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Latinos Advancing Education

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LATINOS ADVANCING IN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

At just the age of six, I can recall as if it was yesterday when my family and I were driving away from our home in Mexico. At that moment, the overwhelming emotions that were bought upon my siblings and me as our departure from our homeland became reality were surreal. With just a car window distinctively separating us from what was going to be part of our past and our near future was difficult to understand. At that moment and for many years after, neither my siblings nor I had a complete understanding as to why our parents would take away the only place we knew as home. It wasn't until many years later that my older siblings and I finally began to comprehend the reasoning behind my parents' decision to depart from our known home to an unknown place the United States.

The many reasons behind the decision of migrating from one country to another included the chance of obtaining greater opportunities with hope of a better life. Most importantly, my parents' decision to migrate from one country to another was taken upon the ambition of wanting their children to become educated since they believed that becoming educated was the way to progress in life. In today's society, obtaining a high school education has become insufficient for success. Now days, if someone wants to be successful in life and earn more than just minimum wage, much more than a high school diploma is needed. Although the Hispanic student population is quickly increasing it is estimated that only about half of Hispanic students who enter 9th grade will complete high school and successfully earn their diploma (Kohler and Lazarín 2007). However, out of those high school graduates, about 75% of Hispanics born in the United States complete high school, compared to only 46% foreign born Hispanics (Kohler and Lazarín 2007). While there are individuals of Hispanic descent who do not obtain a high school diploma, there are also those individuals who successfully achieve high school and go beyond to obtain a higher degree. This research study exposes specific factors that contribute to the

continuation and success of first and second generation children of Mexican immigrants in obtaining a higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Making the decision to seek a degree beyond high school can be challenging while at the same time a life changing experience. This important decision is influenced by those individuals that surround us on a daily basis, mainly family. Specifically, in Mexican American families important decisions are influenced by one another. Family is a major factor as to why young adolescents first decide to pursue a higher education but more importantly succeed with their goals. The strong family ties instilled in Mexican-American families allows members to rely on one another regardless of the circumstance. Whether it is immediate or extended family members, it does not matter, students actively search for positive role models who know the importance of education as well as what it takes to academically succeed (Roosa et al. 2012). The contribution of human capital, in the form of having a parent with a least a high school education and positive role models in the student's life relays the message of being academically successful (Roosa et al 2012). Those parents and relatives that have at least a high school diploma become the example for children and resource to achieve academic success (Roosa et al. 2012). On the other hand, just because a student is born to Mexican immigrant parents who did not have the opportunity to become educated does not mean that they will not be able to succeed academically.

Although, immigrant Mexican parents may not have the education of at least a high school degree, parents continue to hold high academic expectations for their children which can also lead to academic achievement (Suizzo et al. 2012). By expressing high expectations of success parents positively impact students' belief that they will be able to finish high school and

go to college (Suizzo et al. 2012). Even when immigrant Mexican parents do not have the education experience themselves, parents still hold high expectations on the academic socialization process (Suizzo et al.). These expectations are held together by either the parents' beliefs or behavior (Suizzo et al. 2012). Even though parents of Mexican American students help less often with their children school assignments or attend school events, high academic performance is still expected (Carranza et al. 2009). About two thirds of Hispanic parents indicated that they would like their children to obtain a higher education than they did (Spera et al. 2009). Thus, many Mexican parents believe that education is the only way to progress in life.

Education is viewed as the key to progress in life by Mexican American parents. When an individual devotes their time and commitment to pursuing a higher education, the rationale behind the motive outweighs the price. Pursuing and achieving a higher education is seen as a long term goal that when successfully completed becomes a long term benefit. When committing to a lifetime investment, individuals are self-interested and want to assure that the investment will result with positive outcomes or upward mobility. From Mexican parents' perspectives, the only way to advance is by becoming educated (Spera et al 2009). Obtaining an education beyond high school increases the chances of upward mobility not only in the social and economic structures but also within across ethnicities where judgments are made of another other (Spera et al. 2009). Judgments or messages can either negatively or positively impact individual; however it is ultimately the individual's choice in how a message is perceived.

