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Building Bridges, Not Walls, Between Latinx Immigrant Parents and Schools

Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove

As a teacher educator and former bilingual teacher, I have encountered many teachers who have negative misconceptions about immigrant parents. These misconceptions prevent teachers from forming reciprocal and meaningful relationships with parents and even with children (Colegrove, forthcoming). Negative misconceptions impact teachers' abilities to be equitable as well as their willingness to offer high-quality learning experiences to children (Adair, 2015; Crosnoe, 2006) or to include parents in meaningful, educational decision-making (Doucet, 2011, 2008).

This essay addresses some of these misconceptions as they were articulated during a large video-cued ethnographic study of Latinx immigrant parents of young children in Texas and California. As part of the larger Agency and Young Children study (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013), Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair and I interviewed 116 Latinx immigrant parents. I focused specifically on 55 Latinx immigrant parents who were from México, Perú, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Chile. I conducted group or individual interviews with all the parents after they watched a twenty-minute film about a first-grade classroom comprised mainly of children of Latinx immigrants. Parents were asked to respond to the practices in the film. The majority of the parents wanted to talk about their frustration about not being taken seriously by schools and teachers.

The essays looks at the parents' reactions to the film and their understanding of the negative misconceptions of themselves and other Latinx parents. It then offers some strategies for teachers to overcome these misconceptions and to work with Latinx parents to create reciprocal and meaningful relationships between them and schools.

Negative Misconceptions

The parents whom I got to know during this research had achieved educational levels ranging from fifth grade to master's degrees, and represented a wide range of socioeconomic status. Yet they all faced similar misconceptions from teachers and schools. These misconceptions included beliefs that teachers had about their parenting, their interest in education, and their abilities to help their children progress in school. Here are the five most common misconceptions shared by the participants I interviewed.

Misconception #1: Latinx immigrant parents believe teachers are responsible for all the teaching

The Latinx immigrant parents I interviewed understood that the role of the teacher was a role that teachers and parents shared. Teachers educate at school and parents educate at home. For example, Rocio spoke about the role of teachers and parents in children's education:

En la escuela se encarga el maestro, pero en la casa nos encargamos nosotros, de verlo que los niños van a hacer. [In the school the teacher is in charge, but at home we (parents) are in charge, to see what the children are going to do.]

Teaching was not exclusive to the teacher. Parents knew that they were teachers at home and were expected to support the learning taking place at school. This is contrary to the idea that culturally and linguistically diverse families leave all the teaching to teachers and do little at home to support teachers' efforts.

Misconception #2: Latinx immigrants lack knowledge of U.S. expectations of parental involvement

Parents understood that there were pre-established expectations in U.S. schools that all parents should be involved in some capacity at the school. Parents knew that their involvement at home was important, but also that they were required to help and support the school's efforts. Immigrant parents learned these expectations from family members who lived in the U.S. before them, from neighbors, and from other parents at schools. They were also informed by teachers and parent support specialists. Some parents in California learned these expectations through educational advertisements on TV. These public ads provided ideas on how to help children at home and described the type of interactions that were expected at schools, including, for example, volunteering in the classroom, acting as a chaperone for field trips, or participating in school events and festivities.

Misconception #3: Latinx immigrant parents don't help with homework

During focus group interviews with teachers carried out as part of the larger study, a few teachers expressed frustration with parents, particularly parents of bilingual students, regarding homework completion. However, all parents in the study mentioned that helping with homework was crucial for the academic success of their children. Parents indicated that they helped with and checked their children's homework daily. Parents also reported approaching the teacher to ask for help when they

needed clarification with homework and seeking teachers' advice on how to better support their children at home.

Parents did encounter difficulties while helping their children, especially with homework in English. However, they sought help from their neighbors and family members. In some instances, they used a dictionary to translate assignments and understand them better. For example, Valentina in South Texas shared how difficult homework in English could be once her child started transitioning to English. Her strategy was to ask her neighbor for advice and help. Valentina said:

Oh si mucho más difícil... yo empecé con mis niñas de aquí de primer año y luego les dejaban las tareas en inglés... y pues ahí voy con el vecino a preguntarle ¿Cuál?, ¿Cómo?, ¿Cómo le hacía?, porque yo no le entendía. [Oh yes, way more difficult... I started school here with my girls since first grade, and they (the teachers) gave them homework in English... and well, there I went to the neighbor to ask Which? How? How did you do it? Because I couldn't understand.]

Like the parents Yosso describes (2005), these parents were wise and resourceful, seeking support and advice by using their community cultural wealth.

