

# Barriers to School Success for Latino Students

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## Abstract

Academic achievement among Latino high school students is a pressing issue as data consistently demonstrates that Latino students underperform and are at higher risk of dropping out of high school than their non-Latino peers. This paper reviews nonacademic barriers to the success of Latino students focusing on sociocultural issues that influence the school success of Latino students and how schools and communities can co-labor in order to support Latino academic achievement. This includes a look at the lack of culturally competent school personnel that work among Latino populations, the misunderstanding of schools in relation to the perceived Latino parental disengagement, home and school partnerships that can help foster success for Latino students, and other strategies that can be developed to link Latino parents and communities to the schools that educate their children.

**Keywords:** Latino student success, Latino academic achievement, parental engagement, cultural competence, home-school partnerships, Latino high school students

## 1. Introduction

The achievement gap between Latino students and their counterparts is of concern in the United States due to the increasing Latino population and the economic and social implications for American society. With Latino's representing 25% of students enrolled in public schools across the United States (NCES, 2013), and more than 40% of the enrolled public school population in nine states (Fry & Gonzales, 2008), understanding the sociocultural factors that impact educational success for this group is imperative for educators, communities, families, and policy makers. While Latino high school graduation rates have increased over the past decade, Latino academic achievement and college completion have fallen behind in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Vega et al., 2012). In fact, national high school dropout rates have indicated that Latinos have a 300% higher chance of dropping out than their Caucasian counterparts at 4% (NCES, 2013). If the Latino population growth trends continue as expected, the long-term implications for the U.S. economy and social stability will depend in part by addressing the issues of Latino educational attainment. Traditionally, uneducated groups have experienced marginalization and have had difficulty finding employment, which can lead to other social ills that may perpetuate themselves within marginalized populations (Cataldi, Laird, & Kewal Ramani, 2009). Understanding the actions and relationships that foster achievement for Latino students within their families, communities, and schools will help to develop behaviors, expectations, and policies that can potentially narrow the achievement gap and contribute to Latino student success.

### 1.1 Sociocultural Factors in Achievement

Within the framework of achievement, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory proposes that individual learning is associated with social relationships and interactions that effect educational outcomes through the emphasis that the individual and the environment are linked. In education, this is demonstrated in the experiences, interactions, and relationships of students with their teachers, mentors, community, and family, and how this sociocultural matrix impacts who they are, what they believe of themselves, how they think, and how they learn (Miller, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). The specific type of support, communication between home and school, extracurricular activities, and assistance with homework can be factored into the outcomes of a student in order to gauge achievement. In addition, the quality of curriculum, teacher preparedness and commitment, school and family relations, and the interest that the community as a whole has in the individual student's success can also impact success.

In this context, sociocultural theory purports that relationships and cultural comprehension help individual students relate to themselves and link their goals to their community, which provides meaningful purpose that may impact educational outcomes. In other words, understanding how these relationships impact student success or failure is directly tied to learning; linking culture as an added value to the equation of success, finding ways to bridge the gap between home, school, and community through linkages and relationships which benefit students, and leveraging social capital to help students succeed are all manners in which this theory relates to Latino school success.

### *1.2 Understanding Latino Family Culture*

Latino culture places a significant value on family, which provides support and encouragement throughout the continuum of life. Yet it is important to note that the prominence of the family within the culture can also have a negative effect on educational outcomes. Many Latino students have had to postpone educational aspirations in order to financially support family members. In a Pew Hispanic Center study, nearly 74% of respondents explained that their studies were hindered by a need to work in order to provide economic support for their families (Lopez, 2009). A culture that values family first will have distinct ideas on how this notion should be interpreted. Latino family values, which include “familismo, respeto, and educación” all interact to impact achievement (Woolley, 2009, p. 9). These values influence the types of activities and relationships fostered by families that support educational outcomes. Home life, or *familismo*, is a powerful source of strength and support for Latino students and serves as a protective factor in youth development; Hispanics are strongly connected to their families and have a sense of obligation to one another (Fulgini & Yoshikawa, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). This can be particularly noted in the value placed upon the people and activities within a family.

