Negotiating the American Dream: The Paradox of Aspirations and Achievement among Latino Students and Engagement between their Families and Schools

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The lagging achievement of many U.S. Latinos is staggering. Latinos have the highest high school dropout rate. Further, second- and third-generation Latinos in the United States perform less well than do recent immigrants. These statistics belie the hopes and aspirations for upward mobility, a better life, and the deep value for education that are tightly held by many Latino immigrant families. Understanding this paradox between the aspirations of Latino families and their academic outcomes is the focus of this article. The experiences of Latino children in U.S. schools, the incongruence between the cultural worldviews of U.S. schools and Latino families, and the interactions and expectations for partnerships between families and schools are integrated and applied to the question of why Latino students are not reaching their potential, despite goals for achievement and significant parental sacrifice and investment.

The American Dream is the premise that one can achieve success and prosperity through determination, hard work, and courage—an open system for mobility. Hopes of a better life, greater opportunities, employment, and education for their children still drive decisions to immigrate to the United States (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996). Policies dictating the scope of immigration and impacting the adjustment of immigrants have been of central focus from the 19th century through today (Lansford, Deater-Deakard, & Bornstein, 2007).

In seeking a better life, recent Latino immigrants hold strong beliefs about the role of education for upward mobility in the United States (Carger, 1996;
Access to public education for their children is a major factor in deciding to immigrate to the United States (Reese, 2002). Some immigrants, who regard their situation in the United States as more favorable than their experience in their country of origin, feel privileged about being in the United States, which results in striving to succeed academically and economically to compensate for the suffering of those who are less fortunate in their families (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Latino immigrants hold high expectations about the quality of American schools and the opportunities it will proffer.

To reach their dreams, many families make great sacrifices, including working multiple low-wage jobs (Lopez, 2001). Despite a strong work ethic, an intense desire to succeed, an understanding of the value and utility of education, and a trust and belief in the quality of the American school system, the academic achievement of Latinos lags behind others in the United States. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) statistics, only 14% of Latino fourth graders are reading at proficient levels and 57% are below even basic levels, often this means that students are unable to read in either English or Spanish. With the highest dropout rate, only 64% of Latino 18-24-year-olds have completed high school (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). Stunningly, research shows that the longer Latinos are in the United States the worse they perform academically. That is, later generations of Latinos often perform less well than do first-generation Latinos (Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Rodriguez, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). First-generation students have higher achievement motivation (Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, this issue), hold stronger beliefs about the value of education (Olmeda, 2003; Perreira et al., this issue), and perceive fewer barriers to reaching their goals (Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003).

Understanding this paradox between the aspirations of Latino families and their academic outcomes is the focus of this article. The experiences of Latino children in U.S. schools, the incongruence between the cultural worldviews of U.S. schools and Latino families, and the interactions and expectations for partnerships between families and schools are integrated and applied to the question of why Latino students are not reaching their potential, despite goals for achievement and significant parental sacrifice and investment. More importantly, why are Latino students who are in the United States longer performing less well than those who are recent immigrants?

Current policies to promote achievement in the United States emphasize the role of the family. To date, extant theories of family-school relationships and policies that mandate family-school relations have not considered culturally embedded strategies or beliefs about parental involvement for the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States. In this article, the extent to which discordant perspectives between families and schools about their respective roles for promoting achievement undermine students’ performance are outlined as they inform lags in achievement among Latinos. The utility of
two characteristics of the extant literature on Latino students’ achievement and parental involvement in education impact the analysis of this literature. First, well more than half of the research focuses on families of Mexican descent; other research combines samples from different countries of origin. A smaller proportion of research focuses on families of Puerto Rican descent or from the Dominican Republic. This is consistent with the estimates of the countries of origin of the U.S. Latino population. Those from Mexican descent make up 63% of the U.S. Latino population, whereas the next largest group is Puerto Ricans at 10%. Because the vast majority of the research is on families from Mexican descent and they are the largest subpopulation of Latinos, this is largely the focus of this article. The second characteristic is that over two thirds of the research is qualitative, utilizing open-ended interviews, focus groups, case studies, and participant observations. An advantage of qualitative data is that it provides deep description. The voices, experiences, and perspectives of Latino students are recorded without the constrictions of existing theories and measures. We looked across the qualitative studies to identify patterns that tell a story of the experiences of Latinos in U.S. schools. However, such data preclude our ability to evaluate the strength of the relations between parenting and achievement, a distinct disadvantage. In this methodological context, we focus on Latino students’ descriptive experiences at school, parents’ beliefs about and goals for their children’s education, the values and worldviews that guide their involvement in their children’s education, and the congruence between theories and policies of parental involvement and the experiences of Latino families.

