Two-Generation Strategies and Involving Immigrant Parents in Children's Education

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Intervening in the parent generation can improve current and future prospects in the child generation. Such two-generation strategies target either parents' life circumstances or the parenting behaviors through which these circumstances affect children (Smith 1995).

When looking at the growing immigrant population, two-generation strategies often focus on parental involvement in education. Because many immigrants do not have the English capabilities, inside knowledge about schools, or social standing conducive to the involvement expected and rewarded by the American educational system, engaging them more fully in the educational process in the home, school, and community could bring academic returns for their children (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). For the most part, these efforts have targeted parental involvement through, for example, programs to help immigrant parents construct home literacy environments or to help teachers better communicate with immigrant parents. Yet, attempts to alter the barriers to involvement behavior—through, for example, programs to help parents increase their education or their own English proficiency—have also gained traction (Bridges et al. 2009; St. Pierre et al. 2003).

This paper describes two-generation approaches to the education of young children from immigrant families that center on parental involvement in education. It focuses on Latin American and Asian immigrants, who make up the bulk of the immigrant population.

Early Education and Parental Involvement in Immigrant Families

School Readiness

Much has been written about achievement patterns among young people from immigrant families. The evidence suggests that early childhood and the transition into formal school are periods of potential academic risk for these children (Crosnoe and Lopez Turley forthcoming).

Indeed, analyses of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative study of American kindergarteners, have revealed that the children of Latin American immigrants (especially those from Mexico) score significantly lower than other children on math and reading tests. Although these children make up ground with their peers as they move through elementary school, their lower levels of school readiness put them at a competitive disadvantage at the very beginning of school and force them to play catch-up (Glick and Hohmann Marriott 2007; Han 2008; Reardon and Galindo 2009). Importantly, analyses of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a nationally representative study of American infants, have revealed that such disparities in cognitive tests emerge as early as 9 months of age (Fuller et al. 2009). The children of Asian immigrants (especially those from East Asia), on the other hand, have similar levels of school readiness as the children of native-born white families. Yet, these children have shallower academic gains as they move through the primary grades, so they lose some of their competitive advantage over time (Glick and Hohmann Marriott 2007; Han 2008).

These disparities in school readiness are important because even small differences across groups in early learning can compound over time into larger differences in end-of-school outcomes

(e.g., graduation rates) and because intervening early in the educational career tends to bring greater long-term returns to investment (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 2005; Heckman 2006). Thus, understanding why such early disparities emerge is crucial.

The general consensus is that the socioeconomic circumstances of immigrant families represent the single biggest factor. Compared with the general school-age population, children of immigrants tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. One-quarter live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and one-quarter have no parent with a high school degree. This disadvantage, however, is primarily experienced by Latin American immigrants, not Asian immigrants (Fortuny et al. 2009). Such socioeconomic disparities reflect *differential selectivity* in migration—in Asia, higher socioeconomic status (SES) individuals tend to migrate, while in Latin America and especially Mexico, lower SES individuals do. They also reflect *different opportunities* for socioeconomic attainment in the United States (Feliciano 2005; Tienda 2009). Taking SES into account does more than anything else to reduce observed disparities in early learning and school readiness related to immigration.

Whether channeled through SES or not, the mechanisms connecting immigration to early education are many and varied. One popular mechanism of interest—in terms of both research and policy—is parental involvement in education (Crosnoe 2006; Lopez 2001).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in education refers to the ways that parents attempt to support and manage their children's educational experiences. At home, they may establish cognitively stimulating environments by providing books and other learning materials, set up learning activities (e.g., reading), and stimulate language through conversation. In the community, they may expose their children to programs, events, and public institutions (e.g., libraries) and connect to other parents to tap into channels of information about schools and services. When children are in preschool and school, parents may coordinate with teachers, help children with lessons, and participate in school activities. Thus, parental involvement can occur well before formal schooling begins and encompass direct contact with schools and indirect support of the pedagogical mission of schools (Epstein et al. 2002).

