Chicana College Aspirations and the Role of Parents: Developing Educational Resiliency

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Abstract: Using a theory of resiliency, this study provides a Chicana student's perspective of the role of parents in the development of college aspirations. Qualitative interviews with Chicana high school seniors shed light on the different ways these students perceive and come to understand the manner by which their parents influence and shape their educational goals and aspirations. The findings of this study point to the pertinent role of parents in the development of educational aspirations.

Resumen: Usando una teoría de resistencia, este estudio provee la perspectiva que estudiantes Chicanas tienen del papel que los padres desempeñan en el desarrollo de sus aspiraciones universitarias. Entrevistas cualitativas con estudiantes Chicanas de ultimo ano de preparatoria iluminaron las formas diferentes en que las estudiantes perciben y vienen a entender la manera en la cual sus padres influyen y forman sus aspiraciones y metas educacionales. Los hallazgos de este estudio señalan el papel pertinente de los padres en el desarrollo de aspiraciones educacionales.

Keywords: Chicana; parental influence; resiliency; college aspirations; college choice; higher education

Among Chicana[1] students, the important role that parents play in the development of educational aspirations has been well documented (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Gandara, 1995; Perez, 1999). Several studies, for example, have found that the amount of encouragement and support offered by parents and other family members is cited by Chicanas as the most important reason for wanting to pursue a college education (Alva, 1995; Ceja, 2001; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998). Although many studies that examine students' decisions to attend college illuminate the important role of parents in the de-

velopment of college goals and aspirations (Hossler, Braxton, & Cooper-smith, 1989; Hossler & Stage, 1992), misunderstood and rarely examined are the specific ways that Mexican parents positively shape the college goals and educational outlook of their children.

Understanding how parents influence the college aspirations of Chicana students is important given current educational statistics that reflect low levels of higher education participation among this group. Current national data show a 60% high school completion rate among Latino[2] students (Harvey, 2002). Latino students also lag every other population group in attaining college degrees (Fry, 2002). In addition, Latino students are less likely to enroll in a 4-year institution immediately after graduation (Perna, 2000) and more likely to be concentrated in the community college system (Darden, Bagakas, & Armstrong, 1994). As a subpopulation, Latina students experience the lowest levels of educational attainment of any population group and score lower on several indicators related to attainment, including achievement tests, completion of high school, and participation in and graduation from college (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

To this end, this article highlights how first-generation[3] college-going Chicana students perceive and come to understand the manner by which their parents have influenced and shaped their educational goals and aspirations. Close attention is given to what parents say and do that enables these parents to instill the importance of attaining a college education among their daughters. In doing so, this article discusses direct and indirect forms of parental influence. Also explored is how Chicana students interpret and find meaning in their parents' lived experiences and how the interpretation of these experiences becomes a critical source of motivation for Chicana students to aspire for a college education. Finally, this article addresses the important role that parental influence plays in the development of resiliency among Chicana students. In many ways, it is through the influence of parents that Chicana individuals begin to learn and realize that they could overcome many of the exclusionary forces that have made it difficult for their own parents to succeed.

Perspectives on Chicana Educational Achievement

Much has been written about the educational experience of Chicano and Chicana students in the United States. Earlier work concentrated primarily on explaining racial/ethnic differences in educational attainment largely from a cultural deficit perspective (e.g., Heller, 1966; Holtzman, Diaz-Guerrero, & Swartz, 1975). In general, the cultural deficit model focuses on the detrimental effect of such sociocultural factors as parenting styles and placement of less value on education and upward mobility (Carter & Segura, 1979; Sowell, 1981). Moreover, this framework postulates that Chicana individual cultural values, as transmitted through the family and specifically

the parents, are dysfunctional and therefore the reason for their low educational and later occupational attainment (Banfield, 1970; Dunn, 1987; Sowell, 1981; Wilson, 1987).

One of the primary assumptions of this research, that the low academic achievement of Mexican students is linked exclusively or, in great part, to family factors, has received intense criticism from several scholars (Arzubiaga, Ceja, & Artiles, 2000; Baca Zinn, 1989; Solorzano, 1992; Valencia & Solorzano, 1998). Valencia and Solorzano (1998) argued that one aspect of deficit thinking that fails to die is the belief that low-income parents of color typically do not value the importance of an education, fail to inculcate such a value in their children, and seldom participate in the education of their children.

Similar to Valencia and Solorzano (1998), other studies have shown that Latino parents do, in fact, place a high value on the education of their children (Ceja, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Gandara, 1995; Garcia, 2001). Moreover, in her ethnographic portrait that focused on bridging the distance between culturally diverse families and schools, Valdez (1996) found that parents expressed strong values toward education. Furthermore, research has also shown that organizational obstacles, including communication barriers and negative experiences with teachers and counselors, make the efforts of Mexican parents to become involved in the schooling process of their children difficult (Perez, 1999; Valdez, 1996). Although earlier explanations of Chicana and Chicano students' educational success were fueled by cultural deficit assumptions, more current research has attempted to show a more accurate representation of how Mexican parents articulate to their children the importance of succeeding in school.

