). In particular, the educational attainment of Latinos in the United States is marked by a consistent pattern of underachievement. Compared with non-Latino Whites, Latino students have higher school drop-out rates and lower representation in all areas of higher education (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Stevenson et al., 1990).

Educators and social science researchers have proposed a number of theories to account for these disturbing trends. Historically, however, researchers relied on deficit models, highlighting what low-income homes lacked compared with middle- and upper-class homes and viewing these deficits as responsible for the low academic attainment of children from poor and minority families. The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) Inventory (Caldwell & Bradley, 1979), for example, is a widely used semistructured observation interview that evaluates home and parental characteristics. Individual items assess household resources (e.g., reading materials), involvement in educationally enriching activities (e.g., musical lessons), and specific parenting practices. Despite the predictive power of the HOME Inventory in accounting for child outcomes, many items assessed by the HOME Inventory simply measure material and cultural resources commonly available to upper-middle-class parents. Indeed, higher quality HOME Inventory scores are linked to mothers with more education and greater family incomes (Baharudin & Luster, 1998). More recently, the academic underachievement of Latino students has been attributed to a host of other factors. These include risk factors associated with poverty, the presence of institutionalized racism within schools (e.g., tracking systems and low expectations), adolescents’ disillusionment with education as a means to economic success, and barriers to English language proficiency (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Stevenson et al., 1990).

Although parenting styles and demographic characteristics, such as parental income, education, and family structure, are consistently related to the academic performance of White students, they are not as reliably predictive of scholarly achievement among racial minority youths (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Maton, Hrabowski, & Greif, 1998; Steinberg et al., 1992). Authoritative and authoritarian parenting strategies invariably emerge as robust predictors of academic outcomes among European American students (Gonzales et al., 1996; Maton et al., 1998; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989; Steinberg et al.,...
1992). Specifically, academic achievement is highest among European American adolescents from authoritative homes that combine parental acceptance, behavioral supervision, and psychological autonomy granting. Latino high school students are also likely to benefit from authoritative parenting; however, the presence of authoritative parenting is lower in Latino homes. Compared with European Americans, Latino parents are more likely to rely on authoritarian strategies that emphasize obedience and conformity (Steinberg et al., 1992).

Despite general trends in the academic underachievement of racial minority youths, some children from impoverished, racial minority families do, in fact, succeed against the odds. Unfortunately, the long-standing scholarly focus on the academic underachievement of poor youths has eclipsed insight into the strengths and resources of students who are successful despite adversity. Although resiliency, the ability to surmount overwhelming life challenges, has received enormous academic attention in other areas (Rutter, 1979, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982), the operationalization of resiliency among different racial groups and in different social contexts warrants far greater academic attention (Jarrett, 1995). More recently, a few studies have specifically explored the family characteristics of high-achieving African American youths from low-income homes (Jarrett, 1995; Maton et al., 1998).

Far fewer studies have explored personal and home environment characteristics of academically successful Latino youths. Ethier and Deaux (1990) identified students’ affiliation with their Hispanic cultural background as an important component of personal identity among Ivy League Latino students. In a qualitative study of 30 undergraduates of Mexican descent, Arellano and Padilla (1996) identified several factors that were especially salient to these students’ academic accomplishments. Three personal attributes were identified as contributing to these students’ success: an affiliation with their Latino culture as a source of pride, an optimistic outlook regarding their abilities, and a persistent drive to succeed. In addition, the students identified parental support and encouragement of educational pursuits as critical to their educational success. For the students from working-class families, the presence of role models and faculty mentors was also identified as contributing to their college-bound trajectories. Still, parents of the working-class students viewed education as the primary vehicle for social and economic mobility. However, they conveyed their support for education in ways that differed from the course work assistance and school-based interactions of the more educated Latino parents.

A number of studies indicate that Latino parents firmly believe in the importance of education for their children, even though they may convey this belief in ways that are different from White, middle-class families (Arellano
In a sample of more than 1,000 mothers and elementary school-age children, Latina mothers rated the importance of their children’s academic achievement higher than their European American counterparts (Stevenson et al., 1990). The authors describe the mothers’ attitudes toward education as enthusiastic and supportive. Among poor, immigrant parents, strong support for educational goals often reflects the belief that an education is the ticket to fulfilling the American Dream, the mythical vision of rising from “rags to riches” via hard work and determination (Fuligni, 1997; Stevenson et al., 1990). Ironically, poor Latino parents seem to maintain strong support for educational goals even while feeling ill equipped to help with school assignments. Okagaki and Frensch (1998) found that Latino parents did not feel as confident as European American parents in their ability to help their children succeed in school. Stevenson and colleagues (1990) similarly reported that Latino parents expressed discomfort with assisting their children in doing reading and mathematics schoolwork. A lack of proficiency with the English language, little familiarity with American educational systems, and demanding work schedules may hinder Latino parents’ ability to provide specific instrumental assistance with course work.

