

# Latino Understandings of Learning and Education

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As educators are well aware, we have increasing numbers of Latino students in U.S. public schools. Even states not thought of as traditional designations for Latino immigrants, such as Indiana, are seeing a recent rise in the number of Latinos in communities and in schools. Because of this, educators and administrators are working to readjust and reevaluate their curriculum, teaching methods, and school environments to help integrate Latino students into the school's learning community. Yet educators often feel unequipped to make these changes in an informed manner.

This brief is meant to provide educators and others working with Latino/a youth an overview of how these students may conceptualize learning and education. The concepts discussed will encompass forms of learning and education that do not necessarily take place in school. This is meant to broaden the scope of understanding about diverse forms of learning that take place beyond the school walls. Such a perspective can assist educators in making the critical connections between the home and school experiences of all students, Latino/a and otherwise.

Clearly, this overview can in no way encapsulate the variety of Latino students' life experiences that shape their understandings of learning and education. It is only meant to serve as an introduction. Ultimately, there is no substitute for each teacher getting to know his or her students and their families in order to begin to appreciate the ways in which all students, Latino/a or not, understand education and the processes of learning.

While this overview risks stereotyping, one can safely generalize about certain commonalities that are likely to be present even across most national and social-class differences amongst Latin American immigrants. Hopefully, this overview will provide a springboard for more frequent conversation among educators and policy makers today.

## **Educación is more than school!**

The concept of *educación*, which literally translates into the English word 'education,' often has a much broader connotation to Latino/a students than the word might suggest to non-Latinos/as. The concept of *educación* in Latin American Spanish refers more to the inculcation of fundamental values and orientations in the home and the community. Thus to be "*bien educado*" -'well-educated'- is to have good morals and manners, to show proper respect for people, and to be an upright person in the moral sense. While Latinos do highly value school and school knowledge as well, the emphasis on moral education means that people can have lots of schooling but still be considered "*mal educado*"-poorly educated. This distinction may seem like a minor matter of translation. However, an awareness that Latino/a students understand the term 'education' in a way that might differ from non-Latino students and teachers can not only decrease the likelihood of misinterpretations, but also add to everyone's appreciation for the diversity of ways that children can "be educated."

### **Notions of respect and moral education**

Connected to this concept of educación is that of *respeto*, which is roughly equivalent to the English word “respect,” but linked more strongly to specific social roles. Children are “educated” to have respeto for people in certain roles, especially older family members, but also those in socially important roles such as teachers and religious figures. Part of Latinos/as’ moral upbringing is learning to have high regard for the people who occupy these important social and cultural roles.

In addition, for Latino/a students and their families, school seems focused more on specialized subject “instruction.” Because of this, school is considered the province of teachers, who have specialized knowledge in these areas. In contrast to this, parents see the home as a place for learning practical skills, values or moral education, and for contributing to family welfare. So while both school and home are considered places of learning, each is associated with a separate sphere of learning; the school with academic instruction taught by teachers with specialized knowledge, and the home with moral education taught by the family.

One important implication of this distinction between home and school learning is that teachers of Latino/a students should not always expect these students’ parents to help with school projects and school knowledge in the home, because the home is mainly for moral education and for contributing to family welfare. While individual Latino parents each have their own norms for how they view their role in the school work that children bring home, in large part they see their primary role as moral educators, not as academic instructors.

Recognizing different understandings of home and school learning can also encourage educators to think about parental involvement in school in fresh ways. For example, López (2001) and López & Vázquez (2006) challenge stereotyped assumptions of Latino parents as largely “uninvolved” in children’s education by expanding

conventional concepts of parental involvement and showing how Latino parents get involved in their children’s schooling in ways that are often unrecognized in U.S. schools. The authors show that while Latino parents **do** get involved in school in ways most often encouraged by U.S. schools (such as parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights), these parents tend to concentrate on other activities, such as the giving of *consejos*, as an important form of involvement in their children’s educational lives. *Consejos* are little stories or lessons told by Latino parents, and parents’ *consejos* include lessons about persistence, positive dispositions, and motivation. In addition, many of the Latino parents interviewed considered themselves the “first parents,” responsible for imparting social, behavioral, and dispositional knowledge to their children, while viewing teachers as “second parents” who were responsible for imparting academic knowledge.

By understanding this, educators might be more willing to seek new ways of drawing upon the existing involvement of Latino parents, which takes place within their cultural frames of reference and social-economic constraints, even as they seek to be more inclusive and proactive with Latinos through “traditional” involvement activities. Such an understanding would help educators work toward gaining a deeper appreciation for the home-based educational practices of their Latino students, and to begin building stronger ties between home and school.

### **Gender and age hierarchies and roles**

Though quite variable by social class and level of schooling, in most Latino immigrant families strong and diligent women accept primary caregiver roles, even as they are also moving into the labor force. In cultural terms, their most important role is still seen as anchoring household affairs and helping their children grow into responsible adults. Children are taught to contribute to the family unit and to function well within the family

“system”; much of the learning takes place amongst siblings and cousins, and rivalry is strongly discouraged. In addition, older siblings and cousins, not to mention parents and aunts and uncles, are accorded a great deal of respect. Senior authorities in the family are typically consulted about their opinions and experiences. Yet the older siblings and cousins of a family are also expected to sacrifice some of their own personal opportunities for the benefit of the younger generation. It is not uncommon for older brothers and sisters to forgo advanced schooling to contribute to the household economy at an earlier age, and thereby facilitate more advanced schooling for their younger siblings. Thus, working at a job rather than continuing school may not be viewed as negatively in Latino immigrant families; certainly it does not carry the same cultural stigma of school ‘drop-outs’ in the United States. So what educators perceive as indifference or resistance by Latino/a students to staying in school may reflect economic and family dynamics.

### **Achievement in Schools**

While it is common for schools in the United States to emphasize individual achievement, this might not best match what Latino/a students have been brought up to strive for and value. In general, in Latino cultures individuals are not socialized to stand out or to pursue individual excellence and distinction. Rather, the goal of personal independence is typically subordinated to the goal of familial interdependence, and solidarity for socioeconomic survival or

advancement. People do not define themselves as much by their work or their formal school-based knowledge, but instead define themselves by their life experience and how well “educado” they are. While many Latinos recognize the opportunities for social mobility that schooling provides, they may worry that school success will take children far away from their families and home. So, success in school is cultivated with modesty, and with the expectation that individual success will ultimately serve the family welfare.

Clearly, this orientation to collective welfare may clash with the strongly individualistic and competitive orientation of our schools. Latino children are not used to the emphasis on individual “standing out” and “performance” often required by schools. In addition, students might be accused of “cheating” or “copying” because of their orientation to, and comfort with, more cooperative learning styles. These differences are especially important for educators to understand in the context of our current push toward individual high-stakes testing with the No Child Left Behind Act. Indeed, the discomfort that Latino students may feel with this type of assessment should encourage us to question the validity of high-stakes testing models for evaluating the learning of all students, Latino or not. Further, educators should consider how a cooperative, group-oriented learning environment can help support all students to feel comfortable and learn in schools.

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