“Como la Gente”: A Personal Testimonio of Effective Pedagogies of the Home Devalued by Mainstream Education

Elizabeth Esparza
Dr. Elvia Ramirez, Faculty Mentor

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed Chicana/Latina parental involvement in schools via the use of testimonio. Testimonio, a feminist research method entailing first person narrative accounts, was used in this study to document my mother’s involvement in schools. Guided by Chicana feminist theorizations of home pedagogies, this study found that though Chicana/Latina parents do not engage in mainstream parental participation practices, they nonetheless inculcate in their children values that are highly conducive to educational success, such as punctuality, respect for teachers, a strong work ethic, sacrifice, and endurance. These “pedagogies of the home” have helped me successfully traverse through inequalities and barriers I have encountered as a working-class Chicana student, such as unequal access to high quality schooling, segregation, uncaring/unqualified teachers, and other structural inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Latinos/as are the largest minority group and one of the fastest growing, accounting for more than half on the U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2010 (Liu 2011; Passel, Cohn, and Lopez 2011). By early 2014, Latinos/as in California are projected to become the “plurality” (California Department of Finance 2013) and by 2060 one in three U.S. residents will be Latino/a (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Notwithstanding their impressive demographic growth, Latinos/as remain educationally marginalized. For example, as of 2011, only 19% of Latinos/as had obtained a college degree, compared to 42% of Whites and 26% of African Americans (Liu 2011).

Parental participation in schools might hold the key to alleviating Latinos’ educational disadvantage. A substantial body of empirical literature suggests that parents who are more involved in their children’s education have children who are more socially and academically successful (Epstein 2001; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Hill and Craft 2003; McWayne et al. 2004). In fact, some scholars contend that parent participation in a student’s education is as or more significant than family background variables, such as social class, marital status, and race or ethnicity, in determining a student’s progress and success in school (Epstein 2001). Historically, however, Latinos/as have had lower parental involvement rates (Clark 1983; Comer 1984; Delgado-Gaitan 1990; Tinkler 2002; Turney and Kao 2009). These lower participation rates have led to the misconception, supported by cultural deficit theories, that Latino/a parents do not care about their children’s education (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001; Hill and Craft 2003; Jones 2003; Váldes 1996). Cultural deficit perspectives claim that Latinos/as are incompetent, not interested in their children’s education (Delgado-Gaitan 1991), and do not value education (Fulgini 2007; Goldenberg et al. 2001; Ramirez 2003; Valencia and Black 2002). These perspectives are very widespread in academia and in the larger society.

The perception of what constitutes parental participation and/or involvement in schools has been subject to debate. According to mainstream perspectives, parental involvement constitutes attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in the PTA, and volunteering at school (Crozier 2001; Klugman, Lee, and Nelson 2012) — all activities that can be seen by school personnel and parents (Englund et al. 2004; López 2001; McWayne et al. 2004; Ryan et al. 2010). This definition of parental participation is undoubtedly reflective of the experiences and perspectives of the dominant white, middle-class community (Crozier 2001; Klugman, Lee, and Nelson 2012). However, there is other research which shows that Latinos/as do indeed care and that there are barriers that impede, or hamper, Latino/a parental involvement in schools.

Some scholars suggest that barriers to Latino/a parental involvement in schools revolve around lack of knowledge about school settings and limited English proficiency (Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Yet, there is research that finds that native-born Mexican American parents who tend to speak fluent English and are knowledgeable of school processes and expectations are less involved in their child’s education than foreign-born parents (Lopez, Sanchez, and Hamilton 2000). This contrast needs further and urgent attention, particularly when studies have also shown that third- and fourth- generation Mexican Americans fall behind in educational levels compared to earlier generations (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Thus, the factors associated with low Latino/a parental involvement in schools, such as linguistic and cultural barriers, are not always present; yet, the results remain the same, which should lead to further investigations regarding the validity of previous research.

Though a plethora of studies have examined Latino/a parental involvement in schools, few studies have analyzed this issue from a Chicana feminist, autobiographical perspective. In order to fill this gap in the literature, this research details the struggles of a Chicana/Latina with parent involvement, using testimonio as a research methodology and Chicana feminist theory as the conceptual framework. Based on the author’s personal experiences, this study will
elucidate the barriers and support structures that have impeded and aided her family’s involvement in schools.