*Respeto* is a value that parents emphasize in Latino culture and communicates respect for one another, elders, other adults, family relationships, and community. This concept of respect prepares youth to engage in relationships that will provide important links to potential resources outside of the home that may affect their educational outcomes through the concept of social capital (Fulgini & Yoshikawa, 2003). *Respeto* prepares the student to engage in relationships that have the potential to support them as they seek to attain their goals. Research has also demonstrated that Latino families hold more influence on their children’s educational decisions than students from other ethnic groups, demonstrating that the culture not only promotes respect as a characteristic in relationships, but also plays a strong role in student regard for familial advice (De Garmo & Martinez, 2006; Woolley, 2009).

*Educación* is another value extolled in the Latino home, but it denotes a broad encompassing meaning to the whole education of a child and not solely academics. This concept fixes parents as the main source of education for their children on how to navigate different adult relationships and social systems in relation to the position of their parents in those networks (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). Latino parents believe it is their responsibility to educate their children for life, not just for school. Within the Latino community there is a collective sense of responsibility among families for one another’s children, which is inherent to the culture. Latino parents help to create a type of social capital for their children by imparting these values to their children and helping to mediate different relationships for and with them. Schools can capitalize on these important insights to the Latino culture and develop relationships with parents and students that encompass these truths. Families that possess a collective responsibility for children present a strong sense of community.

## **2. Latino Student Achievement: Barriers**

The literature has linked the ongoing gap in Latino high school graduation rates and academic performance with a host of factors, including a lack of training for school personnel working with this specific population, segregation of school districts by low socioeconomic status (SES), lack of bilingual programs in certain areas of the United States, financial stressors, lack of parental involvement as traditionally defined by educators, peer groups, and family poverty (Hawkins, Jaccard, & Needle, 2013; Marshall, 2006). Research has demonstrated that when a school lacks resources and personnel that may provide insight to the issues and cultural clues that may assist the school in engaging traditionally marginalized groups, it debilitates the efforts put forth by that school on behalf of its students. The individuals, types of programs implemented, and policies that make up a school convey organizational methods, attitudes, and messages to the student body and the extended community in which the school operates. Schools that cannot convey appropriate messages and affect policies that are relevant to their populations will negatively impact the school community and serve as barriers to student success.

### *2.1 Culturally Competent School Personnel*

Cultural concept is defined as the set of consistent behaviors, attitudes, and practices that unilaterally form a system across professionals that enables them to work collectively across cultures (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, &

Isaacs, 1989; Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991). School staff, teachers, and administrators make up a significant portion of the individuals that form a school setting; within that setting there should exist a cultural representation and respect for the diverse people, geographies, and ethnicities that make up the school community. This requires that school personnel value and respect people that look different, communicate differently, and hold different values and traditions than they do. School personnel are responsible for developing and creating a valuable, respectful, and healthy climate where learning and growth occurs for students, while simultaneously respecting diversity. When students feel a sense of trust and care in their environment and believe the adults around them feel a sense of responsibility for their well-being, including trying to help and understand them, they will become motivated to rise to the academic pursuits before them. In this context, culture should be integrated into each aspect of school life and staff should be trained in cultural competent methods that are responsive to diversity and help eliminate bias. Failing to do so can create negative student perceptions that affect academic outcomes.

Schulz and Rubel (2011) interviewed Latino high school students about their high school experiences and found that negative expectations were set up for them by school personnel that inhibited their engagement in the academic process. One participant told Schulz and Rubel:

When I first met him (school personnel), I was talking Spanish to my mom so, I think he probably took that and decided, Ok, this kid is Mexican, I don't like him. Not to mention, this kid fights my power, so he's out (p. 9).

Another study found that Latino students perceived their teachers as unhelpful and wondered why they chose the teaching profession in the first place (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). One student stated, "Some teachers, they love what they do, but other teachers are not into their jobs, and they're not into helping students, sometimes I just wonder, why did they choose to pick this job?" (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015, p. 44).