Ample evidence suggests that parental involvement can promote children's learning and achievement (Cheadle 2008; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007). Involvement indicates to children that their parents value education, provides stimulation and structured activities for cognitive development, enables parents to gain knowledge about how schools work and what opportunities are available for children, and allows parents and school personnel to stay on the same page (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Parental involvement, especially visible school-based behaviors, also signals to preschool and school personnel that parents can be counted on to help children in school and, moreover, that they cannot be ignored when they have issues with what schools are doing (Lareau 2003). Such patterns have been a driving force of major educational policies aimed at promoting parental involvement, including the family-school compact provision of No Child Left Behind as well as the long-standing parent engagement components of Head Start (Epstein 2005; Zigler and Muenchow 1994).

Given such evidence, differences in parental involvement related to immigration are noteworthy. To that end, table 1 presents selected parental involvement means, from ECLS-K, for children of Latin American and Asian immigrants, children of native-born parents of Latin

American and Asian ancestry, and children of native-born whites (the largest portion of the child population). This last group has the highest rate of each behavior. When looking at the other groups, however, some patterns stand out.

- Latin American immigrants have the least engagement in all four behaviors.
- Home learning activities and school involvement have the clearest native/immigrant distinction, regardless of race or ethnicity.
- Parents of Latin American origins are less likely to enroll their children in preschool than all other groups, regardless of whether they were born in the United States.
- ECLS-B findings not shown in table 1 indicate that differences in home-based involvement behaviors (e.g., literacy activities) related to Latin American immigration exist when children are infants and toddlers (see Fuller et al. 2009).

Table 1. Involvement Behaviors among Parents of Kindergarteners, by Race/Ethnicity and Immigration Status

	Mean (Standard Deviation) for Children of				
	Native whites	Immigrant Latino/as	Native Latino/as	Immigrant Asians	Native Asians
Reading [a]	3.17	2.91	3.08	3.13	3.17
	(.70)	(.84)	(.76)	(.75)	(.76)
School involvement [b]	4.12	2.98	3.42	3.13	3.11
	(1.59)	(1.66)	(1.82)	(1.74)	(2.01)
Home learning activities [c]	2.76	2.45	2.70	2.61	2.71
	(.48)	(.58)	(.53)	(.55)	(.49)
Preschool enrollment [d]	.38	.19	.25	.33	.27
	(.48)	(.40)	(.43)	(.47)	(.45)
n	9.151	1,361	1,489	801	495

Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K).

[a] Average of how often parents reported looking at picture books and reading books at home (1 = not at all, 2 = once or twice a week, 3 = three to six times a week, 4 = every day). Native whites are significantly higher than immigrant Latino/as.

[b] How many of the following activities that parents reported participating in during the last year: attended parent-teacher association meeting, attended parental advisory meeting, attended school event, attended parent-teacher conference, attended open house, volunteered at school, participated in fundraising activities. Native whites are significantly higher than native Latino/as, who are significantly higher than Asians (immigrant and native), who are significantly higher than immigrant Latino/as.

[c] Average of how often parents reported engaging in activities with their children, including building things, exploring nature, working with art, singing songs, and playing games (1 = not at all, 2 = once or twice a week, 3 = three to six times a week, 4 = every day). Native whites are significantly higher than native Asians, who are significantly higher than native Latino/as, who are significantly higher than immigrant Asians, who are significantly higher than immigrant Latino/as.

[d] Whether parent had enrolled child in preschool in the year before kindergarten. Native whites and immigrant Asians are significantly higher than native Asians, who are significantly higher than native Latino/as, who are significantly higher than immigrant Latino/as.

In sum, Latin American immigrants are less likely than many other parents to engage in involvement behaviors that American schools expect. Although, in general, Asian immigrants engage in more of these behaviors, they do not do so at rates comparable to native whites and, frequently, to their U.S.-born Asian American counterparts. Why do these patterns emerge?

Socioeconomic status. Latin American immigrants have low rates of educational attainment and income than other groups in ECLS-K. Asian immigrant parents look similar to native whites in educational attainment but have lower incomes. Considerable evidence suggests that more educated parents are more likely to understand what is needed for their children to succeed in school. Further, money enables them to purchase goods and services for their children (e.g., preschool, books) and frees them from practical constraints (e.g., transportation costs, inflexible work schedules) on involvement (Lareau 2003; Mayer 1997).