Parental Encouragement and Support

Parental encouragement has been shown to be associated positively with postsecondary educational plans (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Ekstrom, 1985; Hossler & Stage, 1992). A large segment of the literature on parental encouragement has shown a strong relationship between a family's socioeconomic background and the amount of parental encouragement that children receive. This research suggests that the more prestigious the father's occupation (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987) and the higher the parental levels of education (Hossler & Stage, 1992), the more likely parents are to encourage their children to pursue college studies (Sharp, Johnson, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996). However, as illustrated in other research, lower levels of parental education and occupation do not necessarily translate into lower levels of encouragement and expectations by parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Ovando, 1977; Perez, 1999). This is an important note given that Latino families tend to lag behind other populations with regard to educational and occupational attainment (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Several studies have shown that, despite their low socioeconomic status, Mexican parents hold high educational aspirations for their children (Gandara, 1995; Ovando, 1977; Perez, 1999). Similarly, Alva (1995), in looking at the academic success of Mexican students, highlighted the importance of protective resources and appraisals from friends, teachers, and, most important, family members. Successful Mexican students, for example, mention their parents as an important source of support and encouragement in their educational processes (Alva, 1995; Gandara, 1982). Furthermore, an early study of the factors influencing the college aspirations of Latino high school students (Ovando, 1977), consistent with Gandara (1982), Alva (1995), and Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), found that the low income and low education of the parents was not necessarily related with low college aspirations.

For Chicana students, the type of parental encouragement they receive may look differently than that offered by White, middle-class parents (Arrellano & Padilla, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987, 1992; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). Gandara (1995), for example, looked at home influences that have facilitated the academic success of low-income Chicano children, particularly the role of family stories told by the parents. Still others (Valdez, 1996) refer to the use of *consejos* or advice to depict the manner by which Mexican parents articulate the importance of an education to their children. Despite their lower levels of education and income, Mexican parents manage to find alternative ways of conveying the importance of a college education to their children. In many of these cases, high student motivation and positive encouragement and expectations by Mexican parents serve to mediate the inhibiting effects of their often-marginalized educational, social, and economic circumstances.

Resiliency and the Development of College Aspirations

Given the educational conditions and challenges experienced by many Chicana students throughout their schooling process, as well as the economic and social struggles their families endure, a theory of resiliency can help us understand how these students manage to succeed despite these circumstances. Indeed, a number of studies on highly resilient students of color (Alva, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000) suggest the usefulness of such a theory in explaining how students are able to negotiate the various social, economic, and cultural forces affecting their college aspirations. In the current study, a theory of resiliency provides an appropriate analytical lens for understanding how Chicana students conceive and interpret the manner by which their parents shape and influence their own educational aspirations.

Citing a number of studies on resiliency, Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) stated that under proper conditions, "Resiliency becomes associated with a certain kind of consciousness that goes beyond buffering the individuals from ecological forces which carry the potential to arrest healthy psychological development and effective participation in school" (p. 229). Similarly, Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo (1992) stressed that "resilient children are able to manipulate and shape their environment to deal with its pressures successfully, and to comply with its demands" (p. 103). Still others (Alva, 1995) referred to resilient students as academically invulnerable students who "sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in schools and, ultimately dropping out" (p. 289).

Taken together, the above definitions of resiliency suggest that individuals develop a certain consciousness or mental outlook that allows them to form a critical perspective of their surroundings and lived experiences that, in turn, allows them to cope, survive, and in many cases thrive within those realities. The concept of resiliency allows us to understand how Chicana students are able to find strength and empowerment from their often-marginalized social conditions. According to Solorzano and Villalpando (1998), "Marginality is a complex and contentious location and process whereby students of color are subordinated because of their race, gender, and class" (p. 301). In this study, a theory of resiliency sheds light on how college aspirations are developed among Chicana students through their interpretation of the direct and indirect educational messages shared by their parents.

Method

Objectives

The objectives of the current study are twofold. First, the current study attempts to understand the college aspirations of first-generation Chicana students and the role parents play in shaping those aspirations. More specifically, the current study looks at the different types of support and encouragement parents display in their efforts to transmit high educational values to their children. The second objective of the current study is to show how resiliency, as a conceptual perspective, can help explain how Chicana students find meaning in their parents' lived experiences and how they interpret these lived experiences as important sources of motivation to pursue a college education.

The following are the primary questions addressed in the current study:

1. What role do parents play in shaping the college aspirations of Chicana students?
2. Among Chicana students with college-going aspirations, what form does parental influence and encouragement take?

3. What do parents say or do to inculcate in their daughters a high educational value?

4. How does a theory of resiliency help us understand the role of parents in shaping their children's educational aspirations?

Sample

The data analyzed and presented in the current study come from a larger qualitative study that explored the college-choice process of Chicana high school seniors. In this larger study, the decision to pursue a college education was examined within the context of the home and school experiences of Chicana students to understand a range of issues, including how Chicana individuals developed their initial aspirations about college (the focus of the current study) to their eventual enrollment and transition into institutions of higher education.