**Literature Review**

A number of studies find that parent involvement in schools is critical for students’ academic success and achievement (Epstein 2001; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Keith and Lichtman 1994). Studies find, for example, that parent involvement in schools is positively correlated with academic achievement, school attendance, graduation rates, educational aspirations, constructive classroom behavior, enrollment in rigorous curriculum, and positive attitudes toward school (Bracke and Corts 2012). Furthermore, parents who participate in schools are more knowledgeable about the school’s expectations and are thus better advocates for their children (Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Additionally, when parents are involved in schools, teachers provide greater attention to students, teachers identify students’ potential learning problems at earlier stages, and parents and teachers are able to coordinate efforts to aid students and provide family services (Bracke and Corts 2012). Parental involvement is also associated with greater community mobilization around issues concerning school quality, such as the hiring of qualified teachers, administrators, and staff and the building and maintenance of quality physical facilities (Bracke and Corts 2012; Epstein 1995; Mediratta and Frucher 2001; Zill and Nord 1994). In short, parental involvement in schools fosters student academic success and is paramount for establishing positive relationships between students, parents, teachers, and the larger community.

Although research shows that most parents value education and recognize that parental involvement is critical for students’ educational success (Epstein 2001), parents with lower levels of education and from working-class and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds tend to be less involved in their children’s schools (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Englund et al. 2004; Grodnick et al. 1997; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Ramirez 2003; Ryan et al. 2010). Several factors have been identified as possible causes for these parents’ lower participation levels including: an unwelcoming school environment, lack of trust in the school, feelings that participation will not ‘make a difference,’ lack of time and flexibility in parents’ schedules, and lack of teacher preparation in the domain of family-school relationships (Bracke and Corts 2012; Lareau and Shumar 1996). Concerning the latter point, Bracke and Corts (2012) note that “many teacher education programs do not provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to interact with families in their field experiences, meaning that a teacher candidate may have had little practical experience in working with parents – and thus may be hesitant to work with parents” (191). The lack of parental involvement is thus also the result of teachers’ inability to effectively engage with parents.

Given their lower levels of participation in schools, many researchers and practitioners, particularly those who subscribe to cultural deficit theory, assume that working-class and racial/ethnic minority parents do not place a high premium on education. Cultural deficit models tend to portray these parents as incompetent and uninterested in their children’s educational success (Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Scholars, however, have begun to debunk many of the myths surrounding these parents’ participation in schools.

In their study of Latino parent participation, for example, Quicho and Daoud (2006) found that Latino parents had high expectations of their children’s academic achievement, though teachers held negative perceptions of Latino parents. Furthermore, researchers have found Latino/a parents tend to value education because they perceive it as a means to obtaining well-paid jobs for their children (Adams et al. 1994). However, the level of parent involvement is misclassified because it does not fit the standards of parent involvement as being visible involvement. Thus, the lack of visibility may make it seem that Latino parents do not care. Indeed, Hill and Craft (2003) found that teachers believe that parents who volunteer more at school valued education more than did other parents.

The findings from Quicho and Daoud’s (2006) study contrast starkly with the perceptions many teachers and administrators have of Latino/a parent involvement in their children’s education. Teachers and administrators often perceive that Latino/a parents do not care about their children’s education (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001; Quicho and Daoud 2006; Valdés 1996). In short, the poor outcomes of Latino/a students, combined with the tendencies to judge them more negatively (Hill and Torres 2010) and the misinterpretation of the educational values in the Latino/a household based upon the lack of parent involvement, requires further research. In particular, more research from the perspective of Latino/a families is needed. In an effort to fill in this gap in the literature, this study analyzes Latino/a parental involvement via the lenses of Chicana feminist theory and testemonio.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Chicana feminist theorizations of home pedagogies (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006; Villenas 2006). More specifically, it draws from Delgado Bernal et al.’s (2006) conceptualization of “pedagogies of the home” (42). Pedagogies of the home are the culturally specific ways that Latino/a parents and families organize informal teaching and learning practices within the home environment (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006). In contrast to cultural deficit models, a pedagogies of the home framework underscores the cultural strengths embedded within Latino/a ways of teaching and learning. This framework resonates with ethnographic research documenting Latino(a) ways of teaching and learning as
cultural strengths and elucidates how children draw on their cultural and linguistic resources to function and succeed in schools (Delgado-Gaitán 1990, 1992, 1994; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Trueba 1988, 1991). Pedagogies of the home is also connected to a funds of knowledge approach (González et al. 1995; Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 1992), which underscores the bodics of knowledge that Latino/a families rely on for survival. Finally, this perspective also resonates with Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework, which highlights the positive cultural values and strengths that minority families and parents inculcate in their children; these forms of cultural wealth include: aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational types of capital. Delgado Bernal et al.’s (2006) pedagogies of the home perspective is thus consistent with extant literature highlighting the cultural strengths embedded in Latino/a teaching and learning practices within the home environment.