Language. Parents who do not speak (or are uncomfortable speaking) English may not know what is available to them or is expected of them. Even if they do, they may not follow through when the personnel they come into contact with at school or in other settings do not speak the same language as they do (Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001; Yoshikawa 2005).

C*ultural differences between parents and school personnel*. Latin American immigrants often operate with a cultural model of parenting (educación) that views moral learning as the bedrock of academic learning and moral teaching (not academic teaching) as the primary role they have in their children's school readiness. Further, this moral teaching tends to focus on respect for authority, obedience, intergenerational solidarity, hard work, and other qualities that may not bring advantages in an individualistic American educational system that emphasizes competition, rewards demanding and entitled behavior, and views work outside school as a threat to work inside school (Lopez 2001; Reese et al. 1995). Asian immigrants may engage less in visible involvement behaviors in school (e.g., parent-teacher associations, or PTAs), and white middle-class teachers may view them as either distant or controlling. Still, they are often actively involved in their children's education outside school. In particular, Asian immigrant parents tend to set high academic standards and then marshal the resources that their children need to meet those standards (Kao and Thompson 2003). For example, many Chinese immigrants find ways to arrange supplemental education for their children (e.g., Chinese school, tutors) despite the expense (Zhou 2009). Recall also from table 1 that Asian immigrants enrolled their children in preschool at rates higher than any other group considered except for native-born whites.

Thus, if Latin American and Asian immigrants have a different script of involvement than their children's schools, they may score low on behaviors favored by the U.S. script even if they are involved in their children's education in other ways that are not as rewarded by school personnel (Lopez 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). These patterns, however, vary according to parents' histories in the United States and their home countries. For example, the involvement behaviors of immigrants move closer to the U.S. script the longer they live here *and* when they accrued their own education in urban areas in their countries of origin (Fuller et al. 2009; Glick, Bates, and Yabiku 2009; Goldenberg, Gallimore, and Reese 2005).

Recognizing this disconnect between cultural scripts of parental involvement related to immigration is an important part of schools' efforts to create partnerships with families. Such recognition may reduce the counterproductive views that many school personnel have of immigrant parents as uninvolved (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). It may also increase awareness of the barriers to strong partnerships. For example, schools that take an expansive view of parental involvement are more likely to work with the schedules of migrant-worker parents so they can maintain close contact with schools (Lopez et al. 2001).

Programs and Interventions Targeting Parental Involvement

Given that immigration-related disparities in parental involvement exist, how can we reduce them? One strategy is to *directly* target parents' behaviors and/or schools' approaches to parental involvement. Another is to *indirectly* target parental involvement by addressing the factors (e.g., lack of education, language barriers) that constrain it. The examples below include programs with both direct and indirect two-generation strategies.

Direct Approaches Encouraging Parental Involvement

Table 2 contains information on seven programs that attempt to strengthen parents' supports of children's school readiness and early learning. All or most of these programs

- focus on families of Latin American origin (immigrant or native), especially those who are low income and Spanish speaking, with young children;
- are coordinated with existing child services and programs (e.g., Head Start);
- operate out of schools, community centers, or program sites, although HIPPY is organized around home visits and AVANCE also incorporates home visits; and
- emphasize providing services in the language preferred by families and drawing on Latin American culture as a way of encouraging participation and persistence.

As for other key features of the programs considered…

First, all the programs attempt to make the home environment more cognitively stimulating and supportive of early literacy. For example, Lee y Seras, sponsored by the National Council of La Raza, shows parents how to construct literacy activities out of everyday life, PEEP helps parents set up home studying areas for children, and Project FLAME teaches parents how to read to children and support language use. In doing so, several programs (e.g., Abriendo Puertas, HIPPY) recognize that giving parents an evidence-based understanding of child development will help them to make such changes in the home environment on their own.