High Expectations met with Harsh Realities: Experiences of Latinos in American Schools

Latino students are currently the most segregated racial or ethnic group in the United States in terms of school enrollment (DeBlassie & DeBlassie, 1996). They attend the most poorly equipped schools in the most impoverished school districts (Peske & Haycock, 2006) and are most likely to have inadequate instructional materials and teachers with less experience (Conchas, 2001). Such schools do not promote the link between academic success and mobility (Ogbu, 1983). Creating even greater difficulties for upwardly mobility, Latino students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement classes and are more likely to be placed on a vocational track than on a college preparatory track, regardless of their academic background. This forecloses educational opportunities because, even for students with lower levels of academic performance, being on the college preparatory track increases the likelihood of college enrollment and graduation (Baker & Velez, 1996). Given the increasing necessity of a bachelor’s degree to secure jobs that
pay a living wage and differences in earning power between those with and without a college degree, such tracking decisions undermine lifetime earning potential.

Teachers are likely to have diminished expectations for Latino students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Further, they are less likely to have Latino teachers. In the 2003–04 school year, only 6.2% of full-time teachers in the United States were Latino (NCES, 2007). Teachers praise Latino students less, even for correct answers; behave less favorably toward them; and penalize them for lower levels of English proficiency (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Teachers often fail to consider the diversity among Latinos, at times speaking about different cultures interchangeably (Ramirez, 2003) and referring to Latino students, collectively, as “the Mexican students” (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009), thereby undermining students’ sense of connection to the school.

There is increasing evidence of the detrimental effects of discrimination for Latino students. Schools who value diversity have more motivated and engaged students (Conchas, 2001; Freng, Freng, & Moore, 2006; Hollins & Spencer, 1990). Further, discrimination is associated with lower academic motivation because it is connected to a school climate whereby students do not feel respected or valued (Perreira et al., this issue). Therefore, it is not surprising that by the second generation in the United States, the cumulative experience of discrimination might lower achievement motivation and interest in school. They “reject the schools that reject them” (Conchas, 2001). Even as students struggle to find their place in schools, their parents struggle to understand their expected role vis-à-vis the schools.

Parents’ Experiences Engaging with Schools: Misunderstandings, Mistrust, and Frustration

Because of Latino parents’ expectations for high-quality U.S. schools (deCarvalho, 2001), they are often surprised at the lack of rigor and standards of the schools their children attend (deCarvalho, 2001; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Further, they are disappointed that school districts pronounce equity across school when there is marked inequity in instructional quality and course offering across schools (Auerbach, 2002; Ramirez, 2003). Even within schools, there are inequities in decisions about advanced courses and tracking (Conchas, 2001; Yonezawa, 2000). Many Latino parents want higher academic standards, stricter dress codes, and stricter expectations for conduct (Levine & Trickett, 2000). Having sacrificed for their children to be educated in the United States, they do not want the opportunity to be squandered (Hill, 2009). Parents’ initial satisfaction with U.S. schools often develops into frustration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995), again pointing to diminished achievement in subsequent generations.

When engaging with school personnel, Latino parents often feel unwelcome and misunderstood. Indeed, most principals are trained to manage their schools without regard for parental involvement (Hein, 2003). Training and accountability
for the promotion of involvement are lacking, especially for engaging families for whom English is a second language and who do not understand the implicit expectations of U.S. schools. Even when Latino parents engage in activities designed to increase parental involvement (e.g., PTA, volunteering), they often come away feeling confused by the school structure and implicit expectations (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). They do not understand the politics among parents and between parents and the school administration (Peña, 2000). They often find that their attempts to garner information are thwarted (Yonezawa, 2000), and they feel abandoned (Ramirez, 2003).

The lack of sufficient translators or bilingual staff is more than an inconvenience for Latino parents. It undermines the ability of basic acts of parental engagement (e.g., parent–teacher conferences) to foster relations between parents and teachers and communicate key information. Further, because of the inability to communicate, teachers often treated them as if they were incompetent (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). In one study, the Latino parents indicated that they attended PTA meetings even when they could not understand the content of these meetings because they wanted to communicate to their children and to their teachers that they care about education (Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009).