Educators of Latino students should focus on developing trusting relationships, establish high expectations of them, and move away from negative stereotypes and deficit thinking. Stevens, Hamman, and Olivarez (2007) asserted that deficit thinking is made up of the low expectations that teachers of Latino students hold them to, or the negative categories and low expectations believed of this marginalized population. Further, perceptions of negativity can provoke students to stop trying, to lose hope in their educational possibilities, and to underperform as they perceive is expected of them (Halx, 2014). Latino students need nurturing, trusting relationships with their teachers that are built through sincere interest, attention, and understanding.

## *2.2 Latino Parental Engagement in Education*

Latino parental engagement is an expanding area of research, mainly due to the disparity among educational outcomes for this group, and to the growing literature that has documented the positive effect families have on the outcomes of students. Harris and Goodall's (2008) empirical study demonstrated that parental involvement in education was an essential factor in increased levels of achievement, which suggests a link between a child's learning and parental involvement. Yet recent research has purported that while schools may report lack of Latino parental involvement, Latino parents often bypass traditional avenues defined by a school as involvement to engage in their children's education (Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014).

Poza, Brooks, and Valdés (2014) suggested that Latino parents are indeed involved and concerned about their children's education, and that Latino parents ask questions of neighbors and well informed friends in their own communities regarding how to navigate the school systems. Their research found that Latino parents want to understand how to best help their children succeed in their studies, but more importantly are focused on engagement that helps their children develop holistically as people and not just within an academic setting. In many instances, these parents turn to a "culture of power, such as employers, church authorities, or staff of nonprofit organizations about their rights as parents or processes" that will allow them to best assist their children (Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014, p. 132). Latino parents consider engagement in the education of their children as participating in home based activities outside of the school that assist students, and not necessarily on the traditional model of engagement such as fundraising, school activities, and PTA membership.

Research has demonstrated that Latino families value education and work in diverse forms to contribute to their children's success. Often, this is overlooked by school personnel because this involvement does not fall within traditional definitions of engagement and in many instances takes place within the community and at home, away from school (Auerbach, 2007; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012). This creates yet another barrier for Latino student success. Latino parents consider engagement in their children's education as checking homework, instilling strong cultural values that support education, conversing with their children, and making sure their children are well rested (Niemeyer, Wong, & Westerhaus, 2009). Marshall (2006) stated that teachers misinterpret lack of parental involvement as having an uncaring attitude, when in reality parents cited different ideas of parent and teacher roles

and expectations in the education of their children. It behooves school personnel to study the cultures represented within their schools to gain an understanding of how to best serve populations that do not operate under the same assumptions regarding education and parental involvement.

The cultural differences between Hispanics and the mainstream culture of a school contribute to this misunderstanding of Latino parental engagement in education. This can be remedied by schools and nonprofit community organizations partnering to link relationships with the Latino community, schools finding community gatekeepers that can help them open channels of communication within the Latino community, and by training school personnel to understand the nuances of the Latino culture in this area in order to promote understanding about parental engagement for this community.

### *2.3 Home and School Partnerships*

Schools typically define partnerships with parents in the education of children as participation in “formal activities, such as school events or meetings, or volunteering at the school”, indicating a more traditional or formal partnership (Marshall, 2006, p. 1057). This interpretation of partnership with parents may be very limiting for Latino families and schools, as there are many cultural factors to consider in this relationship. Issues such as language, child care, how Latinos define a home and school partnership, and respect for the profession of a teacher in Latino culture are factors that should be taken into account when schools attempt to establish partnerships with Latino parents (Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014). Latinos generally regard teachers with deference; within some subcultures of Latino communities, asking questions of teachers is considered inappropriate. Research has demonstrated that in some cases, Latino parents will inquire of trusted community members instead of school officials. Those schools that work with immigrant Latinos who are still learning how to navigate the U.S. educational system will benefit from assimilating information about those cultures and engaging trusted community leaders to help them develop partnerships of trust that will help overcome these types of barriers.

Families and school districts alike are experiencing specific situations that hinder their ability to successfully navigate the educational experience of Latino students. Data on achievement gaps and immigration issues direct us to some of these barriers. English as a second language, non-English speaking populations, legal documentation to reside in the United States, and an inability to navigate the educational system all impact Latino educational attainment (Marshall, 2006). Parents who do not speak English may shy away from engaging with the schools that educate their children, and may experience emotions of inferiority and helplessness in navigating a foreign educational system. This provokes a breakdown in the potential partnership between the school and parent that is necessary and beneficial for positive student outcomes.