The present study uses qualitative methods to explore the interconnections between home or family processes and the academic success of Latino students from impoverished, immigrant families—a topic that has been relatively unexplored in the literature. The central goal is to identify parenting practices, family ideologies, and home environment characteristics that support the scholastic achievement of low-income Latino students. Several themes emerged from my interviews with Latino students, including (a) parents’ steadfast verbal commitment to the importance of education, (b) parental facilitation of their child’s autonomy, (c) parents’ frequent expressions of nonverbal support for educational tasks, and (d) the presence of supportive faculty mentors and role models in the students’ lives.

Method

While encouraging psychologists to broaden and refine qualitative methodologies, Marecek, Fine, and Kidder (1997) reviewed many of the challenges and benefits of using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research designs provide an ideal mechanism to investigate topics about which relatively little information is known, because “instead of specifying at the outset...
the variables whose main effects and interactions will be tracked, qualitative workers begin with a period of exploration and immersion” (Marecek et al., 1997, p. 633). Other scholars maintain that qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for research focusing on cultural issues and racial minority populations because qualitative methodology “allows [for] a rich, multifaceted, in-depth exploration of a phenomenon, grounded in the world view, vocabulary, and context-specific experiences of those studied” (Maton et al., 1998, p. 643).

In 1986, I conducted qualitative interviews with 10 Latino undergraduate students at Yale University. I recruited students for this study by making announcements at several Latino student organizations and informal word-of-mouth advertising. I then interviewed students individually in a location of their choosing, with interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. All of the students came from low-income Puerto Rican or Mexican American families where Spanish was spoken in the home. In addition, all were first-generation, U.S.-born students and the first in their families to receive a college degree. The sample included five women and five men whose ages ranged from 20 to 22 years. Of the 10 students, 6 came from families in which neither parent graduated from high school. Parental occupations included farm labor, domestic work, and automobile repair; 6 students had parents who were factory workers. All but 1 of the students attended a public high school, and 7 students mentioned some involvement in honors classes or gifted programs.

All of the students completed a demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the interview, and a semistructured, open-ended format was then used for the rest of the interview. I constructed the interview questions around topic areas, such as parental involvement in academics and students’ participation in extracurricular activities. Examples of interview questions include, “Did your parents supervise your academic work at home?” and “In what ways were your parents involved in your academic work?” Open-ended questions allowed students to frame their experiences, as they understood them; follow-up questions were used to gain greater clarification and specific examples. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. I used principles of grounded theory methodology to conduct a systematic analysis of the transcribed interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). Major themes, commonly occurring across interviews, were culled from multiple, in-depth readings of the interview transcripts, drawing commonalities among recurrent themes, assessing specific support for theories, and maintaining an openness to continual recategorization.
Results

Four common themes emerged from the students’ interviews; these are described in detail in the following sections. Also highlighted is the saliency of family relationships and parental characteristics to the students’ academic success. Interview excerpts are used to illustrate the common themes throughout the next section. Although some of the students were more verbose than others, I have tried to present excerpts from each student’s interview at least once. Although much of this article places an emphasis on identifying similarities among the students’ trajectories from impoverished homes to Yale, the serendipitous events in each student’s unique situation must not be forgotten. Attendance at an Ivy League institution marks a transition in social class location for every student interviewed. Fictional names are used for all of the participating students, and identifying information has been modified to ensure the students’ anonymity.

Parental Emphasis on the Importance of Education

All of the students portrayed their parents as maintaining an almost unconditional commitment to education. Their parents consistently expressed verbal support for all educational matters. For these parents, an American education was viewed as the best and only route for their children to escape poverty. Rafael was a 22-year-old Mexican American student who was raised in east Los Angeles with his four siblings. He explained his father’s philosophy: “He saw education, just in general, as very good [as] being a way out of physical labor. So, he would preach any type of education. It was education!” Several parents regretted not being able to complete their own formal education and were therefore resolutely committed to making education a priority for their children. For example, Christina, a 21-year-old Mexican American student who was also raised in California, explained her parents’ beliefs:

They believed in education. They believed that they did not have it and they had to work really hard. My mom has always said that she could have done so much more in her life if she had been able to go to school instead of work.