In the current study, the individual and collective educational experiences of 20 Chicana seniors enrolled at one inner-city high school in the greater Los Angeles area were analyzed to understand the role of parents in the development of college aspirations. Students selected for participation in the current study shared three important characteristics. The participants were all first-generation college-bound Chicana students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.[4] Students selected to participate in the study were chosen from a list prepared by their school's College Center Office that separated all graduating seniors into three college-bound tracks: University of California (UC) bound, California State University (CSU) bound, and community college bound. From this list, participants were contacted via telephone by the researcher at which time the purpose of the study was explained and their participation solicited. Students from the three college-bound tracks were contacted until a similar sample size was achieved for each category. To reflect the hierarchical system of California higher education, the 20 Chicana students selected to participate in the current study consisted of students from each of these three college-bound tracks—7 students each from the UC and CSU tracks and 6 students from the community college track. It is important to note that the current study only sampled students who were officially listed on one of the three college-bound tracks, and thus students with alternative post–high school plans were potentially excluded.

Procedures

The primary method of data collection was one-on-one semistructured qualitative interviews. Consistent with Bogdan and Biklen (1998), semistructured interviews were used because it allows for comparable data to be gathered across participants. Moreover, this data collection method allows the researcher to obtain data in the participants' own words from which the researcher could then develop insight on how participants interpret a partic-

ular phenomenon, in the case of the current study, the role of their parents in the development of college aspirations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The 20 Chicana students were individually interviewed on three different occasions. The first interview took place during the fall semester of the students' senior year. The sample of Chicana students were interviewed a second time at the end of their senior year and one final time 6 months after their high school graduation.

This semilongitudinal design made possible an examination of the changing nature of students' thoughts and plans about college. Furthermore, it allowed for an analysis of the process of decision making and an understanding of how this process eventually culminated in specific college choices and the subsequent enrollment or lack of enrollment in higher education for the Chicana students in the current study. For the purpose of understanding the role of parents in shaping college aspirations, only data from the initial interview were analyzed because the goal of the first interview was to gain a baseline understanding of the educational experiences of Chicana students and the key factors influencing these students' college aspirations and motivations for wanting to pursue a college education.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol gathered information on the past educational and personal experiences of the participants. The goal of the interview was to gain a baseline understanding of the home- and school-related factors influencing how students developed their college aspirations. The interview protocol included open-ended questions that fell into five general categories of background information—parental and family influence, school characteristics and experiences, peer influences, personal attitudes, and characteristics and access to information sources. All of these factors are believed to influence the way students think about their postsecondary opportunities. The questions in the protocol were based on relevant research that has identified certain sociocultural factors and school influences that have apparent, concurrent validity when addressing issues related to the college aspirations and choices of Chicana students (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Escobedo, 1980; Gandara, 1995; Hossler et al., 1999; Ovando, 1977; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998; Vasquez, 1984).

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by an external transcribing agency. The interview transcripts were examined, and the data systematically analyzed for thematic patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was accomplished by completing three steps. First, using a theory of resiliency, subthemes were identified that highlight simi-

larities and differences in how students' college aspirations were influenced by messages transmitted by parents. Second, data were analyzed to determine whether different themes could be further collapsed into similar categories (i.e., direct messages vs. indirect messages). Last, quotes from the transcriptions illustrating examples of themes identified in the previous two steps were extracted and used as narratives to elucidate and document the role of parents in the development of college aspirations among Chicana students.

Findings

Contrary to cultural deficit perceptions on the role of Mexican families (Sowell, 1981), and consistent with earlier work on the educational achievement of Chicana students (Gandara, 1995), the important role of parents on academic success and educational aspirations was mentioned consistently by all 20 Chicana students in the current study. In general, Chicana students felt that their parents held a strong value toward the importance of gaining a college education, despite not always talking directly about college in the educational messages they would transmit. In some instances, participants mentioned some of the different things their parents would say to them to make it clear that education was important. In other cases, it was not so much what the parents said through their direct messages but what these Chicana students perceived to be important, as a consequence of being keenly aware of the conditions and struggles of their parents. Whether the importance of an education was directly or indirectly inculcated in the minds of these participants, these messages translated into powerful sources of motivation for these students not only to develop educational resiliency and do well in school but also to view a college education as an attainable goal.

During the interview, the participants were asked to talk about their parents' attitudes and values regarding the importance of education and to explain how their parents transmitted these values to them. It became apparent during the interviews with all 20 Chicana students that parents had very unique ways of influencing the college thoughts and aspirations of these students. What became clear from the responses was that the majority of these parents, despite their low levels of formal education, managed to find their own ways of instilling in their children the importance of doing well in school and going to college. The majority of these parents had no formal experience with the U.S. educational system, and many of them also lacked a fluency in English. Despite these circumstances, however, these parents understood that the only way their children were going to achieve a greater sense of economic and occupational mobility was contingent on their children's ability to do well in school.