According to Delgado Bernal et al. (2006), the intergenerational transmission of knowledge within working-class Latino/a households – a process that is oftentimes brokered by Latina mothers, and which typically takes the form of cuentos (stories), consejos (advice), dichos (sayings/proverbs), and other storytelling forms – helps Latinos/as survive, resist, and succeed within an educational system that is oftentimes oppressive to Latino/a students. As Delgado Bernal et al. (2006) noted, “the teaching and learning of the home allow Chicanas to draw on their own cultures and sense of self to resist domination along the axes of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (114). Through subtle and overt resistant strategies that they learn at home, Chicanas are able to overcome the challenges and inequalities they encounter throughout their educational trajectories.

A pedagogies of the home perspective underscores the role of Latina mothers in promoting and facilitating Latino/a children’s educational successes. This framework thus contests hegemonic and pejorative portrayals of Latina mothers in the media and schools. As Villenas (2006) noted, Mature Latina women and mothers are the most visible in media images about illegal immigration, poverty, family disintegration, and other of society’s ills. They are highly visible as childbearers responsible for the reproductive ‘invasion’ of the United States; they are highly visible as silent maids, nannies, sweatshop laborers, and ‘Latin’ prostitutes. And they are visible, in fact center-stage, as parents who purportedly don’t care about their children’s schooling (143).

Delgado Bernal et al. (2006) and other Chicana feminists thus write with “a passionate commitment” (Villenas 2006, 143) to documenting the role of Latina mothers in fostering their children’s educational successes.

In short, guided by Chicana feminist theorizations of home pedagogies, this study will highlight the role of one Latina mother (the author’s mother) in promoting her daughter’s educational success. This will be accomplished through the use of testimonio.

Methodology

This study employs testimonio as the primary research methodology. Testimonios provide a personal account that allows the researcher deeper personal access to the topic being observed. This form of methodology holds particular importance for Latino/a scholars because it repositions power out of the colonized framework and allows Latino/a scholars to construct knowledge through narratives that originate from personal experiences, which challenge social inequalities (Huber and Cueva 2012). This form of method, then, denies the claim that any research can be conducted under genuine objectivity, while accepting that a cultural bias has been present in previous modes of research; hence, testimonios commit to providing a different view under a different lens, one which has historically been disregarded by mainstream academic research. Hence, testimonio rejects the construct of unbiased knowledge and challenges it by locating the collectives of individuals formed by common experiences of oppression, resistance, and marginalization (Delgado Bernal, Bucia, and Flores Carmona 2012).

Though testimonios appear to be a form of research that operates with a single agenda, its value rests on the information mainstream academic research does not typically access. Testimonio in educational research helps us understand the oppression that exists within educational institutions by showcasing the sort of biases that otherwise go unnoticed; therefore, this methodology highlights and calls attention to the efforts which students of color commit to for the sake of challenging and transforming cultural and intellectual spaces (Huber and Cueva 2012). As a form of communication, it stands on the premise that sharing the personal narratives that require vulnerability and intimacy is an invitation for audiences to self-reflect, to engage with deeper understanding of the marginalized, and to share spaces with people who otherwise might never coalesce (Delgado Bernal, Bucia, and Flores Carmona 2012). Mainstream research, with its limitations that create cultural bias, leaves out crucial information that only existing members of the researched community have access. Testimonio breaks through such barriers because it is a form of research that looks to disrupt silence, create deep meaningful connections through common noise, and serve as a catalyst for social justice; therefore, it is no surprise that testimonio in academia has grown in practice as the result of political urgency to pursue social justice education reform and for communities of color (Delgado Bernal, Bucia, and Flores Carmona 2012). This form of methodology continues to grow as a response to years of biased conclusions that created systems of social isolation and oppression.

Testimonios, particularly in the field of education, hold value because they help increase the sense of community, which can result in further collaboration amongst scholars and more action. As research on the topic points out, testimonios intend to unite people, not exclude or create new margins; the method serves as an invitation to listen, to learn, prompt curiosity, and further critical inquiry.
California State University, Sacramento

(Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012). This system of research, then, allows for scholars who otherwise felt excluded an avenue for further communication and validation of similar experiences. It is no surprise that this research method follows in the work of scholars, particularly women of color, who have not only undergone marginalization but use testimonio as a vehicle to express the concerns, the stories, the efforts, and modes of survival from those of the margin to centralized academic audiences; and, thus, again challenging the space relations by providing evidence that such boundaries and forms of exclusion exist (Huber and Cueva 2012). Furthermore, it continues to grow validity as the intent of testimonio becomes clearer and academia recognizes that it is not a mode of selfish validation, but rather a tool for various communities to understand one another, engage with dialogue, and reach new understandings that otherwise might not present themselves without the, otherwise silent, voices of the marginalized (Reyes and Rodriguez 2012). As a form of research, it is more prone to create action than forms of qualitative and quantitative methods that leave out the human story behind the research, hence eliminating motivation to act. In short, based on Chicana feminist conceptualizations of home pedagogies, this research examines Latina parental involvement in schools via the use of testimonio. The findings are presented below.