Although Christina’s parents did not finish high school in Mexico, Christina was the only student who attended a private, Catholic high school. Her mother often said, “You get everything you can out of this school. It costs a lot of money, and it has a lot to offer you, so take advantage of it.” Altagracia, a 20-year-old Puerto Rican female student who attended a selective public high school in New York City, similarly described how her father’s own educational background affected his beliefs.
One scene that has been recurrent in all of my conversations [with my father] is that, “You’re having the opportunity that I never had.” . . . He basically grew up in a sort of backwards, very small, small pueblo. I think he has always felt things would have been so much easier for him had he been able to have had completed high school or gone to college. For him, college is the ideal . . . and education has to be the single most important criteria for advancement and just for self-respect and me not undergoing the humiliation that he felt when he came here [the U.S. mainland].

For these families, an education in the United States was a tremendous opportunity for the next generation, something not to be squandered or taken lightly.

Although the students described their parents as being zealously committed to their education, they also acknowledged that their parents understood little about the details of their education. Most of the parents did not know about specific educational goals or requirements; nonetheless, they supported any attempts made by their children in educational settings. Alejandro was a 20-year-old Puerto Rican male student who grew up in a three-room Chicago apartment with his parents and three siblings. He explained his mother’s encouragement of his education in this way, “Even though she didn’t know what it was all about, she always knew instinctively to keep at it.”

All of the students interviewed described their parents’ repeated affirmations of the necessity of an education. When Jose, a 22-year-old Latino from Los Angeles, was asked, “What were the five most important things in your home environment that contributed to your academic success?” his first response focused on the emphasis his father had placed on educational pursuits. He posited that if it had not been for his father, “I wouldn’t have seen the value of education, its urgency, the urgency of studying and getting along in school. It was so ingrained in us.”

While beneficially providing encouragement and motivation, their parents’ commitment to education might have felt like a burden to some students. For example, Antonio portrayed his mother’s fervent belief in education as a guiding force in his life, perhaps precluding the development and articulation of his own goals. Antonio was a 21-year-old Mexican American student from Texas whose mother worked in a strawberry packing plant and died when he was only 9 years old.

She clearly felt that you absolutely had to get an education in order to have better jobs or to have a more comfortable life. . . . She would say, “Just study because if you wanted to succeed, you had to study.” . . . Actually, my main motivation through my years in school was, you know, I kept her in mind. After her death, I felt that I had to get an education for her. I was doing it for her, more
than for myself. . . . I was going to do this for her, to make her proud of me. . . . I sort of directed all my talents to the memory of my mother.

In sum, limited knowledge about specific school curriculum and educational paths did not prevent these parents from displaying a keen interest in their children’s academic progress. They frequently asked their children about school projects or events, and many bragged about their children’s academic accomplishments to friends and family members. Thus, all of the students had parents who shared a deeply rooted and generalized commitment to their child’s educational attainment.

**Parental Support of Children’s Autonomy**

On the whole, the students described their parents’ direct involvement in their schooling as minimal. None of the students reported that their parents assisted with extracurricular activities, supervised homework, or helped with school projects. Christina simply said, “They weren’t in a position to help me with my homework.” Lack of parental assistance was due, in part, to language barriers and parents’ own limited schooling. Even when their children were highly involved in extracurricular activities, some parents did not feel comfortable visiting a school where they could not speak the language. Nor could they provide specific, concrete help with the college application process, even though they supported their children’s efforts to go to college. Elena, a 21-year-old Mexican American student from Texas, explained, “I went through the whole college search on my own. My parents didn’t really get involved in that and nobody else thought I was going to college.” Other students stated that they simply told their parents where to sign the forms. Rafael said, “I would tell them to just sign papers. You know, I needed their signature. They didn’t even know what Yale was.” Likewise, Altagracia recounted,

In terms of the whole college process, it was weird, because I wish that they [her parents] had participated more—that I could explain to them that Yale is a really big deal. It is BIG! I said, “You don’t understand,” and they did not. In terms of financial aid, I filled out all the forms, and it was like, “Sign here.”