**Direct Messages on the Importance
of an Education: What Parents Say**

It is safe to suggest that, in general, parents who are able to transmit messages about the importance of doing well in school and the benefits of going to college often base those messages on personal experiences that include not just an exposure to but also a general understanding of the educational system. In some cases, parents, through their established social networks, are able to confer an educational advantage on their children by sharing valuable information and insight on how to successfully maneuver through the educational pipeline (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). Given the lack of educational background and experience of many low-income minority parents, the educational advantages these parents were able to pass on to their children were not necessarily anchored in the same types of social networks, relationships, or educational knowledge that middle-class White parents may have access to.

Consequently, the manner by which low-income minority parents instill educational values on their children would seem to require a different approach. In fact, the findings suggest that what Mexican parents say and do to influence the educational pathways of their children is grounded not on their educational success or established set of networks but rather on their economic, social, and occupational struggles. In other words, what the parents of these Chicana students have done, and what becomes clear in their responses, is that parents and daughters have found strength in the particular contexts that have defined their lived experiences and everyday realities. Indeed, one could say that what allows these participants to succeed is a sense of resiliency, fueled by their parents' ongoing support, that allows them to redefine and maximize the educational opportunities available to them.

Doing Well in School

The following three excerpts begin to illustrate the different types of messages that parents shared with their children to emphasize the importance of achieving educational success. Priscilla, for instance, talked about what her parents would tell her and her siblings to encourage their success in school: "Like my dad and my mom, they really push us. They want us to go to school and get good grades, and they want us to continue our education. They tell us that we have to get good grades."

Similarly, Gloria recalled some of the conversations her parents would have with her that made her aware of her parent's strong value toward an education. Gloria talked about her parents' belief in the necessity of having an education to be successful in this country:

> My parents really see school as very important. They see it as the most important thing someone could do. [For them], if you don't have an education then

you cannot really be anything in life because you have to be educated in this country in order to be successful, in order to be able to survive.

Finally, Erika shared her parents' belief that only an education could afford individuals a better life in this country:

> They [parents] both feel that education is a big deal. They both say that the only thing they could leave for us is our education. They both feel that [by] getting an education you could do better in life, especially here.

For other Chicana students, the messages that their parents shared made them realize that doing well in school had promising outcomes. For example, Mary noted,

> When they [parents] come from work they're always telling us, "do your homework." They motivate you. They always tell us, "if you get good grades not only will we buy you this, but in the long run you'll come to see that it's going to help you." They make us see that.

In other cases, parents influenced the educational aspirations of Chicana students by encouraging their daughters to avoid the same kinds of educational mistakes they (the parents) had committed. Virginia talked about this: "They're [parents] always helping me out, and they're always telling me, 'don't commit the same mistakes that we did, that we didn't study that much. You have the opportunity to do it, why won't you.'"

In other cases, parents made it clear that education was important by simply suggesting no other option but to just do it. As one participant expressed, "They [parents] have always been supportive of me. Especially my mom, she's been even more than supportive. 'You have to do it,' she tells me."

Parents' ability to tap into their own personal experiences can prove to be a useful way for parents to influence their children's educational aspirations. For instance, some parents may reflect on their own educational experiences or on their own occupational success to confer an educational advantage on their children. It was clear from some of the above responses that Mexican parents engaged in a similar approach, however, given that many of them had not had the opportunity to experience educational or occupational success in this country, their messages were largely contextualized in lived experiences characterized by struggle and hardship.

For many of these parents, their own lived experiences became stories of empowerment and motivation. For example, Monica shared how her mother encouraged her to do well in school by telling her, "Keep on going, don't give up. You don't want to end up working for minimum wage." In

this case, the mother used her lived experience as a minimum-wage earner to persuade Monica that doing well in school would help her expand her occupational opportunities and, as a result, help her avoid earning a minimum salary.

For another participant named Bertha, her parents used their own personal experiences as a way of suggesting a better life for her and her siblings. In this particular case, Bertha's mom talked about the costs of not finishing school and getting married at an early age, whereas her father reminded her of his occupational struggles.

> My mother always said, "There're something better than just getting [to] a certain age and getting married." She always used that example because she married when she was 19 and had six of us, and all her life she was there with us. She would always put us first. My father would tell us, "There's something always better for you to do. I don't want you to end up like me, working in a factory, night shifts to barely make ends meet for you guys." So they always put education first for us.

It was not uncommon for Chicana students to suggest that their parents would often use their current occupational status as a source of motivation for their children. As evident in the above quote, the father used his poor working conditions to encourage his children to see beyond his own reality, namely, to view school as a vehicle to create a more positive future.

In other instances, the direct messages transmitted by parents were based on the physical pain and scars that were a testament of their parents' occupational struggles. For Claudia, her mother used the scars on her hands to remind her daughter of the pain she had endured, so that Claudia would not experience something similar.