Findings

As a youth, I was made aware of the importance of education by the high disciplinary standards my mother set for myself and my sisters, and I progressed in school using the tools and values—or pedagogies of the home—my mother taught me through her actions. Just as it has been previously documented, “many researchers have found that Latino parents have high expectations for their children’s education and want to participate in their academic success” (Quiocho and Daoud 2006, 256). My mother’s expectations and modes of participation, however, were specific to the cultural, economic and educational system in which we existed, as Delgado Bernal et al’s (2006) pedagogies of home framework suggests. She was born and raised in Mexico (which we visited at least once a year), we lived in the poverty-stricken community of South Central Los Angeles, and we were enrolled in a failing school district. Thus, my mother’s efforts were of a different sort than the kind that is typically classified as mainstream parent involvement. Most of her efforts took place in our home; her involvement was not always visible to my school. So, as researchers point out, “The lack of visibility may make it seem that Latino parents do not care... teachers believed that parents who volunteered more valued education more than did other parents” (Ryan et al. 2010, 393). The lack of communication on the school’s part, the prejudices that were then constantly placed upon students and their families, and the outright misguidance that is given to those same students contribute more to the educational achievement gap that plagues our educational system than lack of the unfairly defined parent involvement.

Perhaps the highest expectation my mother set for my sisters and me came in the form of our attendance. School attendance had a specific sort of meaning in my home. My mother showed us rigorous discipline in the way she delivered us to elementary school. Every day she woke us up, before 7:00 a.m. and directed us through our morning routine. As soon as we set foot off our bed, my mom hurried us from our room to the bathroom. We washed our faces, brushed our teeth, and combed our hair. She always insisted we look presentable; “como la gente!” (like people), she would say. Through this dicho (saying), my mom communicated the importance of grooming, self-presentation, and discipline, values undoubtedly critical for educational and occupational success. Our clothes had to be ironed, creased, and matching. If I wore a blue and white dress, my hair accessories, my shoes, and my socks had to correlate. My hair was combed differently every day. She would not let us leave the house two days in a row with the same hair style; that would show lack of effort on her part, and she could not allow people to think she was not trying. When word got around that a kid nearby had lice, we had to wake up earlier to put our hair in a braid, each day a different style. Appearance mattered to my mother; in her mind, a well put together child was representative of a loving and caring mother. I saw how the other kids came to school and felt privileged because I had a mother who made sure I was proper, como la gente.

After our morning rigor, my mother walked us through South Central Los Angeles to get to our school. As a single mother, she was fearless. We walked underneath the local 110 freeway overpass where drug addicts, homeless people, and gang members often gathered to hideout from the cops. Once in the sixth grade, I was robbed by a grown man who grabbed for my neck, wrestled me down to the ground, left me with scratches and bruises around my neck, and stole my gold chain. Plenty of people drove by; saw me, an eleven year old girl, being mugged by a man, and did nothing. South Central was that sort of place, and my mother walked us through there every morning; we only altered routes at nights, when crime flared highest. If she felt any fear, we did not know it; she kept any assumed weakness off her face. We walked through these streets with sharply ironed clothes and lemon juice in our hair (because it kept the baby hairs from sticking up) and firm smiles on our faces because to my mother appearance, preparation, and confidence walked hand in hand. That fearless conviction of my mother made me feel protected. I was well aware, conceptually, that I lived in a dangerous area, and yet I could feel safe if I carried on the way my mother did. My mother made it a point for us to arrive to school early every morning. She wanted to make sure that we had time to eat our free breakfast with the other kids while she had her slice of bread with raisins and coffee. Breakfast was also
her time to chitchat, socialize and network with the other moms. All the moms shared information, resources and helped one another in their own unique way. There was no formal structure or set schedule. They simply asked for help when they needed it, and offered help when they could. They spoke to each other and tried to generate their own solutions because no one else helped, nor did it appear that anyone wanted to help. I cannot recall seeing school staff or teachers ever approaching the group of mothers who gathered in the mornings with any solutions. Perhaps there were cultural and language barriers that prevented the interactions from happening, but nonetheless, the two worlds never connected. Still, my mother could gather with the other mothers and get or receive help and solutions depending on the situation. She made me feel safe, my mother. *Mi madre es chingona*, my mother is bad-ass, I remember thinking - and she was.