Misconception #4: Latinx immigrant parents lack the structure and discipline to create healthy learning habits

Contrary to this misconception, parent participants in my study fostered learning habits in their children, understanding that these skills were necessary for their children's academic success in school. For example, parents created routines. When children came back from school, parents provided a nutritious snack, determined a time for homework, and established bath time and bedtime routines. Rocio described the routine she created for her daughter:

Pues yo le doy un tiempo, verdad, de que vea tele sus caricaturas, pero también le doy tiempo de que va a hacer su tarea y la mando a bañar temprano pa' dormir temprano para que ella al otro día este relajada su mente. [I give her time, right, so she can watch cartoons, but also I give her time to do her homework. And I tell her to take a bath early so she can go to bed early and the next day her mind is relaxed.]

Parents understood that routines and schedules help children to organize their time and create habits that later support them with their schoolwork.

Misconception #5: Latinx immigrant parents don't make the time to support learning for their children

Parents in the study knew about the curriculum their children were covering at school by talking to their children, asking questions, reviewing homework and tests, or revising school materials such as notebooks and worksheets that their children brought home. They reinforced the curriculum through such activities as teaching addition and subtraction and creating additional problems for their children for extra practice (Colegrove & Krause, 2017). Jazmin, a mother from the U.S.-Mexico border, devised new problems for her child. She would use dots and fingers as teaching tools for learning at home. She was very enthusiastic about the teaching and learning happening at home: “Así él va aprendiendo o le enseño como usar los deditos” [this way he is learning or I teach him using his fingers].

Most parents read with their children or promoted the children’s own reading time at night before bed to help them develop a reading habit. Parents started these literacy practices as early as pre-kindergarten. Also, parents asked their children about their day after school or at dinnertime. This was a significant part of the day during which parents could hear about their children’s daily experiences.

Strategies for Building Bridges

Latinx immigrant parents care greatly about their children’s education despite the deficit discourses and stereotypes that mischaracterize their participation in U.S. schools. Parents understand that they need to be involved and participate in their children’s education at home and school from early on in their children’s school trajectory. However, there is a need to build a bridge between home and school that values respect and true collaboration (Doucet, 2011). This bridge needs to create spaces where families and teachers can listen to each other, with time and respect, and trust. The following are strategies that teachers can implement in their classrooms to better understand and communicate with families, and to build relationships that support children’s learning.

Think of Parents as Partners

When teachers think of parents as their partners, they make the effort to be accessible. They want to bring parent and community knowledge into the classroom as much as possible. In my interviews with Latinx immigrant parents I often heard that teachers had a one-way relationship with them and where the teachers tried to keep them away from school. In one of the parent focus groups in California, for example, Mariana shared her frustration that many teachers build walls instead of inviting her into the educational process. Mariana was an immigrant mother from South America who has lived in the

U.S. for fifteen years. She arrived as a young adult and eventually earned an associate's degree at a local community college. She described herself as an involved and caring mother.

Even though she was formally educated, middle-class, and assertive when it came to her daughter's education, Mariana noticed that relationships with teachers seemed to be one-sided, particularly after kindergarten, when teachers became less and less approachable. She described this process as a "wall" being created between teachers and parents. All of the communication was through email. Mariana said that once a teacher approached her after dismissal to discuss her daughter's behavior, a problem of talking too much during instruction. Mariana wanted to speak with the teacher for a longer time, but was told she had to set up an appointment through email. Mariana was upset because the teacher felt free to approach her and address her concern at any time, even at pick-up time, which is stressful for parents. And yet when Mariana wanted to talk, she had to make an appointment. Mariana saw this as a major barrier:

Mariana: Pero a mí me gustaría que, si se toma esa libertad, porque te ponen como una barrera ¿no?, sabes que, no, no este, con la profesora tienes que sacar cita, appointment si quieres hablar de algo ¿no?

Kiyomi: Okay.

Mariana: Si, porque así es, pero entonces que también para eso me saque appointment ella.

Mariana: But I would like that if she takes the liberty, why do they set a barrier, no? You know with the teacher you need to make an appointment if you want to discuss something, right?

Kiyomi: Okay.

Mariana: Yes, that's the way it is, but then she needs to ask for an appointment with me too.

Mariana was not alone in feeling frustrated with the treatment she encountered from schools and teachers. Parents often felt like the relationship between home and school was one-sided, due mainly to language barriers between themselves and teachers. They tried to communicate with teachers and school personnel who only spoke English, but this type of communication was difficult. Parents told me that sometimes school staff pretended not to speak Spanish even when they were fluent in Spanish. Teachers also scheduled meetings at difficult times for parents, particularly those parents who worked two jobs or full-time jobs that did not end until the evening.

Latinx immigrant parents have a lot to learn from teachers and schools. And schools and teachers have a lot to learn from Latinx immigrant parents. Engagement that is respectful and meaningful is usually prompted by teachers. Teachers can send signals in various ways that they are interested in a reciprocal

partnership, not in a one-sided relationship. These ways include helping parents feel welcome in the classroom, initiating and maintaining ongoing communication with and listening to parents, and changing parent-teacher conferences from a formal discussion to a more conversational dialogue.