Messages communicated from others can be taken and turned into good or bad. Successful Mexican American students that perceived negative comments from peers about pursuing higher education positively correlate the messages into motives to continue forward with education (St. Hilaire 2002). Students who experience negativity or discrimination translate

those feelings into aspirations to succeed academically (St.Hilarie 2002). While there are students who have experienced discrimination or put downs from their teachers or those of higher authority are not directly impacted by the perceptions of discrimination, there are students who are significantly impacted by discrimination and negative treatment from their peers (St. Hilaire 2002). Not only negative messages from peers are conveyed into academic aspirations but also positive messages from parents. The support given to the student portrays the importance of education which is delivered through parental messages(Suizzo et al. 2012). The parental messages conveyed the importance of school success with the potential outcome to bring honor and joy to the family (Suizzo et al. 2012). Even when the parent(s) are unable to help with school work due to language barriers or lack of knowledge of the subjects, the messages conveyed to the children about the importance of succeeding academically directly influence school success (Suizzo et al. 2012). Parents continue to remain optimistic about their children's future (Raleigh and Kao 2010). By conveying messages of the importance of obtaining higher education parents utilize the technique of being maternal warmth (Suizzo et al. 2012). This is when parents take acceptance, show interest in the hobbies, show warmth and love which in exchange is view as an academic push by the child (Suizzo et al. 2012). By sending strong messages of the importance of success while at the same time providing acceptance, it proves to the young adult that adults or parents are willing to not help but also want them succeed, this allows the child to be able to take a grasp at their own life while still feeling love and accepted by the parents (Suizzo et al. 2012). By having a combination of acceptance, love and warmth, students may become motivated to work hard and take on challenging tasks (Suizzo et al. 2012). By simply providing unconditional support a parent sets strong messages of what is expected to be achieved by their child. Although, the presence of role models, parents' expectations, and

parental messages contribute to the academic success of students, holding onto the individuals culture is as equally important.

Arriving to a different country can be challenging for adults; however, the level of difficulty increases for children, becoming increasingly overwhelming. In order to culturally assimilate, certain expectations are brought on upon when one enters a different country such as learning the language and becoming socially integrated within the culture. Being able to adapt and assimilate into a new culture can determine whether an individual will be successful within the environment. By being able to quickly adapt or assimilate to a different culture Mexican American students are at an advantage not only when seeking higher education but most importantly at successfully achieving it. However, complete assimilation into the U.S. culture is not recommended. Students of Mexican origin who maintain the cultural values of their native culture, such as language and family closeness tend to aspire and experience greater educational opportunities than those who become completely assimilated into the U. S. culture (St. Hilarie 2002). By being able to quickly adapt to a new environment while maintaining their cultural values Mexican Americans are able to move forward with achieving goals because the barrier of not belonging is not present. Cultural knowledge of both the U.S. and Mexico can have lasting impacts on education through adulthood (Roche et al. 2012). If immigrant parents maintain their native language, their children have higher odds of holding higher aspirations for their children to obtain a higher education degree (Raleigh and Kao 2010). Holding onto cultural values is as equally important as adapting to a new environment or country, this is the ultimately the idea of being bicultural.

Hence, while the population of Mexican Americans continues to increase in the United States, about half of the Mexican American student population is not motivated to seek higher

education. Although, there are individuals that are in the lower side of the spectrum who do not obtain a high school diploma, in contrast there are also individuals who surpass the spectrum and earn a Bachelors, Masters or even Doctorate degree. This qualitative research study investigates the different factors that influence Mexican American students born to immigrant parents to pursue a higher education; namely family, parental expectations, peer influences and the ability to remain bicultural. The factors identified can potentially assist professionals when advocating for higher education among minorities, specifically within Mexican Americans students.

METHODS

Sample

Interviews were conducted on five women attending a Midwest Chicagoland public university. All of the participants ranged from 20 to 23 years of age and were attending either their third, fourth or fifth year at the University. The specific setting chosen to conduct the interviews was a convenient place, where both the researcher and interviewees had easy access to. All of the interview participants were all born in the United States of America. The participants either had one or both parents of Mexican descent; at least one parent was born in Mexico. The parents' ages ranged from 37 to 51. The family dynamics of each participant varied from having nuclear to blended families. All participants and location of the study were protected from harm and revelation of identity through the use pseudonyms. The interviewees were chosen on the basis of easy access. Interview participants were known individuals to the researcher. Before the interview, however, the purpose of the research was communicated to the interviewees. Participants were asked to sign a consent form upon agreement to participate in the Latinos Advancing in Education study.