As a student, I knew and felt that my mother cared for my education; I had absolutely no doubt about it. Yet, according to research, “Parent involvement, has been defined in various ways, but most definitions emphasize participation in school functions and events and direct communication between parents and school personnel” (Ryan et al. 2010, 392). My mother did not attend any Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, or stay to volunteer during classroom hours, or organize any sort of afterhours community events because no one ever let her know that was expected of her, or even possible. As Quiocio and Daoud (2006) have noted, “Latino parents often misunderstood their role in their children’s education because they didn’t understand the concept of involvement as defined by the school” (257). Like most parents in the community I grew up in, my mother had limited contact with school staff. Those two worlds rarely met; they only came together during teacher-parent conferences (which always felt like a trial), and the annual open-house events hosted at the school. However, research concludes that “parent involvement has often been defined in terms of activities that are visible to school personnel and other parents” (Ryan et al. 2010, 393), yet there were few attempts from the schools I attended to create these opportunities for interpersonal communication.

Though school staff rarely made significant outreach efforts to parents, research suggests, “parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse students, however, often fail to participate in the schools in numbers comparable to other majority group parents” (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, 20). Research goes on to conclude that “ethnically diverse families living in poor socioeconomic conditions often face sustained isolation from the school culture, which can lead to miscommunication between parents and school” (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, 21). Yet the isolation of parents, at least that of my mother, was not a conscious one; she did not intend to not be involved. My mother and other parents were there, present in the mornings when they dropped us off, and in the afternoons when they picked us up; yet the school made no effort to communicate with them and provide the standards and expectations of parent involvement, as the school defined them. The parents in my school were, in fact, already a community; they had systems of communication and problem solving methods which they put to use almost daily. They simply needed a direction, which the school failed to provide, and in turn wasted the potential of that community.

I formed a sense of discipline for punctuality from the seriousness my mother applied to our school attendance. The way she saw it, she was responsible to get us to school, and she took that responsibility seriously. She woke us up early, made sure we were at school on time, and looked presentable. Once she dropped us off, she assumed the school would take over. My mother was not unique to this experience; research finds that, “many immigrant parents in the United States are confronted with expectations of parental involvement that contrast with those of their home countries, where parents are supposed to defer to their children’s teachers and not intervene in the schooling process” (Klugman, Lee, and Nelson 2012, 1321) Thus, just as research concludes, my mother trusted the school teachers and staff would do a much better job at providing an academic education to her daughters than she could. Her highest level of education was elementary school while the teachers at school had all completed college. She figured the best she could do was to get out of the way and let the teachers do their job. As one study points out, “low-income parents believe their role is to support teacher’s educational decisions rather than initiate activities or intervene in their children’s education more directly” (Ryan et al. 2010, 392). This was the tradition she came from. In Mexico, the parents were expected to trust that the teachers knew best; to question the teachers was a sign of disrespect of their authority and preparation, almost an insult; through this pedagogy of the home (Delgado Bernal et al., 2006), my mother taught me the importance of respecting institutional agents such as teachers, a value undoubtedly crucial for educational success. She did not know about parent involvement, the expectations of an effective parent were not explained to her. She did what she knew and did it to the best of her capacity.

The high standard of discipline my mother held us to during our mornings carried throughout my school day. Just as class got out, my mother was already at school, waiting for us. We walked back home and arrived to a home cooked meal. She cleaned the house from top to bottom, did any laundry that needed to be done that day, and cooked a meal from scratch every single day while we were at school. She did that work so that when we arrived home from school, we arrived to a clean home and a warm meal; those were the responsibilities she understood as expectations, and she met them daily. Just as we entered the door, my mother demanded that we change our clothes because our school clothes were our “good” clothes, and she wanted to keep them that way. Once we were in our home clothes, we sat down to eat. Then, it was time for homework; we were not allowed
to do anything else until our homework was done. And, because we lived in South Central and it was too dangerous to go out past sunset, if we wanted any time to play outside, we had to do our homework promptly and correct; she checked our homework each day. When we played outside, we came inside at sunset, showered, waited for our long hair to dry (we did not own a hair dryer), and promptly went to bed, always part of the routine and on schedule. The next day, we started our process again. Thus, I never felt as if my mom did not care or value our education; I knew she did, and it made me value my role at school as well.