> I look at her and she has all these calluses on her hands, and she looks at me and says, "I don't want this for you, and this is why I'm sacrificing myself because I don't want this for you and I don't want this for your children, and I don't want this for your children's children."

Similarly, Rosario talked about the message instilled by her mom and how this message was rooted in her mom's limited occupation role. In this particular case, the mom made reference to her third-grade education and the difficulties this had created for her.

> My mom has to do manual labor because that's the only thing she can do. She sometimes tells me that it's difficult for her because sometimes she has to add or subtract, and since she only has a third-grade education, she says, "It's embarrassing for me and I don't want you guys to go through that." So that's why they've always emphasized that we need to get a higher education.

What starts to become clear in the last couple of examples is that some of these parents, because of their limited educational experience, realized that they could use their lived experiences as a positive source of encouragement. Through their messages, the participants were made aware of their parents' past and current conditions and how those circumstances had made it difficult to be successful. Being told that they should not envision a similar life for themselves became an important way for Chicana students to learn to view education as a vehicle for expanded opportunities and economic mobility. Hearing about the personal struggles of their parents was also important in helping these students develop a sense of resiliency about the various conditions surrounding them.

Another approach that parents used to contextualize their educational messages within their current life experiences was through the use of storytelling. For example, Jeannine shared,

> They [parents] want us all to have an education. They don't want us to go through what they went through. . . . They share stories, and they tell us that they don't want us to be suffering and going to factories and working there, like they were before. . . . Sometimes they didn't have anything to eat, and he [father] would tell us how hard it was. He had to drop out of school to work and help his parents. . . . He even had a scholarship to go to college in Mexico, but he had to drop it because he had to work, and I don't want to go through the same thing. . . . [When I hear these stories] they motivate me. They want to make me have an education and go to school.

Janice also expressed the following:

> My mom, she couldn't afford to go to school in the sixth grade. My grandparents couldn't pay for her education. She tells me stories about how the principal would talk to my grandparents everyday, telling them to let her study because she was a genius. She [mom] knew she could have made something of herself, and that's why she wants me to study.

Gandara (1995) emphasized the importance of storytelling on the part of Mexican parents as a way of shaping the educational aspirations of their children. In the above examples, participants interpreted parents' stories about their own educational experiences as sources of motivation. The power of storytelling as an influential tool in the development of educational aspirations was illustrated in the responses of two participants. First, Rosario explained,

> The stories that they tell us are more of encouragement. . . . Some people would say that it makes them sad and it makes them feel bad, and it does to a certain extent, but then it encourages me to say, "I don't want my children or my brother's

children or anybody really to go through that." If I could set an example, and my brothers could set an example, and so could my sister, then that would hopefully eliminate any further disadvantages for our children.

Monica also mentioned,

[Hearing these stories] makes me see that they had it harder. Right now we complain about the stories and the work, but it's going to help us in the long run. I just think about it and say, "This is nothing."

When conceptualizing about the role of nonconventional methods of parental encouragement on college aspirations, such as storytelling or the use of current and past-lived experiences, the dearth of research in this area becomes clear. Much of the growing literature on the influence of Mexican parents suggests that they play a pivotal role on the predisposition of their children to aspire for a college education (Alva, 1995; Gandara, 1982; Ovando, 1977; Perez, 1999). Despite this growing literature, much of it does not explain some of the nonconventional approaches used by parents to exert their influence on the educational aspirations of their children. The above responses are important because they begin to provide concrete examples of what these nonconventional methods of parental encouragement may look like. These examples also begin to shed light on the possible relationship between parental influence and the development of educational resiliency among Chicana students.

An interesting aspect about the above messages was that in none of those excerpts did parents speak about college or make explicit use of the term *college* when talking to their daughters about the importance of an education. Given that the majority of these parents had experienced low levels of educational attainment in Mexico, they were not necessarily afforded the information or knowledge base to engage in conversations about specific types of colleges with their children. Instead, parents found other ways of making their children understand the benefits of advancing in the educational pipeline, without necessarily talking specifically about going to college. So in many cases, instead of speaking about college, some of these parents talked about doing well in school and getting good grades. Others found it useful to talk about doing well in school within the context of their occupational and educational experiences. Still other parents relied on the sharing of stories as a way of reinforcing the notion that education represented a vehicle for upward mobility.

What this amounted to were direct messages transmitted by parents that attempted to persuade their daughters to do well in school, knowing that this would have beneficial outcomes for their education. So although the messages transmitted by the parents to their daughters did not explicitly mention college or the importance of attending a particular type of college, these

Chicana students indicated that, for them, these messages of encouragement and support were important in making them realize that they wanted to achieve and continue their education beyond high school.

Conversations About College

Although parents did not talk substantively and comprehensively about college, some parents did allude to the importance of attending college. In the majority of these cases, however, these conversations about the importance of going to college were usually very vague and nonspecific. This type of direct message on the part of parents was evident in Claudia's response:

> My parents have always raised us with the initial thought of going to college, that we were going to get a degree, that we were going to be someone in life, and so ever since I was small, my parents use to say, "You have to get good grades." Even in elementary school they use to say, "You have to get good grades if you're going to go to college."