Data collection and analysis

Five interviews were conducted over a four week period during October and November of 2013. Fifteen to 30 minute interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted during the weekdays to accommodate to the interviewees' availability. After transcribing the interview, the recorded material was deleted. Challenges that were overcome included asking challenging questions which may have raised awareness about a specific topic of the participants' life. In this case, the interviewees were assured that all information shared would be kept confidential and that they had the right to not answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable and that they had the right to stop the interview at any time. After interviews were conducted and transcribed, the transcribed interviews were analyzed line by line with the purpose of providing meaning to the rich detailed data. In the process of analyzing the data, data was coded and placed under broader themes.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

“Why do we [Latinos] seek higher education...in general the reason why we seek higher education is not only for ourselves. I think a lot of the time when people seek higher education is for their needs, for what they want to achieve in life. But I think when you come from a minority or low income family, you are not only doing it for yourself; you are doing it for your family. You know because you think back, if I reach this, if I can get a good job I can help my family. I think that is a big difference between different cultures and economic status.”

The importance of family, culture and tradition

Latino families tend to be very family oriented; relying on one another through thick and thin. When one falls, immediate and extended family are there to help no matter the circumstance. At times, extended family becomes part of the immediate family tending to step up to help with any situation one way or another. Whether it is immediate or extended family the Mexican culture and tradition is continued from generation to generation in order to keep the roots alive. When an interviewee was asked how close they are to their families, she responded:

...my mother's side is where we are really close. I was raised in a house where...first cousins, second cousins, aunts, uncles, all [lived] in the same house so we are really close to my mom's side and her family.

Another respondent provided a very similar response:

I used to be very close to my grandpa but they just recently moved so it is...a little difficult...he used to be like my dad [because] my grandpa...raised me. Ever since he moved, it has been a little weird.

Family is a very important factor in a Latino household. The sense of being together and being able to help one another in the good and bad times is what makes the family bond stronger.

Extended family plays major roles in being able provide assistance to another in the time of needed, when this occurs the bond between the families becomes stronger. Extended family takes on the role of caregivers when necessary and at times are seen as the adult models of the family.

Strong familial values are an important aspect of Mexican culture. Successful students retain in their process of assimilation into U.S. culture which shows individualism and self-sufficiency. The ability to identify as bicultural appears to be a factor involved in academic success. When participants were asked whether they considered themselves part of both the Mexican and American culture a participant responded:

I describe myself as part of the Mexican culture because we go by a lot of the traditional stuff; I mean I had a Quinceañera. For Christmas...not a lot here in the United states but when we go back to Mexico we go to the posadas. We celebrate Mexican Independence Day even Cinco de Mayo even though Cinco de Mayo is not that huge in Mexico.

Another respondent answered similarly:

I say both because I am biracial and I was born here so I don't know any other culture but being American...I feel that I can identify with that very well. As far as identifying with the Mexican culture, I do because we are so close to my mother's side so we were raised more with eating the food [and] the certain traditions that we celebrated were as...

Although all of the participants were born in the United States, four out of five participants identified themselves as being part of both the Mexican and American cultures for various reasons. The reasoning behind most of the answers included being part of both the culture and traditions that each culture has. Even though, not all participants speak the Spanish language, they still manage to keep traditions alive and value their Mexican heritage. Maintaining tradition, culture and family values close to heart are factors that contribute to academic success beyond high school, the factors do not only show determination, passion but also pride and truth between what really matters in one's life.

Positive versus negative role models

The presence of positive and negative role models was a common theme among the majority of interview participants in terms of academic achievement. Researcher found that throughout the interview process participants defined their role models both in positively influencing them to continue and being successful in obtaining higher education. However, some of the interviewees also had negative role models who inspired them to strive for better. These negative role models are not necessarily bad role models but instead are an example of what interviewees do not want to become, in a way they are inspired by these individuals to achieve greatness, confirming prior research finding St. Hilaire (2002).

The participant's parents' education varied from six grade, high school diploma, GED to some type of certification program enrollment after high school. A general theme that arose was parents conveying to the subjects that they dislike their own jobs. The fact of intense aversion to the work parents did, yet the example provided by consistency going to work and making the best of their situations make these parents a positive role model for their children. The following

is an example of a hard working parent and positive role model as one of the participants described:

[My mother] currently she works as a factory worker warehouse picker and a janitor at night. My parents both talk to me about their current job and their past jobs and they dislike their jobs very much. They always come home complaining. My mom was my main push... to get my education because she always told me that if she was able to do it in Mexico with the economy being so bad and my grandparents being able to pay for it that I had no excuse. But then in general, my whole family is my motivation because I want to prove to my little cousins that just because we are Mexican and poor doesn't mean that we can't get our education.