Though we lived in a poverty stricken community, our sense of gratitude maintained our discipline; we could not waste any opportunity. We lived in a rough part of town plagued with violence and drug abuse, but my family was aware of a deeper sort of poverty, the kind we experienced in rural parts of Mexico. We cherished the opportunities we were granted, the education, the free breakfast at school, the clothes; all of it could not go to waste. Deep in our psyche was the idea that if we did not value our possessions, through our efforts, they could be taken away. On yearly summer trips to Mexico, I saw the sort of poverty that made South Central look like paradise. Other kids ran up to me and asked me to show them my things, and they were happy just to see and touch them. I gave some kids my home clothes, the kind we weren’t able to wear outside, and they were ecstatic. I saw them wear my home clothes to church. I saw the school materials children kept there, the pencils that were only long enough to hold with two fingers. Meanwhile in South Central, we threw out pencils far before the midpoint. Thus, my mother constantly reminded my sisters and I how good we had it, and how we could not waste our opportunities. That experience, knowing and feeling like my daily efforts held value, made me move along daily without ever stopping to complain about the disadvantages we were exposed to. Yet, gratitude and other similar values we gained from our home experiences are rarely valued or documented as an element involved with student success; but for me, it was the glue that held me together.

The summer before the start of middle school, my mother and my step dad separated. My mother, being the sort of woman that she is, took on her role as a single mother in stride. She never let herself become or be seen as a victim. I remember seeing her taking her predicament and pushing forward full speed ahead. She picked up multiple jobs, made sure our house remained up to par, and still fulfilled all of her motherly duties in regard to us. I was proud of her. I saw my mother's striving, and it inspired me. She eventually picked up a full time job, had part time work, and did side jobs whenever they came up, and never once complained or cried about it. *Ya ni llorar es bueno*, she would say; crying won't help us now. Her determination made me push myself, do things on my own, and take some of the daily duties of her hands. As the academic year continued, I began walking myself to school and doing some of the other things my mom used to do for me in previous years. Just as she was taking care of the things that needed to be taken care of, I too was doing my part, becoming an independent person, but not without structure. All that rigor and discipline from earlier years were now a part of me; I instinctually followed the traditions of my mother. I woke up early, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, combed my hair, ironed my clothes, and headed out of my home with enough time to get to school early and have my free breakfast. When I came home from school, I did my homework, and checked my sister’s homework just as if my mother was there; but she was not there, she was at work. I enjoyed knowing that my mother was out earning; she gave me a sense of pride, and that sense of purpose and pride translated over to my academics. I maintained my academic achievement because that was another burden I could keep from my mom. If I did well in school, my mother would have less to stress about.

Through my middle school experience, my mother and I shared more responsibilities, and I depended less on her to have an active role in my education. Research by Hansen and Lareau (cited in Delgado-Gaitan 1991 and Lareau 1989) concludes that the relationship my mother, my school, and I shared was a product of the school culture alienating students and parents from poor socioeconomic conditions until parents become isolated, resentful, and apathetic. Yet, my mother’s values and expectations had not diminished nor changed; instead, her expectations of me were rising. Additional research concludes that “parents are less involved because of lack of time and flexibility in their schedules” (Ryan et al. 2010, 392); this conclusion draws a simplistic yet unreliable connection between longer working hours and job positions that do not provide flexibility with a particular definition of parent involvement. Parent involvement, as defined by mainstream education, fundamentally excludes parents with a lower socio-economic status. Under this conclusion, mainstream education relieves itself of any liability and places all responsibility on the shoulders of parents. It completely disregards the life values my mother was teaching me, it disregards the discipline she had instilled in me already, it disregards the limited attempts school officials made to reach out to our community, and only infers that lack of their definition of parent involvement is caused by the disposition of a parent’s socio-economic background.

At the surface level, my mother’s actions can be interpreted as neglectful and abandoning. She became less active in the standards that she set for herself (making sure we got to school safe and ensuring we had a good clean environment when we got home). So, as research theorizes, “deficit perspectives depict inactive parents in the schools as incompetent and unable to help their children because they have a different language, work long hours away from home, belong to different ethnic groups, or are just not interested” (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, 22). Thus, some researchers have noted that a common conclusion from studies demonstrating lower involvement of ethnic minority parents is that they value
education less than do whites (Fuligni 2007; Goldenberg et al. 2001; Ramirez 2003; Valencia and Black 2002). But, for me, her new view on life added to the values she was instilling within me. I was already made aware of disciplined attendance and the importance of personal appearance, and now I was witnessing a level of determination and drive that I did not see elsewhere. My mother had a full time job, part time work, and would do small jobs whenever they presented themselves. My grades reflected these three elements, and I was becoming a model student. However, in the eyes of researchers who conclude on sight parent involvement is directly connected to students’ academic success, I should have been on my way to a slow disengagement because of the lack of my mother’s visual presence in my education.