Hence, the students received a “blank check” regarding all academic matters; their parents conveyed enormous trust in them, and the students did what they thought best. Consequently, they managed every aspect of their academic careers on their own—with little, if any, specific parental input. Christina explained the benefits of such a situation, “It was ideal, in a way that they [her parents] didn’t go to school beyond the eighth grade. They didn’t know this school system well, so they weren’t on top of me.” However,
it is also worth noting that so much autonomy may feel like a mixed blessing. Elena remembered feeling that her parents’ lack of knowledge about school matters made her feel unsupported in high school. Similarly, Antonio’s single father frequently worked the night shift, and Antonio felt that he was left alone much too often. He frequently felt lonely and longed for more guidance in his daily life, even though he made good decisions about school and other matters by himself. When Antonio asked his father for advice about selecting courses, his father said, “Try to take the best courses that you can take. . . . It is up to you.”

The enormous amount of scholarly independence transferred to a variety of nonacademic areas as well. For instance, some students had the large responsibility of caring for younger siblings. Anita and her four siblings were raised by their Puerto Rican, single mother in New England. Anita’s mother was not at home in the evenings because she frequently worked the night shift and held two jobs. For several years, Anita was entirely responsible for the care of her three younger sisters after school. She had
to make sure that they got home all right after school, to wait up for them, to cook for them, to heat up anything Mama had left. If they had to go some place that she had given them permission, to make sure they got there safely and got back; to make sure they went to sleep at a proper time.

In general, the students’ families had very few, if any, household rules for them. As long as they were home in the evenings, the students were allowed to budget their time as they saw fit. Elena recalled, “For the most part, my parents let us make all kinds of decisions about how we dressed, where we went, who we went out with.” For these parents, the decision to grant their children with this much autonomy may well have been based on their children’s previously demonstrated records of academic success and responsibility.

Generational and cultural clashes between parents’ traditional values and children’s new, more “American” ways of doing things are common in immigrant families. For the parents of these students, supporting their children’s educational choices and life decisions occasionally entailed allowing them to break with traditional ethnic customs. Elena’s parents, for instance, supported her decision to go to college on the East Coast, even though their relatives scorned such an arrangement.

They always supported me and my decisions to be what I wanted . . . like choosing to go to college was a big deal because nobody else had done that in our family. My mother had to deal with people saying that she wasn’t a good mother because if she had been a good mother, then I wouldn’t be wanting to leave home.
Antonio’s father abdicated responsibility to his son in almost all areas of his life—even deferring to him, at times, against his own judgment. Antonio remembered one instance,

“During the summer, he [his father] was laid off so there was no way for us to support ourselves. He wanted to go up North to work, but I wanted to [stay and] go to a summer program. . . . He just went along with my decision to do that.

For many first-generation Latinas, traditional gender roles can be a source of great conflict and tension. Although parents may grant their daughters autonomy in educational matters, they may nonetheless be quite restrictive about appropriate social activities for girls. Several of the women interviewed described heated disputes with their parents over sleeping over at a friend’s house or attending an overnight school retreat. Altagracia remembered that these conversations would start with her father’s saying, “What is the matter? Isn’t your home good enough for you? When you sleep elsewhere, you will be married.”

Nonverbal Support for Educational Endeavors

The students’ parents expressed their commitment and support for education with a limitless array of nonverbal (unspoken) behavior. They showed their children, by virtue of their behavior, that they supported and valued the effort behind their academic pursuits. Jose described the distinction between the types of nonverbal support his mother provided him with and those of other parents. He said,

“She would just come by and hug me and say, “Don’t worry too hard and go to bed.” So there was a positive support. As far as “Let me do this for you or tell me what you are doing, maybe I can give you some ideas,” there wasn’t any of that.

Antonio explained that his father expressed his support by “never wanting me to work.” Although any small monetary contribution would have helped their family financially, Antonio’s father allowed him to devote all of his time to school and extracurricular activities. Furthermore, Antonio continued,

“To show me that they thought education was important, we stopped migrating during the school year. Because we used to migrate to the northern states starting like April and then we would come back home right around October. So we missed like 2 full months of school every year. And that went on until like fourth grade, and then they stopped migrating so that I wouldn’t miss school.