Consistent with the fact that many Latino cultures place a high value on relationships (Hill, 2009), many Latino parents would prefer a more personal relationship with their children’s teachers (Trumbull et al., 2003). However, rather than feeling like they are building relationships, parents often are alienated in their interactions with teachers. Teachers talk down to them (Jones, 2003), especially when parents have limited English language proficiency. Parents reported that teachers are not held accountable for the success of their students and parents fear retribution if they intervene (Ramirez, 2003). Further, rather than feeling like “collaborators” or “partners,” which is the premise for many theories of family–school relationships (Epstein & Sanders, 2002), Latino parents often come away from interactions with teachers feeling inferior and embarrassed (Auerbach, 2002). The cumulative effect of insensitivities experienced at schools decreases the likelihood that parents will return and continue engaging teachers and school personnel, which is often interpreted by teachers as a parents’ lack of concern about their children’s education (Jones, 2003; Rodriguez & Lopez, 2003). Families and schools are often perplexed by difficulty in establishing productive relationships and interactions between families and schools. It may be the incongruence between home and school that is the source of such frustration (Hill, 2009; Peña, 2000).

Discontinuities and Incongruence between Home and School

One of the incongruences between Latino families and schools is regarding expectations (Hill, 2009). Latino families define being “well educated” more broadly than do U.S. schools. In addition to its academic components, for Latinos, “educación” encompasses being moral, responsible, respectful, and well behaved.
Latino parents believe that they are responsible for developing these aspects of their children, which are the foundation of the academic education that is the schools’ domain. Whereas much of the literature and policies on family-school relationships promotes “partnerships” (Epstein & Sanders, 2002), Latino parents are often uncomfortable with the notion of being “equal partners” with teachers on the academic aspects of education (Correa & Tulbert, 1993), especially as they hold the profession of teaching and teachers in high esteem (Jones, 2003; Yan & Lin, 2005).

Because of differences in beliefs about their respective roles, Latino parents often feel uncomfortable with the expectations schools have for them. Teachers and school personnel expect them to engage their children in ways that impact their home life (Ramirez, 2003), and they feel that, if they did not comply, teachers would judge them negatively (Trumbull et al., 2003). Whereas they respect teachers’ roles in school, they also expect teachers to respect parents’ roles in the home. Latino parents hold teachers in high regard and believe that it is disrespectful to challenge teachers, so parents are often reluctant to express their opinions to teachers, especially if they disagree. They do not want to be disrespectful or disrupt the relationship with him or her (Correa & Tulbert, 1993; Trickett, Swartz, & Martin, 1997). Latino parents do not want to interfere with the teachers’ domain (Yan & Lin, 2005) yet feel that their own authority at home is questioned.

Second, incongruence exists in the implicit cultural worldviews that guide interactions at home and school (Hill, 2009). Many school personnel presume that Latino parents, who may not have been educated in the United States, are facile with U.S. school traditions. Teachers underestimate the implicit culturally based assumptions from which the schools operate (Hill, 2009). Latino parents often have limited knowledge about the implicit power structures at school and their “rights” as parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991b). Some argue that Latino parents should learn the system through school activities (Levine & Trickett, 2000). However, because of a lack of familiarity with the educational system, many Latino parents do not know how to participate nor do they know about what things to ask (Jones, 2003; Ramirez, 2003; Yan & Lin, 2005).

There is often disagreement about what is meant by parental involvement. Schools utilize programs designed to increase parental involvement, but it is unclear how these programs are understood by Latino parents (Carreon et al., 2005). For example, one principal stated, “We offer programs and willing parents come” (Carreon et al., 2005), thereby casting parents for whom barriers limit their involvement as unwilling. Further, because involvement is defined by school-directed programs, other culturally embedded aspects of involvement are not recognized. Other principals indicated that parents were involved at the level they wished to be and, when they were ready, they would increase their involvement (Peña, 2000). Principals were unaware that Latino families in their schools felt excluded. Many of the less visible, but still conventional, ways of being involved
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are closed to Latino parents because they either lack the cultural knowledge to engage school personnel or the activities themselves require cultural knowledge that they do not possess (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991a). Latino parents often do not know that the more “active” parents, as defined by school-directed or school-sanctioned involvement, are given greater voice and influence on school matters. This exclusion of Latino parents takes away their voice on matters pertaining to their children’s education and development (Vasquez, 2004).