Table 2. Programs Targeting Parental Involvement Relevant to the Immigrant Population

Program	Location	Target	Primary activity	Evaluation
Abriendo Puertas	Primarily CA	Latino/a parents of children age 0–5	Instruction in support group settings on how to be child's teacher and create a home learning environment	Mixed methods, nonexperimental. Evidence of greater parent knowledge and efficacy but weak effects on actual parent participation at school.
AVANCE	TX, CA, NM	Low-income Latino/a parents of children age 3–8	Early childhood education and parenting education in home and on site	At least one randomized control and matched control experiment. Evidence of increased parent knowledge, skills, efficacy, and use of services as well as improvements in home learning environment.
Lee y Seras	Multiple states	Latino/a parents of children age 0–8	Literacy workshops for parents as well as workshops for teachers and care providers serving the community, both with emphasis on Latin American culture	Pre/post-test comparisons of program participants. Evidence of improvements in parent knowledge, efficacy, and home literacy activities.
Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)	Multiple states and international	Low-income parents of children age 3–5	Series of home visits and support group meetings to enhance parents' knowledge of child development, teaching behavior, and home literacy	At least one randomized control experiment. Evidence of effects on children's school adjustment and parents' expectations and short-term effects on parents' construction of home learning environment.
Parent Engagement Education Program (PEEP)	Multiple states	English language learner parents of school-age children	Literacy and teaching workshops for parents, teacher workshops for engaging parents	Pre/post-test comparisons of program participants. Evidence of increases in children's test scores, parent knowledge, and parent efficacy.
Project FLAME	Multiple states	Low-income Latino/a parents of children age 3–8	Parent workshops to help parents serve as literacy models, connect to schools, and use community services	Pre/post-test comparisons of program participants. Evidence of improvements in home literacy activities and environment and in parent efficacy.

Sources: Bridges et al. (2009); AVANCE, Inc., "The Carnegie Corporation Evaluation of the Parent-Child Education Program," http://www.avance.org/why-avance/impact/carnegie-corporation-study/; Goldenberg and Light (2009); HIPPY (2010); Baker, Piortkowski, and Brooks-Gunn (1999); Parent Institute for Quality Education, "Parent Engagement Education Program," http://www.piqe.org/prog_parentengage.php; and University of Illinois-Chicago, "Project FLAME," http://www.uic.edu/educ/flame/flameobjectives.html.

Second, a key feature of many of these attempts to alter the home environment is helping parents become teachers at home. Indeed, this teacher role is a main focus of HIPPY, which uses home visits, parent activity workbooks, role playing, and discussion groups as a means of encouraging parents to see themselves as teachers, demonstrating concrete ways that this role can be enacted, and helping them maintain this role over time. Abriendo Puertas, Lee y Seras, PEEP, AVANCE and Project FLAME all explicitly identify teaching parents to teach as central to their programs, including efforts to help parents set learning or educational goals for children and manage their time and their children's time.

Third, some programs try to bridge home and school. One approach is to provide insights to parents about how schools work and what education entails in the United States. As just three examples, Abriendo Puertas gives information about preschool and school choice, HIPPY helps parent understand the role of homework in school, and PEEP explains the curricular pathways to college. Central to this agenda is helping parents understand what teachers expect of them, providing tips about and exercises for effective communication with school personnel, and demystifying the educational process so parents feel more comfortable around teachers (e.g., Project FLAME, HIPPY, Abriendo Puertas). A few programs take this approach further by focusing on teachers and how they can better communicate with and engage parents. PEEP has workshops for teachers about engaging English language learner parents, and Lee y Seras does the same for child care providers and preschool teachers.

Fourth, many programs also try to build stronger connections between families and communities. Abriendo Puertas assists parents with child care services, AVANCE helps channel parents into available continuing education classes, and Project FLAME brings in representatives of community institutions (e.g., banks, hospitals) to speak to parents about how to capitalize on community resources. These activities recognize that parental involvement in early learning and education is facilitated by parents who have a strong sense of the opportunities and supports available to them outside the home.

