Cultural Brokers: Helping Latino Children on Pathways Toward Success

Catherine R. Cooper
Jill Denner
Edward M. Lopez

Abstract

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

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

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

This article discusses ways in which teachers, family members, and young
adult staff in community programs can serve as culture brokers for Latino
students by helping them to feel safe in home, school, and community, to
find educational experiences beyond the classroom, and to remain on path-
ways that lead to personal and academic success. Families, schools, peers,
and communities represent both resources and challenges for children.
They can help Latino children stay in school and can act as intermediaries
as children bridge their worlds. This article draws on new research to illu-
minate the conditions under which Latino children attempt to achieve their
dreams, focusing on immigrant families from Mexico because they repre-
sent the largest group of immigrants in the United States.6

The Aspirations of Latino Youth

What do Latino children want to be when they grow up? What challenges do they face
and what resources do they see for achieving their dreams? A recent study analyzed the
essays written by 116 Mexican-descent sixth
graders applying for a program offering
scholarships to the local community col-
lege.4 Most children described dreams of
becoming doctors, lawyers, nurses, and
teachers, as well as secretaries, police offi-
cers, firefighters, and mechanics, although
many of their parents worked as agricultural
field workers or held service jobs. The chal-
 lenges the children saw to their achievement
of their dreams included not having enough
money to pay for school, as well as the expec-
tations of key people in their lives such as
family members (“my parents wanted me to
work in the field”) and peers (“friends who
will pressure me to take drugs”). The chil-
dren saw their greatest resources in their
families, including parents, siblings, and
cousins; their schoolteachers, counselors,
and coaches; their friends; and themselves
(“never giving up, looking for help by asking
people, and studying a lot”). Children also
named the program staff and scholarships as
resources in their essays.

During the transition from elementary to
middle school, children begin to look ahead
in their own lives and look up to older sib-
lings, peers, and adults. Some children’s
pathways lead them toward college and
adult responsibilities, while others lead
toward school dropout and the risks of
“underground” occupations. Consequently,
these years are a critical time to ensure that
children find help moving toward the goals
that they and their families hold.

Bridges and Barriers,
Resources and Challenges

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

Schools as Gatekeepers and
Brokers

Teachers act as institutional gatekeepers
when they assess students against standard-
ized benchmarks of achievement that deter-
mine eligibility for college-prep classes or
placement in vocational or remedial
classes.8,9 When elementary schoolteachers
disproportionately place Latino students in
special education classes and in low reading
and math ability groups, they send these stu-
dents toward remedial tracks in middle and
high school.10

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

Parents Promoting “The Good Moral Path”

The transition from childhood to adolescence triggers both hopes and fears for parents who want to promote their children’s school achievement but also want to protect them from drugs, violence, and early pregnancy. In one study, Latino parents in Los Angeles, who were primarily Mexican immigrants, described their children as nearing the crossroads between the good moral path (el buen camino) and the bad path (el mal camino).15 The parents considered moral guidance of their children as their primary role and sought to protect their children from negative peer influences (malas amistades). To these parents, a strong moral upbringing includes and supports academic achievement. Mexican-immigrant parents, however, often face the dilemma of holding high aspirations for their children’s school success while they lack the knowledge of educational institutions needed to guide their children. For example, one study interviewed parents in 36 Mexican-immigrant families with children in third, fifth, and seventh grades.5,16 Most of the parents worked as farm laborers or in canneries and had left school in their Mexican villages at age eight. By fifth grade, the children from these families exceeded their parents’ schooling, making it difficult for parents to help with homework. The parents hoped their children would become doctors, lawyers, or teachers, but some did not know that these goals required a college education. Others understood the importance of college, but could offer little assistance because they did not know of application procedures or financial aid. Parents tried to help their children indirectly by making homework a priority over chores and by holding up their own lives of physical labor as examples of what not to do.

On moral topics, however, the parents saw themselves as experts. They taught their children respect, honesty, and responsibility. One parent said, “We are people who are very poor, but we don’t give them (our children) bad examples about anything. We behave well, hoping that they will learn to behave.” As children approached adolescence, parents’ hopes of education as the way out of poverty were challenged by their
fears of drugs, neighborhood violence, and negative friends. Some families moved to other neighborhoods or sent their children back to Mexico. Their dreams of college and professional work dimmed to hopes that children would finish high school and find steady jobs.

**Siblings as Mentors**

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

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

**Program Staff as Culture Brokers**

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

An interview study found that, like Latino parents, young adult staff members working with Latino children in after-school programs defined success in life in moral and academic terms. In guiding youths, the staff drew on positive and negative aspects of their past experiences.
When reflecting on the sources of their own success, three young men credited mentors they had and programs they had attended, but they lamented the scarcity of positive role models in the communities of the children with whom they worked. Though sensitive to the difficulties children faced, staff members understood that others would judge the children on criteria like school grades and so they helped the children with homework and other tasks. Staff also felt that some children in their programs were growing up in families where the pressure of scarce family resources meant that it was up to the program staff to create the conditions for the children’s success.

The young adult staff in community programs have supportive attitudes toward children, similar to those of family members, but they also offer children a broader view of schools, college, and other mainstream institutions. They can help children link their worlds of family, school, street, and community with their personal dreams and fears for the future. Community and business mentoring programs bring successful adults into contact with youths, but interviews with students suggest that some prefer mentors who are closer to them in age.

**Cultural Partnerships for Latino Youth**

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

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


14. See note no. 6, Shartrand.