The mother described here is a prime example of how women work hard to provide for their children with the hopes that their children do not have to face the same struggles that they have faced thus far. Mothers in particular expressed that the sacrifices they are making will pay off when their children successfully obtaining their higher degree. In other words, there are no excuses to not becoming a successful individual. While the primary role models are the parents of the individuals, the above quote also shows how the students view themselves as role models for younger family members.

Participants reported to have negative role models in their lives however; their influence was also to encourage the attainment of higher education. Just because these individuals were classified as negative role models did not mean that they were bad individuals. Instead, what it is meant by the classification of negative role model is that these individuals have motivated the interviewees to do better than they have. In other words, interviewees have witnessed or heard stories of the struggles that their negative role models have faced and have made a choice not to go down the same path. When an interviewee was asked who acted as her role model in terms of going to college and being successful beyond high school she responded:

...it was my mother, my father and my aunt and my cousin...their stories is what motivated me like through high school. My cousin and dad...would give me the decisions

they've made...how they didn't choose to go to college and how that has affected their life after that [decision]. [They told me] how much of a struggle sometimes it is [not to have a college degree]...when you apply for job sometimes and...don't have a degree... [it] affects [whether you get the job or not]. My mom more so is because, not to sound bad or anything but I didn't want to follow in her footsteps. I wanted to do something else, it seemed like my mom is a primary example of the women in my family and what they end up doing. They just finish high school and they have kids and that...is the end of it. I wanted something different and for my little sister too. It is kind of tiring that [it] is all that women do. My mom was so smart and she could've done so much better but she chose that but that was really respectful and I admire her [however] she made me want to do better too.

When another participant was asked if her older siblings ever act as a role model a similar response was given:

No, one because they were not there, they didn't grow up with us. Another reason is because my sisters all got pregnant before graduating high school and my older brother just dropped out.

By witnessing the struggle that parents and older siblings have and continuously go through, participants have recognized that they do not want to follow in the footsteps of their loved ones. Being able to not only hear but also see the struggle of their loved ones gives participants more reason to listen to parent's advice of pursuing higher education. Siblings in this instance also served as a negative role model that served as an ultimate goal of making different decisions to be able to prove to the family that her life wasn't going to be like her siblings.

Parents' expectations regardless of their lack of academic knowledge

Although the vast majority of the participants parents did not obtain education beyond high school with the exception of two parents, most of the parents were unable to provide their children with guidance not only through the process of applying for college but also at a much earlier stages of learning. Participants recall their parents being unable to provide assistance as early as in elementary school thru high school. In some instances, parents were able to help with the basics of reading and math from kindergarten through third grade but were not capable of

providing guidance beyond those academic years. When a respondent was asked in what ways her parents expressed their expectations about her academic success and how often they were involved with providing assistance with school assignments when growing up, she responded:

...their expectations...were just for me to do what makes me happy. They never said you are going to do this and that's the end of that. They've always supported me with what I want to do but they did expect me to do good like academically so if I came home with a C... I would get yelled at. [My parents] would [tell me] you need to step it up...you have this opportunity to get a better education, to do something better with your life don't take it for granted. [In terms of] me wanting to be who I wanted to be in the future they supported [my decision] but they wanted me to do good in school so that when I did have to make that choice I had options...[and] I [wouldn't have to be] stuck in [a] job because that's the only thing I [would be able to] do.

The same respondent stated:

...Considering my mom only had... six grade level [education] she really didn't help me a lot. She mostly helped me during my Kindergarten years...trying to do the letter[s]... my dad was very good at math but he wasn't very good at teaching [therefore] I had to do a lot of things on my own...all of my school work up to...third grade I got help from them and...from then on I did it on my own.

Although Latino parents were unable to provide academic assistance beyond the basic grades, parents still held and continue to have high expectations of their children's academics. When another participant was asked the same question a very similar was given, she responded:

[The expectations]never ended. I always had to get good grades. If my report card came home with less than a C, I was grounded. [My parents] were always there if I needed help but they really didn't know much.