Finally, whereas most immigrants wish to embrace many U.S. cultural values, especially those that are related to upward mobility, Latino parents find some values unsettling and in contradiction with the values they wish to preserve (Carger, 1996; deCarvalho, 2001; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007; Olmeda, 2003; Reese, 2002). Some differences can be solved through code-switching—that is, following one set of behavioral proscriptions at home and another at school. However, when values contradict one another, simultaneous endorsement is difficult. Many Latino families found the schools to be disrespectful of their culture and their authority in the family and did not trust their judgment. For example, legal action has been threatened against parents who extend the holiday break in December to celebrate cultural holidays in Mexico (Olmeda, 2003). In addition, many Latino parents find U.S. culture too permissive, compared to their cultures of origin, and their children’s exposure to such permissiveness undermines their vigilance as parents (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). For example, the promotion of individual rights, common in the United States, goes against the Latino understanding of the self as defined through relationships, including obedience and respect for authority (Olmeda, 2003; Reese, 2002).

Relatedly, Latino parents are often perplexed by teachers’ complaints that center mostly on children’s behaviors. Parents have difficulty in understanding why their children are having so many behavioral problems at school when they are responsible and invaluable to the family’s survival at home, especially in negotiating interactions with community agencies (Plata, 1989). This demonstrates that problems with communication between parents and schools are often due to differences in values as much as differences in language (Trumbull et al., 2003). When parents find that the values learned at school or undermine values at home, they are less likely to accept advice and information directed toward the “parenting” domain (Hill, 2009).

Parents are not the only ones to experience the discontinuities between home and school. Although children acculturate at a faster rate than their parents, due to greater exposure to U.S. culture through school (Lau, McCabe, & Yeh, 2005; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008), they are not immune from experiencing the cultural discontinuities between home and school. U.S. schools have an implicit (and sometimes explicit) goal of resocializing ethnic minority children (Hollins & Spencer, 1990). Because such cultural resocialization is implicit, when Latino children do not meet teachers’ expectations, the reason is often unclear, and
students do not readily understand how to rectify it, resulting in internalizing failure (Fordham, 1996). Latinos are working on achieving success in two domains (i.e., academic and cultural), whereby success in one domain is dependent on the other and success in the cultural domain often comes with a social cost at home. It is not solely language barriers, but barriers in culturally expected ways of engaging schoolwork. Teachers are trained to reproduce U.S. mainstream culture, and it shows in the curriculum, the class structure, and behavioral expectations (Hill, 2009).

Even high-achieving Latino students feel marginalized at school (Conchas, 2001). Their success, at times, comes with unintended social and cultural costs. Because they are one of a few Latinos enrolled in advanced classes, they are alienated from their non-Latino high-achieving classmates with whom they do not share a cultural background. Concomitantly, opportunities to develop friendships with other Latinos are limited because their class schedules preclude interactions across the academic tracks. Further, the focus on individual achievement and the competitive nature in advanced classes conflict with the communal and interdependent characteristics of Latino cultures (Conchas, 2001), making the learning process feel foreign.

Perceptions of competence and self-worth are experienced differently between home and school (Lopez, 2001). Because of their families’ immigrant status, students as young as 14 have significant responsibilities. Such maturity and responsibility are not affirmed at school, which undermines students’ attachment to school. Whereas some suggest that these experiences result in the development of an “oppositional identity” toward school (Ogbu, 1983), rather these students develop an orientation toward work and family responsibility (Lopez, 2001). Moving past these discontinuities between home and school cultures requires understanding them and then building bridges that capitalize on the strengths of each.

**U.S. School Culture, Latino Cultures, and the Theories and Policies that Shape Engagement**

**U.S. school culture and policies.** Historically, American public schools have served dual purposes (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). On the one hand, they provide the skills for individual subsistence and economic gains and the knowledge and literacy needed for society to function as a democracy. On the other hand, with the influx of immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, public education was a method of assimilating immigrants into U.S. culture. Resistance against bilingual and culturally inclusive curricula is based in part on the notion that U.S. schools are a vehicle to create and maintain national unity among people from diverse places.