In some cases, parents had inculcated the thought of going to college at a very early age:

> Ever since I could remember, my parents, my dad and my mom have always told me that whatever I do in life, make sure I go to college. Make sure I get an education because they didn't have a chance to get one, and I have a chance to get one, and I should take advantage of that chance.

Early parental influences on the importance of going to college was also the case for Janice who remembered, "My parents, when they came here [to the U.S.], they always implanted that idea in my head that I must go to college."

In the case of Jessica, her parents had always talked about the importance of going to college, even if it meant going to the local community college.

> My parents have always told us how important college is. In my house, it's more like you need to go further in life. I don't think they mind even if it's at a [community college], they just want us to continue our education.

What's interesting about Jessica's experience is that it raises an important question regarding how some parents may view and understand the structure of higher education. Does higher education, for example, represent a monolithic set of institutions for some parents? If this is the case, how does this affect the role that parents play during the college-choice process? Clearly, in the case of this particular participant, going to college was definitely important, however, it was not as important for her parents where she went, so long as it represented a continuation of her education past high school.

When parents transmitted educational messages that emphasized college, these messages were never attached to a specific type of institution or specific types of higher education outcomes, nor were they coupled with strategies for thinking and planning for a college education. Generally, when parents talked to their daughters about the importance of going to college, it was always in a very general and loose manner. Nevertheless, parents' direct messages, whether they dealt with performing well in school, avoiding marginal occupational and social conditions, or aspiring for a college education, were undoubtedly important in the development of college aspirations among participants.

In illustrating some of the nonconventional forms of parental encouragement, one important theme that emerged across Chicana students' responses was the tendency of parents to use their marginal social and economic realities to transmit their educational values. It was clear that hearing their parents talk about the importance of doing well in school and going to college, particularly within the context of their parents' own lived experiences, was important for them as they developed their educational goals and aspirations. The lived experiences of parents, although important in the direct messages transmitted by parents, appeared to be even more powerful as an indirect influence.

Indirect influences: Parents' lived experiences. In addition to directly instilling in their children messages about the importance of an education, Chicana students also alluded to an indirect form of parental influence on their educational aspirations. The most common of these types of influences came in the form of a self-interpretation by Chicana students of their parents' lived experiences. In many cases, participants talked about their parents' struggles and the impact they had on the development of their college aspirations. For instance, Janice shared one example of this type of self-interpretation:

> I've seen my dad, how he struggles to get ahead. I don't want to go through that struggle. A big factor for him is that he didn't have an education. That's why I want to get higher than high school. I know I want to go to college and get somewhere further than high school.

Janice went on to explain how a lack of education was the primary reason for her father's current work schedule:

> [My dad] goes to work at 1:30 in the morning, and for the same [reason], he's the only one without the diploma. He's the only one that has to go in at that time. I've seen the struggles he's going through . . . he's been sick, so it's been hard seeing that he is doing all this to get us ahead. I realize that I don't want to go through those struggles.

Heidi, who had witnessed her parents struggle as they tried endlessly to learn how to speak English in this country, offered a similar sentiment:

> I see them struggle. I mean 20 years of trying to learn English and not speak it correctly. It motivates you because they keep on trying, they don't give up, and because they don't give up, I know I could do much more, and I should not be giving up.

Another theme that was common in the voices of many of the participants was their desire to succeed in school to improve their economic and social opportunities relative to those experienced by their parents. In part, this was a testament of their awareness and understanding that education represented one of the only vehicles with the potential of helping them ameliorate their present conditions. This theme was evident in Gloria's response:

> I want to go to college because I see how my parents really try a lot. They came from México, and they didn't really have enough opportunities, and they had to settle for whatever they could. I really want to try to be successful, try to progress in life so I could become a better person than them. . . . They struggled a lot.

In a similar fashion, Claudia talked about some of the barriers experienced by her parents because of their lack of education:

> They [parents] came over from México and so, of course, right away that put barriers on them. [My parents] can't speak English, so there's one [barrier]. They don't have a high school diploma, they don't have a college degree, so that right away puts barriers on them. My parents are people who earned US$7 an hour, $8 an hour, and they know how important it is to have a college education. I don't think you have to go to school in order to [know that] you need a college education.

What resulted from participants' interpretation of their parents' lived experiences was a realization by these students that they had access to educational choices and opportunities that were never available to their parents. As a result, there was a sense among most Chicana students that they needed to take full advantage of their current educational opportunities. Rosario elaborated on this realization by expressing the following:

> Well my mom and my dad were both born in México, and they never had quite a choice. They were just doing what you can to survive. I heard stories about my parents of how they lived and things that they went through as children, and I don't want that. I want to have a choice. And I do have a choice.