The expectations of being academically successful were always present regardless if the parents knew the content their children were being taught. From a young age participants were expected to be expect to be academically successful in order to reach the ultimate goal of finding a better job that doesn't require hardcore labor. Parents conveyed the messages that they do not want

their children to struggle the way they have; they want them to live a better life. Another respondent replied along the same lines:

[My parents] always wanted to me to go [college]...[since] elementary school [and] high school they've always wanted me to go a university. They really never pushed me to do a certain career..[however, when I told them that I wanted to go to] culinary school and pastries...[they rejected the my goal]...they [told me that they] wouldn't help me paid for anything but if I decided to go [to culinary school, however if I went] into... nursing or anything besides pastry work that they would help me and support me... my mom [wanted me to] get a better degree. [In the eyes of my parents] pastries [was just seen] as a hobby [not a career].

Latino parents hold high expectations of their children and although they do not directly demand their children to go to school or pursue a specific career; they are still involved in approving or disapproving of decisions, more specifically of career decisions. The expectation of Latino families is to successfully obtain a higher degree in order to obtain a good paying job which means that their child will earn a decent amount of money for less labor. Not only that but the decision of a career, in the eyes of Latinos, must hold a high status within the community or else it is unacceptable. As seen through the example above, the choice to go to culinary school was immediately shut down because culinary is seen as a side job or hobby rather than a lifetime career. Latino parent's simply do not see a monetary benefit from this so called hobby.

CONCLUSION

Hence, although the Latino population continues to grow in the United States, the population growth is not portrayed in high or college graduation rates. With an increase in the Latinos population and no increase in graduation rates studies need to occur to see what is delaying or preventing Latinos from successfully completing their education. Although, there is a high percentage of latinos not graduating with higher education, there is still a percentage that successfully achieves their goal of graduating not only with a high school diploma but with a

higher education education degree. Factors that contribute the success of those particular individuals should be carefully analyzed and understood in order to help the remaining of the Latino population become educated and obtain their education beyond high school successfully.

Appendix

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. At what age did you arrive to the United States?
3. Are you currently a college student or college graduate?
 - a. If a college student...what year are you? (Freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). If you graduated already...what is your highest level of education (Bachelors, Masters, PhD)
4. How many siblings do you have?
 - a. What are their ages?
 - b. Were your siblings born here in the United States? Or another country?
 - i. If another country, which one?
 - ii. If born in another country at what age did they arrive to the United States?
 - c. What grade are they currently attending?
 - i. Highest education earned?
 1. If they didn't attend college, why?
5. How old are your parents?
 - a. Can you tell me what country your parents were born in?
 - b. What is the highest education each of your parents earned?
 - c. What is your mother's current job and position?
 - d. What is your father's current job and position?
 - i. Do your parents ever talk to you about their job or past jobs? If parent is retired—what did they do before retirement?
 1. Did they like them?

In Depth Questions:

1. How close of a relationship do you have with your parents? Siblings and relative/extended family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins?
2. Who acted as your role model in terms of wanting to be successful in school and to continue your education beyond High School?
 - a. How did they inspire you?
 - b. If older siblings exist...Did your siblings act as role models?
3. In what ways did your parents express their expectations of your academic success?
 - a. What made you think that you would be successful in college?
4. How often were your parents involved in helping you with your school assignments when you were growing up?
 - a. Did your parents attend school events?
5. Were you involved in extracurricular activities?
 - a. If so, how involved were your parents with your extracurricular activities?
 - a.i. Did being involved in extracurricular activities help you in terms of going to college?
6. What were your parents' goals for you?
 - a. Did your parents ever speak of the importance of education?
 - b. Did your parents ever discuss college with you?
 - b.i. If not, where did you get information about college?
7. Where did you go to high school?

- a. Can you tell me how diverse was your high school?
8. During high school were you close to your peers?
 - a. Did you ever experience negative remarks regarding your future from your peers?
9. Did your friends ever talk about college?
10. Do you recall being encouraged by your high school teachers to go to college?
 - a. Or do you recall being discriminated by your teachers?
 - b. Can you give me an example?
11. Do you recall your family feeling honored and happy with your or your sibling's school success?
 - a. If so, can you provide an example? (college or high school)
12. Do you speak Spanish?
 - a. If yes, are you fluent?
 - b. Do you the Spanish language still?
 - c. How often do you speak it?
 - c.i. Where is it used more?
13. Were you ever in Bilingual classes?
14. How and when did you learn English?
15. Can you describe how you are part of both cultures/worlds, Mexican and American?

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