U.S. worldviews on education are based on the Socratic methods (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). As such, learning is focused on questioning authorities and one’s
own beliefs and knowledge and developing and expressing one’s own hypotheses. Therefore, U.S. schools are focused on developing self-confidence, self-esteem, and the abilities to question knowledge and create doubt (Tweed & Lehman, 2002), and they emphasize individual achievement, individual attention, self-expression, and competition (Linney & Seidman, 1989). Correspondingly, U.S. mainstream parenting is focused on independence, individuation from family, self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-initiative (Heine et al., 2001; Reese, 2002). Education is used to reach individual/personal goals, rather than to promote and reach community-level goals (Li, 2005).

There is a tacit belief that middle-class, Euro-American culture is normative, with all other cultures deviant, despite efforts and expressed goals of multiculturalism (Hill, 2009). School organizational structures and curricula validate the culture and ideology of some groups in society more so than others (Anyon, 1980; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). U.S. schools subtly devalue cooperation, cooperative learning, interdependence and conformity, placing ethnic minorities, immigrants, and low-income children and families at a disadvantage.

Even when schools attempt to endorse multiculturalism, it is often done with Euro-American culture as the point of reference (Giroux, 1981). That is, the study of Latino cultures is compartmentalized to special times of the year (i.e., National Hispanic Heritage Month), rather than being fully integrated throughout the year; begins with encounters with Europeans rather than with native cultural perspectives (Hollins & Spencer, 1990); and focuses on superficial aspects of culture such as foods and dress rather than the more meaningful aspects of cultural values (Hill, 2009). The implicit message is that Latino cultures are to be understood in comparison to Euro-American culture, rather than in their own right.

Similarly, policies governing interactions between families and schools are based on the same cultural values and expectations. There are at least three major frameworks that guide research and practice in the area of family–school relations (i.e., Comer, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). All of these frameworks are multidimensional, including communication between families and schools, parental involvement at school, and parental involvement at home (or out of school). Each of these theories is based on the assumption of mutual understanding and coordination between families and schools. The types of home activities that support achievement are directed by the school and curriculum, require parents’ understanding of what is happening at school, and require the resources to replicate it at home.

Adding to these commonalities, Epstein’s six-factor model (Epstein & Sanders, 2002) includes the schools’ role in training and promoting general parenting, including guidance on discipline and creating conditions at home that support learning and development; parental involvement in school decision making through school councils and committees; and the role of the community, businesses, and governmental agencies in supporting schools. The premise of this
theory is that families and schools are equal partners or collaborators in the promotion of academic success. Although organized differently Grodnick’s model (Grodnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) adds personal involvement, reflecting the parents’ attitudes about school, expectations parents’ hold about their children’s academic development and achievement, conveying enjoyment of learning, and the importance of schooling and education.

Based in part on these theories, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) mandates written policies for parental involvement at state and local district and school levels that are co-created with parents and that outline the shared responsibilities of students, families, and school staff to promote achievement. Parents are to be included in decision making regarding how funds allocated to parental involvement are used. Schools are required to hold annual meetings for parents regarding parental involvement in education and ensure that these meetings are open to all parents, provide training for parents, make information available to families in their own language, pay for expenses that are related to involvement activities, and conduct in-home conferences for parents who cannot attend meetings (NCLB, 2002).

These theories and policies shape the school climate, instructional style, and how families and teachers engage. Without significant communication, it is impossible for Latino immigrants to understand their expected role. Families of Latino descent bring with them styles of engagement, culturally embedded expectations, and learning styles that differ in some ways from mainstream U.S. culture (Hill, 2006). Teachers and schools do not recognize or validate Latino parents’ “invisible” strategies they employ to support their children’s achievement (Auerbach, 2007; Carger, 1996; Lopez, 2001; Rodriguez & Lopez, 2003).