Despite what research might suggest based upon my mother’s involvement, I remained an excellent student. I was also becoming my mom’s right hand; I was developing a more important role. I taught myself how to drive by taking the car out into the neighborhood. No one pulled me aside and taught me how to drive; it was just something I did one day when no one was home. I remember grabbing the keys one day when no one was there and slowly drove the car through the neighborhood. But, that act was not an act of rebellion; I knew driving would give me a higher role in my house. According to Delgado Bernal et al. (2006), this was an act of “transformational resistance” (115) because driving would ultimately help me overcome challenges and obstacles I confronted in my life. I would be able to contribute more if I could drive, and I did. My mom would get headaches at night and I had to drive her in the middle of the night. It was out of necessity. I felt purposeful. My mother and I were partners. I elevated into the status of my mother. My mother never saw me as pitiful; I always made sure she knew I was in full control, and I was proud. I was contributing. I didn’t feel used, neglected, or abused; I felt privileged. I carried that attitude into school, I just needed to know what I needed to do and I got it done. That came from early responsibilities. As Delgado Bernal et al. (2006) notes, students’ commitment to their families through their fulfillment of familial obligations can be “a source of inspiration and motivation to overcome educational obstacles” (124). As long as I got my homework done and did well on tests, I could keep moving, even if I didn’t know where I was going. No one in school explained to me why I had to do well in school; they did not talk to me about college or a future career. I simply did well so my mother would not worry, not because of the idea of a better tomorrow. We existed in our present environment, in the current struggle; we were not operating under a vision of a better tomorrow, we were trying to survive the day. We had no empirical evidence to demonstrate that anything else worked.

For high school, I was supposed to go to Washington High School, but my mom did not want me to go there. Even she, who had little access to information, knew that the school would not be good for me. So, she enrolled me at El Sereno Junior High, which was five cities away, because my aunt, whose daughter went there, told my mom that the school was better than Washington High. Because I already knew how to drive, I drove there in the morning. I knew then that was not okay; I was driving a long distance to get to school, and I didn’t know anyone else who made that sort of drive. I did not know any other ninth graders who drove at all. I used to hide the car three blocks away and walk to school because I was scared that my mom would get in trouble. By then I was the mother. I protected my mother. I never worried about getting in trouble; I was more afraid of my mom getting into trouble. My mom used my aunt’s address, and I thought that if someone saw me driving, they would automatically know that my mom lied on my application. Yet, through the entire experience I felt proud. I fooled the school. My mother and I were taking on the entire school system, and we were winning. Delgado Bernal et al. (2006) would also label this an act of transformational resistance. My mother knew all the schools near South Central were horrible. They were the sort of schools that got mentioned in gangster rap songs; so, she did what she could to get me enrolled at another school, and trusted me to get there every morning. She trusted me. I was worthy of that. That’s why I felt proud. I had my mother’s trust. I was valuable.

During my first semester of high school I remained an A student. I still embodied the same discipline that I had learned in those early years. I attended every class and did not ditch school once, even though I had a car and other students would constantly ask me to take them out. I left my home around 6:30 a.m., though school started around 8 a.m. My mom expected me to get home before 5 p.m., do my homework, take care of my sisters, and make sure their homework was done. I had to be the watchful eye because my mom was not there, and I liked the responsibility. My role at home continued to translate over to my school work. I was good at receiving a task and getting it done. Thus, in-class work and homework came easy, and tests and quizzes were even simpler; all I had to do was take notes, remember the information and regurgitate it back to the teacher. All of those academic tasks were a breeze in relation to the responsibilities I was expected to fulfill at home. And yet, my contact with my teachers and my counselors was limited. I was offered no sense of direction, no alternative option beyond the world that was right in front of me.

During my second semester of high school, my mother was sent to prison. One night she called me and told me she got busted; I knew what happened and why she was going away, but I did not feel she was a bad person. She did what she had to do. I never felt sad publicly though I would cry some nights, but only when I was alone. I cried only because I missed her, not out of self-pity or pity for my sisters. I also cried because my mother was gone and I was left with an aunt that did not have the same level of authority that my mom had. My mom was secure and trusted me with a role, a purpose, but my aunt operated in fear and kept
us from doing anything. She trusted no one. She counted the cookies we ate (we were only allowed 5 cookies each); she counted the amount of toilet paper we used, and often complained that we were not going to make it through the month. My mother never expressed that sort of concern, she always found a way. Still the worst part of my new life was that my aunt did not let me have a role at home; I could have helped. I felt as if she was wasting my potential; I also began to feel that school was likewise wasting my potential.

Though my mother was in prison, I remained an academic achiever in school. When I was in the tenth grade, I was in Algebra II with my older cousin; she was in the twelfth grade, was heading off to a four-year university, and we were both “A” students. My family saw her as the model student, and I was there with her. Thus, I knew I was good. My mother was in prison, we were forced to move into the projects of East Los Angeles, I had to be a mother to my sisters, and I still competed with the academic pride of my family. I knew, though the feeling was not as strong, that I was good enough to do anything that was expected of me. The problem was, however, that no one at school (neither my teachers nor my counselors) expected anything from me. Even though I knew I had what it took academically, my teachers seemed not to care. They let the class run amuck. There was no discipline; students would walk out, kids would scream out the window to other students, teachers would sit in their desk while we chatted, and I felt I was just forced to be there, for no real purpose.