Another participant talked about the importance of not taking her education for granted, especially given that her parents were forced to stop going to

school at a very early age to support their own families. It was clear to this participant, given the limited educational experiences of her parents, that it was her obligation to take advantage of the opportunity she had to go to college. Gloria shared the following:

> Both my parents lived in México. My father only went up to third grade, and after third grade he started working right away because he had to help support his family. My mom only went to fifth grade, and she also had to help around the house. . . . And here I am, going to school, not having to pay for it, and I have this opportunity to go to college.

In other instances, some participants talked about being aware of the racial experiences of not just their parents but of other Latino individuals. For one participant, it was her awareness of Latino individuals who were discriminated against for not speaking English that led her to believe that attaining a college education was one of the ways of combating discriminatory behaviors and practices. Jeannine explained,

> I've seen people, how all this discrimination goes on because they don't know how to speak English or they don't have an education, and I want to have an education. I don't want to be suffering, going through the same thing.

It is clear from the literature that parental encouragement and support are influential factors in the development of students' educational aspirations (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2001; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Ekstrom, 1985; Gandara, 1995). The parental influence exerted by Mexican parents, however, has often been characterized as deficient and a primary reason for the low levels of achievement among Chicana youth. Literature suggests that some of the more significant predictors of low achievement and educational success include the low educational and occupational attainment of parents, family income and composition, ethnic minority status (e.g., Laosa, 1982; Rumberger, 1983; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1984). It is contended that the presence of these variables influences or causes the disproportional level of attrition among Chicana students, particularly from high school (Alva, 1995: Brown, Rosen, Hill, & Olivas, 1980; Carnegie Council of Educational Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1979).

This line of research would presume that the low levels of educational and occupational attainment achieved by the parents of the participants in the current study would not be predictive of the high educational values held by these parents. In fact, conventional predictors of student achievement, such as parental education and socioeconomic status, can also lead to generalized conclusions about the type of influence that Mexican parents have on the educational aspirations of Chicana students. More important, these

more-conventional predictors of academic success fail to examine and un-
mask the specific ways that parents from marginalized backgrounds influ-
ence and shape their children's perspectives on the importance of an educa-
tion. Whether the influence of parents on the educational aspirations of
Chicana students resulted from a direct message or a self-interpretation on
the part of participants, it was clear that education was an important value
held by parents and children. Moreover, the fact that these parents, despite
their lack of knowledge and exposure to the structure of educational oppor-
tunities in this country, still managed to transmit powerful educational
messages that were pivotal in the development of their daughters' college
aspirations was impressive.

Resiliency and college aspirations. Finding meaning in their parents' cur-
rent and past experiences was an important source of motivation for these
Chicana students. In such cases, it was not so much what parents said, but
how Chicana students interpreted and how they were able to find meaning in
their parents' lived experiences. Literature suggests that the lived experi-
ences and realities of growing up Chicana are marked by distinct gender
roles, difference, and social location (Gonzalez, 1998). These lived experi-
ences and realities can oftentimes produce a keen awareness of multiple sys-
tems of subordination such as oppression, poverty, sexism, and racism
(Crenshaw, 1995).

    Although the possibility exists that the Chicana participants in this
study became aware of these conditions through their own experiences and
interactions in multiple settings, their awareness of their status in this larger
society of inequality stemmed for the most part from their own observations
and interpretation of their parents' conditions and struggles. For most of
these students, knowing that their parents had struggled economically, or
their awareness of the working conditions of their parents, became a catalyst
for wanting to expand their educational opportunities beyond high school. A
testament of this motivation was captured in the voices of two Chicana
students. First, Erika shared,

> The reason I want to continue is because I feel you could get a better job if you
> go to college. . . . Then I see it too, my parents, my dad, he has to be working, and
> I feel if I could get a job and a better education I won't have to work as hard as
> he's working.

Claudia added,

> I want to have a higher education because my parents don't have one, and I
> don't want to go through what they went through. They don't speak English. My
> dad is the only one that works, and he has to almost kill himself, working hard
> every day to give us what we have.

The bottom line for these Chicana students was that they did not want to experience the life afforded to their parents in this country. For this reason, a college education represented, for many, a means of escaping and avoiding their parents' current and past economic, social, and educational conditions.

Literature on resiliency (Alva, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000) suggests that such theoretical framework can help explain how first-generation Chicana students negotiate all the social, economic, and cultural forces affecting their educational experiences. This literature suggests that, "children are able to manipulate and shape their environment to deal with its pressures successfully, and to comply with its demands" (Garbarino et al., 1992, p. 103).

The lived experiences of their parents, that participants alluded to, points at the types of circumstances that defined the realities in which these students existed. Within these realities, these Chicana students had learned to develop a critical perspective on the meaning of their lives and on the types of opportunities available to them. Being able to find meaning in the often-marginal experiences of their parents was important in convincing these participants to believe that they could be invulnerable to some of the same factors that had shaped their parents' current realities. Alva (1995) suggested that invulnerable students are those who manage to achieve despite the presence of circumstances that may place them in danger of not succeeding. In essence, these Chicana students, through the messages transmitted by their parents developed a sense of educational resiliency that embodied an understanding that education, particularly a college education, offered an opportunity that would enhance their economic and social positions in society.