**Latino Cultures and Practices Related to Achievement**

As this is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the values, beliefs, and family dynamics among Latino cultures or to represent the cultures as monolithic, there are some commonalities across Latino cultures on the values that shape interactions with school personnel. Because Latino cultures value communalism and interdependence (Triandis, 1988), social relationships are held in high regard. Indeed, there are several values that guide social relationships. *Simpatía, personalismo, and respeto* pertain to the importance of smooth, pleasant, and harmonious social interactions (Marin & Marin, 1991; Simoni & Perez, 1995). In maintaining relationships, *simpatía* includes a willingness to conform to others and be agreeable, ability to share with one another, and empathize with others (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007; Simoni & Perez, 1995). *Personalismo* reflects a desire to relate to and trust people, rather than institutions, a genuine interest in people, in contrast to a professional distance. Similarly, *respeto* reflects empathy, respect, and intimacy in relationships (Andres-Hyman, Ortiz, Anez, Paris,
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& Davidson, 2006; Simoni & Perez, 1995). Further, *dignidad* is the reverence, venerability, and honor expressed between people—regardless of one’s status in life (Andres-Hyman et al., 2006). The importance of honor and respect, regardless of one’s social position, is often contrasted with the respect of social hierarchies (Simoni & Perez, 1995). However, the Latino cultural value of *obligación* implies that those in authority are responsible, through their position, for those in lower social positions, and thereby warrant the respect they receive (Padilla, Pedraza, & Rivera, 2005). For example, teachers are respected because of their position and teachers, because of their position, are expected to be responsible for the best interests of their students.

In addition, there are culturally embedded values that parents develop and instill in their children that pertain to achievement. To help their children reach their potential, Latino parents seek to develop *ganas*, the drive and will to succeed (Auerbach, 2006; Padilla et al., 2005); *empeños*, the dedication and commitment to the task or goal (Auerbach, 2007); and *estudios*, which is diligent study, effort, that will bring success (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Reese, 2002). In addition, Latino parents do not want their children to be prideful. Therefore, they instill *vergüenza*, defined as interpersonal humility, shame, honor, and self-respect. (Olmeda, 2003). When asked what they highly value, Latino parents said, “Dignity in conduct, respect for others, love for the family, and affection for children” (Ruiz, 1982, p. 192).

Parenting practices among Latinos, while shaped by cultural values, have been characterized as strict or authoritarian and permissive (Yan & Lin, 2005). However, it is more precisely described as “responsibility oriented” (Buriel, 1993). Children are expected to make productive use of their time, take advantage of their opportunities, and to be responsible, especially pertaining to family assistance. This orientation toward developing responsibility is manifested in parenting practices that are both stricter (e.g., about not wasting time) and more permissive (e.g., expecting children to handle their responsibilities with little assistance; Rodriguez, 2002). Although this combination of strict and permissive seems contradictory, authoritarian parenting is positively correlated with warmth and better mental health, which suggests that these stricter parenting practices are understood as caring about their children (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003; Mason, Walker-Barnes, Tu, Simons, & Martinez-Arrue, 2004).

Through taking their children to work, parents teach their children that manual work is difficult and doesn’t pay well, thereby developing a better understanding about the utility of education for securing better jobs. Also, children learn valuable skills that they can “fall back on” should other options not work as planned (Lopez, 2001). Further, through work, adolescents contribute to their families financially and develop a sense of responsibility. Their work may facilitate the educational opportunities of siblings. Their desire for economic and academic achievements is embedded in a desire to nurture one’s family, rather than individual pursuits (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).
Although Latino parents have high aspirations for their children and make sacrifices to help them succeed, many of their achievement-related parenting strategies are not captured in models of family–school relationships (Ibenez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004). For example, their use of manual labor to teach the importance of school may be misinterpreted as a devaluation of school. They draw on their own experiences (consejos), focus on respect and proper behavior, and affirm that hard work, studying, and college are the right steps (“Un buen camino,” Reese, 2002). School involvement as typically defined (e.g., PTA) often feels inauthentic. They do not result in better relationships with teachers or greater understanding of their children’s needs. Further, the linkages between some aspects of involvement and achievement are less clear (e.g., chaperoning events, helping in the school office). Because the purpose and utility of some involvement strategies are unclear and because Latino parents find that their cultural beliefs are challenged or devalued, there are significant barriers to building partnerships.

**Applying Knowledge about Latino Cultures and School Culture to Practice**

Latino immigrants arrive in the United States with a strong belief in the American Dream, a strong work ethic, and high aspirations for their children. However, after a generation or more in the United States, the possibility of achieving the Dream and the sure pathway of education become elusive. Time living in the United States is associated with diminished aspirations for their children’s achievement (Keith & Lichtman, 1994) and lower levels of involvement in education (Lopez, Sanchez, & Hamilton, 2000). Despite these declines in involvement across generations, 90% of Hispanic parents surveyed across six Southwestern states want to help their children with schooling (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). The resources necessary for developing culturally inclusive policies and programs seem out of grasp for the often-impoverished schools that Latino children attend. The ways to ensure that all voices are represented at school, district, and state levels as mandated based on NCLB remain elusive, especially for Latino families who are unfamiliar with U.S. schools and who may not be comfortable or proficient in communicating in English.