Fifth, the informational supports provided to parents often go well beyond the basic purview of parental involvement. PEEP and Abriendo Puertas, for example, have financial literacy activities for parents, including discussions of tax codes (e.g., the earned income tax credit), and AVANCE also provides information on contraception and family planning. Again, these services acknowledge that parents who are better at managing their own lives will be better able to get involved and stay involved in their children's early education.

Sixth, all programs stress that intervention must be sustained over time, although they differ widely in their conception of what sustained means. Some programs run for about two to six months (e.g., Lee y Seras, PEEP), but HIPPY is designed to last for three years (when children are 3, 4, and 5) and has a mandatory minimum two-year commitment.

No program has all these qualities, but all of them have most. They demonstrate a wide variety of activities and services, but they generally are all motivated by the idea of focusing on parents who are often socioeconomically and/or linguistically marginalized or isolated and trying to empower them as the managers of their children's lives and education. The focus is clearly on parents themselves, less so on children and less so on schools.

Although all the programs have been operating for some time, evaluations have not been extensive. All evaluations that have been conducted show positive effects of at least some program components. Most have involved comparisons of program participants on a battery of outcomes (e.g., child academic skills, parent perceptions of the self, parent reports of behavior) at the start of the program and at some point after completing all or some of the program. Results typically suggest that the biggest observed impact is on parents' knowledge about community resources, comfort dealing with schools, and knowledge of child development, with weaker impacts on parents' everyday literacy activities at home.

Although this pre/post-test strategy cannot establish causal effects, it can be informative, especially when coupled with family interviews (e.g., Lee y Seras). For example, Abriendo Puertas parents described just how disenfranchised many low-income Mexican-origin parents feel in their children's schools and how learning the often-unspoken rules of American schools can change their approach to parental involvement. As one mother explained, "I now know about different school services, what a child should be learning developmentally, and how to fight for someone's rights" (Bridges et al. 2009, 4). This qualitative evidence captures the general thrust of most pre/post-test evaluations—changes occur more in parents' general orientation to parent involvement than in their actual involvement behavior.

Other evaluations have been experimental and, therefore, provide stronger evidence of causal impact. They have revealed some, albeit fewer, program benefits. For example, a randomized experimental evaluation of HIPPY had a sample that was one-third Latino/a, although not necessarily immigrant. It revealed no long-term changes in parents' involvement behaviors (e.g., supplying learning materials at home) but significant increases in their educational expectations for children and in children's test scores. Importantly, these effects were only realized when parents had high levels of program participation (Baker et al. 1999). Such effects have led to conclusions that HIPPY has an acceptable cost-benefit ratio, with long-term benefits (through reductions in special education, retention, etc.) of the program outweighing costs (approximately $1,681 per child) by a margin of 1.8 (Kilburn and Karoly 2008). As another example, two experimental evaluations (one randomized, one with a matched control) have been conducted for AVANCE. Program mothers were observed to create more organized, stimulating home environments, spend more teaching time with children, and engage in more verbal interaction with children than low-income Latinas in the control group. This evaluation, however, is now dated.[1]

In sum, several programs directly intervene in parenting behavior and family-school relations, many focusing on or relevant to Latin American immigrants. These programs are in line with theory and evidence about early education and parental involvement and seem to have promise. More rigorous evaluation of these programs—especially long term and focused on immigrant families—is needed, however, before stronger conclusions can be made.

Two-Generation Approaches That Also Indirectly Encourage Parental Involvement

Another two-generation approach centers on the idea that the best way to change parenting behavior is to alter the conditions under which it emerges. In other words, if socioeconomic and language barriers are preventing immigrant parents from active involvement in their children's education, than reducing these barriers could improve parents' lives while also leading to changes in their behaviors. Indeed, any behavioral changes realized through these indirect methods may be even greater than those observed when directly targeting the behaviors themselves.