### **3. Strategies to Improve Latino Parental Engagement**

Various factors promote success for Latino students and provide insight for educators, researchers, Latino families, and policy makers. Garret, Antrop-Gonzalez, and Velez (2010) stressed the importance of schools to encourage more community and school-based activities that expose families to pertinent information that will help their students succeed. These activities should consider culture and language in the planning process, and educators must revise how they define parental involvement in education. Schools that understand how Latino parents engage at the home level can help schools advantageously utilize this to benefit their students. Communication models must also be reassessed, taking culture into consideration as a main ingredient in how information will be presented and disseminated, as well as expected types of engagement. Schools should consider culture and ethnicity from an asset based perspective, understanding that the traditional American model may not apply to all Latino students and their families. When schools learn to care, respect, and treat ethnicity from a more value-based perspective, better outcomes may result.

One school district in Chicago decentralized school governance in order to increase the levels of Latino parental and community engagement and help assess school programs, personnel, and problems (Marshall, 2006). This structure shifted from centralized, bureaucratic control to a more democratic model by establishing a Local School Council made up of parents, community representatives, teachers, and principals, all through election. By shifting to this model, the district engaged more parents, was able to involve parents and community in the development of solutions to local matters, and witnessed a more empowered and engaged parent population (Marshall, 2006). Efforts such as these that divest power structures in order to employ Latino parents in the education process in a more direct manner are beneficial to schools as they will learn more of the culture of their students and in turn understand how to best address important issues from a sociocultural perspective. From the parental perspective, understanding the foreign educational process is a powerful force for navigating the system to which they and their children are subject.

A secondary benefit from the decentralization process mentioned above was the communication system that developed through the distribution of information. Latino communities tend to be tight-knit and information is processed fairly informally through relationships in the community. Parents that would otherwise not have access to school communications and information now stay informed through the Local School Council which includes in its membership Latino community leaders. This allowed Latino parents to stay informed and encouraged Latino parent participation in a more direct manner with the schools in which their children were attending; among the leadership they trusted were other adults they could relate to. Another researcher found that Latino representation within the schools that Latino children are educated motivated Latino parent participation, as they perceived themselves represented in the governing levels of the school and felt that they had a voice in decision-making (Shah, 2009).

Another strategy that schools can employ is to set up parent mentoring programs, having parents who do understand the educational system assist those who do not and who may experience inhibitions about reaching out to school officials. These relationships can provide a gateway for a connection between school and parent, as well as relationships that can provide social capital for the student. Woolley, Kol, and Bowen (2009) found that there are key social relationships that influence educational outcomes for Latino middle school students. They learned that friend, parent, and teacher relationships have statistically significant relationships to school outcomes for Latino middle school students, and that social variables such as parental support, parental education monitoring, friend support, friends' school behavior, and teacher support were "directly or indirectly related to school outcomes including school behavior and satisfaction, time spent on homework, and grades" (p. 62).

#### 4. Conclusion

This article focused on sociocultural factors that can act as benefits or barriers to Latino student success. The literature has indicated that there are perceived differences in how parents and adults should be involved in education, and the reality of engagement as perceived by Latino parents. This implies that traditionally, schools have taken a top-down approach in the participation of parents, but the research has pointed elsewhere. If schools desire to successfully engage Latino parents and communities as participants in the education of Latino youth, then they must rethink the sociocultural factors such as relationships, perceptions, language, customs, and values in the process of this engagement. What do these groups think? How do they understand engagement? What do they think their role is in the education of their children? How can schools and teachers best reach out to them and create bridges that foster communication and relationships? The literature appeals to educators, policy makers, and adults involved with Latino youth, to consider these questions when developing policies, programs, and strategies that will engage the culture as well as the families in order to raise Latino student achievement. Supportive and caring adults across the different institutions that Latino children participate can positively impact achievement through culturally competent cooperative relationships that foster these outcomes. As children are each unique, when educators, parents, policy makers, and scholars understand how differing factors contribute to achievement, then fair and equitable practices can take place to benefit them.

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