Conclusions and Discussion

The important role of parents in the development of educational aspirations was explored in this article. Specifically, this article was interested in examining how Chicana students perceived and understood the manner by which their parents influenced their thoughts about going to college. The current study focused on what parents said as well as some of the things they did to implant the importance of attaining a college education among their daughters. Two forms of parental influence were discussed—direct and indirect parental influences. Parental messages about the importance of education and Chicana students' self-interpretation of their parents' lived experiences were important not only in the development of participants' college aspirations but also in developing a sense of educational resiliency among these students. By focusing on the different ways that parents were influential in the development of college goals, the current study was able to shed light on some of the more nonconventional approaches used by Mexican parents to transmit educational messages to their children.

The manner by which parents' direct and indirect influences were transmitted was intriguing especially because messages about the importance of education were based largely on parents' limited past and present social, educational, and occupational conditions. Direct forms of parental influence included educational messages of encouragement conferred to Chicanas by their parents that stressed the importance of doing well in school and attending college. Parents' limited educational and occupational backgrounds made it difficult for these parents to tap into their own experiences to engage in educational conversations with their daughters that entailed a specific knowledge base and understanding of the structure of educational opportunities in this country. Although their educational and occupational background did not allow parents to speak specifically and substantively about the types of colleges their daughters should aspire to, parents' marginal conditions situated them in a unique space that allowed them to understand that education was an important way of achieving economic and social mobility. For many of these parents, attaining an education was perceived as the only viable option that would give their children the opportunity to avoid the barriers that had made it very difficult for them (parents) to achieve.

Another important source of parental influence was embodied in the form of a self-interpretation on the part of Chicana students of their parents' lived experiences. In many cases, it was not so much what parents said that was important in the development of Chicana students' educational aspirations. What appeared to be perhaps most important in the development of college aspirations was the meaning that Chicana students were able to extract from their awareness of the struggles that their parents experienced on a daily basis. These participants understood that their parents' lack of education, along with their lack of English fluency and their immigration status, were among some of the main factors that had situated their parents in the margins of society. For Chicana students, their parents' lived experiences represented an important source of strength and motivation to aspire for a college education. For these Chicana students, their parents' experiences served as a vivid reminder that they did not want to struggle like their parents.

It was through an examination of the role of parents that a theory of resiliency proved useful in understanding how these Chicana students were able to reinterpret the meaning behind their current realities, from one of dismay and misfortune to one of strength and motivation. Their recognition of the contextual forces shaping their family life was the basis of their motivation to succeed and gave them the resiliency to transcend all of the conditions and circumstances that were part of their everyday life.

Through their support and encouragement, these parents created what Gandara (1995) called a "culture of possibility." According to Gandara, parents create this through their stories and through their own faith in the possibility of mobility. The parents of these Chicana students created this culture

of possibility by transmitting messages about the importance of education that were based on their limited social opportunities, past and present. The fact that Chicana students were able to find meaning in the marginal conditions and struggles of their parents served to strengthen their belief that to avoid a similar life as their parents, advancing in the educational pipeline would be crucial. The existence of a culture of possibility, coupled with Chicana students' ability to find meaning in their current realities, also reinforced Chicana students' sense of educational resiliency that allowed them to reinterpret and redefine many of the factors and circumstances that would normally make it difficult for students to succeed. Instead, this sense of educational resiliency gave Chicana students the ability to view and interpret their everyday experiences as empowering realities and gave them a source of motivation to aspire for a college education.

Many Chicana and Chicano students continue to be concentrated in high schools that have poor records of academic success, have inadequate counseling, and are resource poor (Orfield & Paul, 1993). Furthermore, literature indicates that Chicana and Chicano individuals continue to experience low socioeconomic status and low levels of economic, educational, and occupational positions (Gonzalez, 1998; Rendon & Hope, 1996). Many of these students have educational aspirations that oftentimes fall short of fruition given the schooling as well as home opportunities available to them. Students who manage to succeed are those with parents who articulate messages of educational success and who confer onto their children tremendous support and encouragement to do well in school. As the current study shows, for Chicana students, the role of parents is important in the development of college aspirations. To this end, schools must acknowledge that Mexican parents, despite their low levels of educational and occupational attainment, act as an important resource in the schooling process of their children. The current study shows how educational resiliency can be developed as a result of positive parental educational messages. Similarly, schools that enroll large numbers of Chicana and Chicano students can structure educational opportunities aimed at developing educational resiliency as an important way of increasing educational success and college participation among these students.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this study, a *Chicana* is defined as a female student of Mexican descent living in the United States.

2. The umbrella term *Latino* is referenced throughout the article to make inferences about the educational status of Chicana and Chicano students, where data on Chicanas are not available.

3. First-generation status is accorded to students whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

4. All 20 Chicana students came from households where neither parent held a professional occupation and where at least one parent was employed in a low-skilled, low-wage occupation. In addition, of the 20 participants, only two had at least one parent who had completed high school in the United States.

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