The logic behind this argument has driven international aid and development for decades, with efforts to help children focusing on improving the educational attainment of their parents, especially mothers. It is also supported by quasi-experimental evidence in developed nations demonstrating that increases in the education and training of low-income mothers are associated with improved child outcomes. The general consensus is that these associations reflect changes in mothers' management of their children's health and education (Carneiro, Meghir, and Parey 2007; Gennetian, Magnuson, and Morris 2008; Oreopoulos, Page, and Stevens 2006). In turn, efforts to raise the human capital of parents even minimally (e.g., continuing education classes) have been attempted by public assistance programs in many locales, such as the Advancement Plus Program in Adams County, CO, that is funded by Temporary Aid to Needy Family dollars. Similar programs have also been incorporated into child interventions, including several programs described here (e.g., AVANCE).

Such efforts have among the aims of Head Start since its inception (Puma et al. 2010), and, indeed, many parents in the programs in table 2 (e.g., Abriendo Puertas) have participated in continuing education through Head Start. This same arrangement—educational and language services for parents accessed through early education programs for children—can be found in public pre-K in many states. In Texas, for example, the public pre-K program for low-income children and English language learners encourages schools to partner with local workforce development agencies to offer courses (e.g., English as a second language, GED preparation) to students' parents (Austin Independent School District 2008). On the federal level, Even Start connects various programs in an effort to link early education, adult literacy programs, and parenting education for low-income families with children age 0–7. Although not focused on immigrants, a portion of Even Start funds is set aside for programs targeting migrant workers.[2]

A current limitation of this two-generation approach is that we still do not know how well it works. Several large random assignment demonstrations have tested whether programmatic interventions could boost maternal schooling in disadvantaged populations and thereby improve children's outcomes. Results have been disappointing, indicating that such programs were not particularly successful in increasing low-income mothers' educational activities above control group mothers (McGroder et al. 2000). Yet, these null findings could have reflected that many control group mothers also pursued more education outside the focal programs and, in the process, diluted the comparison. Indeed, reanalysis of one study of the welfare-to-work population using an instrumental variable design rather than an experimental comparison concluded that young children whose mothers participated in continuing education made substantial gains in school readiness, with parenting being the likely mechanism (Gennetian et al. 2008).

Perhaps even more troubling have been the consistently disappointing results of Even Start evaluations. The most recent—a randomized trial of 463 families in 18 programs—revealed that Even Start parents did not post larger gains on literacy assessments than control group parents. Yet, these null results should not be viewed uncritically. First, about one-third of the control parents also received educational services outside Even Start. Second, the Even Start parents had low levels of persistence in the program. The average duration was only 10 months, with only a 30 percent take-up of educational services offered. The parents who received a large amount of instruction, however, posted much larger gains on literacy assessments. Thus, the results of the evaluation could point to the need to expand the time window of services or to target the most motivated parents (St. Pierre et al. 2003).

Importantly, almost none of the evaluations of or basic research related to these two-generation strategies focuses on immigrants, although the populations considered (e.g., low-income parents of young children) likely contain many immigrants. As a result, we know very little about how investing in the human capital of immigrant parents may affect their children or their involvement in their children's education.

Looking Forward

Today, more than a fifth of children, and rising, have at least one foreign-born parent (Fortuny et al. 2009). That the children of Latin American immigrants enter school with less developed academic skills, therefore, is important, as is the tendency for the children of Asian immigrants—despite more school readiness—to have shallower academic gains early in school than many of their peers. The links among family SES, language, cultural models of education and parenting, and parent involvement seem to be key ingredients in these patterns.

Fortunately, some programs target these links, either by addressing parental involvement or the factors that might constrain it. Unfortunately, the benefits of these programs have not been definitively established, and they have not been experienced by large numbers of parents. Moreover, the programs' effectiveness in and applicability to diverse segments of the immigrant population is largely unknown, and whether they can be ratcheted up to a broader scale is still a question. At the same time, more can be done to shift the focus away from the supply side of parental involvement (i.e., parents) toward the demand side (i.e., schools, preschools). Filling in these blanks is a necessity in the future, given the stakes involved.

Notes

[1] See AVANCE, Inc., "The Carnegie Corporation Evaluation of the Parent-Child Education Program," http://www.avance.org/why-avance/impact/carnegie-corporation-study/.
[2] See U.S. Department of Education, "Even Start," http://www.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula/index.html.

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