In countless ways, the students’ parents demonstrated that their children’s education was more important than anything else. A majority of the students
explained that if they had schoolwork to do, their parents would excuse them from most everything else, like doing their chores, attending church, and visiting relatives. In addition, their parents nonverbally facilitated their child’s studying at home by lowering the television volume or keeping other siblings quiet. Anita elaborated, “School work could be an excuse for almost anything. I mean, if you needed to do something, we could be exempt from anything. . . . That is one of the few excuses that she [her mother] would accept.” She further explained the privilege of being allowed to go into a room, by herself, to study.

It was peace and quiet. . . . I have never had a room to myself, and a lot of times, you didn’t even have a bed to yourself. So being able to go into a room and close the door was about as close as you got to privacy. Also, it was an acknowledgment that this was important, because we had to do so many things. I had to cook and stuff like that. There were so many other things that needed to get done that to be dismissed from that showed that there was something even more important.

The students acquired an appreciation for the value and importance of education, in large part, due to the nonverbal support and nurturance that their parents displayed for their academic work. For Alejandro, his mother’s commitment to buying school supplies a month ahead of time was an important sign of her support. Jose recalled that his mother would type things for me sometimes. That was really remarkable because think of how strange that could be for a person that doesn’t speak English as well as I do—to type so carefully and look at each letter.

Christina recounted,

I have gotten a lot of support from my mom [like] waking me up at some ridiculous hour in the morning, like four or five, because I had to finish a project or bringing me hot chocolate late at night. . . . She couldn’t actually help me out with my actual school work, but [she would provide] different kinds of support.

The mother of Joaquin, a 21-year-old Mexican American student from California, always tried to save the schoolwork that he would throw away. “When I would throw away papers, she would be concerned that I was throwing away something [important]. . . . She went to the extent of going back through the trash, honestly, finding things.”

Some students did not fully appreciate their parents’ nonverbal support until they had left their homes for college. During high school, Elena was painfully aware of not having any practical assistance with school assignments. She frequently said, “They didn’t know what algebra was!” Later, she appreciated the type of support her parents had provided.
It is just because now I look back and I realize how much support I had, but as we were going through school, [I remember] feeling like I had no support, feeling like, my parents knew so little about what I was doing, what my academics meant. . . . Even though they didn’t understand what I was doing, I realize now that they were being really supportive in the ways that they could be.

Faculty Role Models and Mentors

Adult mentors were often mentioned as key, instrumental figures in the students’ lives. Every student included at least one teacher when asked to name the three most influential people during their high school years. These teachers typically expressed interest in the student’s personal life as well as his or her academic work. Moreover, many of these teachers were described as people to look up to, competent and inspirational role models. Marissa, a 20-year-old Puerto Rican student from New Jersey, said, “I admired . . . my English teacher especially because he was an extremely bright person, extremely knowledgeable. . . . I knew that I could count on him if I had any questions about what I would be doing after graduation.” Elena described a teacher who “was very supportive of me and what I did and what I wanted to be. . . . She was a Ph.D. . . . She got where she was by herself and showed me I could do it too.” Altagracia recalled that it was a special teacher who suggested that she take the entrance exams to a selective New York City high school. In sum, these teachers challenged students intellectually, helped to involve them in extracurricular activities, and assisted them with college applications.

All of the students interviewed were highly involved in an average of four school-based extracurricular activities (e.g., choirs, bands, drama, sports, student government, and academic clubs). After-school activities facilitated students’ relationships with teachers whom they came to know in multiple roles. For example, Joaquin described an influential teacher who was “my eleventh grade teacher. . . . He was my journalism adviser, and he had been my debate coach . . . so he knew me in other contexts besides school [classes].” In addition, school activities gave students a sense of pride and meaningful involvement. Elena succinctly declared, “I think they [extracurricular activities] were the most important part of my high school experience.” Jose explained how he acquired a sense of personal importance and meaning from his participation in school groups.

Ultimately getting involved in my school was a really meaningful, spiritually and emotionally fulfilling thing. [This was] a place where I could really belong and where I felt that I was doing something important. . . . I always said to the people on the student council, “We are not here to make rallies for people; we
are here to do very essential things—to translate for parents at meetings—to help develop special programs after school.”

Discussion

The educational performance of poor Latino children from immigrant families is marked by a consistent pattern of underachievement. Researchers have investigated several family characteristics associated with such poor academic performance and proposed causal explanations for this pattern. Despite the importance of this work, such approaches do not foster an identification of factors that may improve Latino children’s school performance. The current investigation focuses on the academic accomplishments of a handful of Latino students from poor homes. Highlighting the strengths and resources on which these students relied allows us to draw recommendations for other students. Four common factors are identified as facilitating these students’ college-bound trajectories. These included (a) parental commitment to the importance of education, (b) parental support of adolescent autonomy, (c) nonverbal parental expressions of support for educational goals, and (d) the presence of faculty mentors in the students’ lives.