When my mother was released from prison, some of my previous discipline and habits returned. If I went to class, I was determined to be present and be engaged; I was never a disruptive student. I was responsive to the authority of my mother. If I got bad grades, my mom would know about it. I was afraid of disappointing her; I feared that if I disappointed my mother, I would fall off the pedestal she held me up to. I did not want to be one of the bad kids, though I was clearly aware that we were survivalists, and we did all the things we had to do to survive, whether they we good or bad. Still, I felt my mom held me in high regards because she gave me trust; she gave liberty. No one around me had that. I was the only Latina student who got to drive to school, who had a car, and who operated under an entirely different system. I was free, unbound by any cultural strings. I did not want to get pregnant because I would disappoint my mother. That was my mother’s major concern for me throughout my high school years. My high school success was determined by my ability to not get pregnant. If I did that, I was good.

Eventually, I stopped going to school simply because I did not care; I did not see the value of it. I saw that I could miss classes and still pass. The only time I met with a counselor was to change classes. When I began to think about my future and thought of being a lawyer, I went to the career center to ask questions. The counselor asked me what I wanted to be, so I said lawyer. She told me that it would take me eight “long” years after high school and suggested a career such as a flight attendant because it would take less time, and I would get to travel for free. I felt disappointed because my counselor, whom I assumed “knew best”, had no trust in my abilities, so I stopped thinking about being a lawyer altogether. I slowly became disengaged, school was not being presented as valuable by any one. Classes were boring, teachers were wasteful, and no figure of authority seemed to care whether I was there or not. I felt purposeless, the worst feeling I could feel. Towards the end of the twelfth grade I told my mother, “¿Ya para que voy?” Why even bother? My cousins who graduated high school were not any better than I was, my teachers did not ever seem to expect anything from me, and my role outside of school was beginning to shift again. I was expected to be a bigger contributor. In retrospect, that is what always drove me towards achievement, knowing that I had a role, that I was purposeful and valuable.

Though I did not graduate from high school, I was able to pursue higher education, largely through the resources and knowledge I gleaned from my mother’s teaching, or pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal et al. 2006). She taught me to be resilient and resourceful. At the age of 31, I found out about the existence of FAFSA and I was given an opportunity to go to college for free. This information was never provided to me in High School. I knew this endeavor would be tremendously difficult, being that I was a wife, a mother of three, took care of a full household, fourteen years had passed since my disengagement from High School, and we would have to face the daily financial hardship that comes from a limited income. Yet, I was presented with an opportunity so grand that I could not let it go to waste, just like my mother taught me. I had in my possession the memories of my mother’s fearless conviction when things were against her. The way she took her predicaments and pushed forward like a beast. Just as when I was child, I followed my mother’s traditions. I used the many tools she had given me as a child such as confidence, discipline, and determination and I excelled. I became the 4.0 student with College President’s Highest Honors six consecutive semesters in a row; was granted membership to the Phi Theta Kappa international honor society for two-year colleges; was awarded the Outstanding Women Award in 2009; obtained three Associates Degrees in Sociology, Social Science, and Liberal Arts-Social and Behavioral Science; and I am currently an undergrad student in a Northern California university, with a GPA of 3.9 and a plan to pursue a doctoral degree.

Conclusion

This research problematized Latino/a parental involvement in schools through the lenses of Chicana feminist theory and testimonio research methodology. Part of the purpose of this work is to challenge the previously accepted factors that contribute to student success, particularly regarding parental involvement in the Latino/a community and identify other factors that have been neglected...
by past research. As the findings clearly revealed, Latino/a parents, particularly mothers, highly value education. Though Latina/o parents do not engage in visual mainstream parental participation practices, they nonetheless teach their children values conducive to educational success, such as punctuality, respect for teachers, a strong work ethic, sacrifice, and endurance. These findings thus stand in stark contrast to cultural deficit theories, which tend to portray Latino/a parents and families as dysfunctional and uninterested in education. Researchers thus need to move beyond cultural deficit models and examine structural barriers that impede Latino/a educational success, such as unequal access to quality schooling, segregation, uncaring/unqualified teachers, and other structural inequities. Furthermore, researchers should re-evaluate the definition of parent involvement and create a more complex definition of parent involvement that includes valuable pedagogies of the home that have thus far been neglected by mainstream education. As more research is produced, policy and practice should reflect new findings to maximize student potential.

References