If co-responsibility and partnerships between families and schools remain the goal, then bridging the discrepant expectations and world views between Latino families and schools is necessary. The first step in building productive family–school relationships is for schools to consider their own cultural biases and assumptions so that they can be mindful of the hidden or implicit curriculum and expectations that may not be readily apparent to Latino parents who may be unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system (Hill, 2009).

Latino families desire more information about how to effectively support their children’s academic success. Therefore, schools should provide information willingly. Families with low levels of social capital are less likely to know where and how to obtain the most useful and accurate information (Lareau, 2003; Lareau
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& Horvat, 1999). In addition, school personnel should understand that when new information given to parents is inconsistent with their current beliefs and practices it will be more difficult for parents to assimilate into their everyday practices (Goodnow, 2002). This is especially true when extended family, who are often not the target of school-based parental involvement programs, are actively involved in child rearing and are the experts from whom parents receive and vet advice. Therefore, an additional effort is required to build the bridge between school expectations and culturally embedded beliefs.

Building on Current Knowledge: Next Steps for Theory and Research

The body of qualitative research on family dynamics and achievement among Latinos is rich in descriptive detail and has identified culturally embedded values, practices, and experiences that are often not included in extant theories of parental involvement in education or recognized by school programs. However, few studies of family processes and achievement among Latinos have directly tested the relation between culturally embedded parenting and academic outcomes. We found only one study that included a Latino cultural value (i.e., familia), defined as the increased salience and dependability of relatives over friends. It was not predictive of achievement (Rodriguez, 2002). A broader conceptualization may be needed.

The findings are mixed for the relation between traditional types of involvement and achievement. For discussions about school activities, school programs, subjects studied, and future plans, the relation with achievement was positive and significant, but modest in size (Keith & Lichtman, 1994). Among school-based involvement, such as attending events at school, PTA meetings, and parent–teacher conferences, one study found that only parental expectations were related to achievement (Yan & Lin, 2005), and another study found that all were related to achievement (Rodriguez, 2002). The extant empirical literature on the relation between family practices and academic achievement is not large or robust enough to draw firm conclusions about whether existing theories of family–school relations are generalizable to U.S. Latino families. Further, whereas the qualitative studies have richly informed the field of the culturally embedded strategies that might be especially effective in promoting academic achievement among Latinos, research still needs to be conducted that tests their influence on achievement and determine whether they generalize across Latinos of different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Mexican, Guatemalan, Puerto Rican). Doing so will provide the empirical support to broaden theories and identify evidence-based practices to enhance the effectiveness of parental involvement in education and, ultimately, Latino students’ academic achievement.

Finally, the decline in achievement levels between more recent Latino immigrant and those who have been in the United States for two or more generations remains perplexing. Few studies have identified the reasons for the decline. The plethora of qualitative accounts of discrimination and frustrations when engaging
U.S. schools points to potential sources of the decline. However, for many Latino families, there are many sources of disadvantage including economic, lower levels of social capital, low English proficiency, and cultural misunderstandings. This and understanding pathways by which Latino immigrants integrate the cultural values of the United States with values from their countries of origin are needed steps toward identifying ways in which schools and families can build on cultural strengths while simultaneously relinquishing old and taking on new cultural identities and practices.

As has been widely noted, the Latino population will be the largest ethnic minority population in the United States by 2050 and possibly sooner. As of July 2007, 24% of children younger than age 5 were of Latino descent and 34% of those under 18 years of age (Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2008). Further, from a global perspective, only Mexico has a larger Latino population than the United States. The combination of the reality that the Latino population is the largest, youngest, and fastest-growing population in the United States and that the public schools are failing at educating Latino children means that the call to reform educational practices, curricula, and policies to better capitalize on the cultural and educational strengths of Latino families and the call to invest research dollars to understand the processes that shape normative development and achievement outcomes for Latinos are not just based on a liberal value of multiculturalism, but on a need to develop the future human capital of the United States to assure its global competitiveness.

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