The finding that Latino students’ parents are firmly committed to the importance of an education for their children’s social and economic advancement is in keeping with several prior studies. Researchers have consistently found that Latino parents hold educational attainment in extremely high regard (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Fuligni, 1997; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Okagaki et al., 1995; Stevenson et al., 1990). However, as Lott (2001) illustrated, many teachers and administrators maintain negative stereotypes about poor parents, portraying them as apathetic, uninvolved, and uncaring about their children’s education. These beliefs color their interactions with poor parents in negative and condescending ways. Social programs that address teachers’ misguided perceptions about poor parents are needed to accompany changes in school policies for fostering greater parent-school cooperation (see, e.g., suggestions outlined by Lott, 2001).

Moreover, educational interventions that strive to inculcate White middle-class behavioral norms among poor, racial minority parents are ethnocentrically nearsighted. Although poor Latino parents are constrained by the particular circumstances of their socioeconomic position, their parenting practices can be highly supportive of educational attainment. The students in this study were highly influenced by their parents’ verbal declarations about the importance of education, the trust parents conveyed in them, and the many nonverbal expressions of support for academic work. Although this combination of verbal encouragement and nonverbal support is different
from what is typically observed among European American parents who foster their children’s academic performance, it is in keeping with other results. Both Okagaki and Frensch (1998) and Stevenson and colleagues (1990) found that Latino parents felt neither as comfortable nor as confident in assisting their children with specific schoolwork tasks as their European American counterparts. However, the importance of parental support and encouragement was emphasized by all of the Latino students in Arellano and Padilla’s (1996) study. Likewise, every student in this study mentioned parental support when they were asked what home experiences were most important in contributing to their academic success.

Finally, these parents did not shield their children from the presence of other adult role models and mentors who could provide more specific scholarly assistance. In accord with this finding, research indicates that relationships with a caring adult or mentor can buffer children from many adverse life circumstances (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982).

One of the greatest limitations of the present study is its limited generalizability. As with other qualitative studies, this study relies on a small select sample of students and does not provide interviews with a comparison group of poor, low-achieving Latino students. Hence, I cannot claim with certainty that the strategies identified among this sample generally distinguish low-achieving students from high-achieving students in poor, Latino homes. It is possible that the students in this study represent an unusually gifted and select group of people. In such a scenario, some of the parental strategies identified in this article, like autonomy granting, may actually interfere with the performance of less academically gifted students. Moreover, class and ethnicity are also somewhat confounded by the restricted nature of the sample. On the basis of this study, I cannot clearly demarcate the strategies discussed as specific to either Latino families or low-income families. However, studies with larger samples that provide comparisons across race and class confirm that certain strategies, such as a high regard for the importance of education, are commonly used among parents of Latino ethnicity (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Okagaki et al., 1995; Stevenson et al., 1990). Finally, other factors, such as levels of acculturation and family household composition, may moderate the effectiveness of the strategies presented.

Other cautions are also warranted. First, questions about the accuracy of anyone’s memories naturally arise when relying on retrospective, self-reported interview material. Because participants for this study were recruited at Latino organizations on campus, this group of students may be particularly inclined to recall and frame their past experiences in a positive light,
perhaps as a result of a political commitment to favorably representing Latino families. Second, because the students were interviewed in 1986 and are currently in their mid-30s, it is also possible that the findings reflect the presence of a cohort effect for that particular generation of Latino students. Third, the Latino population in the United States consists of an extremely heterogeneous group, whereas the sample in this study consisted solely of Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. Fourth, the present focus on parent-child relationships cannot address the many important individual personality traits that contribute to students’ academic success. Finally, the fact that I was a Latina student from a poor immigrant family at the time that I conducted these interviews means that my own personal biases may have influenced the study. While bearing these limitations in mind, the current study is nonetheless one of a few studies to address the sources of strength and resiliency in academically successful Latino students from poor families. Moreover, the strategies identified here may also apply to successful students from other racial minority groups. More culturally sensitive research is needed on this topic, and investigations exploring gender differences in family relationships and cultural values guiding the socialization of children are key areas for future study.

References


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