Make Parents Feel Welcome in the Classroom

At the beginning of the school year, teachers can invite families to visit the classroom so that parents and families get to know the teachers and staff as well as become familiar with the daily routines and curriculum. In addition to a specific, purposeful invitation, teachers can send home the class schedule in children's folders and invite parents to stop by and visit the classroom at any time.

Parents seem to feel more comfortable when the teacher invites them through a phone call or a face-to-face invitation at drop-off or pick-up. These direct forms of communication, rather than an email or note, are more personal to many parents and can communicate to families, from the very start, that teachers are willing to communicate with them.

Some teachers may prefer to invite parents to specific activities at specific times, such as to help during Centers Time. Centers are designated areas within the classroom that provides independent and self-directed activities for students to practice learning objectives. However, an invitation to volunteer in the classroom limits the time in which parents can come to the classroom and the activity they can see. I propose opening the whole school day, allowing parents to come during a work break or their lunch time. Parents in my study expressed interest in learning about their children's school day, and opening the classroom for visits anytime would be a way for parents to learn about their children's day-to-day experiences. Many teachers worry that this will produce chaos, but children get used to seeing their parents after a few minutes and they get excited about their parents visiting their classroom. As a teacher, I had an open-door policy and parents visited the classroom often. Some helped with whatever we were doing at the time. Others walked around and talked with students or read with them, and still others dropped off their children's lunches or stayed for lunch. The parents, the children, and I all enjoyed these visits.

One of the reasons I started these visits was because most of the parents in my classroom were immigrants and I wanted them to experience and learn about a typical day in my classroom and become familiar with classroom procedures. During these open or planned visits, teachers can be welcoming

by inviting parents to come in, offering them a space to drop their belongings, offering them a chair, walking them around, and providing non-verbal cues that show their excitement about their visit. This is especially important for teachers who speak a language different from the family. Parents know when they are wanted and welcomed and when teachers are making real efforts. Through these types of interactions, families will most likely start to feel more comfortable coming to school.

Listen to Parents and Communicate with Them

Parents are experts on their children and are the ones who know their children best. When parents visit the classroom, teachers can interact with them, engage in conversation, and gather information about the families. This type of informal communication is critical to bridging cultural gaps.

Conversation allows teachers to learn from parents. Shifting the role of the teacher to the role of learner (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) helps parents to see teachers as more supportive and open. Teachers can then use that knowledge to teach better and motivate students' learning and achievement. I found in my work that when parents felt that I was listening to them, they were more comfortable saying and sharing things about their child and about education. Teachers can open the conversation so parents can ask questions about aspects of schooling that concern them, or about which they are unsure.

Rethink the Parent/Teacher Conference

Parent-teacher conferences offer an auspicious time for teachers to build bridges with parents. During the first parent-teacher conference of the year, teachers can plan for extra time to talk with parents. In my own parent/teacher conferences as a teacher, I would talk to parents about my own family. I showed them pictures and postcards of my hometown. This small gesture seemed to prompt parents to talk about their own family and children. Teachers can also talk to parents as members of the community and ask questions about the larger community, asking parents for recommendations for restaurants or places to visit, for example.

Angela, a mother we interviewed in Texas, said how much she appreciated her first-grader's teacher, who showed interest in their lives and asked them questions about their lives outside of school. Angela explained:

El maestro se involucra mucho con los papás. ¿Señora cómo le ha ido? ¿Cómo está? ¿Cómo le va? 'Muy bien maestro,' y así como que daba la oportunidad. [The teacher gets very involved with the parents. How are you doing Mrs.? How are you? How are things going?] "Very well

teacher,” and that’s how it gives the opportunity.]

These small exchanges show that teachers care for the parents and their lives.

Offering Latinx Children the Education They Deserve

Culturally and linguistically diverse parents historically have been positioned by the dominant group as lacking the necessary skills and abilities to succeed, or needing to change their approaches and practices to mirror those of the dominant group (Leonardo, 2009, 2015). As teachers and schools develop partnerships with immigrant parents and families, they will better be able to overcome, dismiss, or counter negative misconceptions. Moreover, teachers and schools benefit from assuming and recognizing that Latinx immigrant parents care about their children’s academic achievement. When parents and teachers engage and interact, teachers can learn from parents about their deep interest in and care for schooling as well as the ways in which parents and families support children in their learning. As misconceptions give way to actual communication and partnerships with parents, transformation is possible.

It is my experience that as teachers change their perceptions of families and parents, they also improve their perceptions of the children. And when teachers see children in strength-based ways, they offer them better, higher quality, and more dynamic learning experiences. As teachers, schools, and the larger early childhood educational system adapt strength-based decision-making rather than acting on deficit and often false ideas about families, it becomes possible to offer all young children the dynamic and high-quality early learning experiences they deserve.

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